

Summer at Hideaway Key

By Barbara Davis

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Pragmatic, independent Lily St. Claire has never been a beachgoer. But when her late father leaves her a small house on Hideaway Key—one neither her mother nor she knew he owned—she's determined to visit the sleepy spit of land along Florida's Gulf Coast. Expecting a quaint cottage, Lily instead finds a bungalow with peeling shutters and mountains of memorabilia. She also catches a glimpse of the architect who lives down the beach….

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Editorial Review

Review
Praise for the Novels of Barbara Davis:

“With some books, it is difficult to pick just ‘one thing’ to highlight. *The Wishing Tide* by Barbara Davis is one of those books.”—*USA Today*

“You can practically taste the salt in the air and feel the sand underfoot…Atmospheric, suspenseful and very romantic.”—Erika Marks, Author of *It Comes in Waves*

“A poignant, mysterious and heartfelt story.”—Diane Chamberlain, Author of *Necessary Lies*

“Davis has a gift.”—Historical Novel Society

"A captivating read about fighting for the life you want and daring to believe that happily ever after can exist outside of fairy tales."—Barbara Claypole White, Award-Winning Author of *The In-Between Hour*

"Filled with wonderful descriptions of North Carolina's Outer Banks...[a] book about love and loss and finding your way forward."—Anita Hughes, Author of *Lake Como*

"Davis's writing is heartfelt and effective."—*Kirkus Reviews*

About the Author
After spending more than a decade in the jewelry business, **Barbara Davis** decided to leave the corporate world to pursue her lifelong passion for writing. She is the author of *The Wishing Tide* and *The Secrets She Carried*. She currently lives near Raleigh, North Carolina with the love of her life, Tom, and their beloved ginger cat, Simon.

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Some books seem to write themselves, while others come into the world kicking and screaming—thrashing, gut-wrenching, bloody. But the one thing I know for sure is that no book makes it onto the shelf without a team of midwives, that dedicated circle of family, friends, lovers, and professionals without whom our work might never come into the world. And so, without further ado . . .

PROLOGUE

June 21, 1953

Mims, Tennessee

Something was wrong. Bad wrong.

A rooster tail of scorched yellow earth kicked up as the pickup rounded the corner onto Vernon Dairy Road. I cut my eyes sideways at Mama, rigid behind the wheel, but bit my bottom lip to keep silent. I didn't like the look on her face, like she'd just been told the Rapture was coming and she'd been caught off guard. But mostly, she looked tired. Beneath the streaky traces of last night's powder, her face was pale and strained, her eyes puffy and red, though whether that was to do with tears or drink, I couldn't say.

Both, probably.

Beside me, Caroline was mute, huddled against the passenger-side armrest, her beloved rag doll, Chessie, clutched to her chest, wide green eyes fixed on some invisible point beyond the cracked windshield. Her hair was snarled from sleep, a coppery halo around her pale young face. We'd barely gotten breakfast down—milk and hunks of leftover corn bread—before Mama shooed us from the table and out of the house.

I thought of the battered suitcase bumping around in the back of the truck, then tried not to think about it. I didn't want to remember the way Mama's eyes slid away from mine when I spotted it, or how the sleeve of my sister's blue dress had spilled out from one corner. There was something ominous about that sleeve, something ominous, too, in the way Mama had pressed that old hand-me-down doll into Caroline's hands as she herded us out the door and across the front yard, past the empty plastic swimming pool and the old tire swing Daddy put up the summer he went away for the last time.

Mama was quiet behind the wheel, her eyes hard on the road as it ground away beneath the tires, as if she'd made up her mind about something and there was no going back. In her rumpled hat and too-tight dress she looked as threadbare as Caroline's old rag doll, like her stuffing might come loose any minute. Desperation. The word popped into my head without having to reach for it. It was written all over her face, coming off her like last night's bourbon.

We'd been driving almost two hours, and I still hadn't scraped up the nerve to ask where we were going. Maybe because I knew I wouldn't like the answer. Or maybe because I couldn't think over the words echoing in my head. Something's wrong. Something's wrong. *Not the regular kind of wrong, like when Daddy would disappear for weeks at a time, or Mama would lose another job because she didn't have money to put gas in the truck, but the really bad kind of wrong, like when Sheriff Cady had come to the door to say that Daddy wouldn't be coming back ever. Today felt like that kind of wrong—the kind that changed things forever.*

A fresh cloud of dust churned up from the road, boiling into the open windows, coating the dashboard with another layer of grit. We were passing an empty field of sun-bleached scrub, an ugly stretch of nothing that made me want to leap from the moving truck and run all the way home. Turn around! *I wanted to yell at Mama.* Turn around and let's go home. *But I didn't. There were tears in her eyes now, and I couldn't bear the sight of Mama's tears.*

The road narrowed to a single lane as we passed under a peeling wood sign. I had to squint to make out the letters: Mt. Zion Missionary Poor Farm.

Poor farm?

I shot Caroline a panicked look, but she just kept on staring straight ahead, her green eyes fixed on the narrow swath of dirt road. Either she hadn't seen the sign, or she didn't know what it meant. But I knew.

I knew money was tight, and had been for a while. We hadn't had milk in weeks, and more nights than not, dinner was nothing but corn bread and collards. But we'd been through rough patches before and Mama always found a way. Sometimes, when she was between jobs, she would bring a man home from the Orchid Lounge. Sometimes he would even stay a few weeks. But there hadn't been any men for a while—or any jobs, either.

Up ahead, a big white farmhouse shimmered into view against the hot blue sky. Beyond the house was a small whitewashed chapel, and beyond that was a scatter of smaller houses and outbuildings, all crisscrossed with a maze of split-rail fences. A handful of men milled about in overalls and dirty boots. A few looked up with dull eyes as the truck rattled up the circular drive and stopped in front of the house.

I sat stock-still while Mama climbed down out of the truck, then went around to drag the old suitcase out of the back. If I didn't move, if I didn't get out of the truck, maybe it would all go away. Or maybe if I said a prayer. But there was no time for prayers. Mama was coming around to the passenger side and opening the door. Caroline tumbled out obediently, Chessie dangling limply from the crook of her arm. I had no choice but to scoot across the sticky seat and follow my sister.

Mama pointed to the suitcase and then to Caroline, charging me with the care of both while she went inside to see to things. I thought I caught a whiff of bourbon on her breath. Last night's, I remember hoping, though I didn't think so. I watched as Mama mounted the porch steps and disappeared through the screen door with a soft slap. I couldn't say for sure what things she was going to see to, but I had a pretty good idea.

