

SAND  
*in My*  
EYES

Books by  
CHRISTINE LEMMON

*Sand in My Eyes*

*Sanibel Scribbles*

*Portion of the Sea*

*Whisper from the Ocean*

# SAND in My EYES

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*An older woman growing flowers,  
A younger woman caught up in the weeds*

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SAND in MY EYES

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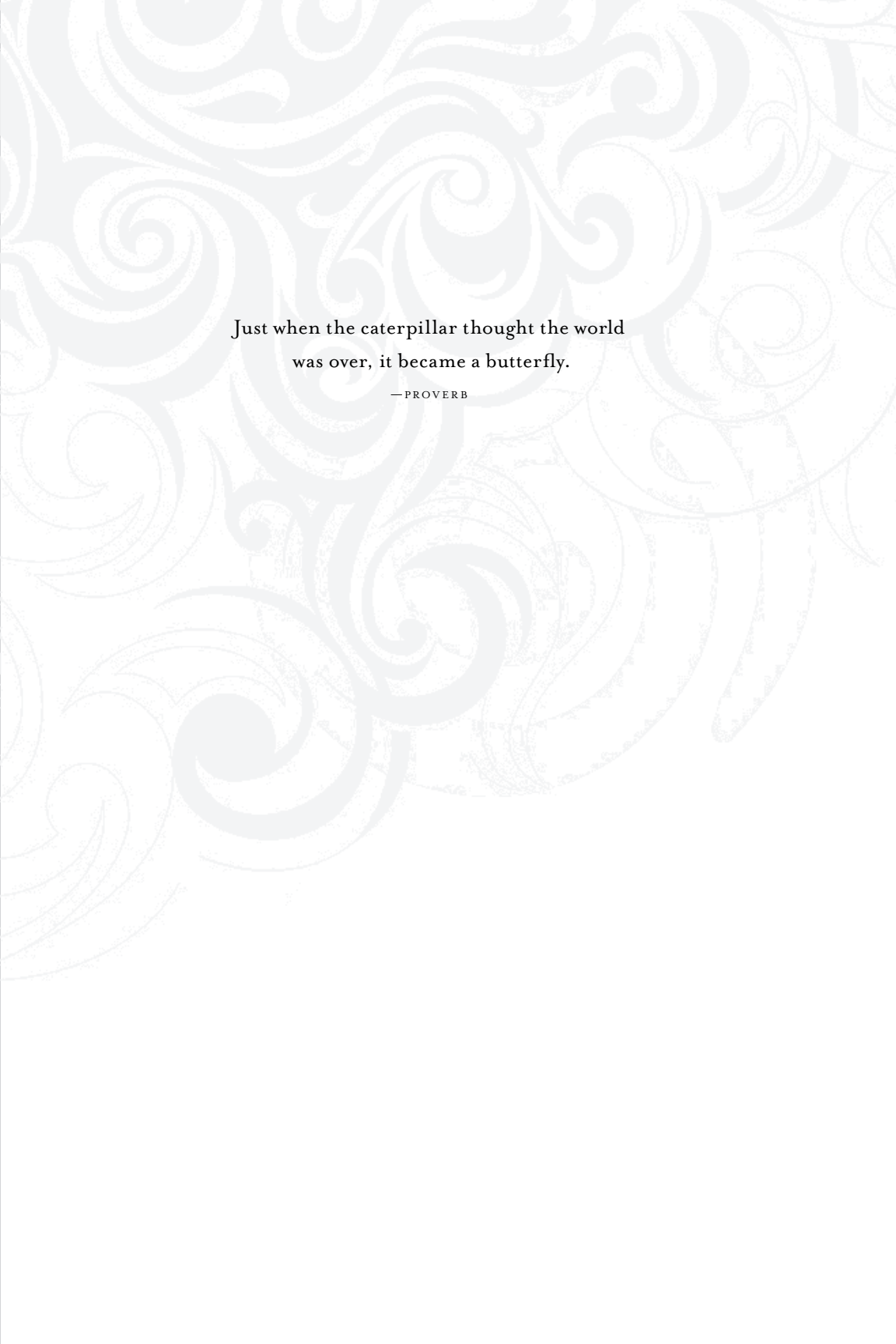
This story was written for my three children  
Jacob, Michael, and Julia

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And dedicated to  
my mom

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Just when the caterpillar thought the world  
was over, it became a butterfly.

