





**DON'T  
LOOK  
AWAY**

**A NOVEL**

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*For Mike and Rachel*



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## PROLOGUE

Opening a paperback does nothing to settle Barbara Tiller's nerves. A beach read: that was the bright idea. Take Sarah out on Friday afternoon, watch her build a sandcastle, maybe get some sun and a solid two chapters in before bringing Sarah to her father's place by evening. But when had the weather ever cooperated with Barbara's plans? It's a gray, brumous, unseasonably cool day by Florida standards. If not for the two of them, the beach would be empty.

"Mom." Holding up her trowel, Sarah makes her voice a warning siren: "Ma-ohhhhhhh-om."

Barbara gives her daughter a little wave. *Very good, honey.*

"You barely looked." Dig, dig.

The paperback is a romance. Barbara checks the flowy illustration on the cover: a man in a nineteenth-century justaucorps is dipping a bare-shouldered woman in what looks to be either a dance or a burgeoning make-out session. Usually that's the sort of thing she'd enjoy, but she can't get past the first page without reading evil intentions into each character. Everyone who isn't the hero is a threat.

Barbara snaps the book shut and looks over the empty beach. Is there some hurricane warning she missed? She's tempted to go check the radio in her car. Her phone battery is dead and the clouds have gone sour.

"Castle or sea turtle?" Sarah asks, a bucket in each hand.

“Sea turtle for sure.”

Sarah snicks her tongue. “Sea turtles are hard.”

In truth, the reason Barbara hauled Sarah to a beach on a wet day is that her custody ends at 6:00 p.m. Then it’s her ex-husband’s turn—Friday, just in time for the weekend—and of course he’d take Sarah deep-sea fishing, or driving go-karts, or jet-skiing in the channels. His new girlfriend would be with him. Barbara is sure the two of them would keep Sarah giggling for three days straight. Sarah’s eight now, and Barbara doesn’t want her childhood memories of the Gulf Coast to be miserable school days with Mom in between kick-ass Saturdays with Dad and his endless parade of hip, twentysomething girlfriends. Kids don’t remember routines, the countless PB&Js you carved them, the thousand books you read them to sleep. Childhood memories are always the outliers, the wild detours that stick pleasantly in the craw. Sometimes—usually Mondays, when Sarah comes home shouting about what an *awesome time* she had that weekend—Barbara wonders whether Sarah will remember her at all.

*Hence this rainy beach*, Barbara thinks. She can’t conjure fun and magic the way her ex-husband does. The sun’s probably waiting for him to show up.

“Maybe we should think about packing up soon,” Barbara calls.

“Awwww.”

“It’s gonna rain, honeybee.”

“I’d say we have about seventeen minutes,” Sarah says, squinting at the horizon. Ever the little meteorologist.

“Seventeen, huh?”

“Sixteen.” Sarah taps an imaginary watch on her wrist. “And fifty-five seconds.”

Barbara stands and gathers their things. Then the answer comes to her. North Naples, not the threat of rain, would explain why no one's here. North Naples, scene of the most recent of the Gulf Coast Killer's murders as he stabbed his way up Florida, was less than a half hour down I-41. Barbara had spent a few late nights watching self-defense videos. She learned morbid things about the world. One doctor on YouTube quoted the depressing kidnapping statistics, saying that if anyone threatens you at gunpoint and tells you to *get in the car*, you should tell them to go ahead and shoot you. Otherwise, you might regret missing your chance at a quick death.

“Pack up,” Barbara says. “Time to go.”

Another grumble from the ocean, the sound of water collapsing on water. Or was it thunder this time? Barbara has her beach bag packed and is about to start on Sarah's when she spots a black SUV pulling up near the dunes. A man eases out and waves at her. Barbara waves back, almost smiles. Having the company is oddly reassuring.

“Ma'am,” he calls between cupped hands, his voice soft and fluty. “Band of rain coming. Just thought you should know.”

“Thanks. We're headed home now.”

