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# **GREAT BIG BEAUTIFUL LIFE**

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# **GREAT BIG BEAUTIFUL LIFE**

Emily Henry



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For my mom and my three grandmothers.  
Life is complicated. Your love never was.



# **GREAT BIG BEAUTIFUL LIFE**

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THERE'S AN OLD saying about stories, and how there are always three versions of them: *yours, mine, and the truth*. The guy who first said it worked in the film business, but it holds true for journalism too.

We're not really supposed to take sides. We're supposed to deal in facts. Facts add up to truth.

Fact: Robert Evans—producer, studio exec, and actor, who coined that catchy mantra about the truth—was married seven times.

Fact: I, Alice Scott—staff writer for *The Scratch*, aspiring biographer, not much else—am not even officially the girlfriend of the man I've been dating for seven months.

Fact: At five feet and nine inches tall, Robert Evans was the exact same height as I am.

Fact: My entire life is quite possibly about to change, and instead of sprinting up the walkway to the quaint picket fence separating me from a lifelong dream, I'm sitting in my rental car, blasting air-conditioning and reading the IMDb page of a man whose name I'd

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never heard three minutes ago, because his quote about stories popped into my head and also because I'm stalling.

I'm more excited than nervous, but there are still a *great* deal of nerves vibrating through me. With one last deep breath, I turn off the car and pop the door open.

Immediately the dense midday heat of a Georgia summer hits me from all sides, a familiar and deeply loved sensation that's only improved by the salty sea breeze sweeping in off the water surrounding Little Crescent Island.

I double-check that I have my notebook, voice recorder, and pens, then bump the door shut and stoop to check my rapidly dampening bangs in the side mirror.

I try to school my grin into an expression of neutrality. It's important that I play this cool.

Fact: I have never played it cool in my life.

I open the gate, my sandals slapping the stone walkway as I follow its curve around a wall of foliage: black needlerush and cabbage palm, prickly pear and glasswort, and—my favorite—live oak.

Eleven years in Los Angeles, but every time I see a Georgian live oak, I still think, *Home*.

A charming turquoise house on wooden stilts comes into view, and I climb a handful of worn wooden steps to reach its hot-pink front door, every inch of which has been hand-painted with white swirls.

I'm rewarded with a suitably eccentric doorbell. I mean, it looks like a normal doorbell, but when I hit it, it sounds like wind blowing through chimes.

I'm still mid-preparatory breath when the door swings open and a short, gray-haired woman in a faded flannel shirt and jeans scowls out at me.

"Hi!" I stick my hand out. "I'm Alice. Scott."

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She stares back, her eyes pale blue and hair cropped short.

"With *The Scratch*?" I add, in case that jogs anything.

She doesn't even blink.

"I mean, not *with The Scratch*. I'm on staff there, but I'm here about the book?"

Her expression remains placid. For a second, I'm forced to contemplate the possibility that all of this has been an elaborate ruse, perhaps orchestrated by this woman's middle-aged son, from his computer in her basement, where he spends his days shooting off emails and phone calls to gullible writers like me, pitching his voice upward and adding a light shake to pass himself off as a woman in her eighties.

It wouldn't even be the first time.

I clear my throat and refresh my smile. "I'm sorry. Are you Margaret?"

She doesn't *look* like her, but then again, the last pictures I've seen of the woman I'm supposed to be meeting are easily three decades old. So for all I know, this *could* be the once-glamorous, nearly legendary (at least to a certain subset of people, including me) Margaret Grace Ives.

*The Tabloid Princess*. Known as such both because she was the heiress to the Ives media empire *and* because of those years when her own celebrity status earned her near-constant attention from the paparazzi and gossip columnists.

The woman barks out a loud, genuine laugh and widens the door. "I'm Jodi," she says with the faint hint of an indeterminate accent—German, maybe. "Come on in."

I step into the cool foyer, the smell of lemon and mint in the air. Jodi doesn't pause or even slow for me, just marches straight into the house, leaving me to pull the door shut and bound after her.

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"This place is beautiful," I chirp.

"It's hotter than hell, and Dracula has nothing on the mosquitoes," she says.

I spare a thought for Robert Evans: *Yours, mine, and the truth.*

At the end of one narrow hallway, she turns down another, the house an airy, bright labyrinth of whitewashed beadboard and sea-glass-colored accents ending in a spacious sitting room whose walls are seventy percent window.

"You wait here, and I'll go grab *madame* for you," Jodi says, with a detectable edge of amusement in her voice. She unlocks one of the glass back doors and steps into the yard, a vaster and wilder garden than the front, with a small swimming pool set off to one side.

I take the opportunity to make a slow lap around the room, still buzzing *and* smiling big enough that my jaw has started to ache. I set my things down on the low rattan coffee table and cross my arms to keep myself from touching anything as I wander. Art crowds every inch of the walls, and plants hang in clusters in front of the windows, still more in clay pots on the floor. A thatched fan twirls lazily overhead, and books—most of them about gardening and horticulture—sit in messy stacks and face down with cracked spines, covering every antique-wooden surface available.

It's beautiful. I'm already mentally drafting how I'd describe it. The only problem is, I'm still not convinced I'll have a *reason* to describe it.

Because so far there's nothing to indicate this is Margaret Ives's house. No photos of her illustrious family. No copies, old or new, of any of their dozens of magazines or newspapers. No framed illustrations of the opulent "House of Ives" where she'd been raised on the California coast, and none of her late husband's Grammys on the mantel either. Nothing concrete to link her to the now-collapsed media juggernaut, or the joys and tragedies of the Ives family's competing

publications had so loved to catalog back when Margaret was still on top of the world.

