



The Red Bikini

By Lauren Christopher

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But Giselle never expected romance to enter the picture again—especially with a hot twentysomething from a completely different world. And even though it feels like Fin is everything she's trying to run away from, she can't help coming back for more...

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The Red Bikini By Lauren Christopher Bibliography

- Rank: #2167724 in Books
- Published on: 2014-07-01
- Released on: 2014-07-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x .81" w x 4.19" l, .34 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 320 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

"I love this book! Funny, heartwarming and plenty sexy...A fantastic debut. Charming and funny and a totally great read...And I have a new favorite hero. Fin is amazing!" –Susan Mallery, *New York Times* bestselling author

"A heartfelt, well written story with characters I rooted for. *The Red Bikini* is a winner!" –Jennifer Probst, *New York Times* bestselling author

"The easy charm of fictional Sandy Cove, Calif. sets the scene... Christopher's writing is crisp and her characters are strong, and readers will look forward to the next ... in the trilogy." –*Publishers Weekly*

"A great debut and a fantastic start to a series." --*RT Book Review* (Top Pick)

About the Author

Lauren Christopher has lived in Southern California all her life and currently makes Orange County her home. She lives with her hubby—who has always made it easy to believe in true love—and their three teenage children. *The Red Bikini* is her debut novel.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

CHAPTER

One

Giselle flung the suitcase on her sister's tropical-patterned bedspread and let out the sigh she'd been holding since sometime over the air space of Kansas. Or maybe as far back as Illinois. Or maybe even since they'd been in the airport in Indiana.

She stared at a bright red cloth napkin Lia had left on the bed, next to a note in her sister's loopy handwriting: "*It's okay. Relax.*"

Giselle frowned and lifted the napkin, then felt four strings slip through her fingers.

It was a bikini. How very Lia. How very *not* Giselle.

It's okay.

Relax.

She folded the triangles and tucked the package deep into the corner of Lia's dresser drawer, amid some tissue-wrapped lingerie and a lavender drawer sachet.

“Mommy,” came a breathless voice from behind her, “there’s *sand!*”

Her daughter flung herself onto the bed, sending the suitcase and all their clothes bouncing and squeaking. “And Aunt Lia left me *sandals!* Can we go to the water now? Can I put on my suit?” Little hands gripped the edge of Giselle’s suitcase.

“In a minute.” Giselle closed the drawer. “Why don’t you help me unpack?”

Giselle’s fake enthusiasm—held in a false falsetto since Indiana—sounded too breathless, but Coco seemed to buy it, and her little pale legs whisked her to the front room.

Giselle tried to take her twenty cleansing breaths while Coco was gone, but, as usual, she only got to about the seventh. Coco came bumping back through the doorway with a pink Barbie suitcase.

“I wonder how Aunt Lia knew I liked *pink* sandals.”

Giselle eyed Coco’s sparkly shoes and the tutu she’d worn on the plane. “Probably a good guess.” She lifted Coco’s suitcase onto the bed beside hers.

Lia’s beachside apartment was small—not much more than a box, really—but Giselle felt a wave of appreciation that her sister had opened it to them, and on such short notice. Sandy Cove was the perfect place to escape to for two weeks. But California would have been much too expensive without being able to use Lia’s apartment. Giselle couldn’t use up what was left of her cash reserves.

“What was that song Aunt Lia taught you?” Giselle asked over her shoulder as she yanked closed the bedroom’s palm-colored curtains.

Coco flung one of her blond braids over her shoulder and began swaying her hips. “*Stir it up . . .*” she began singing. Her toothlessness lent a lispy charm to the Bob Marley song.

Giselle smiled. “. . . *Little darlin’ . . . stir it up . . .*”

Their hips moved in exaggerated sways, and soon most of Giselle’s worries were tucked away with their T-shirts, shorts, Giselle’s tailored slacks, Coco’s sleep toy Ninja Kitty, and their sensible bathing suits.

While Giselle was sad she wouldn’t get to see Lia, who was tied up with a business trip in New York, she was sort of relieved. The pitying platitudes were exhausting. Especially when coupled with the hushed tones from friends and family in Indiana: *Omygod, what will she do? And what will she do without Roy?* Giselle knew the way to make the hushed voices stop was to show everyone what she was made of—lift her chin, showcase her strength, saunter into a room with a confidence she might dredge up from somewhere. But she hadn’t quite been able to do that. Maybe she just needed time. . . .

As Sandy Cove’s afternoon light began calming her through the mango-colored shades, Giselle felt relaxed enough to get into Lia’s tiny kitchen and bake. She’d picked up a few staples at the beach corner market to make her raisin cookies. Counting strokes and measuring ingredients always did her wonders.

While she measured and poured, Coco sat at the dining table and told knock-knock jokes until a sharp rap sounded at the door.

“Someone’s here,” Coco whispered.

