

Island Charm

AUDREY WICK

"Escapism at its best!"

-author Beth Wiseman



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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History
First White Rose Edition, 2021
Electronic Edition ISBN 978-1-5223-0342-8
Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Melissa, my forever friend.

Acknowledgements

This story was inspired by my own trips to Key West, and I hope armchair travelers enjoy the journey that Anna takes through these pages. Fay Lamb, my editor and a Florida resident, helped ensure the authenticity of details in this story. Nicola Martinez, editor-in-chief of Pelican Book Group, was also instrumental in bringing this story to life and designed the fun cover art. I appreciate being embraced by the entire group of publishing professionals and dedicated readers at PBG.

I remain grateful to the Key West Literary Seminar, without whose support my most recent trip to the island would not have taken place. Also, there are special people in my life who deserve recognition. Brian Cravens, you are my first reader and biggest supporter. Thank you for helping me during every stage of the writing process. Beth Wiseman, I am grateful to you for being an early champion of this story. And finally to Melissa, decades of friendship with you have given me a model for the connections that characters make in this book. It's an honor to dedicate this story to you.

What People are Saying

"A sweet romance to savor! Escapism at its best!

"Who doesn't love a beach romance? Especially when it's delivered in a way that is both entertaining and well crafted. Wick has a way of creating characters who stay with you long after you read the last page. *Island Charm* is perfect for an armchair traveler longing for romance and a suntan without leaving the comfort of home." ~ Beth Wiseman, author at Harper Collins

1

Anna reached for the handle of her roller bag. A luggage tag with a name that wasn't hers flashed on full display. She flipped the tag over, hoping the inn's proprietor wouldn't notice.

"Good evening." The man across the counter offered a welcoming smile. "Welcome to The Cove."

"Thank you." Anna brought the bag to a halt in front of the check-in desk. She skimmed the palm of one hand across the skin of her arm, rubbing away her travel tension. Everything about this trip prickled her with nervousness.

"Do you have a reservation?"

Not exactly...

Anna didn't have a reservation. But someone she knew did.

"It's under Worthington." She stilled her hand. The last leg of her flight was so full of turbulence that she should have been covered in bruises. It was a bumpy ride to match an equally bumpy weekend.

The proprietor swiped his finger across the keypad of his laptop and tapped the keys in a cheerful rhythm. "Yes, here you are." His eyes lit as he read, "You reserved the newlywed suite."

Anna shifted, trying to sidestep the uncomfortable

exchange she didn't want to have. "Yes, that's what was reserved."

The glare from the computer screen washed his skin in a sickly hue that matched how Anna felt. "You're going to love it."

Doubt it. Anna bit her lip.

"And if you don't," the proprietor paused, "blame my wife." He gave a chuckle that bounced off the wood furniture in the foyer, echoing in the absence of Anna's reply. "You see," he started again, "my wife added some complimentary touches that will help you and your new husband celebrate your special day."

I don't want to hear this.

"Well," the man continued. Anna couldn't have gotten a word in edgewise if she tried. "Not only to help you celebrate the special day, since I'm assuming that's passed, but to celebrate the whole week here."

Don't say it. Don't say it.

"Because this is your honeymoon!" His enthusiasm rang like a bell.

But, in Anna's ears, all she heard was the tolling of a funeral call. "The groom's not coming."

"Oh?"

Anna had rehearsed the best way to play this moment. But now that it was actually here, preparation went out the window. "Lester Lawson is a sorry excuse for a man." She bit back the expletives that were on the tip of her tongue. "He doesn't need to be dirtying this beautiful place with his presence."

The proprietor's face reddened. "Sounds like

someone needed to get that out of her system.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.”

Losing her cool wasn’t what Anna wanted to do. She needed to keep it together, just as she had through her twin sister’s jilting at the altar in front of her friends and family. Nothing prepared Anna for that moment.

And as sucker-punched as Anna felt when Lester failed to show for the four o’clock ceremony, her sister had a one-two punch.

Jilted.

Then she was left to deal with a ceremony and reception that weren’t going to happen.

Anna helped whisk Brie away as her parents and friends dealt with the aftermath. They cocooned her as best they could do. Anna thought the next day’s all-expenses-paid honeymoon could be a sisters’ trip they took together as a reset for Brie.

Wrong.

Explaining all of this to the proprietor was too hard, especially when Anna was still trying to wrap her head around the turn of events at the airport, which left her alone on a flight that wasn’t meant for her.

With a set of luggage that wasn’t hers.

“It’s not a problem at all, Brie.” The proprietor turned his attention back to the computer. Hearing him voice this mistaken identity was a hard pill to swallow.

