



Dragon Daddy's Second Chance (Mysteries of Dragon's Island #5)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: One chance to reclaim the love of a lifetime if they dare.

Blake never thought he'd see Wren again, let alone on a secluded island where he hoped to find peace. Years ago, his powerful family forced them apart, but Wren has been holding onto something precious—a son, hidden to keep them both safe.

Now, fate throws them together, and Blake is astonished to meet the child he never knew. As love rekindles, their reunion is threatened by the same forces that once tore them apart.

With everything at stake, Blake is determined to protect his newfound family and fight for the second chance they both deserve.

Can they find happiness at last, or will danger claim their happily-ever-after once again?

Total Pages (Source): 24

PROLOGUE

Max gathered together the folders on the table, downed the last of his coffee, and then headed for the village to meet with Mateo. He wasn't looking forward to another tense negotiation with the man, especially since working together the last time he wanted something from the government on the big island. This was a different battle, one they'd been fighting for over a month, and he didn't plan to lose. They needed security on the island. The past had proven that clearly. He wanted his guests to feel safe when they came to Heart of the Ocean, wanted them to forget the outside world for just a little while.

Recent events had made it obvious that the island was too accessible, the wide sandy beaches too easy to navigate in a small boat. The coves were open to anyone who wanted to land on the island undetected. He hated to cover the island in cameras, but he was determined to put a stop to unwanted visitors. If Mateo refused to let him bring in security staff, he'd have no choice.

Walking down the path to the village, he ran through all of the arguments he'd come up with hoping to convince Mateo that people would be better than technology, but he knew how stubborn the man could be, how serious he took his job protecting the island. It was no secret that Mateo was against him being there, and he'd certainly tried more than once to convince him to leave, tried to blame all the strange things that happened on something supernatural with dire warnings about what might come next. It was all just a bunch of nonsense, a string of coincidences completely unrelated, and he wasn't about to give up his dream because Mateo was superstitious.

The village was bustling with activity when he arrived, the stores and shops filled

with guests, and he paused for a second to enjoy the sight, pleased that all the hard work that went into running the resort was being appreciated. Greeting people as he walked over to the food court, he kept a smile on his face even when he saw Mateo sitting at a table, a frown on his face.

“You’re late,” Mateo said when he sat down.

“Since when do you worry about stuff like that?” he asked. “Besides, I’m not late, you’re early.”

“I just want to get this over with,” Mateo said. “You know how I feel about the whole thing.”

“Yes, you’ve made that perfectly clear, but I can’t have my guests in danger, and for some reason, trouble just seems to find us on this island,” he said, then wished he hadn’t when Mateo opened his mouth. “Before you start lecturing me, let’s just get to it. We need security on the island in some form or another. I’m willing to be flexible, but I can’t do it alone.”

When Mateo didn’t answer, he shoved the folders across the table to him, then got to his feet. “I’m going to go get some coffee and let you look those over,” he said. “Do you want anything? ”

All he got was a grunt as Mateo reached out for the folders, but he waited a second longer, sure the man couldn’t resist the offer. “I’ll take my usual,” he finally said. “And make it a double.”

When he came back with the coffees, there was one folder separated from the stack. Mateo shoved it back across the table at him. “I want to know more about this one,” he said. “If we have to have security, I think I would feel most comfortable with someone you know.”

“Harrison is a good guy, that’s why I chose him,” he said. “And he knows his stuff, he’ll keep the island safe.”

“Will he do it?” Mateo asked. “With a resume like that, guarding this island might be a little too sedate.”

“He’s been looking for a change,” he said. “How about I set up a meeting between you two?”

“Fine, I’ll be headed back over to the big island later this week,” Mateo said. “How soon can he start?”

“It will be a couple of weeks before he’s free,” he said, holding back a smile. “But I’m sure he can zip over to Bermuda before then. I’ll make it happen.”

“See that you do. It’s the only way I’m going to agree,” Mateo said. “Now, what disaster do we have to look forward to when your friend arrives today? We’ve had abusive exes, mobsters, and don’t even get me started about all the other strange things that have gone on, I’m too tired today.”

“I’m sure Blake’s visit will be nice and quiet,” he said, hoping he was right. “He’s a good solid guy, he won’t bring any trouble with him.”

“Yeah, that’s what you said the last time,” Mateo said. “Maybe you should postpone his trip until we get some security around here.”

“I can’t, he’s already on his way,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Besides, I’m sure everything will be fine.”

CHAPTER 1

BLAKE

Blake watched Bermuda get smaller and smaller, then finally disappear. A pang of regret that he hadn't been able to stay longer made him frown, and then he turned to watch as the boat sped into the open ocean. He knew that it was only a few miles to the island, but for just a moment, with no land in sight, he could imagine that he was far away from civilization. Someday, he told himself, closing his eyes for just a second to indulge in the fantasy that had been his saving grace for the last few years, a fantasy that was soon going to be reality.

The thought made him smile and when he opened his eyes, the captain, Montgomery, was watching him with an understanding look on his face. "You've got a bit of the sea in your blood," he said. "I can see it in your face."

"I've been around boats for as long as I can remember. I've got a thirty-foot cabin cruiser back home, and there's nothing better than taking her out on the weekends and just getting away," he said. "Someday I'm going to buy a sail boat and travel around the world. My parents think it's a terrible idea, but it's become a bit of an obsession. I don't want to marry someone I don't love just to have kids I don't want, I want to do something exciting with my life."

Shocked that he'd revealed so much to a stranger, he snapped his mouth closed before he said any more, acutely aware of how pathetic his life sounded. "I've made the trip a couple of times," Montgomery said, ignoring everything else he'd said. "It's a lot of work, but there are some really beautiful places out there in the world. How

long have you been sailing?”

He didn't answer right away, hating the fact that he'd exposed the biggest flaw in his plan. "I took a few lessons when I was a kid, but that's about it," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "The people in my social group are more into the yacht scene, sailboats are too much work, but I've made up my mind to buy one. I've been saving for three years, I'm almost there."

"Then you'd better learn to sail, and soon," Montgomery said, laughing. "I give lessons every morning. I've got a ten-thirty open tomorrow morning if you're interested."

"Are you kidding?" he asked. "Max didn't say anything about sailing lessons. Sign me up every day that I'm here."

Montgomery laughed. "You got it," he said, then backed away from the wheel. "You want to take over for a while?"

Without hesitation, he slid over and was soon lost in the feel of skimming over the waves, the power of the boat speaking to the part of him that was just a little wild. It was a relief to lose himself in the moment, to let the ache of loss that followed him every minute of his life fade as he navigated the boat through the waves toward Heart of the Ocean and the friend he hadn't seen in over five years. He was ready for a new start and everything pointed to this being the time and place to make that happen.

When the island came into sight, still only a speck on the horizon, he looked over at Montgomery, wondering if he wanted to take over. "Take her all the way in if you want," he said. "It's an easy harbor and a small marina. You've got this."

Following the path plotted on the instruments in front of him, he slowed the boat and slipped into the harbor, forcing himself to concentrate, but the island's beauty made it

difficult. A second later, he noticed another boat keeping pace with them, but only gave it a quick glance to assure himself that there was plenty of space between the boats, thinking more about the dock in front of him.

It had been a while since he'd docked anything but his cruiser; the last thing he wanted to do was scratch Montgomery's boat, and he thought about handing the wheel back over for a second. But it wasn't far, and he was sure he could do it, so he stayed where he was, heart pounding just a bit as they approached.

Montgomery stepped up next to him. "Looks like you're not the only guest captaining one of the boats today," he said, looking over at the boat running next to them. "She's giving you a run for your money too."

Unable to resist, he looked over at the other boat, and his already racing heart skipped a beat when he saw the redhead standing behind the wheel. Completely forgetting what he was doing, he could only stare at the woman as all his senses suddenly came to life. His body began to tingle, and desire swept through him. He knew what was happening to him all too well; it had happened many times before, in crowded restaurants, busy shopping centers, even in line at the bank once, but this response was stronger than anything he'd felt before.

"Hey, you'd better slow down, or you're going to ram the dock," Montgomery said, reaching around him to pull back the throttle. "Maybe I should take over."

"Sorry, I just lost concentration there for a second," he said, shaking his head. "I thought I.....saw someone I used to know."

The boat had already disappeared to the other side of the marina, the only evidence it had been there was the small wake it had left behind, and he stepped away from the wheel, feeling like an idiot. It had been so long since he'd had one of those episodes, he'd been sure they were over, but the redhead had brought it all to life again, and he

groaned, wondering if his broken heart would ever heal.

Wren

Wren slid into the jump seat next to the captain, a man named Bruce, who was about her age, and gave him a big smile, feeling like she'd finally come home. It had been so long since she'd been out on the sea, so long since she'd ridden the waves and let the power of the ocean soak into her. Bruce smiled back, a look of perfect understanding on his face, then looked back at her best friend sitting huddled on the deck, her face white with fear.

"Susan doesn't look like she's enjoying this very much," Bruce said. "Maybe I should slow down."

"She's been like this since we were kids, the only way she would get on a boat back then is if I was behind the wheel," she said. "I'll go back there and sit with her in a few minutes, I just want to enjoy this for a second. It's been so long since I was on a boat, especially one this fast."

"Were you raised around boats?" Bruce asked. "I've had one foot in the water since I could walk."

"Me too," she said, laughing. "My father is a fisherman, and he took me with him all the time. I think I spent more time on the water than I did on land growing up."

"Eastern coast of Ireland, if I'm not mistaken," Bruce said, looking over at her and grinning when he saw the surprise on her face. "I spent a few years there working the fishing boats. Do you still go out with your dad?"

She hadn't expected the question, and it opened the wound of losing her parents all over again, making her hesitate for a second. "I'm afraid not," she finally said,

pleased that her voice didn't betray the pain that surged through her. "I had a bit of a falling out with my parents a few years ago, and we haven't spoken since then."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bring up a painful topic," Bruce said, his face full of regret, but then he smiled at her. "Do you want to drive for a while?"

"Really?" she asked, then looked back at Susan. "I would love to. It might make Susan feel better, too."

"Then the wheel is all yours," Bruce said, stepping back. "Our course is plotted; all you have to do is follow it."

It was easy to lose herself in the joy of driving the boat. All the stress and worry of her life back home faded as if the spray from the waves washed it all away. For the first time in years, she was on the water, the one place she truly loved to be, and feeding the part of her soul that craved freedom. When the island finally materialized on the horizon, she felt better than she had in years, more relaxed and more in control.

Glancing over her shoulder at Susan, she was relieved to find her friend looking out at the island, a little smile on her face. Reassured that Susan was okay, she took a quick look at their approach to the marina on the chart plotter, then powered down the engines for a slower approach. Spotting another boat on her port side, she caught up to it, then turned to wave at the captain, a smile on her face that probably looked silly but she didn't care, she was happier than she'd been in a long time .

The smile faded when she saw the man behind the wheel. Her heart began to race and she quickly looked away, sure that she'd been wrong. Unable to resist, she looked over at the boat again, but it had pulled away at an angle. She couldn't see the captain's face anymore, but a strange feeling began to grow inside her. A mixture of desire, fear, and anger that left her slightly breathless, and she had to force herself to

concentrate so she didn't miss the turn to get to the slip.

Hands shaking, breath coming in short gasps, she told herself it couldn't be him, he couldn't be on the island, it was impossible, too big of a coincidence. "Are you okay?" Bruce asked, his face full of concern. "You look like you just saw a ghost."

"I'm okay, just a little hungry, maybe," she said, stepping back from the wheel. "Maybe you should take over. Thanks for letting me drive, it was great."

When she finally sank down next to Susan, her friend gave her a searching look, then let out a long sigh. "It happened again, didn't it?" she asked, shaking her head. "When are you going to get over that guy? He was just a rich, stuck-up jerk. You're better without him."

"He wasn't like that and you know it," she said, wondering why she was defending him after all these years. "It's not like I haven't tried to get over him. I'm as tired as you are of this, but I just can't get him out of my mind."

"It's a big waste if you ask me," Susan said. "There are a hundred men out there who would treat you like a queen if you just gave them a chance, instead, you're wasting your life pining over that loser. He didn't even try to come after you, Wren. If he really loved you as much as he said he did, he wouldn't have given up that easily."

"Do you think I don't know that?" she asked, then took a deep breath. "Let's not fight about this, we're on the vacation of a lifetime, I promised I would try to move on, and I will. You just have to be patient with me."

Susan reached over and gave her a hug. "I'm sorry, Wren, I just hate to watch you wasting your life," she said. "But I don't want to fight either, I just want you to be happy."

CHAPTER 2

BLAKE

After thanking Montgomery for letting him captain the boat, Blake threw his duffle onto the dock and climbed out of the boat, wondering if Max was going to meet him. He spotted him a second later, hurrying down the shore with a big smile on his face and decided that his friend looked happier than he'd ever seen him. Hoping that the island would be as good for him, he grabbed his bag and started toward Max, looking forward to catching up.

Just as he reached the shore, he caught a glimpse of the redhead from the boat as she disappeared down a path that led to what looked like a village. "Hey, buddy, it's been too long," Max said, smiling at him. "You haven't changed a bit in all this time."

"You either," he said, craning his neck to look around Max, disappointed when he realized the woman was too far away to see her face.

Max backed up a couple of steps and then turned to see what he was looking at before looking back at him, but he wasn't paying attention to his friend, he was watching the woman walk away, the sway of her hips so familiar it stirred his blood. Forgetting Max was there, he started up the shore toward the little collection of huts, intent on catching up with the woman.

"Hey, you want to wait for me, this is my island after all," Max said, catching up with him. "What's with you anyway?"

“I think I see someone I know,” he said. “I have to see if it’s really her.”

Max followed him silently, but he didn’t miss the concerned look on his face, and wanted to assure his friend that he hadn’t lost his mind, but he wasn’t sure that he hadn’t. When they got to the village, he stopped and looked around, but there was no sign of the redhead and disappointment shot through him, a feeling so familiar he just let out a sigh.

“I don’t see her now,” he said, turning back to Max. “But if she’s here, you’d know. Maybe you could look her up or something. Her name is Wren Bennett. Well, it used to be, but I guess she could have gotten married or something.”

The thought that she might have married someone else made him feel a little sick, but it had been almost six years since he’s seen her, just because he couldn’t move on didn’t mean she was stuck in the past as well. Taking a deep breath, he fought the feeling off, and looked over at Max, surprised to see the concern on his face.

“Are you okay?” Max asked. “You look a little...frantic, I’ve never seen you like this before. Who is this woman?”

“I told you, Wren Bennett,” he said, beginning to get impatient. “I just need you to check your records or whatever, I need to know if she’s here.”

Max hesitated for a second, “I’m sorry, Blake, I really wish I could help you,” he finally said. “But those records are confidential. Even if she’s on the island I would be invading her privacy if I told you she was here.”

“So, you won’t help me?” he asked. “This is really important Max, I need to know if it’s her. ”

“I can help you look for her, but I can’t tell you what’s in the records, especially since

I don't know who this woman is," Max said, shaking his head. "It would be breaking rules I've put in place for everyone to follow, maybe if you told me a little more about her it might help."

"Never mind, it probably wasn't her anyway," he said. "I know how you feel about love, you don't want to hear about it."

"I may not believe in love, but I can see that this woman messed you up but good," Max said. "You're my friend, Blake, that hasn't changed. I want to hear about it, maybe talking about her will help."

"I wish it was that simple," he said, then sighed, "but I suppose you do deserve an explanation for my crazy behavior."

"You don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," Max said. "Let's get some lunch. We can talk while we eat. You're probably starving."

Max sent him to find a table while he grabbed the food, then sat down across from him and started eating, giving him some time to gather his thoughts. "I met Wren the summer after we graduated from college when I went over to Ireland to work on the fishing boats," he said. "Remember how angry you all were at me when I refused to tour Europe with you all?"

"We couldn't understand why you turned down that trip to wrestle with fish," Max said, shaking his head. "I think now I understand why you did it, but back then, I just thought you were crazy."

"I wanted to do something worthwhile for a change," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I was struggling with what I wanted to do for the rest of my life. I didn't think working for my dad's company was the direction I wanted to take. I thought working with my hands might make things a bit clearer, and for a while, a few weeks

anyway, I thought I had it figured out.”

He paused, remembering the moment he'd realized that he was in love with Wren, then let out a long sigh, hating the way just thinking about her filled him with warmth. “Wren was the daughter of the captain I signed on with. She was only eighteen, but the moment I saw her, I knew deep down that she was the one for me.”

Max paused with a bite halfway to his mouth when he stopped speaking, then set it back down and studied him for a second. “I wasn't going to say anything if that's why you stopped talking,” he said. “I don't believe in love at first sight, but that doesn't mean you didn't feel something.”

“It was love, Max, the kind of love that lasts a lifetime. Trust me, I know, it's been almost six years, and I still haven't gotten over her,” he said. “It's hard to understand if you haven't felt it, so I understand if you're skeptical. Honestly, until it happened to me, I didn't really believe in love either.”

“What happened?” Max asked. “I take it there was no happily ever after.”

He shook his head. “I'm not sure what happened. One minute we were planning our lives together; I was going to work with her father while she went to nursing school, then we'd get married and start a life together,” he said. “I was just about to propose when she broke things off and disappeared. No one would tell me where she went, not her father, not her mother. I begged and pleaded but nothing I said made any difference. I finally went home, taking my broken heart with me. After that, I really didn't care what happened to me, so I gave into my parents and started working for my dad. They've been trying to marry me off for years, but Wren is the only woman I want.”

Max sat back in his chair, then shook his head. “Six years is a long time to be hung up on someone,” he finally said. “I guess we'd better try to find out if she's really on

the island.”

Wren

Wren stood at the bedroom window of the cabin she was sharing with Susan, looking out into the trees, but she wasn't seeing the birds that filled the branches or the ocean that rolled onto the beach in the distance. She was thinking about Blake, wondering why after all this time, the sight of a man who looked a little like him could completely destroy her.

Deep down she knew that the choice she'd made all those years ago had been the right one. It never would have worked between them, they came from different worlds. Too much had separated them, and she firmly believed that Blake had known it as well; it was the only explanation for his hiding his wealthy family and privileged background. Feeling the anger rising over her other feelings, she indulged it, preferring the emotion to the pain of her broken heart and missing him, but it didn't last long, and the ache in her heart was soon back.

“What are you doing in here staring out the window?” Susan asked. “There's a beach just waiting for us out there. Get changed and let's go, I don't want to waste a minute of our time here.”

She turned to face her friend, forcing herself to smile. “Sorry, I got distracted, I've never stayed in a cabin that sits up in the trees,” she said. “Have you seen all the birds out there?”

Susan studied her for a second. “You're lying,” she finally said with a sigh. “You're thinking about Blake again, aren't you?”

“I'm sorry, I just can't help it,” she said, sitting down on the bed. “I don't want to feel like this, I want to forget him. I want to move on with my life...”

“Then get changed, and let’s head down to the beach,” Susan said. “I bet there are some single men on the island. Maybe if you just tried talking to one of them it would help. There are lots of other fish in the sea.”

She looked over at Susan, who had a silly smile on her face, and groaned. “If that was a joke, it was a terrible one,” she said, then laughed. “Okay, maybe it wasn’t terrible, but come on, fish in the sea?”

“But it made you laugh, so it was worth it,” Susan said, grinning at her. “I don’t know about you, but I’m starving, let’s pick up something to eat in the village and take it with us. I saw a sandwich shop, I bet they could pack us a picnic.”

At the mention of food her stomach began to growl. “It has been a long time since we ate,” she said. “A picnic on the beach sounds great, then we can swim it off.”

“Not me, I’m going to sleep it off,” Susan said. “We’ve been up since before dawn. I don’t know how you have the energy to swim, but the walk down there will be about as much as I can handle.”

“You know how I get around the water,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “I didn’t realize how much I missed it. The ocean feels like home, I never should have left it.”

“Well, you can always come back,” Susan said, then hesitated. “Wren, your parents want to see you. They know that they messed up, they want to make it up to you and be there for you now.”

The memory of the night her parents kicked her out of the house surfaced in her mind. She still remembered every ugly word they’d said to her, remembered the pain and humiliation of having her clothes thrown across the front yard. It was impossible to forget her father screaming at her from the front porch as she stuffed everything into her car or erase the feeling of devastation when she realized that the two people

who should have loved her no matter what were turning their backs on her when she needed them the most.

“That’s not going to happen,” she said, shaking her head. “We’ve been over this a million times. You know how I feel, so let’s not bring it up again.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry,” Susan said. “I’m just being selfish. I want you back home, Wren. Dublin is so far away, I worry about you all the time alone in that big city.”

“I’m not alone, Susan,” she said. “I have friends and neighbors, people who truly care about me. I wish we could see each other more often, but I have bills to pay and responsibilities that I can’t ignore.”

“I miss you,” Susan said. “But we’re not supposed to be worrying about real life right now, we’re on vacation. Let’s go get some food and hit the beach.”

After climbing down the ladder that suspended the cabin up in the trees and protected it from being washed away during a hurricane, they took the path to the village. “This is so amazing,” Susan said when they stepped off the path. “It looks just like what you’d think a tropical village should look like. I feel like I’ve stepped onto a movie set.”

Smiling at her friend’s enthusiasm, she looked around at the huts forming a circle around a grouping of tables under a big canopy, unconsciously scanning the faces for Blake. When she realized what she was doing, she looked over at her friend, hoping she hadn’t noticed, but Susan was already on the move, heading directly for the sandwich hut and their lunch.

She was a few steps behind her when the back of a man’s head caught her attention. Her heart began to pound as she stared at him, and she had to take a deep breath when a wave of dizziness hit her. Thinking that her worst fear was coming true, she studied

the man, too panicked to move, sure that it was Blake, and telling herself that she needed to get out of there.

“I have to go,” she finally said, grabbing Susan’s arm. “I have to get out of here.”

“Hey, hold on,” Susan said, following her gaze. “It’s not him, Wren, calm down.”

“It is him,” she said. “I’m not imagining things, he’s the right height, his hair is the right color...”

Her words died away when the man turned to face them, and their eyes met. Relief flooded her when she realized it wasn’t Blake, but she kept staring at the man. She finally managed to tear her eyes away, feeling a blush rising on her cheeks, and then, to her horror, the man started toward them. The people in line behind them blocked her exit and she was forced to stand there as the man closed the distance between them, a confused look on his face.

“Do I know you?” he asked. “You look really familiar.”

“No, I don’t think so,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry I was staring, you look a little bit like someone I used to know.”

“Oh, that’s okay, I’m Sam, by the way,” he said, sticking out his hand. “It’s nice to meet you.”

She shook his hand. “Wren,” she said. “Have you been on the island long?”

“I just got here this morning,” he said. “It’s an amazing place. My brother and I just closed a big business deal. This was our treat for busting our butts for months, two weeks in paradise.”

“I hope you enjoy your stay,” she said. “Sorry again for staring.”

“No worries,” he said, smiling at her. “I’m not going to complain when a pretty woman looks at me, I just wish you’d been looking for a different reason. Maybe we could meet for coffee sometime. ”

“Oh, I don’t know...I’m here with my friend...” she stammered, not used to men flirting with her. “I wouldn’t want to leave her alone.”

“I’ll be fine,” Susan interrupted. “She’ll meet you tomorrow morning at nine.”

“Great,” Sam said, grinning at her. “I’ll see you then.”

He was gone before she could say anything. “Susan, I don’t want to meet him for coffee,” she said, giving her friend a dirty look. “You go after him and tell him I’m not going.”

Susan just shook her head. “Too late, he’s gone.”

CHAPTER 3

BLAKE

Blake walked down the beach feeling guilty that he wasn't enjoying the beauty around him, but knew that he'd never be able to relax until he knew for sure that it wasn't Wren that he'd seen in the boat. Max ambled along next to him, not saying a word, but he knew that his friend thought that he'd lost his mind, and he was probably right, he might need professional help. That didn't change the compulsion that wouldn't leave him, so he'd headed for the water figuring that was his best chance of finding her.

"I'm sure you have other things to do," he said, looking over at his friend. "You don't have to babysit me, I'll be fine on my own."

"There's always work to do," Max said, shrugging his shoulders. "It can wait, I'm enjoying walking on the beach and watching you drive yourself crazy."

"You're just scared to leave me alone," he said. "You're afraid I'm going to do something stupid."

"I'm your friend, Blake, I'm just trying to be here for you," Max said. "If you don't want company, just say so and I'll leave you alone. "

"No, that's not what I want. I'm sorry, I guess I'm just a little wound up," he said. "This is the closest I've ever gotten to finding Wren. Deep down I know it's probably not her, but a little part of me can't stop hoping."

“Hope can be a very powerful emotion,” Max said. “Let’s keep searching, I know you won’t be satisfied until you know one way or another.”

They walked on in silence and each time he saw someone on the beach, his heart skipped a beat, but it wasn’t until they were far from the village that he finally saw a redhead in the distance. Max saw the woman at the same time and turned to look over at him, raising his eyebrows in a silent question, but they were too far away from her to be sure, so he just shrugged and kept walking.

As the distance between them shrank, his heart began to pound with anticipation. Everything about her was right, including her height, hair color, and even the way she stood with her hands on her hips. Now that he was so close to finding the woman he’d dreamed about for six years, he suddenly realized he had no idea what he wanted to say to her. Anger, desire, and pain welled up inside him at once, making it hard to think.

Telling himself all he wanted was answers, he stomped toward the woman, desperate now to get the moment over, but when he stepped up to her and she turned around, it wasn’t Wren’s green eyes he was looking into. Disappointment crushed all the other emotions including his hope, and he stood staring at her, suddenly more tired than he’d ever been. Anger at himself rearing up, he took a deep breath, aware that the woman was staring at him, a touch of fear in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you,” he said, backing away from her. “I thought you were someone else. ”

“That’s okay,” the woman said, smiling at him. “No harm done.”

“Can I ask you a question?” he asked. “I’m not a stalker or anything, but I was wondering when you got here.”

The woman studied him for a second, “This morning,” she said. “My boyfriend and I snuck off for a long weekend. He’s taking a surfing lesson, and then he’s meeting me here.”

“Okay, well, thanks for being understanding,” he said, backing away. “I hope you enjoy your weekend.”

Max was waiting for him a few feet away. “I guess it wasn’t her,” he said, falling into step next to him. “I’m sorry Blake, I really am, I wanted it to be her, too.”

“Well, at least now I know that it wasn’t Wren and I can enjoy the rest of my trip without obsessing about her,” he said, sighing. “But I was really hoping...never mind, it doesn’t matter. Thanks for hanging in there with me. I think I’ll go back to my cabin and get settled in, and maybe go for a swim later.”

“Are you sure?” Max asked. “I can push work off for a few more hours, I haven’t given you a tour of the island yet, and you haven’t seen Keith yet. I thought we could head over there and say hello. You’re going to love his fiancé, she’s an engineer and smarter than all of us combined.”

“I can’t wait to meet her, but I think I need some time alone,” he said, feeling guilty. “Don’t worry about me, Max, I’ll be fine, I just need a chance to hit the reset button, I guess.”

