

“Bin says you’re staying at The Taylor. Are you gonna head back there tonight?”

“Why?” Moira kept her back turned. “So you’ll know where to bring the branding party?”

A grin emerged on Zyon Hammond’s striking face. “That’s a good one,” he said.

“Right,” she threw back, “but I guess that depends on which side of the fence you’re on. But then, I guess we already know that, don’t we? Past experience and all.”

Zyon’s grin dialed down in amusement as he stepped closer. “Look Moy, I’m-”

“What?” She turned on him then, rabid fury alive in eyes the same pale green as the linen shirtdress she sported with coffee-colored boots. “What Zyon? You’re sorry? Is that what you were going to say?”

“Yes and I am.”

“You don’t get to be, you treacherous jackass.” She bowed her head suddenly, squeezing her eyes shut as though she were mentally berating herself for revealing too much emotion. The cool look she leveled on Zyon when their eyes next met, called as much attention to her beauty as it did her resolve.

“You know what?” She held up her hand. “I’m leaving before I forget this house belongs to a woman I respect and before I forget the promise I made to El not to rip your lying tongue from your mouth when I see you.”

“I’m sorry and I love you.”

“I hate you.”

“You’ve made that clear.”

He moved closer, taking advantage of their proximity when she didn’t retreat.

Moira clenched her fists. Aside from dropping eye contact when he reached up to brush his thumb across her jaw, she did nothing in the way of attack.

“I’ll accept your hate and your fury,” he said. “Even if it means losing my tongue in the process. But I will have you back, Moy. I won’t stop loving you and I will have you back. There’s nothing you can do to change my mind about that.”

She turned her head, another ploy to keep her eyes from his. Zyon let himself believe it was to absorb more of his touch along her jaw. He dared to take greater advantage of the moment then. Barely, he pressed his nose to her cheek and treated himself to a hint of her fragrance before he walked away.

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Uncharted, was perhaps the best way to describe New Island. An unincorporated area, the island was just shy of 70 miles off the South Carolina coast. New had been so named by the newly freed slaves who had settled there as the promise of civil war began to scratch along the shores of South Carolina and its plantations.

Six of the area’s chief plantation owners had predicted an unfavorable outcome to the unrest that was already dividing a nation. They decided they would not be victimized and dictated to by the new regime. Additionally, they knew that the bondage upon which their livelihoods was founded, was an outrage deserving of being dismantled.

The six owners made decisions to relocate, but not before granting freedom to the thousands of slaves they held between them. New had once been scouted as a possible cargo station where goods; including newly arrived slaves, could be unloaded, inspected, bought.

With the threat of war looming and those plans approaching obliteration, the six not only granted freedom to their slaves but also gave them the island- deed included- with their blessings to be fruitful and multiply. As free men, the former slaves were at last allowed to set sail. The island suited their needs perfectly. They settled on the name New Island because they were new people- free people ready for the possibilities their new lives promised. Possibilities that would include manufacturing, commerce and eventually tourism.

By the mid 20th century, New had come to embrace all three of those economic entities and more. Most successful, had been the island’s growth in tourism. Having been dubbed with an almost

mythical name- Exodus- New had flourished beneath an influx of history buffs, adventure seekers, general travelers and the media. All wanted a peek at the past and present that lay in the local population- all direct descendants of the slaves who had bled to build a nation.

If New Island's Exodus was a peek into a brutal past, then the lifestyle of the local population was most certainly a look at an accomplished present. Though the island boasted a sizable number of residents, many had moved on to make their way in a world not so closely tied to its rich, but heartbreaking history. The majority of those descendants had gone on to become revered members of the medical and law professions as well as powerful movers and shakers in politics, entertainment and the intelligence communities.

Of the descendants who had stayed, their accomplishments were just as inspiring. The island was a natural marvel and its constructions were works of sheer architectural splendor. Exodus was but one-half of New Island. The residential sector was off limits to tourists. Only guests of residents were granted admittance. Only descendants of the six founding families were allowed residency, which was only granted after strict consideration from the island's governing council.

The island's security team upheld rules against tourists' admittance inside the residential sector. The impressive force kept any unrest in Exodus to a minimum while a smaller, yet equally impressive force kept the peace on the private residential side of the island.

Exodus boasted galleries; three palatial museums that rivaled some of the most splendid facilities in the world. There was a noted theater on site, which featured shows from well-known national and international drama and ballet companies. Shops and boutiques showcased authentic wares from local weavers, sculptors, clothiers and more. African sculptures, masks and furnishings, direct from the Continent, could also be acquired from the island's exclusive warehouse. There were a number of cafes on site, but the island's most revered eateries were located inside The Taylor Hotel.

Many claimed it was the hotel's three restaurants that made it such a premiere destination. Others believed it was the perfect meshing of fine dining and fine customer service that lent to the hotel's popularity. It wasn't as if guests had no other choices for accommodations. Ferries arrived on the half hour to make transports from the island to the mainland.

Moira wondered if she shouldn't be hopping a ferry back to the mainland then as well.