Anna bolstered every ounce of confidence she

didn't feel to reply with a simple "Thank you." There was no use in airing her sister's dirty laundry and correcting the name on the reservation. Especially since she looked just like Brie.

"So will it just be you this week?"

"Just me." At least those words were the truth.

"Here's your key card."

Anna accepted it as a lifeline.

"I can help you with your bag. The room is on the second floor."

"I'm fine." After all, Anna had gotten to this point by herself. The least she could do was walk up a single flight of stairs alone.

The proprietor offered a curt nod. "Enjoy your stay."

I'll try. Every muscle ached, and her bones were so travel-weary that she might collapse onto the bed the moment she laid eyes on it.

Anna heaved the contents of a suitcase packed by her twin that had mistakenly changed hands in the airport. Her parents should have never bought them a matching set in the first place.

Too late now.

Anna arrived at the entrance of the suite, swiped the card across the electronic pad, and swung open the door. But as she stepped inside and her eyes adjusted to the sight, her lethargy turned to loathing.

Rose petals were spread across a pristine white down comforter. Champagne chilled in a bucket flanked by two crystal flutes. Towels were folded into

two swans that looked as if they were necking. And a small fabric bag labeled *Pleasure Pouch* stared back at her from a side table. She winced as the door shut behind her. She needed none of these things—except maybe that champagne.

She released the luggage handle, grabbed the bottle by the neck, and popped the cork. She poured herself a much-deserved drink. “Cheers to anything but love.” She raised her glass into the air and toasted the end of an exhausting couple of days.

Once she had sipped enough for her muscles to relax and her head to buzz, she scooped all the rose petals into the trash, snapped the necks on the swans to unfurl the towels, and shoved the pouch into the lowest dresser drawer.

She plugged in her cell phone for a charge. She had used it to try and reach Brie once she realized their repackaged plan had backfired.

Anna had pushed Brie too hard. In her own crisis of commitment at the airport, Brie couldn’t will herself to board the plane. Brie had insisted Anna go on ahead while she dealt with a nauseous bout in the terminal’s restroom. She had taken off so fast with luggage in tow that Anna’s head was left spinning while her body was pushed forward by willful passengers eager to board.

Anna trusted Brie to be behind her by just a few minutes. But instead of boarding the plane, she went the other direction. It wasn’t until the cabin door closed that Anna understood. She was left with luggage that wasn’t hers, an empty neighboring seat, and a sorrowful text message on her phone from Brie.

She was a honeymoon imposter bound for Key West.

Now that she had arrived on the island, all she wanted to do was sleep. She dove into her sister's luggage, hoping for a simple pair of cozy pajamas.

Instead, an array of lacy negligees, silk panties, and skimpy unmentionables leapt from the suitcase. There was even a sheer bra with some type of feathered straps.

Anna's face puckered. She held the lingerie at arm's length, studying it like a piece of modern art. She flicked the feathers with her thumbnail. Her sister's honeymoon-inspired taste left much to be desired for Anna.

But it was too late now.

At this point, she wanted to strangle Lester for making Brie think he was worth all this sensual effort. There was not one pair of decent, everyday pajamas packed at all.

"Fine." Anna sighed with a heavy drop of her shoulders and resigned to a makeshift combo she created herself.

Not by choice.

Not anywhere in the realm of her style.

But at least it was clothes.

She would take a victory however she could get it.

Anna's improvised pajamas included a white tank top with silver sequins across the front that spelled the word *Taken*.

"Which couldn't be further from the truth," she

mumbled, her feelings still raw from her sister's pain. She paired the new bride top with a pair of skin hugging bottoms that she hoped were not part of some bed-play jumpsuit. She shimmied into the tights and crawled beneath the blankets of a too-big bed, pulling the sheets over her head to cover herself like a woman scorned.

The next morning, Anna awoke far later than what was normal for a Monday.

She rolled across the plush mattress and angled the bedside alarm so that she could make out the digital numbers. *Past ten o'clock?*

The days leading up to Brie's nuptials had been busy ones, with early mornings of commitments that stretched into long afternoons of work and evenings of further responsibility. Sleeping in hadn't been Anna's style. At least, not lately in Texas.

But I'm not in Texas. She practically had to pinch herself as a reminder.

The interior of the suite was so quiet she didn't even hear the hum of daily activity as she did in her Austin apartment, the one she was about to default on with sky-high rent she couldn't afford to pay. Not unless she could find a suitable way to monetize the jewelry she loved designing, but that wasn't selling.

She thought she could make it on her own, but if something didn't give, she would have to crawl back home to her parents.

Pathetic.

