

*Almost Perfect*

By

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### Author's Note

All the characters in this book have no existence outside the imagination of the author and have no relation whatsoever to anyone bearing the same name or names. They are not inspired by any person known or unknown to the author, and all incidents are pure invention.

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# One

*I am a rotten person.*

Biting her lip, Cleo Alyssum painstakingly printed this fact into her journal. She thought the whole idea of a journal of emotions about as silly as it got, but if the counselor wanted honesty, that's what he would get.

She would do anything to transform herself into the kind of mother Matty needed. *Anything.*

Of course, that's how she'd got into this situation in the first place. Sitting back in her desk chair, she gazed out the sagging windowpanes of the old house she was restoring. She missed Matty so desperately, her teeth ached, but the court had set December as the deadline for his return—provided she danced to the steps the counselor called.

Matty needed security and stability, they said, and her sister provided it.

She'd tried suburban life with Maya, but she just couldn't hack

it. Trouble found her too easily in crowds. Out here on the island she could get her head together without too many people in her face. She was far less apt to jeopardize Matty's return if she stayed away from people.

These last few years she'd learned to restore old buildings, turning decrepit dumps into useful, viable businesses and homes, and she loved the satisfaction of seeing the visible results of her hard work. Too bad the difference she was supposed to be making in herself wasn't as obvious.

The opportunity to buy a small town hardware store had opened up just as she'd run out of buildings to restore, and at the time, it had seemed ideal. She knew the business inside and out, loved the isolation of the South Carolina coast, and when she'd found this run-down island farmhouse for a steal, she'd known she'd found a home.

The beach cottage down by the shore might be beyond hope, but she hadn't given up on it yet. Maya and the kids might visit more often if she could fix it up. In the meantime, she was diligently turning the main house into the home she'd never known. She hoped.

If she could only convince her federal supervisor she was a fine, upstanding citizen, she'd be free and clear soon, and almost in

a normal world for the first time in her life.

Having a job she could do without hassles from any boss, and a home where she could lock the doors against the world, she thought she finally had a chance of living a civilized life. She wasn't doing this for the feds, though. Matty deserved a sane mother, and she was doing her best, if the process didn't kill her first.

At least now when he visited on weekends, she could give him her entire attention, and he seemed to be blossoming into a new kid with the change. Even Maya had noted how much happier he was.

Cleo ran her fingers through her stubby hair and returned to staring at the almost empty page of the notebook. She didn't think she was capable of verbalizing all her conflicting emotions about her sister. Maya could have written an entire essay on how Cleo felt about her. Cleo would rather hammer nails.

If she compared her mothering skills to Perfect Maya's, she was destined for failure.

The muffled noise of a car engine diverted her attention. A fresh breeze off the ocean blew through the windows in the back of the house, but the only things coming through the floor-to-ceiling front windows were flies. Thickets of spindly pines, palmettos, and wax myrtle prevented her from seeing the driveway entrance

or the rough shell road beyond.

She didn't encourage visitors and wasn't expecting anyone. A lost tourist would turn around soon enough.

She returned to the blank page of her journal and printed: People are pains in the a... She struck out the "a" and substituted "butt."

She crinkled her nose at the result. One word probably wasn't any more polite than the other.

The smooth hum of the car's powerful engine hesitated, and Cleo waited for the music of it backing up and turning around. Someone took good care of their machine. She couldn't hear a single piston out of sync.

She rolled her eyes as the obtuse visitor gunned the engine and roared past the four-foot blinking NO TRESPASSING sign. One would think a message that large would be taken seriously, but tourists determined to reach a secluded beach were nearly unstoppable.

"Nearly" was the operative word here.

Biting her bottom lip again, Cleo reread her two-line entry. She had to go into town and open the store shortly. She didn't have time for detailed expositions if that's what the shrink wanted. It looked to her like a few good strong sentences ought to be

sufficient.

