

THE BEST PART OF US by Sally Cole-Misch

Excerpt from Ch. 1

Beth turns the package over in her hands, paces the kitchen, and peeks down the bedroom hallway for signs of Mike and Kobi. Nothing yet. There's only one reason her mother would hand deliver this: something about the island, the place her family loved and had left fourteen years ago. Kate has wanted it out of their lives ever since. But why would her grandfather want to do something about it now?

She glances down the hallway again. Her brother Dylan's painting of her on the island, which she held in a tight roll as they left the lake for the last time, stares back at her. When Mike pulled it from a moving box, he'd demanded that it hang where she would see it every day. Even now, Kobi sometimes points to it and asks, "Is that really you? Smile like that for me, Mom." Beth sighs and walks back to the kitchen.

When she reaches for the envelope's corner, her body shudders. She closes her eyes and envisions one morning from the last summer on the island. She'd woken to leaves rustling above her in the early morning breeze, the silver-and-white birch branches swaying in an energetic to-and-fro as if refreshed from their own evening's rest, eager to wave good morning just to her. Chipmunks chattered as they scavenged for food, downy woodpeckers *rat-tat-tatted* in a frenetic cadence against nearby cedars and pines, and gulls cawed from across the lake at fishermen unloading their catch. A lone mourning dove cooed somewhere deep in the woods along the north shore.

She squinted to take in the brilliant sky just beyond the canopy of birches, pines, and spruce. The earth under her felt warm and comforting despite its granite base, the moss her fingers caressed without thinking offering an opposing tenderness and subtle aroma of must. She unzipped her sleeping bag and stretched. The breeze carried droplets of brisk lake water from the rock shoreline far below, where waves gathered in eager swooshes and receded in sighs. Goosebumps spread across her arms and chest.

She gathered her sleeping bag, book, and flashlight and headed down the narrow path through proud trees, sharp-jutted outcroppings, and low bushes overflowing with blueberries to her family's log cabin on the island's eastern shore. Her grandmother and father were returning from their early morning search for whitefish and trout, and her brother from drawing the sunrise, for blueberry muffins and dandelion mint tea prepared by her mother, sister, and grandfather. Like every other summer of her young life, her family had returned to the one place where Beth was surrounded by everything and everyone she loved. Someday, when she was old enough to make her own decisions, she thought she would go there and stay forever.

Her heart constricts, her breathing catches. *You can't go back, and you know it*, her mind tells her heart. *This is the world you live in now. The past is the past.*

Beth opens her eyes and rips the package open.

A handwritten letter, two stapled groups of papers titled “Last Will and Testament of Padrig Llyndee,” and a deed dated June 23, 1944, slide into her hands. She scans each group and the letter. Thick bile rises from her stomach and settles in a solid block in her throat. How could Taid do this? He knows how hard she’s fought to erect a solid, safe barrier between her life here and her childhood summers there. Why would he ask her to decide the island’s fate?

“What has Taid sent now?” Mike asks behind her.

Beth flinches and hands the stack of papers to him over her shoulder, then clenches the counter’s edge and takes two slow breaths so she can answer in a normal voice. “Guess he’s decided his time is almost up and he needs to get his wills in order.”

“Wills? I thought you only needed one.”

She can hear him rifling through the documents behind her. “Me too. He’s written two, one that passes the island to me, the other to Lily’s family. He wants me to choose.”

“To Lily, your brother’s girlfriend?” Mike whistles. “I’ve never doubted that Taid has big kahunas, but that’s huge even for him.” He waits for her response, but Beth is too busy trying to breathe.

“What’s your mother’s role in this?”

She turns toward him and shrugs, resting her back and palms on the counter behind her so she can still grip its edge. “She probably saw the envelope on Taid’s desk and changed her travel plans so she could deliver it right away. I can’t believe she didn’t open it, but the seal wasn’t broken, and that’s Taid’s handwriting.”

“What did she say when she gave it to you?”