The man flashes some sort of sign, maybe okay, maybe a goodbye wave. He's wearing a black button-up that's a size or two too large; the breeze plumps it up like a sail. His hair is

soft and bleach white. As he gets back into the SUV and pulls away, Barbara rolls her eyes. As if she didn't see the rain coming herself, as if he couldn't see her packing up already. Another Good Samaritan of Madre: the island is full of widowers who use kind gestures as excuses to chat women up. Most of them mean well.

By the time Barbara and Sarah get up to their Subaru in the parking lot, the first few needles of rain start to sting. Barbara spreads a beach towel across the back seat for the sand Sarah is about to track in. Barbara will be vacuuming all weekend, sighing to the steady seethe of suction like it's such a pain, all the while counting the minutes until Sarah returns and she can fret about sand again.

Sarah calls out to her. She's pointing down to where the parking lot meets the road.

Barbara pulls out her head and looks. The same black SUV is idling near the sign announcing PRESIDIO HEIGHTS (PRIVATE BEACH). The driver's-side door has flipped open.

Underneath it, the white-haired man has collapsed on the concrete.

"Is he okay, Mom?"

"Stay here. Take the keys. Turn on the AC and lock the doors."

"I wanna hel—"

"Sarah! Just do it."

Thunder rolls like a passing train as Barbara jogs across the parking lot. She kneels beside the man. She can't tell if he's breathing. The SUV's radio is on (*come on down to Madre Island*

*BMW if you want to give your lap a little luxury!*) and the engine is still idling in park. Whatever it was, it happened suddenly.

Barbara presses two fingers to his neck. *Tha-dump. Tha-dump.* That catches her off guard: the steady, soft kiss of his pulse. She's no doctor, but wouldn't that rule out a heart attack? Then something else put him down. A stroke? Far away, she would have guessed he was old. But up close, the white hair doesn't quite match his age. She half expected to find a knife in his back and a trail of blood.

She's been spending too many late nights on YouTube.

Her phone is still dead. She'll have to plug it into her car charger to dial 911. She takes stock for a moment. The SUV is a Lincoln . . . Aviator, she notes. Someone might ask about that. *Aviator, Aviator, Aviator. A Lincoln Aviator,* she thinks, picturing Honest Abe flying a biplane, a ridiculous image—Lincoln aviating, donning aviator glasses, hot aviation wind blowing in his gunny Lincoln hair—to preserve the memory. The ambulance will need an address, and the vague answer of Presidio Heights will have to suffice. That could work. Wouldn't it? She turns to run back to her car.

But one leg doesn't turn with her. Her ankle is in his hand.

And as the realization darkens inside her, he stands, half a head taller, sinewy, lanky, healthy. He scratches his wrist through his long sleeves. Then he clutches her by the forearm and doesn't let go. He leans in as if he means to bite her, close enough for her to taste the piney burn in his breath. The obsessive way he works his wrists suggests a sudden, violent rash.

"Call your daughter over here," he says. "Then get in."

Barbara stares. Mouth open. Lips flexing. *If anyone tells you to get in the car, the best response is to say, "Go ahead and shoot me."* Does this man have a gun? What is she supposed to say? Nothing comes out of her but a hot trickle running down her leg.

"Mom!"

Sarah's voice is a shot of mom adrenaline. Barbara slips her wrist from his grip and runs to her idling Subaru. And, running up to the windshield, she catches her reflection as a figure explodes onto her from behind, his long arms cupping hers, his body weight crumpling them both to the concrete. Her veins go syrupy inside his reach.

Sarah screams.

Underneath the passenger's-side door, Barbara rolls over, freeing a leg she can drive into his groin. It's clumsy, but his groan tells her it landed. Barbara slides loose from underneath him and stumbles to her feet. She runs around the hood, over to the driver's side. "Sarah! Hit the emergency assist!"

Crying, shaking, Sarah's eyes dart around like every button is written in French. Barbara climbs in the driver's side, shouting. "*Seat belt, seat belt!*"—but Sarah's gone panic blind, feeling around for the button she can't find.

