

## CHAPTER 1



Brenna McKee entered her friend's yard via the back gate to find both Cristal and Nina poolside. They perched on the edge swirling their legs in the water. "How's the temp?"

"Icy cold." Cristal hurriedly pulled her feet from the pool and stood. Heading toward the house, she passed Brenna. "Come on. We're getting out of here."

Brenna drew closer to Nina and the refreshing pool of water. "What's with her? I came to swim."

Nina hopped up, toweling her legs dry. "Cristal had another argument with Bobby. Now she wants to skip town."

As Nina finished explaining how Bobby broke up with Cristal once again, Cristal returned, jiggling car keys in the air. "Where shall we go?" Her airy tone replaced the scowl she wore only moments ago.

Nina said, "Let's go to the lake."

Cristal nudged her in the ribs with enough force to indicate her error.

Nina blushed. Looking down, she said, "Sorry, Bren."

Brenna refused to let the traumatic memory take over, but she still wasn't ready to revisit the accident scene, never would be. She

didn't want to go anywhere near the lake house. "It's still hard. Let's go somewhere else—anywhere else." Planning a getaway suddenly seemed like a brilliant way to forget the unforgettable, and the idea of escaping chores and bills released her rebel side. She longed to be wild and reckless if only for a few hours.

"Let's go to the beach—Dolphin Island." Why did Nina have to suggest the one place Brenna had been forbidden to visit?

"Except there," Brenna said quickly before Cristal could get excited about a journey Brenna had no intention of taking.

"Oh, come on, Bren. It's just what I need." Cristal spread her arms wide, keys jingling a happy tune, making Brenna yearn to agree. "I can already feel the sea breeze in my hair. If we leave now, we can have our toes in the water in less than two hours."

Warm summer air tickling across sun-warmed skin sounded more liberating than a dip in Cristal's pool, and Brenna was almost ready to agree.

Nina coaxed, her words painting a lovely picture. "I love riding the ferry, feeding the seagulls, and watching the sunset on the water."

The relaxing images heavily swayed Brenna closer to the forbidden island.

Cristal bounced up and down. "We can stay all night and watch the sunrise too."

A night away from responsibility sounded heavenly, and she was just about hooked. "Well, maybe. How about a different beach? My mom said to stay off the island."

A collective gasp met her ears. Cristal recovered first and said, "Why would she say that? Dolphin Island is the most amazing place I've ever been. It's so peaceful."

"Almost magical. What did your mom say about it?" Nina asked.

Cristal and Nina's excitement made Brenna want to explore the forbidden island, but the contradiction confused her. She thought hard to recall her deceased mother's words. The only time Mom had mentioned Dolphin Island was when they had

lived on the other side of the country. Brenna had been researching landforms for a junior high school book report. She didn't have many memories of her mom helping her with projects, but her warning came through loud and clear. "Mom said it is the most suffocating place on earth." Mom had not gone into detail, and Brenna assumed she meant the climate conditions. But if it was truly awful, why did their last move bring them so close?

Brenna shrugged. "I guess Mom didn't want her hair to frizz." *We are lake people*, Mom had always said. Could she have misunderstood Mom's warning?

"Your hair will be fine." Nina took Brenna's hand and tugged. "Say yes. We can soak up some rays, work on our tans, and listen to music—"

"Put our toes in the sand and read the new releases," Cristal added.

"Stay up all night, drink wine, and roast marshmallows."

"Yes, Nina, 'cause wine and marshmallows go so well together."

"Well, screw the mallows, I just wanted a bonfire."

Cristal wrapped an arm around Nina. "It'll be the biggest campfire you've ever seen." They both locked their gazes on Brenna, waiting, pleading for her to agree.

"You two act like the island has some weird magical hold on you. Like it's calling to your souls."

"Wait until we get there, Bren." Nina's enthusiasm edged Brenna closer to agreeing, but it was Cristal's words that made her eager to see what all the excitement was about.

"You have to walk the shores to understand the... magic."

Their hopeful expressions had Brenna ready to consent. A trip to the forbidden beach sounded like the perfect escape from reality she'd been needing. Cristal wanted a break from Bobby; Nina had her own problems; Brenna could use a getaway more so than either one of them. She barely knew what she stood for anymore, but she'd only give in if both of them agreed to reinstate the traditional

campfire snack. “But I like marshmallows when they’re melted between chocolate and graham crackers. Extra chocolate.”

