



PORTION  
*of the*  
SEA

Books by  
CHRISTINE LEMMON

*Portion of the Sea*

*Sanibel Scribbles*

*Sand in My Eyes*

*Whisper from the Ocean*

# PORTION *of the* SEA

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*A novel*

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CHRISTINE LEMMON



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PORTION of the SEA

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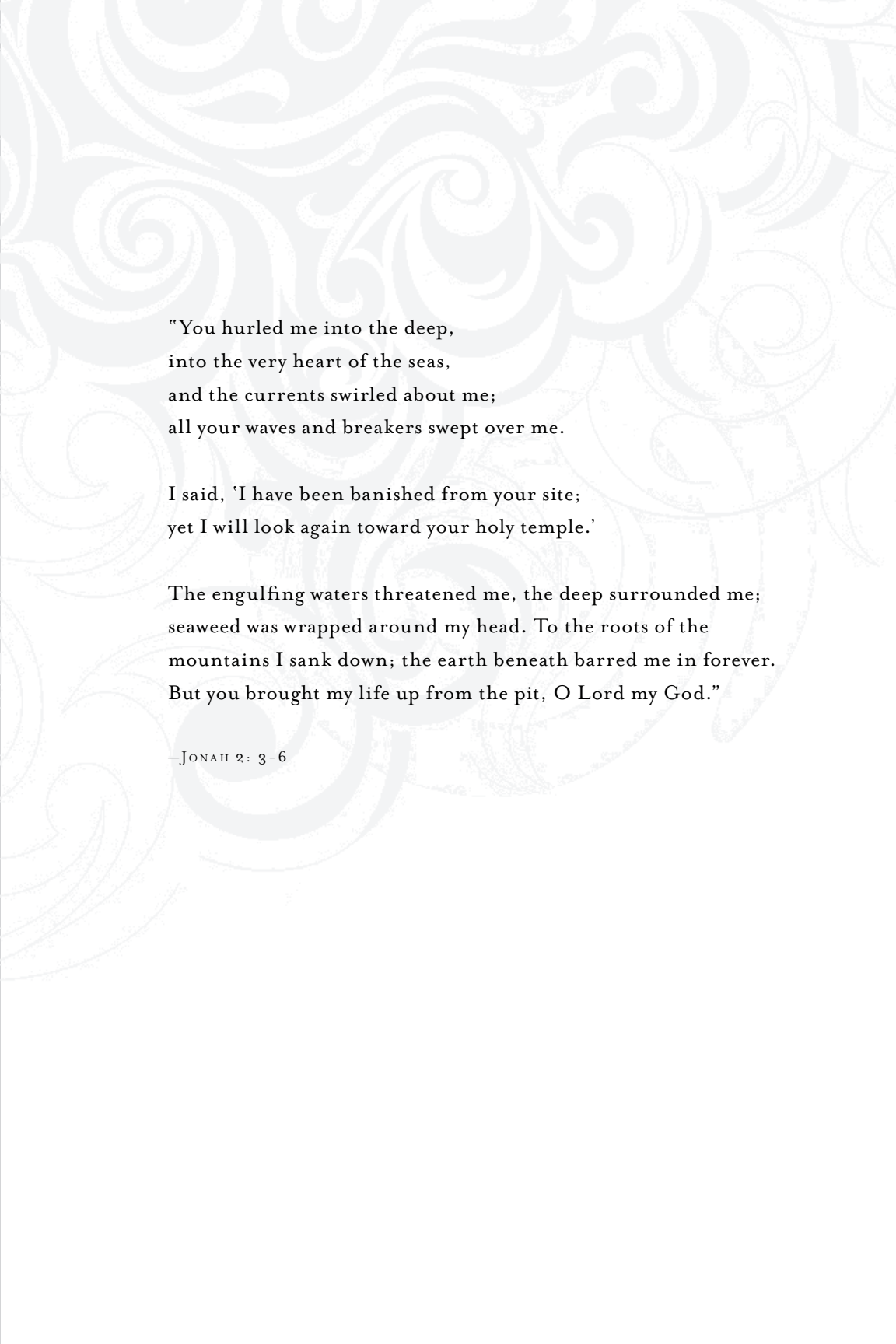
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To John



“You hurled me into the deep,  
into the very heart of the seas,  
and the currents swirled about me;  
all your waves and breakers swept over me.