The tightening began in her neck as Giselle wiped her hands on a towel and made her way to the entryway.

She peeked through the peephole and saw a totem pole of a boy standing on the porch.

He was young—maybe twenty—with a black rubber item folded like a tablecloth in his right hand. Sable brown hair coiled into quarter-sized curls all over his head, and a brown tuft of hair sprouted from his chin in a hippie “soul patch” style. His toast-colored eyes were close together, giving him a comical air. He brought them closer to the peephole, his face distorting in the funny glass.

Giselle opened the door a crack.

“Heeeey,” he said. His eyes took in as much of her as he could see from behind the door, but the gesture didn’t feel insolent, or even flirtatious—which was good, since he seemed at least fifteen years younger than she was.

Giselle flung the dish towel over her shoulder and tucked a strand of hair back into her chignon as she pulled the door wider. He wore bright orange-and-brown knee-length swim trunks that hung low on his waist, as if there wasn’t quite enough body to hold them up. He stood the same height as Giselle, but was reedier, the outline of his ribs pressing through his tanned skin. His knobby feet were covered in sand.

“You must be Lia’s sister,” he said lazily.

“Yes.”

“You look just like her.” A note of wonder hung on his words.

“Thank you.” Giselle smoothed her skirt.

She was flattered—she thought of Lia as beautiful in every way—but Giselle didn’t see a resemblance. She felt much older, although their age difference was only six years. But she also felt duller, and at least a dress size bigger. Despite the fact Giselle had won beauty contests throughout her teens, her confidence had plummeted when Roy had had his first affair.

“This is for your daughter.” The rubber item unfurled from his fingers. It was a small wet suit. “I’m Rabbit.”

Rabbit? Giselle blinked back her surprise. So this was who Lia had told her about? Somehow she’d had the image differently in her mind: She’d pictured maybe a grizzled old guru who lived on a sand dune with parrots. Or at least someone out of junior college.

Clutching the wet suit against her chest, she held out her other hand in default hostess mode: “I’m Giselle.”

He regarded her hand with amusement, then shook it briefly. “Sweet. You have something cooking in there?” He tried to peek around the door.

“Oh—raisin cookies.” She stepped back, and Coco popped her head around, able to stand it no longer.

Rabbit studied her as she pushed her way through the doorway. “And you must be Coco.” He crouched to the ground, rubbing the tuft of hair on his chin. “I’ve heard all about you from your aunt. How do you feel about being a little grommet this week?”

“A grommet?”

“A young surfer. Lia signed you up for my camp. I have twelve new groms coming.”

Coco's short, jilting bounces expressed everything.

Thank goodness Lia had arranged this. It would be good for Coco to escape the drama that had become their lives. All Giselle had to do in return was take pictures for Rabbit's brochure. And go out on one date with a guy Lia knew named Dave or Don or something.

Although it was a pretty close toss-up, the brochure made her the most nervous. Marketing-minded Lia had coordinated it, even though Giselle had insisted she had no brochure experience. In fact, she had no work experience at all, unless you counted posing as the perfect doctor's wife at charity balls. But Lia had insisted that the photos Giselle took of Coco were excellent. *Your photos capture such truth and beauty*, her sister had said. Giselle had continued to protest, but Lia reminded her that Rabbit wasn't exactly a Fortune 500 company. He couldn't even pay. Except in trade. Which was where Coco benefited.

"I have a surfboard for you," Rabbit whispered to Coco. He glanced up at Giselle. "Can you come see it?"

Giselle hesitated. The unpacking wasn't done. She hadn't taken her twenty cleansing breaths. The raisin cookies had four minutes left. She needed to organize, prioritize, get their lives in order.

But she caught the expression on Coco's face—one of hopefulness, a trust in adventure—and decided she could take a few cues from her daughter. Giselle did need to learn to relax. She did need to straighten her backbone and garner some strength. She did need to learn how to grasp adventure.

"Sure," she said, shrugging as if she made impromptu decisions all the time. "But I have a few more minutes for the cookies."

"I'll wait." Rabbit grinned.

When the buzzer finally went off, Giselle loaded the entire batch onto a plate to bring to his apartment. She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and took Coco's hand. "Then let's go."

She tried not to think of the clothing still on the bed, or the blind date with the man whose name she couldn't remember, or the twenty cleansing breaths, while she followed Rabbit next door.

Let their new life begin. . . .

• • •

A waist-high gate divided the halves of the second-story patio Rabbit and Lia shared.

When her sister had said that Rabbit lived "next door," Giselle hadn't realized how close that would be. No wonder their mother wouldn't stay here. Having their coiffed, French-manicured mother staying within shouting distance of a barely clad boy like Rabbit, who probably got stoned to the Doors and tracked sand across the patio on a regular basis, would be their mother's undoing. Eve McCabe typically chose to stay at a Hilton in posh Newport Beach several miles up.

