

A young man with dark, wavy hair is lying on his side on a sandy beach. He is looking towards the camera with a slight smile. His skin is tanned and has some sand on it. The background shows the ocean waves and a clear sky.

THE

# NEIGHBOR BOY

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## CHAPTER 1

Voicemail again? Seriously?

"Dammit, where are you?" I shake the phone and scream, "I want to strangle you!"

Sadly, it doesn't help. Whenever Max is in trouble, he reverts to text only communication. So I call, it goes to voicemail, over and over. He'll text back eventually, making it impossible for me to even yell at him properly. He should have stayed up last night and finished packing those stupid CD's, ugh, and that game collection...I can't help but be cranky, having wasted the entire day just sitting here at his Aunt's house, hopelessly anticipating the arrival of movers that failed to show until just after six o'clock. By the time they unloaded it was already dark, leaving little time for settling in.

It had definitely been a mistake to leave him in charge of the city side exodus. I can only imagine how those first hours of the day had been lost while he "wrapped things up." Numerous protestations of innocence, "I swear, everything is moving along as quickly as possible..." were downright inexcusable by 2:00 p.m. Rush hour traffic had already begun to form on the L.I.E. by the time he had finally texted to confirm that the truck was on its way, making delivery a snail-slow process.

You know what? It's probably a good thing that he's staying in the city tonight. I'm too annoyed with him and couldn't pretend to be nice at this point.

Plopping down in the middle of the floor, I fold my legs under me and look around helplessly. Dropping my phone into my lap, I gaze upwards at a pike's peak of scattered boxes, a skyline of skyscrapers from my vantage point. Some boxes are his, some belong to me, and a few belong to his Aunt. I have a clipboard that she provided so I can make a list of what items are to be moved down to the basement during our housesitting phase. She also started me out with thoughtful suggestions for this list, including several pieces of particularly important antique furniture. I don't really mind that she doesn't trust us with her three hundred year old armoire. I'm beyond concerned about ruining anything of high value during this time period anyway, and I would really like to create room for us to live among our own things. Maxwell Stanhope's family has been collecting for generations, and although everything is insured, nothing is replaceable.

Sitting idly, I attempt to formulate some sort of plan of attack. Look for shoes, socks, bras, toiletries...those are obviously necessary right away. Books and winter coats can wait. Kicking the side of one of Max's large cardboard wardrobes in front of me, I grunt slightly, although there is no one around to notice. I realize that nothing of consequence is to be done about unpacking this evening. Lifting tired limbs, I rise and wander through a box-y maze into the kitchen.

I'm not hungry for dinner because with nothing to do all afternoon long, I have been lazy grazing the day away in front of the refrigerator, which I seem to be doing again. Aunt Vivian had considerably arranged for groceries to be delivered in advance of my arrival with a slightly irritating note. "Cassandra, Maxwell says you are off that silly diet, happy to hear it, enjoy!" Of course, I couldn't resist poking my nose into everything. I have only recently begun to disregard my waistline. Since I am not working at the moment, I feel no obligation to keep the calories to a minimum, a true indulgence. There are six different kinds of cheeses, an array of cured meats and a fatty-veined, long, weathered salami covered in peppercorns. The fridge is overflowing with an array of standard deli delights, plus a prepared crudité platter with hummus and some sort of creamy dip that dominates one entire level of storage. Bins have been filled with oranges, apples, berries and peaches; tuna salad, chicken salad, lobster salad; a blueberry pie does look fairly irresistible, but I'm feeling stuffed to the limit. I sigh, what I could really go for is some wine though, and a

cigarette maybe. What my fiancé doesn't know won't hurt him. It's his fault for leaving me alone on the first night in this house.

I hope we've made the right decision, moving here. It feels strange to be leaving the city, to be living in someone else's place. Granted, Max's Aunt is committed to a contract in Paris for two years, and she had been generously clear in indicating that we were to consider her East Hampton house our very own. Nevertheless, it's sad to leave behind the apartment that we've shared for the last three years. A certain degree of independence accompanied it, and engaged status is still taking some getting used to.

I begin to hunt, reading carefully as I move throughout the room. Wrapping my arms around one of the boxes, lifting with my knees, I carefully shift it on top of the box next to it. Using the tip of a scissors I slice into the box below, relishing the thought that I'm alone, which makes this intrigue possible. Reaching deep within I pull out several handbags, feeling for one in particular, and...there it is! Feeling the corner of the box press against my finger, I pull, crushing the edge somewhat, until finally it gives way. Removing my hand, I sit down on the floor and open my emergency cigarettes, inhaling the scent of musky tobacco. It is deeply satisfying to know that I can simply light one up without being scolded. Moving into the kitchen, I choose an inexpensive chinon from the wine storage room located off the side of a pantry, grab a glass and a corkscrew, and head outside to the front porch.

