



Chapter 1

He was staring at her cleavage and she tried to be cool, like she did this kind of thing all the time. The spaghetti strap on her white sundress slipped off. Kate adjusted it back over her sunburned shoulder, then sipped the pink fruity drink he had bought her. The steel band in a tiki hut was playing reggae, and the night air smelled like fish and brine.

“So,” he said, “you girls down on spring break?” His tongue darted over the thin white line that split his upper lip into two uneven halves. His name was Carl and the other guy was Luis. They were med students—at least that’s what Carl said when they sat down at the outdoor bar next to Kate and Joanne.

“Yeah,” Kate said. “We’re staying in South Beach with some friends, but we decided to check out the Keys.”

Kate gave Joanne a warning look. Her best friend was clutching an oversized handbag against her chest, ignoring the drink in front of her. The last thing Kate wanted was for the two guys to know they were still in high school.

“That’s cool,” Carl said. He had dark hair and thick eyebrows and the scarred upper lip made him look a little like Elvis. But his friend Luis was the really sexy one with his shaved head and tattoos all over his muscled arms. Kate didn’t think they looked like med students, but hey, what would she know, having been holed up in Small-Town-Nowhere her whole life?

“The club scene can get old real quick,” Carl said. “It’s much more laid back here. We’re at a house on the bay. Pretty nice place. It even has an indoor pool.”

Luis seemed less than impressed with Kate and Joanne and was checking out the other girls as they came into the bar area from the parking lot or the beach. He wore a tank top, and every time he moved, his biceps rippled through his tattoos.

Kate sucked on the straw in her drink and caught Luis’s eye. She knew she was cute with her blue eyes, dimples, and long, black hair. And even though she had a few extra pounds on her, the boys back home in Deland didn’t seem to mind her in jeans.

Luis smiled at her with even white teeth against his tanned face. God, he was hot. If she was going to lose it, he was definitely the one. Maybe they’d invite the girls back to their house with its indoor pool.

She held her shoulders back and tossed her hair. She couldn’t believe she was doing this—her dad would kill her if he knew—but for the first time in her life she felt special. Let her dad find out. She really didn’t care. He might actually notice she existed.

The music was getting louder, the beat throbbing against the swish of metal. She crossed her legs, swinging her foot back and forth. She was wearing new white sandals with these cool clear plastic heels.

“Wanna dance?” Luis asked. His voice was low and rough, like sandpaper.

“Sure.” Kate slid off the bar stool. She was a little wobbly, not used to drinking. “Come dance with us,” she said to Joanne, feeling badly about leaving her friend alone with Carl.

Joanne shook her head. She was small and blonde and looked about twelve, even under all the makeup Kate had put on for her. Joanne hadn’t wanted to drive down to Key Largo, but Kate had begged her. Promised that the rest of the week they’d hang out by their hotel on South Beach if Kate could just have this one night.

One night out of her father's radar, so she could lose her virginity and not have to show up for her freshman year in college like some over-protected weirdo.

Luis tugged on Kate's hand and glanced back at Carl. "Why don't you get the girls a couple of fresh drinks?"

The dance floor was wooden planks set in the sand. Kate rolled her head back as she got into the beat. Palm trees shifted in the warm breeze and stars glittered against the dark sky. Bodies spun around her. The light from hanging lanterns bounced off Luis's bald, sweaty head. He slipped his tattooed arm around her waist and pulled her closer. Her sunburn made her hot all over. Luis brushed her lips with his. Her heart was beating like a maraca. What was she doing? Was she crazy?

"I, I have to sit down." She was trembling. What she really needed was to get the hell out of here before she did something insane. What had she been thinking?

She returned to her stool at the bar. Two fresh pink drinks were in front of her and Joanne. "We need to be getting back to Miami," Kate said.

"Right." Carl said. "You high school kids probably have a curfew."

Kate's cheeks heated up.

"Hey man," Luis said to Carl, "no reason to be a dick. If the girls gotta go, they gotta go." He rested his hand on Kate's shoulder. "No sweat, baby. But the least you can do is finish your drinks. My friend was nice enough to buy them for you."

Joanne reached into her bag and pulled a twenty out of her wallet. "Here," she said, waving the bill at Carl. "This is for our drinks. We're leaving."

"And now you insult me?" Carl said.

Luis's breath was in Kate's ear. It gave her goose bumps. "Please don't go."

“Let’s just stay a little longer, Joanne,” Kate said. “We don’t want to hurt anyone’s feelings. Okay?”

Mascara was smeared under Joanne’s eyes, and her nose, too big for her narrow face, was red-tipped like she was about to cry. “If that’s what you want.” Joanne gulped down the pink liquid.