—PROVERB



## PROLOGUE

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### BELVEDERE

*Dear Marjorie,*

*After we talked, I hung up the phone and stayed awake, thinking of you, of all that is stressing you at college. I'm writing to tell you how proud I am of you, studying the way you are, and the grades you are getting. You are an ambitious woman and will achieve great things in the world. But more importantly, I hope you live a life that you love. There is nothing a mother longs to hear more than that her grown daughter is living a life she loves.*

*This is not to say life is meant to be an everyday beautiful walk in the park. It's not. But as you journey into adulthood, you will hear all kinds of advice and things said about life, and will experience them for yourself. In case you're wondering, here are a few of the things your mother has heard, a few of the things she has experienced for herself:*

*Life is brilliant, life is dull. It's easy, it's hard. It's about reaping wealth, about giving to others, about living passionately, about doing what one must to survive. Life is joy. Life is suffering. The bigger the better, less*

*is more. It's a world of abundance, a world of scarcity, a beautiful world, an ugly world, a world moving toward peace, a world headed for destruction. People are good. People are bad. Ask for help. Do it yourself.*

*I hope you rake through that which you hear about life. Some of the stuff, keep, but some, bag up and burn. As you work your way through this world you will see that everyone has something to say and is an authority on "life." Me? I can relate to most everything I've heard. It depends on the morning I'm having.*

I stopped writing, then folded and dropped the letter to my daughter into my purse. My writing it was the act of a loony mother bird, one whose baby has left the yard for the first time. It had me awake at five, pacing the floor of the hotel room, unable to sleep, worrying whether I had taught her everything she needed to know about survival and the world—how to find food, water and shelter, and to fly, of course, but more importantly, how to soar; had I taught my daughter how to soar through life, so her journey is not all demanding, but breathtakingly beautiful, too?

"I don't think I taught her that," I mumbled to myself as I picked out a bouquet of flowers from a kiosk in the hotel lobby. "But if I pick her up and bring her back to me, she'll only want to leave again. That's where she's at in life. She's flown the nest."

As I unlocked the car I had rented for the week and got in, I had to start accepting it, that it was my time now, and to focus on the very present and the trip I was on—the trip that was mine—the trip to southern Indiana!

They *say* convertibles are the best cars for women suffering hot flashes, but after opening the hood, trunk, and gas door I found myself sweating profusely by the time I found the button that makes the top go down. It made me want to pull out the letter I had started to my daughter and add a P.S. to it to tell her that life is frustrating, that, well into my fifties, I had wanted by now to have mastered the basics and to be going about philo-

sophically, spending my mornings sipping green tea in profound thought; not wasting precious time struggling to get the top down on a convertible!

But, oh well, it was a five-mile drive from my hotel to the nursing home and Indiana's crisp autumn air had me forgetting my frustrations and thinking instead how wonderful life can be—until I picked up speed and my hair whipped across my eyes, making it hard to see the colorful corn stalks out in the fields.

"This is *not* the best car for me," I muttered under my breath, questioning the guy who worked at the rental car agency, and all the other so-called experts of the world. "Who are they and what are their credentials?"

And because I didn't want to miss the corn drying, and the crimson maple trees, and the big white birds headed south for winter after a summer spent in the Midwest, I pulled to the side of the road to buy a cup of apple cider and slices of fudge, and to tie my hair back with the silk scarf I kept in my purse, the one I typically wore around my neck to hide the telltale signs of my age. I then took my sunglasses off and put my reading glasses on, instead. I had taped the directions to the nursing home to the dashboard and would soon need to look at them.