The door swings open again, and I spin to face Jodi, working myself up to demand answers about who exactly invited me to do eleven hours of air travel plus forty-five minutes in a rented Kia Rio for this meeting.

But then I see the woman standing just inside.

She's shrunk a few inches, gained some weight—much of it muscle, I'd guess—and her once jet-black hair is now a mix of mousy brown and silver.

She's been scrubbed clear of any glamour, or air of money and power, but that sly sparkle in her blue eyes is exactly the same as in every photograph I've seen of her, the elusive, unnamable *something* that had turned her from *heiress to a newspaper fortune* to *princess of the cover page*.

"Well, hello there." The warmth in Margaret's voice surprises me, just like it did during our few brief phone calls in the weeks leading up to this trip. "You must be Alice."

She shucks off her gardening gloves and tosses them across the arm of the nearest white rattan chair as she strides barefoot toward me, dusting her hands off on her caftan before stretching one out to shake mine.

"You're her," I say. Every eloquent or even *serviceable* sentence I've ever put together has been typed out slowly, over time. The ones that come directly from my mouth usually sound more like this.

She laughs. "I was under the impression that was the point."

She gives my hand a little squeeze, then drops it and gestures for me to sit.

"No, it is." I lower myself to the couch. She takes the chair opposite me. "I was just trying not to get my hopes up! It didn't work. Never does. But I keep trying."

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“Really?” She sounds amused. “I tend to have the opposite problem. Can’t help but expect the worst from people.” She flashes a smile. It’s both dazzling and sad. Sazzling.

That, for example, would *not* make it to a typed-and-edited sentence. But the point is, I can see it hidden back beneath those sparkly irises of hers somewhere: the truth. The one we’ve never heard before.

What it was like to be born into a world of silver spoons and golden platters, of actors drunkenly swimming fully clothed through your indoor pool and politicians making handshake agreements across your antique dinner table.

How it felt to fall in love with rock ‘n’ roll royalty, and for him to love you back, wildly.

And, of course, about the *other* things. The scandal, the cult, the trial, the accident.

And finally, twenty years ago, Margaret’s disappearance.

*What* happened, but also *why*.

And why now, after all this time, she’s open to finally telling the story.

Behind Margaret, the door squeals open and Jodi reenters the house, toting a bucket of lemons. “Thank you, Jodi,” Margaret calls, without turning around.

Jodi grunts. I could not *begin* to guess whether the two women are friends, romantic partners, an employer and employee, or mortal enemies who happen to be roommates.

Margaret crosses one leg over the other. “Cute nails,” she says, jutting her chin toward my hands in my lap.

The moment of connection makes me near giddy. “They’re press-ons.” I lean forward so she can get a better look at the little strawberry-printed designs.

“I’d bet you’re the kind of person,” she says, “who tries to find beauty in everything.”

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“Don’t you?” I ask, intrigued by the soft, sad smile that feathers across her lips.

She gives a half-realized shrug that reads less like *I don’t know* and more like *I don’t like that question*.

Then, like the Ives she is, she neatly reroutes the dialogue: “So how exactly would this work? *If* I agreed to do it.”

I don’t let the *if* discourage me. I know she isn’t one hundred percent in just yet, and I don’t blame her. “However you want it to,” I promise.

She arches one brow. “What if I want it to work how it would usually work?”

“Well,” I say, “I haven’t done anything exactly like this before. Usually I’m doing features and profiles. I spend a couple days, or weeks, with a person. And I write about my observations, crack some jokes. It’s an ‘outsider looking in’ perspective. This would be different.

“It’d be about getting *your* experience onto the page. ‘Insider looking out.’ That would take a lot longer, months probably, just for the first round of research to be able to write a draft and figure out where my holes are. I’d rent a place nearby, and we’d have a schedule, times for sit-down interviews, but also time for me to just shadow you.”

“Shadow me,” she repeats thoughtfully.

“Follow you around in your normal life,” I clarify. “See what you grow in your garden, who you spend your time with. Hang out with you and Jodi, and any other friends you’ve got in town.”

Margaret’s chin juts forward, her eyes closing on her own quick, blunt laugh. “Do me a favor and say that again when she gets back in here.”

Mere seconds later, Jodi comes streaming into the room, carrying two glasses of lemonade. She plops them both down on the coffee table.

“Thanks, Jodi,” I say, determined to win her over.

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She marches back out the way she came in.

"I'd die without you," Margaret calls teasingly after her.

"Don't I know it," Jodi shouts, before disappearing through the doorway.

I take a tiny sip of the lemonade, which turns into a long gulp, because it's amazing, fresh and crisp with torn mint leaves swirling around along with the ice cubes.

I set the glass down and force myself to get back to business. "Look, there are a lot more experienced writers you could pair up with. There are hundreds of people who would push me in front of a bus to get this job, and honestly, I'd understand it if they did."

"Troubling," Margaret says.

"My point is, if you're ready to tell your story, you deserve to have it told exactly how you want it to be. It needs to be yours, no one else's. And that only works if you're doing this with someone you completely trust. But I can promise you, if you end up wanting to write this book together, *your voice* will be front and center. That's my top priority. Making sure it's your story."

Her smile fades, her face sobering. The crinkles at the corners of her eyes and the folds at the edges of her mouth deepen, proof of an entire life lived, not just those first thirty-three years she spent in the public eye, but the thirty she spent as a recluse after that, and the twenty since she vanished.

"What if," she says slowly, "that's not what I want?"

I shake my head. "I'm not sure I'm following."

"What if I don't want it to be my version of the story?" she asks. "What if I want the whole awful truth? What if I'm done living with my version of events, where I'm always the hero, and I want to sit down and see things in black and white for once?"