Poor farms were for people who couldn't feed themselves or their families, a place where grown-ups and children earned the food in their bellies and the roof over their heads by working in the fields. I had heard of such places, and what folks said about the people who went to them—people willing to take a handout because they were too lazy or too dull-witted to find real work.

We would be those people now.

I eyed the old suitcase with a sick feeling, wondering how Mama had managed to pack three people's clothes into one small case. The thought filled my head with a low, dull buzz, like a swarm of irate bees, though I couldn't put my finger on why the thought kept nagging at me. It wasn't until I heard the screen door slap again, and looked up into those guilty green eyes—eyes just like mine—that I realized Mama had left the truck running.

ONE

June 5, 1995

Manhattan

Lily barely registered the sound of her own name being spoken, jumbled together with a lot of legalese. The lawyer was doing his thing, parceling out her father's worldly goods like door prizes at an Amway rally—stocks, bonds, corporate holdings. She didn't care. Not about those things.

She should have been there when he died. Instead she had lingered in Paris, working out the details of her next strategic career move—a move that would land her at one of the hottest design houses in Milan. It

didn't help that her mother had waited until the last possible moment to inform her that her father was seriously ill. Finalizing the details had taken only a day, but the delay had cost her dearly. She'd been so busy trying to make her father proud that she'd missed the chance to say good-bye.

And now, twenty-four hours after landing at JFK, she was sitting in Stephen Singer's Manhattan office, listening to the terms of Roland St. Claire's last will and testament. Except she wasn't really listening. Her mother was, though, with her signature blend of disappointment and disapproval stamped all over her perfectly powdered face. When it came to money and getting her due, Caroline St. Claire didn't miss a trick.

She had certainly dressed for the occasion, Lily noted frostily—black Norma Kamali with gold buttons and a skirt just short enough to show off surprisingly good legs.

Widow couture?

Perhaps there was something to that. Perhaps her mother had inadvertently stumbled onto the signature niche that had been stubbornly eluding Lily all these years, despite fashion degrees from both Parsons and IFA, and nearly ten years at various Paris design houses.

"Miss St. Claire?"

Lily blinked, vaguely aware, as she stared at the sheaf of papers being pushed across the desk, that a response of some kind was expected. "I'm sorry, what?"

Stephen Singer smiled, tapping the stack of pages with the flats of his fingers the way one might pat a puppy or child on the head. "I was saying we've come to the portion of your father's will that concerns you."

"Oh yes. Thank you."

She really didn't understand why they needed to sit through this. Her father's holdings, liquid or otherwise, were hardly a secret, at least not to anyone who read the *Wall Street Journal* or *Fortune* magazine. Nor was it likely she or her mother would ever starve. They were grieving—or at least she was—wearing black and sipping bad coffee while they pored over the man's portfolio, carving up things he'd spent his life building. She just wanted it over.

Lily picked up the papers and placed them in her lap, not bothering to follow along as Mr. Singer started to read. It was mostly about her trust fund—dollar amounts, dates of scheduled payouts. None of it interested her. She was staring out the window, at the smoggy stretch of Manhattan skyline, when a sharp intake of breath got her attention. Snapping her head around, she was surprised to see that the color had all but drained from her mother's cheeks.

"That isn't possible," Caroline replied emphatically to whatever her father's attorney had just said. "Roland hasn't owned that property for years."

Singer cleared his throat, adjusting himself uneasily in his high-backed leather chair. "Mrs. St. Claire, you might not be aware that your husband reacquired the property last year. Your sister—that is, Ms. Boyle—bequeathed it to him upon her death. And now Roland has bequeathed it to your daughter."

Lily blinked at Singer, then turned to her mother. "What property?"

Caroline stared back as if she hadn't heard the question. Beneath all the carefully applied makeup, her face had suddenly gone the color of ash.

“Mother?”

Singer jumped in to fill the void when it became obvious that Caroline wouldn’t answer. “The property in question is Sand Pearl Cottage.”

Lily ran the name around in her head but came up empty. “I’ve never heard of it.”

He shot Caroline a pointed look before going on. “No, I don’t suppose you would have. It’s down on the Gulf Coast of Florida, on a little spit of beach called Hideaway Key. It used to belong to your mother’s sister.” He paused briefly when Caroline opened her mouth to interrupt, sending her a quelling look. “As I was saying, your aunt Lily-Mae owned the cottage for years, and then left it to your father. Now he’s passed it on to you.”

All of a sudden, Singer had her full attention. Lily-Mae Boyle had left her a cottage? “Why me? I’ve never laid eyes on the woman.”

Singer’s lips thinned. “Yes, well . . . perhaps that’s why.”

Lily tried to wrap her head around what she was being told, but she wasn’t having much luck. For as long as she could remember, the name Lily-Mae Boyle had been forbidden in their home, an edict Lily-Mae’s death, one year ago, had done nothing to change. And yet she had remained a part of their lives, a shadowy but palpable presence in the St. Claire household. It irked her that despite her thirty-year fascination with the exiled Lily-Mae, she still didn’t understand the long-standing feud between her mother and her aunt. She only knew the sisters had sparred briefly for her father’s affections, and that her mother had emerged the victor.

“I won’t allow it.” Caroline’s voice crackled in the silence. “It’s a mistake. My daughter will not have anything to do with that . . . that . . . place.”

“Caroline.” Singer drew the name out on a sigh, as if addressing a headstrong child. “Do I need to remind you that your daughter is well beyond the age of twenty-one? In fact, if memory serves, and you can trust me when I tell you it does, Lily will be thirty-six on her next birthday, which means you have absolutely no say—in this or in anything else she might choose to do. Roland was very clear about her having the cottage. Period. Now, with your permission, I’d like to move on to the final paperwork.”

Caroline’s chin came up a notch, as it always did when she didn’t get her way, but she said nothing more.

• • •

?As Lily navigated the snarl of downtown traffic, she could barely recall the rest of the meeting, except that it had all been rather surreal. She had signed where she was told to sign, initialed where she was told to initial, and then dutifully accepted the paperwork Singer handed her as she left his office, including the key to a beach house that until two hours ago she hadn’t known existed.