A sweeping wrap-around terrace offers three separate couches for lounging. Choosing the one closest to the door, I collapse into the overstuffed cushions and open the wine. The sky has fallen completely dark in a very short amount of time. It's amazing how the city's perpetual light shelters you from the total silence of blackness. It's just so dark out here that things seem unnaturally quiet to me. The stillness does seem to project loneliness. Am I lonely? Max will be here tomorrow night, which is a reassuring thought, but with outline of tall trees framing the area fencing me in, it does feel a little like a B-movie horror scene. A full planetarium is on display above, a mesmerizing view of twinkling stars. I try to remember the last time I've thought to look up and notice, but when is there something to see in the city sky? You can't distinguish stars when neon signs illuminate the streets. A smile rests gently on my lips, maybe peace and quiet is just what's needed. Maybe driving myself crazy in an attempt to create a career that only happens to one in a million, is, well, crazy. Maxwell continually reminds me that working for a living is no longer necessary, and the memory of my recent meltdown is still painfully fresh. But acting is something I've always wanted, something I've dreamed of from as far back as I can remember. What other the path would I want to follow at this point? And yet, the thought of returning to the stage makes me violently ill, like a crashing wall of water hitting me in the face. The paralyzing silence comes to me in a nightmare over and over again. I can't breathe when I think about it. Those empty spaces, the words completely escaping me, everyone trying to bring me back to the scene, but such an obvious misstep. A long sigh seeps out of every one of my pores.

In the distance, the churning sound of an older engine is gradually gaining momentum, and what could only be described as a "vintage" Mercedes in the Hamptons, rolls up to the curb of the house next door. The car lights turn off, as does the motor, yet no door opens. Sitting forward, I struggle to adjust my eyes again to the darkness and can just distinguish two figures in the car, two heads, and oh, oh! A low laugh escapes as the realization hits, they're making out!

At first I look away on instinct, but then turn back; they can't see me anyway...and wow, they are really going at it! I swallow what is almost an entire glass of wine and refill. Is it horrible to spy? Yeah probably, but the chinon is smoothing away my guilt quickly. A fast movement of arms in the air then down again, hmmm, someone must have removed

someone's shirt. Is he kissing her neck? Is she kissing his? Wow, Max and I really have to spice things up a little. I can't even remember the last time we really made out.

A slight stab of jealousy for the couple in the car is replaced by extreme amusement as one head disappears completely from view. Oh my God, is she giving him a blowjob? I watch as a shadow of movement up and down in the car gives them away, and a thin layer of sweat begins to form on the back of my legs. My body tips forward, almost as if I'm drawn towards them. As the car windows begin to fog along the edges, I notice that my hands are digging into the flesh of my upper thighs. Okay, so I'm a little turned on and I do feel silly, but since my fiancé has been stressed about the move, and about work, and about the wedding...well, we haven't been getting it on as much as I would have liked to lately. I think I hear something, a strange noise? Just my imagination most likely. How long has it been? Ten minutes? Fifteen? Twenty? Finally the passenger door releases, and a fairly tall man with appreciably wide shoulders steps out. Is neighbor guy having an affair? What's the story here? My curiosity is near unbearable.

There are no lights on next door, so the man is almost invisible as he walks stealthily across the lawn and then turns right, to walk along the side of the house. I pick up a cigarette, gently place it between my lips and light the end, enjoying my first puff of nicotine in almost two months. Just then the car, which had begun to pull away, stops a few feet from the curb. A hiss, a whisper, the faintest call out from the driver, and the man reemerges. Waving something in the air, the woman shakes her hand and holds out an object, which he returns to claim. His cell phone maybe? I watch as neighbor guy grabs the woman in his arms and pulls her face towards him, aggressively kissing her, passionately it would seem. Once again, I wonder who they are and what exactly is going on between them. Suddenly light explodes on the driveway, a series of bulbs that is obviously on a timer. It seems kind of early for a tryst of this type, maybe neighbor guy told his wife he was working!

Now in full view, I watch the man squeeze the woman's ass, before pushing her into the car and closing the door. He runs towards the house again, and as he does, something causes him to look over. Dammit! The light from the cigarette!

I toss it quickly to the floor and stomp on it, and looking back up, find that he is facing my direction. My breathing stops. He smiles and waves before continuing on to the house, giving me a frontal glimpse of what could only be described as an archetypal Greek God. It's pretty far away, but with the lights now illuminating the area, I can make out his defined cheekbones, full lips, giant dark curls framing his face. Both hands fly to my throat, and I blink a few times before exhaling slowly.

