

A scenic beach view featuring a lighthouse in the distance, a red building with a wooden deck and stairs in the foreground, and a yellow bicycle with a basket. The sky is blue with light clouds, and the ocean waves are visible. The foreground shows a sandy path with seashells and a patch of green grass with yellow flowers.

The Island Bookshop

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Chapter One



Washington, DC
Present Day

White gloves tugged into place, Kennedy Marshall reached for the treasure before her—old leather, careful gilding, delicate paper. She drew in a deep breath as she slowly opened the cover and let her gaze roam the end leaves. Not purely because she loved the smell of an old book, though she always swore it was the sweetest perfume in the world, but to check for a not-so-sweet smell. Mold, the archnemesis of books and hence of her. The same thing her eyes scanned for.

No discoloration met her eyes, and no odor affronted her nose. Good—and a little miraculous given the age of this volume. She flipped to the title page, her examination beginning again. Her pulse kicked up a notch when she read those beautiful, precious words. The words that meant this book might actually be what the original owner had claimed, a rare first edition.

The Whole Booke of Psalmes
Faithfully
TRANSLATED into ENGLISH

Metre.

Whereunto is prefixed a discourse
declaring not only the lawfullness, but also
the necessity of the heavenly Ordinance
of singing Scripture Psalmes in
the Churches of God.

Imprinted, 1640

Her breath caught, her pulse thudded at those last two words. She'd known, of course, that was what the page would have on it. That was why it was here now, in her hands, bequeathed by the billionaire book collector who had died two months ago.

But everyone always claimed the books they donated to the Library of Congress were valuable—and all too often, they were lying through their teeth. Okay, fine, more likely they were just mistaken. People saw the date and, if it matched the year in which a title was first printed, or didn't have "Second Edition" typed right there to see, they just assumed. The general populace didn't know the difference between an edition and a printing, didn't know the hallmarks to look for in each book to know if it was *really* the most valuable version.

Kennedy's job was to never assume. Her job was to know which details to look for in each title they received, to examine every inch of every tome, to evaluate, to grade, to restore where possible, and to store accordingly.

Some books would enter their permanent collection, where any library visitor could view them. A few were so valuable they would be on display, but were not to be touched without her hovering over them, white gloves ever present. Some would be stored in the parts

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of the library that regular patrons would never see, when the books were too fragile to be exposed regularly to light and humidity. Others would be sold or given away, when they weren't good additions to the collection for one reason or another.

This one she had high hopes for. Ephraim Kensington had invited her to a dinner party at his estate last year for the sole purpose of showing off his rare book collection, and she'd pegged this little book as the gem—if it turned out to be what he claimed. Unlike most people, Kensington would have done his homework. *The Bay Psalm Book* was the first book printed in the Massachusetts Colony, back in 1640, and if this was really one of that first printing...

"Take a breath, Kennedy," Melessa Taggart teased from the worktable beside her own.

"Can't." Kennedy exaggerated the breathlessness of the word, just to make her friend chuckle. "Too nervous. If this is one of the eleven surviving copies of this book..."

"What, you're not used to handling books that auction for tens of millions of dollars?" Melessa had another of the donated books in front of her, but, much as she loved her best friend in DC, Kennedy hadn't been willing to let anyone else touch this one. That was the perk of her recent promotion, after all—she was the boss in this room. Her new position meant that, once in a while at least, she could snatch the best books for her own perusal.

Still, she obeyed the advice and made herself take another long breath—not to smell for mold this time, just to steady herself.

She knew all the elements to check for, after spending two hours already this morning refreshing herself on the hallmarks of a first printing of this text. Having familiarized herself with Kensington's

documentation regarding each book of his collection, Kennedy knew that another specialist had authenticated the book fifty years ago.

But the Library of Congress required everything entering their permanent collection to be verified again, of course. Not to mention she needed to document any changes to the book since its last evaluation. *Please, Lord, let the condition still be excellent.*

Yes, Kennedy prayed against mold and mildew and rips and tears and paper decomposition. Melessa always razzed her for it, but she figured the Lord loved books too, right? Why else would He have instructed His people to write them?

Okay. One more deep breath, and she was ready to slowly turn another page, then another and another, watching and listening for any creaking of the binding, fingers noting the feel of the paper through the gloves. Heart still skipping along like a kid in a candy shop as she saw that, unlike the last version of this book to go to auction, there were no handwritten markings marring the margins, no crumbling along the edges.

“It’s clean,” she whispered, knowing Melessa would hear the glee in her voice.

Melessa abandoned all pretense of doing her own work and moved to Kennedy’s side with a little squeal of delight. “Man. If this went to auction, it could probably surpass the fourteen million for the last copy that sold.”