She was leaving for Milan in a few weeks. What was she supposed to do with a beach house? Although, at the moment, she had to admit the prospect of hiding out for a few weeks at a seaside cottage had its appeal. Just the thought of returning to her parents’ Gramercy town house made her squirm, especially now that her father was gone. Unfortunately, short of checking into a hotel, she had nowhere else to go. It hadn’t made sense to hang on to her loft when she left for Paris. And she’d been right. In nine years she’d been home less than a dozen times, usually for Christmas, or her father’s birthday. Now, she would have happily paid rent on an empty flat if it meant having a place to escape her mother’s present mood, or for that matter, most of her

moods.

Lily stole a sidelong glance at Caroline, sitting sullen and white-faced in the passenger seat. She refused to talk about her outburst in Singer's office, or to explain her reaction when the cottage became part of the conversation. Fine. Let her pout, or fume, or whatever *this* was. At the moment, Lily was too jet-lagged to launch into a proper cross-examination, but that didn't mean she wasn't going to get to the bottom of whatever was going on—because something was definitely going on.

She swallowed a groan as she stepped into the elaborate foyer and kicked off her shoes. It was full of flowers, sickly sweet blooms that kept arriving every day as news of her father's death rippled through the world of international finance. Roses, lilies, gardenias—their cloying scent made her stomach turn. And the sight of them broke her heart. Stacks of sympathy cards crowded the foyer table, condolences from friends and colleagues all over the world. Most would have gone unopened had she not come home. Her mother couldn't be bothered.

It was true that her parents hadn't been close; they'd never pretended otherwise, even for her sake. But there was such a thing as decency, as respectful grieving for a husband of thirty-plus years. So far, her mother hadn't shown any.

Caroline pushed past her, making a beeline for the bar. Lily checked her watch; a little past noon, so technically a martini wasn't a complete no-no, but she couldn't help wondering when her mother had started drinking so early. She'd never been an easy woman to read, her emotions wrapped so tightly that Lily sometimes wondered if she had any at all. But then, maybe her husband's death was affecting her more than she cared to let on. On impulse, Lily crossed the living room, laying a hand on Caroline's arm.

"Mother . . ."

Before she could form her next words, Caroline pivoted to face her. "You will not keep that cottage—do you hear me? Your father had no business leaving it to you."

Lily dropped her hand and stood studying her mother with something like fascination. Her cheeks were a mottled crimson, and she was actually trembling. "All right, Mother. What's this about? All this anger, and . . . I don't know what. You obviously have some sort of problem with Daddy leaving me this cottage, so what is it?"

"He had no right."

"No right to what? Have a place of his own?"

"Not that place—no."

"So this is about Lily-Mae? Because the cottage used to belong to her, and Daddy accepted it without your permission?"

Caroline faltered as she filled a martini glass, sloshing Tanqueray onto the marble bar top. She ignored the mess, lifting the half-full glass and draining it in one long swallow. "You know you're not to use that name in my house. Not today. Not ever."

Lily felt her patience starting to fray. "Honestly, Mother, the woman is dead—your sister is *dead*—and so is Daddy. And you still can't let go of this ridiculous feud. Why? Please tell me you're not still nursing a grudge against a dead woman because a million years ago she had eyes for my father. He married you. And

she never married at all, which means we're all the family she had. Why wouldn't she leave the cottage to Daddy? She knew you'd never accept it."

Caroline glared at her like a truculent child. "No, I wouldn't have. And you're not accepting it, either."

"That's ridiculous, and you know it! Your feud with Lily-Mae has nothing to do with me. How could it? I never met the woman. But maybe Mr. Singer was right. Maybe that *is* why Daddy left me the cottage. Because he thought I should at least know something about the woman I was named for. God knows, I've never learned anything about her from you."

Caroline turned back to her pitcher of martinis, the thin glass rod tinkling as she stirred. "No, you haven't. And there's no point now. She's dead, and it's over."

"What's over?" Lily demanded, frustration finally boiling over. "What happened to make you hate her so? To make you *still* hate her? Are you jealous? Is that it? She was famous, and you weren't? Is that what all this has been about?"

"That's enough!"

"No, it really isn't. I want to understand, and have since the day I found that magazine clipping of Lily-Mae in your dresser. Do you remember that? I was snooping around, and there it was, at the bottom of one of the drawers. You walked in and I held it up. When you saw what it was you snatched it out of my hand, and then you slapped me. Six years old, and you slapped me in the face. You'd never laid a hand on me until then, and never have since."

"I was trying to teach you about going through people's things," Caroline said stiffly, but she had gone a little pale, her free hand fluttering anxiously at her throat. "It's what parents do."

"No, you just pretended it was about the snooping. Even then, I knew there was something else going on, something you were hiding. I've never forgotten that day, or stopped wondering what it was you weren't telling. I'm wondering about it right now, quite a lot, in fact. So why not just tell me the truth? Is this about Daddy? Because all those years ago he and Lily-Mae went out a couple of times? Because, honestly, Mother, it feels like more than that—a lot more."

Caroline picked up her freshened glass and moved to the window, gazing out at the hazy city skyline. When she finally turned back, her eyes held a note of pleading. "Isn't it enough that I'm asking you to leave this be, Lily? Can you not be loyal to me just this once?"

Lily caught the faint Tennessee drawl that sometimes crept into her mother's speech when she was upset. But it was the word *loyal* that jumped out at her now, better suited to wars and territorial disputes than conversations between mother and daughter. But then, the word *war* wasn't completely off the mark when describing their relationship over the years, the cool, careful distances, tensions that never quite erupted into full-scale conflict. A cold war. And now, for reasons she couldn't fathom, at a time when they should be bonding over the death of her father, it seemed the hostilities had resumed.

"Just this once?" Lily repeated softly, still absorbing the sting of the words. "You're saying I've been disloyal to you in the past? That I've *always* been disloyal?"

Caroline's face didn't soften. "I'm saying you've always taken your father's side in everything, and now you're doing it again. You know how I feel—how I've always felt—and still, you keep prying. If you care about my feelings you'll drop this obsession of yours, and get rid of that horrible place."

“Why horrible? You keep saying that, but you won’t say why.”

“The *why* isn’t important, Lily.”

“Of course it’s important. Look, I’m trying to understand all this. I really am. But you’re not helping. Mr. Singer said Daddy had reacquired the property, which makes it sound like it was his to begin with, and that Lily-Mae was just giving it back. Is that what all this loyalty talk is about? You think Daddy should have said no to the cottage? Or is it because he accepted it without telling you? Because I can totally see him not sharing that information. I mean . . . look at you. This is *not* normal behavior.”