Oh...my...God! Oh my God, oh my God! The shock hits me in several waves – he's just a kid. It isn't an affair at all. It was two teenagers fooling around in a car. The neighbor guy is merely a neighbor boy.

## CHAPTER 2

The house is too quiet, unfortunately, for a good night's sleep. I've spent far too many years in the city listening to sirens, horns honking, voices drifting up from the street below. I always have trouble sleeping on vacation in general, because noise is the norm, and I generally feel out of sorts without it. But it's just after 10:00 a.m., so after tossing and turning for the past several hours, it's probably time to admit defeat and crawl out of bed. Throwing aside the pale green gingham coverlet that reeks of Hampton-esque interior design, I stand up, crack my neck to the right, then left and walk to a set of floral etched glass French doors. I chose one of the guest rooms with an outdoor patio attached, offering a wide view of the carefully manicured gardens and Olympic sized rectangular pool. It also affords a bird's eye perch of both neighbor's properties. Maybe we would settle on his Aunt's master bedroom, but for now I'm comfortable here. Leaning over the railing, I close my eyes and relish the warmth of sunlight on my lids. The cool breeze lifts errant hairs away from my face. After a time, I survey my surroundings.

To the right, a large brick and stone house spreads out in several directions, appearing to have been renovated in different architectural styles, most likely over many years. Some sections are more worn, but the overall effect is wealth and consequence, with untold rooms hidden under ivy and hydrangea, as well as a substantial pool house that sits on the rear of their property. To my left is a much smaller home and certainly less majestic, but prettier somehow, a white colonial with black painted shutters. A contained pool area is shaded by old, sprawling trees that have evidently been in residence for a long time, as their height dwarfs the trees planted on our own back lawn. A woman is sitting on a lounge chair by the pool with a little girl on her lap, and a slightly larger boy is basically running around in circles, trying to gain their attention. When suddenly he falls to the ground a small yelp escapes from somewhere within me, drawing the group's attention. The woman raises her arms in the air and waves. I wave back and go inside to hide from my embarrassment.

Pulling my hopelessly tangled hair back into a ponytail, I splash cold water on my face and dry myself with one of the many fluffy towels carefully folded and stacked in an apothecary styled cabinet, all clearly of the full loop Turkish cotton variety. The bathroom fixtures are made of polished brass, and my fingers turn cold when I move the faucet into an 'off' position. As I line my toothbrush with paste the sound of the doorbell surprises me. Looking down at my pajamas, I worry about who could be at the door.

Making my way down the winding staircase, I peer through the peephole and see a pretty brunette standing outside with a cherubic girl balanced in her arms. Both have long loose curls and big blue eyes. It's the woman from next door, so I open the door and smile.

"Hi."

"Good morning! I'm Angela Decker, I live next door. I think it's adorable that you freaked out when my kid fell. Obviously, you don't have kids. They fall a lot. Welcome to the neighborhood! Vivian told us that her nephew was moving in to take care of the place while she's in France."

Well, I suppose it is good news that the neighbors were forewarned of our arrival. "Hi, I'm Cassie."

"Cassie, it's nice to meet you. Sorry, I'd shake your hand but this one is starting to get too big to carry. I need both my hands to handle her! This is Sophie. Sophie, say hello to the pretty girl. She is going to be living next door to us."

Sophie turns her face quickly towards her mother and digs head first into her shoulder blade. "Ow! Sophie!" Angela chided her daughter. "She's shy sometimes."

"Oh don't worry, that's okay. I was shy as a kid too. Hi, Sophie, it's very nice to meet you too."

"Listen, why don't you get dressed and come over for breakfast? You probably have nothing in the house yet to eat."

Although this statement couldn't be farther from the truth, I can't help but be curious about the neighbor boy, who is obviously too old to be Angela's son. I accept.

"Great, see you soon. Just come on over whenever you are ready. We're having French toast. We'll wait for you."

Angela must be the nicest neighbor ever. New York City does not necessarily breed friendly conversation between neighbors. Mostly, people just want to get the hell home after work without having to talk to anybody.

"That's incredibly nice of you. I'll hurry!"

"Don't worry! I have to wrestle up my children anyway. See you soon." I watch them walk away together for a moment and then head upstairs to change clothes.

The Decker's front lawn feels familiar, since I spent last night staring at it for so long. As I work my way to the door, I notice all the little metal lights lining a pathway, which is what sprang to life when the neighbor boy ran past yesterday. I hear a loud screech from within the house, and although I ring the bell, the door has been left slightly ajar for me, so I enter hesitantly. "Angela?"