“How about dinner at my cabin tonight?” Max asked. “I’ll invite Keith and Stella. We can grill some fish and watch the sunset. There’s lots of news to catch you up on since you never bother to text or call anymore.”

“Are you trying to make me feel guilty?” he asked. “Because it’s working.”

“Good, I’ll see you at eight,” Max said, smiling at him. “ And don’t worry about

dressing for dinner, we're strictly casual around here."

When they got back to the village, Max pointed out the path to his cabin, then headed for his office. He made his way to his cabin, climbed the ladder, then fell into bed, too tired to even take off his shoes. After sleeping for most of the afternoon, he woke feeling refreshed, had a long talk with himself sitting in a rocking chair on the porch of the cabin, then took a quick shower, looking forward to reconnecting with his friends.

Wren was a part of his past. He had to get over her. Fate wasn't going to drop her back into his life no matter how much he wanted her. They'd had their shot at happiness, but something had come between them, and he had to accept that he'd never know what it was, let it go, and move on with his life. With new determination, he set off down the path toward Max's cabin, looking forward to a night with his friends, hoping that for once, Wren's memory didn't intrude.

Wren

Wren was practically skipping as she walked up the beach. It had been a great morning, and she was still flying high from the endorphins sailing had dumped into her blood. Pleased to see Susan tucked up in a lawn chair in the shade of a big palm tree, a cooler by her side, she waved to her friend and hurried a little faster, her stomach growling loudly.

"Glad to see you finally got out of bed," she said, flopping down in a chair next to Susan. "What did you bring for lunch? I'm starving."

Susan lowered her sunglasses and looked over the top of them at her, a little smile on her face, then shook her head. "I can't believe this is the same person who was sulking around the cabin last night," she said, leaning back in her chair. "I take it you're feeling better this morning."

“Sorry about yesterday, I guess I just needed to get it out of my system,” she said, grabbing the cooler. “I was thinking we could go for a hike after lunch. I want to explore, and I want to see everything we can while we’re here.”

“Hey, slow down, I just got out of bed,” Susan said, holding up her cup of coffee. “I’m definitely not ready to go trekking around in the jungle, so maybe we should start by going for a swim.”

“Fine, but tomorrow we’re going hiking,” she said, pulling a sandwich out of the cooler. “And no excuses, I’m getting you up before I leave for my sailing lesson.”

“You’re taking another one?” Susan asked. “Montgomery must be a good teacher, you don’t usually take direction from anyone well.”

“Hey, that’s not true,” she said, then shrugged. “Well, it might be a little true, but Montgomery is great. He knows exactly when to step in and when to let me make mistakes. I can’t wait to get back out there tomorrow; he said we’d try circling the island if the weather is right.”

Susan shivered. “I’ll stay right here on the shore where it’s safe,” she said. “I was thinking about checking out the surfing lessons while you’re on the boat.”

“That’s not exactly staying on the shore,” she pointed out through a mouthful of food. “Won’t you be scared?”

“Honestly, I don’t know, maybe,” Susan said. “But I won’t know until I try.”

“You go, girl,” she said, giving her friend a big smile. “This vacation is all about trying new things.”

“Speaking of new things,” Susan said, grinning at her. “How was coffee this

morning?”

“Uhhhh...don’t remind me,” she said. “It was awful, Sam spent the whole time talking about some business deal. I almost fell asleep in my coffee, and he didn’t even notice.”

“Oh, well, they can’t all be Prince Charming,” Susan said. “At least you got out there. Next time it will be easier.”

“There won’t be a next time,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m happy being single. I don’t need any more stress in my life; I’m just not ready, but maybe someday.”

Susan just sighed and sat back in her chair, and she turned her attention to her lunch, happy to let the topic fade away. Romance was nothing but a headache and a hassle. She had already had enough of that in her life, and the last thing she needed was a man messing everything up even more. She’d meant what she said, someday she might be ready to let someone into her life, but right now, she was happy with how things were.

When her stomach was satisfied, she packed the leftovers back into the cooler and sat back in her beach chair to watch the water, the food making her sleepy. “A little nap might not be the worst idea in the world,” she said, rubbing her stomach. “Then we’ll go for a swim.”

“Fine with me,” Susan said. “I’ve got my book, and it’s nice here in the shade. Sleep as long as you want.”

Wren had no idea how long she’d been asleep when the happy laughter of children woke her. She sat up slowly, looking around, confused for a second, then remembered where she was and saw the source of the laughter. Out in the water, a mother and two children were splashing around in the waves, their faces filled with

happiness, and for the first time, she missed Theo. Pushing the feeling away, knowing it wouldn't be the last time, she focused on the family, surprised to see the father blowing up a huge float shaped like a doughnut.

There were signs posted on the beach prohibiting the use of floats in the water. The danger of being swept out to sea was real and very likely, especially with no lifeguards on duty. Wondering if she should say something, she watched as the father set the float in the water and then called to the woman and children. They all piled onto the pink doughnut, and the man pushed them out into the water, holding onto the strap to keep them from going too far.

Growing more uncomfortable by the second, she watched the family playing in the surf, wondering if the man knew that he was slowly going deeper into the water. She saw the moment when he realized what was happening, then held her breath as he struggled to pull both himself and the raft back to the shore. Her lungs released the air with a whoosh when the man lost his grip on the raft, and it began to float out into deeper water.

“Wren, that doesn't look good,” Susan said. “What the hell are they doing with that thing?”

“Trying to drown themselves,” she said, getting to her feet. “See if you can find some help. I think we've got a big problem.”

Susan jumped to her feet and took off at a run for the village without a word as Wren ran down to the shore, hoping that the current would bring the raft back in. After watching for a few seconds, the sound of the man screaming at his family to paddle in the background, she ran into the water, fighting her way through the waves, then dove in and began swimming for the float.

CHAPTER 4

BLAKE

Blake was sure that he was finally getting the hang of setting the sails as he tightened the line and sat back, a smile of satisfaction on his face. Montgomery had been drilling him hard since his second lesson of the day had started, but he'd held up to the challenge, impressing the other man. He was determined to absorb as much knowledge as possible before he left the island, and his fantasy of sailing around the world felt more and more of a possibility as he learned the ins and outs of the little sailboat.

"What the hell?" Montgomery asked, breaking into his thoughts. "What are those idiots doing with that float? Are they trying to kill themselves?"

He looked up to find a big pink doughnut floating by the shore, a woman and two children balanced on it, a man shoving them around in the waves. Understanding the danger at once, he adjusted the sails and headed for the shore, hoping to cut them off if something went wrong. Only seconds later, his fear became a reality. The man lost his grip on the raft, and it began to bob out to sea, and the frightened woman and children began screaming for help.

The sailboat was getting closer to the doughnut, but the wind suddenly changed direction, the sails went flat, and they slowed to a halt in the water. He looked over at Montgomery, who was barking into the emergency radio, then back at the float, horrified to see it had drifted farther out.

“I’m going after them,” he shouted to get Montgomery’s attention. “You’ll never get help here soon enough.”

Without waiting for a response, he jumped into the water; his life jacket shot him to the surface instantly, and he began swimming for the doughnut, hoping he could get there in time. He was only a few feet away, beginning to think that he was going to reach them, when a big wave crashed first over him, then into the trio floating on the surface. The youngest of the children was thrown off the doughnut, his scream cut off by the water as it closed over his head, but he popped up a second later, his face full of terror.

Afraid the current would take the child out to sea, he began swimming toward him, slowly becoming aware of another swimmer in the water with him when he heard splashing next to him. They both reached the boy at the same time, but he got a hand on the tiny life jacket first and, without even looking at the other person in the water with him, began swimming for the shore.

“Get the doughnut,” he shouted. “Another wave will capsize them.”

It took all his strength to get to shallow water, but the man was there waiting for him and scooped the child out of his arms. “My wife and daughter, they’re still out there,” he said, pointing to the water. “You have to help them.”

Gathering the last of his strength, he waded back into the water, then let his magic come to the surface until he felt the burst of power fill him before diving in again. With the magic flowing through his veins, he shot through the water, barely keeping the creature inside him contained but using its strength to fuel him. It was a delicate balance, but it was a life-and-death situation. He had to risk a full shift if he was going to save the woman and child.

He could see the other swimmer as he came up out of the water on the other side of

the doughnut but turned his focus to the shore, using the last of his strength to propel them through the water. When they got close enough, hands reached out to grab the raft, and he let it go, stumbled out of the water, and collapsed onto the sand. He was only vaguely aware of a woman collapsing next to him, her breath coming in short gasps as she tried to fill her lungs with more air.

It took him several minutes to shut down his magic, the creature inside him still determined to get out, but he fought for control through the deep exhaustion that was settling over him. As the magic faded away, his muscles began to throb in protest, and he groaned, then rolled onto his back, squinting up at the sun, wondering if he'd ever be able to walk again.

He slowly became aware of the commotion on the beach, and then a woman leaned over him. "Are you okay?" she asked. "Do you want me to help you sit up?"

"I'm all right, but I think I need a minute before I sit up," he said, embarrassed. "You don't have to wait with me."

"Sorry, it's my job," the woman said, pointing to her scrubs. "That was quite the swim you just took. I'm here to make sure you're not injured."

"You should check on...the woman..." he panted. "She might be in worse shape than me. She was out there longer."

"There's already someone looking after her," the woman said. "Let's you and I just worry about you."

She helped him sit up. His head swam for a second, then cleared, and he looked over to make sure the woman was okay. A man was helping her sit up, and for a moment, he thought it was the woman from the day before; the red hair was just right, but then she turned to face him, and everything froze. A pair of green eyes he hadn't seen in

almost six years stared back at him. His breath froze in his throat, his heart skipped a beat, the dizziness returned, and all he could do was return her gaze, thinking that he still loved her as much as he ever had.

Wren

Wren's head was spinning, her lungs on fire, and her vision a little blurred as she turned to look at the man sitting next to her on the beach. It took her a second to focus on him, but when his features finally became clear, she didn't believe what she was seeing for several long heartbeats. Time seemed to stand still as she sank into his brown eyes like she had so many times before. A burst of warmth flowed through her making her entire body begin to tingle, and she sucked in a shocked breath.

"Are you okay?" the man hovering over her shoulder asked. "I think we should get you back to the village. You might be in shock."

She realized that she'd begun to tremble; her breath was coming in short gasps, and then Susan was standing in front of her. "Let's get her out of here," she said, giving Blake a dirty look. "She's had enough for one day."

Just then, a man came running down the beach, his face filled with concern. "Is everyone okay?" he asked, then knelt down on the sand next to her. "I'm Max, the owner of the resort. You're a very brave young woman. Let's get you back to the village so the doctor can take a look at you."

He scooped her up out of the sand before she could protest and started for the village, Susan trailing along behind him, Blake still sitting in the sand fading slowly from view. Wondering if she really was in shock, she forced herself to take deep breaths until the trembling stopped, but calming the thoughts bouncing around in her head was a different matter. Her greatest hope and fear had just come true, Blake had reappeared in her life. Worse, there was no escape, they were on the island together,

and there was no way she'd be able to avoid seeing him.

Fear suddenly shot through her, the words Blake's mother had said to her all those years ago flooding her mind, and she realized that no matter what else happened, he couldn't find out about their son. Theo meant everything to her; she couldn't risk losing him, couldn't imagine her life without him, and knew that with their money and power, she didn't stand a chance, they'd take him away from her just like his mother had promised all those years ago.

When panic threatened to gain control, she fought it off, reminding herself that it was up to her to protect her son from Blake and his parents. Keeping him a secret was the only way to do that. Forcing herself to calm down, she began to think about what she would say to Blake when he finally caught up to her, formulating the lies that would hold him off until she could get off the island and away from him.

By the time Max deposited her on a bed in the small infirmary at the back of the main building in the village, she'd convinced herself that she was ready to see Blake. "There now, that's better," Max said, stepping away from her. "The doctor should be here soon to check on you. In the meantime, I'll get you some water and maybe a little snack."

"Thank you, that might help," she said, a little tremor still in her voice. "I'm feeling a bit run down."

"And you should, from what I hear, that was a very daring rescue," Max said. "I'm just glad that everyone is all right. I may have to think about hiring some lifeguards after all."

"It might be a good idea," she said. "But I'm happy I was there to help."

"Of course I'm going to refund the cost of your stay. It's the least that I can do," Max

said, then paused, an embarrassed look on his face. “I usually meet all my guests at some point, but I don’t think we’ve met yet.”

“I’m Wren, and this is my friend Susan,” she said. “You don’t have to give us a refund. That’s unnecessary, I was glad to help.”

Max was looking at her strangely, his mouth hanging open a little, and she began to wonder if there was something wrong with him. “Did you say Wren?” he finally asked. “Your last name wouldn’t be Bennett, would it?”

“Yep, that’s me,” she said, looking over at Susan. “I really am feeling better. Maybe I’ll just go back to my cabin.”

“It’s you,” Max said, his eyes wide with shock. “He really did see you, I can’t believe this...I have to go get him...he wants to talk to you.”

Before she could say anything, Max spun around and left the room. They could hear him barking orders as he walked down the hallway, and she suddenly just wanted to get out of there. She wasn’t ready to see Blake, and she couldn’t remember a single one of the lies she’d made up in her head. A wave of panic shot through her, making her gasp.

“I’m not ready to see him,” she said, trying to keep her breath steady. “And no matter what else you do, don’t tell Blake about Theo. He can’t know about him.”

Susan looked over at her. “Wren, are you sure?” she asked. “Doesn’t Blake deserve to know that he’s a father? Doesn’t Theo deserve to have a father?”

“It’s not Blake I’m afraid of, it’s his parents,” she said. “They’ll try to take him away from me. I know it, please just don’t say anything. I’ll explain later, I promise.”

Just then, the doctor came bustling into the room.

“Well, now, you don’t look so bad,” she said. “Couple of fools you two, swimming out after that float like that, could have gotten yourselves killed, but I guess it all worked out okay.”

CHAPTER 5

BLAKE

Blake ran into Max as he was coming through the front door of the infirmary. “You were right,” he said. “It’s her, Blake, Wren is on the island.”

“I know, I saw her on the beach,” he said, giving his friend a dirty look. “You took her away before I could talk to her. Where is she?”

“Inside, but I saw the doctor come in right before you got here,” Max said, following him inside. “What are you going to do?”

“What do you mean?” he asked. “I’m going to talk to her. What else would I do?”

Max pulled him to a stop. “When we were on the beach and you thought you spotted her, you got really angry, and you’re not exactly calm right now,” he said. “I just don’t want you to go charging in there and making a fool of yourself or worse. I mean, maybe she doesn’t feel the same way you do; maybe she hasn’t been missing you for all these years.”

That made him pause for a second. He’d never considered Wren’s feelings; had been so focused on his broken heart and longing for her, he hadn’t seen past it. It was like being punched in the stomach, and he staggered back a step; in his mind, he’d always assumed that she still loved him. The idea that his infatuation might be one-sided hadn’t entered his mind. What they’d shared had been so powerful, he’d never imagined that it could die away that easily.

The hope that had been slowly building in his chest began to fade away, but then he remembered the look in Wren's eyes on the beach, he'd seen the love simmering just under the surface, had felt the warmth of what they shared. Shaking his head, he started down the hallway again, trusting what the creature deep inside him was telling him.

"She still loves me," he said over his shoulder. "I saw it in her eyes. I let her get away once, I'm not going to make that mistake again."

Max sighed and followed him down the hallway. "You can't just go bursting into the room," he called. She's still worn out from the crazy stunt you two pulled today."

Susan was standing guard outside the door when he walked up, and that summer came back to him in a rush. "Well, look what the cat dragged in," she said, glaring at him. "Have you come to ruin Wren's life some more?"

"What do you mean?" he asked. "What's wrong with Wren's life?"

"Nothing and none of your business," Susan said, crossing her arms over her chest. "Now, go away. She doesn't want to see you right now."

He looked past Susan at the door. Wren was so close that he could smell her unique scent, and the creature inside him began to stir, recognizing its mate. If there had been any doubt in his mind over the last six years, it vanished instantly as his magic flared to life, and it took everything in him not to shove Susan out of the way to claim the woman he loved.

"I just want to make sure that she's okay," he said. "I promise I won't upset her. "

Susan studied him for a second, then shook her head. "Just seeing you will upset her," she finally said. "Why don't you go away and leave her alone? All that stuff between

you was in the past; let it go.”

“I can’t, I still love her,” he said. “I’ve never gotten over her. It’s been six years, and I still miss her like she walked away from me yesterday. I just need to see her for a second; I just need to know that I didn’t dream the whole thing. I don’t know what I did, how I hurt her, but I never meant to; you have to believe me.”

He saw the moment Susan began to give in, saw the softening of her eyes, and waited, holding his breath, hope fluttering in his chest. “Fine, I’ll let her know that you’re here,” she said, letting out a long sigh. “But I’m not making any promises so don’t get your hopes up.”

He paced up and down the hallway, too nervous to stand still. The minutes ticked by on the clock on the wall, one, two, three, and he began to lose hope. But he reminded himself that this was his first try. He wasn’t going to give up that easily, not when he had Wren cornered on the island. She’d talk to him eventually, if not now, then tomorrow or the day after. He’d seen the look in her eyes, seen the passion he remembered so well, and he wasn’t going to let it slip through his fingers again.

Susan wasn’t exactly smiling when she came back out of the room, but his heart leaped anyway, and he took a deep breath, hoping he didn’t look too anxious. “I can’t believe I’m on your side, but I talked her into seeing you tomorrow,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “That’s the best I can do. I think she needs some time to get used to the idea, but let me give you a piece of advice: no more secrets; complete honesty is the only way that you’re going to get her back.”

“I never lied to her,” he said, defending himself. “I was always honest with her.”

“Lies of omission count too, and that’s all I’m going to say about it,” Susan said. “Wren will meet you in the village for breakfast at nine tomorrow morning.”

“Thank you,” he said, beaming at her. “I don’t know why you decided to help me, but I’ll be eternally grateful.”

“You’d better not screw this up,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. “Wren has already been hurt enough.”

“I don’t want to hurt her,” he said. “I want to love her for the rest of my life.”

Wren

Wren climbed down the ladder, wishing she’d agreed to let Susan come with her. Then, she looked up at the doorway where her best friend was standing watching her, a look of concern on her face. Seeing Blake after all the time that had passed wasn’t going to be easy, especially when she was still in love with him, but she couldn’t risk losing her son and dealing with him now was the only way to make sure that didn’t happen. She had to find a way to make him understand that what they’d shared was gone and make him believe that she didn’t love him anymore, and would never love him again.

When she’d walked away from him six years ago, it had been one of the hardest things she’d ever done. This would be even worse, this time she’d have to face him, and there would be no running away. Taking a deep breath to calm her pounding heart, she reminded herself what was at stake, and when Theo’s little face popped into her head, she felt her resolve strengthening.

She’d do and say whatever was necessary to keep her son in her life and never complain again about her job, their crummy apartment, or the challenges of being a single mother. Her happiness would always come second to Theo’s needs. He was her baby, and it was her job to protect him. They might not have all the benefits that come with being rich, but there was love in their home, something that was worth more than anything money could buy.

Her heart still skipped a beat when she saw Blake standing at the edge of the village waiting for her, but she was able to walk up to him without hesitating, reminding herself that he knew nothing about her life. A big smile spread across his face when he saw her, and she wished more than anything that they could have the reunion he clearly wanted, but she knew that was impossible, too much had happened since that day his mother had ambushed her at the dock.

“I’m so glad you came.” Blake said, searching her face. “I already ordered breakfast. I thought it might be easier.”

“Thank you, that was nice of you,” she said, fighting the urge to throw herself in his arms. “I can’t stay long though; I have a sailing lesson this morning, and I don’t want to miss it.”

“I’ve been taking lessons too,” Blake said, clearly relieved to find a safe subject. “I guess you still love the ocean as much as you used to.”

“I don’t get as much time on the water as I would like now, but sailing has been a lot of fun,” she said. “Montgomery is a great teacher. We’ve been having a lot of fun.”

“Yeah, he reminds me of some of the guys on your dad’s crew, he really knows his stuff,” Blake said. “Maybe we should go sit down. Our breakfast is probably getting cold.”

She followed him through the village to the food court, pausing when she saw a table draped with a white cloth and set for two. “It looks like you did a little more than just order us breakfast,” she said, touched at the effort and unable to hide the smile on her face. “You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble.”

“It wasn’t that big of a deal,” Blake said, clearly pleased. “Come and sit down. I wasn’t sure what you wanted to eat, so I ordered a little of everything. You have to

help me eat it all.”

She let him hold her chair while she sat down, and she found herself holding her breath when his scent drifted over her, making her feel warm all over. She fought off the feeling by taking deep breaths, reminding herself she just had to get through breakfast, and then she'd be free of him for good. As Blake filled his plate and they began to eat, an uncomfortable silence fell between them, all the things that had never been said all those years ago suddenly looming between them.

When Blake put down his fork and looked at her, she was sure that he was going to bring up the past. Instead, he studied her for a second. “You're even more beautiful than I remember,” he finally said. “I want to know about your life now, Wren. I want to know all about you.”

She shrugged. “There's not much to tell,” she said, pleased with how calm her voice sounded. “I manage a clothing store in one of the biggest malls in Dublin. It's not my dream job, but it pays the bills, and I like the people I work with.”

“You didn't go to nursing school?” Blake asked. “I thought...well...that was always your dream; I assumed when you left, that's where you went.”

It took her a second to answer, the brief flash of pain in his eyes making it hard to speak. “Nursing school didn't quite work out. I had to give up the idea,” she said. “Sometimes dreams don't come true. We trade them for other things that become more important.”

Blake thought about that for a second, then shook his head. “I promised myself I wouldn't bring up the past; I swore that I'd leave it alone, but I can't,” he said, the pain back in his eyes. “When I thought that you left me to go to school, well, I could live with that, but now... What happened, Wren? Why did you leave without saying goodbye? I thought we had the real thing. I thought we were going to spend the rest

of our lives together, and I thought that's what you wanted to do, too."

Her fork clattered onto her plate when a powerful wave of despair washed over her, laced with an overwhelming grief. The feeling was unlike anything she'd ever felt before, and it took her breath away and even made her feel a little dizzy. Trying to suck in a deep breath, she tried to push the feeling away, but it wouldn't ease, and when she looked into Blake's eyes, she saw the feelings mirrored there. Shaking her head, she could only stare at him, the realization that she was experiencing not only her own feelings, but his, slowly settling over her.

"It can't be...this isn't right..." she stammered rising shakily to her feet. "I shouldn't have come...I can't do this...."

Desperate to get away from Blake, she headed for the beach, hoping he wouldn't follow her, but she heard his footsteps behind her and groaned as the emotions racing through her changed. Now filled with desperation, she fought for breath, beginning to feel dizzy just as she hit the shore and the waves washed over her feet.

CHAPTER 6

BLAKE

Blake caught up to Wren on the shore, but resisted the urge to reach out and pull her into his arms. He had done exactly what he'd promised himself that he wouldn't do and brought up the past. He hadn't meant to go down that path, but hearing that she'd never fulfilled her dream of going to college had made the loss he was already feeling even more intense. He'd always seen her living the life she'd always dreamed of, the sacrifice she'd made worth it, but that illusion had now been shattered with all the rest.

"Wren, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you," he said. "I'm sure you had very good reasons for walking away from us. I shouldn't have brought it up, but all these years, I've been imagining you making your dreams come true. It helped me make sense of you just disappearing like you did. It helped me get through the days and nights without you."

Wren stood motionless for several long minutes, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as the waves washed over her feet, then he saw her relax just a little. "You've been thinking about me all this time?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "I thought you'd move on, that you'd find someone...better suited for you than me."

"Better suited for me? That doesn't sound like you," he said, taking a few steps toward her. "You're the only woman for me, Wren; you're the one who's suited for me, as you put it. It was true six years ago, and it's still true now."

Wren started shaking her head. “It wouldn’t have worked then, and it won’t work now,” she said. “I’m sorry, Blake, we come from different worlds, a fact you hid from me, which tells me that you know I’m right.”

“Different worlds, what is that supposed to mean?” he asked, stepping closer. “I didn’t hide anything from you. We were planning a future together, Wren.”

She whirled on him, eyes flashing with anger. “Oh, I see, and when were you planning on telling me about your rich parents and their plans for you?” she asked, taking a couple of steps toward him. “At least if I’d known I wouldn’t have looked like an idiot when your mother ambushed me on the dock, I would have been prepared for the vile things she said to me.”

“My mother?” he asked, not sure that he’d heard correctly. “When did you meet my mother?”

“The day I left, you idiot,” she said, shoving him. “She showed up on the dock and explained very clearly why she would never let me marry you, made it very clear what our lives would be like if you did. I was too shocked at first to understand exactly what she meant, but she was happy to elaborate, happy to let me know exactly how I would be treated by your family and friends.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” he asked, stepping up to her until they were almost touching. “I was ready to give it all up for you. I hated that life, Wren. I wanted to do something real with my life, and that’s why I was working for your dad. I didn’t want what my parents were offering me; I wanted you. I didn’t care about the money or the social status, and I still don’t.”

“You would have been sorry eventually. You would have grown to hate me for making you give up so much,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t you see, your mother was right, and I wanted...to remember you the way I’d seen you the last

time.”

“She wasn’t right; she’s a mean, controlling woman who was only out to get what she wanted. Walking away from her and that life wouldn’t have been a great sacrifice,” he said. “If you’d just come to me, we could have worked it out. We still can, it’s not too late. I still care about you, Wren, I still want you in my life.”

Her eyes filled with sadness, and his heart sank. “It’s too late, Blake,” she said, wrapping her arms around herself again. Too much has changed. We can’t go back to the kids we were back then; we’re different people now.”

“Not that different. My heart still pounds when I see you; I still want to hold you in my arms as soon as I get close to you; I still recognize your scent, Wren,” he said, reaching up to stroke her cheek. “Fate brought us together again, I can’t just walk away from you. I’ve waited too long to have you back in my life. Isn’t what we still share worth something to you?”

Tears began to roll down Wren’s cheeks. “Oh, Blake, please stop. You just don’t understand,” she said, stepping away from him. “What we had is gone. There’s nothing left. It died out long ago. You’re just holding onto a memory. It’s time for both of us to move on.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do, but I’m trying to do it with you,” he said, then closed the distance between them and took her face in his hands. “If you can look me in the eye and tell me that you don’t care about me anymore, I’ll walk away and leave you alone. I’ll never bother you again, even if it feels like I’m having my heart ripped out.”

Wren wouldn’t meet his eyes at first, but he waited her out, and she finally looked up at him, then let out a little sigh as her arms dropped to her sides. She opened her mouth and closed it again. A fresh wave of tears rolled down her cheeks, and he used

his thumb to wipe them away, but he still didn't say anything or let her go.

"I can't," she finally croaked. "I don't want you to leave me alone, I've missed you every minute since we've been apart, but it's not just about what we want..."