I was on my way and feeling older than I did the last time I rode in a convertible—twenty years ago, through a wildlife refuge in Florida; a forbidden ride I have never told anyone about, my romantic secret that only the tri-colored herons witnessed, and I'm sure they haven't told. And there were a few other birds looking down at us that day, but I can't remember what they're called, the ones that seem to be wearing golden slippers. Their name was on the tip of my tongue, lingering with all the other words I had been forgetting lately.

As I continued along the winding country road, I worried that if I were forgetting things at my age, what if the friend I had flown all this way to see wouldn't remember me? I was the frazzled mother of three who lived next door from long ago. She was the elderly widow who, by way of her garden, lent me a unique way of looking at my life and the world. After all these years, I've never forgotten her, and I hope she hasn't me.

Serendipity is what helped me in tracking her whereabouts when, recently, I turned on the radio and listened to a national story on butterfly

gardens cropping up throughout the country, at campuses, schools, museums, zoos, and institutions. I was captivated by the interview they did with a resident of a nursing home, by what she had to say and, to my astonishment, I knew before they gave a name that it was her, my neighbor from long ago.

“It’s the life cycle of the butterflies that gets me to thinking,” she told them when asked whether the newly instated garden had increased her quality of life at the facility. “I’m old and frail,” she went on, “but like those butterflies need flowers, I need people. I crave the company of others.”

I glanced at the directions taped to the dashboard, the ones her son—Liam is his name—had given to me. After hearing his mother on the radio, I tracked him down and called. I had met him back when I was living next door to her, and it was he who took me on that ride in his mother’s convertible, the ride that gave the birds something to chirp about.

“Remember that silly little story about flowers?” I told him over the phone the day I called, the day I booked my flight. “The one I started way back when I lived next door to your mother?”

“The one you wouldn’t let me read?”

“That’s the one,” I said. “Well, I’ve been tinkering with it on and off for years now.”

“And you’re done?”

“Not quite,” I said. “That’s why I’m calling. I need to see your mother. I need her blessing before I move forward with the story, before I send it out into the world. After all, she’s the inspiration behind it, and so are you to an extent.”

“Is this story of yours fiction or fact?”

“A little of both,” I told him.

“Should I be worried?”

“It was a long time ago. You shouldn’t be. I’ve changed the names and made up a bunch of stuff. It’s hard to remember everything the way it happened.”

“How many years has it been, twenty?”

“Around that,” I told him. “I’m better of not doing the calculations.”

“Well, my mother is in a nursing home in Indiana—sharp as a whip mentally, but physically, she’s touch and go. I don’t know how much longer she can go on.”

I glanced over at the simple three-step directions he had given me to where his mother was living and felt remorse over the friendship I had let wither away—silently retreating over differing points of view one day—and for having lost touch, and for showing up now, after all these years of not making a simple phone call or sending a single letter. I had been feeling this way lately about several past friendships I had let fall by the wayside. It happens at a certain age. We question ourselves regarding things we once did and said, and more so over the things we didn’t do or say. It’s why I flew all this way to reunite with her and tell her, “I’m sorry, please forgive me,” for the ending we had.

Only then would I be able to write an appropriate ending to my novel and move on, by asking if she had any of the tidbits she used to share with me—ideas for how a woman my age might go about re-landscaping her current life and the dullness setting in.

“This is the day,” I declared out loud as I turned into the parking lot of Belvedere Nursing Home. “This is the day for change in my life.”



## CHAPTER ONE

AS I GOT OUT of the car with the bouquet of flowers, and a canvas bag with the manuscript strung over my shoulder, I wondered whether my friend liked where she was living and, other than watching butterflies, how she passed her time, all those hours in a day. And could she recall the details of the life she had lived, born at the turn of the century and now living out the New Millennium in a bed on wheels, a bed operable by remote control?

I stared at the two-story white brick nursing home, wondering whether I had it in me to live as long. I always assumed I might die before getting so old, but now, thanks to health care advancements, I knew I needed to start brainstorming ways I might go about living productively for another half century on Planet Earth. Others my age were talking optimistically of the future and were content with the present, but I had been living in the past, walking in my mind the halls of the old house, hearing the voices of my children when they were small and wanting to know that the years I already spent living mattered.