"Ms. Croix?"

She blinked herself into the present and forced a smile for The Taylor front desk attendant. "Sorry, thanks," she accepted the folded card embossed with the hotel logo. Inside were two room keys and a preferred guest card that would grant access to all Taylor restaurants and amenities free of charge.

The Taylor, established by the late Elliott Taylor and now run by his daughter Ellia, epitomized 21st century efficiency alongside centuries old beauty. Cream marble finishes enhanced the rounded edges of the desks and bannisters. Furniture was plush suede and ran to soothing earth tones that whispered elegance and tradition. Those tones were offset by thick, dark carpeting and the array of mammoth chandeliers that captured the soft violet, burgundy and caramel hues then spewed in a colorful shimmery array.

The floors along the administrative wing were dark pine buffed to a high shine. Tan, rectangular rugs ran the length of the long corridors and left thin splices of the pine flooring visible on either side. The establishment honored the essence of warmth and hominess even as it beamed status and grace.

Moira made it to the elevator bay, proud that she'd so far refused any crack in her protective shell. A car arrived and, though she was the only passenger, she assumed security cameras were in use. The last thing she needed was to be caught raging, or worse, blubbing for The Taylor guards.

Blubbing was a distinct possibility, she acknowledged, especially after last night. *I'm sorry and I love you*; he'd said and what the hell? What the hell was she supposed to do with that. *I will have you back*-that one topped everything.

Over her dead body, she nearly shook with anger over the words that had jarred her as much now as they had when he'd said them the night before. Shaking with anger...all the good *that* had done her. She hadn't even lifted a hand to slap him. Some hard ass she was.

Caught off guard, that's all it was. She'd expected to see him, hadn't she? For years, she'd had her course of action in place for when they were face to face. Rushing back to Bin's after the attack on her cousin by Zion's own brother of all people, hadn't been part of the event's sequence however. Neither had listening to Zion confessing undying love and his plan to win her back.

He was as infuriating as ever-that certainly hadn't changed. She refused to think about how adorable she'd found the quality when he was a boy.

He was far from a boy now, she noted and grimaced when a distinct throb struck someplace she didn't want to acknowledge. Yet, the face remained. Zion Hammond was not the boy she'd known. Once tall and skinny, he was now taller-easily 6'4 and powerful, owning a build that treaded an enticing line between lean and massive. Yet, all that perfection had nothing on the face. Friends as well as jealous acquaintances had always regarded him as a pretty boy. It seemed he always would be. Of course, the moniker had done nothing to diminish his appeal to the opposite sex. While there were women whose egos would never tolerate them being on the arm of a man prettier than they were, Zion Hammond's ability to hold attention and libido captive was beyond compare.

Moira muttered an oath as the elevator doors parted. Quickly, she made her way along the thickly carpeted corridor to the polished cherry door. Her room number gleamed on the polished bronzed plate affixed to the door. She had time to be impressed and take comfort in the suite's welcoming vibe. Then, her phone rang. She barely had time to greet the caller before Lacy Croix's thunderous voice filled her line. She winced even as a bright smile illuminated her face.

"Moya!"

She laughed then, recalling long ago memories of the times she'd raged at him for getting her name wrong. She'd raged, despite the fact that she'd accepted and answered to the name since they were in middle school.

"Where were you off to in such a hurry?" Lacy asked. "I called out when you were going to the elevator."

"My fault," Moira conceded. "I must've gotten used to answering to the proper pronunciation of my name."

"Ah, whatever, you know my way is better. It's why you stopped givin' me grief over it."

"What do you want, fool?" Soft laughter, hugged the query.

"Some of us are having breakfast at the Old Grill."

"Sounds good." Moira recognized the name of one of The Taylor's three restaurants. "I didn't have time to eat before I left Bin's this morning."

"Yeah," Lacy's jovial tone took a grave turn. "We all heard about it," he said. 'It', being Russ Hammond's abduction of Ellia Taylor and the fight with his cousin and Ellia's fiancé Frayzer Guthrie. It was believed that the fight had been to the death. Russ had not surfaced from the Atlantic after his tumble into its icy depths.

"Is El okay?" Lacy asked.

"She's fine."

"Bin?"

"Of course."

Lacy chuckled at Moira's response. "I pray to be half that tough if I'm blessed to reach her age."

"Come out from behind that news desk and get some exercise."

Lacy's heavy laughter rumbled again. "Exercise? I didn't know you even knew that word Moya." Lacy Croix's face and voice were fixtures during pro football season. He and three other decorated pro ballers commented the weekly games for one of the major networks.

"So are the rumors true about her and Fray? Being together? Engaged?"

"Fraid so...makes me sick," Moira sighed.

"Understood. The Guthries, Nobles and Hammonds are why a lot of us only come home for Bin's birthday and the occasional holiday. Anyway, we're goin' to see Teller after we eat, wanna come with?"

Moira didn't need additional prodding. "I'm on my way down."