Before she could finish her sentence, he pulled her into his arms, lowered his mouth to hers, and kissed her, instantly igniting the passion between them. It felt so right to have her in his arms again; he never wanted to let her go. He broke off the kiss, not wanting to push Wren too hard, then stood arms wrapped around her, thanking the powers that had brought her back to him.

"Will you have dinner with me tonight?" he asked, pulling back and looking down at her. "I promise we don't have to talk about the past; we can focus on the future if that's what you want. We both made mistakes, but it doesn't matter anymore; we're together again."

Wren

"He kissed you," Susan interrupted, her face filled with surprise, bouncing on the couch. "Oh my God, he actually kissed you. What was it like?"

"It was a kiss," she said, but felt her cheeks turning pink, the memory making her entire body begin to fill with warmth. "It was just a quick kiss, actually. It only lasted a few seconds, so it was no big deal."

"Liar, it was a big deal, wasn't it?" Susan asked, narrowing her eyes at Wren. "And don't you dare try to lie to me. I always know when you're lying, missy."

She let out a long sigh. "Fine, it was one of the best kisses I've ever had," she said, feeling like she wanted to cry. "It was like coming home after being gone a long time, and I just wanted it to go on forever and ever. Now, are you happy?"

“I’m sorry, Wren, I was just happy for you,” Susan said, then hesitated. “Wren, you should tell him about Theo; Blake really cares about you; he wouldn’t try to take him away from you.”

“But his mother would, and I can’t take that risk, at least not right now,” she said, shaking her head. “It might be different if I knew for sure that I’d have Blake on my side, but I don’t trust him yet. I just can’t risk it. I need to find out what kind of a man he is now, I need to know that he’ll stand up to his parents. Theo is my entire life, Susan, I can’t risk losing him.”

Susan was silent for a second, then a smile spread across her face. “Well, telling him that he’s the father of a five-year-old boy would certainly be a test of what kind of man he is,” she said. “You could do a gender reveal kind of thing, light some blue sparklers...”

“Don’t even joke about this,” she said, groaning. “It isn’t funny, I have no idea how I’m going to tell him, if I do decide to tell him.”

“Well, if you want my advice, the sooner you tell him, the better,” Susan said. “The longer you wait, the harder it’s going to be.”

“I know, but I’m not ready,” she said. “I’ll have dinner with him and see how it goes. Theo stays a secret until I’m sure that I can trust him.”

After Blake’s big display at breakfast that morning, Wren wasn’t sure what to expect when she got to the village that night and hoped that he hadn’t done something equally flashy. The sun was just beginning to slide toward the horizon, and she wished that she was down on the beach to watch the bold display of color that came with the onset of night, but turned her attention to the evening crowd in the village, scanning the faces for Blake.

When she didn't see him at first, a wave of disappointment washed over her, and she had to scold herself both for being impatient and putting so much energy into one dinner. She finally spotted Blake coming out of the sandwich shop, a wicker basket in his hand, and a thrill washed over her as she watched him walk toward her, a big smile on his face.

"I thought I might have overdone it at breakfast this morning," he said, holding up the basket. "So, I thought I'd keep it simple tonight: a picnic on the beach while the sun goes down. We'll let Mother Nature entertain us tonight."

"I can't think of anything I would like more," she said. "But you have to promise me two things."

"Okay, I'm game," he said. "But I have to hear what they are first."

"First, no kissing, I can't think straight when you kiss me," she said, then blushed when she realized that she'd said too much. "And second, no talking about the past, not tonight anyway."

"I'll agree to the second one, but I don't know about the first," he said. "This is a date, and there's usually a goodnight kiss involved in a date. I think I should be allowed at least that."

"You never said this was a date," she countered. "Give me a minute; I need to consider your counteroffer."

She could see Blake trying not to laugh and didn't drag it out. "Okay, I'll give you one goodnight kiss, but that's it," she said. "Take it or leave it."

"You've got a deal," he said, laughing. "It's been a pleasure bargaining with you, but if we want to see the sunset, we'd better get moving."

Blake led them to a perfect spot on the beach, unfolded the blanket he'd been carrying in a bag on his back, then helped her sit down. He unpacked the food, refusing her offer to help as the bright oranges, reds, and pinks of a tropical sunset spread themselves across the horizon. Without a word, he made her a plate, then handed it over before filling one for himself, and it was a few minutes before she looked down at the food.

Spread across the plate were three of her favorite foods; for a moment, she could only stare down at them. "You remembered," she finally said, looking over at him. "You're not making this very easy, Blake."

"That was my plan, Wren. I want you back," he said. "And I'll do anything it takes to make that happen, so you'd better get used to this. I've just begun to try and win you over."

She wanted to tell him that she'd always been his, that six years apart hadn't changed that, but Theo's face popped into her mind, and she held back. "Don't get your hopes up," she said instead, hating the hurt she saw in his eyes. "Nothing has changed, Blake. There's still so much standing in our way."

CHAPTER 7

BLAKE

Blake swallowed his disappointment with a big drink of his iced tea, then pretended that Wren's words hadn't hurt him, reminding himself that he couldn't rush things. She was going to need time to see that they belonged together despite what his mother had said. It hadn't hit him just how much damage his mother had done until he'd gotten back to his cabin after breakfast with Wren that morning, and even now, the anger was so powerful that he knew that no amount of time was going to dull it.

Taking a deep breath to calm himself, he looked over at Wren watching the last rays of light slip behind the horizon, a smile on her face, and reminded himself tonight wasn't about his mother. He would deal with her when the time was right. He wanted a few days to figure out what he wanted to do, but one thing was clear, he was done with his parents and his job. It might mean that his sailboat would have to wait, a sacrifice he was willing to make now that he knew just how far his mother would go to get what she wanted.

"That was beautiful. Thank you for thinking of it," Wren said, interrupting his thoughts. "I'm usually still at work when the sun goes down, and watching it from my apartment window just isn't the same."

"I remembered how much you used to love to watch the sunset when we were out on the fishing boat. No matter what we were doing, you always took a few minutes to watch," he said. "I used to love those moments because I knew that I'd have you all to myself."

Wren's face softened with the memory, igniting a spark of hope. "Sunset always seemed like a magical time of day to me, and having you there only made it better," she said with a sigh. "I wish we could go back to when things were that simple."

He wanted to tell her that they could, that nothing was too complicated if they were together, but held back, sensing that wasn't the right thing to say. "You made me promise not to talk about the past, and I guess I already broke that promise," he said, taking a small lantern out of the picnic basket. "So, let's talk about the present. That should be a safe place to start."

A flicker that almost looked like fear flashed in Wren's eyes, but it was gone so quickly he couldn't be sure thanks to the shadows the lantern cast on her face. "Like I said before, there's not much to tell," she said, with a shrug of her shoulders. "I ended up in Dublin after I left home. I worked my way up at the clothing store, and now I'm the manager."

"Your parents must miss you," he said. "You were all so close, I was always a little jealous."

"There was nothing to be jealous of," Wren said, a little catch in her voice. "Their love turned out to be very conditional. We haven't seen each other in a long time, and I don't like to talk about it."

"Oh, Wren, I'm so sorry," he said, scooting a little closer to her. "I didn't mean to bring up a sensitive subject. It seems like I can't avoid the past no matter what I do."

"It's okay. I guess it was an unrealistic expectation on my part," she said, smiling at him. "I know you're not doing it on purpose, but how about if we talk about you instead?"

"Which will be a very short conversation; my life is pretty boring. I go to work and

come home every day, that's about it," he said. "I have a few friends that I hang out with occasionally, but they're all married and have kids now, so it doesn't happen that often."

"That sounds lonely, Blake," Wren said. "Don't you have someone special in your life?"

"No, I haven't tried dating in a long time, it never worked out, and the woman always ended up hurt," he said. "I decided it was better to be single until...well, I got over you, but that hasn't happened yet."

"Blake, I told you..." she started to say, but he interrupted her.

"Wren, I'm not putting any pressure on you, I'm telling you the truth," he said. "Maybe if we get all this past stuff out of the way, we can be done with it and move on."

She studied him for a second. "You mean like ripping off a bandage?" she finally asked. "Just get it over all at once so it's out of the way."

"Something like that," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Maybe we'll both get some closure, or maybe we'll be able to get past it. I don't know, it might be a bad idea."

Wren was silent for a second, then seemed to come to a decision and looked over at him. "Did you look for me?" she asked. "Did you ever try to find me?"

He nodded, "No one would tell me where you went. I knocked on every door I could think of, most of them twice. I begged and pleaded with your parents. I spent an entire night camped out in front of the house, hoping that would work," he said. "They still wouldn't tell me anything. They acted like I was a criminal or something. I was just getting ready to start looking for you in the next village when my parents

showed up.”

“Your mother talked you into going home, didn’t she?” Wren asked, her face full of sadness. “She told me she was taking you home, and I’d never see you again. I guess she was right.”

“Only because you let her,” he said, a spark of anger igniting inside him. “I didn’t know she’d come to see you; I didn’t know about the terrible things she said to you; you didn’t give me a choice, Wren. You just disappeared, and no one would tell me where you were. I was heartbroken, I had no idea what went wrong. One night, we were planning our life together, and then the next morning, you were gone. Maybe I should have stayed and looked for you, maybe I gave in too easily, and maybe I would have made a different decision if I’d known what was wrong.”

Wren

Wren was surprised by Blake’s anger at first, but then realized that he was right. She’d been so caught up in protecting Theo that she’d forgotten about her part in everything back then. “I’m sorry, Blake, I guess you did the best you could,” she said. “And you’re right, I should have come and talked to you, but I was just a stupid kid back then. I thought I was doing the right thing. I was scared of your mother, scared that she’d follow through with her threats and cut you off and that someday you’d come to hate me for that. You should have told me about her, you should have warned me. I was so unprepared to handle a woman like her that I just did what she said and ran away from you. I guess I could have fought harder, but I wasn’t sure what I was fighting for. I felt like I didn’t know you after discovering the truth. ”

Blake let out a long sigh. “I guess we both made mistakes. I should have told you about my parents, but I didn’t want people treating me differently just because I was rich,” he said. “That’s happened to me my entire life. That summer I just wanted to be me, I wanted to stand on my own two feet without my family’s money or social

standing propping me up. But that's no excuse. I should have told you, I should have trusted you of all people with the truth. I knew it wouldn't make any difference to you, I just never..."

"I didn't trust you enough either," she said when his words trailed off. "I should have come to you, we should have talked it out, though. Things might have turned out differently."

"Let's start over, Wren," Blake said, taking her hand. "We can take it slow if you want, and I promise my mother isn't going to be a problem this time; I am done with her meddling in my life to get what she wants."

She wanted to believe him, wanted to sink into his arms and feel his lips on hers again as the warmth of their love spread through her, but she held back, Theo as always at the back of her mind. It was quickly approaching the point where she had to tell him about his son or risk the new and fragile bond they were creating. The problem was that she wasn't sure it was what she wanted.

Blake was both the love of her life and the man she couldn't live without. She'd been completely vulnerable with him once before, and she wasn't sure she could risk that kind of devotion again. If it was just her, if it was only her heart she was risking, she'd take the leap, but there was Theo to think about. The last thing she wanted was him getting hurt if things went badly, and that was something she just couldn't risk.

But looking into Blake's eyes, she felt the pull he'd always had over her as warmth spread through her, and she let out a long sigh. "Maybe if we take it slow it might be all right," she finally said. "Don't forget, we both have lives waiting for us when we leave the island. Life has taken us in different directions, Blake; we can't ignore that."

"We have these two weeks, Wren," he said. "That's all I'm asking for right now. We

can worry about what's waiting for us out there later. Right now, I just want to enjoy having you back in my life. I know we're not in a fairy tale, but fate was kind enough to give us a second chance, let's not waste it."

When he put his arm around her, Wren leaned into him, deciding that for the rest of the trip, she wouldn't worry about Theo, home, or any of the other million things that always filled her mind. She'd give herself this time with Blake, two weeks of what could have been, and pushed telling him about their son to the back of her mind. She'd know when the time was right, when he was ready to find out that he was a father.

"Let's do something together tomorrow, I know you have a sailing lesson, but maybe after that," Blake said, breaking into her thoughts. "You could invite Susan, I know she doesn't like me very much, but..."

"If it wasn't for Susan, I wouldn't be here," she said, looking up at him. "She pushed me to have breakfast with you the other day. She wouldn't let me say no."

"Really?" Blake asked. "I was under the impression that she thought I ruined your life. She basically said so the first time I saw her."

"I guess she changed her mind," Wren said, shrugging her shoulders. "Maybe you should ask her yourself."

"I think I will; after all, I need all the help I can get," he said, grinning down at her. "Have you ever been snorkeling?"

She shook her head. "No, we try to stay out of the water in Ireland," she said. "It's a bit frigid even in the summer for something like that. "

"I've only been a couple of times. It's a lot of fun," he said. "I bet the water around

here is perfect, and I saw a sign-up sheet for a class tomorrow in the village. What do you think?"

"Sounds like fun to me, and I'm sure Susan will want to go," she said. "As long as it doesn't involve getting up early in the morning, she's boycotting them while we're here."

Blake laughed. "Well, isn't that what vacations are for?" he said. "It's getting late, so I guess I should walk you back to your cabin."

It was a bit of a surprise to find that she was disappointed the night was over. She wasn't ready to give up the feeling of Blake's arm around her, and she didn't want to lose the warmth of their connection. He must have sensed what she was feeling. Instead of getting up, he pulled her closer and buried his face in her hair, sending waves of warmth coursing through her.

"I think you still owe me a goodnight kiss," Blake finally said, turning to face her. "That was our deal, wasn't it?"

Her heart began to pound when he gathered her in his arms and lowered his mouth to hers. Waves of pleasure instantly spread through her, and she let out a little sigh, opening her mouth to him. Blake slipped his tongue into her mouth with a sigh of his own, pulled her closer as he deepened the kiss, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, the years slipping away.

It was like the six years they'd been separated had never happened. She was lost in his kiss again, drowning in the sensations that rushed through her. When he finally released her, it took a while for her to come back to the present. She was in deeper than she'd ever been, her love for him surging to the surface, and she hoped that she hadn't just made a huge mistake.

CHAPTER 8

BLAKE

Blake was doing his best to listen to the instructor, but the sight of Wren in a bathing suit was so distracting he was only catching every other word. “Now that we’ve got the basics down, I’m going to let you all head off on your own,” the young woman said. “If you’re not a strong swimmer, I’d suggest you stay close to the marina, but for those of you with more experience there’s some great rock formations on the island's south side that are great to explore. Just be careful of the tide. It come in quick over there. As soon as the water starts rising, get out of there. The riptide is dangerous.”

There was some murmuring among the students, and they began to split up in groups. “Let’s go check out the rocks,” Susan said, then nudged him. “If you can stop drooling long enough.”

He realized he was staring at Wren. “Sorry, it’s just hard to believe that she’s standing right there,” he said, shaking his head. “I thought I’d never see her again, but now here she is. I’m afraid I’m dreaming.”

Susan rolled her eyes at him and made a face. “Gross, she’s my best friend,” she said. “I don’t want to hear all that sappy stuff.”

“What sappy stuff?” Wren asked, joining them. “Are we going to go check out those rocks?”

Ignoring her first question, he nodded. “Susan’s already been bugging me to go,” he said. “I’m in, but we should grab some lunch to take with us. It’s a bit of a hike over there.”

An hour later, they emerged from the jungle on the other side of the island, hot and sweaty but rewarded by the sight of a rocky coastline filled with lots of potential. “Oh, look, tide pools, I want to explore them after we swim. I bet there’s all kinds of cool stuff in there,” Susan said, dropping her backpack onto the sand in the shade. “But first, I want to cool off. Last one in is a rotten egg!”

“I haven’t heard that since I was a kid,” Blake said, laughing. “Come on, she’s right. A swim would feel amazing.”

They frolicked in the water like otter pups, then grabbed their snorkeling gear and explored the underwater world just off shore, finally emerging from the surf, tired and hungry several hours later. After collapsing onto their towels, all three lay looking up at the blue sky and listening to the waves until the worst of the exhaustion passed. Then Wren sat up and grabbed her backpack.

“I’m glad you thought about lunch, I’m starving,” she said, flipping the bag open. “I could eat a horse.”

He laughed, “I’m afraid they were fresh out of horse,” he said. “But I did manage to secure a delicious seafood salad. They were just putting it out when I came in.”

“Even better,” she said, pulling the sandwich out. “I’ve never eaten horse, I wonder if it’s tough.”

“Gross, you’re ruining my appetite,” Susan said, rifling through her backpack. “Can we change the subject?”

Instead, they just ate in silence, the sound of the waves washing up on shore and the wind in the palm trees in the background. “Okay, I’m stuffed, I didn’t know seafood salad could taste that good,” Wren said, stuffing the wrapper back in her backpack. “There’s a big cookie in here, but I think I need a nap before I eat anything else.”

“A nap sounds pretty good,” Blake said, then polished off the last bite of his sandwich. “Then maybe another swim before we head back.”

“I’m going to skip the nap and go explore the tide pools,” Susan said, zipping up her backpack. “Don’t sleep too long. We’ve only got a couple of hours before the tide comes in, and you heard what the instructor said about the water over here.”

Wren stretched out on her towel and closed her eyes. “I just want a few minutes,” she said. “We’ll come find you when we’re ready to go swimming again.”

With his stomach full of food, Wren lay with her head on his chest, her even breathing telling him that she’d already drifted off, it wasn’t long before he fell asleep. The cool breeze from the ocean and the sound of the waves rushing to shore kept them deeply asleep for much longer than a few minutes, and the sun was already sinking in the sky when he finally opened his eyes.

It took him a second to remember where he was, but a smile broke out on his face when he saw Wren in his arms. Unable to resist, he kissed the top of her head. She stirred, then opened her eyes and looked up at him. A slow smile spread across her face and she sat up, stretching her arms over her head before looking up and down the beach.

“Blake, how long have we been asleep?” she asked, her face slowly filling with concern. “Susan should have been back by now, don’t you think?”

He sat up, looked at the sun’s position in the sky, then got to his feet. “She probably

just got distracted,” he said. “Let’s go find her. The tide is going to start coming in soon. We probably don’t have time for another swim.”

After helping Wren to her feet, he took her hand and they started toward the tidal pools, but he noticed that the water had already begun to rise on the shore. Not wanting to alarm Wren, he slowly increased their pace, his eyes scanning the horizon, hoping to catch a glimpse of the pretty blonde. But ten minutes later, they still hadn’t found her, and he began to get a sick feeling in his stomach that something was wrong.

Wren

“I don’t see her anywhere,” Wren said, a bad feeling in her stomach. “We never should have let her go alone. What if she fell in? What if she hit her head and got washed out to sea? I’ll never forgive myself if something horrible happened to her.”

“Hey, calm down, I’m sure she’s fine,” Blake said, pulling her into his arms. “We just need to look a little harder.”

She took a deep breath. “Sorry, I started to panic,” she said, then filled her lungs once again and let it out slowly. “Let’s split up. Maybe she’s in one of the tidal pools and can’t hear us.”

“Some of them are pretty deep,” Blake agreed, looking across the expanse of rock. “You search closer to the jungle, and I’ll stick close to the shore. One of us will find her, you’ll see.”

“We’d better hurry,” she said, looking out at the water. “The tide is already coming in.”

It took time to hopscotch between the tidal pools on the slippery rocks, and she found

herself holding her breath every time she approached one of the deep crevasses, but time after time she was disappointed. Then, just as she was about to give up hope, she heard a faint cry over the sound of the surf, froze where she was, and lifted her head to listen. When she heard it again, she looked over at Blake, who was standing as still as she was, his entire focus on a spot farther down the beach.

A desperate cry for help floated to them on the breeze and Blake took off in the direction it had come from, a look of relief on his face. But when she came to a halt next to him on the edge of a huge tidal pool, he was already frowning and shaking his head, and she understood why when she saw the size of the rock formation. Water had worn away the rock in a huge circle all the way down to the sand, the sides were worn smooth, and there wasn't a single hand or foothold in sight.

Susan was at the bottom at least six feet from the top standing in a foot of water, her face red and streaked with tears, but she managed a smile when she saw them. "It's about time. I thought you two were never going to show up," she said, her voice hoarse from screaming. "Now get me out of here."

She looked over at Blake, then back down at Susan. "We're going to need a rope or something," she said. "Hang on, we'll figure something out."

"I twisted my ankle when I fell. I don't know if I can climb out of here," Susan said, staggering when a wave of water rushed through an opening in the rock. "Hurry, it's getting deeper."

Blake stepped back from the edge, a look of frustration on his face, "I don't know if we have time to come up with a rope," he said, keeping his voice low. "The water is coming in fast, Wren."

"What are we going to do? We can't just let her die," she said, beginning to panic. "We have to get her out of there."

Just then, an even bigger wave came crashing through the opening in the rock, sending up a spray of water that drenched them both. She heard Susan let out a cry, then there was silence, and she hurried back over to the edge, gasping when she saw her friend crumpled against the rocks, her eyes closed, a gash on her forehead. Turning back to Blake, now desperate for a way to save Susan, she fought back the panic and fear, hoping a way to help would pop into her mind.

A look of resignation on his face, Blake walked over to her, grabbed her by the shoulders, then looked into her eyes. "There's only one way I can think of to save Susan, but it's going to scare the hell out of you," he said. "I wish I could have prepared you better for this. I wish I could have told you sooner what I can do, but there's no time now; the water is rising, and it's now or never."

"Blake, what are you trying to tell me?" she asked, the look in his eyes scaring her. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to use my special gift to save Susan," he said, then kissed her. "Just remember it's still me, I'll just look different."

Still confused, she reached for him when he stepped away, but then a powerful wave of energy washed over her, and she was frozen for a second while her body absorbed it. The air around Blake began to shimmer oddly, and before she could take another breath, he vanished, replaced by a winged creature she could only describe as a dragon. Her brain instantly shut down, her head began to get fuzzy, and the reality of what she was seeing was almost too much, but then she looked into the dragon's eyes.

She sucked in a gasping breath when she realized she was looking into Blake's eyes, and the darkness that was slowly closing around her vanished with the wave of warmth that spread through her. Staggering back a couple of steps, no longer afraid of what she saw, she watched Blake spread his wings, pushed off from the ground with

his powerful legs, and soared up into the air. He plunged back down into the tidal pool, gently scooped Susan into his arms without even landing and rose back into the air, his wings beating in the air, creating a slight breeze.

He landed lightly in front of her, Susan clutched to his chest, and folded his wings in close to his body. Then she felt another rush of power, this time making her entire body tingle and the man was standing in front of her again. Not aware that she'd been holding her breath, she let it out in a whoosh and rushed over to the two of them, surprised to find Susan's eyes open and focused on Blake's face.

"You scared the heck out of us," she said, wondering how much her friend had seen. "That was a little too close if you ask me."

"I thought I...did I just see..." Susan stammered, then shook her head and winced. "I must have hit my head really hard, I thought I saw...a dragon."

CHAPTER 9

BLAKE

Blake was very aware of Susan's eyes on him as he carried her back to the village, but did his best to pretend that everything was normal even though he was sure his life was about to crumble around him. He'd never shifted in front of a regular human, never trusted anyone enough to expose his secret so openly, and he didn't want to think about what Wren must be thinking. The look in Susan's eyes was enough to give him just a taste of what must be running through Wren's mind, and he wished that he'd told her, that he'd explained about the magic that ran through his blood before she had to see it.

He wasn't fooled by how calm she appeared as they followed the path back to the village. He knew that her mind must be overwhelmed by what she'd seen and was preparing himself for the moment that it hit her. He had no idea how she would react; he'd never been in this position before, but he was sure that it wouldn't be good, that before it was over, his chance with her would be gone, evaporated like mist in the wind.

As soon as they reached the village, they were surrounded by a crowd; someone took Susan from his arms, and someone else handed them water bottles as they were shuffled over to the infirmary. The doctor swept Susan into a room, and Wren followed as soon as they walked in the doors, and he was left standing in the hallway alone again, but it wasn't long before Max came rushing in.

"What the hell happened?" he demanded. "Does trouble just follow you around?"

“Hey, this wasn’t my fault,” he said, holding up his hands. “Susan went to explore the tidal pools and fell in a really deep one. She twisted her ankle and couldn’t get out. We made it just in time to get her out before the tide came in. She’s got a big bump on her head, but I think she’s okay.”

“How did you get her out?” Max asked, clearly relieved. “Those rocks are as slick as snot.”

He didn’t answer right away, and Max’s eyes widened in surprise. “You shifted,” he whispered. “Have you lost your mind? Someone could have seen you.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to let Susan die,” he shot back. “You would have done the same thing, and no one saw me, so there’s no harm done.”

“Are you sure?” Max asked. “Where was Wren? What about Susan?”

“Susan was passed out from the bump on her head,” he said, then paused. “But Wren was right there. She saw me, so I guess someone did see me, but she’s not going to tell, at least I don’t think she will...”

Max groaned, “You’d better hope she doesn’t,” he said. “How did she take it?”

He looked over at the closed door, then back at Max. “Too well, I think,” he said, then sighed. “She didn’t freak out, well, not very much. I thought she was going to pass out for a second, then she seemed to...I don’t know...accept what she was seeing. ”

A look of surprise appeared on Max’s face. “Well, that’s something I guess,” he said. “What are you going to tell her?”

“The truth, I mean, what else can I do,” he said. “I don’t know how I’ll explain it, but

she's seen me, Max; I can't tell her that she imagined the whole thing."

"No, I suppose not, I'm glad it's you and not me. That is not going to be an easy conversation," Max said, then hesitated. "Blake, you should...well, be prepared for the worst. I don't mean to bring you down, but there's always the possibility Wren isn't going to think it's a gift like we do. I just want to make sure you know that before you talk to her."

"I'm not fooling myself. I know she may think that I'm a monster," he said, sighing. "I'm just hoping that's not the case."

Just then, the door opened, and Wren came out into the hallway; she looked right at him, then over at Max, before taking a deep breath and walking over to them. "Susan is fine. She's got a big bump on her head, a sprained ankle, and she's still a bit shaken, but the doctor says she's going to make a full recovery," she said, then looked nervously over at Max. "Thank you for saving her, Blake. She would have drowned if you hadn't...been there."

"I'm just glad I was there to help," he said, searching her face for some sign of what she was really feeling. "Are you okay? That was really scary."

"Only at first," she said, smiling up at him, then glanced over at Max. "I think we need to talk later."

Just then, the doctor came out of the room. "I think I'll go check in with Dr. Slater," Max said. "I'll be around if you need me."

Max disappeared into another room with the doctor, leaving them alone, and he was suddenly more nervous than he'd ever been. Wren's face gave nothing away, and he wondered if she was still in a bit of shock, if the truth hadn't quite sunk in, but then she walked over to him, wrapped her arms around him before burying her face in his

chest.

“I don’t know how what I saw is possible, and to be honest, I don’t care right now,” she said, her words muffled in his chest. “I just want you to hold me. I don’t want to think about anything else right now.”