Luis was so close, Kate could smell his sweat mingling with his cologne. The muscles beneath the tattoos were smooth as boulders. “Damn, you’re sexy,” he whispered.

Kate sipped her drink, afraid to leave, afraid to stay. The music got louder, softer. The breeze off the ocean warmed her, chilled her. The stars got larger, larger, like giant asteroids ready to explode.

Luis’s arm was around her. She could feel the heat off his body. They were walking, but she could hardly stand. He held her up. Her words came out like someone else’s voice. “Where are we going?”

“It’s okay, baby,” he said. “Everything’s all right.”

She was tired, so tired. Her eyes kept closing. Smell of leather, gasoline. Engine noise. Cool air. Warm breath against her cheek. The car stopped.

Kate opened her eyes. Trees all around. A jumping red dragon. Big white house, like a giant box on legs.

She was flying, or being carried. Her sandals scraped against something smooth and bumpy. Pebbles. Millions, billions, trillions of pebbles. A sandal fell off. She tried to say something, but it felt like there was glue in her mouth.

A baby was crying. “Let me go,” the baby sobbed. “Please let me go.”

Someone was holding Joanne. The one called Carl. He carried her like a baby. “Please let me go,” Joanne cried.

Kate got scared. “Joanne,” she tried to say, but nothing came out.

“Here you go,” someone said, and put something in Kate’s mouth.

Kate was dreaming. Such a lovely dream. Talcum powder and rainbows. Splashing water. Something silky beneath her. Silky, dark, blurry. A tongue in her mouth. Butterfly kisses up and down her skin. Everything nice. So nice.

A stab of pain.

Wet, falling. Help, I'm falling.

Help.

Squeezing, squeezing. Tighter, tighter. Stop.

Stop.

Breathe. Can't breathe.

Drowning. I'm drowning.

Stop. Stop.

STOP.

Time went in and out. Black all around.

She got up and walked toward lightness. White walls covered with dragons. Red, blue, green. Rooms with no people. Windows like mirrors everywhere. She saw herself. Hair wild, long legs, full breasts. No clothes. Where were her clothes? Where was Joanne?

In front of her was a big, glowing blue square. A pool. A swimming pool. Lights from beneath. Someone floating. Long blonde hair spreading like a halo. Joanne swimming. Naked. Not swimming. Floating. Joanne naked? Not possible.

"Joanne," Kate called. "Joanne, come out."

Joanne floating. Face down. Face down in the water.

"Joanne?" she whispered.

Heat behind her, touching her shoulder. Sweat and cologne.

Joanne floating.

"Fuck," a rough, sandpapery voice said. "Look what you've done."



Chapter 2

The plastic grocery bags swung from the handlebars as Robbie Ivy walked her bicycle onto the wrought iron stand in front of her apartment complex. The Sunday afternoon sun was strong, despite the shade of the palm trees, and she was perspiring in her T-shirt and worn jeans.

Robbie pushed a bar lock through her second-hand bicycle's frame and front wheel and locked it in place on the rack. Then she wove the extra-thick metal chain around the wheels, frame, and rack, clicked the lock closed, and pocketed the keys. With all the hardware, she felt a bit like a warden in a penitentiary. But this was the third bicycle she'd bought in the three months since she'd moved here after she and Jeremy had decided to take a break from each other. She was determined not to lose this one, even as she noted the bare, bent frame of what was once a bicycle attached to the stand. The vultures had stripped down the bike taking both wheels, the seat, handlebars, and the wire basket.

Remind me again why I decided to live on South Beach?

Robbie ran her fingers through her sweaty chin-length black hair, then slipped her arms through her canvas satchel and grocery bags. Truth was, she liked it here. Liked the vividness of the colors, the crumbling old buildings, the salty smell of the ocean. But mostly she was here because of the warmth. After Boston, she'd decided she

had no use for cold or the changing seasons. Year-round summer worked just fine for her.

She carried her bundles past hibiscus bushes and flowering bougainvillea. The neighborhood still had the feel of old Miami Beach. The two-story U-shaped apartment complex had been built in the 1930's Art Deco style with rounded corners and glass block walls. Rusty air-conditioning units sprouted from the faded seafoam green concrete block walls that surrounded a small swimming pool and cracked, pebbled Chattahoochee deck.

Robbie ran up the outside stairs to her second floor corner apartment. Just down the catwalk, her neighbor Gabriele was fumbling with his house keys, still in his evening clothes. His Dutch-boy platinum blonde wig and white lacy dress made a striking contrast with his long, black, muscular arms. A bit different from the jeans and button-downs he wore when he headed off to teach English at the local college.

"Need some help?" she called to him.

"Robbie. Thank God. Yes, please. Come save my life again. I must have the wrong key."