Her friends cheered, jumping and hugging her. “Oh goody.” Nina clapped her hands and bounced around. Her light brown hair unraveled from its hold in her exuberance. Cristal wrapped an arm around Brenna. “We’ll have s’mores galore. Let’s go.”

“We need to swing by my house first to check on my sisters and let them know I won’t be home tonight.” As the words left her mouth, she instantly regretted giving consent. No telling what kind of mischief her three sisters could dredge up without adult supervision. If anything went wrong, their entire cover could be blown.

Cristal rattled the keys. “We can take Daddy’s convertible.”



BRENNA HOPPED out as Cristal slowed the sleek sports car to a stop in front of her home. “I’ll hurry.” She was more excited to be heading to Dolphin Island than she should have been, a night of freedom within easy reach. Only a tinge of worry burdened her heart.

“Hey, Bren, grab a few bottles from your mom’s cellar,” Nina said as Brenna headed up the front steps.

“By a few, she means a lot.”

Brenna gave a thumbs up and went into the house calling for her sisters and making a mental list of items to add to her pool tote: the wine and extra cash. She slid the bottles deep down beside the rolled towel and pocketed the money and then called for the girls again. Could they ever listen, just this once? She searched the house, finding them in the media room watching cartoons.

Cari saw her beach bag. “I want to go too.” She bounced up and made to leave to fill a tote. Kyndall and Ella right behind her and equally excited. Silly girls didn’t even know her destination, so she kept it that way.

Brenna spread her arms wide, corralling them back toward the

sectional. “Nope. I’m having one, overdue night out with my friends, no sisters allowed.” The expressions looking back at her broke her heart, and she briefly reconsidered leaving, but only briefly. Thankfully, the blaring car horn strengthened her resolve. “I’ll take you swimming next weekend, I promise.” She looked at Kyndall and sent a begging expression attempting to get her to take her side.

Kyndall picked up on the cry for help. “You’re right, Bren. You deserve a break.” She guided Ella back to the couch and said, “Come on, Cari. Besides, it’s a school night.”

Brenna watched them resettle themselves in front of the TV. She leaned over the back of the couch and quickly kissed the tops of three heads. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Kyndall, I’m counting on you to get them to school on time.”

“I will—promise.”

Truancy would put their secret at risk, and if the school had any reason to call their parents, their little family of four would be ripped apart. Brenna didn’t want to think about what the state would do to her younger sisters if it were discovered that they were all living here alone. Sure, she was an adult now, but two years ago when they had all become orphans, their only goal was to stick together. So, till this day, they kept a low profile and stuck to the rules.

“Have fun without us.” Cari’s sarcasm was more hurtful than funny.

“Be careful,” Ella said.

“Always.”



JARED MASTERS SET ASIDE the article in *The Islander* about population growth. More and more families were moving to Dolphin Island and were excited and devoted to making a commitment to learning and living the island way. It was good news for his

chateau. He enjoyed teaching the tradition and ingraining in his pupils the importance of carrying on the culture of the founding members. It was his calling, and he had built two of his businesses around the island's beliefs.

A feminine knock, followed by a pause, assured him it was not one of the agents from his security contract operation coming to see him. Those guys took great delight in barging in, a prank started by one of his best snipers, Kal Durango. The others found it just as humorous to invade his office unannounced, but deep down, he liked the way it deepened the bond between them and him. "Come in."

Professor Dianthus entered his office. Tall, sexy and married to one of his men, Faith had applied for employment soon after mastering the lifestyle and now taught a class on domestic discipline at Chateau Dreambox to any woman who wanted to learn more about the topic. "Good evening, Master Jared Masters, how are you?"

Hmm. Casual opening yet too mundane for the talented teacher. What was her game? She clearly wanted something. Would she mention the brisk evening they were currently enjoying as the island prepared to say goodbye to the long summer months and welcomed the slight change in the climate? Well, he wouldn't give her a chance to discuss the weather. "What do you want, Dianthus?"

She smirked at him and sat, making herself comfortable in the wingback. She looked as though she held a glorious secret and couldn't wait to share it.

Jared stilled, wondering to what degree her announcement would negatively affect him. "Spit it out."

"I'm pregnant."