Wrapping his arms around her, he gathered Wren closer to him, then closed his eyes and said a silent thank you to whatever power was guiding his life. They stood that way for a long time before Wren finally pulled back and looked up at him with a million questions in her eyes, but something else, something that made his heart pound a little faster.

When she stretched up on her toes and kissed him, he let out a long sigh of relief, sure that everything would be okay. As the warmth of their connection spread through him, for the first time, he could see a future for them.

Wren

“Wren, I’m sorry to interrupt,” the doctor said. “But I don’t want to keep you here any longer than necessary.”

She reluctantly pulled away from Blake. “That’s okay,” she said, turning to face the doctor. “How is Susan? Will she be able to go back to the cabin tonight?”

“I think she should spend the night here. She’s going to need to be watched carefully for the next few hours,” the doctor said. “You should go home and get some rest yourself. I promise that she’ll be in good hands here.”

“Can I see her?” she asked. “I just want to make sure that she’s okay with me leaving.”

“Of course, she might be asleep, but it’s okay to wake her up,” the doctor said. “Don’t stay too long. She needs her rest; I’m sure she’ll be ready to leave in the morning. ”

“Thank you, Dr. Slater,” she said. “We seem to be spending a lot of time together.”

The woman laughed, “Yes, we do,” she said. “But let’s not make a habit of it.”

“I’m going to go see Susan for a few minutes,” she said when the doctor was gone. “Do you want to come with me?”

“No, I’ll wait out here,” he said, then hesitated. “Wren, there’s a small chance that Susan saw me too. I don’t know for sure, but I think her eyes were open when I shifted back to my human form.”

“Oh, that might be complicated,” she said, looking over at the door. “I don’t want to lie to her, she’s my best friend, but I can understand why you might not want her to know the truth.”

“Do you trust her?” he asked. “You know her better than I do.”

“With my life,” she said. “We’ve been friends since we were kids. She’d never do anything to hurt me, she’s not that kind of person. Your secret will be safe with her.”

“You can tell her what you have to then,” he said. “I don’t want her to think she’s lost her mind or something. I just hope it doesn’t freak her out.”

“I won’t tell her unless I have to. I’m not sure it’s really sunk in for me,” she said, giving him a shaky smile. “You might have to be a little patient with me.”

“I’ve been waiting six years to find you again,” he said, smiling down at her. “I can

wait as long as it takes. I'm sure you have a lot of questions. I promise to answer them the best I can."

"That's a deal," she said, stretching up to give him a kiss. "Will you wait for me?"

"Forever if I have to," he said, kissing her back, then letting her go. "I'll be right here when you're done."

Susan was asleep when she slipped through the door, but when she sat down in the chair next to the bed, her friend opened her eyes. "That was a close one," she said, managing a smile. "I feel like such an idiot for falling in. I knew better than to get so close to the edge."

"There's nothing to be embarrassed about; we all make mistakes," she said, taking Susan's hand, relieved she hadn't said anything about Blake shifting. "You're okay, and that's all that matters."

"How did you get me out?" Susan asked. "It's all a little fuzzy right now. I remember the wave pushing me up against the rocks, I hit my head, that's still there, but after that, well, I guess I must have passed out and started dreaming or something. Maybe I'm losing my mind, I don't know."

"I'm sure that you're not losing your mind, that's a big bump you've got on your head," she said, choosing her words carefully. "It's not surprising that you wouldn't remember everything that happened."

Susan studied her for a second. "It's not what I don't remember that's bothering me," she finally said. "It's what I do remember that has me concerned. I saw something strange, Wren, well maybe not strange...I don't know how to say it. You're going to think I'm crazy, that I was dreaming, but I wasn't, I know I wasn't."

“Hey, calm down and take a deep breath,” she said, putting her hand on Susan’s arm. “You aren’t crazy. You did see something, but I’m not going to talk about it until you calm down.”

Susan collapsed onto the pillows, closed her eyes, let out a sigh of relief, and lay catching her breath for a few seconds before opening them again and looking over at Wren. “Okay, so I haven’t lost my mind, I’m as sane as you are,” she said. “Tell me what I saw then. It sure as hell looked like a dragon to me, but then again, I’ve never seen one before, so who am I to judge. ”

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, feeling like a traitor. “It was a dragon,” she said. “It was Blake; he can turn into a dragon when he wants to.”

Mouth hanging open, Susan stared at her for a long time, and the silence slowly became uncomfortable. “Oh my God,” her friend finally managed to croak out. “All this time I was sure I’d imagined the whole thing, that it was some kind of a hallucination because of the bump on my head. I never imagined it could be true. Wait, how can it be true? How is it possible?”

“I’m as new to this as you are,” she said, with a shrug, relieved that Susan was taking it so well. “You’re not freaked out? You don’t think he’s a monster?”

“Are you kidding? I was saved from drowning by a dragon,” Susan said. “That’s about the coolest thing ever.”

“You can’t tell anyone,” she said. “It has to stay a secret.”

Susan gave her a dirty look. “You know me better than that, even if it would make a cool story,” she said. “Besides, no one would believe me anyway.”

“Thank you. I never doubted you for a second,” she said, sliding over to the bed and

giving Susan a hug. The doctor wants to keep you here overnight, but I could stay here with you if you want.”

“No, I’ll be fine. Dr. Slater is great, and I’m just going to sleep the time away. Besides, you and Blake probably have a lot to talk about,” Susan said. “Including the fact that he’s a father.”

She groaned, “Don’t remind me,” she said. “I’ve put it off so long, I’m afraid he’s going to be mad. I should have told him sooner.”

“There’s no time like the present,” Susan said, giving her another hug. “I’ll see you in the morning. I know that you’ll do the right thing.”

CHAPTER 10

BLAKE

Blake found a comfortable place to sit while he waited for Wren. It had been a long day, and he was beginning to feel the effects of shifting after not making the transition for so long. Closing his eyes, he let himself float in that state between awake and asleep, sure that the day wasn't over and preparing himself for the questions Wren was bound to ask. He got sleepily to his feet when she came out of Susan's room and walked over to her, trying to judge what she was feeling by the look on her face, but all he saw was the same exhaustion he was experiencing.

"How is she?" he asked, pulling her in for a hug, relieved when she didn't resist. "Do you want to stay here with her tonight?"

"She's fine. She told me to go back to the cabin and get some rest," Wren said, then looked up at him, her face full of regret. "I had to tell her, Blake, I'm sorry. She knew just enough to ask questions, so I couldn't let her think she was going crazy."

"It's okay. I had a feeling that she saw me," he said. "She didn't freak out?"

"No, in fact, she thought it was amazing that she was saved from drowning by a dragon," she said, shaking her head. "I have a feeling she's going to want to talk about it, so you'd better prepare yourself."

"I'll talk to her until I'm blue in the face as long as she doesn't tell anyone else," he said, shrugging his shoulders. "Honestly, it might be good for you to have someone to

talk to who knows the truth. Secrets can carry a lot of weight, especially when you have to keep them from the people you love the most.”

“Susan won’t tell anyone. She knows what could happen if she did,” she said. “I’m not sure anyone would believe her anyway, but she won’t tell.”

“I wasn’t worried for a second,” he said, then gave her a quick kiss. “I happen to know that you have good taste in friends.”

Wren laughed. “Let’s get out of here. I’m so tired I can barely keep my eyes open. It’s been a long day, and the sun hasn’t even set.”

“I’ll walk you back to your cabin,” he said, taking her hand and heading for the front door. “A good night’s sleep will help.”

“I’m sure that you’re right,” she said, then hesitated. “Will you stay with me tonight, Blake? I don’t want to be alone.”

He looked over at her. “Are you sure?” he asked. “I thought maybe you needed some time...you know, to process things...or something like that.”

“I think I’m processing things just fine, and there are still a few...umm...things we need to talk about,” she said, looking apprehensive. “I don’t want there to be any secrets between us anymore. I want everything out in the open.”

“That’s what I want too, Wren,” he said. “I promise we’ll talk. I just didn’t want to overwhelm you with too much at once.”

“That’s not what I meant,” she tried to explain, but her words faded away when the smell of food reached them, and her stomach growled loudly. “Oh, something smells wonderful.”

“It sounds like you're hungry,” he said, laughing. “Maybe we should get something to eat before we go back to your cabin.”

Wren made a face, “I’m not really in the mood to be out in public. I’d need to shower and put on some clean clothes,” she said. “Maybe we could just get something to go and take it back to my cabin.”

“You look just fine to me,” Blake said, grinning at her. “And I don’t think you smell bad at all.”

“I didn’t say that I smelled bad,” she said, giving him a dirty look. “I just said I needed a shower.”

“Oh, I just assumed,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “Maybe I should get a little closer and find out for myself.”

Before she could stop him, he scooped her into his arms and began sniffing her neck, making her start to giggle. “Huh...you were right,” he said when he let her go. “You don’t smell bad at all. In fact, you smell pretty good.”

He thoroughly enjoyed the blush that crept up her cheeks, “Behave yourself,” Wren said. “We’re in public.”

“Oh, so I don’t have to behave once we’re not in public,” he said, a big grin on his face, then laughed. “Come on, let’s go get something to eat. I promise I’ll be a perfect gentleman if that’s what you want, sweetheart, but it’s not going to be easy; I’ve been thinking about you for six years.”

Wren gasped, her eyes filled with desire, and he took advantage of the moment by sweeping her off the path under the shelter of a tree, then lowered his mouth to hers. There was only a moment’s hesitation before she slipped her arms up around his neck

and began to kiss him back, igniting the passion between them. He slipped his tongue into her mouth, tasting and teasing until they were both gasping for breath, and he was forced to let her go.

They stood staring at each other for several long seconds, need pulsing between them, but the sound of voices approaching on the trail broke the spell, and they stepped apart. "It's probably a good thing that didn't happen in the cabin," he said, his voice hoarse with desire. "My promise to be a gentleman would have gone right out the window."

"I don't remember making you promise to be a gentleman," she said, a little smile on her face. "I think that was all your idea."

"Now I really want to get that food and go back to your cabin," he said, the grin back on his face. "Be careful what you ask for woman, you just might get it."

"I'm counting on it," Wren said, taking his hand. "But I think you'd better feed me first."

Wren

Wren knew that she should stop teasing and flirting with Blake as if nothing was wrong, but it was the only way she could cope with the fear and anxiety that were slowly building. She couldn't put off telling Blake about Theo; the time had come, and a part of her was terrified that he would never forgive her for not telling him sooner. He might not understand that she was just trying to protect her son, he might not see how scared she was that his mother would try to take her son, he might not understand that Theo was her entire life, the only reason she got out of bed in the morning sometimes.

Taking a deep breath to calm herself, she thought about waiting to tell him. She was

exhausted, and another emotional blow might be more than she could handle in one day. Looking over at Blake ordering them food, she discarded the idea. She was just making up an excuse. It was time to trust him, to put all her faith in him, and to hope that what she felt deep down wasn't wrong.

He was the father of her son. He deserved to know the truth, even if it destroyed what they'd built over the last few days. "Hey, you look awfully serious," Blake said, interrupting her thoughts. "Is everything okay?"

"I'm just tired," she lied. "I'll feel better after I eat something."

He studied her for a second. "You're an amazing woman, Wren," he said. "You've been through so much today, and your only complaint is that you're tired. Most people would still be freaking out about... well, you know."

"I guess I'm a lot tougher than I look," she said, managing to smile at him. "Come on, let's go; the smell of that food is driving me crazy."

Back at the cabin, they spread the food on the table out on the porch and began to eat. At first, Wren was so hungry that was all she could think about, but as her hunger was fed, her mind began to wander. Theo popped into her mind as he always did, but she chased him away and looked over at Blake, suddenly nervous again about telling him. But as she watched him as he ate, she noticed for the first time not only how much her son looked like his father, but all the other little things they shared.

Letting herself imagine the three of them a happy family, she felt tears stinging her eyes when a wave of hope washed over her. What she'd always secretly wished for deep down inside might be coming true. She just had to get through breaking the news about Theo to Blake. Searching her mind for a way to open the conversation, she set down her fork and took a deep breath, then let it out slowly. She'd waited long enough, it was time to jump in with both feet.

“Blake, I was wondering, well, how do you become a shifter?” she asked, hoping it was the perfect opening. “I mean, do you inherit the ability, or is it just random?”

Blake looked over at her, then set his fork down. “Are you done eating?” he asked, gesturing to her half empty plate.

She nodded, “I’m stuffed,” she said, her appetite suddenly gone. “I couldn’t eat another bite.”

He got to his feet and held out his hand. “Then let’s sit over in the swing and talk,” he said. I’ll take care of the dishes later.”

Without a word, so nervous that she thought her dinner might come back up, she let him lead her over to the swing suspended from the porch roof, and settled down in his arms, hoping it wouldn’t be the last time. They swung in silence for a few minutes, neither speaking, and she wondered if she was going to have to start the conversation again.

“The ability to shift is genetic. It’s usually passed down from fathers to sons. Female shifters are rare, but it does happen sometimes,” Blake said. “Not every male will become a shifter. I honestly don’t know what the percentages are, but I’d guess it’s something like one in four. I’m the lucky one in my family, not that my parents see it that way. To them it’s more like something to be ashamed of, even though all our wealth came from that ability.”

He paused to take a breath. “Wait, what do you mean?” she asked, forgetting about Theo. “You’re rich because you’re a shifter?”

“Sort of,” he said with a shrug. “Our gifts make us just a bit smarter, stronger, a little more cunning than regular humans; some of us, my ancestors, for example, used that advantage to get rich. My parents have conveniently forgotten that fact and are

embarrassed by my ability; that's one of the reasons I was trying to break free that summer, Wren. I don't want the life they lead. I want to be me, I want to shift if I want to, and I want to spend my life doing something besides making money and trying to climb the social ladder. Most of all, I want to be with someone who isn't embarrassed by what I am."

"I'm not embarrassed, I think what you can do is amazing. I still have a lot to learn about what it means, but I would never want you to hide that part of yourself from me," she said, aware that she might be having this same conversation with her son in a few years. "Blake, your gift is part of who you are. I wouldn't want to change that for anything."

"I should have told you sooner," he said, pulling her closer, then hesitated. "There's something else I should probably tell you. I wasn't sure until we saw each other again. When we were together before, I didn't really believe the stories that go around, but now, well..."

Suddenly a little alarmed, she sat up in his arms. "Blake, what is it?" she asked. "Whatever it is, I'm sure it's not going to be as big of a deal as you think it is."

"Well, the thing is, there are these stories about shifters bonding with their mates, a throwback to the days when the world was a much more dangerous place," he said. "That bond is supposed to last a lifetime, and coupled with our magic, it can be both wonderful and horrible, warm and comforting when we're together, heartbreaking and awful when we're separated."

The implications of what he was telling slowly sank in. "And you think we're forming that bond?" she finally asked. "That we're becoming connected in some way?"

"I don't think we're forming it, I think it's already there," he said, looking into her

eyes. “I think it formed six years ago, and it’s never been broken. I’m not sure anything can break it.”

Her mind was whirling, all the long, lonely nights when she felt like her heart was being ripped out, all the days of missing him until it was a physical ache, the times she’d looked into her son’s eyes and felt a powerful longing for something she couldn’t have flooded her. Anger quickly followed the burst of feelings, and she could only stare at him for a second as it bubbled to the surface, choking her for a second, and she fought to drag in a breath.

“So, we’re trapped, stuck together whether we like it or not?” she demanded jumping to her feet, suddenly feeling like there wasn’t enough air, her secret about Theo so much bigger suddenly. “Blake, you should have warned me, you should have...”

Her words trailed off as a huge sob pushed its way up from the depth of her chest; Blake was instantly on his feet, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her closer. “I’m sorry, Wren, I really didn’t believe it back then,” he said. “I didn’t really believe it until I saw you again. I know this is a little scary, but I thought you wanted to be with me as much as I wanted to be with you. I love you, Wren. I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you standing on the bow of your father’s boat.”

It was more than she could take. Pushing him away, she ran for her bedroom, closed the door behind her, and threw herself down on the bed, sobbing out her anger and confusion. Her life wasn’t her own; it belonged to Blake, and if he couldn’t forgive her for keeping Theo a secret, she’d be miserable for the rest of her life.

CHAPTER 11

BLAKE

Blake sat motionless in the swing for several seconds, the sound of Wren's sobs fading as she disappeared into the cabin, then jumped to his feet to follow her. He found her crying into her pillow and stood in the doorway, wanting to go to her, but afraid that would be a mistake. But the need to comfort her, even if he was the cause of her pain, was too great, and he finally walked over to the bed and carefully sat down next to her, then gently put his hand on her back.

She didn't tell him to leave, didn't tense at his touch; instead, to his surprise and delight, she turned, sat up, and threw herself into his arms. "I'm sorry, Wren, I didn't know. You have to believe that," he said. "I thought it was just a stupid legend. I didn't think the bond was a real thing. I never meant to trap you, I was in love with you, and I still am."

"You don't understand..." she sobbed into his chest. "There's something I haven't told you, something that will change everything between us. You're in love with the girl that I used to be, not the woman I am now. You bonded with someone who doesn't exist anymore."

He pulled back, Wren's emotions pouring through him, the pain and heartache so powerful that it took him a second to find his voice. "Wren, look at me," he said, tipping her chin up. "I love the old you, I love the new you, nothing is ever going to change that. The bond is only part of what we share, we're meant for each other, no matter what happened while we were apart."

She searched his face, tears still streaming down her cheeks. "I'm afraid that you'll never forgive me, that you'll never be able to see past what I've done," she said, then sucked in a deep shuddering breath. "I don't think I could survive losing you again."

"You're not going to lose me, Wren," he said, reaching up to wipe the tears away with his thumbs. "The bond makes sure of that. It makes us work through our problems, and that's exactly what we're going to do, but I promise you right now, nothing you've done is going to make me love you any less."

Wren's eyes filled with hope. He could feel the love and longing slowly building up inside her, and he slowly lowered his mouth to hers, gently kissed her, and then pulled back. "Don't give up on us, Wren," he said. "What we have is too special to just walk away from. Fight for me, fight for us, fight for the life we could have together. I know the idea of being bonded to me is frightening, but I promise you'll never be sorry, not for a single day of your life."

"Losing you again is the only thing that scares me," she said, then hesitated. "I don't know how to tell you this..."

"Then don't, it doesn't matter, sweetheart, what matters is that we're here together," he said, then pulled her closer. "I want to make love to you, Wren. I want you so badly it hurts. I don't want to talk anymore tonight. We have the rest of our lives to work everything out."

She studied him for a moment, desire slowly replacing the fear and doubt in her eyes, and he felt a rush of warmth spread through him as the passion between them slowly came to life. His instincts slowly taking over, he lowered his mouth to hers, cutting off anything she might say, and kissed her deeply, hoping she could feel everything he was experiencing right that moment.

Wren gasped, then pulled away and looked up at him. "I want you too, Blake," she

said. "I never stopped wanting you."

This time, when he kissed her, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body up against his, and he felt her nipples harden under her shirt, sending a wave of pleasure shooting through him. Gently pushing Wren down onto the bed without breaking the kiss, he slowly began to unbutton her shirt, then pushed it aside to reveal her plump breasts covered only by a skimpy lace bra.

Trailing kisses down Wren's throat, he captured one stiff peak in his mouth, need coursing through him when she let out a whimper of pleasure, then moved to the other one. When he finally pulled back and looked down at her, need pounding inside him, he forced himself to take a deep breath. He wanted to take his time. He wanted to explore every inch of Wren's body, wanted her writhing in need under him when he finally made her his forever.

After slipping the shirt off her shoulders, he looked down at her as he reached for the button on her shorts and slipped it free. "I want you naked in my arms," he said, slowly slipping them down her legs, exposing a matching pair of lace panties. "I want to feel your skin against mine."

Wren gasped, her breath coming in short gasps, but didn't move as he stripped off his clothes, exposing his obvious need for her and pleasure shot through him when she reached for him. He let her stroke him for a few seconds before pulling away with a groan, afraid that if he let her continue, it would all be over much too soon. His eyes roamed over her body as he slowly slipped off first her bra and then her panties; he realized that she was even more beautiful than he'd remembered.

No longer the girl he remembered, but a woman, he drank in her full breasts, rounded hips and shapely legs, and his body began to throb with a need more powerful than anything he'd felt before. Unable to resist the urge to touch her, he reached out and ran one finger from Wren's throat between her breasts, then lower over her belly and

between her legs.

She opened them to him with a long sigh, and he slipped between them, then pushed them open wider, unable to stop the growl that rumbled up from deep in his chest when he slipped one finger between her folds and found her slick and ready for him. Resisting the urge to take her right then, he dropped his head between her legs, found her pleasure button with his tongue, then began to lavish his attention on her, enjoying the sound of her cries of pleasure until she tumbled over the edge, body trembling, his name on her lips.

Wren

Wren was soaring as wave after wave of pleasure washed over her, but as the sensations slowly died away, she found herself left with an empty feeling that she knew only Blake could fill. “Please, I need you inside me,” she begged, lifting her hips to him. “Take me now, Blake, I can’t wait.”

He growled as he slid up her body, his eyes locked on hers, then pushed her legs further apart, grabbed her by the hips, and drove himself into her. The world exploded in a burst of pleasure so intense, she was forced to close her eyes as it overwhelmed her, her entire body shuddering with the relief of being joined with her one true love again. Blake filled her over and over again, his moans of pleasure filling the room, and she opened herself completely to him.

As the sensations intensified, they were joined by something more, something deeper and more ancient, and she understood it was the bond between them flowing stronger than it ever had before. All her uncertainty about the future vanished as their souls twined together, the warmth of the love between them driving away all the fear and doubt. It felt so right, so natural to be with Blake like she’d found the other half of herself, and she opened her eyes to find him looking down at her, all the love she was feeling mirrored in his eyes.

They tumbled over the edge together then, Blake buried deeply inside of her, her cries of pleasure joining his as they were thrust into a world of pure sensation, and floated there for a long time. When they finally started to come back down to Earth, Blake collapsed on top of her, his breath coming in short gasps, and she welcomed the weight of his body as the pleasure slowly drained away, leaving her trembling with the intensity of what she'd just felt.

When Blake finally rolled off her, breaking the connection between them, she involuntarily let out a little whimper, but he gathered her into his arms and pulled her close. Lying in his arms, the sound of his heart beating in her ear, she let out a long sigh of happiness, then looked up to find him smiling down at her, and she felt a blush spreading across her cheeks.

"I love it when you blush like that," he said, leaning down and giving her a kiss. "I'm just wondering what you were thinking about that made you blush like that."

"Nothing really," she said, the look in his eyes making her body begin to tingle again. "I'm just happy, that's all; for the first time, I think everything is going to be okay."

"I told you it would be," he said. "What we share is special, Wren; it's a gift that most people search their entire lives to find. We're lucky, sweetheart, and I'm never going to forget it."

Pulling out of his arms, she sat up and looked down at him. "I love you, Blake," she said. "I've loved you since you walked onto my father's boat, and I'm going to love you for the rest of my life."

"I love you too, Wren," he said. "I love you more than I ever thought possible, and I can't wait to start our lives together."

Theo came roaring back into her head. "Blake, we have to talk," she said. "It can't

wait any longer.”

Blake reached up and put his fingers over her lips before she could say anything more. “Tomorrow is soon enough, sweetheart,” he said. “Whatever it is can wait until the morning.”

“Blake...” she started to protest again, but he grabbed her and swung her up onto him, forcing her to straddle his hips, and she felt his swollen manhood slide between her folds, making it hard to think. “Blake, I’m serious; it can’t wait...”

“Are you sure about that?” he asked, a confident look on his face.

When he grabbed her by the hips and shifted so that he could slide inside her, she couldn’t help the sigh of pleasure that escaped from her chest. “That’s not fair,” she managed to say. “I can’t think about anything but...”

Her words died away when he slipped his hand between them and began stroking her swollen nib, sending pleasure rocketing through her. “That’s just fine with me,” he said, his voice husky. “All I want to hear right now is you calling out my name.”

And she did, several times, before they finally fell asleep wrapped in each other’s arms, the heat of their passion finally dulled by the satisfaction of their bodies, the power of their love radiating out into the night. Outside the cabin, the trees began to stir as a breeze picked up the strands of energy and carried them up to the top of the mountain, where they were swept around the rocky peaks and then slowly soaked into the ground.

Deep below, in the heart of the island, a light appeared in a deep cave hidden behind a waterfall; it pulsed as if taking deep breaths, then began to glow steadily in the darkness. Anyone awake at that hour would have sworn that the island came to life for a brief second that early morning, as if it was shrugging off a deep sleep, but not

even the man charged with protecting it noticed the small change. Only the creatures in the jungle seemed to sense something was different, but only minutes later, they settled back into their burrows and nests. Silence fell over the landscape once again, and the two lovers slept on.

CHAPTER 12

BLAKE

Blake woke with the first rays of sun and lay watching Wren sleep for a long time, his heart swelling with love, making him feel a little dizzy. There were still moments when he couldn't believe that he'd been lucky enough to find her again, but lying there next to her, it suddenly became real. The woman he'd never gotten over was back in his life. He had the second chance he'd been praying for every day since he'd lost her, and he was going to make darn sure that she was officially his before they left the island.

Warming to the idea of slipping a ring on Wren's finger, he realized that he'd need Max's help. A ring wasn't just going to appear out of nowhere. If he wanted it to be a surprise, he'd need to make a trip back to Bermuda, find a ring, and get back without Wren knowing where he'd gone. Deciding that he definitely wanted to make it a surprise, he slipped out of bed, put on his shorts, and headed for the kitchen, wondering how early he could bother Max.

After putting on a pot of coffee, he stood looking out of the window at the jungle slowly waking up, then remembered that Wren had something to tell him, something she thought was bad enough he wouldn't want her anymore. Shifting his mind from the engagement ring, he poured himself a cup of coffee and took it out to the porch, searching his mind for anything that could be so terrible that he'd turn his back on the woman that he loved.

After coming up with and then discarding several possible scenarios, he finally gave

up with a sigh; he was just driving himself crazy thinking about it. Wren would tell him when she woke up. Deciding that talking was easier on a full stomach, he went back inside and searched for something to make for breakfast. Finally settling on a cheese omelet and toast, he got to work. He was just beating the eggs when the sound of tires on the gravel of the path in front of the cabin caught his attention, and he froze. The sound was so foreign on the island that it took him a second to identify it.

A second later, a happy voice broke the morning's silence. "Good morning, I'm home," Susan called. "And I've brought company."

He set down the fork and walked over to the window, surprised to see Susan riding in the golf cart with the doctor, but even more alarming, another cart was parked behind it. Wanting to believe he wasn't seeing what he was, he closed his eyes then opened them again, but Wren's parents were still sitting in the second cart, her sister and a little boy behind them. Tearing himself away from the window, he hurried back to the bedroom and sat down on the bed next to Wren. Then, he gently shook her until she groggily opened her eyes.

"Sweetheart, you'd better wake up," he said. "Susan is home, and she brought your parents with her. Your sister is here too; she has a little boy with her."