The man is on his feet again, dragging one leg as he circles around the front. Then he smiles and stops in front of the hood. Daring her.

Barbara fumbles with the stick. Park. Over to Drive. She's done it a million times. But her fingers are gummy.

"He's *coming*, Mom!" Sarah screams. Just a glance and Barbara sees him—walking to her side, now.

The stick *thunks* into place. Barbara kicks the gas. The engine roars. The RPM needle spikes—

—and they go nowhere.

Barbara looks down.

Neutral.

Then her door flies open.

“Run,” Barbara screams to Sarah. “*Run*, baby!”

Sarah hesitates, then does what she’s told, opening the door and running off into the rain.

It only takes him one arm to drag Barbara out and send her spilling to the ground. She tightens her fists, ready to kick his ribs, his pelvis, his legs, his groin, whatever soft spot he gives her, but when he stands over her, the blade in his hand catches a glint of the Subaru’s headlight, and the fight goes out of her.



# PART ONE



## LESLIE

“Robert,” I call. “Did you see? An eight-year-old got away.”

Robert is in the den reviewing the bills, wearing rimless readers that age him beyond his sixty-two years. “Mm. Got away from what?”

“The Gulf Coast Killer.” Self-soothing, I comb my fingers through my hair, rub a knot in my neck. “That poor girl. First witness.”

“What happened to *Wheel of Fortune*?”

I turn the volume up. Though my gentle, squeamish husband, Robert Woodhouse, can barely unhook a bluegill without wincing, I grew up with a mother who worked in angiography. There’s a social callus you develop when you see more veins and capillaries in a ten-hour-shift than most people do in a lifetime. I think she passed it on to me.

On the news, which I watch from our sofa with a bottle of rosé and a pile of cubed fontina cheese larger than my doctor would prefer, a breathy news anchor is relaying the key bits of information:

*The woman had been at the beach with her daughter . . .  
forty years old and divorced . . .  
police are suspicious it’s the latest of a series of attacks attributed  
to a “Gulf Coast Killer” . . .  
though nothing is confirmed, this eight-year-old child would be  
the first witness . . .*

Police use such lawyer-speak for the sake of the public. Suspicious? Of course it's the Gulf Coast Killer—and now we have to wait and see if an eight-year-old girl can describe him in any detail.

We would've heard if there was anything distinctive, if he were six foot six with a surgical scar, a blackwork scalp tattoo, and a severe case of Tourette's. No such luck. Until now, this killer has had the quiet precision of a Swiss watch. I've been reading about the case from Marco Island (single white male, age twenty-seven) through North Naples (married Hispanic female, age fifty-four), and though the killer is patternless with his victims, I've read enough from the headlines to know that this girl, eight years old though she may be, is the first loose end, the first to see his face without enduring ninety-six hours of dehydration before death. Ever since the news broke last night—I convinced Robert to walk with me down to Madre Beach Pier as far as the police barricade—we've heard nothing about the Gulf Coast Killer himself.

Robert rises behind me and walks to the kitchen. I hear the clanging of popcorn kernels swirling into a pot. This is the sign: the bills are done and soon it will be time to watch something we *both* like.

Once he fills his bowl, Robert drops a kiss on my head and sits next to me. The flare of the TV outlines his features: his narrow shoulders, his slick white hair, the subtle heterochromia of his eyes. The blue one is near-green, the green one is near blue, like different hours in the same sea. The combined effect is that sometimes when you look at him, two separate men return the gaze. He has a young man's smile, but it's mottled in wrinkles, his lips pinched and veiny like a folded old map. Follow the roads

of it and you'll find a man who usually swallows his words. On nights like this, an ideal husband.

On the news, a reporter interviews frightened locals. Robert sets the bowl down without a bite. "Les. Really?"

"Just until the commercial."

"I don't know why you're so fascinated with this. It's macabre."

"Life's macabre."