Adding “Men are the root of all evil” struck her as funny, but she supposed a male counselor wouldn’t appreciate it. She left it there anyway. The counselor had said he wanted honesty. Of course, she was probably sabotaging all her efforts. She’d had enough therapy to acknowledge her self-destructive tendencies. Now, if she’d only *apply* that knowledge...

She lifted her pen and waited for the car engine to reach the next turn in the half-mile-long lane. The sound of waves crashing in the distance almost drowned out the wicked screech of her mechanical witch. Still, she heard the car tires squeal as they braked. The battery-operated strobe light was particularly effective at keeping teenagers from turning this into a lovers’ lane at night. During the day, well...

She shrugged and capped the pen. That was enough introspection for one day. The counselor ought to know she was a mucked-up mess. She shouldn’t have to lay it out in terms a first grader could understand. Another thought occurred to her, and she grabbed the pen again.

*Baring my soul is not my style.*

There. That ought to be letting it out enough for one day.

Her head shot up as the car engine drew closer, evidently

bypassing the scowling witch. Stupid bastard. What was she supposed to do, dump a load of pig turds on him to get the message across that this was a private drive? That might work if they were in a convertible.

They usually were.

She despised the arrogant, self-confident yuppie asses who thought the whole world was their oyster. Didn't "Private Property" mean anything to them?

Apparently not. The car engine zoomed right past the pop-up sign she'd rigged in the middle of the lane. Forgetting to turn off the system before she'd left for work, she'd driven around the sign one too many times herself, and the dirt bypass was clearly visible. She'd plant a palmetto there tomorrow.

Slamming the notebook into her desk drawer, she picked up her purse and donned her sunglasses. She hadn't quite perfected the mechanism to shut the swinging post barrier on the access road. She hated the idea of erecting a fence across there. The moron would simply have to drown if he insisted on using her beach. A bad undertow past the jetty made this a dangerous strip for swimming, but she supposed the NO SWIMMING signs wouldn't stop the nematode either.

Maybe she could rig a siren to a motion detector. There wasn't

any law out here for it to summon, but tourists wouldn't know that.

Pulling out her truck keys, she almost didn't hear the purr of the engine turning into her drive, but the shriek of a hidden peacock warned of the intrusion.

Damn. Did the jerk think the house deserted? Admittedly, she hadn't bothered painting the weathered gray boards and the sagging shutters, but she kind of thought them picturesque. And it wasn't as if she'd not littered the place with warning signs.

If the town council insisted on encouraging film crews to work here, she'd be prepared to keep them out. She hadn't traveled an entire continent to have that California lifestyle follow her.

She waited as the barking guard dog yapped through its entire routine. A real dog would scare the peacocks, but the tape recording was usually effective. Amazing how many people were frightened of barking dogs. The mailman had quit delivering to the door after he'd heard it.

Cleo sighed as the driver shut off the car engine instead of turning around. Determined suckers. Only Maya and Axell ever got this far past her guardians. She could slip out the back way, but curiosity riveted her to the window. She knew she was far enough back not to be seen, but she had a partial view of the walk and porch. She couldn't wait to see how her intrepid guest reacted

to her burglar alert system.

A pair of long-legged, crisply ironed khakis appeared beneath the porch overhang. A man. She should have known. Men had to prove themselves by showing no fear. It didn't seem to matter if they showed no intelligence while they were at it.

The lean torso decked in a tight black polo appeared next. She was sick of looking at fat slugs with pooching white bellies and hairy, sunken chests cluttering the view from the beach. At least this ape strode tall and straight and...

My, my. She stopped chewing her fingernail to relish the loose-limbed swing of wide shoulders and a corded throat topped by a long, angular face with more character than prettiness. He was all length—arms, legs, nose, neck—but they all fit together in a casual sort of package. He had his hands in his pockets as he gazed up at her mildly eccentric porch, so she couldn't see his fingers, but she'd bet they were a piano teacher's dream.

