EXCLUSIVE
BONUS EPILOGUE

After The Storm

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by Alison Reid

Ten Years Later…

Rachel stood at the bow of the boat, the warm tropical breeze lifting her hair as Silhouette Island came into view.

Her breath caught.

Some places never really left you.

The island rose from the turquoise water exactly as she remembered it—lush green mountains cloaked in rainforest, stretches of white sand gleaming beneath the afternoon sun, and the endless expanse of sapphire ocean surrounding it like a jewel.

Beside her, Megan squealed with excitement.

"There it is!"

Alexander grinned and bounced on the balls of his feet, unable to hide his excitement despite trying to look grown up.

"I can't believe we're finally here. Mum has told us about this place at least fifty times."

"Closer to a hundred," Darcy corrected dryly.

Rachel laughed and slipped her hand into his.

Ten years.

Ten years since she had first arrived on this island with a suitcase full of uncertainty and a fiancé she wasn't sure she loved.

Ten years since she had met the man standing beside her. The man who had changed everything.

Darcy brought her hand to his lips and pressed a kiss against her knuckles.

His wedding ring glinted in the sunlight.

"You nervous?"

She smiled softly.

"No."

Her gaze remained fixed on the island.

"Just emotional."

Darcy's arm slipped around her waist, pulling her against his side.

"I know the feeling."

Behind them, Eleanor groaned dramatically.

"If you two start making moon eyes at each other before we've even docked, I'm throwing myself overboard."

Her husband James laughed and wrapped an arm around her shoulders while their two children Daniel and Heather burst into giggles.

Rachel shook her head.

Some things never changed.

And she was grateful for that.

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The next few days passed in a blur of sunshine, laughter, and the kind of happiness that seemed to exist only on tropical islands.

The children spent every waking moment in the ocean.

Alexander and Daniel quickly developed a fierce rivalry, each determined to prove he was the better fisherman. Every morning they could be found on the jetty arguing over techniques neither of them actually understood.

"It was a big fish," Alexander insisted one morning.

"It was tiny," Daniel shot back.

"It was definitely bigger than your hand."

Rachel smiled as Darcy settled into the lounge chair beside her.

"They sound familiar."

Darcy looked entirely unapologetic. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Really? Because that sounds exactly like you and James arguing about fish in the Maldives."

"It was a very large fish," Darcy informed her.

"According to James, it was barely bait-sized."

Darcy looked offended. "It was magnificent."

Nearby, Alexander immediately turned to Daniel.

"See? Dad agrees with me."

Rachel groaned. "Please don't encourage them."

"Too late," Darcy said with a grin.

Meanwhile, Megan and Heather were inseparable. The girls spent their days collecting shells, hunting for tiny crabs, and building elaborate sandcastles that the incoming tide destroyed every afternoon.

By the third day, watching the waves demolish their creations had become part of the fun.

"There goes the palace," Heather announced solemnly.

"The bridge is gone," Megan added.

"Everybody evacuate."

The entire family dissolved into laughter.

In the evenings they gathered for dinner overlooking the ocean. The children shared stories from the day while Eleanor entertained everyone with increasingly embarrassing tales from Darcy's childhood.

"Wait," Alexander said one night. "You got stuck in a tree?"

"For nearly three hours," Eleanor confirmed.

"I was eight," Darcy muttered.

"You cried."

"I did not."

Rachel nearly choked on her wine as the children erupted into laughter. She loved every second of it. Because despite the luxury surrounding them, this was what mattered.

Family.

Love.

The people who made a place feel like home.

When she wasn't with the others, Rachel often found herself wandering alone through the rainforest. Many of the old trails remained unchanged. The giant banyan trees still stretched their ancient roots across the forest floor.

The waterfalls still cascaded over moss-covered rocks. Birdsong still echoed through the dense canopy overhead. Yet there were subtle differences everywhere.

The paths were better maintained. New viewing platforms had been added. Several conservation projects had flourished under careful management.

The resort was undeniably more luxurious now. More refined. More sophisticated. Yet somehow it had retained its soul.

Darcy had made sure of that.

He'd invested heavily in protecting the island rather than changing it. Preserving the very things that had made it special in the first place.

Rachel loved him for that.

One afternoon she found herself standing outside the open-air theatre where she had once danced beneath the stars. The stage looked smaller than she remembered. Or perhaps life had simply become larger.

She walked slowly across the weathered boards, her sandals making soft sounds against the timber. The audience seating remained largely unchanged. The lanterns still hung overhead. Even the ocean breeze felt familiar.

Rachel closed her eyes.

Ten years ago, she had stood on this stage wondering what her future looked like.

Back then she had felt lost. Now she had a husband she adored, two beautiful children, and a life richer than anything she could have imagined.

Funny how everything important had started right here.

A smile touched her lips. A pair of strong arms wrapped around her waist from behind. Warm. Familiar. Home.

"You've been smiling for the last five minutes."

Rachel leaned back against him, instantly recognising the scent of his cologne and the steady strength of his embrace.