Caroline was trembling in earnest now, her fingers white around the stem of her glass. “Your father was a fool. He couldn’t help . . .”

“What?” Lily shot back. “Being decent? It was obviously more than *you* were willing to do. Maybe my getting the cottage was what Lily-Mae had in mind when she left it to Daddy. Did you ever think of that? That maybe she just wanted to leave me something?”

“She never cared about you. She never cared about anyone but herself.”

“And Daddy,” Lily said softly. “That’s what this is really about, isn’t it?”

Caroline took a step back, as if the words had touched her physically. “She always won. Whatever she wanted, she got. But not your father. Your father belonged to me. And now she’s dead—done with things that don’t belong to her.”

Lily heaved a sigh. “I don’t know what that means, Mother.”

“It means the less you have to do with that woman—and that place—the better for all concerned. The job in Milan is what you should be thinking about, Lily, your career. Not wasting your time worrying about a dead woman you never met.”

Lily blinked at Caroline, not bothering to hide her surprise. “Suddenly you’re interested in my career? When you’ve barely bothered to keep up with where I’ve been the past nine years? Pardon me if I’m just a little bit skeptical. I also find it odd that you can’t wait to send me packing. Most mothers would want their daughter with them after losing their husbands, but not you. You can’t wait to send me off to Milan. Why is that?”

Caroline’s gaze narrowed, the whites of her eyes flashing as she waved a finger under Lily’s nose. “I will not stand here and be questioned in my own home, not about that woman, and not by you.”

Lily simply stared at her. Something about that finger, about the way her mother stood there glaring, as if her word were absolute, sent some tiny wheel or gear clicking into place. She was finished arguing, finished asking questions.

“Don’t worry, Mother. You won’t have to. I’m leaving. But before I do, let me remind you that *that woman*, as you insist on calling her, was your sister. And that *place* you talk about with such contempt was a gift from my father—my *dead* father—and it’s the last thing he’s ever going to give me. So I’d appreciate it if you’d at least pretend to respect Daddy’s wishes. Now, if we’re finished here, I’ll go and pack.”

Caroline’s eyes had lost some of their fire. “You’re leaving for Milan? Now?”

“No. I’m leaving for Florida. I’m going to see what all the fuss is about.”

TWO

1995

Hideaway Key, Florida

Lily lowered all four windows, savoring the gush of sticky, salty air that poured in as she blew past the shell-shaped sign welcoming her to Hideaway Key. For a moment she felt an absurd urge to turn on the radio and find a Jimmy Buffett tune—or maybe the Beach Boys. Her father had been crazy about the Beach Boys.

She couldn't help smiling as she recalled the Saturday afternoon he had dragged out his album collection and cranked up the old stereo, how he had lifted her into his arms and slow danced with her in the living room, crooning the words to "Don't Worry Baby" softly against her cheek.

The memory brought a sudden sting of tears. She hadn't thought of that day in years, but was glad she'd recalled it now. She would like to think he was happy once, that he had at least a few good memories to sustain him through less happy times, but she wasn't sure. As far back as she could remember he had stressed the importance of finding her right place in the world, of listening to her heart and following her own North Star. There had always been something faintly intense about those lectures, as if drawn from a deep well of unhappy experience.

Lily pushed the thought away as she cruised past ice-cream parlors and hot dog stands, surfside bars and beachwear shops. There were a handful of motels, too, flat-roofed mom-and-pops with names like the Surf Rider and the Sea Grape Inn. Sadly, none of them were advertising vacancies. It was starting to look as if she would have to head out of town to find a bed for the night. But first, she wanted to find the cottage while it was still light and give it a quick once-over.

Sand Pearl Cottage.

She liked the name. It was charming, like something from a fairy tale. And it was hers. Over the past two days, what had begun as an impulse was starting to feel like a much-needed reprieve, a bit of breathing room before she headed to Milan at the end of the month. Or maybe she just wanted somewhere to hide, a place to lick her wounds and sift through her emotions. Grief over the loss of her father and mentor. Resentment of her mother's petty dramas. Guilt for the way she had ended her relationship with Luc.

And beneath it all, a restlessness that never seemed to leave her, the sense that there was something more she was meant to do, something just beyond her grasp that would finally feel right—her elusive North Star, perhaps. Or maybe it was only a fancy, felt more keenly now that her father was gone.

The first three emotions she understood. It was the last that baffled her. Since her first conversation with Dario Enzi, her contact at Izzani, she'd been trying to convince herself that she was excited about going to Milan. She wasn't, though. It was just what she did, what she had always done, because her work was who she was, a way of proving to the world that she was more than just Roland St. Claire's little girl. So, here she was, twelve hundred miles from home with three weeks to figure it all out, and not the slightest idea where she was going to sleep.

The cottage wasn't likely to be an option after sitting vacant for more than a year. She'd need to find a motel, and soon. After two days behind the wheel, she didn't care what the place looked like as long as it had a bed and a shower. She'd find someplace to grab a quick dinner, ask a local for directions to the cottage, give the place a once-over, and then find somewhere to crash. As for what came next, she had no idea. Until she'd gotten a good night's sleep she refused to make anything resembling a plan.

Dinner turned out to be an omelet and coffee at Sonny's Omelet Barn, a bustling greasy spoon on the outskirts of town. Janice, her waitress, recommended two motels in Arcadia Beach, the next town south, then scratched out a rough map to the cottage on the back of a paper place mat.

It took three U-turns, but Lily finally managed to locate Vista Drive, a narrow, winding lane lined with trees that looked as if they'd been transplanted from a jungle. As instructed, she followed the lane to the end, surprised when it opened up onto a broad cul-de-sac. Unfortunately, there wasn't a house in sight.

Lily checked the makeshift map again, assuming she'd missed a turn, but Janice's directions clearly said to go to the end of Vista Drive. She was about to turn around when she noticed a set of mailboxes neatly camouflaged by an unwieldy gardenia bush, and just beyond, what appeared to be a pair of driveways branching off toward opposite sides of the cul-de-sac. After consulting the place mat one more time, she took the right-hand drive, leaning forward over the wheel to peer through the thickening canopy of foliage.

The tires crunched noisily as she came to a stop at the end of the crushed-shell drive. She cut the engine, fished the cottage key from her purse, then stepped out onto the drive. It was the stillness she noticed first, not silence exactly, since there were birds trilling somewhere up in the trees, and the papery rustle of palm fronds overhead, but a sense of calm she hadn't felt in years—or ever, really. And there was something else, too, beneath the quiet: a low, hypnotic thrum, like a pulse.