"Death is, actually." Robert lifts the bowl to his lap. "You'll get nightmares."

"You're the one who gets nightmares."

"Then you won't sleep. It's like caffeine for you." He lobs himself a handful of popcorn, crunching absentmindedly. "I'd say the same if you were drinking coffee after seven."

"I do drink coffee after seven."

Robert plinks me in the side of the head with a flake of popcorn and it drops to a cushion. I flick it back at him. He pops it in his mouth, cushion fuzz and all, and smiles with his tongue sticking out between his lips.

On-screen, a slender, suited woman files her report in front of a line of palmettos and two-floor condos. Presidio Heights at night. It could be any Gulf Coast community, I suppose—we're all the same species of sunbird, sixty or seventy, each of us with absurdly expensive cars and a taste for nautical-themed toiletries—but over the woman's right shoulder is the ice cream stand Robert and I like to visit, the Balanced Diet. Its logo weighs two scoops on either side of a scale.

Robert stops his crunching. "That's our place."

“I know.” To think we were there so recently, licking butter-scotch and marshmallow confetti, imagining these headlines were so far away from us. Now we’re both imagining that poor woman. That beautiful beach. An eight-year-old’s life destroyed.

The news switches topics: we won’t believe how high the Powerball has gotten. Yeah, that’ll help us forget there’s a killer stalking the Gulf Coast.

Robert sets his popcorn on the coffee table. “If you were defending this guy, how would you get him off the hook?”

“That’s not how it works.” I’ve told him as much a thousand times.

“C’mon. Indulge me.”

I clear my throat, ready to indulge. My old life as a public defender is a constant fascination to him. My steel stomach. Before I knew Robert, I could take my work home with me, let crime-scene photographs flashbulb in my brain while other people, normal people, tried to sleep.

“Assuming there’s no alibi? I’d need something else for reasonable doubt. As far as I can tell, there’s no DNA evidence so far, not so much as a hangnail left behind at any of the scenes, not even a make or model on a car. Whatever the prosecution gets on him, I’d have to demonstrate it doesn’t only apply to my client, but, say, one-fifth of the general population. Reasonable doubt. Now, if they had a single hair, or a phone location that puts my client at the scene . . .”

“Let’s say he did leave some DNA behind.”

“That’s beyond a reasonable doubt, so I’d have to start digging. Is that evidence inadmissible for some reason? Mishandled,

maybe? I'd ask for time stamps on everything, buy one of those giant calendars and start reconstructing. You wouldn't believe how incompetent some police are."

"You make it sound like his odds are fifty-fifty."

"Well, yeah, if he hired me." I shove my knuckles into his shoulder. "Don't ask if you don't want the answer."

"You wanna order a movie?"

"Sure. I'm just gonna wash my hands."

"Les, your hands are clean."

I look at my palms, spread my fingers wide. They are withered pink, knobby and thick, and technically clean. Robert doesn't understand that for people like me, *clean* is an emotion. "They're gonna feel gritty during the movie. I can't watch a movie with gritty—"

Robert captures my hands, brings them to his lips to kiss a fingertip. Then another. "If they're dirty, aren't I contaminated now? So we're in this together."

He smiles, and my lips can't help but mirror his. That is vintage Robert, the feeling of the screwy puzzle nubs of my personality snapping into the only other piece they'll ever fit. Something in his smile reminds me of why it was this man who convinced this old widow to remarry: he filled me up too happy to have room for anything else. And by the time the movie's on, I forget all about my hands.

I'm up first the next morning, whisking eggs and dicing Roma tomatoes at the kitchen counter. I stare at the weeping red

mountain on the cutting board and decide the omelet needs more oomph. Goat cheese, if we have it. The saltier the better.

A little expensive for breakfast, and Robert has to watch his blood pressure, but the man deserves some oomph. He's been achy lately. The strain of our mortgage, maybe, the tightrope act of me paying for Steph's college out of my underfunded Roth IRA while we get by on his modest pension, of learning how expensive books and board are these days, of never quite broaching the subject that everything would be easier if I borrowed money from my sister or went back to work.