I said, ‘I have been banished from your site;  
yet I will look again toward your holy temple.’

The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me;  
seaweed was wrapped around my head. To the roots of the  
mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in forever.  
But you brought my life up from the pit, O Lord my God.”

—JONAH 2: 3-6



## AUTHOR'S NOTE

**THIS IS A WORK OF FICTION.** I wrote it while living on Sanibel, and my love for the area has inspired the writing. It has always fascinated me how generation after generation of families who could vacation anywhere in the world continue returning to Sanibel. My grandparents were the first in our family to fall in love with the area and move to the island.

They passed their passion on to my parents who began vacationing there from the Midwest. I was two years old when I first walked the white beaches in search of seashells, and I continued doing so all the way through college, spending spring breaks with Grandma on Sanibel. I like to think of my love for the area as being inherited.

My husband and I did most of our dating on Sanibel and later held our wedding reception there. A portion of my heart stayed even as the tides of our careers carried us geographically near and far from Florida over and over again throughout the years. John and I have lived all over the country. But just as two songbirds travel to far-off places seasonally only to return to the same nest year after year, so too did we find ourselves returning to Sanibel, this time to live. Living here has inspired the writing of *Portion of the Sea*.

The history of the island has always interested me; however, in this story I did not intend nor attempt to portray real people or real-life experiences of any of Sanibel's historical residents or visitors. For information on the history of Sanibel, I recommend a visit to the Sanibel Historical

Village & Museum. I created this story and its characters from my imagination; however, I did read historical books, and they were valuable to me. I recommend them. They include the following:

Dormer, Elinore M. *The Sea Shell Islands*. Tallahassee, FL: Rose Printing Company, 1987. (A History of Sanibel and Captiva)

LeBuff, Charles. *Sanibel Light*. Sanibel, FL: Amber Publishing, 1998. (An Historical Autobiography)

O'Keefe, Timothy M. *Seasonal Guide to the Natural Year*. Golden, CO, Fulcrum Publishing, 1996. (A Month by Month Guide to Natural Events)

Oppel, Frank and Meisel, Tony, eds. *Tales of Old Florida*. Secaucus, NJ, Castle, 1987.



# I

## SANIBEL ISLAND

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1953

### *Lydia*

*There is a time in every woman's life when pink is her favorite color, when anything is believable and the lines separating the possible and the impossible are blurred. It was that time for me when I first met Marlana, and the colors of my world changed forever.*

*There are many reasons why women tell their stories. I'll tell mine for one reason only—I never want to forget the girl I was and the dreams I had.*

IT WAS SPRING IN Florida, and I was as much a part of the spring day as the roseate spoonbills flying overhead and the hot pink periwinkles covering the ground and the pale pink coquina shells burying themselves beneath the sand. I was shy, too, like those coquina shells.

I was sitting on a blanket spread out across the white powdery sand of Sanibel Island, with the late afternoon sun beaming down upon me when I opened my diary and began to write. This crescent-shaped island located in Southwest Florida and extending into the Gulf of Mexico, my father had told me when we arrived two days ago, was my place of conception. Ever since he shared that news with me, I had been trying to squeeze from him more juicy details regarding my conception, but I quickly learned it was one of those “hush hush” topics, the kind that makes fathers who hate any form of dancing look like they’re about to do the jitterbug.

“So you and my mother were vacationing here when my conception occurred?” I had asked him over breakfast.

“We were.”

“Define the word *conception* for me, Daddy.”

I was good at vocabulary, and my father was proud of me for this. But when I asked him to define that word for me, he looked nervous as a school-boy on stage before an audience and judges. And then he choked on his grapefruit juice. I waited until he recovered, and then I repeated the word.

“Conception,” I said. “What is the definition of conception?”

He walked over to the bookshelf and picked up the wildlife book he had been reading the night before. “Most of the year the heads and necks of brown pelicans are white,” he explained. “But during breeding season, the heads of the pelicans turn a distinctive yellow color, and the sides and back of the necks a dark reddish brown.”