Wren murmured something he couldn't understand and for a second he thought she'd gone back to sleep, but she suddenly sat up in bed, her eyes frantic. "Did you just tell me that my parents are here?" she asked. "Or did I just dream that?"

"Wren, they're right out front," he said, then jumped up from the bed. "I need to put my shirt on; your father is going to kill me. You should get dressed. Maybe they won't know I've been here all night."

He turned back to the bed, surprised to find Wren still sitting there. "Sweetheart, they're right out front. Maybe you should get out of bed," he coaxed. "Maybe put on

some clothes before they get inside.”

“They weren’t supposed to be here. I can’t believe Susan and my sister did this to me,” Wren said, shaking her head, then looked over at him. “We never talked, you don’t know...this wasn’t the way it was supposed to happen.”

“Hey, calm down; it’s okay, sweetheart, we’re both adults,” he said, suddenly worried when all of the color drained from her face. “I’ll help you get dressed, and we’ll face them together; there’s nothing wrong with us being together.”

Several loud thumps followed by the sound of Susan laughing got Wren moving. “I can get dressed by myself,” Wren said, jumping out of bed. “Why don’t you go to the kitchen and wait for me there? I won’t be long.”

“Are you sure?” he asked, noticing that two bright spots of color had appeared on her cheeks. “I’m worried about you. First, you were white as a sheet, and now your cheeks are bright pink.”

“I’m fine, I just need a few minutes to compose myself,” she said, searching the dresser for clothes. “I promise I’ll be right there.”

Not satisfied but not sure what else he could do, he went back to the kitchen and started a new pot of coffee, listening as Susan came hobbling into the cabin. “Wren, are you still in bed?” she called. “I have a surprise for you. ”

There was a second of silence, and then he heard Wren’s voice. “I’m coming. I just got out of bed. Give me a second,” she called, and he winced. What are you doing home so early?”

“I brought you a surprise,” Susan said. “Come out here and see.”

The silence lasted even longer this time. “Mom, we thought we’d surprise you,” the little boy said. “Aunt Lisa said it was okay since I was missing you so much, we get to stay with you until you leave. Isn’t it that great?”

“I missed you too, kiddo,” Wren said, a warmth in her voice he’d never heard before, and he stumbled back a step. “I’m so excited that you’re here. You’re going to have a lot of fun.”

“Can we go to the beach right now?” the little boy asked. “I want to play in the water. Aunt Lisa says it’s really warm, and the waves are fun to play in. Can we build a sandcastle?”

Wren laughed, “Of course, but first...well, maybe you should get settled in. You must be tired after the long trip,” she said. “Maybe you should go lay down for a little while and rest.”

“Mom, I’m not tired,” the little boy said. “I slept the entire time we were on the plane, but I am hungry. I want something to eat.”

He heard the sound of little feet coming his way. “Theo, hold on a second. You can’t just go running in there,” Wren said. “Come back here...”

The little boy came around the corner at a run, but when he saw Blake, he abruptly stopped with a little gasp and then stood staring at him. “Well, hey there...” he started to greet the child, suddenly understanding what Wren had been trying to tell him.

The two stared at each other for several long seconds, then Wren came running in and froze, looking from one of them to the other. “Ummm...Theo, this is Blake,” she finally said. “We were going to have breakfast together.”

Completely tongue-tied, feeling like he was looking at a picture of his younger self, he could barely draw in a breath, let alone speak. “I think I’d better go,” he finally said, desperate to get out of there, the truth of what he was seeing more than he could take. “We’ll have to do breakfast another day.”

Wren

Inwardly cursing herself for not telling Blake about Theo sooner, Wren started to follow him, hoping to make things right, but a tug on her arm stopped her. “Mom, who was that man?” Theo asked, looking up at her, his face full of confusion. “Have I met him before?”

“No, sweetheart,” she said, trying to hold back the tears that stung her eyes. “He’s an old friend of mine, I haven’t seen him in a long time.”

Theo studied her for a second. “You like him don’t you?” he asked. “You’re sad because he left.”

“Well, that’s part of it,” she said, ruffling his hair. “But it’s nothing for you to be worried about. I believe you said that you were hungry.”

Theo nodded, “I want some cereal,” he said, then quickly added. “Please.”

“I’m afraid I’m fresh out of cereal, but I could...” Her words died away when she saw the eggs and cheese on the counter, all ready to go in the pan, but she took a deep breath and ignored the little stab of pain when she thought about Blake. “How about a cheese omelet instead?”

Theo wrinkled his nose, then shrugged his shoulders. “I guess so,” he said. “But we really need to get some cereal.”

“Do you need some help in here?” Susan asked, hobbling into the kitchen. “I thought your mom and dad might want some coffee. Is there a fresh pot?”

“You bet,” she said, giving Susan a dirty look. “Was this your idea?”

Susan shook her head. “I had nothing to do with it, I promise. I’m as surprised as you are to see them,” she said. “You didn’t tell Blake, did you?”

She glanced over at Theo, then back at Susan, and shook her head. “I was going to this morning,” she said, then sighed. “I think he figured it out on his own. He’s going to be so mad at me, I’ll probably lose him now; I really screwed up, Susan; I need to talk to him.”

“I thought you were bringing coffee,” Lisa said, joining them. “I’m practically asleep on my feet, but Mom and Dad insist on talking to you before we go to our cabin. Can we just get this over with?”

“In case you missed it, I’m having a bigger crisis than Mom and Dad’s conscience right now,” she hissed at her sister. “You shouldn’t have brought them here, especially without telling me.”

“Don’t blame me; it was Dad’s idea. He paid for everything, so you’re going to have to talk to him,” Lisa said. “By the way, it’s good to see you having some fun. Who was that delicious man we chased out of here?”

She could only stare at her sister, and then she remembered that Lisa had been gone most of that summer. “That was Blake,” she said. “He didn’t know about Theo, but now thanks to you all showing up, the cat is out of the bag. I can’t deal with Mom and Dad right now. I have to find Blake and talk to him.”

“That was Blake?” Lisa asked, her eyes round with astonishment. “You ran into him

here?”

“It’s a long story, and I don’t have time to go into it right now,” she said, letting out a long sigh. “I know you just got here, but could you please keep Theo busy? I have to find Blake right now; it can’t wait. I already waited too long to tell him. I hope I haven’t screwed everything up again.”

“I’ll take Theo down to the beach. I can manage that much with my ankle, Lisa, you get your parents settled,” Susan said, then turned to her. “Go find, Blake, he’ll understand. Just tell him the truth. If he loves you as much as I think he does, he’ll forgive you.”

“Thank you,” she said, giving Susan a hug. “I hope that you’re right. I can’t live without him, not again.”

“Then you’d better go find him,” Lisa said. “I’ll handle Mom and Dad.”

She walked over to the table and crouched down next to Theo. “Hey, kiddo, Susan is going to take you to the beach as soon as you’re finished eating. I’ve got a few things to take care of, and then I’ll meet up with you guys,” she said. “I want you to be good for her and listen to what she tells you. The ocean can be a very dangerous place, you know that.”

“I know, Mom. Grandpa told me all about it,” Theo said. “I promise that I’ll be careful. Aunt Lisa bought me a lifejacket to wear in the water. I won’t get washed out to sea.”

“Good,” she said, ruffling his hair. “I love you, baby.”

Theo rolled his eyes at her. “I’m not a baby, Mom,” he said, “but I love you too.”

She took off from the cabin at a run but forced herself to slow down. Blake would be at his cabin, she was sure of it. They'd talk, and everything would be okay. Her heart was pounding when she knocked on the door, but she was greeted by silence and knocked again. A few minutes later, she turned away disappointed and headed for the village, hoping that he'd gone to get something for breakfast.

There was no sign of him in the village, so she headed for the beach, but she didn't find him there either. She fought off a wave of disappointment so powerful it took her breath away. She couldn't go on one second more wondering and worrying about how upset Blake was with her but she had no idea where else to look for him; then it hit her. He'd be with Max. It took her a second to find the path that led to his cabin, but once she found it, she began to run, desperate to find Blake and make things right if she could.

When she knocked on the door, it was opened right away as if Max had been waiting for her. "It took you long enough," he said, swinging the door open wide. "He's on the porch. I'll leave you two alone to talk."

She let out a sigh of relief. "Thanks, Max," she said. "I'm sorry you got pulled into our drama. I hope I can fix things."

"He loves you. I just think he's in a bit of shock," Max said, patting her on the back. "Honestly, so am I, but I can't wait to meet Theo."

CHAPTER 13

BLAKE

Blake stumbled down the ladder and up the path toward his cabin, his head spinning. Theo's image ran through his head over and over, making his breath catch in his throat. A few steps down the path, he was forced to stop and lean against a tree to keep from passing out, but he stood taking deep breaths, willing his brain to slow down, too. The shock finally began to fade away as the oxygen began to feed his body and the darkness that had been threatening subsided, leaving him standing there, not sure what to think.

Emotions tumbled through him one after another: panic that he was a father, anger that he hadn't known, pride that he'd created such a handsome young man, and finally, a deep desire to get to know his son. He looked down the path, wondering if he should go back; running away had been the coward's way out, but the anger surged to life above all the other emotions, and he knew that he wasn't ready to see Wren. But he didn't want to be alone. He needed to talk to someone about the dramatic turn his life had just taken, and headed to Max's cabin, hoping his old friend would help him work through the mess in his mind.

Max opened the door only seconds after he knocked, dressed only in his pajama bottoms, a cup of coffee in his hand, an annoyed look on his face. "It's awfully early," he said, then saw the look on Blake's face. "What's wrong? You look like the world is about to come to an end."

"I need to sit down," he said, feeling his knees begin to buckle. "Did you know that

Wren's parents and her sister were coming to the island?"

"Of course, I arranged it yesterday afternoon. It was supposed to be a surprise," Max said, swinging the door open. "You'd better come in before you fall down. What the hell is going on, Blake?"

"Did you know they were bringing a little boy with them?" he asked, sinking into a chair at the kitchen table. "He looks like he's about five years old. His name is Theo."

"Sure, Wren's nephew, I guess," Max said, setting a cup of coffee in front of him. "I still don't see what the problem is."

He could only stare at Max, the words he needed to say stuck in his throat, his brain not ready to accept the truth. "He's not Wren's nephew," he finally said. "He's her son."

Max looked surprised for a second. "I guess I got that wrong," he said, then shrugged his shoulders. "So, she's got a kid. It's not the end of the world; things happen."

"He's five years old, Max," he said, then took a deep breath. "He looks just like me."

Max's eyes widened. "Do you mean..." his words died away.

"That's exactly what I mean," he said, then plunged on. "I think he's mine. I think I'm Theo's father. Wren has been trying to tell me something for two days, I think that was it. I think she was trying to tell me that I have a son."

"Oh, that's well..." Max sat down heavily in the chair across from him. "Are you sure he's yours? You could be wrong, you know."

"I'm not wrong," he said, shaking his head. "He looks just like I did when I was five;

he's mine, Max, and Wren never said a word; all this time, she kept him a secret from me."

Max held up his hand. "Give me just a second to catch up. I haven't had my coffee yet," he said, then took a long sip. "Okay, so you're the father of a five-year-old, and his mother never told you, but you're in love with her, so maybe this isn't so bad. It sounds like instant family to me."

"You seem to have missed the part where she hid Theo from me and would have continued to if we hadn't met again," he said, anger surging through him. "He's my son, I might have gone my entire life not knowing about him. I might have died alone, never knowing that he existed."

"Don't you think that you're being a bit dramatic?" Max asked, sitting back in his chair. "I know that you're mad, and I don't blame you. I would be too, but I just want you to look past that and ask yourself why Wren didn't tell you. I'm guessing she had a good reason."

He took a deep breath, realizing that Max was right, pushed the anger away, and tried to look at things from Wren's perspective, and it didn't take long to figure out the answer. "My mother," he said. "She ambushed Wren the day she disappeared. I didn't know about her little visit until Wren told me the other day, that's why she left me, my mother scared her off, she said some terrible things to her. I bet she had something to do with Wren not telling me."

His anger began to build again when he thought about all his mother's meddling had cost him, it was bad enough when it had just been the loss of the only woman he'd ever loved, but now he'd lost the first five years of his son's life. He wanted to strike out at her right then, pick up the phone, and tell her exactly how he felt, but shut the anger away and focused on the little boy and woman on the other side of the island.

“I need to talk to Wren,” he finally said. “We have to straighten this out.”

Before he could get to his feet, there was a knock on the door. “I bet that’s her,” Max said, getting to his feet. “I still can’t believe that you’re a father. I feel sorry for that kid.”

“Very funny,” he said. “Are you going to get the door?”

Wren

Blake was standing with his back to the door, looking out the window, when Wren walked into the kitchen. She hesitated for just a second, bracing herself for his anger and rejection. When he turned around, there was a different emotion in his eyes, and she was instantly filled with an intense feeling of loss that made tears come to her eyes. The urge to rush over and comfort him was almost too strong to control, but she was painfully aware that she was the cause of his distress and didn’t move.

“I’m sorry, Blake,” she said, blinking back the tears that threatened to spill down her cheeks. “I should have told you sooner, I just...”

“You mean like when you found out you were pregnant?” he asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm, anger flashing in his eyes. “Or what about when he was born? Did you think of me then?”

“I’ve thought about you every day since I left,” she said, knowing that she deserved his anger, but feeling the pain of it anyway. “I did what I had to, Blake. You have to understand, I couldn’t lose Theo; he was my baby.”

Blake stared at her for a second, then his anger seemed to drain away. His shoulders relaxed a little, and he let out a long sigh. “Why would you have lost him?” he asked. “What did my mother say to you?”

“She told me that if I even thought about getting pregnant to trap you, she’d take the baby away from me,” she said, unable to stop the tears this time. “She said I’d be sorry if I didn’t leave you alone, that she could ruin my entire family with just a snap of her fingers. When I found out that I was pregnant a few weeks after you went home, I knew that I couldn’t tell you. I knew that she’d follow through with her threats.”

“Dammit, Wren, you should have known I would have never let that happen,” he said, shaking his head in frustration. “We were planning a life together. I was going to ask you to marry me, and a baby would have just made everything that much better.”

“But I didn’t know that back then,” she said. “You hid who you really were from me, Blake. I was just a kid, and I was scared. Your mother sounded so serious. My parents had already kicked me out. I was alone in the world. It wouldn’t have been hard for her to take the baby away from me.”

“So, it all comes back to my mother,” he said with a sigh. “I don’t know how to fix this, Wren, I don’t know where to go from here.”

She took a couple of steps toward him. “How about meeting your son?” she asked. “We can’t do anything to change the past, Blake, and I’m truly sorry that you had to find out the way you did. I should have told you sooner.”

He looked over at her. “Is it really that easy?” he asked. “It can’t be; it has to be more complicated.”

“We’re bonded, Blake. You said so yourself. I think that means you have to forgive me or something,” she said, taking a few steps toward him. “I’m sorry I hurt you, Blake, I promise there will never be any secrets between us again. I know now that I can trust you completely, I know you would never do anything to hurt me, and I

believe in the love between us. Now you just have to decide if you do.”

It only took a heartbeat for him to open his arms to her and she slipped into them gratefully, sighing when he pulled her close. “You’re not completely to blame; I should have told you about my family and the money and everything,” he said. “Just promise me one thing. Tell me the next time you have my baby, I’d really like to be there.”

She looked up to find him grinning at her. “Blake, that’s not funny; I still feel so guilty,” she said. “I think it will be a while before I can joke about it.”

“It’s time to put it all behind us, Wren. We were both to blame, but it’s all over now; we’re together, and my son is waiting to meet me on the other side of the village,” he said. “I forgive you, Wren. I understand why you hid Theo from me.”

“Thank you, Blake, I think I needed to hear that,” she said, finally managing a smile. “I was so afraid you’d never be able to get past this, that you’d turn your back on me, and I’d never see you again.”

“I could never do that, sweetheart, you’re the other half of me,” he said. “Without you, I’m not complete, and I never will be. I love you, Wren, and I always will.”

“I love you too,” she said. “I’ve been miserable since we’ve been apart, I don’t ever want to live without you again.”

“That can be arranged,” he said, grinning down at her. “Now I’m going to kiss you to seal the deal and then you’re going to introduce me to my son.”

It was more than a single kiss, but they eventually made their way back to her cabin. “Wren, what have you told Theo about me?” Blake asked, pulling her to a stop at the bottom of the ladder. “He doesn’t think I’m a bad guy or something, does he?”

“When Theo asks about you, I tell him that you love him very much but can’t be with us,” she said. “I tell him stories about the summer we spent together, the fun we had fishing, the way you made me fall in love with you...”

Her voice trailed off all the years of pain and longing back for just an instant, but Blake put his arms around her chasing it away. “It’s over now, Wren,” he said. “We’re together now, and we’re going to stay that way; it will never be like that again, I promise.”

She looked up at him, the truth of his words clear in his eyes. “You’re right,” she said, stretching up to give him a kiss. “That’s the past; this is the future. Let’s go see what Theo is up to.”

CHAPTER 14

BLAKE

It was a relief to walk into the cabin and find only Susan and Theo, but Blake was still nervous about how their talk with the little boy was going to go. “Mommy!” Theo called, jumping to his feet and throwing himself at Wren’s legs. “You don’t look sad anymore; I’m so glad.”

Wren picked Theo up with a grunt and gave him a big hug. “No, I’m not sad anymore,” she said, pulling back to look at him. “But there is something we need to talk to you about.”

“Oh, I think that’s my cue to go take a nap,” Susan said, getting to her feet. “I’ll be in my bedroom if you need me.”

When she was gone, Wren motioned for Blake to sit down on the couch, then carried Theo over and sat down next to him. “Sweetheart, do you remember when I told you that your dad loves us but can’t be with us?” she asked, then waited until Theo nodded his head. “Well, things have changed, and your dad...well, he’s free to be with us now.”

Theo thought about that for a second, then looked over at him. “Does that mean you’re my dad?” he asked. “Mommy always looks sad when she talks about you, but she doesn’t look sad now, so I guess I’m glad that you’re here. Can we go back to the beach now?”

Wren looked at him over the top of Theo's head and shrugged her shoulders. "Sure, sport, let's go to the beach," he said, wondering if it was really going to be that easy. "Are you sure you don't have some questions for me?"

Theo studied him for a second. "Are you going to be around all the time now?" he asked. "Are you going to move in with us?"

"Let's see, yes, I'm going to be around you all the time now. I hope that's okay," he said. "I think we can share your mom, can't we?"

"Only if I still get story time," Theo said, a challenge in his voice. "We always read stories at bedtime."

"I would never dream of interfering with story time," he said. "But maybe I could do story time with you sometimes."

After a brief pause, Theo smiled. "Okay," he said. "I get four stories every night."

"Theo..." Wren said, looking down at him.

"Oh, right," Theo said. "Three stories, sometimes I get mixed up."

"Well then, we've got story time all figured out," he said. "What's next?"

Theo's face became serious. "Why haven't you been with us before now?" he asked. "Why did you stay away?"

Aware that he was talking to a five-year-old, he chose his words carefully. "A bad woman has been keeping us apart, but she isn't going to be able to do that anymore," he said. "I've been looking for you guys for a long time. Now that I've found you, I'm never going to lose you again."

That seemed to satisfy the child. “That’s okay then,” Theo said, then looked up at Wren. “Are you guys going to get married? ”

“Oh, I don’t...that’s not...” Wren stammered. “Hey, weren’t we going to the beach?”

He laughed, “I think maybe we’d better take this one step at a time,” he said, ruffling Theo’s hair, but he was thinking about a ring again. “The beach first, wedding rings later.”

After a full day spent at the beach, Blake felt more than ready to handle story time and bed with Theo, so he tucked him in, then began to read to him. His son watched him intently, a happy smile on his face, his eyes getting heavier by the second, and a wave of love so powerful it took his breath away washed over him. Forcing himself to concentrate on the book, he flipped the pages, deciding that he enjoyed being a father.

“And they all lived happily ever after,” Blake said, closing the last book with a snap. “I think that was my favorite one.”

When there was no answer, he looked over at his son, and a wave of tenderness washed over him. Sound asleep, his long eye lashes brushing his cheeks, he looked just like his mother. Love welled up inside him, followed by profound gratitude that he’d been given a second chance at the life he was supposed to lead. He wasn’t embarrassed by the tears that slipped down his cheeks; he knew how lucky he was, and he didn’t bother to wipe them away when Wren slipped up behind him.

“I’m sure it’s all a bit overwhelming,” she said, wrapping her arms around him from behind. “I still get all weepy when I watch him sleeping sometimes. He’s a little miracle.”

“Our little miracle,” he said, reaching up and taking her hand. “You’ve done an

amazing job with him, Wren. I have a long way to go to get caught up.”

“You were great with him today,” she said. “It’s not easy being a parent, but I think you’re already getting the hang of it. ”

“I hope so. I want to be the best father that I can be,” he said. “I didn’t have a very good role model.”

“You will be because it’s important to you,” she said. “You don’t have to be your father, Blake, you can be you. Now let’s go to bed, I’m exhausted and I promise you, there won’t be any sleeping in tomorrow.”

He got up, tucked the blankets up around Theo’s neck even though it was warm, then took Wren’s hand and left the bedroom. “It was nice of Susan to switch cabins with me,” he said. “I hate to imagine what your parents think, but I don’t want to be away from you for even one night.”

“I don’t care what my parents think. They threw me away when I needed them most,” she said. “If they hadn’t turned their backs on me, I might have been brave enough to contact you when I found out about Theo. I don’t know if or when I’ll be ready to talk to them. They hurt me, Blake, all they cared about was their reputation, which was more important to them than I was. I don’t care how far they’ve come. It doesn’t erase what they did. You weren’t there; you didn’t hear my father screaming obscenities at me or see him throwing my clothes out the window onto the front yard.”

“Oh, Wren, I’m so sorry,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “I should have been there with you. I should have been there with you the entire time. I’ll make it up to you, I promise. I’ll make all your dreams come true, and we’ll never have a thing to do with your parents or mine again. We’ll have our own little family, just you, Theo, and me.”

“I like the sound of that,” she said, taking a deep breath. “I didn’t mean to make you feel guilty, Blake, I just don’t think I’m ready to forgive my parents yet.”

“I don’t blame you,” he said, stroking her back. “My mother and I are going to have a long talk when I get home. She’s got a lot to answer, and I have a feeling she’s not going to like what I have to say. ”

“Let’s promise to be better parents to our kids than ours were to us,” she said, looking up at him. “Together, we can undo the damage they’ve done.”

“Kids?” he asked, grinning at her. “Is there something you want to tell me?”

“Blake, stop kidding around...I just thought...well, I mean that you’d want more kids,” she said, a blush spreading across her cheeks. “I know we haven’t talked about it yet...”

He grabbed her hand. “We should get started right away,” he said. “You know these things take time, and Theo needs a brother or sister.”

Wren

Wren’s entire body was already throbbing with desire as she let Blake pull her into the bedroom. “Blake, I didn’t mean right now,” she said, gasping when she saw the look in his eyes. “Theo is right in the next room.”

“Then you’re going to have to be quiet,” he said, pulling her into his arms. “We don’t have to make a baby tonight, Wren, I just want to practice.”

“Well, that’s a relief,” she said, giggling when he began to kiss her on the neck. “Blake, stop that, it tickles.”

He swept her up off her feet and carried her over to the bed. "I'm going to do more than tickle you, sweetheart," he said, laying her down, then whipping her nightgown up over her head. "I'm going to make love to you until the sun comes up, then start all over again."

Blake didn't quite fulfill his promise, but it was deep into the night before she finally curled up next to him and fell asleep. A satisfied smile was on her face, and his gentle snores filled the bedroom, a comforting sound. After a deep, soothing sleep, she woke with Blake curled around her, and the feel of his naked skin against hers made goosebumps break out all over her body, and she shivered at the memory of the night before.

"Good morning," Blake whispered in her ear, his hand sliding over her breast. "All that wiggling around woke me up."

She gasped when he began to tease her nipple with his thumb and finger, then sighed with pleasure when he slipped into her from behind. "Good morning," she managed to say, her voice slightly breathless. "I thought you were still asleep."

"Not anymore," Blake said, his voice full of amusement. "Not with you lying naked next to me."

The conversation died away after that as the passion between them took over, and it was more than an hour later before they lay exhausted in each other's arms. "I could get used to waking up that way," she said. "Much better than any old alarm clock."

"I should hope so," Blake said, laughing. "I'm a finely tuned machine."

She laughed, "Oh, is that so?" she asked. "Maybe I should give you a quick once over to make sure everything is in working order."

Before she could follow through,, little footsteps pounded down the hallway, and Theo appeared in the doorway. “Mom, Aunt Lisa is coming down the path, and she’s got doughnuts with her,” he said, then looked over at Blake. “Umm...you should get up.”

“That sounds like an excellent idea, especially if there are doughnuts involved,” Blake said. “Why don’t you wait for us in the living room? We’ll be right there.”

Theo studied the two of them again and shrugged his shoulders. “Okay, but don’t take forever,” he said. “I want to go to the beach again.”

“Bossy little thing, isn’t he?” Blake asked when Theo was gone. “I guess we’d better follow orders. ”

“And start shutting the bedroom door,” she said. “If he’d come in here just a few minutes sooner...”

“Yeah, that might have been awkward,” he said. “Note to self, close bedroom door before making love to my woman.”

“Your woman?” Wren asked, slipping out of bed. “Are we cavemen?”

“No, but I can’t call you my wife yet,” he said, grinning at her. “And girlfriend seems like an understatement, so I decided to go with woman.”

Wren rolled her eyes at him. “Get dressed,” she said, shaking her head. “I don’t want my man meeting my sister naked.”

Blake’s laughter followed her all the way to the living room, filling her with warmth and making her body tingle all over, but the good feeling didn’t last long. “You have to talk to Mom and Dad; you have to give them a chance to apologize,” Lisa said as

soon as she walked in the door. “How much longer are you going to drag this out?”

“Well, good morning to you, too,” she said, taking the box of doughnuts from her sister. “I don’t want to talk about this. I’m barely speaking to you as it is. How could you bring them here? This was supposed to be my vacation, I was supposed to be relaxing and recharging, not dealing with ghosts from my past.”

Lisa had the grace to look sorry. “Wren, this fight between all of you isn’t healthy. You need to give them a chance to tell you how sorry they are,” she said. “I know that I overstepped, but I can’t go on listening to them go on and on about it; that’s all I ever hear about. It’s your fault, and you have to fix it; I want my old life back; I want things to go back to the way they were.”

“So, this is really more about you than me,” she said, letting out a long sigh. “You haven’t changed, Lisa, you’re still as self-centered as you’ve always been. You weren’t there that day, you didn’t hear Dad screaming at me, you didn’t see him throwing my clothes out the window. The neighbors came out to watch Lisa. It was humiliating. If it hadn’t been for Susan and her family, I don’t know what would have happened to me.”

“Don’t talk to me about humiliation, I live with it daily,” Susan said. “People in town still talk, they still ask about you. The scandal just won’t go away; it’s ruined my life, and it’s ruined Mom and Dad’s life.”