“She was adamant I deal with whatever is inside immediately, ‘so we can move on once and for all and get past whatever curse the Ojibwe put on the island and our family.’ That she knows I’ll do the *right thing*.”

“Does she really believe Lily’s family cursed yours? I’ve always known Kate’s a control freak, but to throw her demands at you, on top of Taid’s—it’s too much, even for her.”

Her grip tightens on the counter as she stares at the floor and remembers the intensity of her mother’s anger when they left the island all those years ago, and its distant echo this morning. “You can’t go home again, Beth,” she said. “No one can. All we can do is stand up and move forward.”

Beth doesn’t have a clue how much time has passed when Mike squeezes her shoulder.

“Hey, I’m still here.”

She nods and puts her hand on his chest. “Thanks, but my thoughts are in a million directions. Kobi will be out soon, the Fourth of July party will last until late tonight, and I have to catch a six-a.m. flight.” She takes the package from Mike and sets it on the counter behind her. “I’ll read everything more closely in Toronto, and then we can talk.”

He stiffens and steps back. “You get letters or emails from Taid all the time. You talk on the phone twice a week. You must have had a clue this was coming. Are you ever going to share that part of your life with me, with us?”

“You didn’t live through it all. You shouldn’t have to bear the consequences.”

“I live with it whether or not you talk about it, and so does your son.” He paces the kitchen, turns to her after the second pass. Beth digs her hands into her pockets to guard against what’s coming.

“We watch you fade away every time we’re with your family. I get why your mom pushes your buttons—she’s got enough anger for all of us. But every time you disappear into a polite robot, it takes days for you to come back.”

Beth’s not sure when the façade took over. She can sense them urging her back at holiday dinners: Taid with his sideways glances, Mike hugging her at odd moments, Kobi yanking her sleeves as if he’s trying to pull down the wall she’s raised between them. When the accumulation of tight smiles, controlled conversations, and going along to keep any semblance of family intact forces her so far inside that even Mike doesn’t recognize her.

She could argue that he knows her in ways her family doesn’t. He knows the Beth that smiles deep in her heart when she’s with him and Kobi, no matter where they are. He’s seen glimpses of the young Beth when they’ve played in the Lake Michigan sand on hot summer weekends, when she’s taught Kobi about the waves, birds, and fish, and he always asks for more of that her.

But that part—the girl who lived for open skies, rocky peaks, crystal blue water, and stands of windswept pines; who craved the sweet scent of dew on the cedars on an early morning hike and the loons’ wistful trills across the bays just after sunset; who shared the joy of being in and a part of nature with her brother, Dylan—could never survive living in Chicago. She shudders as she realizes how deeply she’s buried her memories and that part of herself to create what felt like a contented life in spite of her surroundings.

“Sometimes the past overwhelms, no matter how hard my family tries to keep it buried. Maybe we *are* cursed.”

She forces herself to look at him: he’s narrowed his gaze, sharpened his navy eyes into steel arrows that pierce hers. “From what we’ve read so far, it sounds like your grandfather’s giving us the chance to go to the island and figure out what we want for *our* family.”

His words “go to the island” reverberate off blood vessels in her ears, landing nowhere.

“Why don’t we celebrate the family we’ve created, the memories we could make there? I’ve seen Taid’s amazing photos and paintings of the place and how you light up when you look at them. At the very least, it’d be a chance to get out of the city, which you used to say you want.” Mike pauses. “Do you want to disappoint Taid, me, and your son? I bet he’d love it up there.”

She knows he’s pulling Kobi into the conversation to reach her deepest regret—that it feels normal to her son to grow up in a grit-filled city of concrete and steel, the skyscrapers crowding together like a forest of silver spikes reaching for the heavens in a decadent illusion of grandeur. Around people who crave cramped coffee haunts where they suck each other’s energy dry through idle conversation and needy smiles, rather than open skies and full breezes that cleanse the lungs and soul. Where the constant hum of traffic and human activity whines in her ears and dulls her imagination, while Lake Michigan’s waves urge her to remember another world that’s alive and free just beyond her vision.

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