Her question catches me off guard. If anything, I'm used to having to reassure my subjects that I'm not there to twist everything

they say into a brutal takedown piece. That I *want* to see the full picture, right down to their humanity.

Margaret's brow arches at my hesitancy. "That a problem?"

I scoot to the edge of the couch. "It's how you want it told," I repeat. "If that's what you want, that's what we do."

She considers for a long moment. "One more question."

"Anything." She could ask for my most embarrassing sex story, and I'd trot it out right now. I need her to understand she's safe with me.

Her gray eyebrow arches wickedly again. "Are you always this perky?"

I let out a breath. This is too lengthy and important a job to kick things off with a lie.

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I am."

Her chortle is interrupted by a sound like wind blowing through glass chimes. Margaret glances at the driftwood clock on the Grammy-free mantel.

"That'll be my two o'clock." She sweeps onto her feet. "You've given me a lot to think about, Alice Scott."

I bounce up onto mine too, grabbing my unused notebook and recorder. "Either way," I say, "thank you. Seriously."

"For *what*?" she says, sounding genuinely baffled as she leads me back through the maze of hallways.

"For today," I say. "For giving me a chance." For the fact that I *finally* have something work related to tell my mom that won't make her eyes glaze over with disinterest.

"It's just a chance," Margaret reminds me as we reach the front door. "Don't thank me for that. Everyone deserves that much. And I've still got a couple other branches to shake, see what falls out."

"I completely understand, but—" My words drop off as she swings the bright pink door open and I realize how wrong I was.

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I did *not* completely understand.

Margaret's two o'clock is standing on the top step in slate-colored chinos and a white T-shirt.

It's not the outfit that makes my heart sink and all the blood drain from my face—though the idea of wearing long pants in weather like this certainly does give me pause.

It's the hulking, dark-eyed, hawk-nosed man wearing it.

Hayden Anderson.

Four years ago, you might've said *Hayden Anderson the music journalist*, and that would've been a fair summation. But if he were *still* just a music journalist, I wouldn't know his name, let alone what he looked like. I have a decent memory, but I don't make a habit of memorizing *Rolling Stone* bylines.

However.

He's no longer just *Hayden Anderson the music journalist*.

Now, he's *Hayden Anderson the Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer*. The one who wrote that doorstep-length gut punch about the Americana singer with dementia.

Now he's the Hayden Anderson that Margaret just referred to as another branch to shake. A more successful, more well-known, more *more* branch.

His dark eyes cut from me (expression blank, he doesn't recognize me; why would he? I am an unimpressive branch) to Margaret (in whom he is only marginally less disinterested) as his low rumble of a voice says, "Am I early?"

"You're exactly on time," Margaret says warmly. "Alice was just going."

I would describe the expression on Hayden's face as a distinct mien of *who the hell is Alice*, like he's already forgotten there's another person standing immediately in front of him, or possibly didn't actually register me the first time our eyes met.

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“Hi!” I recover enough grip on my organs for my heart to be pumping blood again, my lungs to be pulling in oxygen, and my hand to be reaching out to shake his.

He lifts his slowly, as if he’d like some more information before he agrees to physical contact.

“I was just leaving,” I promise, and that seems to do the trick. Finally, his very large, very warm, very dry hand folds around mine, dips once, and drops back to his side.

“Thanks again,” I tell Margaret over my shoulder as I hurry out onto the sidewalk.

“I’ll be in touch,” she tells me, and I force a smile, like my heart isn’t a little bit breaking and I’m *not* on the verge of tears over the dream job I’m ninety-nine percent sure I’ve just missed out on.



I SPEND MY first night at the Grande Lucia Resort eating Twizzlers and googling Hayden Anderson while convincing myself the world isn't ending.

First I read a dozen rave reviews of his book. Then I stumble across a *Publishers Weekly* article that estimates its first year's US sales to be upwards of two million. Lastly, just to torture myself, I watch an interview with Hayden and the book's subject, Len Stirling, wherein Len informs the interviewer that he'd already considered nine writers before Hayden even threw his hat in the ring. Hayden, without any trace of humor or irony, leans forward to add, "I'm very competitive."

I cut my own groan short.

There's still a *chance* Margaret will choose to work with me.

Maybe she'd rather work with a woman. Maybe she always roots for the underdog. Maybe she just has a natural distaste for tall, muscular, talented men who write the kind of biographies that not only *don't* make a person fall asleep but also go so far as to make said

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person weep multiple times while she's reading alone at the bar of her neighborhood taqueria back in Highland Park.

There could be lots of reasons why she doesn't want to work with Hayden, and surely there could be at least *several* why she *would* want to work with me.

I nod to myself, more enthusiastically than I feel, as I flop back on the cheery gingham bedspread, gazing out the window, upside down, toward the beach beyond the hotel's courtyard.

I should've known a secret like Margaret's whereabouts couldn't last forever.

It had all started four months ago, when my profile on the former child star Bella Girardi came out. That piece was *the* thing I was absolute proudest of in my career thus far. I had a full folder of sweet emails from former colleagues and glowing screenshots of online chatter about the story after it went live.

And all of that, in itself, would've been *more* than enough to make the weeks of writing and rewriting and back-and-forths with my fact-checkers and editor all worth it.

But at the bottom of one very short email there was also a little something extra.

Loved the piece, LindaTakesBackHerLifeAt53 wrote. P.S. That Cosmo Sinclair song about Margaret Ives that u and Bella talked about is one of my all-time faves. Did u know Margaret's living down on an island in Georgia now, selling art under a fake name?

That was it. No more information. And when I emailed Linda back, I got no reply.

I spent two weeks researching any connection Margaret might have to Georgia (none that I could find), and googling combinations of her name with "art" and "island," to no avail. Margaret Ives vanished entirely from public view in the early two thousands, and

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mostly the rumor mill seemed to suggest she'd married an Italian olive farmer half her age and settled down on the opposite side of the Atlantic.