“Daddy,” I said, rolling my eyes, “you’re speaking to the state of Illinois vocabulary champion. You think I’m going to accept a definition like that? I’m not.”

He closed the book and tried once more. “Much like the pelicans, there are also changes that must take place in the body of a man and woman right before conception.” He was looking back and forth at the bowl of fruit and me. “Let’s just say, after ‘courtship’ is over, the neck and heads of the pelicans return to white. I know it’s a lot to think about. Conception—it’s all so detailed.”

“One more thing,” I said. “Where exactly on the island did my concep-

tion take place? Was it in a bungalow or on the beach?”

“Lydia!” he said, and I knew I had rattled his cage. “There are things a girl shouldn’t ask, nor know, nor think about. Enough! Understood?”

“Sorry, sir. But I am growing up.”

“You’re only fifteen.”

“Almost sixteen.”

“You could be thirty and I’d still say you’re too young to know those sorts of things about . . . about courtship.”

“Conception,” I corrected. “The word in question was ‘conception.’”

“Whatever,” he said. “I regret mentioning that word in the first place. It’s time to move on now. How about you start making me lunch.”

I stopped writing about it all and looked up from my pink-poodle diary, wondering whether the details of my conception meant anything at all. I did have hair as white as the Sanibel sand I was now digging my toes into, and eyes which were most days blue but on occasion green like the Gulf of Mexico. Then again my mother was a fair-skinned Irish woman with green eyes. I could probably credit her for the way I look more than my place of conception.

I often watched mothers and daughters as they shopped, drank sodas, walked in the park together, and now strolled by me on the beach, and I could always match which girls belonged to which mothers. Usually it was their hand gestures flapping about in a synchronized manner like wings of birds, or their smiles, identical to those of dolphins. Sometimes it was less obvious, and I had to match their eyes or the shapes of their hips and butts. And there were the girls who gave it away the moment they opened their mouths, sounding sarcastic, critical, uppity, or sweet like their mothers—similar to parrots repeating whatever they’d heard over and over again.

As the warm, comforting air wrapped itself around me, I tried not to feel sorry for myself, a parrot alone in its cage with no one to mimic, no one to teach me about certain words and things I wanted to know. My mother died when I was an infant, leaving me her smile, her hair, and on some days, if I wore green and stood under the right lighting, the color of her eyes. I loved to look at pictures of her, but all they told me was what she looked like.

One day I had asked my father to tell me more about her, about things she loved. And when he told me there was an island off the coast of Florida that the two of them had visited once, and that my mother had fallen madly in love with, I had to go there, to see it for myself. And if she were sitting here beside me now, I would turn to her and say, "You and I are a lot alike. I agree with you that this place is utopia." And just as my father said that my mother never wanted to leave the island and return to the Midwest, neither did I. But after a one-week vacation here they did leave, and nine months later I was born. This was the first time my father had been back since her death nearly fifteen years ago, and we were here for a week.

It was also the first vacation he had ever taken me on. He didn't like vacations. He had accumulated a treasure chest of wealth and money but didn't know what to do with it, nor did he care. It wasn't the money he liked but the acquiring of it. He was a man who lived to work, and earning salaries that rose higher each year was pure recreation to him. Vacations, vocabulary competitions, and me in general, only got in the way.

I'm sure wives know as much or more about their husbands than daughters do about their fathers; so, my mother must have known this about him, which is why she put it into writing, that sometime around my sweet sixteenth birthday my father must take me here to see the place she loved. They found this request of hers in a letter she wrote the same morning they found her on the bedroom floor.

I turned to the front of my diary, to where I had first started entering all the information I had gathered about my mother. And now the book was like a precious seashell to me, with a living creature inside. As I flipped my thumb through its pages, I swore I heard her laughing, whispering, and crying out loud.

I clasped my hands together tightly, closed my eyes, and whispered to my mother. I only talked to her every so often and didn't know whether or not she could hear me. "Thank you for insisting that I see this island. I love it. If loving a place is an inherited trait, then I got it from you. We are alike in many ways, I think." I stopped only to wipe a tear from my face and then continued. "But I hope we're different. Please tell me we're dif-

ferent. I want to be different from you, too."