And on that unutterable thought—unutterable to Robert, anyway—I go for the omelet flip. A spongy streak of egg sticks to the pan. I stir, a little too angrily. Not an omelet now: a frittata. As intended.

I leave it on the stove to stay warm, then pour my coffee and head outside. This routine is the point of our whole retirement: sip coffee, let the salty sea breeze whisper through our hair. It's Saturday morning and the sky is already sparkling under the June sun.

Three years of routine in the condo we've named the Senectitude haven't erased the pleasure of the Gulf of Mexico.

At high tide, our beach doesn't go out far. There's a thin, pitted layer of sand dunes, then a lip where the beach goes smooth and wet as sealskin. Then the furry white foam, then the water: turquoise mixing to deep blue. The tide, now slipping away, has scattered peach-colored seaweed in its wake. A storm rolled through last night and scrubbed the sky clean. There's not a single cloud. Or a single person.

“Mornin’,” Robert says. He closes the screen door behind him, coffee mug in hand. It’s a collage of nineteenth-century impressionists like van Gogh and Monet with a caption underneath: I SEE DEAD PEOPLE. A retirement gift from the art department at Suncoast State University.

“Mornin’. High tide.”

The thing about that salty sea breeze whispering through our hair: beach access like ours is expensive, which is why we had to settle for the side-by-side condo. Foolishly, Robert and I pictured more privacy in retirement, clinking champagne flutes in our hot tub, our lives a looping Cialis commercial. Instead we share deck space with the octogenarian next door. Steph got into Wharton, and when your daughter gets into Wharton, you don’t say, “No, Steph, you can’t attend your Ivy League school because your mom and stepdad had their hearts set on the full beach house with the private deck.”

Maybe I retired too early. *Maybe* is a nice word. A fabric softener of language. Sussing out the *maybes* made me a decent defense attorney. But I seem to have brought that work home with me, too: the reasonable doubts.

“A bit eerie out here,” Robert says.

My fingers rise to guard my throat. For the past several weeks, the Gulf Coast Killer has been a story for the mainlanders. First the young man, age twenty-seven, a Walgreens worker from Marco Island, then slowly north as though the killer were hitchhiking his way up the coast. After Port Royal—about three murders in—local media started connecting dots. Victims always turned up *in a state of extreme*

*dehydration*, according to the reports. When one reporter in Miami dubbed him the Gulf Coast Killer, the two hard *k* sounds were evidence enough for the public: we had a serial killer on our hands.

“I’d pick a different title,” Robert says, sipping coffee. I blink, then realize he’s talking about last night’s movie. “It sounded like a comedy. And they needed different writers. Two stars. Maybe another half star for the performances.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“What are you going to do today? As little as possible?”

“I’m hoping to see someone.”

He shoots me a startled look. “Who?”

“Patricia. Back from Santorini today. You all right?”

“Fine.”

“It’s not like I said *Wes*. Is he even in town?”

“I think so. I don’t know.” Squinting into the sun gives Robert a lemon-sucking look. He leans back and sighs into the breeze. Steadily, I rub my hands across his shoulder blades from behind and kiss the back of his head. Robert’s a maze of a man—pointy elbows, Osgood-Schlatter in his knees—and it’s not always easy to find the soft spots in his crevasses. But when he slides his hand up and takes mine, rubbing his thumb over my knuckles, I can feel him tremble.

Robert and I had only been on two dates when he confessed he had a son named Wes. He would wince like he was telling the story of an old war wound to explain the hitch in his stride. Their relationship teeter-totters. It’s not as simple as checking the tide clock, in or out. It’s impossible for me to picture a parent-child

relationship so unlike mine and Steph's. How could Robert be anything but insatiably curious about what Wes is up to? How *couldn't* he want to sift through the notes in Wes's backpack, sort through his mail, scroll through his phone? But maybe that's my issue. Somewhere between Robert and me, there is one perfectly balanced parent.