At first, I was ninety percent sure Linda was lying or misinformed.

There was no way Margaret Ives was in Georgia, on a little island that survived on local tourism, within a long day's drive of the west Tennessee hometown of her late husband, Cosmo Sinclair.

But the idea wouldn't let go of me. The rumor had to come from *somewhere*, I thought, even as I tried to talk myself out of my innate optimism.

I started trawling online message boards. Anything to do with Cosmo's music, with the illustrious Ives family, with Margaret's disappearance.

Nothing. On any of them.

And then I found the conspiracy theorists. People posting pictures of "Elvis" at a mall in Tuscaloosa. Or JFK wearing a bucket hat and a barely buttoned shirt, white chest hair spilling out around his gold chain necklace, in Miami. It took a while to find the Margaret post, just because the *mystery* of what happened to her had faded with time.

People knew about Ives Media, and they knew about the family's palatial estate (now owned by the state and open for tours). They of course knew about the whole snafu with Margaret's sister and the cult, and they could probably instantly call to mind the famous black-and-white photograph of Margaret and Cosmo running, hand in hand, up the courtroom steps the day that they eloped, his blond hair slicked back and hers teased into the beehive style of the time.

But after Cosmo's tragic death, his widow had largely retreated from the glare of the spotlight. So that when she disappeared altogether, twenty years ago, no one was quite so interested as they might've been.

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Most people had simply accepted that we'd never find out what happened to her. Just another Amelia Earhart, a woman lost to time.

But there were still some active Margaret Ives online communities dedicated to the rumors surrounding her vanishing. To debunking or proving them, depending on the poster's point of view. They were treated like true-crime-junkie communities, bits of old interviews trotted out as evidence for or against a favorite theory.

Those specific message boards got me nowhere.

The Not So Dead Celebrities message board, however, led me here, to Little Crescent Island.

And if *I* could find her through that post, there's no telling how many other Hayden Andersons might be flying cross-country to Little Crescent Island this very minute.

My phone buzzes on the mattress beside me, and I feel around until I find it. My stomach rises expectantly—maybe Margaret's already made a decision—but then I see the screen.

Theo. Now, a different sensation rumbles in my stomach, that anxious flutter I *still* get when I hear from my on-again, off-again not-boyfriend.

How'd it go with the heiress? he asks. I'm touched he remembered. Probably too touched. I haven't talked about much else the last few weeks. But still! He reached out to check in—that's something!

I hesitate over how to phrase it and settle on: She's intriguing and her house is a dream and I want the job so, so, so badly.

All true. It wouldn't do me any good to add *and I'm terrified I'm not going to get it, because a six-foot-three rock face of a man with a Pulitzer and a scowl to freeze a Gorgon is on the scene.*

I watch the phone for a minute, two, three. I set it aside. I was drawn to Theo for his easy confidence and his laid-back, carefree way of moving through the world. There's something so appealing about a person who doesn't take anything too seriously. Until you

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have to text with one. Theo's terrible at it. To be fair, I'm not amazing myself, but he's the *king* of sending a message, to which I immediately reply, and then waiting a full day to acknowledge my response.

By then I may have lost my dream job and also fully melted into this bed, the puddle formerly known as the writer Alice Scott.

"Get yourself together, Scott!" I cry, pitching myself back onto my feet and slapping my laptop shut.

"You're on a beautiful island with a growling stomach and an open schedule," I tell myself, snatching my phone and stuffing my feet into my sandals. "Might as well make the most of it."



LITTLE CRESCENT ISLAND is a vacation destination, but it's *not* a nightlife hot spot. Most of the people here seem to be either retirees or families with kids, and it's nine o'clock on a Tuesday night, so pickings are slim on the main drag.

The first open restaurant I come to is called Fish Bowl, and the menu posted out front seems to be ninety percent alcohol and ten percent seafood.

Inside, it's cramped and wonderfully kitschy, with bamboo wall paneling and fishnets suspended from the ceiling, all manner of colorful plastic fish and glow-in-the-dark seaweed caught in them. A ponytailed server in a tight white shirt and short shorts whisks past me, tray in hand, and says cheerfully, "Sit anywhere you want, hon. We're slow tonight."

There are plenty of open tables, but two older gentlemen in matching bowling shirts are sitting at the bar, and I'm feeling kind of chatty, so I head their way. Right as I'm sidling onto a stool two down from them, though, they're tossing money onto the glossy, dark wooden countertop and standing to go.

One catches my eyes, and I flash a smile.

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He smiles back. "Highly recommend the Captain's Bowl!"

"I'll take that under advisement," I promise, and he tips an invisible hat before shuffling off after his companion. On the way out, the two of them stop to have a word with the ponytailed server, and she gives the lover of the Captain's Bowl a peck on the cheek, so either they're all locals or this place just has over-the-top service.

I go back to perusing the menu, resuming a practically lifelong debate of mine: whether to order fish tacos or fish and chips.

I'm still working on this when someone plops a massive bowl of startlingly blue liquid, ice, and roughly five fruit spears down in front of me. I look up, surprised, to find the ponytailed server smiling at me from behind the bar. "Captain's Bowl," she says. "Courtesy of the captains themselves."

"Oh?" I glance toward the front door, the gentlemen from earlier long gone now. "What are they the captains of?"

"Uncle Ralph is the captain of the bowling team, and Cecil is the captain of this restaurant," she muses. "Each has his own seat of power, but Cecil's carries a bit more weight here, understandably."

"Well, next time you see him, thank him for me," I say.

