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Island Intrigue
Wendy Howell Mills
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A cutthroat family secret isn't enough to hide the dead in this author's newest novel, the first installment of an anticipated new mystery series set in the tropics. Best known for her popular "Callie McKinley Outer Banks" novels, like *Death of a Mermaid*, which take place off the coast of North Carolina, Mills turns to the macabre nature of isolation and jealousy in this gritty composition.

Sabrina Dunsweeney, a hypochondriac teacher from Ohio, decides to revitalize her life after a breast cancer scare. In a moment of spontaneity, she travels to fictional Comico Island for some relaxation, only to find herself entangled in dangerous family rivalry that dates back millennia. What begins as a soothing break from reality quickly shifts into a bloody series of events when a controversial member of the Wrightly clan returns to seek vengeance on the island's supposed heirs, the snobby Titteltots.

Rolo Wrightly, the direct descendent of a bloodthirsty pirate, intends to reveal a guarded family secret that could derail a childhood friend-cum-enemy's bid for Sanitary Commissioner of the island. After having been banished from the island for a crime he may not have committed, Rolo is again the center of gossip as election festivities ensue. It isn't until Rolo is horrifically murdered that the island is paralyzed by the ramifications of the revelation of the secret. It's up to Sabrina, the outcast, to play the role of detective and dig up the buried truths of the island's provocative history before the body count rises.

Through her depiction of island ease and tropical malaise, Mills is able to shock her readers by transitioning from drama to mystery. She sets up the story in such a fashion that her audience can easily embrace the characters, only to later feel obligated to defend them in the wake of the murder. Engaging and structurally sound, *Island Intrigue* is a perfect novel for beach-book enthusiasts in that it offers a quick pace. Like Sabrina, readers can put their minds on vacation and revel in the refreshing perspective of island life: the depiction of a balmy breeze, island food, and hectic tourism.

For all its interesting twists, this novel doesn't confuse the reader with pointless

minutiae. For example, Mills could have focused only on the murder of Rolo Wrightly; instead, she details the island's history so that readers can feel as if they are actually there. As tropical mysteries go, *Island Intrigue* manages to avoid the usual smorgasbord of clichéd action; there are no drug smuggling rings, vengeful cops, or top-notch explosions here. Instead, Mills's plot is individualistic: it relies more on character development than gaudy fireworks of action; Sabrina's growth from reluctant tourist to confident detective is in itself a perfect example of the author's ability to nurture a plot into a full-bodied story.

Whether depicting tourists stumbling over a corpse or the inquisitive protagonist searching for the killer and his alleged buried treasure, Mills keeps her audience hooked. By painting island politics with a blood-spattered brush, she sets off this first series installment on a right note.