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## The Island

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## *The Island* Delaney Temple

“Don’t hit any manatees!” my father yelled as we began to float away from the Palmetto Bay harbor.

“I promise we won’t! I love you!” I called back, waving until I could no longer see his smiling face. I turned to Will.

“Vic, what if we *ride* the manatees?” Will teased, maintaining a straight face.

“Did you remember to bring your saddle?” He cracked a smile and gently shook his head. “Guess we’ll have to wait until next time then.” I sat next to him on the cushioned bench and he pulled me in close to him. The feeling of his strong arms around me would never get old. As we watched our beloved hometown drift into the distance, we chatted and joked, laughing until our stomachs began to grumble. I pulled a crab sandwich out of the cooler for myself and a turkey one for Will.

We were sailing to Nassau, Bahamas to celebrate over 2 years together. During our trip, we would relax on the beach, go snorkeling, and explore the island. I couldn’t wait to spend a whole week with the man I love, free from parents and obligations, something we’d never experienced. My dad had been teaching me how to sail since I was a little girl, one reason we’re so close, spending hours upon hours on the ocean together. He finally felt I was ready to take the boat out without him. Although, he spent an entire weekend debriefing Will on the “ways of the sea” as well.

I’ve lived in Palmetto Bay my whole life and it would’ve felt claustrophobic if it weren’t for the wide-open ocean so close to my home. I fear I would’ve gone crazy without the constant reminder of the adventure of the sea with the refreshing breeze, crashing waves, and sand that got in everything.

Stomachs full, we watched the sunset on the horizon until long after the solar star had gone to bed. I would never tire of the sky’s beautiful colors, fading from pink and orange to purple and blue each evening. This sunset was as marvelous as any other, but something about being alone on a boat with my loving partner made it that much more magical. After tightening the sails and confirming we were still on course, Will and I headed down into the small bunk room below decks, just big

enough for our bed and some storage. I fell asleep quickly to the lulling sound of the waves, feeling safe and comforted that my love was right there next to me.

In the middle of the night, I awoke to Will shaking me.

“Baby? Vic, sweetheart, please. Victoria, wake up!” I shot up in bed, my mind swirling with confusion and lack of blood flow.

“What’s going on?” I asked, although it didn’t take long to realize that we were in the middle of a storm, and a big one at that. It was shocking I didn’t wake up sooner. “We have to get onto the upper deck and secure the sails.” My stomach dropped as the boat suddenly lurched and Will grabbed me by my arms, forcing me still. I looked deep into his piercing green eyes.

“It’s too dangerous up there, we just have to--” He was interrupted by another lurch of the boat. “...wait the storm out until it calms down.” I wrapped my arms around his waist and pulled my face into his broad chest. It was rare for me to be fearful, and I was used to feeling out of control, but something about the look on Will’s face made me wonder if we’d survive the night. He was always so calm; his nerves were contagious.

We held each other, tightly pressed together, until the waves calmed to a swell instead of a crash. There were several billows that I feared would capsize us, but somehow we were always righted again. I couldn’t tell if the storm lasted two hours or two days but I was grateful it was finally over. I was exhausted, mentally and physically, from the stress of the storm, and all I wanted to do was fall asleep in Will’s arms, but I knew we needed to go to the upper deck and make sure everything was okay.

On shaky legs, I slowly followed Will up the steps and into the bright sunshine. I heard Will let out a breath that could’ve been relief, shock, or both. I brought my arm above my eye line to block the harsh rays and noticed some strange shadows on the wooden deck. They were almost transparent and my mind grasped for an explanation.

“Vic, you’ve got to see this,” Will uttered with amazement. Once my eyes had adjusted to the light some, I relaxed my arm by my side and cautiously began to look around. We were missing one of our sails entirely and the other had a huge rip down the middle. The tiller had broken off so we had no control over the rudder, but all in all, it was a miracle more

damage hadn't been done. We had spare sails in the cargo and I'm sure Will would find an ingenious replacement for the tiller.

What was the most shocking though were the tens of strings that were tied to the mast that led high above us to a cluster of balloons. It looked as if the storm had presented us with a balloon bouquet. I wondered if that was what had saved us from overturning in the storm; I was in disbelief and awe.

"How do you think they got there?" I let out a laugh and hugged Will. He seemed to be too deep in thought to answer, so I asked, "What are you thinking?" an urge for him to think out loud and let me in on his mental processes.

"Unbelievable..." I guess I wouldn't be getting any insight out of him at the moment. I scanned the horizon, realizing that we were probably far off course to our destination. Despite not having any working sails, we were still slowly drifting onward. I released Will to go find our compass. I held the heavy metal device in the palm of my hand and waited for the needle to stop spinning but it continued to go round and round the dial. I figured our cell phones would be useless as well, but I checked just to confirm.

"Look at this." I felt Will approach me from behind and raised the compass so he could see.

"Look at that." He rested his chin on my shoulder, a familiar and comforting weight, and extended his arm past me to point to a spot on the horizon. I followed his gaze to the only thing in our sights other than ocean and sky. It was an island, with trees and sand and hills and something else that I couldn't quite place. As we gradually floated closer to the island, I realized that the specks of color I was seeing were more balloons. They were scattered everywhere, along the beaches, in the trees, and even floating above the highest peaks.