She nods once. "Will do. Now, are you eating too tonight or just swimming?" She tips her chin toward the gargantuan bowl of violently unnatural blue, and I burst out laughing.

"What's even in this?" I ask.

"Everything," she says. "Plus some Coca-Cola."

I take a tiny sip through the neon-pink straw, and it feels like I just inhaled sugar, then poured gasoline down my throat, but in a fun way.

"Food?" the woman—her name tag says Sheri—asks again.

I tell her my predicament, tacos versus fish and chips.

"Tacos," she says decisively. "Always go with the tacos."

"Perfect." I set my menu down, and she whirls off through the door behind the bar. I look down at my drink and burst into laughter

again. I've never been a big drinker, but I'd give this concoction a ten out of ten on presentation alone. I snap a picture and text it to Theo while I start nibbling on the first spear of fruit. You as a drink, he replies immediately. Have fun!

I will! I tell him, then set my phone down and give the restaurant another once-over. Other than me, there are two parties present at the moment: a family of five at the table under the front windows, and a guy nursing an ice water and eating a salad at the tiny booth back by the bathroom hallway.

He looks up from his water at that exact moment.

Nearly black hair, angular nose, a stern brow.

I whip back around to face the bar, nearly capsizing my stool in the process. I grab the edge of the counter to steady myself, heart racing. It probably isn't even him. It's probably my mind and the glow-in-the-dark ceiling playing tricks on me, forming Hayden Andersons out of random shadows.

I take another small sip of Captain's Bowl to steel myself and then slowly, casually, throw a glance over my shoulder toward the booth.

He's no longer looking this way. Instead he's staring down at something in front of him, his brow tightly furrowed. Hunched over the tiny table like that, he gives the impression of a bear at a tea party, everything around him just a little too small and breakable.

Definitely him.

And seeing him now, a not-so-small part of me wants to run and hide. Which makes *no* sense.

He's not a grizzly. He's a guy who happens to want the same job as me. A guy who wrote a book I *loved*!

It's ridiculous to treat him like some kind of enemy, just because we both want to write Margaret's story. And it's ridiculous to sit here and ignore him when we're ten feet apart.

I should say hi. **Copyrighted Material**

Just one more sip of Captain's Bowl for good luck, and then I hop down from my stool and cross the restaurant to stand in front of Hayden's table.

He doesn't look up. I give him a second to finish his page, but even after he taps to the next one, he doesn't peel his eyes off his e-reader.

"Hi!" I chirp.

He flinches at the sound of my voice, then slowly, very slowly, drags his eyes up to mine from beneath a creased brow.

"We met earlier?" I remind him. "I'm Alice."

"I remember," he says, his voice a flat rumble.

"I actually already know who you are," I say.

One of his dark eyebrows arches.

I slide into the booth, across from him, our knees bumping together. I'd always wondered why it seemed like enormously tall men tend to date adorably tiny women, and now I have my answer, apparently: A man as tall as Hayden Anderson can't comfortably sit opposite anyone over five three. I'm about six inches into the red here.

I turn to perch sideways instead. He's still staring at me with that brow arched, the visual equivalent of a question mark.

"Because of your book," I explain. "*Our Friend Len*. I loved it. I mean, obviously. Everyone who read it loved it. After the Pulitzer, hearing that from a random woman in a bar probably feels a little anticlimactic, but still, I wanted you to know."

His shoulders relax, just a bit. "Are you a friend or family?"

"What?" I say.

"Of Margaret's," he clarifies.

"Oh, neither." I wave a hand. "I'm a writer too."

His gaze dips down me again, sizing me up now that he has this new information. His irises are lighter than I thought. Still brown, but a pale shade of it.

"What sort of things do you write?" he asks.

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"All sorts," I say. "A lot of human interest, and pop culture stuff. I work at *The Scratch*."

His face remains completely impassive. I try a different tack: "Have you ever been to Georgia?"

"First time," he says.

"Really?" I say, surprised. "Where are you from?"

"New York," he says.

"The city or the state?" I ask.

"City," he replies.

"Born and raised?" I say.

"No," he says.

"Then where'd you grow up?" I ask.

"Indiana," he says.

"Did you like it?" I ask.

His brow sinks into a scowl, his wide mouth still keeping to an utterly straight line. "Why?"

I laugh. "What do you mean *why*?"

"Why would you want to know if I liked growing up in Indiana?" he says, face and voice perfectly matched in surliness.

I fight a smile. "Because I'm considering buying it."

His eyes narrow, irises seeming to darken. "Buying what?"

"Indiana," I say.

He stares.

I can't fight it anymore. The amusement wins out, and another laugh escapes me. "I'm just trying to get to know you," I explain.

He sets his forearms on the table, his posture very nearly a challenge. His head tilts to the left, and he says, quite possibly, the last thing I'm expecting: "This isn't going to work."

I draw back, surprised and confused. "What isn't?"

"You, trying to throw me off my game," he growls.

"And what 'game' exactly are we talking about here?" I say, glanc-

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ing around the now totally empty Fish Bowl. “Wait, *Sheri*?” I spin back to face him, our knees colliding again.

“Who is *Sheri*,” he says, with some distaste.

“Our server!” I drop my voice, in case she pops out of the kitchen. “If you’re trying to make a move, all you had to do was say so, and I would’ve gone right back to my fishbowl—”

“Not the server,” he interrupts. “The book.”

“The book?” I repeat. Then it dawns on me. He means *the* book. Margaret’s book.

Hayden goes on: “I don’t know what this”—he waves one large hand between us—“is supposed to accomplish exactly, but this is *Margaret Ives* we’re talking about. I want this job and I’m not going to back off, so you can stop.”