Her parents had always told her to follow her

passion. Which sounded good in theory. But putting it into practice was hard.

And left her broke.

Turning an act that some considered a hobby into a steady paycheck was much more difficult than she'd anticipated.

Still, she was tenacious, and Anna had pride for her work. She wasn't ready to give up. At least not until a zeroed bank account forced her to do so.

She would succeed—or fail—on her terms. That attitude wasn't something she possessed a few years ago. During her senior year of college, she was so paralyzed by a breakup that she lost all her design energy. Irrational decision making almost prevented her from graduating with her degree. Luckily, someone had knocked some sense into her.

Brie.

She had been the one to heal Anna's emotional wounds then, encouraging her to stay in school and get the degree she deserved. She had kept her on track. Now, Anna needed to repay the debt of her sister's counsel all those years ago. And she couldn't do that lying down.

Anna threw back the covers and swung her legs to the side of the mattress. As she stood, a slip of paper peered at her from the half open suitcase that was still in disarray from the night before.

She bent down, plucked the paper by the corner, and read the words.

Top Five Goals for Key West

Eat key lime pie.

Watch the sunset.

Sail on the water.

Collect seashells.

Lounge on the beach.

Brie's handwritten wishes choked Anna with homesickness. These simple pleasures were her bucket list for the vacation she had wanted to enjoy. And Lester couldn't give that to her. He had stripped the possibility away, so much so that it crippled Brie from coming here, even with Anna at her side.

Anna clenched her free hand in a series of frustration pulses. Then, she released, stretched her fingers, and grabbed her phone. Scrolling, she read through their text exchange from the night before. The words held such heartbreak, especially the final message.

I can't do it. I need to be alone. Go to Key West and enjoy what I can't.

Love you. Xoxo

Studying the words again, Anna now considered one phrase with fresh understanding. Brie had instructed Anna to "*enjoy what I can't.*"

Anna reread the Top Five list, weighing options in her mind. She couldn't bring Brie to Key West, but maybe there was a way to bring Key West to Brie.

Today, Anna wouldn't be changing her ticket and flying back to Austin. Her sister was safe and had landed softly in the arms of their parents, who were insulating her after such public humiliation. Anna

couldn't pick up the pieces of Brie's broken heart, but she could support her twin in another way. While she might not be able to make her romantic dreams come true, she could fulfill her island ones.

And that started with searching for key lime pie.

~*~

"Come get him."

Gunnar cringed at hearing the words. He could all but feel the hot breath of the shop's cashier through the phone.

"He needs to get out of here before he causes any damage."

Gunnar rushed through words of apology followed by his promise that he'd be there. "Give me two minutes, tops." Gunnar was already reaching for his *Be Right Back* sign with the plastic hands that could be positioned atop the face of a clock. The phone line cut abruptly, and Gunnar understood the anger of the caller.

But he also understood Jack. That was the bigger problem.

Gunnar slid his cell phone into the side pocket of his Bermuda shorts, glanced at his wristwatch, and spun the hands of the sign to twenty minutes into the future. He hated leaving his post, but this was an emergency.

Although, in truth to himself, so much regarding Jack had turned into an emergency lately.

Gunnar released a heavy sigh and scrubbed a

hand over his face, wiping the perspiration from his forehead and under his eyes that had built during the call. He knew the lines in his forehead were deepening with every missive like this. During the past few weeks, they had been building in frequency.

First, a concerned neighbor. Then the clerk from the Monroe County Public Library. Last week it was the volunteer coordinator for the island's half marathon. And today it was Kermit's Key Lime Shoppe calling about theft.

Petty theft, Gunnar reminded himself. But, still, Jack had stolen from one of Key West's most iconic stores, right on the pedestrian friendly Duval Street.

Gunnar slipped out of the corner information booth, dashed across the intersection, and headed to the scene of the call. Hopefully, the cashier had ushered Jack outside where Gunnar could meet him, take him by the arm, and direct him away from any further humiliation.

But that would have been too easy.

Gunnar heard Jack long before he saw him. He had come to recognize his voice anywhere. It was an odd cross between Mr. Rogers and Mr. T that saw-sawed with his mood. "Limes are a natural gift from the island."

The cashier at the pie shop rolled his eyes. "You've already mentioned that, Jack."

"Well, I have to say it again because you're not listening."

Gunnar inched toward the propped open front

door.

"I don't think you should make people pay for any of this stuff."

"Jack," Gunnar steadied his feet against the polished wooden floorboards of the small, pristine retail space. Thankfully, the place wasn't crawling with tourists yet. It would once the next cruise ship docked. Everyone wanted a getaway, and everyone wanted a taste of what Key West had to offer.