Robbie left her groceries in front of her apartment and went to join Gabriele. She examined the keys on his key ring, matching up the brand names with the locks on his door. The top bolt clicked open.

"You're a miracle worker," Gabriele said, leaning over to touch one of her beaded, feather earrings. "Are these new? They're exquisite, just like you."

"Thank you. I'll make you a pair."

"You're too good to me." He fluttered his tapered, black fingers in front of his lacy bodice. "First you do my taxes, which, by the way, I promise I'll keep my records better organized in the future."

She unlocked the bottom and pushed the door open. "Sure you will."

He tossed his head, the straight edge of the platinum wig swinging over his shoulder. “You know me too well, girlfriend.” He blew her a kiss. “But if there’s anything you need, just ask. I’m your Galatea—putty in your hands.”

“I thought Pygmalion carved his beloved Galatea out of ivory.”

He grinned. “Someone’s been reading her Ovid.”

“Have a nice beauty sleep, professor.”

Robbie returned to her own door, unbolted the two locks, and went inside with her groceries. It was a great little apartment. Cozy. And cheap. One side overlooked the pool, the other a wide street with a view of other low-rise pastel buildings. Palm trees were everywhere. Very different from the brick high-rise in Boston where Robbie had grown up, a place she could only remember as chilly, dark, and sad.

Matilda purred and rubbed against her ankles.

“Just a sec, kitten.” Robbie put the bundles on the small kitchen table, then scooped up the cat. She buried her face in Matilda’s soft white fur to take in her sunshine smell. “Any calls or visitors?”

Matilda meowed.

She let the cat spring from her arms onto the hardwood floor. Against the living room walls, mismatched bookcases that Robbie had picked up at estate sales overflowed with books, and her white sofa was covered with a thin layer of cat hair. In the center of the room were tables with half-finished necklaces and earrings, trays of colored beads, spools of wires, and plastic bags of feathers.

Jewelry making was the latest in a series of projects Robbie had taken up since she and Jeremy had separated. She was just trying to keep it simple for now—no car, no mortgage, no real job. And definitely no relationships that smelled of a future. Robbie was a little worn out from throwing her heart into something, then having it stabbed and gutted. Some people looked at her funny on hearing she’d once been a CPA on a fast track to corporate success. “And

now you're a bartender?" they'd say, like she was serving vomit, not alcohol.

But they didn't understand that the tragic death of Robbie's mentor had been another deposit of scar tissue on top of old layers that had never healed. And even though Robbie and Jeremy had taken some time to get away from everything, Robbie still occasionally felt a cumulative ache. So for now, jewelry making and bartending were fine. Well, at least they didn't make her hurt.

Robbie went back into the kitchen alcove and unpacked her groceries—a bag of salad, two boxes of pasta, a jar of spaghetti sauce, coffee, and bananas.

For dinner tonight, she'd have pasta. Just like last night. Maybe Gabriele would want to come over. No. He'd probably be sleeping.

Robbie sat down at the small oak table and picked up the painted ceramic salt and pepper shakers. They were in the shape of a mother and daughter wearing bonnets and dresses with aprons. Robbie used to play with them for hours when she was a child while she waited for her mom to come home from work.

She considered making dinner for Brett. But did she even want to see him tonight? They'd been dating for about a month, and while Brett was a lot of fun, she had to be in the right mood for his frenetic energy.

Should she call Jeremy? They'd told each other they would still be friends, but neither one had gotten in touch with the other in the months they'd been apart. She took out her cell phone and opened it. Just for dinner.

But what if Jeremy misconstrued the call, thinking she wanted to get back together?

She closed the phone. The mother and daughter shakers looked up at her stoically, as they had when she was a child.

A knock on the door startled her. She sat up, alert.

Through the sheer curtains in front of the kitchen window, she

could see a hunched, gray-haired man. No one she knew. He wore a well-cut navy blazer, but hadn't shaved in a day or so.

She went to the front door. "Can I help you?" she asked through the door.

"Roberta Brooks?" the man asked.

Something crashed inside her. *Roberta Brooks*, a child's voice in her head repeated. *My name is Roberta Brooks and I live at—*

The walls shifted. Robbie leaned against the door, trying to catch her breath.

"Are you there?" the man asked. "Roberta?"

She knew the voice. She hadn't heard it in eighteen years. Not since she was seven and he had kissed her goodbye.

"Please let me in. I need to speak with you, Roberta."

"That's not my name."

There was silence for almost a minute. An eternity as she remembered her tears and how she had clung to him.

"I keep forgetting," he said. "You're Robbie now. Robbie Ivy. Please let me talk to you, just for a minute."