The good news: it sounds like he and Wes are speaking again.

As I wonder how to nudge Robert on that, I head inside to wash my mug. The dishwasher is already open. Rudely, brazenly, the blades of the steak knives are facing up. I crouch down to remedy that. Face down might cut up the plastic, but if Robert trips and falls and lacerates a kidney, I won't have to blame myself for the dishwasher being an open spike pit. I snap the cutlery basket shut to finish, but a doubt snags in me. I unsnap it, try again. Snap. Not quite it, either. Still feels wrong. I know it's the obsessive-compulsive in me talking, but if I shut it when my mind isn't fixed on a perfectly clean thought, it will spray knives everywhere.

I try again.

Robert walks in and watches my whole routine with soft eyes. "Les. Let me clean those. Use the ones I got you."

I'd forgotten. A gag gift from our first Christmas. Plastic knives for kids: grippy handles, bright pastels. But they're serrated, so with just enough wiggle, you can slice oranges. Robert had noticed me nudging aside a steak knife on our first date and asked me about it. I confessed the red flags of my own, all my irrational fears, how they had gotten worse since my husband passed. Six months later, I had these knives. Robert had brought sliced fruit back into my life.

“I know.” I snap the basket shut. “I know.”

He licks his lips to say something, but the sound of rattling glass interrupts him. I’d left my phone on the coffee table in the living room.

CALL FROM: PATRICIA.

Wincing, I tap *Accept*. I already know what’s coming. “Patreesh. Mea culpa.”

“She *is* alive.” Patricia’s voice is shrill, blaring through a crowd somewhere. Even across telecommunication lines, I can tell how inappropriately loud she’s being. “Do you know how distressing it is when you’re an old lady and your ride doesn’t show up? I feel like a lost toddler.”

“I just woke up. I’ll leave now.”

“Too late. I’m going to the bar. I’ll ask a strange man to drive me home.”

“Not funny. There’s a serial killer. Stay put!” I hang up.

Robert, still standing in the kitchen, shoos me. “Go, go.”

“Her flight must have gotten in early.” I pluck the keys from their wall hook and comb my fingers through my hair—the sea breeze whipped it into the texture of a Brillo pad—and blow Robert a goodbye kiss. I head out to the driveway leading out to our cul-de-sac. A full Florida day: swampy air, cicadas sizzling. I jangle my keys in my hand, pausing, spinning around aimlessly, before remembering my car’s in the shop.

“Take mine,” Robert shouts from inside.

I whirl around. The black Lincoln Aviator is sitting turtle head in the garage.

Robert’s car it is.

## ROBERT

A missed-call notification blips as I hop out of the shower. Still dewy, I step into my slip-ons and swipe the screen to find the tiny-phone icon that always makes my guts swim these days. It isn't Wes's most recent number, or else the contact would have shown up DOMINO'S PIZZA, but the four-digit suffix is still a tad familiar.

A blow-dry and a polo shirt. Khaki shorts and a brown belt. Kind of a uniform at this stage in my life. I brush my hair back, glad to still have something to brush, white and willowy though it may be, and tip back a gargle of Listerine. It has alcohol, so I consider swallowing. Not that desperate, am I? I spit into the sink. A deep breath will have to do. Then I bring up the missed call and tap the green icon.

"Madre Island Police Department," a voice rings in my ear.

"I was returning a call? Robert Woodhouse."

"You've reached the main line, sir. Do you have an extension?"

"Sorry, no."

Without an extension, she says, I'll have to wait for a call-back. Maybe someone left an extension in my voicemail inbox, but that's been full for months, and I'm a bit of a procrastinator with these things.

Still. Now a voice from Madre Island PD is probably in there. There is no amount of mouthwash that will clean the absciss of dread lodged in my gums.