“Ah, now I see. You all are embarrassed, and you want me to fix it,” she said, shaking her head. “You want me to forgive and forget so people will stop talking about you. Well, I’ve got news for you. I don’t care. Clearly, reconnecting with you was a mistake. I think you should leave now. None of this is my fault, so don’t blame me; blame Mom and Dad.”

Lisa turned and stomped out of the cabin, slamming the door behind her, and she

realized that Theo was watching her, a shocked look on his face. “I’m sorry you had to see that, sweetheart,” she said, walking over to him. “Your aunt Lisa and I don’t have a very good relationship, but it’s nothing for you to worry about. Grown-ups fight sometimes.”

“That’s right, buddy,” Blake said, coming out of the bedroom. “Now, where are those doughnuts? We’re going to need some fuel if we go to the beach.”

She sent Blake a grateful look, “If you two are okay on your own, I think I’ll go take a shower,” she said, her voice shaking a little. “I’ll have a doughnut when I’m done.”

“You go on, Theo and I will be just fine,” Blake said, then crossed the room and pulled her into his arms. “But I need a kiss first.”

“Gross,” Theo said. “Don’t do that in front of me.”

“Too late,” Blake said, planting a big kiss on her lips. “You’d better get into the kitchen, or you’ll be next. ”

Theo squealed and took off, calling, “Gross, gross, gross,” at the top of his lungs.

“Now, where were we?” Blake asked, pulling her closer again. “Oh, yeah, the gross part.”

When he’d kissed her thoroughly, Blake looked down at her, “Are you okay?” he asked. “That was a bit rough. It couldn’t have been easy to kick Lisa out.”

“She’s always been a selfish little brat,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “When she contacted me last year, I thought she’d changed, but I was wrong. The truth is, I’m not surprised she’s more worried about herself than me, it’s nothing new. I’m just a little disappointed.”

“We’ve got each other, sweetheart,” Blake said, smiling at her. “I love you, Wren.”

“I love you too,” she said, stretching up and giving him a kiss.

CHAPTER 15

BLAKE

Blake watched Wren set the sail on the small sailboat, a big smile on her face, then looked down at Theo, who was staring at his mother, a look of concern on his face. “Don’t worry, she’ll be fine,” he said. “Your mom is a better sailor than anyone I know, well, except for Montgomery. How would you like to meet my friend Max?”

“He’s the guy that owns this place, right?” Theo asked. “He must be super rich. I bet he has a big house and a swimming pool.”

“I don’t know about super rich, but Max does own the resort,” he said. “He has a cabin just like the one we’re staying in, and his swimming pool is the ocean, but he wants to meet you.”

Theo looked disappointed. “Oh, okay,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I hope there’s something fun to do there.”

“I’m sure we can find something to entertain you, and I won’t be long,” he said, smiling down at his son. “Can you keep a secret?”

“Sure, I’m really good at it,” Theo said proudly. “I never told anyone that Tommy was the one who broke the window.”

Theo slapped his hand over his mouth. “That’s okay. Wherever Tommy is, he’s safe from me,” he said, trying not to laugh. “How would you feel if I asked your mom to

marry me? I want to make sure it's okay with you before I do. A lot of things are changing really fast."

Theo was silent as they walked along the path, then he looked up at Blake, his little face as serious as any five-year-old could be. "I've never seen my mom so happy, I think that you're good for her, and that means you'll be good for me too," he said. "Besides, you're my dad, you're supposed to be married to my mom. It's just the way things are done. I don't know why you didn't do it before."

"That's a story for when you're older," he said, crouching down next to Theo. "Will you be my best man? It's a lot of responsibility, but I think you can handle it."

Theo perked up. "Do I get to eat as much cake as I want?" he asked. "I like wedding cake, it always has frosting flowers on it. I like to stick the whole thing in my mouth at once."

"You bet, that's one of the perks," he said. "Now we just have to talk your mom into it."

"She won't say no," Theo said. "She likes you a lot."

"Well, I need to ask for Max's help. I can't propose without a ring," he said, standing up and taking Theo's hand. "I'm going to run over to the big island this afternoon. I need you to keep your mom busy while I'm gone. Do you think you can do that?"

"Hmm..." Theo's face scrunched up as he thought about it. "She promised to take me fishing. Will that work?"

"That's perfect," he said, beaming at his son. "Just remember, this is a secret, I want to surprise her with the ring."

Theo mimicked zipping his lips shut. “I won’t say a word, Dad,” he said. “I promise.”

It was the first time Theo had called him Dad, and he had to hold back tears. “Thanks, Son,” he said. “You’re a great kid, I’m proud to be your father.”

Lisa flopped down in the shade under a palm tree and stared at the ocean, a scowl on her face, frustrated and angry that her plan wasn’t going as well as she’d hoped. It had all seemed so simple when she’d come up with it a year ago. She’d been so sure that Wren would play right into her hands, she always had in the past. But she’d made the mistake of under estimating her sister, assuming that she’d be so desperate to get out of Dublin and the pathetic life she lived there that she’d jump at the chance to come home.

It had never occurred to her that Wren might not want to make up with their parents. She hadn’t realized how much her sister had changed, hadn’t really listened when they talked. Now that she understood that the old way of getting what she wanted clearly wasn’t going to work on Wren, she’d have to come up with a new angle. Marrying Bruce was all she wanted in life, and her sister was the only thing standing in her way. She had to get her to come home and behave like a good daughter.

The way things stood now, that was never going to happen and she had to find a way to turn the tide, to get her sister to agree to help clear their name in town. Her entire future depended on it. Feeling like everything was hopeless, she sat staring out at the ocean, her perfect future going up in flames, sure that her life was over, that she’d end up single and alone. It wasn’t fair, she was the pretty one, she was the smart one. Wren shouldn’t get everything she wanted, she didn’t deserve it. She’d humiliated them all by getting pregnant.

Anger and frustration building inside her, the urge to hit something growing stronger. She started to get up but spotted Blake and Wren coming down the beach, Theo

between them. Scooting back deeper into the shade, she watched them, smiling and happy with a plan beginning to form in her mind. Blake was her sister's biggest weakness. Without him, she would be devastated, willing to listen to reason and come home. The world suddenly didn't look like such a bad place when Lisa realized how easy it would be to bring her sister down, and a smile slowly spread across her face.

Biding her time, she watched Blake help Wren set up beach chairs and fishing poles, then kiss her sister goodbye before slipping out of her hiding place and hurrying up the beach. She found a good place to watch for Blake, then followed him down to the docks, a bit surprised he was leaving the island, then prepared herself for the biggest seduction of her life. Men were all alike, and she was sure a man like Blake wouldn't be able to resist the gifts God had given her. All it would take was one kiss, and her sister's heart would be broken.

Wren

Wren reeled in her line and stepped back from the shore. "I think it's time for something cold to drink," she said, wiping the sweat from her face. "Maybe we should give the fishing a rest for a while, I don't think they're biting right now."

"I'm not ready to quit. I want to keep practicing," Theo said, then shrugged his shoulders. "I don't care if I don't catch anything, this is fun."

"Okay, but stay back from the water, no going in for any reason," she said. "I'll just be sitting right over there, call if you get into any trouble."

"Mom, I'm not a baby, I'll be fine," Theo said with a huff. "I'm just fishing, nothing bad is going to happen, and I'm wearing my life jacket."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry, but I'm your mother, and it's my job to worry about you," she said, walking over and giving him a hug. "That's never going to change, so you

might as well get used to it.”

“Dad doesn’t fuss over me like you do,” Theo complained. “He just lets me get on with it.”

Wren had to blink back tears when she heard her son call Blake dad, and had to clear her throat before she spoke. “Well, that’s fine for your dad, but your mom is going to worry and fuss,” she said, grinning at him. “It just means that I love you.”

“I love you too,” Theo grudgingly said, then let her give him a kiss.

“Have fun fishing,” she said, turning away from him, surprised to see Susan walking down the beach toward them.

“Are you mad at me?” her friend asked when she got close enough. “I wouldn’t blame you if you were, but you have to believe me, I didn’t know they were coming.”

“It’s okay, Susan, I know you would never do that to me,” she said. “We should sit down. That was a long walk on that ankle. You shouldn’t have come all the way down here.”

“I had to make sure we were okay, a little pain was worth it to know that you’re not mad at me,” Susan said, limping a little as they walked to the chairs. “How are things going with Blake and Theo?”

“Great, actually, Theo seems to accept Blake is his dad; they’ve been getting along really well,” she said, then shrugged her shoulders. “I know it won’t always be this easy; they have a lot of bonding to do, but I think this was the perfect place for them to start that process.”

“Where is Blake?” Susan asked. “I thought I saw him at the marina when I was

walking over here, I could have sworn your sister was with him.”

She let out a groan. “That can’t be good,” she said. “Lisa and I got into this morning about me talking to Mom and Dad. She wants me to fix things with them because it’s ruining all their lives. As usual, she made it sound like it was all my fault and demanded that I forgive Mom and Dad so her life could go back to normal.”

“I can’t blame her. The gossip still gets going sometimes about that night, and let me tell you, people are not very kind about it,” Susan said, shaking her head. “No one ever says anything when I’m around, but your parents aren’t exactly popular in town, and I guess that spills over onto your sister.”

“I had no idea,” she said, then looked over at Susan. “Does it make me a terrible person because that makes me just a little bit happy?”

Susan shook her head. “No, I feel that way too,” she said, then hesitated. “Wren, I’m going to suggest something, and I just want you to listen before you shut me down.”

She had a pretty good idea what her friend was going to say. “If you’re going to suggest...” she started to say, but Susan cut her off with a look. “Okay, fine, I’ll listen, but I’m not making any promises.”

“I think you need to talk to your parents, not so they can apologize to you, not so you can forgive them and fix things,” she said. “I think you need closure. I think you need to tell them how you feel so you can move on. Until you do, I don’t think you’ll ever be able to heal completely. If that’s really a door that you’re ready to close, then do it, if not, well...”

Silence fell between them, but she was thinking about what Susan said, turning it over in her mind, trying to look past the torrent of emotion that swirled to life when she thought about facing her parents. She wondered if Susan was right, if avoiding

them was only making it harder to let go of what happened, if she was intentionally keeping the door open so she could hold onto her pain and anger. Maybe it was time to face them, time to look the ghosts of the past in the eye and put it all to rest once and for all.

“You might be right, I might need to get some closure,” she said. “Dragging all of this hurt and anger around with me is exhausting. Blake and I are going to start over, and I think this is something I have to do to really move on from the past.”

Susan reached out and took her hand. “I know it’s not going to be easy,” she said. “I’ll be right by your side if you want me there.”

“I wouldn’t dream of doing this without you there,” she said. “You’ve been there for me since we were six years old. You’re more than just my best friend, you’re my sister.”

CHAPTER 16

BLAKE

Blake was almost to the boat that would take him over to the big island when he heard someone calling his name, and turned to see Lisa hurrying down the dock toward him. “Blake, I didn’t think you heard me,” she said, flashing him a big smile. “You’re not leaving, are you? Wren will be so upset.”

“Just for a few hours. I have some business in Bermuda that can’t wait,” he said, instantly on his guard. “I’ll be back later this afternoon.”

“Oh, take me with you,” Lisa said, clamping her hands onto his arm. “I would love to do some shopping. We left on this trip so quickly that I barely had time to pack anything, and you know how girls love their clothes. I’m sure there’s room in that big boat for one more.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I mean, I think you’re supposed to clear it with Max before you leave the island or something,” he said, taking a step back. “Maybe you should check with him first.”

Lisa stuck with him. “Please, Blake,” she said, grabbing his arm again, this time making sure her breast brushed his arm. “He won’t even notice that I’m gone, and it would make me so happy.”

“It’s not up to me, Lisa,” he said, pulling away from her. “I can’t stop you from getting in the boat, but you’re not coming with me, I have things to do in town.”

Lisa began to pout. “Why are you being so mean to me?” she asked, then pushed her way past him and jumped into the boat. “I don’t need you to babysit me, I’ll be just fine on my own.”

Blake climbed on board and sat down as far from Lisa as he could get, then signaled to Brian that he was ready. “I have to radio in that I have an extra passenger,” he said. “It will just take a second, Mr. Watson.”

“Blake please, you’re the one in charge here,” he said, then looked over his shoulder. “I don’t suppose you could get rid of her.”

Brian glanced over his shoulder, then back at him a little smile on his face, “Sorry, sir, I can’t refuse a paying guest,” he said. “But I could make it a very uncomfortable trip.”

He laughed, “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear that and hold on.”

As soon as they cleared the marina, Brian hit the throttle and the boat surged forward with a burst of power sending Lisa tumbling to the floor with a scream that could be heard over the roar of the engines. She lay there stunned for a second, then slowly picked herself up off the floor, then looked over at Brian, her face full of anger. It quickly disappeared when she saw him watching her, her face crumpled up, a few tears appeared in her eyes, then she grabbed her wrist.

“Oh, I think I’m hurt,” she whimpered, sliding over next to him. “My wrist is throbbing, I think it might be broken, that guy did that on purpose. ”

“Let me see,” he said, trying not to laugh. “Can you move it?”

Lisa wiggled her fingers. “Oh, that really hurts,” she cried, grabbing it with her other hand. “See, I told you, it’s broken, you’re going to have to take me to a doctor when

we get there.”

“If it’s that bad, we should turn back. Max has a perfectly good doctor on the island,” he said, starting to get to his feet. “I’ll just let Brian know you need to go back.”

“Wait, maybe it’s not that bad,” Lisa said, a look of desperation on her face. “We don’t have to go back. See, it’s already feeling better.”

“It’s up to you,” he said with a shrug. “But I told you before we left, I have things to do on the island. You’re on your own.”

“You wouldn’t really leave me all alone on a strange island, would you?” Lisa asked, batting her eyelashes at him. “I mean, what if I get lost? What if something happens to me? You’d never forgive yourself. Besides, I just need to make a couple of quick stops; you can even help me pick out a new bikini.”

“The last thing I want to do is go shopping with you,” he said, sliding away from her. “I don’t know what you’re up to Lisa, but it’s not going to work. You should have stayed on the island.”

She gasped and put her hand over her heart. “Blake, I’m shocked that you think I’m up to something, I just want to go shopping,” she said, tears in her eyes. “You really hurt my feelings.”

“Looks like your wrist is better,” he said, nodding at her hand. “That was a miraculous recovery.”

Lisa grabbed her wrist and dropped it onto her lap. “I guess it wasn’t as bad as I thought it was,” she said, clearly annoyed with him. “Maybe we could just go for a drink somewhere. You must have time for that. I’ve always wanted one of those drinks with a little umbrella in it.”

He looked over at her, then shook his head. "I'm here on business, Lisa, that's the only reason I left Wren behind," he said. "I'm not going shopping with you, I'm not going for a drink, you're going to have to find someone else to entertain you this afternoon. It's not going to be me."

The pout on her face was real this time, as was the dirty look she gave him, and he scooted away from her again, hoping that she'd gotten the message loud and clear. It was a relief when the marina came into view, and he got up to help Brian prepare the boat for docking, ignoring Lisa sitting in the back of the boat and pouting.

When they finally got off the boat, Lisa linked her arm with his, looked up at him, and then pulled it away again when he scowled at her. "Okay, how about a picture then," she said, taking his rejection in stride, which should have been his first warning. "Come on, Blake, a picture isn't going to hurt anything."

He studied her for a second. "Fine, but just one," he said. "I have an appointment, and I can't be late."

Lisa stopped a woman walking by and asked her to take their picture, then stood next to him, then just as the woman pressed the button, reached up, grabbed his head, turned him to face her, and kissed him. He heard the camera take several shots before he managed to get away from Lisa, unconsciously wiping his mouth, and stumbling backward.

"Don't ever do that again," he growled, then strode off toward town, so angry that he was afraid of what he might do, the sound of Lisa's pleased laughter following him up the dock.

***Wren** *

Wren stood looking out the window of the cabin, but there wasn't much to see.

Darkness had fallen over the jungle several hours before, but she felt better watching the path from the village. She refused to believe that something terrible had happened to Blake, couldn't believe that fate would have brought him back to her only to separate them again. Telling herself that there had to be a good reason he still wasn't back, she turned and walked into the kitchen to prepare the fourth cup of tea that she wouldn't drink.

Pouring out the old one, she switched on the kettle and stood leaning up against the counter waiting for it to boil, a little voice in the back of her head reminding her that Lisa had been with Blake at the marina. It wouldn't be the first time her little sister had stolen her boyfriend. She could think of at least three boys who'd dumped her for Lisa, only to have her dump them once she'd won them over.

Blake wasn't a boy, and he loved her, she reminded herself; they were bonded, fated to spend the rest of their lives together, and he would never fall for Lisa's tricks. It was just a coincidence she'd been at the marina, just a coincidence Blake was late, her sister hadn't gotten her hooks into him. They hadn't come this far for her sister to ruin everything. Blake wasn't that weak, he wouldn't succumb to Lisa's wiles. He wasn't that kind of man. But no matter how many times she told herself that same thing over and over, just in different ways, she couldn't completely silence that little voice; she'd been burned too many times by her sister.

When Blake finally came through the door a few minutes later, she was limp with relief until she saw the lipstick on the collar of his shirt. "Where have you been?" she demanded. "And whose lipstick is that on your shirt?"

Blake looked over at her, his face full of exhaustion. "It's your sister's," he said. "It's a long story and I'm tired. I don't suppose we could save this conversation for the morning."

"I'm not sure that we can unless you're planning on sleeping with Theo or on the

couch,” she said, alarm bells going off in her head. “Why is Lisa’s lipstick on your collar?”

“Don’t you trust me?” he asked, then sighed. “I can see that you don’t, so maybe I will sleep on the couch. I thought we were better than this; I thought we trusted each other. It’s been a terrible night, and the last thing I want to do right now is relive the whole thing.”

“I’m sorry, Blake, I do trust you,” she said. “I just...Lisa likes to take things that belong to me, not because she wants them but because she doesn’t want me to have them. I just don’t want you to become one of those things.”

“Wren, that’s not going to happen,” he said, with a sigh. “Can you just trust me enough to wait for me to explain in the morning?”

Before she could answer, Theo began to cry and scream. “Oh, he’s having a bad dream,” she said. He needs me; I have to go.”

She whirled around before Blake could say anything and ran into Theo’s room, sure that her worst fear had come true, but held back the tears as she comforted her son. When he finally calmed down, she curled up in the bed with him, sure that she wouldn’t sleep, but it wasn’t long before Theo’s gentle breathing soothed her into a deep slumber.

She woke with a start with the first rays of sunshine and opened her eyes, but quickly closed them again, wishing she could go back to sleep when the events of the night before flashed through her mind. Getting out of bed, she crept out of the room, hoping that Theo would stay asleep. She had to apologize to Blake; she’d overreacted and assumed that he was no different than other men when she knew better. He loved her, and he would never get involved with her sister. She’d been a fool to ever think it was possible.

But when she stepped into the bedroom it was empty. Retracing her steps, she checked the couch, wondering if she'd missed him, but Blake was nowhere to be seen. Taking deep breaths, trying to calm herself, she went into the kitchen, hoping he'd gotten up before her, but he wasn't there either, and tears began to sting her eyes. She'd ruined everything with her jealousy; he must have left early that morning, too disgusted with her to stick around or so guilty he couldn't face her; it didn't matter which; he was gone.

She stumbled to the coffee pot, tears blurring her eyes, and spotted a note taped to the front. She grabbed it, relief pouring through her. She stood trembling as she read it.

Early morning call I can't miss. Working on our future; sorry about last night, I will explain when I see you later. I love you, Blake

After reading it several more times, she stuffed it into the pocket of her robe, admonishing herself for not having more faith in the man she loved. Clearly, she was still having some trust issues, and she'd have to work on that, but she knew deep in her heart that Blake loved her, and she would find her way through for both of them. He was working on their future, trying to find a way for them to make a life together. She needed to calm down and cut out the drama; for the first time in her life, things were going right.

CHAPTER 17

BLAKE

“O h, Mr. Watson, I didn’t expect to hear from you,” Blake’s secretary said when he greeted her over the phone. “You’re supposed to be on vacation.”

“I still am, but there were a few things I had to take care of that wouldn’t wait,” he said, realizing that he was going to miss the older woman. “I wanted to talk to you myself before you start hearing the rumors through the grapevine. You and I have been working together for a long time. I owe you at least that much, if not more.”

“Oh my, this sounds serious,” Margarie said. “Are you okay, Mr. Watson?”

“Actually, I’m better than I’ve ever been. Life has taken an unexpected and wonderful turn,” he said. “I’m not coming back to work after my vacation is over. I submitted my resignation a few minutes ago. My days working for my father are over.”

“Well, this is a bit of a shock. I knew that you weren’t happy, but...” the older woman’s words died away. “I’m happy for you, Mr. Watson; I hope you find the life you’ve been looking for. ”

“Thank you, Margarie,” he said. “I’m sorry to spring this on you, but I’m going to give you a very generous severance package and a glowing recommendation to anyone who asks.”

“I appreciate that, you’ve been great to work for,” she said. “I’ll miss you around here, but don’t worry about me, I’ll be just fine, I’ll have a new job before the day is out.”

He laughed. “I’m sure you will,” he said, relieved that she was taking it so well. “I just have one favor to ask: Could you box up my personal things and have them delivered to my apartment? I won’t be coming back to the office any time soon, and it will just be in the way.”

When he hung up the phone, he stared at it for a second, then took a deep breath. Before he could change his mind, he punched in his mother’s number. It rang a couple of times before she picked up. “Darling, this is a surprise,” she said. Don’t tell me you’re coming home early. I knew you were going to hate it there. I told you not to go.”

“Mother, I’m not coming back early. In fact, I’m not sure right now when I’m coming back,” he said. “There have been some interesting developments while I’ve been here, and I’m in the process of dealing with them.”

There was a brief silence on the line, “Whatever does that mean?” his mother asked, a note of worry in her voice. “Why aren’t you coming home, Blake?”

“Do you remember that summer I spent in Ireland?” he asked, enjoying himself a little. “You came to visit me, so I’m sure you do.”

“What does that have to do with you not coming home?” his mother asked, an edge to her voice he recognized all too well. “Blake, what’s going on? I demand an answer right now.”

“You are in no position to demand anything from me, not after what you did,” he said. “I reconnected with Wren, Mother. You remember her, I believe you had a long

chat with her that summer.”

There was another short silence. “Blake, this is ridiculous. That was almost six years ago,” his mother said, a defensive edge to her voice. I can’t remember who I talked to that long ago; I talk to a lot of people.”

“But you don’t threaten them or their families,” he said. “Wren told me what you said to her, she told me about your threats. You’re the reason she left me, you’re the reason I’ve been miserable for all these years.”

“It was for your own good,” his mother snapped. “She was just after your money. I set her straight to save you from making the biggest mistake of your life.”

“You meddled where you didn’t belong; you just wanted your own way. That’s all you’ve ever wanted, and I was just a pawn in your game,” he said. “Well, I’m done, Mother. I’m going to ask Wren to marry me, and we’re going to start a life together far away from you.”

“You can’t do that. After everything I’ve done for you, you can’t humiliate me that way,” his mother screeched. “We’ll cut you off, and you won’t get a cent from us for the rest of your life.”

“I figured we’d get to that,” he said. “I haven’t taken money from you and Dad for a long time; I don’t need or want your money. You can keep it.”

“But Blake, just think what you’ll be throwing away for that...little scheming slut,” his mother said. “I had a perfect marriage arranged for you. She’s a beautiful girl from one of the best families. Your wedding was going to be the talk of the season. You can’t take this away from me, I deserve it.”

“You deserve a lot more than that, but I don’t want to waste any more of my energy

on you,” he said. “I’m going to hang up now, Mother; I’m done letting you ruin my life; don’t try to call me, don’t try to text me; I don’t want anything to do with you ever again.”

There was no remorse, no sadness when he hung up the phone, just a profound sense of freedom, and a smile slowly spread across his face as the future slowly spread out before him. Wren and Theo popped into his mind, and he was tempted to leave the rest of his paperwork until later but he forced himself to go back to work; he was almost done dissolving his old life. He was ready to make real plans with Wren, and if that meant a move to Dublin, he wanted to be prepared to take that next step in their lives together.

A knock at the door interrupted him a few minutes later, and he remembered that Max wasn’t there. After getting to his feet, he went to the door and opened it. “Are you Blake?” a young man asked, then held out an envelope when he nodded his head. “Then this is for you.”

Wren

Wren closed the bedroom door, then tiptoed down the hallway to the living room, where Susan was just setting down a tray with coffee and a plate of cookies on a table by the couch. “He’s sound asleep, I think the last few days finally caught up with him,” she said, flopping down on the couch. “I think I’m as exhausted as he is. I could use a nap, but I keep thinking Blake is going to come home and talk. I acted like a jealous baby last night; I hope he’s not still mad.”

“Give yourself a break. This has been a lot, Wren,” she said. “You two will work it out, so stop worrying, he said he was working on your life together today. That doesn’t sound like someone who’s mad at you.”

“I know you’re right, I have some insecurity problems,” she said. “I’m trying to work

on them.”

Before Susan could say anything, there was a knock on the door, and Wren got up to answer it, wondering who it could be. When she opened the door, a young man was standing on the porch, a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a white envelope in the other.

“These are for Wren,” he said, holding them out.

“Oh, I’m Wren,” she said, taking the flowers and card. “Thank you.”

She looked down at the flowers, a smile slowly spreading across her face, then ripped open the card still standing in the door way. “Who was it?” Susan called from behind her. “Is it from Blake?”

“He sent me flowers,” she said, turning and closing the door. “And he wants me to meet him later. He even put in a map for me to follow. Isn’t that sweet? I don’t know what I was worrying about.”

“I bet he’s going to propose,” Susan said, grinning at her. “What are you going to say?”

A thrill went through her at the thought of marrying Blake, and she didn’t even have to think about her answer. “Yes, yes, yes,” she said, then laughed. “I can’t believe this is really happening. Will you stay with Theo? I don’t know how long I’ll be gone, but it would...”

“You don’t even have to ask,” Susan said, tears in her eyes. “I’m so happy for you, Wren. It’s nice to know that true love still finds its way even in this crazy world we live in.”

She rushed over to Susan and gave her a hug. “You’ll be my maid of honor, won’t you?” she asked. “I can’t imagine having anyone else there with me.”

“Let’s let Blake ask you before I agree,” Susan said, hugging her back. “We don’t want to jinx it.”

“I have to figure out what I’m going to wear,” she said, starting for the bedroom, but a knock on the door stopped her. “Wow, we’re popular today.”

Her excitement instantly vanished when she opened the door to find her parents standing on the porch, and her first instinct was to slam the door in their faces. Remembering Susan’s advice, she controlled herself but didn’t say anything. She wasn’t going to be the first one to speak. If they had something to say, she listened, but that was it.