I opened my eyes and listened, thinking I heard and felt someone or thing hovering behind me. Maybe it was the seagulls, for great numbers of them had been stalking my box of crackers. Or maybe it was my mother's spirit. But then I twisted around and looked up to find a woman standing behind me holding a plastic bucket.

"Did I interrupt?" she asked, soaring over me, wearing a white bathing cap decorated with brightly bold circles. She looked like a movie star.

"No. Interrupt what?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "I thought maybe you were praying, so I waited to hear an 'Amen.' "

"No, I was talking to my mother," I said, and then regretted telling her that. I should have said I was talking to myself or, better yet, said nothing at all.

But she didn't look at me like I was crazy and instead turned her focus toward some shells in her bucket and nonchalantly picked a few up and tossed them back to the beach. I had to stare. She was glamorous, wearing one of those two-piece bathing suits, the kind my father would never allow me to wear, and the kind I had never seen anyone other than a mannequin at Marshal Fields wearing. I pulled my eyes up off her belly—a good quarter of it was showing—and placed them back onto her face.

And that's when I noticed she wasn't looking into her bucket at all, but rather her eyes were stretching all the way down to my diary, lying open on the blanket beside me. The woman was trying to read what I had written, so I nudged it over a few inches to be sure, and then she cocked her head to the side and continued reading with the fervor of a gull feasting on its prey. As I did with the cracker box earlier, I slammed it shut, not wanting some stranger to peek any further inside at the essence of my mother captured in a book. Then I jumped up from the sand, ready to "shoo" her away, to fling my arms and possibly kick, but I didn't know her next move and feared she might take off down the beach with the seagulls, my diary and the words depicting my mother dropping from her mouth.

"Hi. I'm Marlana," she said in the most elegant of voices, turning her eyes back at me. "Marlana DiPluma. Are you here on vacation?"

“Yes,” I said as quick and snappy as one might say the word “yes.”

“Aren’t you going to introduce yourself?”

“Lydia,” I said. “Lydia Isleworth.”

“And your mother?”

I made a face at her and then remembered it was me who said in the first place that I was talking to my mother who clearly wasn’t here. “She died when I was an infant.”

“I’m horribly sorry to hear that.”

“It’s fine,” I said, sitting back down again. “I’ve written everything my father has told me about her in my diary. And it’s private. Diaries are private, you know.”

She laughed and started swinging her pail back and forth like a child as she looked up at the clouds. There were only two clouds in the entire sky, and they weren’t shaped like anything fascinating so soon she stopped swinging the pail and bent down eye-level with me. “I respect journal keepers more than you could know,” she said. “And I am a firm believer that the words a woman writes in her journal are like bits and pieces of her heart, soul, and mind.”

I loved words, vocabulary words, but I never thought about words as bits and pieces of anyone’s heart, soul, or mind. I wanted to ponder what she had said, but I also wanted to know why she wore a scarf wrapped around her head, covering her nose. Back home we wore our scarves as belts or halter-tops, or tied around a ponytail like mine was now, but never around our faces to cover our noses, like she wore hers. It was a pretty scarf, brightly colored chiffon.

“I don’t mean to pry,” she said, standing back up again. “But is your father remarried?”

“No,” I snapped.

“So you’ve been raised by a man?”

“No,” I said again. “I’ve got nannies, housekeepers, and tutors, and they’re all women.”

“I see. So, where are you visiting from?”

“Chicago.”

“Do you come here often?”

“No. It’s the first time I’ve been back.”

“Since when?”

“My conception.”

She raised an eyebrow at me. “Really? Not many people know that sort of information.”

“My father regrets telling me.”

“Where’s your father now?”

I reached for my pink saddle shoes and my socks. She was nosy, and I wanted to leave.

“Maybe you could introduce me.”

“No,” I said. “He bumped into an acquaintance, and now they’re having a business meeting. He’s always working.”

“And where do you want to work when you grow up?”

It was my turn to raise an eyebrow at her. “Work? What do you mean?”

“A job, a profession. What do you want to be?”

“A wife and a mother.” I started to back up, sweeping the sand off my feet with my hands while looking up at her.