It took a moment to identify the sound, and to realize it was coming from behind the trees. The sea. Searching for an alley or a walkway of some kind, she finally located a narrow slate path and ducked into the shadowy overgrowth, homing in on the sound until she broke from the hedges and out into a small clearing.

There was a moment of confusion as she stood there, trying to reconcile the quaint cottage of her imagination with what actually stood before her—a decaying bungalow with drooping shutters, weed-choked window boxes, and a sadly sagging front porch. Maybe there had been some kind of mix-up. Maybe she had copied the address down wrong. But no, the peeling sign swinging over the porch clearly read SAND PEARL COTTAGE.

Lily had no idea how long she stood there before she finally ventured up onto the front porch. She sighed as she surveyed further signs of neglect: flaking paint, windows rimed with salt and grit, and the desiccated remains of a pair of geraniums on either side of the front door. It wasn't grand, and clearly never had been, but it had been charming once, before it had been allowed to go to ruin.

Narrowly missing a rather formidable spiderweb, she reached for the screen door. The hinges moaned as she pulled it back, like something out of a slasher film. Lily thought vaguely of squatters and vagrants, and about the wisdom of entering the cottage alone, then shrugged off her concerns. This was the Gulf Coast of Florida, not Washington Heights. Places with names like Hideaway Key didn't spawn vagrants and crackheads—did they? It was the spiderweb that finally convinced her, its size and location suggesting longevity. If anyone had gone in through the front door, they hadn't done it recently.

Breath held, she slid the key home, surprised when it turned with little resistance. Inside, the air was stale, thick with disuse and the faint pong of mildew, the way she'd expect an old attic to smell. She hovered in the doorway a moment, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the gloom, then wondered if the power might still be on. Unlikely, after more than a year. Still, she found herself groping for a wall switch.

She was surprised when the frosted globe overhead actually flared to life, but even more astonished when she glanced around the small living room. She hadn't given much thought as to whether the cottage would be furnished, but she certainly hadn't expected to find it crammed floor to ceiling with boxes. The sight almost made her dizzy: cartons of every shape and size, some sealed, some not, stacked side by side, one on top of

another, so that they formed a kind of cardboard maze.

But it wasn't only the boxes that left Lily fighting a wave of claustrophobia. It was the clutter, a hodgepodge of chairs, tables, lamps, and knickknacks jammed into every square inch of the already tiny room; Lily-Mae's things, by the look of them, still here more than a year after her death.

Had no one wanted them?

It was entirely possible. Her aunt had never married, one of the few facts Caroline had ever volunteered, clearly relishing her sister's loveless, childless lot in life. It felt odd standing here now, among her things. She knew so little about the woman, almost nothing in fact, except that she'd been a bit famous once—a spokesmodel for some beauty cream or other—and had briefly caused quite a stir. It was all she knew, and even that she'd had to discover on her own, since her mother flew into a rage anytime Lily-Mae's name was mentioned in her hearing.

Her mother's long-standing hatred still baffled her. But then, so much about Caroline St. Claire baffled her. Like why she refused to talk about her childhood, why there were no photographs of her as a girl, no yearbooks, or scrapbooks, or memorabilia of any kind—as if she refused to acknowledge any life at all before marrying Roland. And now there was Sand Pearl Cottage, this place her mother abhorred and begrudged her. Why?

Lily stepped into the maze with a kind of morbid fascination, sidling carefully until she finally reached the opposite side of the room. The furniture, what she could see of it, was of good quality, but felt strangely formal for a seaside cottage, as if the contents of an entire Manhattan penthouse had been crammed into this tiny bungalow.

There was a matching chair and settee in off-white brocade, a mahogany table with gracefully curved legs, and a beautiful writing desk finished in glossy black enamel. Lily switched on a small brass banker's lamp and surveyed the items on the blotter—several good pens, a brass caddy stocked with tissue-thin sheets of pale blue stationery, a glass paperweight with some sort of scarab suspended inside. If she'd been hoping to find evidence of her aunt's sordid past here, she was clearly wasting her time.

It was nearing full dark, Lily saw, as she turned to peer out the sliding glass doors, only the faintest blush of peach lingering along the crease between sea and sky. She fumbled a bit before locating the latch, but finally the door slid back, letting in a rush of sea sounds and salt-tanged air. She couldn't see much as she stepped out onto the deck. There were a pair of white plastic chairs, and a narrow set of steps leading down to the beach, not that she had any intention of using them in the dark. Instead, she folded her arms close to her body and held very still.

The breeze played havoc with her hair, whipping at the ends of her ponytail, teasing strands free to tickle the nape of her neck. On impulse, she tugged her scrunchie free, letting the wind have its way. The humidity would play hell with it, but she didn't care. She closed her eyes and simply held still, reveling in the briny air and the achingly sweet music of the sea.

She couldn't say how long she stood there before finally drifting back to reality, but the glow on the horizon had faded, leaving the sky an inky shade of indigo. She was struck by the darkness, by the absoluteness of it, as if someone had snuffed out the world with a heavy blanket. In New York—or in Paris, for that matter—it was never completely dark. There was always light, always people going places and doing things.

She'd found it exhilarating once, back when she was fresh out of school and ready to take the world by storm. But life had a way of tarnishing dreams. It didn't care about your résumé, your trust fund, or your last

name. It brought you back to reality with a bump—sometimes more than one. And it could land you in some pretty unexpected places, though there were certainly worse places to languish than a cottage by the sea.

She might have lingered out in the dark if she hadn't been so exhausted, but there was still the matter of sleeping arrangements to be dealt with. Stepping back inside, she was struck once more by the sheer number of boxes in the tiny living room. What was it all, and what was it doing here? Were the rest of the rooms like this? The thought made her head spin. What if this barely controlled chaos was just the tip of the iceberg? She glanced at her watch. It was already heading for nine, but the full tour wouldn't take long. There were only a handful of rooms, and she'd at least know what she was dealing with.

There was a small sunporch off the living room. Just as she had feared, the small space was chock-full of cartons, stacked in corners, piled on chairs, and spilling out into the narrow hallway. She fared no better in the small bedroom facing the driveway, a guest room presumably, furnished with a pair of Bahama beds, a small table, and a lamp, and dizzily stacked with more boxes. Sighing, she turned away. Other than the kitchen and breakfast nook, both of which appeared to have escaped the clutter, there was only one room left, a slightly larger bedroom situated at the back of the cottage, with a pair of glass sliders that opened onto the deck.