“Wren, please let us in. We need to talk to you,” her mother said. Your father and I want to apologize for the night we kicked you out. It was wrong. We should have stood by your side.”

Silently swinging the door open, she stepped back and let them in the house, still not saying a word, then gestured to the empty couch. “Can I get you some coffee?” Susan asked, jumping to her feet. “We were just having a cup.”

“No, that won’t be necessary,” her mother said. We just want to talk to Wren. We want you to come home, sweetheart. We want to be a family again. We know what we did was horrible, but can’t you find it in your heart to forgive us? We’ll never do anything like that again.”

“Was your reputation really that important to you?” she asked, unable to stop herself. “You threw me away because I made a mistake. You abandoned me because I embarrassed you. I thought you loved me, I thought I was important to you, but I was

wrong, and I don't know if I can move on from that."

"We were wrong, Wren. We knew it almost as soon as you left," her father said. "I'm ashamed to admit I was too stubborn to go after you. I guess I thought you'd stay with Susan. I never dreamed you'd move to Dublin."

"It wouldn't have been hard to find me," she said. "It's been six years since I left, and I haven't heard a word from you. Why did you suddenly decide that you needed to see me so badly that you flew halfway across the world and spent a small fortune to get here?"

Her mother looked over at her father and then back at her. "It was really your sister's idea," she said. "She's tired of the town talking bad about us. Honestly, it hasn't been easy since you left, and now...well, Lisa wants to marry Bruce Collingsworth, and you know how she is when she wants something; there's no stopping her."

"Because you never did, you gave her anything she wanted even if you had to take it away from me," she said. "What does any of this have to do with me?"

"We no longer have the best reputation in town, and Bruce refuses to marry Lisa with this little stain on her name," her father said. "But the good news is we figured out a way to make everything right so Lisa can have her man."

"This should be good," she said. "I'm listening."

"It's really quite simple, sweetheart," her mother said. "You come home and join the community again. We've found a very nice man for you to marry and an excellent boarding school for Theo; I'm sure he'll be very happy there."

It took her a second to realize that they weren't joking. "You're not kidding, you're serious," she said. "Do you honestly think I would go through with your little plan?"

Are you really that delusional?"

"But sweetheart, think of your sister," her mother said. "This is her life we're talking about. We want her to be happy."

"Don't call me sweetheart ever again," she growled. "I can't believe I invited you in here. I think it's time for you to leave. I don't give a damn if Lisa is happy, I don't care if the town whispers behind your backs, you deserve all of it. I don't ever want to see you again, we're done. Don't ever try to contact me again. As of now, I don't have parents. You and Lisa are dead to me. Now get out!"

"This is all because of that man," her mother hissed, getting to her feet. Well, let me tell you something, missy. That man is no good. Do you know what he was doing last night? He was kissing your sister. I have proof."

Before she could stop her mother, she shoved her phone in Wren's face. "Look at them, Wren, this is the man you're throwing your family away for," she said, a triumphant look on her face. "He's kissing your sister. She told me he wanted to sleep with her. Come home and get married, stop this madness at once."

For one heartbeat, she believed what she was seeing, then looked a little closer at the picture. "Is this all the proof you have? Because it looks like Lisa is the one doing the kissing to me," she said, shoving the phone back at her mother. "We all know what a slut my sister is. I wonder if Bruce knows, then again, I'm sure he does. That's probably how she snagged him in the first place."

Her parents got slowly to their feet. "We never should have come here," her mother said. "I'm ashamed that you're my daughter, ashamed that you'd turn your back on family like this."

She felt nothing watching her parents walk out the door. She was done with them,

done with the drama they added to her life. “Well, you were right, I do feel better,” she said when the door closed behind them. “They just proved that nothing has changed, and I can walk away with a clear conscience.”

CHAPTER 18

BLAKE

Anticipation made it hard to breathe as Blake made his way along the trail. He was excited to see Wren, excited to tell her what he'd spent most of the day doing, and thrilled that his dream was about to come true. The ring he'd picked out for her was warm in his pocket, and the speech he was going to say was memorized. Now, all he needed was the woman that he loved. He'd been surprised at first by her invitation to meet her for a sunset dinner, then realized it was the perfect setting to propose and decided that it was fitting that Wren had set it up.

They really were the perfect pair and he had every intention of making sure they were married before they left the island in a week. Max had been more than happy to arrange the details, but he realized that he was getting ahead of himself. Proposal first, ceremony second. A smile on his face, he followed the map for a few more minutes, then found himself in a small clearing at the end of the trail. Looking around, a bit confused, he waited, wondering if Wren was late, then he heard rustling in the bushes behind him.

His gut told him that something wasn't right, so he spun around, bracing himself, but found Lisa smiling at him from the foliage. "Well, hey there, Blake," she said, ambling out. "You look very handsome tonight, good enough to eat, if you know what I mean."

A sick feeling began to form in his stomach. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, looking back down the trail, hoping to see Wren coming. "Where's

Wren?”

“Oh, come on now, Blake, you knew I was the one who sent that note,” Lisa said. “Wren isn’t the adventurous type, or didn’t you know that? I’m sure she’s sitting home waiting for you, but you’re right where you belong. I knew that you’d come for me, and I knew a virile man like you couldn’t resist me.”

Trying not to panic, he started to back away from Lisa. “Umm...I think I’ll just go see where Wren is,” he said. “I think you got the wrong message. She’s the one I want, not you, Lisa.”

Lisa took a few steps around him, blocking the only exit from the clearing, slowly unbuttoning her shirt, and then throwing it aside. “Oh, Blake, you poor, poor man,” she said, advancing on him. “You don’t know what you need. You’ve gotten so used to my pathetic sister, you don’t know what a real woman is.”

Before he could stop her, Lisa released the clasp on her bra and slipped it off, making alarm bells go off in his head. Backing away from her again, he looked for a way out but saw only dense vegetation and realized that she’d picked the spot carefully as a sense of doom slowly settled over him. But the ring was still warm in his pocket, reminding him how much he had to lose, and he pushed the feelings away.

His only hope was to turn her around so he could make a run for the opening in the jungle and get away. “Lisa, you don’t want to do this,” he said, taking a step to the side while tuning his body a little. “Wren will never forgive you when she finds out that you tried to seduce me.”

“Oh, that’s not what she’s going to think,” Lisa purred. “She’s going to think it was all you. Now come here. I’m actually looking forward to having sex with you.”

Lisa was suddenly on him, kissing him and dragging his hands to her breasts, but he

managed to push her off, and chest heaving, backed away from her again. “Lisa, this is crazy. You can’t think this is going to work,” he said. “I don’t want you, I want your sister, and she knows that. She’ll never believe you.”

“It won’t matter; once we have sex, the damage will be done,” Lisa said. “Stop fighting this, Blake, you’re going to like it. I know a few tricks my sister doesn’t. It’s going to be fun.”

“No thanks, I’ll stick with your sister,” he said. “She’s all the woman I need.”

“You heard him.” Wren said, stepping up behind Lisa. “Leave him alone. You’re just making a fool of yourself, Lisa.”

Lisa gasped and turned around. “What are you doing here so early?” she demanded. “You’re not supposed to be here for another half an hour.”

“Sorry to break up your party, but after Mom and Dad’s little visit, I was restless,” Wren said, taking a couple of steps towards her sister. “Your plan isn’t going to work, little sister. You can’t seduce Blake like you did the rest of my boyfriends. He can see right through you.”

“But look at me! He took my clothes off, he was going to have sex with me,” Lisa said, her face full of panic. “He touched my breasts, he kissed me, you saw the pictures from the marina...”

“Enough,” Wren bellowed. “You’re done here, Lisa. Go home. You aren’t going to break us up, I’m not going to marry some stranger, and Theo isn’t going to boarding school; you’ll have to find another way to talk Bruce into marrying you. For the first time in your life, you’re not going to get what you want.”

Lisa was silent for only a second, then she let out a scream of anger and charged at

Wren, who smoothly deflected the attack and got in a punch that sent Lisa tumbling to the ground. She started to get up, but Wren walked over to her, she pushed her back down, then got right in her face and stared at her.

“I wouldn’t get up again. While you were off painting your nails and chasing my boyfriends, I was learning a few things from the guys on Dad’s boat,” she said. “I promise you that you won’t come out on top in a physical fight, so just stay down there.”

Lisa fell back with a whimper. Wren walked over, picked up her clothes, and threw them at her. “Go home now,” she said, then turned her back and stomped away. “I’m done here.”

Blake was so stunned that it took him a second to get moving. “Wren, wait for me,” he called, running to catch up to her. “That was incredible. You’re like a warrior princess or something.”

“I’m so sick of all this,” she said, looking over at him, tears in her eyes. “I just want everything to stop, I can’t do this anymore.”

He reached out to pull her into his arms, but Wren shook her head. “I’m tired of crying all the time,” she said, her face full of anger. “I don’t want to cry anymore, so I’m going to be angry for a while instead.”

She turned and marched off up the trail. “Hey, where are you going?” he called. “You can’t just go stomping off into the jungle.”

“Then you’d better come with me,” she called back. “Because I’m going either way.”

Wren

Once Wren got started, she couldn't stop. Years of pent-up emotion came pouring out, but not in the form of tears, but in an adrenaline rush that propelled her through the jungle. She didn't pay any attention to where she was going; she just took the first path she saw and climbed, sweat pouring off her body, her muscles beginning to ache, and Blake following along behind her, filled with confusion.

When she finally got to the crest of the huge hill, her chest was burning, and she was forced to stop to catch her breath. Leaning over with her hands on her knees, chest heaving, she fought to take a deep breath as the last of the emotions drained out of her. Blake appeared at her side, then gently put his hand on her back, but didn't say anything, and she was grateful. One word from him would have been all it took.

"I'm tired of all this. I just want my happily ever after. Why is that so hard," she finally said. "Haven't we been tested enough? When will it ever stop?"

This time she let him pull her into his arms. "I don't have the answers to those questions, Wren," he said, rubbing her back. "But I do know this. Every time we make it through something like this, we come out stronger. You fought for me back there. That says more than any words ever could, and you believed in me, you believed in our love; if that was a test from the universe, I'd say we passed with flying colors."

"I hope that means it's over because I can't take any more," she said, her legs beginning to tremble. "I think maybe I need to sit down for a few minutes."

"It sounds like there's a stream over there behind those bushes," Blake said, looking down at her. "Do you think you can make it that far? "

"I think so," she said, nodding her head. "I've never hit anyone before, I can't believe I did that."

“She attacked you,” Blake said, helping her over to a break in the bushes. “All you did was defend yourself.”

“But I still feel...bad,” she said, then stopped, her breath catching in her throat when she looked around. “Oh, Blake, it looks like we found more than a stream. Isn’t it beautiful? I love waterfalls; they carry so much power, all that water tumbling down; there’s nothing better than standing in the spray on a hot day.”

Blake looked at her and smiled. “I guess life isn’t all about tests,” he said. “Come on, let’s go sit by the water.”

He led her over to the pool that had formed under the cascading water and helped her down onto the soft moss that covered everything. Then, he put his arm around her and pulled her close. They sat in silence, listening to the water splashing onto the rocks, and she slowly felt her strength beginning to return. The warmth of the love between them fed her soul in a way nothing else could.

She finally turned to look up at Blake. “Sorry about earlier. I guess I lost it just a little bit,” she said. It just felt like everything came bubbling up all at once, and it was more than I could handle. Moving seemed like the only way to get through it.”

“They say exercise is good for stress,” Blake said, shrugging his shoulders, then grinned at her. “I think I heard once that sex is another good treatment, too.”

“Oh, really?” she asked, grinning back at him. “And you got this from a reliable source?”

“Oh, definitely,” he said. “Would you like to experiment and see if it works?”

“Hmm...as tempting as that offer is, I’m all sweaty and gross,” she said, getting to her feet. “I think I’ll go swimming instead. ”

Blake watched her shimmy out of her clothes with an amused look on his face, but she could see the desire blossoming in his eyes, and she played it up before striding over to the water. By the time she dove in, he was already on his feet, stripping off his clothes as he followed her, and her heart began to race with desire. The water felt wonderful as it washed away the sweat and dirt from her skin, and she welcomed Blake with open arms when he swam over to her.

His mouth found hers in a kiss so full of promise that it took her breath away for a second, forcing her to wrap her legs around him or sink to the bottom. Blake pulled her closer, slipping his erection between her folds, and she gasped as her body came to life, need already beginning to build deep in her core. He kissed her until they were both breathless, then carried her out of the water and back over to the moss-covered bank. When he laid her down, the smell of nature filled her senses, and above her head, the stars had just begun to twinkle in the sky, and for the first time in a long time, the world felt as if it was just as it should be.

Blake found her mouth again and kissed her as his hands roamed over her body, stroking her soft skin with his rough hand until she was squirming beneath him, desperate for more. When his mouth finally found one erect nipple, she let out a sigh, but she gasped when he pushed her legs open and slipped his finger between her folds, then cried out when he gently began to stroke her.

Pleasure rushed through her in waves that only grew with each movement of his finger; she grabbed Blake's shoulders and dug her nails in, then cried out his name when he took her soaring over the edge. Breathless with the power of her climax, she let out a little scream when Blake grabbed her by the hips and flipped her over, but when he urged her up onto her knees, she understood.

Heart hammering, her body throbbing deep inside, she rose to her knees, then felt Blake behind her, his hands still on her hips, his erection rubbing against her already swollen nub. Pleasure started to radiate through her again as Blake rocked his hips,

then with one hard thrust, he drove himself into her, deeper than ever before. Blake's growls of satisfaction matched her own cries of pleasure as he drove himself into her again and again.

When she finally tumbled over the edge, her climax brought Blake along with her, and the feel of his body shuttering and pulsing inside her sent another even more powerful barrage of sensation through her. Calling out her name, Blake emptied himself inside her, then completely spent, collapsed on his side, pulling her with him, her body still pulsing with waves of pleasure. She closed her eyes, floating on a cloud of pure sensation, unaware that the air sparkled with tiny bursts of light around them, nor did she notice when they floated down and landed on them.

Neither felt it as the light slowly soaked into their skin, but Wren did feel something stirring deep in her belly, then a flash of warmth that made her open her eyes. It faded away a second later, and she forgot about it, but the seed had already been sown with a little help from the island.

CHAPTER 19

BLAKE

Blake didn't want to move, wasn't ready to give up his connection to Wren, but he felt her skin begin to cool in the breeze and reluctantly shifted position so that he could shelter her body. "This wasn't the sunset picnic I was expecting," he said, smiling down at her. "It was even better, but you're getting cold and it's dark. I suppose we should think about heading back."

"I wish we could stay here forever, sheltered from world, just the two of us, but I would miss Theo," Wren said, with a sigh. "Susan took Theo back to your cabin for the night, but I guess we can't stay here all night."

"It's a beautiful place, I wish we'd come prepared," he said. "Some food and a couple of sleeping bags are all we would have needed; there's plenty of wood around here for a fire."

"Umm...that would have been nice," she said. "Just the two of us all night in this beautiful place."

Remembering the ring in the pocket of his shorts, Blake felt a moment of regret and decided to wait to propose; he wanted it to be special, and as wonderful as the night had been, it didn't feel right. The breeze began to pick up as he lay there trying to decide, and he started to get up, thinking that it was time to go home; he'd just have to wait. But before he could sit up, the wind began to swirl around them, getting stronger and stronger, and he rolled over on top of Wren to shield her with his body.

Almost as quickly as it had come, the wind died away, and he picked his head up to look around. “Blake, that was strange,” Wren said, her voice shaking slightly. “Where did that wind come from?”

“I don’t know, maybe the temperature is dropping or something,” he said, sitting up and looking around. “Everything looks normal now.”

Wren sat up next to him and looked around, then pointed across the clearing at a dark lump on the ground. “What’s that?” she asked. “I don’t remember seeing it there before.”

“Me either,” he said, looking around for his shorts. “You stay here. I’m going to go investigate; it’s probably nothing.”

He found his clothes scattered on the shore, picked up Wren’s and handed them to her, got dressed, and pulled the flashlight he’d stuffed in his pocket earlier that night out. Flipping it on, he walked over to the lump, then stood staring down at it, not quite believing what he was seeing. Then, he turned back to Wren and signaled that it was safe.

“What’s under there?” she asked after studying the lump for a second. “Should we take the tarp off?”

“I don’t see why not,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I can’t imagine it’s anything that would hurt us. I’ll take a corner, and you take a corner, and we’ll pull it back on the count of three.”

Wren rolled her eyes at him. “Let’s just pull it off,” she said. “You’re making me even more nervous.”

They pulled the tarp back, revealing two sleeping bags, a stack of pillows, a big

wicker basket, and a lantern. Then, they stood staring at the supplies for several minutes in silence, both shocked. “Maybe this was here before,” Wren finally said. “We might not have seen it.”

Blake looked at her. “You don’t believe that, and neither do I,” he said, walking over to the basket. “What do you want to bet that this is full of food?”

“Open it and see,” she said, trembling a little. “Isn’t this freaking you out a little?”

He reached down and lifted the lid off the basket, then let it fall with a bang before stepping back and pulling Wren into his arms. “Well, maybe a little,” he said. “But magic is real. It’s everywhere around us. I don’t know where this came from, but it’s just what we asked for; maybe it’s a reward for everything we’ve been through.”

Wren looked up at him, then sighed. “Well, in that case, it’s about time,” she said. “I’m starving. Let’s see what there is to eat.”

He laughed, realizing that he could still propose, and said a silent thank you for the gift they’d received. “I’ll get a fire started,” he said, giving her a quick kiss. “Why don’t you set up camp.”

“That’s a deal,” she said, kissing him back.

It wasn’t long before he had a cozy fire burning next to the comfortable bed Wren had created from the sleeping bags. “Let’s see what’s for dinner,” Wren said, opening the basket and peering inside. “There’s enough food for a week in here. We’ll never be able to eat it all.”

“But we can sure try,” he said, grinning at her. “I’m starving.”

By the time Wren packed away the last of the leftovers, the fire had begun to burn

down, the moon had begun to rise in the sky, but the stars still shone brightly. When she was finished, he pulled Wren into his arms and settled her there, his heart suddenly pounding. The moment had come. Six years in the making and long overdue, he was finally going to slip a ring onto Wren's finger.

"I don't think that I've ever been happier," he said. "This has been a wonderful night."

"Considering how it started, I would have to agree," Wren said, smiling up at him. "I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be."

"Good, because I want you right by my side for a long time," he said, pulling the ring box out of his pocket and flipping it open. "I want you to marry me, Wren. I want you to be my wife, I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Please say yes."

Wren

Wren had been waiting for this moment, knew that it was coming, but was still overwhelmed with emotion and couldn't answer for several long seconds. "Yes, I'll marry you," she finally managed to croak, tears blurring her eyes. "I can't think of anything that would make me happier than to be your wife. I love you, Blake, so much that sometimes it scares me."

"I love you too, Wren," he said. "And I always will. I can't live without you. I don't want to wait to get married, I want to do it before we leave the island. Max can arrange everything, the ceremony, the reception, all of it. We can get married on the beach or on a boat or on the top of the mountain; I don't care; I just want to do it before we leave."

"Blake, that's so fast," she said, her head spinning. But then she looked into his eyes and saw love shining in them. It instantly grounded her. "Why not?" she asked,

knowing that it was the right decision. “The island is the perfect place to get married. I think a beach wedding would be perfect. ”

“Really?” Blake asked, his face filling with excitement and a little relief. “Do you mean it?”

She laughed, “Of course I mean it,” she said. “I would marry you right now if I could. I don’t want to wait either, Blake. We can start our lives together before we even leave the island.”

He reached up and stroked her cheek. “Sweetheart, we began our lives together six years ago; our son is proof of that,” he said. “We just lost track of each other for a while, but that’s never going to happen again. I’m sticking by your side for the rest of our lives, and you’ll never be able to get rid of me.”

“That sounds pretty good to me,” she said, fighting back the tears. “I was so lost without you, Blake. Now I feel like I’m complete for the first time in a long time, and it’s because of you. I’ll never let anything come between us again, I’ll never run away from you, I trust the love we share, and I can’t wait to see where life takes us.”

Blake slipped the ring on her finger, then kissed her until conversation was no longer possible, and she gave herself over completely to the love and passion they shared. The moon had risen high in the sky before they fell asleep by the dying fire, wrapped in each other’s arms, bodies and minds in perfect harmony. Around them, a breeze stirred the trees as the island absorbed more of the powerful emotions they shared, and deep in the cave behind the waterfall, the glowing stone became brighter, giving off a glow that illuminated the stone walls around it.

The first rays of sunshine woke them the next morning, but they snuggled deeper into the sleeping bag for a long time, neither ready to give up the spell of the night. But eventually, it was impossible to avoid the start of the day, and they rose, both still

warmed by the heat of the passion between them. A hot pot of coffee and sweet rolls was waiting next to the cold campfire, but they didn't comment on the bounty; they just enjoyed their breakfast by the waterfall and making plans for the wedding.

When they turned to clean up camp, with only their empty coffee cups in their hands, everything was gone, and they looked at each other and then started laughing. "I guess it's time for us to go home," she said. "I wonder what we're supposed to do with these."

A second later, the cups disappeared, leaving them standing empty-handed, staring at each other. "Okay, that was a little weird," Blake said, looking around the clearing. "Maybe we should head home."

She took his hand. "We have to tell everyone the good news," she said. "We should do something to celebrate."

"How does a big lunch in the village sound?" Blake asked, leading her over to the opening in the bushes. "That will give us time to shower and get everyone together."

"That sounds perfect," she said, following him through. "Now we just have to figure out which way the village is. I was so mad last night that I wasn't paying attention to where I was going."

"Don't worry, I was," Blake said, grinning at her. "I've got your back, sweetheart, now and forever."

Susan and Theo were just sitting down to breakfast when they knocked on the door. "What happened to you two?" Susan asked when she saw them. "You look like you slept on the ground last night. Get in here."

They looked at each other and started laughing. "We did," they said together, then

laughed again.

“Mom, Dad, you’re here,” Theo said, running out of the little kitchen, then skidding to a halt. “What happened to you?”

“I asked your mom to marry me, that’s what happened,” Blake said, grabbing Theo and picking him up. “And it was a big surprise. You did a great job keeping our secret.”

Theo puffed up his chest. “I told you I wouldn’t tell,” he said, a proud look on his face. “Now I get to be your best man.”

“You bet, kiddo,” Blake said. “I know you can handle the responsibility.”

“And since I’m the maid of honor, that makes us a pair,” Susan said, taking Theo from Blake and setting him down on the floor. “Let’s you and I go have our breakfast so these two can get cleaned up. There’s more to this story, and I want to hear it, but not until the both of you are presentable.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Blake said, saluting Susan with a grin on his face. “But just so you know, the wedding is in three days, so we have a lot of planning to do.”

Susan froze. “Did you just say three days?” she asked, then looked over at Wren. “He’s kidding, right?”

“Nope, three days,” she said. “We don’t want to wait.”

CHAPTER 20

BLAKE

Max was the last one to arrive for their impromptu celebration. He was all smiles as he greeted everyone, but before he sat down, he came over and leaned down between them. “Wren, I just put your parents and your sister on a boat back to Bermuda. They’re catching a flight home later this afternoon,” he said. “I’m sorry about everything that happened. I hate the fact that I played a part in it all, but I’ll know better next time.”

Wren turned and gave Max a hug. “It’s not your fault, Max. Maybe it all needed to happen this way,” she said. “It all worked out in the end, and don’t forget Blake and I might have never found each other if it hadn’t been for you and this island.”

“Speaking of the island, something strange happened to us at the waterfall,” Blake said. “This isn’t really the place to talk about it, but I was just wondering if anything else has happened since you’ve been here.”

Max’s face paled a little. “Well, maybe, but I think it was all just coincidence,” he said. “And you’re right this isn’t the place to talk about it. ”

He looked over at Wren and she raised her eyebrows at him. “Well, then we’ll look forward to a more private conversation about it,” she said. “I’m very curious about these other things.”

The food arrived just then and Max slipped away to take his seat on the other side of

the table, and he turned his focus on the rest of the little group he'd assembled. They passed the food around, and then everyone settled down to eat while discussing wedding plans. Then, they moved on to other topics. Theo was beginning to get bored, the food was all gone, and Blake was just thinking about wrapping up lunch when a voice he thought he'd never hear again called his name.

"Blake, look over here," his mother called, running across the food court toward them. "We've come to surprise you, isn't that wonderful?"

His mother was beaming at him as she made her way over to the table, his father following behind, an embarrassed look on his face. "Oh, darling, look at you," his mother gushed, giving him a big hug. "I've never seen you so happy."

Alarmed by his parents' appearance and his mother's uncharacteristic behavior, he jumped to his feet. "What are you doing here?" he asked, glancing over at his father, who looked uncomfortable. "I thought I made it very clear that we were done."

"Oh, sweetheart, I know you didn't mean that," his mother said, patting him on the cheek. "I'm sorry about our little talk the other day. I'm happy for you, I really am."

He studied her for a second, noticing that the smile on her face didn't reach her eyes and he was instantly wary. "If you're here to cause trouble, it's not going to work," he said. "Wren and I are getting married in two days, and there's nothing you can do to stop us. In fact, I think it would be best if you just went back home now. We don't want you here."

"I would never dream of missing your wedding. I'm sure that it will be lovely," his mother said, then looked around. "Now, where is my soon-to-be daughter-in-law? It's been so long since I've seen her, I'm not sure I'll recognize her."

"She's right here," he said, pulling Wren to her feet and putting his arm around her.

“And I think you knew that.”

“Nonsense, look at her; that little girl I remember has turned into a beautiful woman,” his mother said, smiling at Wren. “No wonder you’ve chosen her over all your other women.”

He glanced over at Wren, who just smiled at him and rolled her eyes, then back at his mother, wondering how he was going to get rid of her. “Well, now that we’ve said our hellos, I think your father and I should get settled in,” his mother said. “I do hope there’s a room here for us, I tried to call and make a reservation but no one answered the phone, terrible service if you ask me. Doesn’t your friend own this place?”

“Yes, Mother, and he’s right there,” he said, nodding at Max, who was slowly getting to his feet. “This isn’t the kind of place where you can just show up and expect a room. You shouldn’t have come.”

“But darling, after our last conversation, I had no choice,” his mother said. “And now that I’m here, I’m staying. I’ll sleep on the beach if I have to.”

“That won’t be necessary, I’m sure I can find a place for you to stay,” Max said, walking over to Blake’s parents. “But I’m afraid you won’t be getting the kind of service that you’re used to. Our guests are on their own here, and there’s no staff to take care of them.”

His mother scrunched up her face. “Oh, very well,” she said. “But I won’t be recommending this place to any of my friends.”

“I would appreciate that,” Max said with a smile, but his eyes said that Blake owed him. “Come with me, I’ll take you to your cabin so you can get settled in, and we’ll need to discuss how you’d like to pay your bill.”

When they were gone, he pulled Wren into his arms. “I’m so sorry, sweetheart, I never dreamed that she’d show up here,” he said. “I’m sure she’s up to something, she’s never that nice except when she’s showing off for her friends. We’re going to have to keep an eye on her.”