Elation floated through him, and he had to admit he was more than happy for her. For years he had shouldered his share of the blame for the childless couple and had often apologized to them for having to send Agent Snike Dianthus on tour every time his wife was ovulating. Jared slapped his palms on the desk, making a grand

booming noise as he shouted, "Hallelujah." He rounded the sharp corner of his desk, gesturing with both hands for her to bring it in for a hug. "Get your ass over here."

She fell into his embrace laughing with him over the exciting news.

Jared squeezed her tightly then released her. "Congratulations. It's about time Snike figured out how to make that happen."

She patted him on the chest as she stepped away and returned to her seat. "Ha, ha."

Jared sat down too, this time in the wingback next to her. "So, are you leaving your post immediately?"

She shook her head. "I thought Snike would insist upon it, but as long as I'm feeling well and stay rested, he said I can work right up until delivery if I want. But, the moment I wane, he'll pull my rump right off this place."

She glowed in a way that said she was glad she had a husband who would watch over her, care for her, and was dominant enough to make decisions for her, only after considering her happiness and needs. "I made a list of names of people I think would be excellent at teaching my class." She opened her folder and withdrew the paper. "What do you think of these?"

He glanced at her notations then set the page on his desk. "Thank you for taking the time to consider a replacement." He paused not wanting to make any promises about her recommendations until he gave the few names some thought.

"I want to do more than recommend. If you select one, two even, I would like for them to apprentice under me until the big day comes." She rubbed her flat stomach.

He nodded toward her hand. "How much time are we talking here?"

She smoothed her hand over her abs. "Six months."

He ran his hand through his hair, worry quickly building within. It would be damn impossible to train up a new Dianthus in that amount of time. Sure, he could find someone with her skill

set, but where in the world could he find someone with her devotion?



THE THREE FRIENDS danced around the campfire. Marshmallow rods long forgotten and tossed aside. Breakup songs died out long ago, and now, pop hits streamed loud and steady. They twisted and shouted with the tunes. Each balanced, not so steadily, a crystal goblet, wine splashing with some of the moves.

Cristal, carrying the bottle and swishing to the beat, refilled their glasses. “I don’t want to ever go home. This place is amazing.”

Brenna held her glass steady as Cristal poured. She had to agree about the beauty the island offered. From the moment they drove onto the ferry a sense of peace and longing pulled her toward the island. Once on the beach, a serene calm invaded all her senses and reached deep down to her bones. The feeling was surreal yet natural as if she were coming home to a place she had never been.

When they had watched the sunset, an overwhelming sense of belonging beckoned to her in an oddly pleasant way. The docile feelings had consumed and scared her, so she focused on the present and the way Nina turned the bright floral plastic chair into a dance partner.

Cristal paused her hopping to poke at the flames. The fire danced higher sending a blazing heat across the campsite. Brenna attempted to pull her from fire duty. “Dance with me.”

“Wait.” Cristal’s voice pitched high above the pounding music. “What’s that blue light?”

Nina looked where she pointed and took a long sip of wine then declared with knowledge, “It’s a ship. You can tell by the way the light bounces.”

Way down the shoreline, a light flashed from blue to white. “It’s a light house,” Brenna said. But as the light drew near, both girls were proven wrong. “Actually, it’s a red light.”



Cristal giggled and said, "Well that means horny sailors are heading our way."

"Wrong," Nina sang. "Maybe it's shipped-wrecked sailors coming to dance at our fire. Crank up the music." Nina danced around Cristal and pointed a finger in her face. "No sailor for you, Cristal, everyone knows Bobby and you will kiss and make up."

Cristal groaned, clearly not ready to forgive him. She stuck her tongue out at Nina. "Maybe one of them will offer you a job cleaning the ship."

Brenna giggled at the joke, but Nina shot back. "Ha ha. Like you never showed up at work a *bee wit* tipsy from a *lunch long*." They giggled then laughed harder at the way Nina slurred and mangled her speech.

The inebriated pals danced and laughed around the fire until a brilliant-white spot light lit their camp, successfully breaking up the fun.

"Uh oh," Cristal said in a high, screechy voice. She reached for Brenna and Nina, and the three clung onto each other.

Brenna froze; all she could do was stare at a silhouetted shape of the burly police officer as brilliant red and blue flashing lights blinded all her senses.