"I was remembering."

Darcy's chin settled lightly on her shoulder.

"The first night?"

She nodded.

"The first night."

For a moment neither of them spoke.

They stood together looking out across the empty theatre. The very place where everything had begun. Darcy kissed her temple.

"So was I."

Rachel turned within his arms.

"What were you remembering?"

A slow smile curved his lips.

"The most beautiful woman I'd ever seen walking onto that stage."

Rachel laughed softly.

"You mean the dancer covered in enough glitter to blind people?"

"That one."

She shook her head.

"You didn't even know me."

"No."

His hands tightened slightly at her waist.

"But I knew I wanted to."

Even after ten years, the words made her heart flutter. And judging by the look in his eyes, they always would.

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On the morning of their anniversary, Darcy disappeared.

Rachel wasn't surprised.

Owning hotels around the world meant work followed him everywhere.

She spent the day with Eleanor and the children, enjoying the rare luxury of doing absolutely nothing.

As sunset approached, Eleanor appeared at Rachel's villa wearing an infuriatingly innocent smile.

"You need to get dressed."

Rachel narrowed her eyes.

"Why?"

“Because my brother threatened me.”

“Eleanor.”

“He bribed me.”

Rachel laughed.

“That sounds more like Darcy.”

Eleanor grinned.

“Trust me. You’ll want to go.”

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An hour later, Rachel found herself seated beside Darcy in a buggy as it followed a narrow track winding through the rainforest on the far side of the island.

The sky blazed with shades of gold, pink and orange filtering through the trees.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Darcy only smiled.

“You’ll see.”

The track climbed steadily higher. Higher than any guest path on the island. Eventually the buggy rounded a bend and slowed.

Rachel frowned.

The landscape looked familiar. Very familiar.

Her heartbeat quickened. Then she saw it.

The clearing. The rocks. The location.

“Oh my God.”

Darcy helped her out of the buggy.

Rachel stood frozen.

The old storm shelter still stood exactly where it always had. Except now it was transformed. Soft golden lights glowed from the windows. Flowers bloomed around the entrance.

The weathered timber had been lovingly restored while preserving its original character.

A carefully cleared track now led all the way up to it through the rainforest.

It was beautiful.

Tears instantly filled her eyes.

"Darcy…"

His gaze never left her face.

"You recognise it?"

She laughed through her tears.

"Of course I recognise it."

This was where they had taken refuge from the storm. Where they had spent hours talking. Learning about one another. Falling in love without either of them quite realising it.

Rachel pressed a trembling hand against her mouth.

"You renovated it?"

Darcy nodded.

"A few years ago."

Her eyes widened.

"A few years?"

He smiled.

"I had the track cleared and the whole place restored. I've been waiting for the right anniversary to bring you back."

Rachel stared at him.

Even after ten years, he still managed to steal her breath.

"Why?"

His expression softened. The playful smile faded. Leaving only something raw and honest.

"Because most people would look at this place and see an old hut."

His hand found hers.

"But when I look at it…"

His thumb brushed across her wedding ring.

"…I see the place where my life changed."

Emotion lodged painfully in Rachel's throat.

Darcy stepped closer.

"The day I met you was the best thing that ever happened to me."

A tear slipped down her cheek.

"I love you."

His smile was immediate. Warm. Certain.

"I know."

Rachel laughed.

"You arrogant man."

"Ten years of marriage has earned me that confidence."

He kissed her softly. Tenderly. Like he still couldn't quite believe she was his.

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Inside the little hut, dinner had been waiting for them.

A beautifully dressed table sat in the centre of the room, illuminated by candlelight and the soft glow from hanging lanterns.

Fresh flowers decorated the table, and through the open windows Rachel could see the last traces of sunset fading beyond the ocean.

Everything was intimate. Perfect.

But Rachel barely noticed any of it. Because every time she looked across the table, Darcy was watching her.

The same way he had watched her ten years ago. The same way he always did. As though she was the most extraordinary thing he'd ever seen.

Long after dinner, they sat together on the small veranda overlooking the ocean.

Rachel curled against his side.

His arm wrapped around her shoulders.

The island was quiet.

Peaceful.

The stars stretched endlessly overhead.

"You know," she said softly, "I used to think this island changed my life."

Darcy kissed the top of her head.

"And now?"

Rachel lifted her gaze to his. A smile touched her lips.

"Now I know it wasn't the island."

His eyes warmed.

"No?"

She shook her head.

"It was you."

For a moment neither of them spoke. The ocean whispered against the shore below. Darcy rested his forehead against hers.

"I love you, Rachel."

The words still made her heart flutter. Even after all these years.

"I love you too."

And as he kissed her beneath the stars, in the place where everything had begun, Rachel realised something extraordinary.

Ten years ago, she had found shelter from a storm inside this little hut.

Now, after a decade of marriage, two beautiful children, and a lifetime of memories, she understood the truth. She had never really been searching for shelter. She had been searching for home.

And she had found it in him.

— The End —

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