Ending the call, she made quick work of freshening up. In the bathroom, her moves slowed when her gaze drifted to her jaw- the spot Zyon had touched for the first time in 16 years. She was supposed to hate him. She did hate him. Her cousin Teller Croix was in the hospital thanks to a brutal run-in again at the hands of Zyon's own brother. Russ Hammond was the culprit.

As enraged as it all made her, she didn't need her cousin's injury as a reason. Moira brushed a hand over her hip and winced over remembered pain. No, the last thing she needed was another reason. Not when she carried her own proof around as a daily reminder.

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The Old Grill specialized in breakfast. One would need to head to the island's residential side to find a better morning meal. Island visitors weren't permitted to the residential sector without personal invitation from an island resident. Old Grill was the closest many could get. It was time well spent. When good conversation with family was part of it, time well spent indeed.

Moira felt her phone vibrate with an incoming call and she chose to ignore it. Whether or not discussions of revenge counted as good conversation, she was delighted to be surrounded by people she hadn't seen in far too long.

Many descendants of New Island had gone on to establish roots far beyond their homeland. They had gone on to craft respected careers in medicine, law and more. Several were formidable movers and shakers in the worlds of politics, entertainment and even the intelligence communities.

Regardless of the varied and intriguing turns their lives had taken, the families met on common ground that pulsed with love, passion and concern for their own. Lacy Croix led the outraged chatter taking place over remnants of breakfast. What happened to Teller and Ellia was on everyone's minds.

"Isn't there some recourse we want to take here?" Treeva Desmond asked.

Moira smiled at the way her cousin, an accomplished US District Attorney had phrased the query. There was recourse to be taken for certain. Whether it was the route they wanted to take was the question.

"Alright now, Tree," Gaila Croix called from her spot near Moira. "I hope your colleagues won't come after you for saying you agree with any plan that involves giving that shitbag Russ Hammond a taste of his own medicine?"

"Such as putting him in the hospital first and then having the cops arrest him when he recovers?" Barry Croix, Lacy's older brother, asked.

"Recovers?"

The dissention in Moira's query had the table roaring with laughter.

"Do we even have any proof the fool is alive after that messy storm?" Lacy asked.

Talk turned then to the weather. Moira's phone vibrated again and again she ignored. A severe storm had taken place the night of Russ Hammond's disappearance and had proven to be as much of a contender in the bout between Russ and Fray as the human adversaries themselves.

Moira felt her phone vibrate for a third time since she'd arrived at the restaurant. Resigned that the caller's insistence wasn't going to quell, she excused herself from the table.

"Just a sec," she ordered in a huff upon answering. "Yeah?" She greeted after locating a quiet alcove outside the dining room. The fragile-sounding female voice on the other end of the line had her dialing back on the desire to blast the poor soul with nerve enough to blow up her phone.

"I-I'm sorry M-Miss, I-I needed to talk to you before I lose my-my c-courage."

"Um...okay..." Moira was sure her reply wasn't nearly welcoming enough but it was all she could muster.

"C-could we meet Miss?" The woman asked. "I-a fr-friend gave me your number. They used um...your um...your service."

Things crystalized for Moira then. Any reservations or aggravations over being interrupted from socializing with her family, faded. "I'm sorry yes, of-of course," she immediately replied. "I'm out of town just now, but-"

"Oh yes, yes Miss I know you're visiting your family on the island."

Moira tensed. Despite her understanding for the woman's circumstances, she noted the need to speak with her staff about revealing personal details of her schedule. Thoughts on the staff chat ebbed however, when she saw Zion moving down the long corridor leading to the Old Grill.

"Miss?" Moira prodded albeit absently.

"Oh! McClendon, Miss Leslie McClendon."

"Miss McClendon, perhaps we could talk later this evening around 6?"

"Yes Miss, yes, thank you that would be fine."

Moira settled on a call back time with Leslie McClendon and was ending the call as Zion approached. "Following me?" She asked, her tone clearly accusatory.

"Never," his tone and expression blared innocence. "I'd expect something like that might get me killed."

"Too right," she gave a saucy tilt of her head, which sent her low ponytail swinging. "You know you're putting your health in jeopardy walking up in here like this? The hotel is owned by a Taylor, the place is chock full of people on that side of the family." Moira shrugged with a careless flair. "I'd hate for you to find yourself overrun by Croixs, Desmonds and Taylors and all the rest."

"All very fine people," Zion noted.

Moira's expression was bland. "Funny. It never seemed to matter before. Anyway, I think you'd be better off at your aunt's B and B down the street."

Zion winced. "Won't work for me."

"Seriously?" The notion made her laugh shortly. "That place is practically a household name in the Southeast."

"I'm sure it is, but you're not there. You're here. So I'm here."

Moira blinked. "You're not saying that you're actually staying here."

"I'm saying that. I'm actually staying here," he favored her with a wink and sly grin. "I'll be seeing you, Moy."

Zion headed down the corridor away from the restaurant, leaving Moira staring after him.

***Coming April 2020- Until Then... Enjoy Book I "Tradition"***