Before we knew it, we were a hundred feet away from the land mass. Will and I quickly worked to drop the anchor and blow up our emergency raft, eager to paddle to the island and explore. We packed up the essentials, not knowing if there would be food or even traces of civilization anywhere. However, we only had a few energy bars and a couple apples for nutrition. From the distance, it didn't look like a human had ever stepped foot on the island. I noticed that all of the balloons still appeared brand new; there weren't any deflated in sight.

“How have they not lost their helium yet?” I asked as we paddled to the shore.

“Something tells me, the normal laws of physics don’t apply here.”

Once on land, we dragged the raft far enough onto the beach that it wouldn’t float away. I reached out to touch one of the balloons, my childish curiosity overpowering my discretion.

“Be careful, we don’t know—” Will stopped abruptly and I let out a guffaw.

“You sound so funny,” hearing my own voice, I laughed even harder. “We both sound funny!” We collapsed on the sand in a barrage of giggles. We sounded like we each inhaled a full balloon of helium.

“I think I know why the balloons haven’t run out of helium,” Will said once we’d finally gotten our breath back.

“Is that even possible? That there could be so much helium in the air?” I tried to think back to my high school science classes and failed to come up with an explanation. Will shrugged, as clueless as me. We brushed off the sand and began to move inland. As we trekked through the woods, I noticed an abundance of flora but no sign of any fauna. One would think a lack of activity would be eerie, but the climate was tranquil with the calm floating balloons, light breeze ruffling the leaves of the trees, and the distant crashing waves. The lack of humanity was refreshing.

We hiked for forty minutes in silence, absorbing and discovering our new environment. I was just about to suggest that we take a rest from our hike when we entered a large clearing. We emerged from a spattering of tropical trees and balloons and, in front of us, were a crystal-clear lake and a magnificent waterfall crashing down into it from a cliff to our left. Balloons dotted along the cliff’s side. Will and I shared an excited look, and I knew he had the same idea.

“Cannonball!” we yelled in our squeaky voices as we stripped off our clothes and ran towards the water. Given that the lake gradually extended from shallow to deeper water, neither of us could succeed in much of an actual cannonball, but we didn’t mind. Soon, we were splashing each other and diving beneath the waterfall. Will began to chase me and I squealed and dove, zig-zagging to escape his grasp. Eventually, he caught up to me, grabbing my arm and pulling me close. Chest to chest, we breathed hard from our foolery.

“I love you,” I said quietly, and Will kissed me in return.

Noticing that the sky was beginning to darken, we decided to make

camp for the night, building a small shelter out of palm leaves under a banana tree.

Curled up together with our emergency blanket in front of the fire, Will said, “As much as I love this place, we can’t live off bananas and tree nuts for the rest of our lives.”

“I’m sure we would manage,” I offered, “but yeah, we should probably head back in the morning. We’re out of energy bars too.” I crumpled the last wrappers from our “dinner” and shoved them into a backpack pocket.

“Shit!” Will sat up abruptly. “How do we even get home?”

“Oh, I trust the ocean.” Will looked wary but didn’t disagree. He relaxed back into me and soon was sound asleep. I could feel my consciousness fading as well, but I wanted a moment to stare up at the stars and savor the extraordinary day.

In the morning, we awoke to a beautiful sunrise over the lake, the light shining through the transparent balloons and reflecting off of the foil ones, still not a single cloud in the sky. We drank from the clean, pure lake and each had a banana for breakfast. Reluctantly, we packed up what little things we had and began a slow trek back to the beach.

“Where do you think all the balloons came from?” Will asked, a question I’d been pondering since we arrived. I considered it once more before responding.

“I think they’re all of the lost balloons that children have accidentally let go of, the ones that floated away into the stratosphere without a second thought.” Will opened his mouth to respond, but upon arriving at the beach, we stopped dead in our tracks. Our sailboat was not where we had left it, anchored close by the shore, but hovering several yards above the waves, held up by a bundle of balloons. Not wanting to, but deciding it was our only choice, we collected a bunch of sharp rocks to attempt to throw at and pop the balloons to release our boat back into the ocean. It took several trips back to the shore, but eventually we lowered the boat into the water once again. Then, we were able to replace the broken sail and Will tied one of the raft paddles to the rudder as a makeshift tiller.

As I suspected, the trusty sea took us back home by early afternoon, this time without the storm. I was relieved to see that our compass and phones were back working like normal as we entered the

harbor. It was as if nothing at home had changed because, for everyone at home, nothing had.

“Back so soon?” my dad asked, having been expecting to not see us for a few more days.

“Yeah, well the storm last night was kind of intimidating, so we decided to play it safe and head back early.” I thought about the possibility of Will and me continuing our vacation after our detour, but Nassau would’ve just been disappointing in comparison to what we discovered.

“What storm?” My dad looked confused. Will and I shared a look.

“Must have just been an isolated thunderstorm,” Will said, thinking quickly, which may have actually been true, but neither of us was about to give up our secret.

After securing the boat and unpacking our things, we lay on the beach together, reflecting on our adventure. We watched yet another gorgeous sunset, fingers curled around each other’s, admiring the purple clouds floating above. I wondered if we’d ever return to our hidden paradise and decided that we would, someday.

“What should we call it?” Will asked, thinking out loud.

“The Island of Lost Balloons?” I suggested.

“Not so subtle,” he laughed, “but I like it.”