I've got years, decades—at least two, probably three, and hopefully four—I figured as I walked up to the main entrance, before I need to think about assisted-care housing options, nursing homes, or living in a place other than my own home. Then again, in the last year alone I had gone to the funerals of an older first cousin, an aunt, and a roommate from college, so there's no telling whether or not I would make it so far. I only

knew that it felt like yesterday when I was thirteen years old and my junior high teacher had us volunteer at a facility like this and then write a paper about it.

I turned and rammed my behind into the large, silver, square wheelchair button that is supposed to automatically open a door, and, when it didn't open, I rear-ended the button several more times, trying to remember what I wrote in that paper, or the grade I got for it. But I couldn't open the door with my butt nor remember life lessons from my nursing home experience. All I remembered were the stench that had me running out the door, performing cartwheels with my girlfriends in the parking lot.

"That's not the button," a woman looking to be in her twenties and jogging effortlessly up the stately steps told me. "Here," she said, pushing a silver button I hadn't seen. The doors opened instantly.

"Whoops," I said, pulling my reading glasses from my purse, putting them on and taking a better look at the button I had been ramming. And when I read that it was a plaque of dedication for the building and knew that my eyes had failed me, I felt far removed from the junior high girl I once was, the youthful me intoxicated by a sense of invincibility and the belief I'd remain forever young. I should laugh at myself, I thought as I hurried inside, at my hormones for playing tricks on me. They say laughter is the best medicine. Then again, they say convertibles are the best cars for women with hot flashes.

As I stepped up to the reception counter, I didn't feel like laughing. I didn't find me funny. All I felt was nervous at the thought of seeing my friend, and how the years and disease would have had their way with her. I knew from her son that her health had been rapidly deteriorating in recent months, and that the progression of her type-2 diabetes and complications associated with it had been one reason that her children switched her from the assisted-care facility she had been living in to this one.

I picked up a pen and did what the sign-in form instructions told me to do, writing my name, the time I arrived, and the person I came to see.

As I wrote her name—Fedelina Aurelio—on the line, I felt overtaken by emotion regarding this lady I knew from my old street, at a time when I had been feeling entangled by life and its pest-like frustrations and was

hardly seeing all the beauty that was there. I was balancing three children, a marriage in crisis, financial distress, a house in need of repairs and, lastly, myself, and I had been feeling as if I were the only woman in the world struggling, juggling with it all. And because we had recently moved, she was at that time the only friend I had.

It was through our chitchatting here and there that I learned to identify the weeds that were pulling me down and getting in the way of what was important. She never spoke in the form of a lecture, nor did she sound like a preacher. And she wasn't a clinical psychologist. I never paid her a co-payment. All I did was open my door when she came a-knocking, or stopped by her garden when I saw her watering roses, or waved when I spotted her looking out her window at me and my children going by with the wagon.

Fedelina shared with me the insight I needed to rake through my mess. I don't think it was her intention to do gardening on me then, and I don't know whether she knew that, one by one, our small woman-to-woman talks were helping me pull the ugly from my life, so that beauty, peace, simplicity, and contentment could sprout forth strong and free. We were two females gabbing away. She was the older widow out growing flowers, and I was the mother of three caught up in the weeds.

And I'll never forget the letters she shared with me—letters her mother once wrote to her—words I let sprinkle down like slow-release fertilizer, inspiring me long after we both went our separate ways. But it bothered me through the years that I never had the chance to tell her of the profound impact she had on my life. It's why I bought tickets and flew all this way to Indiana, to let her know her life mattered, that it meant something significant, at least to me, and to thank her for sharing with me her knowledge of flowers and of life.

"You don't have to fill that column in," the girl working the reception counter said. "You can skip that, the purpose for your visit."

I stopped writing and crossed out what I had written so far. "Good," I said. "It's enough to fill a book."

"You're here to see Fedelina Aurelio?" she asked, reading the clipboard. I nodded.

"Down the hall, seventh door on your right."