"Hiya, come on in Cassie! No! No!"

I hear a frightening sound that could resemble a child yelling, or a small animal dying, hard to say, but I am going to presume the former.

"Sophie! Sophie put that down right now! Sophie!" Angela looks over apologetically, "I'm so sorry, I'll be right back, don't move! Here!" She pushes a steaming cup of coffee on the counter towards me and then runs out of the kitchen to chase after her daughter, screaming loudly.

I glance around, taking note of the pretty copper pans hanging overhead, the vase full of bright pink cabbage roses in the corner, a bowl of fresh fruit sitting on top of the countertop. I add some cream and sugar that's conveniently sitting in front of me and sit down at one of the high stools lining a center kitchen island. Sipping my coffee, I contemplate whether or not it would be rude to nab a banana from that fruit bowl. My stomach is starting to churn with hunger pains, my intestines are getting too used to being fed often. I gulp down more caffeine.

"Hey."

A male voice from behind startles me enough to almost knock over my coffee cup as I turn around. Catching it safely in between my hands before it slides away, beyond my control, I hug the mug tightly in my grip. In front of me stands the boy from last night. The mess of curls on top of his head is unmistakable. He looks definitely over six feet, maybe six two or three even. His white undershirt is just sheer enough to give an impression of muscle beneath, and by anyone's measure his body looks disturbingly beautiful. I find it difficult to respond but do manage a small, "hey" in return.

"I'm Jasper, but you can call me Jas." He moves over to the fridge, retrieving a gallon of orange juice and then a glass from the cupboard next to it.

"Jazz? Like the music?" Ugh, that was stupid. Why did I say that? He stares at me, without commenting.

"I'm Cassandra, but you can call me Cassie." I reach forward to extend my hand, but the stool tips forward and I basically fall into his arms in a haphazard mess of upper limbs. He pushes back slightly, so that the chair is standing upright again, and scoots me back into place by sliding his hands underneath my armpits. It's awkward. I feel like a child, and even



though at 5'6 I am of average height for a woman, I disappear into his bulk. Neighbor boy obviously works out.

"You all right? Thought we lost you there for a minute."

I laugh. It sounds shrill and unfamiliar. I know how unnatural I must seem, but it's difficult to control. For the first time, we are close enough for me to see directly into his eyes, which aren't precisely hazel, but are not exactly green either, more of a burnt toffee color with mossy streaks around the edges. Jasper seems to make me really nervous, and I have never in my life felt so lame.

"I'm fine, thanks for the save."

He nods, stretches his arms overhead and then pours himself the juice. He tips his head back and drinks the entire portion in a series of guzzles, sending his Adam's apple into exaggerated action. He has the rough edges of a beard forming on his cheeks and neck. I wonder how old he is, maybe in college? Maybe a child from a previous marriage? Angela's stepson?

"How do you know my Mom?"

"We just met. I moved in next door."

He smiles widely, eyes lighting up with recognition, and if I didn't know better, I would say that he's smirking, even laughing at my embarrassment. I can feel the heat spreading across my face, and I wonder how red I'm turning. He is clearly not embarrassed at all, completely composed actually.

"So, you just moved in, like, yesterday, right?"

He raises his eyebrows dramatically up and down. There's that impish little smile of his again. He pushes all of his hair back with one hand, the loose pieces falling like springs.

"Yep. Yesterday."

"Ya, I thought I saw someone out on the porch last night." He laughs, and puts a finger to his lips in a secretive gesture.

I feel so completely awkward, what can I say? He knows that I saw him. I know that he knows, uuuggghhh. I bite my lip and look down into my coffee as if it is the most interesting thing I have ever seen before in my entire life.

A voice emerges from the hallway to save me, "I'm sorry, Cassie! Coming now!"

Angela thankfully returns with her daughter in tow. "Oh please, Jasper, honey, take her upstairs and don't let her come out of her room until every bit of syrup is gone. I don't have the patience and we have a guest. Did you introduce yourself to Cassie? She's living next door while Mrs. Stanhope is abroad." Angela sighs. "Motherhood is a constant challenge!" Smiling with such obvious affection for her children, I instantly love her. She pushes Sophie into Jasper's arms. "Three and four are the most difficult ages I think! Thankfully, we are almost past that with her!"

"No prob, Mom. And ya, Cassie and I have now officially been introduced."

I cough up a little coffee that has been swallowed too aggressively.

Jasper kisses Sophie on the forehead, which is smeared with maple stickiness. "Soph, did you think you were a pancake?"

Sophie giggles, "Yes! I'm a pancake Jas! Oooh, a chocolate chip pancake! Can I be a chocolate chip one?"

