

NINA FOXX

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For Marcea.

*Who welcomed me into her world and
introduced me to the beautiful setting
that made my imagination run wild.*

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*Excerpt: Island Secrets
A Kings of Kaiwaha Story*

By Nina Foxx

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Door Dings and New Things

Denise savored the warm breeze left behind by the summer storm that had skirted the barrier islands, imagining it to be a caress from Charles across her cheek. Even after all this time, this place was magical to her. Thankful for the lull in the blistering heat that normally sat on the shoulders of the South Carolina Low Country, she drove her convertible with her top down. Days like this made her glad that she'd run from the stress in Chicago and moved to hide away in this hipbone of the country, even if these days were tinged with sadness.

Old trees stretched over the narrow road, meeting in the middle and creating a green, mangled tunnel. In an earlier time, she would have spent evenings in her studio, re-creating the tunnel on canvas, hoping to unlock some of its secrets. Charles used to laugh when she talked about the things her paintings revealed. He didn't believe, like she did, that sometimes her eye saw things that were hidden beneath the surface, things that other people missed. On each trip to Kiawah Island, Denise had imagined that she had been traveling through the century of secrets the canopy of trees must have shared. Today was no different. This time, like other times before, she fancied herself being transported to a simpler place, maybe not hundreds of years ago back when Kiawah Island had been a plantation, but certainly one where she was not a widow, back when her

husband had been beside her and they'd ventured out to Buster's Place, hidden deep in the swamp, together.

Ten years ago, when they'd first come this way, there'd been almost nothing here. There were very few people and homes on Kiawah Island when they'd first built their place here, and even less on Bohicket Road and surrounding areas, but the PGA tour had discovered their little golf course and put the tiny island on the map. After the famous golfers and television cameras had left, people kept coming. Then, Buster's Place had just been a spot that she and her friends would go, mainly by boat, when they decided to fall off their diets and enjoy some fish, fried South Carolina style. Her stomach growled as she remembered the taste of Buster's famous fried oysters. Last season, some golfer had discovered the place, and it had been featured on that grease-worshipping TV show, *Diner's, Dives and Drive-ins*. Since then, you could barely get a skiff anywhere near the shore or a car in the parking lot on any day except Monday, the day when the tourists were turning over and headed back to wherever they'd come from. Monday was when the large antebellum-style homes that the owners rented to seasonal people were filled with cleaning teams, preparing for the next batch of visitors to check in and when most of the few public eateries stood empty.

Not that there were many. The islands were dotted with only a few local places other than the Beach Club, a haven that many of the regulars retreated to during high season when the rental homes were full. A member's only establishment, it was where they went when they wanted to get away from all of the people that had brought the bustle of the city with them.

Denise slowed as she reached the clearing that served as a parking lot, rounding the bend in the road. The way the gravel

gave way to reeds and water was unexpected no matter how often she came, leaving her with the feeling that the road had coughed her up and spit her out into the light-filled space at its end. Buster's sat on the water's edge and was nothing more than a shack on stilts, raised high enough to avoid the occasional rise of the water above flood-level. Every time she came here, Denise found herself amazed that the place was still standing, somehow avoiding being damaged by the various storms that came through the Low Country every year or being bulldozed by the forward march of gentrification, masquerading as progress. Trees reached down to meet the reeds that grew up out of the shallow water around the place creating a living cave with the restaurant ensconced in the middle.

Today, there was but one boat in the small clearing, and Denise didn't recognize it. Her eyes moistened as she took in the sight. In her mind, the boat in the middle of the clearing would always be one that her husband had piloted. She'd become accustomed to a crowd, and the lack of one surprised her almost as much as it relieved her. Still, she frowned. The boat looked almost too big to be in this small space, a few more inches and it might be beached. Any other day, the cove would be full of a myriad of vessels, but few would be larger than a small rowboat or powerboat. Compared to those, this boat was a jarring sight cutting a hole through the middle of the picture-perfect backdrop of the swamp and its lone building. Denise's brows knitted. This boat was a symbol of what was happening to Kiawah and neighboring Seabrook Island. Normally small, quiet, and steeped in history, modern intrusions kept making their way into the island life, trying unsuccessfully to blend in with what felt as if it had been undisturbed for centuries.

Denise bit her lip as she fought back the surliness that brewed inside her. Whenever she noticed the juxtaposition of old and new, she had feelings of unease. The contrast reminded her of Charles. He had always been opposed to the renovations and newness that kept creeping into what had been their retreat, protesting every time they returned from the city at whatever had changed while they'd been in Chicago. The quaintness of Kiawah Island, now fading, had been something that attracted them to the area in the first place. Denise had grown to love this place, but he'd had an even deeper appreciation for it and had come down to the island whenever he could, a few times without her.

It was hard not to be angry, but how could she be angry at the man for dying? Even as she thought it, a wave of stress swept over Denise but she resisted the pull, refusing to let herself be drawn back into the funk she'd felt for months after Charles was gone. She'd never seen his body, and no matter how much they'd assured her that the artifacts she'd gotten were his, she wasn't quite convinced. The few things left after his disappearance were her new reality and these had been hard to accept. Together they'd had everything and suddenly he was dead, supposedly falling overboard after a heart attack at the helm of his boat that he'd loved so much, but that was just a theory, and not one she believed. Of course, the police wanted to tie a neat bow on things, so that was what was on the record, for now. But it didn't feel right. Charles had been one to dot every I and cross every T. Normally, as far as she'd known, he'd never gone out boating alone and he was a very strong swimmer, so the whole story didn't seem plausible.