“I’m sure it will be fine,” she said. “Not that I trust her either, but what can she do now? We’re getting married in a matter of days.”

“You don’t know my mother,” he said. “I wouldn’t put anything past her, so I want you to be extra careful for the next few days.”

“Do you think she’d hurt me?” Wren asked, eyes wide. “I can’t believe she’d do that. What about Theo? What’s going to happen when she finds out about him?”

“I’ll handle that,” he said. “I guess our last little talk didn’t quite get through. Maybe I can get rid of her before the wedding.”

Wren let out a long sigh. “I thought this was all over,” she said, then buried her face in his chest. “Just make her go away.”

“I will, sweetheart, I will,” he said, pulling her closer. “We’ll have the wedding of our dreams, I promise.”

Wren

Wren pulled Susan to a stop in front of the clothing boutique. “I don’t think this is a good idea, I can’t afford anything in there,” she said, peering through the door at the clothing racks. “It’s all handmade, and I’m sure it costs a fortune. I’m sure there’s something back at the cabin that I can wear.”

“You are not wearing something you brought from home to your wedding,” Susan

said, pushing her into the store. “And Max is paying for everything, so stop worrying. He said Vivian would take care of you. Now get in there before I carry you in.”

Giving Susan a dirty look, she stepped inside the hut and looked nervously around. “Good afternoon, and I hear congratulations are in order,” a woman said, stepping from behind a little table. “I’m Vivian, and you must be Wren. You look just like Max described you.”

“Oh, it’s nice to meet you,” she said, a bit flustered. “I guess he told you that I’m looking for a wedding dress.”

“This is the third wedding we’ve had on the island. It’s always so exciting. Another one of Max’s friends is getting married here,” Vivian said, shaking her head. “Ever since the first one, I’ve been keeping a few things in the back room for just such an emergency. I’ve several things that would be perfect for you if you want to go on back to the dressing room. I’ll bring them out.”

Half an hour later, Wren stood looking at herself in the mirror in the perfect dress for a beach wedding, a huge smile on her face. “Oh, this one is perfect,” she said, swiveling her hips so the skirt flared out, then fell against her legs again. “I feel like a princess and a fairy all at once.”

“You look beautiful,” Susan said, tears in her eyes. “I’m so happy for you, Wren.”

Vivian clapped her hands. “I knew that was the one,” she said, then turned to Susan. “Now for the maid of honor, let’s see...oh, I know. Wait here. ”

When they walked out of the shop a little while later, both completely enchanted with the owner, their dresses wrapped in plastic over their arms, Wren felt a rush of happiness. In only a few days, she would be married to the man of her dreams, and they’d be starting a new life together. Nothing was going to stand in their way this

time, not even a dress.

Smiling at her own joke, she followed Susan through the village, thinking about trying on the dress again when she got back to the cabin. The smile vanished when she saw Belinda Watson hurrying over to her, a big fake smile on her face, and she groaned.

“Don’t look now, but here comes Blake’s mom,” she said. “Run while you can.”

“Not a chance,” Susan said, planting her feet. “I’m with you to the end.”

“Wren, I’m so glad I ran into you,” Belinda said, giving her air kisses. “I was sitting there in my cabin thinking about the wedding, and I wondered if you had a dress. I mean, with the wedding being so rushed and everything. Anyway, I have some things with me. You could look through them and borrow something if you like. After all, we’re going to be family.”

“Oh, that’s a sweet offer, but I’ve got it covered,” she said, holding up the dress. “There’s a really lovely little boutique in the village.”

Just then, Theo came running up, Blake trailing along behind him. “Mom, guess what?” he called, holding up a garment bag. “I got wedding clothes too.”

“Oh, sweetheart, that’s great,” she said, watching the look of shock appear on Belinda’s face. “Maybe you should take them back to the cabin so they won’t get dirty or wrinkled, I’m sure that Susan will be happy to take you.”

They were gone several minutes before Belinda finally said, “You have a child.” Her face scrunched up with displeasure. “No one said anything about a child.”

“His name is Theo,” Blake said, walking up and putting his arm around Wren, then

shooting her an apologetic look. “I thought you were in your cabin.”

“I got restless, I wanted...” Belinda’s words died away. “Blake, could I speak to you alone for a moment?”

“No Mother, you can’t,” Blake said, shaking his head. “Anything you have to say to me, you can say in front of Wren. You’re not going to separate us again.”

Belinda looked over at her, then back at Blake, and let out a little snort. “I can’t believe you’re willing to take on another man’s brat,” she finally said. “Isn’t the fact that she has a child enough to tell you what a mistake this is?”

“He’s mine, Mother,” Blake said. “Theo is my son; he’s my brat, as you put it.”

Belinda stumbled back a step. “She’s lying,” she said, shaking her head. “He’s not yours. That’s impossible, it can’t be true.”

“Wren’s not lying. All you have to do is look at Theo and you can see it,” Blake said. “Face it, Mother, he’s my son, and I’m going to marry his mother like I should have six years ago.”

Belinda’s mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water, then she turned and stomped off, muttering under her breath. “Well, that was fun,” Wren said with a sigh. “I love your mother more and more every time I see her.”

Blake laughed, “I’m sorry about that. I thought I had more time to tell her,” he said. “But you’re tough as nails, I don’t know what I was worrying about.”

“I kind of feel sorry for her,” Wren said. “She’s as spoiled as my sister, and they don’t take it well when they don’t get their way.”

“I just hope you don’t have to punch my mother like you did Lisa,” Blake said, grinning at her. “Then again, maybe I would. I’d love to see you knock my mother on her butt.”

“Blake, I could never hit your mother,” she said, giving him a shove. “Don’t even joke about something like that.”

“Well, someone should,” he said. “She deserves it.”

CHAPTER 21

BLAKE

Blake climbed up the steps to the front door of his parent's cabin and lifted his hand to knock, but the door was thrown open before he could. "Oh, Blake," his father said. "I was just going to come look for you."

"I was hoping to talk to you too," he said, looking over his father's shoulder. "Is she here?"

His father shook his head. "She took off dressed for a hike a few minutes ago. She's been especially difficult the last few days," he said, shaking his head and opening the door wider. "Come in. I think we should talk."

"No thanks," he said. "I just wanted to come by and tell you both to stay away from the wedding. Mother is not going to ruin this for me. I love Wren, and I'm going to marry her."

His father let out a long sigh. "It wasn't my idea to come here; I told your mother to just leave it alone, but she insisted, and I didn't think I should let her come alone," his father said. "Blake, for what it's worth, I didn't know what your mother did six years ago until she told me. I would never have let it happen if I'd known. "

Blake studied his father for a second. "Why do you put up with it?" he finally asked. "Why do you let her behave this way? She almost ruined my life with her scheming and interfering. This isn't the first time she's done something like this, and I'm not

going to put up with anymore.”

A look of sadness appeared on his father’s face. “Son, I know it might be hard for you to believe, but your mother didn’t used to be like this,” he said, shaking his head. “I never would have fallen in love with her if she had been. Something happened to her over the years. Money and status became more important to her than people. You have to understand that she came from nothing, her family was very poor, and they didn’t have much. I shouldn’t have let it get this bad, I should have put a stop to all of it years ago, but it seems so harmless, and it made your mother so happy.”

He studied his father for a second. “If you’re trying to make me feel sorry for her, it’s not going to work,” he finally said. “If you want to put up with her, that’s your choice, but I’m not going to.”

“It’s not really a choice,” his father said. “Your mother is part of me. I can’t imagine my life without her, even as awful as she is. Son, I hope you know what you’re doing with Wren. I’ve seen you two together, you’ve bonded. It’s hard to miss if you know what to look for.”

“I know exactly what I’m doing. Wren isn’t mother,” he said, surprised to hear his father talking about anything that had to do with being a shifter. “She knows what I am. She’s seen my dragon, isn’t embarrassed or scared of me, and hasn’t asked me to hide that part of myself. The bond between us is pure, and the love we share only strengthens that bond. We’ve been apart for six years, Dad, and it hasn’t dulled any of our feelings for each other. We belong together, and nothing is going to keep us apart.”

His father nodded. “Good, that’s all I wanted to hear,” he said, then hesitated. “I hear that I have a grandson. I would love to meet him.”

“I guess Mother told you,” he said. “His name is Theo.”

“Your mother mentioned that during her little fit when she got back from the village, she ranted and raved for ten minutes about how embarrassing it was, then another ten about how young she was to be a grandmother, then...well, you don’t want to hear the rest,” his father said, shaking his head. “There was nothing I could say to shut her down. She finally got mad at me and locked herself in the bedroom. After a lot of banging and yelling, she finally came out of the bedroom and went for a hike.”

Something in his brain clicked when he heard the word hike again, and he looked over at his father, the feeling that something wasn’t right slowly building inside him. “Since when does mother hike?” he asked. “She won’t even walk down to the mailbox at home.”

“Honestly, it surprised me too. I thought she was packing when she went into the bedroom, but after she left, I went in there, and everything looked fine,” his father said, shrugging, then hesitated. “There’s a map of the island on the desk. Maybe that’s what gave her the idea. She was mumbling a lot when she left, it seemed best just to let her go. She can’t get into too much trouble, the island isn’t that big.”

“What was she muttering, Dad?” he asked, the feeling in the pit of his stomach getting worse. “I don’t trust her. She’s already tried to get between Wren and me, and she’s going to try to do it again.”

“It was nothing new, just the same old stuff about how no one listens to her, she has to do everything, no one appreciates her,” his father said. “She might have said something about ending things for once and all. She talks like that all the time now, every time she doesn’t get her way.”

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “I need to see that map,” he finally said. “She’s planning something, Mom doesn’t hike, and she isn’t going to hurt herself.”

“Son, your mother would never...” his dad tried to argue, but stepped back. “Maybe

we should take a look, she did look a bit desperate when she left here.”

After giving his dad an unbelieving look, he walked into the cabin, then back to the bedroom and grabbed the map, his heart sinking when he saw a circle drawn on the map in red lipstick. His father stepped up behind him, looked over his shoulder at the map, then let out a little gasp of surprise before stepping back, his face slowly turning white.

“Why would she hike up to a cliff?” his father asked, then looked over at him. “You don’t think...I mean, she’s always threatening to kill herself...no, she would never do that...she must have another reason...”

“Wren and Theo,” he said, narrowing his eyes at his father, panic beginning to well up inside him. “How long has she been gone?”

“Blake, your mother would never...she’s not that kind of woman...I’m sure they’re fine,” his father stammered. “She was upset when she left, but she would never...”

Blake didn’t wait for his father to finish. Something in his gut was telling him to find his family, and he was going to listen. “Blake, wait...” his father called when he turned and started for the door. “I’ll go with you, no matter what your mother is doing. She’s my responsibility. I should have stood up to her a long time ago.”

Wren

Wren lay back in her beach chair, closed her eyes, and let out a long sigh. “A nap sure would be nice right now,” she said. I haven’t gotten much sleep lately, and everything has been so crazy. I need this afternoon off to rest. ”

Susan groaned, “Hey, don’t rub it in, some of us are still single over here,” she said. “I’m having a hard time feeling sorry for you.”

She laughed, “Fair enough, I won’t complain anymore,” she said, picking up her head to check on Theo. “But I’m still not moving from this chair for the entire afternoon.”

“That sounds good to me,” Susan said, laying back and closing her eyes. “I’ve got a million things to do to get ready for the wedding. I’ve got so many ideas, and it’s going to be perfect, you’ll see.”

“Susan, this is supposed to be a small, simple wedding. You don’t have to go all crazy; I don’t want you working too hard,” she said, looking over at her friend. “Not that I don’t appreciate everything that you’re doing. I’m sure it’s going to be wonderful.”

“Don’t worry, I’ve got help. Keith and Stella volunteered,” Susan said, sitting up a little and looking over at her, a little smile on her face. “They’re really nice. I wonder if the rest of Max’s friends are like them, or if any of them are single.”

“Well, there are eight of them, so one of them is bound to still be single, I suppose,” she said, shaking her head. “Wait, Max is single.”

Susan wrinkled up her nose. “No, thank you, he’s a bit of a lady’s man, if you know what I mean,” she said, flopping back down and closing her eyes again. “Max is the kind of man who will stay single the rest of his life.”

“Well, there goes that plan,” she said, closing her eyes with a sigh. “We’ll just have to look for someone else for you to set your sights on. I think Bruce Collingsworth is still looking for a wife.”

“Gross, I’m not that desperate,” Susan said. “I’ll never be that desperate.”

Wren had been lying in the shade fighting sleep for a while before she realized that she hadn’t checked on Theo in a while and picked up her head to make sure he was

still playing in the sand. When she didn't spot him right away, she sat all the way up and began to scan the beach, which had become crowded since they'd gotten there, not terribly concerned at first. That quickly changed when she didn't see Theo anywhere, and she jumped up, jamming her feet into her sandals, unsure if she should be mad or scared.

"Susan, I don't see Theo, I think he might have wandered off," she said, trying to stay calm. "Will you help me look for him?"

Susan was instantly on her feet. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Theo would never wander off. He knows better than that."

"Well, he's not here," she said, gesturing around them. "We have to go look for him. You go one way, and I'll go the other."

Susan took off down the beach, calling Theo's name, and she went the opposite direction, doing the same, but only made it a few yards before a young man came running up to her. "An old lady dragging a kid behind her gave me five bucks to give you this," he said, shoving a note at her. "She said you'd give me another five when I delivered it."

Hands shaking, ignoring the young man, she opened the note, then felt her legs beginning to tremble as she read the short message. "How long ago did she give you this?" Wren asked, grabbing his arm. "Which way did they go?"

The young man shook his head, "I'm not telling you anything until I get my five bucks," he said, pulling out of her grip and crossing his arms over his chest. "I'm not saying a word until I get my money."

She could only stare at him for a second. "That woman kidnapped my child," she finally said. "Tell me what I want to know. "

“Not until I get my money,” the kid said. “No money, no information.”

Just then, Susan came running up. “I couldn’t find him anywhere,” she said, then saw the young man. “What’s going on?”

“I need some cash,” she said. “Please tell me you have five bucks.”

Susan dug in her shorts pocket. “Sorry, all I have is a ten,” she said, a confused look on her face. “What about Theo?”

She grabbed the money and shoved it at the kid. “Here, take this,” she said. “Now tell me where they went.”

“She said they were going up there,” the young man said, pointing to the mountain that dominated the center of the island. “Devil’s Drop is the only thing up there. You can see the whole island from the cliff, but it’s like a mile drop down to the jungle, and it sure would mess someone up if they fell.”

“Oh my God,” she said. “She’s going to throw Theo off the cliff.”

Susan grabbed her and turned her around. “Wren, what are you talking about?” she asked. “What’s going on?”

She shoved the note at Susan, then looked around, feeling helpless. She took a deep breath and forced herself to calm down, panicking now wouldn’t help anyone. “Go find Blake. I thought he was going to talk to his parents this afternoon,” she said. Tell him what’s happened; he’ll know what to do. Make sure he knows where his mother is taking Theo. He might be the only one who can save him.”

“What are you going to do?” Susan asked. “We should find Max.”

“There’s not time. I’m going after them. It’s what she wanted anyway,” she said, then looked over at the young man. “And you’re going to show me where the trail is.”

CHAPTER 22

BLAKE

Blake and his father were almost to the village when Susan came rushing up to them out of breath, a frantic look on her face, and his breath caught in his throat. “Oh, Blake, I’m so glad I found you,” she said, fighting to take a deep breath. “Your mother has Theo, and she’s taken him up to Devil’s Drop. She sent Wren a note threatening to throw Theo off the cliff. I don’t know how big of a head start they got, but Wren went after them. She said you’d know what to do.”

His protective instincts ramping up with the panic that shot through him, he forced himself to take a deep breath. He knew exactly what he had to do and began to let the creature inside come to life. Reassured when he felt the tingle of his magic beginning to spread through him, he forced the dread and fear to the back of his mind. Fate hadn’t brought Wren back to him only to take her away. This was just one more test they had to pass before they could live happily ever after, and he wasn’t going to let emotion get in the way.

“Mom is after Wren. She’s not going to push Theo off that cliff. She’s walking into a trap,” he said, as sure as he’d ever been about anything in his life. “I want you two to go get Max, I’m going to shift and go after them.”

“Son, you can’t...” his father protested, looking over at Susan. “It’s broad daylight, someone will see you...we don’t shift...it’s not...”

“It’s okay, Dad; Susan knows about my dragon,” he said, patting him on the back.

“You may not shift, but I do. Maybe if you hadn’t denied who you are all these years, things with Mom might have been different. I have to do this, Dad, and if someone sees me, I’ll deal with that later. I have to save Wren. I love her, and my life would be nothing without her.”

“Then go, we’ll be right behind you,” his father said, giving him a hug. “I’m sorry, Blake, sorry for everything, but I promise you things are going to be different now.”

“I hope you have the chance to prove that,” he said, then turned and headed for the jungle around the village, hoping for some cover to shift.

When he found a small clearing far enough away that he was sure he wouldn’t be spotted, he stopped, took a deep breath, and let his magic flow freely. In seconds, he’d shed his human form and was stretching his wings, power surging through him, the need to protect what belonged to him taking over. Giving the creature inside him full control, he took to the sky, skimming over the tops of the trees until the land began to climb beneath him.

He shot toward the mountain, his eyes scanning the ground, hoping to catch a glimpse of Wren, but it wasn’t until the cliff came into view that he saw her. Standing with his mother and Theo, her back to the drop over the side, she had her feet planted and looked ready for a fight. Still too far away to do anything, he was forced to watch as the three danced around the tiny ledge, his entire future suddenly balanced on nothing more than a few feet of rock. Letting out a cry, he gathered his strength and flew as fast as he could toward the two people who meant the most to him in the world.

Wren

“Mommy, Mommy,” Theo cried when Wren stepped onto the cliff. “Help me, Mommy, this lady won’t let me go.”

“I told you that I’m your grandmother, you little brat,” Belinda said, shaking him. “Now, stand still. You’re not going with your mother, you’re coming home with me. I already told you that. We’re just here to tell her goodbye. She’s going to take a little trip off the cliff. It will only take a second, and then we’ll go get you some ice cream. Won’t that be nice?”

“I don’t want ice cream, I want my mommy,” Theo cried, tears running down his cheeks. “Let me go. I’m going with her, and you can’t stop me.”

“Oh, I can, and I will; it’s about time someone taught you some discipline,” Belinda said, giving Theo a shove away from the edge of the cliff, knocking him onto his butt. “Stay there and don’t move, or I may throw you over the cliff too.”

Theo backed away from the woman and Belinda turned on her, a mad look in her eyes. She began to walk toward her, and for a second, Wren was scared. She’d taken a couple of steps before she realized that Belinda was pushing her toward the edge, so she planted her feet, preparing for a fight. She’d known what she was walking into, known that it wasn’t Theo Blake’s mother wanted dead, it was her, but she wasn’t going down without a fight.

“Getting rid of me isn’t going to fix anything,” she said, taking a step away from the cliff. “Blake isn’t going to come crawling back to you if you kill me, and Theo will hate you for the rest of his life.”

“You’re wrong, I know all about bonds, don’t think I don’t,” Belinda sneered at her. “Do you think I would still be with that pathetic thing I have to call my husband if I didn’t have to be? And then it turns out my son is the same kind of filthy beast. It’s just not fair, I was supposed to have the perfect life, I was supposed to have everything I wanted. Blake was my last chance to be at the top of society, and I refuse to let you spoil that. He will have the wife I chose, and the wedding of the century.”

“Belinda, this is crazy; you don’t want to do this,” she said, stalling for time, sure that Blake would get there and save them. “It’s not going to work, just think about it.”

“I have been thinking about it. You have to die, it’s the only way,” Belinda said, then looked over at Theo huddled in the dirt. “I was willing to take on your brat, teach him to be a civilized human, but...”

Belinda strode over to Theo, grabbed him by the arm, dragged him over to the edge of the cliff, and then gave him a good shake. “I changed my mind. It would all be easier if I didn’t have to deal with either of you,” she said. “Who wants to go first?”

Wren was frozen in place, unable to believe for a second that Belinda would throw Theo off the cliff, and then her maternal instincts took over. “I’ll jump, just don’t push Theo over,” she said. “You win, you can have him.”

“Well, get on with it,” Belinda said, pushing Theo closer to the edge. Jump, or I’ll push him, I swear.”

Wren turned to face the drop, her legs trembling, hoping that Belinda would let Theo live if she jumped. Then, she took a deep breath and looked out in front of her. She’d just picked up her foot when she saw Blake soaring toward them, his body gleaming in the sunlight, and knew that Theo would be safe. Belinda saw him at the same time and, with a frustrated scream, ran at her, then gave her a huge shove .

Blake

Blake’s heart stopped the moment Wren’s feet were no longer on solid ground, and he dove for her, afraid that he wouldn’t make it on time. “Get Theo,” Wren screamed as she fell, pointing up to the edge of the cliff. “Don’t let him die.”

Torn between the woman he loved and his son, he hesitated for a second, then

something strange began to happen. The jungle under Wren began to shiver and shake, the limbs of the trees began to slowly wind together, creating a blanket of leaves, and he understood instantly what was happening. Changing direction, he headed for the cliff, cursing his indecision when he saw his mother trying to push Theo off the edge.

Theo was fighting back, shoving his mother as much as she was shoving him, but eventually, the older woman got the upper hand, and with a triumphant scream, Theo went sailing over the edge. Horrified, he gathered the last of his strength and dove for his son, managed to catch him mid-air, and then pulled him close to his body. Theo squirmed in his arms, trying to look at the ground below, but he held him close until he saw Wren standing safely in a small clearing.

He landed near her and then let Theo go, watching as the boy ran to his mother and threw himself into her arms. Wren collapsed onto the ground with him, tears streaming down her cheeks. Her eyes locked on him so full of love that it took his breath away for a second. Shutting down his magic, he walked toward them, then back in his human form, knelt next to the pair, and put his arms around them.

They stayed that way for a long time, and then Theo pulled back and looked up at him, a look of amazement on his face. “You turned into a dragon, and the jungle saved Mommy,” he said, then tilted his head, a frown on his face. “Will I be able to become a dragon someday, too?”

“I sure hope so,” Wren said, looking up at him, her face stained with tears. “Your dad has a very special gift, and I’m very proud of him, but it’s a secret, the biggest secret you have to keep.”

“I’m good at keeping secrets,” Theo said, a look of pride on his face. “Can you shift again and give me a ride?”

Blake looked over at Wren. “He’s five,” she said, shrugging her shoulders. “And he just found out his dad is a dragon shifter.”

“Okay, kiddo, but just a short one,” he said, getting to his feet. “Then we’d better get your mom back to the cabin. She looks a little worn out.”

Wren

Wren sat next to Blake, listening to their guests having fun and watching the sun set on the water, brilliant pinks, reds, and oranges, the perfect ending to a day she would never forget. Susan had promised the wedding of her dreams, and with a little help, she had delivered. The rings were on their fingers, the promises had been made, and they had their entire lives ahead of them.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been happier,” Blake said, looking over at her with a tender smile on his face. “Thank you for marrying me.”

“I’d do it again in a heartbeat,” she said, smiling at him. “I’ll marry you every day for the rest of our lives if it means I’ll be this happy.”

Blake laughed, “That might be hard to pull off, but I can think of other ways to keep you happy,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her. “I’m working on something special for later tonight, in fact, so you’d better save some energy.”

“I have a few ideas of my own,” she said, grinning at him. “You’re not the only one with a good imagination. ”

Desire blossomed in Blake’s eyes. “You keep talking like that, and we’re going to have to cut this party short,” he said. “How much longer do we have to hang around here?”

“I don’t think anyone would mind if we slipped away a little early,” she said. “We’ll just say our goodbyes and go before anyone can stop us.”

Before they could get to their feet, the doctor came over. “I’m sorry to interrupt, I know you just got married,” she said. “But I didn’t think this could wait. It’s about those tests we ran the other day.”

Alarmed, she sat up and gripped Blake’s hand tighter. “Is there something wrong with me?” she asked, then looked over at him. “I thought we were done with this. We’ve proven our love. I wish fate would stop testing us.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to make you think there’s something wrong with you. It’s perfectly natural,” the doctor said, waving her hands in the air. “Oh, dear, I’ve messed this all up. Wren, there’s nothing wrong with you. You’re pregnant, that’s all. For a woman your age, there’s nothing to be worried about.”

They were both silent for so long that the doctor began to get worried. Then Blake started laughing, and it wasn’t long before she joined in. “Okay, well, maybe I’ll just leave you two alone,” the doctor said. “Wren, stop by to see me before you leave.”

All she could do was nod her head, and the doctor skittered away, “She thinks we’ve lost our minds,” she finally said, then looked over at Blake. “Are you ready to be a father again?”

Blake reached over, grabbed her, and pulled her into his lap, “I love you, Wren,” he said. “And this time I’m not going to miss a second of this baby’s life.”

“I love you too, Blake,” she said, grinning at him. “You can hold my hair while I’m puking. How does that sound? ”

“Amazing,” he said, grinning back. “I guess we’re not quite done with the universe

testing us.”

“That’s okay, I like these kinds of tests,” she said. “I guess we should tell everyone the good news.”

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Cameron stowed his gear away in the cabin of the boat then climbed back up on deck, and took a deep breath of the salty air, relieved to finally be on his way to the island. After his last phone call with Max, he was a little concerned about what was happening at his friend's new resort. He didn't blame Max for being concerned, their friends were dropping like flies, falling in love and getting married one after another, and it appeared the island had something to do with it.

Max was far from the superstitious type, but after their last phone call, he was beginning to wonder. "We are just waiting for another passenger, Mr. Sullivan," Montgomery, the captain, said. "If you want to make yourself comfortable, I'm sure it won't be much longer."

Trying to hide his annoyance, he took a bottle of water out of a cooler on deck and made himself comfortable, then let his thoughts wander back to the island. One thing he knew for sure was that he wasn't going to fall in love and get married during his two-week stay at the resort. Nope, that wasn't going to happen. That would show Max that his worries were unfounded. The island was just a piece of land in the middle of the ocean. There was nothing special about it.

The sound of footsteps on the dock brought him out of his thoughts, and he looked up to find a woman rushing toward them. "Oh, I'm so sorry that I'm late," she said. "I got lost twice trying to find my way here."

When she stopped next to the boat, her chest heaving with exertion, her hair a wild mess of curls, a wave of annoyance washed over him, but then their eyes met, and something entirely different happened. His body began to warm, then to tingle. A wave of desire shot through him like a bolt of electricity, and for a moment he

couldn't breathe.

"No problem, Ms. Fisher," Montgomery said, stepping between them and helping her onto the boat. "We haven't been waiting long."

"Oh, please call me Kennedy," she said, then looked over at him. "Are you going to the island too?"

For a second, he couldn't speak, couldn't do anything but try to calm the throbbing need that she'd awoken. "The island, oh, yes, the island," he said in a daze. "I'm going there, yes."