“I see,” she said, her dark eyes peering at me like a bird digesting its meal.

“So what is your most favorite thing to do?”

“Write,” I answered without hesitation. “In my diary.”

“You love it?”

I nodded.

“You love it more than . . .” She scratched her chin. “I don’t know. It’s been a while since I was young like you . . . more than Hopscotch and Hula Hoop and dancing?”

“More than anything.”

“Then why not apply it to a profession one day? You sound like an intelligent young lady.”

“I am,” I said. “My father says I’ll be able to keep up with my husband in conversation and educate my sons one day.” I couldn’t get all the sand out from between my toes, so I tossed my shoes in my bag instead of putting them on and then stood up and tugged the blanket out from under her foot. “I’ve got to get going,” I said as I lightly shook the blanket.

“If that’s what you want to do, fine,” she said. “I won’t keep you. I just think it’s a shame that in addition to being a wife and mother your father has you thinking there is nothing else in life a girl can do. What about one day when your kids grow up and your husband works all day? What will you do then?”

“I don’t have to worry about any of that. I’m only fifteen.”

“Oh, I think all girls around your age should be challenged to look ahead and ponder who it is they want to be and what sort of life they’d one day like for themselves. But people don’t give it any thought until they’re grown up and disliking their lives and then they don’t know what to do. If only they could think back to when they were around your age and remember what sorts of things they loved to do, things they were good at and things that made them happy.”

“Interesting,” I said. “But I’ve got to go.” I started to walk.

“It was nice meeting you, Lydia,” she called after me. “But don’t forget how much you love writing. I do think you could be a writer one day, perhaps a famous one.”

I stopped and turned my head. “How do you know?”

“I don’t for sure. I said ‘perhaps.’ You were the one who said you loved to write more than anything in the world.”

“Yeah, but only in my diary.”

“Well, we all start somewhere. You just remember that, darling. If a successful writer is what you see for yourself, then by all means, you’ll become it. I believe in you.”

I turned fully around and walked a few steps back toward her. “You do?”

“Yes. It was a pleasure talking with you.” She blew me a kiss in a movie star sort of way, and then turned as if, this time, she was the one ready to leave.

“Wait,” I said. “I’ll let you read a little of my journal, if you like. You can tell me if it’s good or not.”

She laughed. “I’m honored. Let’s go sit down.” She walked over to an enormous piece of driftwood shaped like a bench and sat down as if to perch. I followed and pulled my journal out from my bag and handed it to

her, hoping I wasn’t handing my mind over to the claws of some bird of prey. But I never thought of my writing as being good or bad. I only thought of it as something I loved to do, so maybe I could use some objective feedback. I watched as she flipped randomly to the front of the book and her eyes began to skim.

“An ever-serving, obedient and domestic wife,” she read aloud. “Thrilled and thankful for being born a woman, destined to become a wife and mother,” she continued. “A woman envied by all her neighbors for having the most meticulous kitchen floor and dinner on the table by five o’clock nearly 365 days a year.” She stopped and looked up at me. “Mature words coming from a girl your age.”

“They’re my father’s words, not mine.”

“Yes, I assumed that much.” She rolled her eyes.

“They’re things he has told me about my mother. I can’t write creatively. I can only write about things that have happened or things people have said. I’m not at all good at making stuff up.”

“Then you’re a nonfiction writer,” she said. “That’s what most journal writing is. That’s fine. Maybe you’re in the making to become a journalist.”

“Of course not,” I said. “I’m just a girl.”

“Yeah and Sanibel was just a sandbar once. Look at it now!” She glanced from east to west. “And Thomas Edison was just a boy. Did you know his mother schooled him at home because he drove his teacher nuts with so many questions in the classroom?”

“No.” I laughed.

“It’s true. What would this modern fifties world be like had he never gone on to become more than just a boy? What if he didn’t pursue his interests?”

“We’d be living in a rather dark place, I think.” I thought about it a moment. “But what would Edison have done had his own mother not been there for him? His mother deserves credit,” I said. “She had a very important job. Every mother does.”

“Yes,” she said. “I suppose you’re right.”

“If you ask me, anyone with a mother is fortunate.”