At first, it stings, being talked to like this by a stranger. That someone whose work I admired has just accused me of trying to somehow professionally thwart him when I actually was just trying to get to know him.

But underneath the sting, there’s another feeling growing, getting traction all through my limbs.

Hope.

In life, I’ve learned there’s almost always a silver lining. Here’s one now.

Hayden’s brow furrows, his arms sliding off the table. “Why are you doing that?”

“Doing what?”

“*Smiling*,” he says dryly.

I snort out a laugh and slide out of the booth to stand, practically floating back to the bar, because his reaction has told me one important thing—I mean, aside from the fact that he’s a mistrustful cynic. “Because,” I call to him, “now I know I still have a chance.”

He rolls his eyes, and I pop back down on my stool, buzzing with

excitement, just as Sheri bumps the kitchen door open with one hip and marches out with my basket of fried fish tacos. “I see that Captain’s Bowl got you grinning,” she says.

“It’s great,” I tell her with another big, appreciative slurp. Probably one of the last few I’ll be able to handle, honestly, unless I plan on being hospitalized or arrested later.

“Glad to hear it,” she says. “You’re not driving, are you?”

“No, I’m over at the Grande Lucia, so I’m on foot tonight,” I tell her.

“Aw, my husband, Robbie, and I honeymooned there,” she tells me.

Sheri doesn’t look quite old enough to be married, but I guess that’s going by Los Angeles standards. Most of the girls I went to high school with are married now, and my mom and dad were married by the time they were twenty-three, though they didn’t have my sister or me until much later.

“Get you anything else?” she asks, one hand on her hip.

“Actually,” I say, “I’d like to send a drink to someone, if you don’t mind.” A little something to brighten *his* mood the way he just brightened mine.

Sheri’s eyes wander over my shoulder and back to the corner, locking onto the only other patron in this fine establishment. “What are we thinking here? Whiskey? Beer?”

“Do you have anything bigger or bluer than *this*?” I ask, pointing down toward my bowl.

“Aside from the freshly cleaned toilets, no,” she says, “but I can throw in some candied hibiscus to spice things up if that helps.”

“That,” I say, “would be perfect.”



I WAKE WITH a splitting headache. There's no way I'm hungover—I might be a lightweight, but my five sips of liquor last night couldn't have made quite this impression.

No, this is a kind of headache I am all too familiar with: caffeine withdrawal.

Before I collapsed into my freshly laundered hotel bedding last night, I'd turned off my alarm, cranked my volume up all the way—in case Margaret decided to call—and shut the blackout curtains.

The clock on the bedside table reads 9:32 a.m. A full hour later than my usual first cup of espresso. I stumble out of bed and throw open the drapes to find brilliant sunlight, a clear blue sky, and turquoise waves crashing against the shore below.

It's interesting that Margaret's property is on the far side of the island, backing up toward the marshy waterway that separates Little Crescent from mainland Georgia, rather than out here, where—judging by the string of resorts near the main drag and the mansions farther to the east and west—all the tourists and the millionaires seem to favor.

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Maybe that's because she wants to avoid people, or maybe there's more to it than that. Either way, I make a note in my phone to add it to the list of questions I'll ask if and when she agrees to the book.

The last note I made, sometime late last night, reads *play with structure???* After several seconds of casting my mind backward, I remember what I was talking about.

The idea came from *Our Friend Len*, Hayden's book.

Len Stirling had decided to authorize the biography shortly after his dementia diagnosis. He'd hoped it could help slow the progress of the disease, but more than that, he thought it would be a comfort to his family and friends after he'd gone. Not died, necessarily, but lost his memory of them.

Hayden had told the story in reverse, each section focusing on the Len of a different era as his short-term memory faded, and then, gradually, his old memories too.

In one of their final conversations in which Len remembered Hayden, he'd shared his fear of losing himself, of reaching the point where not only did he not recognize his old band, or his wife, or his daughters, but he no longer knew who he was.

Hayden had asked Len what he ought to tell him, if Len should ever ask the question *Who am I?*

And in a way, that question had been the scaffolding for the whole book, the thesis of who, ultimately, is the legendary Len Stirling. What, in the end, matters most about a person's identity.

After some thought, Len had answered Hayden, "Tell me I'm your friend Len."

By then they'd been working on the book for four years, only Len's manager and most intimate acquaintances aware of the diagnosis that led to it.

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And that final section, the portion of the book concerned with Len's childhood in the Mississippi Delta, beautifully stripped away the legend and the mythos to present just that: a loving portrait of a friend, of a boy who'd rescued snakes from torture at the hands of the neighborhood kids, one who'd hung his head in shame after shoplifting taffy on his younger brother's birthday, a more human Len than he'd probably gotten to be in a long time.

Obviously, I wouldn't emulate the structure for Margaret's book, but finding some other device like that might help to achieve something similar, to scrape away all the labels and rumors and stories piled atop this person and reveal the *person* herself.

Before I can think through it any further, though, I'll need coffee.

I take a quick shower and get dressed: a pink skirt that's technically a tiny bit too short, big watermelon earrings, and a white knit top. I step into my sandals; grab my purse, sunglasses, and room key; and step out into the cool, breezy morning, a layer of salt coating my skin almost instantly.

I jog down the steps and get into my car. I grabbed a coffee at Main Street Bean yesterday before my meeting with Margaret, and it left a lot to be desired, but I found a spot online with rave reviews, a ways back toward the bridge to the mainland.

Punching the name of it—Little Croissant—into my phone, I start the car. The Cranberries song I was listening to on the way home from Margaret's yesterday automatically starts playing, and I crank my windows down as I pull out of the hotel's parking lot.

Within a few minutes, the palm trees that dot the road at regular intervals are replaced by more wild foliage: cypress and live oak and massive century plants, the shaggy grass beneath them dappled in shadow by the rising sun.