Tousled sable hair fell across a tanned brow, and she was almost sorry she'd left the security system on. If he was selling insurance, she wouldn't mind listening to his pitch just to hear what came out of a package like that.

The aviator sunglasses were a downright sexy trim for this parcel.

*“You are under alert!”* The loudspeaker blared as soon as the intruder hit the first porch step. She’d used an army drill sergeant for that recording. It would scare the pants off any normal person. This one halted and removed his sunglasses now that he was in shade, but his gaze traced the bellowing voice with curiosity and not fear.

*“Turn back now. This is your only warning!”*

Cleo bit back a sigh of exasperation as the jerk bent over to examine the step for wires. Did he think her an idiot to put wires where someone could cut them?

*“Your location has been verified, and you are now under surveillance. Put up your hands, or we’ll shoot.”*

The man straightened and seemed to be whistling as he craned his neck and surveyed the underside of the covered porch from the step.

Shaking her head, Cleo reached for the “off” switch, but she waited for his reaction to the final performance. Sure enough, her visitor disregarded the warning and fearlessly breached the porch gate. Sirens screamed, strobe lights flared, and a fedora-hatted skeleton dropped down between him and the front door.

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Jared McCloud came eyeball to eye socket with a six-foot bag

of bones baring a smirk through a cigar clamped between its teeth. He'd been given enough warning to expect it, but he couldn't help grinning in appreciation of the coup de grace. At night, with the shrieking siren and strobes, it would have any potential thief shitting his pants.

“Pleased to meechea, Burt,” he murmured, inspecting the wires which must have held the freak to the porch roof. He didn't know anything about mechanics, but he knew an overactive imagination when he saw one. “Guess this means the old witch isn't at home.”

“Guess it means the old witch is on her way out.”

Jared blinked at the apparition in the doorway. He hadn't heard the door open. Shouldn't the hinges of a place like this creak eerily?

He smiled in satisfaction at the full impact of the skeleton's creator as she emerged from shadows. Far from being an old witch, she was his newest dream of perfection. Not too tall or too short but sturdy, she packed a lot of punch into a compact, sexy bundle. Her knee length man's checked flannel shirt effectively disguised the best of her curves, but he loved exploration and discovery even more than having it all laid out for him.

Generally, women didn't appreciate being ogled, so he respectfully raised his gaze to absorb the rest of the glorious sight.

Rumpled short hair revealed roots of auburn beneath a mousy brown dye job. Tinted half glasses attempted to hide eyes of a spectacular green—not contacts, either. He could see specks of brown in them.

He thought he was in love.

Of course, he'd been in love last week and the week before, and mostly it was a major distraction he didn't need right now. If he didn't finish the piece of idiocy they called a screenplay by December first, he'd be in breach of contract. Another failure and his name would be mud, even if the last failure was more the fault of death-by-committee than anything he'd done.

His agent was already antsy over the cancellation of the comic strip by some backwoods string of newsrags claiming his teenage nerds had become “tiresome.” It had been quite a few years since he'd been a teenager, but from his current outlook, that's what teenagers were—tiresome.

None of that seemed relevant to the moment. “Name's Jared McCloud.” He smiled with as much charm as he could summon. Maybe this was a young relative of the old witch the kids had warned him about. “I'm looking for Cleo Alyssum.”

“She's not here.”

She said that so promptly, Jared figured this had to be her.

Well, well. Curiouser and curiouser.

He produced a business card from his pocket with his hotel phone number scratched on the back. “I’ve been told Miss Alyssum is owner of the beach property back of here, and I’m interested in leasing it. I’m prepared to make a generous offer.” From the look of this rundown sprawling plantation-era farmhouse, she could use the cash.

She took the card and dropped it into her shirt pocket. “She doesn’t like neighbors.” Turning around, she shut and locked the peeling white door, and did something that reeled the skeleton upward like a collapsing party favor.

“Your car’s blocking my drive,” she said curtly as he moved aside to let her pass. “And you’re trespassing, in case you didn’t notice.”