She handed back my diary. "True, dear, but we need to look at what we do have and not what we don't have. You, for instance, have a desire to write. I do believe you will be a successful journalist one day, famous maybe. If that's what you want to be."

She read a little more, this time to herself and I thought about whether I should bolt from this stranger, the strangest stranger I had ever encountered and that was pretty strange. Living in Chicago gave me daily opportunities to pass by, say hello, exchange eye contact with, or walk right by strangers, and sometimes they'd mumble something my way, and once it was about the end of the world coming, but none of them ever told me anything like this. Not even anyone I knew ever told me I could be and do anything that I wanted, and I wondered whether or not I should believe her. Believing her would bring options and possibilities to my life that I never knew I had, but then again, she was only a stranger, and it would be stupid of me to listen to what some stranger had to say.

"I don't believe what you're telling me," I said, standing up from the driftwood. "I don't believe anything you've said." I walked a few steps away, knowing I should keep going, that my father would go ape if I didn't return soon.

"Then what do you believe?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. I believed one day I would get married and have babies and those were my only options. I never believed anything other than that. I never gave it any thought.

"Do you believe you can build a snowman here on the beach?"

I turned and laughed. "You're crazy," I said.

"Oh, no. I'm not. I've been called many things—dramatic, eccentric, fun, but crazy I am certainly not."

"How can anyone build a snowman here on a beach in Florida? It's impossible. There's no snow."

"If you believe, you can achieve," she said, jumping up from the driftwood. "Now get down and help me build a snowman." She dropped to her knees and started digging in the sand. A moment later she looked up and said, "C'mon, join me, and I'll show you."

I didn't want to get my new pink sailor dress dirty, but there was some-

thing inside me that wanted to believe; so, I joined her on my knees and started scraping my hands through the shell-fragmented sand, and she started humming. We were close enough to the shore that the sand was damp, and it packed nicely into a mound. I noticed her fingernails, long and beautiful, painted in mauve, and I felt the pressure of sand building behind my own nails, short in comparison. Her humming grew louder, and I dug harder until broken miniature shell pieces pricked the tips of my fingers. I no longer needed my sunglasses, so I took them off and tossed them aside.

"What are you humming?" I asked.

"A lullaby my mama used to hum."

"Oh." We dug and packed some more, and when I looked at her, I noticed the scarf around her face loosening and falling to the ground. There were white bandage-like wraps covering her nose, and she caught me staring.

"I was born with the long, curved beak of a White Ibis and wanted the nose of a woman," she said, stopping to retie it. "I always imagined how beautiful I might look with a more womanly nose; so, I just recently got a nose job."

"Oh."

"I blame it all on my great, great grandmother. I got my nose from her."

I smiled, wondering whom I got my nose from and also what a nose job was. I hadn't ever heard of that kind of a job before and assumed it meant she got paid to smell stuff like food or cologne. Or maybe a nose job meant she worked as a nose model. Hers was perfect enough. And maybe it's why she wrapped that scarf and gauze around it, to protect it from the sun and air and from catching a cold and becoming red and runny, I thought as I dug in the sand until my stomach growled, reminding me it was almost dinner time and my father would be upset if I wasn't there.

"Why don't you start making the middle ball now?" she said standing up, leaving me to dig alone.

I scooped two handfuls of sand and smacked them atop the first ball, but it all crumbled down the side. I hoped the erosion might remind her we're on a beach with sand, not snow.

“Oh, come on! You can do it,” she said.

I raised my eyebrows at her. “I don’t think so.”

“You still don’t get it. You still don’t believe that anything is possible, do you?”

“Realistic things are possible,” I said. “But one can’t build a snowman in the sand.”

“You can do it,” she reassured, then stooped over and helped me pack sand atop the first ball. Once more, it all slipped down. “This is why we must be flexible,” she said, scratching her long dark hair with her sandy hands. “You’ve got to change your mindset. Make him lying down. Who says snowmen have to stand up? Keep going,” she said. “I’m sick and tired of the world teaching a girl she ‘can’t’ do this, she ‘must’ do that. She should do this and she shouldn’t do that. Can’t, must, should, shouldn’t! What is it that you want in life, Lydia?”