"But then I would eat you, and what would I do without a little sister?"

His mother rubs the side of his face, "Go shave. You know I don't like this look. We are going over to your grandmother's this afternoon. Clean up a little, okay?"

"Whatever you say, Mom. Nice to meet you, Cassie."

And then he winks at me. He winks. I don't know what to do with that, and I sure hope that Angela hasn't noticed it. A small silence ensues as Angela watches her kids leave the kitchen.

"He's my angel. It's so hard to believe that he's graduating from high school. It is true, you know, what they say. Time goes so quickly!"

Hmmm, her angel, well, not exactly. I am deeply surprised by the knowledge that he is, in fact, Angela's son. "Where's he going to college?"

"Oh, he's still waiting to hear back. He's not really into academics, but he's hoping for NYU. He wants to move into the city and focus on his band. And I have to say that he's really talented! That's not just because he's my son, I swear. He plays the guitar, sings, and writes his own music. He's pretty damn good! But we want him to go to school, obviously. I don't know if his grades are good enough to get him into NYU though. We'll see."

"I don't want to offend you or anything, but you look way too young to have a son that age."

She laughs, and I imagine that their house is often filled with the harmonious blend of her vivacious laughter, which rings loudly out like a chime.

"Story on that is we had him young. Jimmy, that's my husband, got me knocked up on prom night believe it or not. I know, such a cliché. We really were in love though, and we decided to have the baby and get married. My parents were livid. My dad stopped speaking to me entirely for like, a year. Anyway, that's why my other kids are so much younger. We waited to have Connor, he's six, and Sophie, she's four. Honestly, I worry that I'm more friend and less of a mother to Jasper sometimes, but he's such a mature kid. He really helps out a lot around here. Jimmy travels a lot for work."

"Wow. That must have been hard on you both though, having a child while you still were kind of children."

"It was difficult in the beginning, but we didn't consider ourselves children, really. We grew up together, we'd been dating since we were fourteen...we always planned to get married and have a family eventually. It just happened a lot sooner than we expected! It was the good kind of challenge in life though, you know what I mean? All for the best, that sort of thing? James Decker was always the one for me. I never had any doubt, even as a kid!"

I nod and smile. What must that be like? To know that you've found the man you want to marry before you've even started adulthood in earnest. People are so very different, soooooo unpredictable. I'm still concerned as to whether or not Max and I are perfect for each other, but who has perfection really? Well, except for Angela and James Decker I guess.

"Of course, it wasn't ideal though. I'd freak out if any of my kids got in trouble like that. I think my husband started talking to our son about condoms when he was like, I don't know, ten or something!"

Oh God, this is too much. I do not need to hear about the neighbor boy's sex education, which has clearly worked too well.

"So, enough about me. Tell me about you, Cassie! When are you getting married? That ring of yours is to die for!" She grabs my left hand and nods appreciatively. "I hate to ask, I know it's inappropriate, but my God, that thing is huge! How much bling ya got there?"

When Max had produced that little red box, I did go into shock a little. I mean, I knew he had family money and most likely a treasure trove of jewels existed in a safe somewhere, but when his great grandmother's five plus carat emerald cut ring from Cartier slid on my finger, all I could think was, "how am I going to wear this thing to auditions? And on the subway? And to the gym?" I don't believe I looked nearly as happy as he had presumed I would. It's really heavy, and sometimes I get a rash under the band because I am too scared to take it off when I wash my hands in a public bathroom. It does draw attention away from my long bony fingers, which is nice, but it still doesn't feel natural to me. The ring and I are uncertain allies.

"Well, it's his great grandmother's ring so...ya, it's big."

She holds my hand in hers, "wow, it's gotta be at least five carats, right?"

I feel really awkward saying how many carats exactly, so I just nod a yes.

"Well, good for you!" Angela laughs, "I never even got an engagement ring, we were too young and too broke! He did buy me a beautiful diamond eternity band for our anniversary one year, but I hardly ever wear it. My hands are always deep in something icky because of the kids. And when are you getting married? You are going to be SUCH a beautiful bride!"

Ugh, the million-dollar question everyone keeps asking. I still have no good answers. "That's nice of you to say, thank you." I pause, "I don't really know when yet, we haven't chosen a place. We can't decide if we want to get married in the city, or out here, or somewhere else entirely...it's still up in the air."

Just then, Jasper reappears with only a marginally cleaner version of his sister attached to his hip. "I couldn't get her to change her shirt, Mom. I honestly tried." Sophie's pink tee shirt is covered in glitter and maple syrup.

"Cassie, I am so sorry, just give me a few more minutes and then we will eat, I promise!"