Not a smile, not a dimple, not a look of interest crossed her stoic features. Jared shrugged and ambled back toward his Jag. Women usually liked him, and he couldn’t see that he’d done anything to tick this one off. No Trespassing signs applied to salesmen, not legitimate visitors, as far as he could see. Surely she hadn’t really thought to scare him off?

“Do you have some idea when Miss Alyssum might return?” He played along with her gag and cast her a sideways look to see if

anything registered in her expression. She had a short, finely honed aquiline nose with a sprinkle of freckles across it, and a mouth drawn too tight to reveal any trace of humor. He wouldn't call it a friendly face by any means. He could cut timbers with the sharp edge of her voice.

“She won't be interested. As I said, you're trespassing. I'd advise you to turn around before the police arrive.” She headed for a beat-up black Chevy pickup, opened the door, then waited for him to move his car.

She didn't even show an interest in his antique Jag. Damn. That car drew more comments than honeysuckle drew bees. Was she blind?

There had to be some way around her. He'd never accepted *no* as an answer in his life. Not that many people told him no in the first place. He wasn't an unreasonable man. She had a rundown beach shack going to waste. He wanted to put it to good use. He couldn't see the problem.

“I can afford whatever price Miss Alyssum thinks the property is worth. I'll buy it if she'd rather not lease it. Just pass the message along, will you?” He leaned against his car door and watched her climb into her truck without replying. Well, damn.

Maybe she *was* a witch, but she had all his incorrigible

pheromones humming. He sighed as she cranked the truck to life without looking back. He'd better move the Jag or she'd drive over it.

Spinning his tires in the soft sand, he edged out of her way and let her fly off down the lane. He wondered if signs would pop out of the road and witches fly from the trees as she left, or if they were rigged only to greet incoming visitors.

He sure did like the way her mind worked. Wonder if she could rig up some of those spooks for him once he figured out how to obtain the beach house?

Bumping the Jag over a timber barrier, he drove down toward the beach to inspect the house he'd only seen from a distance. The real-estate agents had said there was nothing available out here in the middle of nowhere, but a friend of a friend in L.A. had told him about this island. The film business was a small world.

This place should be ideal. He could feel it in his bones. None of his friends or family would go out of their way to reach this remote spot. Surely, once he cleared his head, he would be able to think again. Surrounded by all this peace and quiet, he'd cruise right past the roadblock in his mind that had prevented his coming up with any fresh ideas lately.

A witchy landlady would be a distraction, but one distraction

against the many his places in New York and Miami offered seemed a fair trade. His fingers itched for the computer keys already, just thinking about the sand and the waves and the peace.

Driving with one hand, he idly swatted at something tickling his ankle. He'd have to remember insect repellent. Beaches were notorious\_for bugs.

The house ought to be just beyond that curve in the road ahead, if he'd calculated correctly. He didn't know the name of the scrub brush blocking his view, but it grew in heavy thickets neither man nor beast would dare enter. He'd have plenty of privacy.

Especially with the witch's mechanical guardians blocking the way.

Before he could grin at the thought, an eerie high-pitched shriek shattered his eardrums, and an object the size of his mother's frozen Thanksgiving turkeys smashed into his windshield, scattering brilliant blue-green plumage across the glass, obstructing his view with an iridescent psychedelic hallucination.

Frantically swiping at the irritating tickle crawling up his leg, cursing the Technicolor windshield, he slammed the brakes. The car's rear end resisted stopping and the tires swerved wildly in the soft sand.

Crawling. Up his leg.

Clinging desperately to the wheel for control, Jared glanced downward.

A shiny black snake's tail whipped his leather moccasins. The head had disappeared up the leg of his khakis.

Clutching the spinning steering wheel while cursing frantically, Jared lost control as the car veered sideways on the soft shoulder.

The low-slung chassis hit the ditch at the side of the road, sailed upward, and landed, roof down, in the wax myrtle thicket.

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