I couldn’t think of anything. My father got me everything I ever wanted, which is like eating before getting hungry and never knowing what a hunger pain feels like. We owned three sixteen-inch black-and-white televisions. I had been the first of all my friends to get a Hula Hoop and Silly Putty. When the bridal dolly had come out, my father went to every store in Chicago until he found one for me.

My father, Lloyd Isleworth, was gone most of the time, but I was never alone. He employed an entire staff of females to handle our housework, shop, prepare our meals, tutor me in reading, writing and arithmetic, teach me piano, and so on. And when they all went home to their own families, the television went on, and it kept me good company.

Lloyd had told me this would be our first no-work-allowed vacation, but then he bumped into that man. The man was a developer and had all kinds of things he wanted to develop, and my father, a banker, had all kinds of money he wanted to lend. He gave me a new dress, and I felt better.

“A new pink dress—that’s what I want,” I finally said. “This one was new, but look at it now.”

“Dig, dig deeper!” she chanted. “Think hard about all that you want from your life. You’ve got to dig to find the real answers, to discover what

you want. It’s easy to live on the surface, so dig! Dig harder! What else might you want?”

Curves. I wanted curves, but they were something my father couldn’t buy me. As I felt the sand working its way deep into my girdle, itching me horribly, I knew how ridiculous it was to wear a hot, uncomfortable item in Florida. Still, a girl never knows when she might bump into the man of her dreams, and curves are essential to getting the all-important husband and insuring one’s economic future. Money, thanks to Daddy, I would never lack, but alluring curves, I had no idea why they weren’t yet showing up on me. I wanted them badly. I wanted to look as curvaceous as Marlena. Her hips were wide and the same size as her bust, and her waist was tiny like the necks of the birds trekking along the shore.

“Why are you grinning?” she asked.

“I think trying to build a snowman in the sand is funny,” I said, using my arm to rub sand out of my eyes.

“My dear. Then stop thinking and keep moving. There are times when thinking hinders us from achieving the impossible,” she said as she stood with her arms stretched overhead. She began swaying as we do in art class when our teacher tells us to act like trees, feel like trees, then paint those trees. “You are in the spring of your life, child, when possibilities are blooming as profusely as Florida’s wildflowers.” She leaned to the left, then to the right again. “It’s looking so much like a snowman,” I heard her say. “You’re about there. Now let me rephrase my question to you. What is it that you dream of for your life, Lydia?”

Her words suddenly reached me as if she were a fairy godmother and was tapping me on the shoulder with her magic wand and the world was growing pinker by the moment, probably from the setting sun. And then I spotted a group of motionless bright pink birds, more beautiful than any bird I could ever imagine. I knew of flamingoes, but these weren’t flamingoes! It was sometime after I saw these birds that the white silken sand of Sanibel transformed itself into glistening snow within my own hands and I knew then that anything was indeed possible. I knew then that I would one day become a wife, a mother, and, if I wanted, a journalist!

“I’ve done it,” I announced, jumping up from the sand with my arms in

the air. "I've built a snowman . . ."

"Snowwoman!" she corrected. "Let's call it a snowwoman. Who says snowmen must be men?"

I laughed. "Then I've built a snowwoman on Sanibel."

"You have, Lydia. Do you believe now that you can do anything?"

"Yes!" I shouted. "I do." I gazed over to see if those pink birds were still around, and just as I spotted them, one of them raised and lowered its beak, and the flock took off. The pink was gone.

"Your snowwoman needs facial features. Go and gather up seashells," Marlena said.

I rushed to the water and stooped over in search of eyes, a nose, and a mouth in the clear water below.

"Be kind," Marlena called out to me as she tied her chiffon scarf around the snowwoman's neck. "Be especially kind in choosing a nose."

I returned moments later with my hands filled with shells.

"That broken whelk will be the nose," she said, taking from my hands a shell bearing zigzag-like streaks. "And how about those two sharks for eyes?"

We pushed them into our snowwoman and stepped back a foot. "Looks great, but I better get going before my father hires a search team," I said, noticing the sky getting darker. I walked over and picked up my straw bag.