I take a left onto the four-lane road that heads out of town and off

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island, eyes darting from the GPS to the narrow cross streets as I pass them.

Ahead, a wide dirt turnoff flanked in more palm appears, a grid of candy-colored wooden signs posted there beneath a larger sign for the Little Crescent Enclave.

**Little Croissant Coffee Bar**  
**Two Dudes Pizza**  
**Turquoise Turtle Antiques**  
**Esmeralda's Fine Art & Jewelry**  
**Sisters o' the Sea**  
**Booze Hound**

I turn down the drive and find myself hemmed in by twin rows of squat shops, each as brightly painted as its respective sign. Both sides of the enclave are built atop graying wooden platforms—protection against flooding—and every single shop has its door(s) propped open, shoppers milling in and out with coffee cups in hand.

The road ends in a round, white-graveled parking lot, a huge gnarled tree at its center, and I take the closest spot I can find, leaving the windows open so the car doesn't bake. I hop out, admiring the charming little nook tucked away by woods for a moment before picking my way toward Little Croissant.

The line is all the way down the platform steps, but it takes only a few minutes for me to put in my order, and since I'm just getting drip coffee, I'm waiting only a moment beneath the upper seating area's sun-sails (there's also a stone patio down off the side of the platform) before the teenage barista at the shack's serving window calls my name.

"Thanks!" I call inside as I grab the cup.

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Two decades' worth of tongue burns, and I still haven't learned to be cautious with that first sip, which is why I find myself with a *very* full mouth of something that is *definitely* not coffee, and thus somewhat disgusting.

I almost spit it out, but at the last conceivable second force myself to just hold it in my mouth long enough to turn the cup around and read the name and order scratched on its side.

Green tea. (Instantly less disgusting now that I know this.)

Hayden. (Instantly more embarrassing.)

"This must be yours then," a low, rumbling voice says behind me, and I turn to find a large expanse of chest in front of me, a gray Purdue T-shirt clinging damply to it.

My head tips up past a collarbone, Adam's apple, and strong jaw to an angular nose and glowering light brown eyes.

It's a marvel I remember to swallow the gulp of tea before blurt-ing, "Why are you so wet?"

His glower deepens as he holds the paper cup in his hand out to me, my name clearly written on the side. "It's called sweat. It happens when you run."

I take the cup and pass the one in my hand to him. "What were you running from?" I ask guilelessly.

"Boredom," he says dryly. "And sloth."

"I had no *idea* there were sloths here!"

He stares at me, trying to determine whether I'm serious. I feel my smile growing.

Either way, he doesn't get the chance to acknowledge what I said, because his watch starts ringing with a phone call. He eyes the screen, and I see something like satisfaction flare in his eyes before he drops his arm and meets my gaze again. "I'll leave you to your morning," he says curtly, and turns, tapping the call over to his earbuds as he stalks down the steps toward the lot.

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"See you around!" I shout after him, forcing myself not to check out his butt. Or legs. Or back.

He glances over his shoulder as if reading my thoughts, and I look away right as I hear him answer the call: "Ms. Ives, hi."



I TELL MYSELF that her calling him first is a good thing.

Obviously she'd want to get not-quite-firing-but-definitely-not-hiring one of us out of the way *before* sharing the good news.

But still my heart is in my throat the whole drive back to the hotel, and singing along at the top of my lungs to "Linger" feels less celebratory than desperate. Like doing jumping jacks to stem off a panic attack.

*It will be okay*, I promise myself. *Either way, it will be okay.*

I've been through way worse than losing out on a dream job. And since I barely told anyone aside from my literary agent, a couple of work friends, and Theo about this job, there'd be hardly anyone to let down.

Thank *god* I didn't tell my mom. I almost did, multiple times. The temptation of *finally* working on something she was remotely interested in was nearly too great.

I love my mom, and I definitely respect her, but the list of things we have in common is short. In the Venn diagram of *things she thinks are worth writing about* and *things I might actually have a chance to write about*, the history of America's most influential media family might actually sit in the middle.

In her mind, I'd be contributing to history, and for me, it would be a chance to find the love story inside all Margaret's family's tragedies.

Really, Dad's the one I wish I could tell. He was the one who first introduced me to Margaret when I was a little girl. He used to play

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all of Cosmo's music while he and Mom cooked dinner, but he especially loved what the superfans called the "Peggy Quartet." The four love songs Cosmo wrote for Margaret.

My father, the only other romantic in the family besides me, adored their larger-than-life love story. He used to call Cosmo the "Great American Storyteller"—*He gives you just enough to leave you champing at the bit to get the rest.*

A phone call interrupts the song playing through the car speakers, and I yelp like someone just grabbed me from behind, flicking on my turn signal and pulling into the parking lot of a small strip mall, the smell of sunbaked blacktop wafting in through my open windows.

I check the caller ID: *Margaret!*

Is it good that she called so fast after speaking with Hayden?

Or does that mean *his* call didn't require the requisite apologies that came with passing on an offer? Was it, instead, only a quick *see you on Monday, cowriter?*

"You can do this," I remind myself. Whatever *this* is. It's just a job.

I take a deep breath and answer the call on speaker. "This is Alice Scott."

"Hi, Alice," a brusque, not-at-all-Margaret-like voice blusters through. "Jodi here."

"Oh! Hi!" I recover. "How are you?"

She blows right through that: "Margaret was wondering whether you could come by for another meeting today. Maybe at dinnertime?"

"Yes! Definitely!" I say. "Around five or six, then?"

She snorts. "Good lord, I wish. She's over eighty, and still eating dinner like a twenty-five-year-old in Rome. Eight p.m. But cocktail hour's at seven thirty. Don't be more than five minutes early. Or late."