Why had he come here? Why after all these years?

She took a deep breath, trying to compose herself, then opened the door.

Blue eyes—so much like her own. They watered at the sight of her.

He's nothing to you, she told herself.

The black hair had gone gray, and he was shorter than she remembered, only five eight or nine. How he used to tower over her and lift her high into the air. But this man seemed too unsteady to carry much of anything. And his face was wrong—deep wrinkles around his eyes and in his forehead, sagging cheeks that blurred his once-square jaw. A few wild white hairs protruded from his black eyebrows.

"Roberta," he said, "you're all grown up."

Daddy, she wanted to say. Instead, she held herself straight. "What do you want?"

"May I come in?" He seemed to be trying to peer around her. "Just for a minute?"

She glanced behind her at her home, her sanctuary. "I'd rather we talk by the pool."

"I understand."

His voice touched a place deep inside her, but she wasn't going to be taken in by him. Not after how he had treated her and her mother.

They went down to the courtyard and sat on stone benches on opposite sides of a table with an umbrella sticking up through its center. He turned his wedding ring around and around on his finger. His fingers were long and slender and the nails covered the nail bed with almost no white. Just like Robbie's.

"You have your mother's voice," he said, "and the same Boston accent, but you look just like—"

"Would you please tell me why you're here?"

"It's just . . . You're right." He ran his fingers through his hair. The gesture so familiar. "I'm here because I need your help."

"My help? How dare you—"

"Please. Let me finish. It's about your sister."

"Sister? What are you talking about?"

"Damn." He looked down at the mildewed mosaic tabletop. "I guess your mother didn't tell you."

Robbie's heart hiccupped. "Tell me what? What are you talking about? I don't have a sister."

"But you do. A half sister."

Not possible. Robbie was an only child. An only child with no mother, an absent father. No family at all.

“Her name is Kaitlin. She just turned eighteen.”

Half sister. Eighteen. Her father had left them eighteen years ago.

Robbie got up and went to the edge of the pool. A palm frond had fallen into the deep end and shifted ever so slightly as the water burbled.

He came over and stood beside her. “I thought you knew.”

The sting of his words reminded her of when her mom put antiseptic on a cut. Just as then, she forced herself to hold back tears until the pain subsided. All these years she’d had a sister. A little sister named Kaitlin. And no one had told her.

“Kaitlin’s a senior in high school. She came to Miami Beach with some friends a few days ago on her spring break.”

Her sister was here? In Miami?

“But she’s disappeared,” he said.

“Disappeared? What are you talking about?”

“She wasn’t answering her cell phone. Neither was her best friend, Joanne, so I drove here from home this morning. I spoke with the other girls they’d come down with. None of them have seen Kaitlin or Joanne since early Friday.”

A bright green iguana emerged cautiously into the sunlight, then darted back into the bushes.

“I’m sorry to lay this on you,” he said, “but I’m desperate. Kaitlin and her friend are good girls. They’re both going off to college in the fall. Maybe they got in with a bad crowd. I was hoping you’d know where I might begin to look for her.”

“Me?” She turned to him suddenly. “How did you even know where I live?”

He cocked his head, as though surprised by her question. “I’ve always kept an eye on you. I watched you going off to college, then when you took a job down here. I know about what you’ve been through.”

“You know? You know all about me? How can you say you’ve

been watching me my entire life and never tried to contact me?"

"I never wanted to lose you. It wasn't my choice."

"No. Stop it. It was your choice. And you can't come here and act like the last eighteen years didn't happen. You're not my father anymore. You lost that right."

"Dear God, Roberta. I never meant to hurt you."

"Please, go away. I'm sorry your daughter's missing, but I can't help you. Go to the police if you're worried about her."

He looked down at the cracked pebbled deck beneath his feet. "I've been to the police. They were not encouraging."

This was not her problem. He was a stranger to her. Both he and his daughter.

"I'm going inside now," she said. "I hope you find her, but please don't come to see me again." She started walking through the hibiscus bushes and palm trees toward the stairs.

"Roberta." He took a few steps after her. "Please, take this." He reached into his jacket pocket and held out a small manila envelope.

She grabbed the envelope, then ran up the stairs to her apartment slamming the door behind her. She sank to the floor and began to cry. She cried and cried into Matilda's soft warm fur until she was spent.

The manila envelope lay beside her. Robbie picked it up. Inside was a piece of paper with typed information—names, addresses, date of birth, height, weight—but it was the picture that caused the breath to snag in her chest.

It was a yearbook photo of a smiling girl with a heart-shaped face, long black hair, prominent dimples, and vivid blue eyes. Kaitlin Brooks, it said on the back.

But Robbie could just as well have been staring at her own high school photo.