"It wasn't my intention to get you in trouble," she said. "I do apologize."

"It's okay," I said. "It was nice meeting you."

"You, too. How long are you here for?"

"Six more days but I don't ever want to leave."

"Enjoy."

"I will."

"Goodbye, dear."

I waved and started meandering down the beach. A few seconds later, I heard her calling out to me.

"Oh, Lydia! Lydia! Wait, please!" "Yes?" I stopped and turned.

"I do think we met for a reason," she said, hurrying up to me. "I don't believe it was a coincidence. I hope I'm not wrong."

"Wrong about what?"

She took a deep breath. "Today was the first time in a long time that I poured myself a cup of coffee and went out to my lanai to sit and read. And then, I spotted you on the beach. At first I thought you were just reading, but then I noticed you writing in what looked like a journal." She reached into her bag and pulled out a very old-looking book. "Here," she said, handing me the book, but still clutching it herself. "This is what I went out to my porch to read today, but I've already read it so many times. It's a journal, and it's very old."

"You're giving it to me?"

"Heavens, no!" she said, nearly pulling it back. "I'm only lending it to you. The girl who wrote in it died long ago, but you reading it would be like giving flight to her words. I do believe you and she have some things in common. She loved Sanibel and, like you, didn't want to leave."

"Thank you," I said, the two of us still jointly holding onto it.

"There's one thing I ask of you," she continued.

"Sure, what?"

"That you not tell a soul about this. I don't think this girl wanted anyone and everyone rummaging through her priceless treasures, especially any man; so, please don't tell your father. I'm sure you wouldn't want your father reading your journal now, would you?"

"Of course not."

"Then, you understand. I think it's important that only the right kind of person read this. It's the kind of book that should be read by invite only. You're the first person I've chosen to share it with. Who knows? Maybe when you're done, we might pass it on to another. But in the meantime, can you promise to keep it a secret?"

"Oh, yes."

"Good. And remember, I do want it back. What you walk away with after reading it is yours forever, but the book itself belongs to me."

"Of course," I said.

She looked nervous. "Are you good at returning things? Give me an example of something you've borrowed, then returned properly."

"Library books," I declared. "Only one late fee in all my life, and I

check out about fifty books a year.”

“I thought you looked like an earthbound individual. Still, I need you to swear on your mama’s grave you won’t tell a soul and that you will return it to me before leaving the island.”

“I swear.”

“On what?”

“On my mother’s grave.”

“Thank you,” she said. “When one returns a library book late, there is a fine to pay. Do you know what will happen if you don’t keep our promise?”

“What?”

She thought a moment. “You will be cursed. Your ability and desire to write will erode and you will find yourself stranded forever in a place where ideas and creativity lie stagnant. Some people refer to that place as ‘writer’s block.’ If you tell, you will wreck your destiny as a journalist. And I know you want to become someone important, famous maybe. What girl doesn’t want the entire world listening to all the important things she has to say?”

“What if my father asks me what I’m reading? What should I say?”

“You’re sharp.” She reached into her bucket and pulled out another book.

“Here, take this. Its dimensions are a bit larger, so you can hide the journal inside it.”

“*Catcher in the Rye*?” I asked, taking the book.

“Yes, and author J.D. Salinger autographed it for me personally. It’s about a boy and nothing I’m too interested in reading. Are you familiar with it?”

“No.”

“Figures,” she said. “If anyone asks what it’s about, tell them a generation of adolescents, overwhelmed with anxiety and frustration.”

“Okay,” I said. “I will.”

She sighed. “I think that’s it. Oh,” she covered her mouth with her hand. “I almost forgot the most important thing. I live straight through that thin line of Australian pines.” She turned and pointed. “See that yel-

low place with the green-shingle roof and shutters? The one on stilts?”

I nodded.

“There’s a sign out front that reads, ‘Bougainvillea.’ If you don’t see me on the beach, then please drop it by my mailbox before you leave the island. Now you better get back. It’s getting dark. And keep that journal a secret!”

“I will, I will!” I said as I started walking briskly down the beach and a second later I thought I heard her say, “Go, you little feathery gold plume! Protect your destiny and don’t breathe a word of this to anyone.”