Frankly, I can't imagine Margaret caring whether I landed in that precise ten-minute window, but I'd guess Jodi might care quite a bit, and that's good enough for me.

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Emily Henry

"I'll be exactly on t—" The phone line clicks before I can finish my sentence. "Hello?"

No answer. She's already gone.

The Cranberries blast back into song, and this time when I sing along, it's fed by sheer joy.

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AT SEVEN TWENTY-NINE, I shift the bottle of wine and bouquet I brought into one hand and ring Margaret's doorbell with the other.

Heavy footfalls answer on the far side, and then the hot-pink door swings open to reveal Jodi in a different but nearly identical flannel, T-shirt, and jeans. "You're on time," she announces.

"And bearing gifts!" I thrust the wine and flowers toward her.

She eyes them skeptically. "Margaret hates trimmed flowers. They make her sad."

"Oh." I frown down at them, then meet her gaze. "What about you?"

Her square face softens a bit. "I don't mind them."

"They're yours then," I tell her, and because she did me such a solid, I add, "and if you tell me she hates wine, this is for you too."

Her mouth turns up in an *almost* smile. "Sadly, I'm no liar. She loves wine."

"Well, just tell her it's for both of you then," I say, handing it over. "But I should warn you, I don't really drink, so it could be disgusting."

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Jodi jerks her head over her shoulder. “Come on in,” she says, back to all business. “They’re already out back.”

*They.* I’d assumed this was just a get-to-know-you dinner. If Margaret has friends over, I really should’ve brought my recorder. I always use both it *and* my phone, in case something goes wrong with one of the recordings, and I feel a little irresponsible for not tossing it in my bag before I headed over from the hotel.

In my defense, I’d been distracted combing through a list of Little Crescent Island’s monthly furnished rental properties online. Just in case.

At the back of the house, Jodi leads me through the glass double doors and down a flagstone path that winds around a wall of brush, the sound of cicadas, katydids, and crickets pulsing through the night.

A wide flagstone patio sits ahead, globe lights strung back and forth over the long wooden table in its center, and more still wrapped in a spiraling pattern up the side of a huge tree that partially hangs over the far end of the table.

Twelve people could easily eat here, but there are only three high-backed wooden chairs, two of them occupied.

“Well, hi there, Alice!” Margaret calls cheerily, pushing to her feet as, to her right, a rigid behemoth of a man essentially snaps to his.

Hayden doesn’t look surprised to see me, but he doesn’t look happy either.

I understand, of course—I’m not thrilled to find him here myself—but it still trips an old wire in me, a need not just to win him over but to root around until I find out what’s under his cold exterior.

I push my rising disappointment aside as I follow Jodi to the table.

Ultimately, I am still dining al fresco with the only remaining

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member of one of America's most storied families—someone who has fascinated me since childhood.

"Good to see you both!" I say, reaching out to take Margaret's hand. She holds my palm briefly between both of hers, her warm cookie scent engulfing me and her eyes as sparkly as ever. Which is to say, exceptionally.

"You too, sugar," she says. "Thanks for coming on such short notice."

"Thanks for having me," I reply.

Her gaze tracks sideways to Jodi, and her smile falters.

Jodi heads her off. "The flowers are for *me*, so don't you go getting any ideas."

"And the wine's for everyone," I put in.

"Well, aren't you sweet," Margaret says, gently squeezing my forearm. "You remember Hayden, from yesterday."

"Of course," I say. "I'm a big fan." I specify, unnecessarily, "Of his work."

"That's very kind of you," Hayden says, before lowering himself stiffly back into his chair.

"Sit, sit," Margaret says, waving toward the open chair across from Hayden. As I take a seat, she asks, "What would you like to drink? Jodi's an excellent bartender."

"Oh, I'm good with water," I say.

This seems to displease both Margaret and Jodi.

"Don't deny a gal a chance to show some Southern hospitality," Margaret says. "At least have some sweet tea or something."

I look toward Jodi. "Coffee?" I say. "Decaf if you have it, regular otherwise?"

She nods and disappears back down the path, leaving the three of us to settle awkwardly around the table.

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“So!” Margaret folds her hands together and slides her elbows onto the table. “I’m betting you two are wondering what exactly is going on. Well, you anyway, Alice. I was just telling Hayden here what I’m thinking.”

*Hayden here* takes an extremely terse sip from his water glass, eschewing the dark cocktail also sitting in front of him.

“I am a little surprised,” I admit.

“I know, I know,” she says. “I tried to make a quick decision, believe me, but I kept thinking about what you said, Alice.”

“What *I* said?” I say.

“This only works if it’s with someone I completely trust.” She shrugs. “And seeing as how I’m not the most trusting gal, determining who that might be will take some time.”

I cast a glance toward Hayden. He’s staring at his water, as if he’s trying to make the glass shatter with only his brain.

With a quick clearing of my throat, I look back to Margaret. “That completely makes sense. We should spend a few more days getting to know each other before you commit—”

“A month,” she says.

“A *month*,” Hayden and I say in unison.

She smiles cheerily, but the expression flickers when she reads something in my face. “Now, don’t worry,” she cries. “I’ll pay you both for your time, of course. Jodi’s inside working on some paperwork for you two to sign.” I look to Hayden again, take in his frown and the tension in his brow.

“I’m still not sure I’m following,” I admit.

“It’s like this.” Margaret sips from her frosted martini glass before going on. “I’ll pay you both, for the month, and provide a reasonable housing stipend. Jodi can send first offers to you or your agents, as you prefer. I’ll negotiate within reason, and in the end, you’ll both be paid the same. You’ll sign NDAs, and then I’ll meet with each of you

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