Including Jack.

He licked his lips and looked up to see Gunnar. "Fine time for you to show up. I just finished a slice of pie."

"That's what I heard." He edged around Jack, placing a protective hand on his shoulder to shield his friend from seeing the swift movement he made into his pocket to grab some cash. "How much?" he mouthed.

The cashier held up his right hand and spread all five fingers wide, their stretch matching that of his eyes as he slowly shook his head in derision.

Jack, the old man who was as much a figure of Key West as Ernest Hemingway himself, wiped a crumb from the corner of his mouth. "That was a good piece of pie."

Gunnar fished a twenty-dollar bill from his pocket and lay it across the counter. "Keep the change." He wanted to maintain a positive relationship with Kermit's Key Lime Shoppe since they were a Chamber of Commerce member. The last thing Gunnar needed

was a small incident like this to jeopardize their association with the Chamber and, ultimately, to Gunnar's employment in service to the members. If he could smooth this over without further incident, he could direct Jack home and go back to work.

The cashier, one of several high school students Kermit employed in a rotating schedule, tilted his head, grabbed three more slices of pie in plastic containers from the refrigerated case, and slid them toward Gunnar. "As long as you're buying," He insisted Gunnar take them in even exchange for the bill, as if this were a routine transaction. "I won't tell Kermit about Jack."

Gunnar exhaled a sigh of relief. "Thank you."

Jack was already wandering to the front door, the unspoiled weather outside like a siren call. "Just keep him out of here when he's not buying anything. We can't have him making a scene. That's why Kermit put your phone number here anyway." He patted a piece of paper taped near the bottom of the cash register as Gunnar held his breath again. "You're the only one who seems to be able to handle him."

"It's getting that way." How did it even come to this? Gunnar had asked himself that a million times, yet he knew.

Jack's bachelorhood.

And his dementia.

Poor choices and odd conduct were becoming more of the norm for Jack. Not that he would hurt a fly. But, with each close call of something like this, Gunnar couldn't help but wonder if there would

eventually be an escalation of behavior that might be far more than a good Samaritan could handle.

But even Gunnar had to admit the theft of a pie slice wasn't putting anyone in grave danger. He grabbed the three packaged slices of Kermit's pie and balanced them in a leaning tower as he turned his back to the cashier and headed toward the front entrance.

Gunnar could already hear Jack, talking to no one in particular. "If they want to bring people into the shop, they really shouldn't charge for that pie. Pie is made for sharing. That's why it's cut in those little triangles—"

"Jack!" Gunnar rounded the corner of the entrance, imploring his friend to stop. But Jack had veered the other way, leaving Gunnar doubling back as he spun toward his voice, his body weight shifting as the triple decker pie stack jostled a half second too late.

A woman on her way into Kermit's swerved her upper body just out of reach for a collision with Gunnar. She two-stepped her way to the side with a surprise "whoa" as she struggled to stay upright.

Gunnar whistled through clenched teeth as his knees buckled to keep the pie slices from toppling. He raised a hand to steady the top container, his shoulder brushing against the arm of the woman whose presence created the wake of excitement. He slackened his jaw enough to summon an "I'm sorry about that" before he was even able to make eye contact.

"Pie on the run," her voice chided. "I'd be excited about all that too."

Gunnar lifted his gaze, scanning the curves of a woman covered in a breezy floral fabric that hugged her in all the right places. Spaghetti straps framed creamy porcelain skin of a shapely collar bone and soft shoulders. Dainty silver earrings hung from each tender earlobe, a look that was more sweet than sassy. Her long, strawberry blonde hair was pulled back into a loose ponytail, but chic black shades shielded her eyes from scrutiny. "I take it the pie must be good here?"

"The best!" Jack's affirmation rang from a few meters ahead on the sidewalk, his familiar voice slicing through an unfamiliar sensual tension that perfumed the air between Gunnar and the mystery woman. "Grab a slice," he insisted. "Gunnar's got plenty, and I'm not eating another."

Searching for his voice after being dumbfounded, blindsided, and nearly side-swiped, it was all Gunnar could do not to follow Jack's order. "Sure." He rocked his weight onto one side of his body, balanced the leaning tower of pie, and slid his hand under the top slice to offer it to a perfect stranger.

Or a stranger who was perfect.

Gorgeous.

Lithe.

A bit baffling, he appraised. She was dressed Key West casual, with the chic look of a tourist but the carefree attitude of a local. Yet she was alone. No gaggle of girlfriends, no boyfriend with whom to walk hand in hand, not even a dog at the end of a leash. She had a crossbody purse slung across her torso, making