And thus I am alone again with the neighbor boy. No eighteen-year-old kid should be allowed to have a chest this broad. I tend to talk too much when I'm nervous, and sadly, I am very, very nervous.

"So, your Mom says you applied to NYU."

"Yep." He doesn't blink, focusing those multi-hued eyes of his directly on mine.

"And you play in a band."

"Yep."

"What's the name of your band?"

"The Spearhead Syndicate."

"Interesting, where does the name come from?"

"Long story."

We both get quiet. I can't tell if he finds my casual conversation boring or just unnecessary.

"So, you're what, like, a model or an actress or something?"

That's weird; I wonder what makes him think so. "Why do you assume that?"

"Isn't that what all girls do when they look like Miss America? You have that girl next door thing meets Playboy thing. It reeks of model-actress."

Whoa, that's kind of rude. This teenager is insulting me because I have big boobs and a dimple? Playboy? I've never posed naked for anything, and I am way too short to ever model. I am a munchkin by model standards. And how dare he! I'm completely irritated by his statements. I'm also way more accustomed to guys being nice to me because I'm pretty, not mean to me because of it.

"I'll have you know that I've never once been naked in anything, and I've never been in any kind of pageant like that." Why do I even care what he thinks?

"Bet you've worn a crown though. I bet you were homecoming queen, prom queen, belle of every ball..." He laughs.

"Listen, kid," his eyes flash in surprise as he takes in my anger. "You don't know anything about me. I work hard to be a good at what I do, and it does not make me an empty headed bimbo. Some actors actually care about their craft, you know."

He looks deeply amused and not at all intimidated by my outburst. "I didn't mean it as an insult. You look like a spokes model for something, that's all. You're really pretty, more than most girls. It's just obvious that things probably come easy to you because of the way you look."

Although I will admit that the constant flow of free pretzels from the guy selling them in the park would probably never happen if I was fat and disfigured, I still refuse to admit defeat.

"And what about you? Your life is much more difficult because you're gorgeous?"

He smiles. "You think I'm gorgeous?"

I sigh loudly. He has trapped me. "Oh please, like you don't know that already."

He laughs. "I do. In fact, I am banking on it helping us get a recording contract. Music biz likes to present an attractive package, although I think my band mate, Ryan, is way hotter than the rest of us. He's the one whose face will be everywhere if we make it big. He looks like Brad Pitt, and his girlfriend is pretty damn Angelina, if you know what I mean. She sings back up for us sometimes."

Yes, I get it. They are both beautiful people, but how could anyone be more beautiful than the neighbor boy? He looks down at me, thick eyelashes sheltering half of his ocular cavity.

"You are pretty damn Angelina too, I mean, just for the record. And I don't usually go for brunettes, but you're really attractive for a brunette. Oh, and I'm sure you are a very talented actress. I have no doubt that you'll be famous someday. Quote me on that." He smiles at me, widely.

Does he have any idea how old I am? There's no way a boy ten years younger than me is actually, well, flirting with me? If that's what you call it when someone delivers a compliment wrapped in an insult. He doesn't like brunettes? Uh, hello, most of the world's female population falls into that category.

"Very few blondes and redheads are not helped along by the bottle, just an FYI. It's a recessive gene." He immediately adjusts to my defensiveness.

"Sorry if I offended. I'm an idiot. You are beautiful. I think I love you. Mean it." He grins again.

I cannot help but see the image of him making out last night, grabbing that girl's butt, pushing her up against the car. A trickle of sweat has begun to form along the back of my neck, which I quickly attribute to the caffeine and my empty stomach. Standing up, I hate to admit I'm feeling a little dizzy.

"Listen, can you thank your Mom for the coffee? I really should get some stuff unpacked before my fiancé arrives from the city." I move towards the front door, speaking to Jasper without looking directly at him. "Please tell her I am so sorry I can't stay for breakfast, it's getting late...thanks!" I wave as I run. Not the most dignified exit, but an exit nonetheless.

As soon as the door closes behind me, I collapse against it, my skin responding to the cool texture of painted wood still soaked in morning dew. The strange sensation that I am being watched causes me to look at the kitchen window, where the neighbor boy is indeed watching me, so I stride forward confidently in the direction of my own house with my head held high, as if he hadn't just knocked the romantic wind out of me.

## CHAPTER 3

It's the first truly really warm day of the year, making me itch to spend some time in the sand. It hardly ever gets past seventy-five degrees in May, a prime reason why the 'season' in the Hamptons officially begins after Memorial Day. Thus, I consider the weather a gift to be opened immediately. I crawl back into bed and roll over on top of Max, forcing him to awaken.