Lily peered in from the doorway but couldn't make out much with just the glow from the overhead hall light. Groping blindly, and somewhat noisily, she finally managed to locate a lamp and flip the switch, then groaned audibly as she took in her surroundings. No boxes, at least, but so much . . . stuff. Then it hit her—these were Lily-Mae's things, her *personal* things, all precisely as they had been the day she died.

All her life, Lily had longed to know more about her aunt. Now, inexplicably, she found herself standing in the woman's bedroom. It was a vaguely unsettling sensation, as if she had stepped into someone else's shoes—and someone else's life.

The thought was like a breath on the back of her neck, chilly and warm at the same time. She hadn't given much thought to what she might find when she arrived, but even if she had she would never have imagined Lily-Mae's things would still be here. And what things they were. Everywhere she looked there seemed to be some new piece of treasure: leather-bound books, exquisite porcelains, bits of silver and fine-cut crystal, all displayed like museum pieces about the room.

All except one, that is.

Lily stepped to the bow-front bureau, eyeing the simple jar of seashells placed carefully at its center. She ran a thoughtful finger around the rim, thick and bubbly with just a hint of green in the glass. It felt wrong somehow. In any other beach house a jar of shells would be standard décor, part of the natural seaside ambiance. But her aunt's tastes had clearly run toward the formal, leaving Lily to wonder why such a simple thing had been singled out for what felt like a place of honor.

One more question without an answer.

It was ironic. All her life she'd been denied Lily-Mae's story, denied the chance to know who she was and what she had done that was so very wrong. Now, through no effort of her own, she found herself smack-dab in the middle of that story, apparently tasked with sifting through the remnants.

She had her father to thank for that—or to blame for it. Had he known all of this was here when he arranged to leave her the cottage, or was it all merely chance? Perhaps he'd meant to have the place cleared out but never got around to it. His death *had* been sudden, and it would explain all the boxes. There was no way to know. And it didn't really matter. Whatever the reason, it was hers to handle now.

But when, and how? She was supposed to be in Milan by the end of the month. There simply wasn't time to deal with all this—whatever it was. In fact, just thinking about it made her head hurt. A hotel. A shower. A bed. She needed all three before she could begin thinking about logistics.

Exhausted, and dangerously close to tears, Lily reached for the lamp, preparing to switch it off when she spotted the book on the nightstand. *Wuthering Heights* had always been a favorite of hers. Apparently it had been one of Lily-Mae's as well. The book had been read often, its dark leather spine worn shiny-smooth, its pages well thumbed. And it appeared there was a passage marked, a scrap of paper peeking from between the pages—perhaps where Lily-Mae had left off reading?

Curious, Lily eased down onto the bed and slid the copy of *Wuthering Heights* into her lap, turning to the casually marked page. She was expecting to find a bookmark. Instead, she found a sheet of pale blue stationery folded between pages 264 and 265. She spread the sheet flat, running a finger along the center crease to smooth it, then sat staring at the lines of loopy, elegant script. Whatever it was, it was dated October 1994, approximately one month before her aunt's death.

A letter? A confession of some sort?

Lily couldn't help feeling a pang of guilt. It was silly, she knew. Lily-Mae was dead and gone, and had been for more than a year. She just wasn't sure that gave her the right to peer into someone's private thoughts. Still, the lines beckoned.

October 2, 1994

I have been reading Wuthering Heights again tonight—about Catherine Earnshaw and the poor end she made. I am like her, though, in many ways, and have begun to wonder about my own end, about the pain I have caused, and the pain I have endured. Perhaps they will balance. I don't know. Still, I have had my day in the sun, my brief but shining moment, as they say, and can cling now to that time, to what was sweet, and right, and good. I have much to mourn, but little to regret as my days wind down. We do what we must, after all, to guard our hearts—and the hearts of others. Such a fragile thing, the heart, so easily broken and robbed of its secrets. But strong, too, when it must be. Twice I have loved, and twice I have lost, the pain of it like dying. But now, at the end of things, I find I would not make different choices. I have loved with my whole heart, have tasted both sin and sorrow, and have made my peace—not only with what was, but with what could not be. It is our lot in this life, to love and to lose. We flail for a time, afraid of drowning in our grief, and then finally go quiet, content to simply drift when our horizons are lost and there is nothing left to swim to. Soon even my drifting will be over. I will not send this. I meant to when I began it, but find now that I cannot. There is too much truth in it for sharing, even with you—even now.

Lily read over the poignant words a second time, and then a third. It was a letter, obviously, but a letter to whom? And for that matter, *by* whom? The date would seem to confirm her suspicions that Lily-Mae was the author, but without a greeting or signature, there was no way to be sure. It was moving, whoever had written it, the language dark and vaguely haunting. But it was the opening passage that resonated with Lily, the reference to poor Catherine Earnshaw, doomed to wander the moors for all eternity after a life of tragic mistakes, forever separated from her beloved Heathcliff.

It felt odd, though, somehow, unexpected. Perhaps because literary references didn't quite dovetail with her mother's lurid accounts of Lily-Mae, which tended to conjure images of a libertine who smoked cigars and sipped sugar-laced absinthe, swore like a sailor, and wore fishnets to church. Hardly the stuff of a Brontë heroine, or a Brontë reader, for that matter.

Lily stifled a yawn as she folded the tissue-thin sheet back along its crease and prepared to return it to the

book. One thing was certain. She wasn't going to solve the mystery tonight. She'd read it again tomorrow, after a good night's sleep. Or maybe she'd read it just once more.

THREE

Lily squinted at her watch but gave up when her eyes refused to focus. She felt vaguely headachy as she propped herself up on one arm. Something was wrong. There was sunlight streaming into the room, great yellow puddles of it splashing across unfamiliar sheets. And she was still wearing yesterday's clothes.

It came back to her in a snatches. *Wuthering Heights.* Catherine Earnshaw. An unsent letter, read and reread into the wee hours. Words teased carefully apart, like a riddle that needed solving, until she'd finally collapsed into a fitful sleep, Lily-Mae's letter still in her hand, its words still running through her head.

She looked around for the letter, finally spotting it on the floor. Retrieving it, she folded it neatly and returned it to the pages of *Wuthering Heights*. There was no need to read it again. The words were already burned into her memory, and would be for a very long time. *Twice I have loved, and twice I have lost, the pain of it like dying . . . I . . . have tasted both sin and sorrow.* So much grief for one page—and one lifetime.