He'd been gone almost a year, and that made Denise even more angry. Her coming to the Island alone had never been

in their plan. It had been Charles who reminded her of the local folklore - the idea that the island was both protected and haunted by the spirits of the slaves who had worked the land and toiled in the rice fields hundreds of years ago. "That makes this place special," he'd said. The island was supposed to have been the place where they'd grow old together. Instead, it was now the place Denise ran to hide from the task in front of her as she mourned Charles's absence from her life while continuing to fight with the insurance company. There were still no biological remains, only a wallet and some clothing, and without that, there was no physical proof that Charles was actually dead. No proof, no insurance money, and no closure.

She slowed and pulled her car into a narrow space between an SUV and a pickup truck so large it overshadowed everything around it. Denise pursed her lips. "I don't know why people think these things make sense," she mumbled to herself, unimpressed with the monstrosity of the car.

Denise killed her engine and grabbed her bag from the passenger seat. Just as she was about to open her door, a loud thud and then a jolt shook her car. She looked up in alarm in time to see a pair of male legs jump down from the cab of the truck.

The door trapped her inside her car. Heat rose from her body. Did he not see that he'd hit her car? "Hey!" she shouted. Obviously, this guy was not a regular, probably one of those who had seen the restaurant on television. Why couldn't city folks leave their city manners back where they belonged? This was not how things were done here.

After too long, he slammed his door and hit the button on his remote. The car alarm screamed in response, its beep-beep

cutting through the stillness of the cove. Finally, he noticed Denise. "Oh, hi there. Did I give you a door ding?"

He felt familiar, but she was too annoyed to care. Denise couldn't see his face past the large sunglasses that covered it. "Door ding? More like a dent." She waited for him to step aside and hopped from her car. "You really need to be more attentive." Her words were sharp as she made no attempt to hold back her annoyance.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. I couldn't see your car. It's so low."

"My car is not low. Yours is ridiculously high." She rubbed the door with her thumb, her back turned towards the man.

"You want to give me your insurance information?"

"Is it that serious?" There was a hint of a smile in his voice. Denise could not believe his arrogance. "Maybe not to you, but to me, yes. You clearly have no idea how hard it is to match this paint. It's special edition." She bristled as he spoke. The candy color red had a metric glow to it, and now, a whisper of a scratch. The color had been Charles's idea, even though Denise would have preferred something just a little more subtle.

The stranger seemed at a loss for words. After a pause, he finally answered. "Okay, I can give you my insurance information." He reached for his wallet. "But I'll make sure it gets fixed for you even if I have to take it all the way into Charleston."

"You probably will have to do that. There is no body shop or car dealer anywhere on the island." She folded her arms across her chest like a shield. Just like she'd thought. A tourist. A local would know that. He looked vaguely familiar, but most of his face was shielded by the brim of a hat. "I'll just take a picture of your card and driver's license." Denise glanced at her watch,

looking down to shield her eyes from the sun. If he didn't hurry, the humidity would have sweat running from places where Denise didn't want it to run from.

After what seemed like too long, the man held out his driver's license and insurance card, and Denise used her phone to take pictures of each without really looking at them. "Thank you," she said, her mouth drawn into a thin line. If she didn't hate newcomers before, she edged closer to that now. She dropped her phone into her handbag without even looking at the information.

He held out his business card. "Call me first?"

Denise snatched it from his hand, a grunt emanating from her throat. People were always trying to get away with something. Denise glanced at it, then shoved it down into the outer pocket of her shorts. She's look at it closer later when she was out of the bright sun. She trudged away from him, leaving him standing there watching her make her way across the gravel parking lot and up the three wooden steps that led to the veranda of the restaurant.

The Boat in The Cove

eyes didn't have time to adjust to the light before she recognized Yolanda's loud cackling. Yolanda removed her sunglasses, a broad smile spreading across her face and relaxing the wrinkles that had appeared in her forehead earlier. She spotted Yolanda immediately, in the usual back room of the restaurant. She was holding court, surrounded by four of their friends. Since here were the kitchen, they traded friendly insults with the people working there, only separated by the stainless steel counter tops that separated the kitchens from the front of the house which was filled with tables and chairs that ran the length of the building.

"Where she is," Yolanda's yell filled up the wooden building. Yolanda's slim shoulders moved up and down in time with the silent laugh that remained trapped in her body. She pressed two fingers to her lips in an apparent effort to keep the sounds in. "You know that Diva Denise always has to make an entrance." Samantha added.

"Right." Yolanda's booming voice gave way to laughter and they exchanged hugs all around. "Why do I have to be the Diva? Every last one of you has some Diva in you." Denise's smile widened as she took in the style that made their group the perfect friends. Samantha stood beside Yolanda, as quiet as Yolanda was outspoken, but Denise couldn't miss the ever present smirk on Yolanda's face.

Yolanda laughed. "But you have more than the rest of us. You know, you bring it with you from CHI-cag-O."

"I don't know why you act like you aren't from the city." She waved her friends' ribbing away. Yolanda added to it. This teasing had become part of their ritual. The ones who arrived first enjoyed teasing the others who came later.

"I used to be from the city. You're the only one of us who goes back as much as you do." Yolanda said.

"I don't go back. I live there. Or I used to, anyway." Denise hugged Yolanda first. "I've come

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pany together and Yolanda spent most of her time serving on corporate boards. right here. Don't talk about me. Talk to me." Denise totally respected that her friends to move most of their lives down to the island, but she needed big city-level excitement Charleston had yet to be able to provide. Sure, there had been lots of development on in recent