After hanging up, I wipe the counter down—Leslie insists, lest we electrocute ourselves—and set the hair dryer back on her

side of the his-and-hers countertop. We have an arrangement: I can use her hair dryer as long as I put it back in its place. It's a snug fit into its holder and always rests with a satisfying *click*. Of course. Everything about Leslie has always fit.

I'm in the living room thoughtlessly scrolling through Netflix when my phone rings again. Same four-digit suffix.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Woodhouse." The voice on the receiver is low, bellowy, and familiar. "Sergeant Clay Ingram, Madre Island PD. Can you come in today? We'd like you to participate in a witness lineup."

I should have chugged that Listerine.

"Now, I know it sounds scary," says Ingram, "but think of it this way: it would be a great way to rule yourself out."

"No. Yeah. Of course. It's just—my wife's car is in the shop, and she just took mine—"

Ingram's long, sighing *oh* sounds far more disappointed than the situation warrants. "We can send a cruiser. Now okay?"

"Now's . . . fine."

Then we exchange casual goodbyes as if arranging to pay a speeding ticket.

A cruiser. It's so important to have Robert Woodhouse at this lineup that a police officer will take time out of their busy day just to give me a lift.

I glance at one of Leslie's many legal pads strewn about the house and wonder about leaving a note for her, something about acupuncture or drinks with an old friend, but maybe it won't be necessary. Time bends around Leslie and Patricia when they get together. They'll go hours, sometimes overnight (I'll get the *Don't*

*wait up* texts), the two of them stuck bingeing on some show they'll barely remember the next morning thanks to an empty bottle of chardonnay and the fact they talked over it the whole time.

I'll roll the dice: no note.

The cruiser pulls into our driveway a few minutes later. I'm already waiting by the door and beeline toward the police car as soon as it's there, eager to avoid a neighbor's glance, to keep things moving. I climb into the back seat and say hello politely, innocently, like I'm not one of five potential killers, like I'm not saying my hellos through a steel safety cage. To my great relief, the officer at the wheel is in the same hurry I am, all business and no chitchat, peeling out of our cul-de-sac with a firm start.

Maybe I'll beat Leslie home after all.

## LESLIE

"Santorini was bleh," Patricia says halfway through a virgin margarita. "Don't get me wrong. I don't regret going. Lovely place, gorgeous people, sunsets, islands, blue water, all that. But just you try finding a steak. It's all fish and vegetables in oil. If I popped a zit right now, olive oil would come out."

"Sounds rough." I hide my smile behind the mimosa she's poured me. The complaints this woman has.

"The *worst*." Patricia laughs her spicy, five-alarm laugh. "Well, back to the salt mines."

Patricia's *salt mine* is a Mediterranean Revival home on the mainland. A palace, really. Beach access, like me and Robert,

but her beach access is vast and private, bordered by a ferocious outgrowth of palms and privacy mangroves. She even has a lawn. We're sitting out on her deck, overlooking the Gulf and the channel between the mainland and Madre, toasting pleasantly in the sun.

Patricia winks at me. "You like that mimosa? Want more?" She leans in, whisper close. "I could put a little white rum in it. The white rum, she calls to you."

"Stop trying to get me drunk."

"Live a little."

"I drove, remember?"

"So stay over, sleep it off. I'll have Lucille fix you one. Lucille! Ah. She's not here. Gave her the full two weeks off. Remind me again why I travel?"

Patricia. Like *patrician*. Nobility, wealthy person, the cream of ancient Rome. She was the homecoming queen in Summer-ville, Wisconsin, a thousand years ago, and with me coming up two grades behind her, people would hear our long compound German last name and say, "Are you Patricia's little sister? Didn't know she had one."

My sister is still queenly. Long, fussy, sun-bleached hair drapes to her collarbones in a textured lob, and she wears gold bracelets around one of those thin watches that are too small to tell you the time but tell you plenty about the wealthy wrists wearing them. Papery folds of skin trace the mask of her face. If she looks straight at you, she's still the homecoming queen, but if you catch her from the side—ah, there's the wear and tear. I can imagine a police officer writing her description: *woman, blond*