And far too many questions to be dealt with before she'd had at least one cup of coffee. Donning mental blinders, she ventured out into the parlor, pretending to ignore the chaos as she navigated a path to the sliding glass doors. Maybe some fresh air would help her get her bearings.

She frowned at the year's worth of salt and grime obscuring the large glass panes, wondering as she fumbled with the latch if there was enough Windex in the state of Florida to ever get them clean. The thought evaporated as she stepped outside, her breath caught suddenly in her throat.

The sheer expanse of bright blue water was unexpected somehow, like a gleaming gem in the late-morning sun, the blinding stretch of pearl-white sand unmarred by so much as a footprint. It was the emptiness that caught her off guard, the sensation that she was alone in the world. She didn't mind it. She was fine with alone. She *liked* alone. Perhaps a little more than was good for her.

Eyes closed, she tipped her face to the sky, reveling in the buttery warmth of the sun and the beguiling sensation that nothing mattered but here and now. But it wasn't true. Here and now wasn't real. Milan was real. Her father's death was real. The mess back inside the cottage was real. Only she didn't want to think about any of those things. For once in her life, she didn't want to *think* about anything, *do* anything, *be* anything.

Unfortunately, she had no idea how to *do* nothing. Strategic moves, ladder climbing—that's what she was good at. In the ten years since she finished school, she'd left four different design houses, each time for bigger and better opportunities—better titles, more prestigious labels. It was why she had accepted the Milan job. But then, only a fool would have turned it down. Anyone who knew anything about the fashion industry knew what being tapped by Izzani meant. It was a huge deal, the job every up-and-coming designer dreamed of, and it was hers.

So what was she doing here? She should be getting ready for Milan, not hiding out at some beach house, prowling through a dead woman's things—and a dead *stranger*, at that. Maybe her mother was right. Maybe she should be focusing on her career instead of Lily-Mae. If she was smart, she'd book the first flight she could get instead of waiting for the end of the month. There was nothing standing in her way, no ties left in Paris, nothing for her back in New York now that her father was gone, and certainly nothing keeping her

here.

She could pay someone to clean the place out, put it on the market, and just drive away. She could pretend she'd never heard of Sand Pearl Cottage, never stood in Lily-Mae's bedroom, never read the unsent letter. Except she wasn't ready to do any of those things—at least not yet. She wasn't due in Milan for three weeks, which meant she had three weeks to rake through the mess and piece together the story of Lily-Mae Boyle.

But before she touched the first box she was going to need a shower, coffee, and some breakfast.

It was eleven o'clock on a Thursday, and Hideaway Key's historic downtown was already a hub of activity, its clever shops and trendy restaurants bustling with sunburned tourists and well-heeled locals. Lily strolled down De Soto Avenue's palm-lined sidewalks, stuffed to the gills after a late breakfast, taking it all in.

It was warm for a walk, but she didn't care. She was already in love with the tiny downtown, deliciously Art Deco, with its glass-block windows and smooth stucco curves—like something right off an old postcard. The shops catered mostly to tourists, everything from jewelry stores and art galleries to bakeries selling gourmet dog biscuits.

She was browsing the shopwindows, admiring colorful tropical-themed displays, when one shop in particular caught her eye, though whether the attraction had to with the smartly displayed window or the neon pink sign above the door, she couldn't say. Sassy Rack Boutique. Fun and original. On impulse, she stepped inside.

A gorgeous brunette with a pink and orange scarf tied around her head glanced up from behind the register. She wore a dress of coral silk that fluttered prettily around her tan limbs as she crossed the shop. Lily put her somewhere in her mid-fifties.

"Welcome to Sassy Rack!" the woman chimed with a drawl so syrupy it could only be real. "Looking for anything special?"

"Just browsing, actually. Your windows caught my attention. Whoever does them has a good eye. It's a really nice mix of colors and patterns."

"Thanks. That would be me." She stuck out a hand. "I'm Sheila. Sheila Beasley."

"I'm Lily. So, you're the owner?"

"I am. I'm also the stock clerk, the cashier, and the window washer." She rolled her eyes comically. "The joys of being self-employed. So, New York or New Jersey?"

"New York. Is it that obvious?"

Sheila smiled, a shimmer of peach gloss setting off perfect white teeth. "Not very. But it's kind of my thing, picking up on accents and guessing where folks are from. If there was a way to make money at it, I could give up the cashier job."

Lily laughed, liking Sheila Beasley already, for her easy smile and throaty chuckle, as well as her unique personal style.

"Hey, stay right there," Sheila said, holding up a finger. "I just got a shipment of dresses in this morning, and there's an orange silk wrap that would look great on you."

It was on the tip of Lily's tongue to say she wouldn't be needing any dresses while she was in Hideaway

Key, but Sheila was gone before she could get the words out. In the meantime, she browsed the shoe display, eyeing a pair of strappy pink sandals she didn't need and would probably never wear.

She had just picked up the left shoe when she heard an odd rumble and turned to find a massive orange tabby strolling languidly in her direction. Smiling, she watched as the cat made a beeline for her legs, tail waving like a flag in the breeze. It wove a lazy figure eight around her ankles, then paused to gaze up at her with sleepy yellow eyes. Lily bent down and gave the orange head a scratch, noticing as she did that one of its ears was badly gnarled, one side of its face horribly scarred. He—assuming it *was* a he—was also missing an eye.

"Poor baby," she crooned as the cat scrubbed a cheek against her hand. "What happened to you?"

"I see you've met Galahad."

Lily stood, flicking orange hair from her fingers. "His name is Galahad?"

"Sure is." Sheila scooped the cat up into her arms. "As in Sir Galahad. Because he's as brave as a lion, poor thing."

"Poor thing is right. He's all scarred up."

Sheila pressed a noisy kiss on Galahad's head before setting him back down. "You should have seen him when he showed up in the alley behind the store. He was a wreck. Skin and bone, with oozing sores all over him. It was a good month before he'd let me get close. Then another week before I could coax him to eat. After that, I couldn't have shaken him if I wanted to. He must've known I have a tender spot for scarred things."

Scarred things?

The remark caught Lily off guard, but she decided to let it go. It wasn't exactly the kind of thing you questioned someone about, especially someone you'd only met ten minutes ago.