“It’s in better condition, for sure. I still can’t believe Mr. Kensington willed his collection to us instead of his family.”

Melessa shrugged, making her black braids bounce around her face. “I guess when your family doesn’t value the books for what they are and only see the price tag...”

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“I guess.” Kennedy couldn’t even imagine. But then, she came from a family of booklovers. She glanced over at her friend. “Wanna do the notation for me, since you’re standing here? Then we can switch for yours.”

“Sure.” Melessa pulled the laptop forward from where Kennedy had left it at the side of the table.

They went through the book page by page, with Kennedy noting every telltale oddity that marked it as the first printing, as well as any of this tome as its own unique variation—discoloration of the paper, the tone of the ink, places where the binding was loosening. Melessa typed it all in as they went. As frequently as they worked together, it was easy to fall into the comfort of a rhythm, even on a project as unusual as this one.

When finally they finished, Kennedy’s neck ached a bit from the tension she’d been holding, and she took a moment to roll her head and loosen it again, letting out a long exhale. She still couldn’t quite believe it. It was *real*—authentic. Everything Kensington had claimed.

Melessa gave a sigh of her own. “Well. My date tonight is going to have a hard time topping *that*.”

The grin that tugged at Kennedy’s lips was partly for the book—and partly for the reminder that Melessa would be going out on date number three with a guy they had high hopes for. Kennedy had been teasing her for weeks about having cartoon stars in her eyes.

“This is just the best day ever.” She moved *The Bay Psalm Book* back into its box, clipped the airtight lid in place, and slid it onto one of the metal shelves behind their worktables. “Rare first editions *and* you have a date with Mr. Cutie.”

“At Filomena’s. Last time I got in, I swear I saw George Clooney.” Melessa moved back to her table and the book still sitting out.

Kennedy followed her, reaching for Melessa’s laptop. “Never mind the celebrities. I just want their ravioli again. Those things are big as pillows and *so good*.” Even thinking about the pasta made a mockery of the salad she’d packed for lunch today. Her stomach rumbled a protest.

She tabbed to the correct document and set her fingers on the keyboard, ready for the dictation.

“You should have let me set you up with Mr. Cutie’s brother,” Melessa said in a sing-song tone. “Then you could be going with us tonight.”

Kennedy grinned. But shook her head. “No more blind dates. You remember what happened last time, right?”

Her friend gave her a narrowed-eye glare. “That was *not* Marcus’s fault. He’s a perfectly nice guy.”

Kennedy pressed her lips together. Melessa wasn’t altogether wrong. There hadn’t been anything wrong with the man from her friend’s church. He’d just been...or rather, *she’d* been... She huffed a sigh. Honestly, the problem was that she’d just returned from a trip home for her dad’s birthday. Which meant thoughts of Someone Else were in the forefront of her mind. His grin. His laugh. The way he hugged her so tight. How he called her “Kenni” even though no one else on the face of the earth had ever done that.

She’d spent the whole double date comparing the unfortunate Marcus to Wes Armstrong, and even knowing it was unfair to her new acquaintance, she hadn’t been able to stop herself.

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But maybe she should have let Melessa set her up with Mr. Cutie's brother. She hadn't been back to Hatteras since Christmas, so she'd once again succeeded—mostly—in pushing all thoughts of Wes aside. Until he texted or emailed or called. Which he did at least once a week. But she was fine dealing with those interactions and still remembering they were only friends. It was when she *saw* him that all those old dreams pummeled her again, even though she'd long ago resigned them to the “never gonna happen” file.

Kennedy had known it since they were sixteen, when he'd chosen Britta instead of her. Had done a great job of believing it while he and Britta were married. But these last two years, after Britta's death, when Wes took to calling and emailing and texting nearly every day for a while? Yeah. Her stupid heart hadn't done so well with it then. One would think that a woman who'd just celebrated her thirty-first birthday would be able to forget her first love, but...

She and Melessa got through that book and one more before lunch. They'd left the clean room and were en route to their offices when Kennedy's cell buzzed in her pocket. She wasn't surprised to see her aunt's number on the display—Aunt Grace called during her lunch hour once or twice a week, just to chat and keep Kennedy updated on the goings-on of life in the sleepy seaside town in North Carolina that had once been home. However, today was Friday, and her aunt usually volunteered at the art gallery on Fridays.

Waving to Melessa, Kennedy answered the call, stepping into her office as she said, “Hey, Aunt Grace.”

“Oh, good, you're there! Something happened to Lara.”