"Morning," I kiss him lightly on the cheek. "It's beautiful outside, let's go to the beach."

He groans. "Okay, later."

"Nooooo, now. It'll be empty and pristine. Let's take a breakfast picnic!"

"Cassie, I'm tired. I was up late finishing up those damn reports. I don't want to get up yet."

"Oh, come on! What is the point of us moving out here if we don't take advantage of it? The beach is a short walk. You can do it."

"I can, but I don't want to."

"Please? Do it for me? You can sleep on the sand! Come on Max, I'm restless out here. I've been waiting for it to be nice enough to spend some time at the beach."

"We will. Later."

He pushes me away and rolls over to his other side. I sigh dramatically, as any good actress is liable to do when disappointed, but there is no response from him.

"Maxwell!"

"Cassie, you require too much energy. Let me sleep"

"Fine! I will just go by myself."

"Good, great actually. Go to the beach, and I will meet you there later."

I stare down his back, but he really does seem to have drifted back off to sleep with amazing speed.

After rubbing myself down with sunscreen and slipping into my favorite navy and white striped bikini, I stomp around the bedroom noisily, purposefully trying to make it difficult for Max to sleep as a revenge tactic, but to no avail. He remains silently curled up under the covers. It's very frustrating. I glance around, let's see, I need sunglasses, I grab an oversized red scarf I always use as a sarong, a wide brim straw colored sunhat, my iPad, no, maybe I will just bring a regular old book. Max's Aunt has an impressive library in the salon. I do need my music though, which is still docked. As I grab it, I inadvertently push the 'on' button and music blasts throughout the room. Max sits up startled, gives me a dirty look and pulls the covers over his head while snarling at me. Whatever, he is always so cranky in the morning. Just once, I would like to know what it feels like to look over at someone who just says "good morning" back, takes you in his arms, and snuggles you rightfully into a happy new day. Just once.

After throwing a towel into my beach bag, I wander downstairs and stand in front of what seems like endless built in shelves stocked with books. Art books, classics, modern literature, poetry, plays, the diversity of Aunt Vivian's home collection is astounding. I swiftly decide upon *Wuthering Heights*, an oldie but goodie, too intimidated by the many choices, and toss it into my bag. Should probably be careful with it though. This book doesn't exactly look like it was purchased at a Barnes & Noble. It's probably an edition of value. Everything around me probably has tremendous value. I really do need to remember that.

The walk to Main Beach is less than a mile, particularly if I cut through a few yards, so that's what I decide to do. It's early enough that I won't get caught. The almost official



flower of the Hamptons, hydrangea, is just beginning to bloom, and it lines the driveways, pools, and gardens of every house I walk past. An ombré effect blends pink to purple to periwinkle blue, with soft petals that bend backwards like four leaf clovers. Some houses are more modern, and some are very traditional, facades remaining as they have always been instead of remodeled with age. Those are my favorites, the homes that recalled old Georgian and Edwardian architecture, most likely built before the twentieth century. They have more character, more of a true place in this area, which had been colonized so very long ago.

The soft sway of sea grass hides the beach from view at first, but as I cross one of the wooden bridges I am greeted with an empty expanse of honey tinted white sand and dark blue waters, lapping wildly against the boundary of earth. Pulling out a thin waffle knit blanket, I lift it high into the air before allowing it to collapse gently on to the sand. I spread my beach accouterment around me and untie my sarong. Extending my legs comfortably in front of me and then removing my hat and tipping my face upwards, I am thoroughly enjoying the burning sensation of early summer heat radiating on my cheeks and forehead. I sigh of happiness.

"Cassandra."

My eyes fly open. My stomach drops into the abyss.

"Oh, Jasper, uh, hi."

"Hi. How ya doin'?"

"Good." I take in the tight white tank, nylon mesh shorts skimming the surface of his skin, what the hell is he doing here? Nikes...oh, he's running.

"And you?"

It almost seems like he's taking me in as well. Even though he's wearing sunglasses, they have only a light brown tint and the transparency doesn't entirely shield. I can feel his eyes move from the top to the bottom of me, and then back again. Is he staring at my boobs? Am I completely paranoid? Perhaps.

"Yeah, it's all good." He smiles. More of a smirk really. Like one of those cartoon characters who is about to drop a safe on another's head.

"So, you go running here a lot?"

"Every morning."

"Wow, every day? Even before school?"

"Yep."

"All year? During the winter?"

"Yep. But I have to bundle up. It gets pretty damn arctic out here in January and February."

"I can only imagine." That's impressive. The boy commits.

"I find it makes a good start to the day, gets my blood pumping. And it's actually really beautiful out here in the winter. More savage looking. The waves get really high."