"I hung the orange silk in the first dressing room," Sheila told her, steering the conversation back to business. "I grabbed a couple of other things, too. I don't get many redheads in the shop, so I went a little crazy with colors. Try them on and let me know what you think. And if you need a different size, just holler."

Lily slipped into the dressing room and kicked off her shoes, then looked through the pieces Sheila had chosen. She was more than a little impressed. Every item was one she would have chosen for herself, the most flattering styles for her body shape, the ideal palette for her coloring. She had also known what sizes to pull, another hallmark of a pro. Pros knew body types: how to disguise nature's shortcomings and accentuate her gifts. It was what clothes were all about, after all, making a woman—or a man for that matter—feel good in the skin they were born with.

She was pulling on her third dress when Sheila tapped on the door. "Hey, sugar, I don't know what you've got on, but whatever it is, take it off and try on this suit." A tiny teal two-piece appeared above the door. "I just found it in a box in back, and I swear it's got your name on it."

Lily eyed the swimsuit with something like panic. "I *cannot* wear that."

"Why not? What do you usually wear?"

Lily poked her head up over the three-quarter door. "I don't."

Sheila quirked one dark brow. “Well, now, I’m guessing that makes you pretty popular back home.”

Lily couldn’t help giggling. “It would at that, but I meant I’m not really a beach person.”

“Not a beach person?” Sheila clucked her tongue. “Honey, I don’t know who your travel agent is, but you might want to get your money back. You just happen to be standing two blocks from the most gorgeous beaches in the state of Florida.”

“I just meant—”

Sheila broke the tension with a toothy grin. “I’m just teasing. I know what you meant. Now, try the suit. It’s going to work—wait and see.”

Lily eyed the swimsuit warily. She was going to be here only a few weeks. She didn’t *need* a swimsuit—and certainly not one that fit in the palm of her hand. But the color was wonderful, and the faux-leather fringe and turquoise beads were fun. Against her better judgment, she shimmied into the thing, then turned in a slow circle before the mirror.

It was an awful lot of skin—an awful lot of *very white* skin. Still, it was flattering. The teal set off her fair complexion and red hair, and the high-cut bottoms lengthened her legs. The top was a problem, though. She tugged at the triangular patches, hoping to stretch the coverage, but no matter how hard she tried the tiny halter seemed to reveal more than it concealed.

“Come on out and let me see,” Sheila hollered through the door.

“Not on your life!”

“Doesn’t it fit?”

Lily bit her lip as she took another look at the rear view. “It’s cute, but it doesn’t leave much to the imagination.”

“Hang on.” Lily heard the receding slap of sandals, followed by their reapproach. “Try this.”

Lily slipped on the gauzy cover-up, then reassessed. “Better. But I’m still not coming out.”

“Fine. As long as you’re in there, here are a few more things to try.”

Before it was over Lily left Sassy Rack with a swimsuit and cover-up, several skirts, two breezy little dresses, shorts, tops, flip-flops in a rainbow of colors—and a practical, if slightly ridiculous, straw hat. She had no idea where she’d ever wear any of it—certainly not Milan—but the shopping was fun, and it had helped take her mind off what was waiting for her back at the cottage. But now playtime was over. It was time to find the nearest market, stock up on staples, and then get to work on those boxes. Three weeks would be up before she knew it.

FOUR

Lily dropped her armload of shopping bags onto the bed with a sigh of relief, then shook the blood back into her fingertips. The groceries were still in the trunk, waiting to be brought in, but she had wanted to find the orange silk and hang it up first. If she didn’t, the thing wouldn’t be worth wearing.

It took a bit of rummaging, but she finally managed to locate the dress, loosely folded and wrapped in pink tissue. Shaking out the folds, she pressed the silk wrap to her body and sidled toward the mirror, swearing softly when her foot snagged on something and nearly sent her toppling. Dropping to one knee, she groped blindly beneath the bed until she came out with a long, flattish box. It had seen better days, its corners taped, its flaps battered and creased, as if they'd been opened and then refolded on themselves again and again. Her hands hovered briefly as she pondered what might be inside. Shoes, maybe, or winter clothes, packed away and forgotten.

She was about to pull back the first flap when she heard what sounded like the front door. Had she left it open? She couldn't remember, but with her arms full of bags it was certainly possible. Head cocked, she listened again but heard nothing. Then it came again, accompanied by a faint rustling and the unmistakable sound of footsteps. Easing from the bed, she tiptoed to the hall and peered around the corner, then took a sharp step backward—the natural reaction to finding a complete stranger standing in your living room with an armload of groceries.

Dark-lashed green eyes met hers, amused and free of threat. "Howdy, neighbor."

Lily blinked rapidly, still trying to process the man's presence.

"I was just on my way over," he added, clearly unaware of her distress. "I was coming to introduce myself when I saw your trunk open."

Lily eyed him with one hand on her hip, her adrenaline level gradually returning to normal. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Introduce yourself."

"Oh, right. I'm Dean. Dean Landry. I live next door."

"No one lives next door."

"Okay, not right next door, but about fifty yards to the south. Here, I'll show you, if you'll take these."

Wary, Lily took the grocery bags he held out, depositing them on the kitchen counter, before following him out the sliding glass doors.

"Here," he said, calling her to the end of the deck. "Come stand right here."

Lily followed his outstretched arm, squinting through a curtain of palms until she caught a glimpse of what he was pointing at. It was like something from a travel poster, twin stories painted the same clear blue as the sky, a pair of wraparound decks, and a roof that gleamed like a new dime in the afternoon sun. But even more impressive than the house was the trellised stone patio stretching down to the beach, along with a massive fireplace that looked to still be under construction.

Lily turned to him, not bothering to hide her surprise. "How on earth could I have missed a place like that?"

"Oh, you can't see it from the road, only from the beach. And here, apparently, if you stand on your toes."

"It's gorgeous, especially the patio."

Dean nodded his thanks. "One of these days I'll actually finish it."

“You did the stonework yourself?”

He puffed up a little, pride written plainly on his face. “I did all of it myself. Every nail and board, from the sand up.”

Lily stole another quick glance. He was tan and tall, with a nicely chiseled face, definitely the type that belonged in a beach house, though in his crisp blue oxford and neatly creased khakis, he hardly looked like the hard hat type. Her eyes slid to his hands. No discernible calluses. No ring, either. Single? It was an awful lot of house for one guy. Or maybe he wasn’t single, just a guy who didn’t do rings. At any rate, it was none of her business.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

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