

SANIBEL ISLAND

FALL 2005

The encounter that would unravel the staid fabric of David Blakemore's middle-age life started innocently enough. Certainly it was ironic that this unexpected twist of fate occurred on the first day of his family's long-awaited vacation. In deference to an urgent plea from his wife, he'd gone on a mission to find a cache of beach toys for their children, Ethan, Emma, and Colin. Marianne wanted an immediate inventory so she knew what to buy from the pricey tourist shops when she went into town. The fact that their children, ages six, four and two years old, typically refused to go along with any adult-inspired recreational activity simply did not occur to her. His wife had an agenda and today's agenda was the acquisition of a full set of brightly colored plastic pails, shovels and castle shapes.

The incandescent sunlight darkened as if on a dimmer switch as he entered the garage, a concrete structure supporting the large oceanfront condo building. He headed to the storage locker where the owners kept their beach paraphernalia. It was cool down here, and it felt good on his perspiring forehead. As he turned the corner into a narrow cinder block hallway lit by a dingy lightbulb, he was startled by the presence of another person. In the next second he recognized her. It was the woman he'd seen at the pool this morning.

He had first noticed her while playing with Ethan and Emma in the tropical lagoon-style pool. Alone in a sea of couples and

families, oblivious to everyone around her, she wore a ruby red swimsuit that fit like a leather glove on her slender figure. She had been reading a hardcover book, occasionally lifting her head to take in the postcard view, a glimmering ribbon of white sand beach under a dome of sapphire sky. The Paradise Resort and Spa certainly was everything the brochure promised and then some. Though he wasn't the kind of guy who made a habit of looking at other women, his gaze kept returning to her.

There was no avoiding her in the dank corridor. She stood in front of the storage unit opposite his, turning the key in the rusty deadbolt lock, trying without success to unlock the door. Dressed simply in a pale yellow cotton shirt and denim shorts, there was nothing overtly provocative about her appearance. A cascade of sable-colored hair framed a delicate face on which the most prominent feature were luminous hazel eyes. She was exceptionally pretty. He saw the glint of an emerald-cut diamond wedding ring on her left hand. Her voice, smooth like pancake syrup, interrupted his thoughts.

"Excuse me," she said, still twisting the key, "do you know if there is a trick to opening these doors? I'm not having any luck with this."

"Here let me try it," he said, moving toward her. She handed him the key, her fingers lightly brushing his, her proximity in equal measure intoxicating and overwhelming. Her hair carried the fresh scent of grapefruit, a scent that was clean and enticing and reminded him of long ago warm summer nights and the fervent ache of adolescence. His heartbeat quickened, and an unexpected blast of desire surged through him. He hoped this was not noticeable, and wondered what was behind the razor's edge intensity of his reaction. Not enough sex? Was he losing it? Was this the start of a mid-life crisis, something that he had witnessed in his older friends? Too much sun?

"Thank you so much. If you can't get it I'll just call the office, but I want to be sure because they already think I'm an idiot because I couldn't figure out how to work the bath tub," she said. "It was so embarrassing, turns out you have to *pull* the knob

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instead of *turning* it.”

Glad for the task at hand, he carefully inserted the key into the deadbolt lock, slowly turned it, and then repeated the motion in the doorknob keyhole. “Here you go—problem solved.”

She looked relieved and smiled at him, thrusting him deeper into his attraction to her. “You’re a godsend, thanks again for your help.”

His mind raced to find a way to prolong the encounter. Common sense told him to say “you’re welcome” and leave before he did something stupid. He was, after all, a happily married man, right? It seemed incomprehensible that a perfect stranger could have this visceral of an effect on him, that this day that had started so uneventfully had taken this unanticipated turn, that the seemingly innocuous task of finding pails and shovels for his children had put him in harm’s way. It made him think of small towns and tornadoes that strike without warning in the middle of the night.

She headed into the darkened tomb-like storage room and he seized the opportunity. “Let me hold the door for you.”

She slipped inside, deftly navigating the mélange of beach toys, chairs, fishing poles and assorted beach gear. “So what is it you hope to find in here?” he asked, peering into the dark space.

“A bike. The people I’m renting from offer it with the condo.”

It was resting against the back wall of the cinder block prison. She grabbed the handlebars, flipped up the kickstand and wheeled out a woman’s no-frills standard-issue bicycle—large padded seat, thick tires, no hand breaks or gears and a wire basket. “You have no idea of how relieved I am that you’re here. I’m terribly claustrophobic . . . I can just imagine that door swinging shut and getting locked in there for days!”

“A terrible way to spend a vacation at the beach,” he joked, the flirtation in his voice effortless. The thought of her being afraid made him want to protect her.

“Have you been on the bike path yet?” he asked.

“This is my first day out. A couple of years ago we came here on a day trip and rode all over the island. How about yourself?”

“Not yet. My kids are too young to ride so I haven’t been out yet.” His choice of the “I” pronoun instead of “we” came naturally.

It was a good segue into the question he really wanted to ask. The mere fact that she was wearing a wedding ring didn’t mean she was happily-ever-after married. Could be separated or on her way to divorce. He took in a deep breath, shifting his weight from one leg to the other. “Are you here with your family?”

“Actually, I’m here alone, a first for me. My husband and son—he’s fifteen—are at home. I decided to take a vacation by myself, actually a much needed break from raising a teenager. Fifteen is a delightful age,” she said, a lilt of unmistakable sarcasm in her voice.

“Yes, so I’ve heard. My best friend’s kids are teenagers and they’re giving him a run for his money. His solution is to drink heavily and play a lot of golf,” he said.

She laughed. “How long are you going to be here?”

“Ten days. It’s our first real vacation in a long time. We’re having a family reunion to celebrate my parents’ fiftieth wedding anniversary.”

“What a great idea—your parents must be so happy,” she said, her eyes engulfing him. *If she weren’t so damn beautiful, I could relax, he thought.* He caught himself as his eyes drifted to the curve of her breasts pressed against soft cotton.

“You know, we’re having a barbecue later this week. Very informal, you’re welcome to join us. Does one get lonely taking a vacation alone?”

“I haven’t been here long enough to answer that,” she said, again that easy laugh like wind chimes on a breezy day. “Thanks for the invitation, who knows maybe our paths will cross again. Well, I’d better be going. Isn’t this just the most incredible place?”

A final smile, and she turned and walked away with the bike. She was halfway across the parking lot when he realized that he didn’t even get her name.