He tosses his phone on to the blanket and sits down next to me. Small pools of sweat define the contour of his nipples and the muscles of his upper abdomen. Although the material under his armpits is soaked through, even something about that seems sexy to me.

"How do you like living out here so far?"

"It's relaxing. I needed some down time."

"Oh ya, why? Life in the city too fast for you?"

"No." Why does this boy always make me feel so defensive? "I have a lot of stuff to work out."

His head crooked slightly, "Like what kind of stuff?"

"Work stuff, and, other stuff." Wedding stuff, but for some reason I don't feel like discussing that with Jasper.

"What's the sitch with work stuff? You want to be an actress, right? What was your last part?"

"I was in an off-Broadway play."

"Oh ya? That's really cool, good for you. But, I assume something went wrong or you wouldn't need time to think about it. So what happened?"

Well, he was certainly intuitive. "A bad review."

"That's just one person's opinion though, you can't base your entire career on it."

"It was more than one bad review. I dropped the ball on stage basically."

"Every performer has one of those moments."

"And I haven't gotten any of the commercials, or even bit parts that I've auditioned for over the last three months. I feel like I might not be good enough at this."

I don't know why I told him that. It sounds horrible when I say it aloud and it's so personal. Why did I tell him that? Although it's a completely true statement, I don't even know the guy.

He sighs, "Sometimes it goes in waves like that. It's not always a reflection on you. We had a label guy come to a performance I had really geared up for, and he walked out early, while we were still on stage. Devastating."

He shook his curls loose from a band that I hadn't even noticed that is wound around his perfectly shaped head.

"And then we had a few gigs cancel and I don't know...I am not sure about college, but last year I was thinking that it's the safer decision. My Mom doesn't even know this, but I got into Syracuse. So, I freaked out about turning that down to wait and hear from NYU, because I just know that if I go up north to school, my music will go nowhere. If I am in the city, I think we've got a real shot at something. We've had a few gigs recently that were great. I know it's hard to believe in yourself when other people pass you by, but you have to keep the faith. If you believe that you're a good actress, you have to believe the work will come."

"Those are really great words of encouragement actually."

"You sound surprised."

"I am."

"Why?"

I am drawing a blank. How can I tell him that he is not supposed to speak like that because he's only eighteen and should be using words like "kegger" and "dude." He proceeds to draw his own conclusion.

"Do I seem that young to you?"

I feel caught off guard, and without thinking, I answer honestly.

"Yes...and no..."

He points to *Wuthering Heights*, which is sitting between us.

"We read that book last year. I really liked it. Heathcliff is one angry guy. Sad that they never set it right, don't you think?"

Of course, he read it in English class last year, whereas I've read it at least twenty times, just for personal amusement. I graduated college before Jasper even got to middle school.

"Yes, it's an incredibly sad love story."

He pushes his sunglasses on top of his head, sending those thick dark curls rebounding in different directions.

"When are you getting married?" His eyes have a strange little sparkle to them.

Great, exactly what I wanted to avoid. "I don't know yet. We are still negotiating wedding details. His family wants a big wedding, and I, well, I just, I don't know...seems like a lot of work for a party that only lasts a few hours."

I sound like I'm justifying. Oh, who cares? It is what it is. We just haven't finalized things.

"Well, getting married is a big deal. The party is for you, so it's probably worth the work, right? I thought women love the whole wedding thing. I definitely want a big wedding when I get hitched."

"You already know what kind of wedding you want? That's not something guys usually think about ahead of time."

"Well, I think about my parents a lot and how they didn't have a real wedding, and I have a big family, so I would want everyone around, I think. Ya, that's what I would want."

I smile, unable to control my lips from widening. It's adorable that he's already considered his future matrimony.

"What's your fiancé's name?"

"Maxwell."

"How long you guys been together?"

"Uh, about four years."

"That's a long time. You have problems getting him to commit?"

"I haven't been in any rush. I'm only twenty-seven. Max is twenty-eight. We have plenty of time."

"I hope I'm married by then. I want to have kids before I'm thirty. I don't want that kind of age difference, ya know? I want to be a cool dad."

"I see. Well, I definitely do not want kids before I'm thirty, so apparently you are far more mature and settled in your decisions than I am."

Sadly, this is very true. The thought of having a child right now drives me into a terrible panic. I think childbirth sounds awful. I also enjoy sleeping. I enjoy sleeping very much in fact, and the friends of mine who have procreated no longer sleep. Ever.

"So, you aren't in a rush to get married and you don't really want a wedding...maybe you're not ready." He leaned in closer to me, a tiny bit closer than necessary. "Or maybe you are just with the wrong guy."