Four words, but they made Kennedy freeze just inside the door, her hand hovering over the light switch. She'd heard words

like those before. “*Something happened to your mom*” had been her aunt’s panicked words eight years ago, pulling Kennedy out of a graduate studies lecture to tell her that Mom had had a heart attack—Kennedy hadn’t even made it home in time to say goodbye. “*Something happened to Britta*” was Wes’s choked greeting two years ago when he called, sobbing, to say her best friend, his wife, had been in a fatal car crash—on her way to visit Kennedy. “*Something happened to Grandma*” had been the last one, nine short months ago and again from Aunt Grace, telling Kennedy that her eighty-six-year-old grandmother was in the hospital, declining suddenly and fast. She had at least gotten there before it was too late, that time.

Her throat wouldn’t work. Her heart, she was pretty sure, couldn’t decide whether to pound or stop altogether.

Not Lara. Nothing could happen to her sister. *Please, God, please. Not Lara.*

She couldn’t say anything, gasp as she might for breath.

Aunt Grace didn’t wait for her to speak anyway. “She fell off the attic ladder somehow—at the bookshop. Thank God that Shaleen was there to call the ambulance. I’m following it now.”

Ambulance. Ambulance, with her aunt trailing it, meant that Lara was alive. Kennedy dragged a breath into her lungs. “How bad is she?” *No need to panic*, she told herself. Even something as non-life-threatening as a broken leg would require a trip to the hospital in Nags Head. They only had a few small urgent care clinics on Hatteras Island, nothing that could handle anything remotely serious.

But her aunt was silent for a long beat. “I don’t know, Ken. She was still unconscious when they loaded her up. Her face is a bruised mess—they think she has a concussion, and the EMTs were pretty

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concerned by how unresponsive she was.” Thunder rumbled loudly enough on her aunt’s end to come through to Kennedy, making her eyes dart to her window.

Raindrops streaked the glass, but it was a rather gentle late-spring rain here in DC. She knew they were getting pounded in the Outer Banks. Lara had texted that morning, like she did every day, and mentioned rather grumpily that the roads were flooding. Again. Seemed like every time a system rolled through these days, the barrier island’s low-lying roads went under. Kennedy had replied, THEN HAVE A NICE SWIM TO WORK!

She squeezed her eyes shut. How had they gone from grumbling and snarky morning texts to this? “I’m on my way.”

“Oh, baby, you don’t have to—”

“It’s *Lara*. Of course I have to.” If the situation was reversed, Lara would be in her car already, plowing through the water to reach her. And if the water was too high, she’d be in a boat. And if she couldn’t find a boat, she’d sprout wings and fly by the sheer force of her will. Nothing in the world would keep her sister from rushing to her side if she was injured, so how could Kennedy do any less? Since Mom died, they’d been more than sisters, more than best friends. They’d been each other’s lifeline. “I just need to...”

What did she need to do first? Her mind spun in a dozen different directions. She had to take the rest of the day, let her boss know. And Melessa. Catch the metro. Pack for the weekend, find a gas station, pray that she’d beat Friday afternoon traffic out of DC, which was an absolute nightmare this time of year.

She forced a deep breath in, back out. “I’ll let you know when I’m on the road. Keep me updated, okay? How long till you get to Nags Head?”

“Just another ten or fifteen minutes at this point. The road’s washed out, so we’ve been crawling, but we’re just coming up on the Jug Handle Bridge. Should be fine from here. I didn’t dare take my attention off the road long enough to call you in all that water, even with my hands-free.”

Kennedy finally reached out to hit the lights, striding toward where she’d stashed her purse and messenger bag that morning. “Any closures on Bodie that will affect me?” Bodie Island was where the hospital was located, north of her family’s home on Hatteras Island.

“Not that I’ve heard. They’re not even closed here, and you know we get it worse than they do at the northern beaches. But be careful, baby. If there *is* any flooding, that little car of yours...”

“Mitzi and I will be fine.” She forced a smile into her voice, hoping that referring to her car by its name would make her aunt smile too. “She’s tougher than she looks.”

“Just like you girls. I’ll call with updates whenever I have them.”

“Thanks. See you soon, Aunt Grace. Love you.”

A moment later she was hanging up her cell and reaching for her office phone. But her mind was already hundreds of miles away, back in the one place she tended to avoid—home. Because as much as she loved Avon—that tiny little town nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and Pamlico Sound, on a spit of sand barely wide enough for a road and a couple rows of houses—being there was just too hard.

Maybe it was where tourists went to get away from it all and bask in the beauty of the beach community. But for Kennedy, it was the place that reminded her with each crashing wave and scuttling cloud that dreams too often slipped through your fingers.

And people did too.