Rabbit strode toward his wide-open door in that rubbery way lanky boys move. Music tumbled out: some kind of folk singer with a mellow, seaside sound. Soon the music swallowed him.

Giselle stalled. She peered around the doorway, but he'd already disappeared.

His place was entirely white and beige, with an empty expanse of stained carpeting. A lone card table was set up where a dining table would normally be, a smattering of potato chips and empty beer bottles littered

across its torn top. Beanbag chairs were tossed about the living area, filled with boys with shaggy hair and sandy feet. One was playing a guitar to a song on the speaker.

Along the living room wall were four bright surfboards, each more colorful than the last. One showed off brilliant stripes and flames, two teemed with plant shapes, and the last was in swirls of yellows, oranges, and reds. A fifth, with a bright turquoise stripe down the center, lay across the mottled carpet. One of the boys sat on top, his legs crossed into a suntanned X.

“Hey,” said the one on the board.

Giselle thought perhaps it was meant to be a greeting and gave an uncertain nod.

“C’min, Giselle,” yelled Rabbit from around the corner.

She took a few tentative steps onto the linoleum patch that served as an entryway, her espadrilles crunching in the scattered sand grains.

A boy in the kitchen drew a bottle of beer out of a cooler and held it toward her.

“No, thanks,” she said, wrapping her arm around Coco’s neck and looking toward the doorway where Rabbit had disappeared.

“Are those for us?” he asked, eyeing the plate of cookies.

“Yes.” She thrust the plate forward.

He took a cookie off the top and bit into it as he surveyed Coco. “You must be one of Rabbit’s groms.”

“I am.” Coco nodded. “He’s bringing me a surfboard.”

“Step aside!” Rabbit’s voice emerged from a back bedroom. In both hands, he gripped an enormous turquoise board. He dipped it so it didn’t hit the doorway, then gingerly laid it across the carpet. The boys moved to make space.

“This was my sister’s when she started,” Rabbit said.

Coco bounced around it. A wood-grain pattern ran down the center, with two bamboo shoots on either side. A row of yellow hibiscus flowers entwined through the bamboo. The artwork was faded where the hibiscus flowers began, and there were plenty of scratches and dings, but Coco’s face lit up like a Christmas tree.

“My sis was a little grommet like you once,” Rabbit drawled. “Now she’s on the Women’s World Tour and rides for Roxy.”

Coco turned wide eyes toward Giselle. She clearly didn’t understand any of that, but she could tell it sounded impressive.

Rabbit walked around the board. “So you can use this when you practice, but in my class we’re going to use blue foam boards like the other kids, okay?”

Coco nodded.

He patted the center hibiscus. “Kick off your shoes.”

Coco mounted the board with great seriousness. Rabbit's finger outlined elements of the design that would give her cues—her left toe should line up with the wood grain, while her right heel should round the curve of the bottom hibiscus.

He sat back on his haunches and frowned at her feet. "Are you left-handed, little dudette?"

Coco nodded hesitantly.

"Ah, a goofy-foot," he said. "I thought so. This doesn't look natural for you. Kino surfs goofy, too." He motioned with his thumb to a guy sitting behind him. "Let's switch feet."

Rabbit continued in his rhythmic drone while Giselle breathed in the scent of the ocean that wafted through the nearby dining-room window. The boys' chatter went on in the background—some argument about something called onshore swells. The mellow seaside singer continued to encourage love and sunshine. Giselle closed her eyes and inhaled cocoa butter and salty air, feeling a strange, sudden peace in the room full of strangers with whom she shared very little except being part of the human race.

"*Now!*" shouted Rabbit.

Coco pushed up with her arms to bring her feet to the cues.

"Excellent," he drawled, grinning. "That was a beautiful pop-up. Let's try it again."

Coco giggled, and he went on while Giselle noticed a beer bong in the corner of the room. Over her shoulder, two of the boys began swearing. One shoved the other, and a third threw a bottle across the room to a catcher in a beanbag.

Giselle reached for Coco's shoulder. As nice as it had been to be welcomed into this underworld for a minute, it might be time for their exit. "I, uh . . . We really need to go."

As the swearing continued, she cupped Coco's ears and began steering her toward the front door, but a smooth, firm voice came rolling across the room: "*Boys!*"

The room stilled.

"That's enough."

The voice came from another tanned, bare-chested figure leaning in the doorjamb, watching everyone, with a black rubbery tube stretched from one hand to the other. He looked older than the others, although Giselle couldn't be sure. He definitely had a more solid body, with actual muscles that looked like they would keep him grounded if a big gust of wind came through. His blond-tipped hair was pushed up as if it had just dried that way. He had on swim trunks, his wide chest boasting the dull sheen that salt water leaves, a dusting of wheat over copper.

He frowned at the boys who were swearing, then motioned with his head toward Coco.

"Sorry, Fin," one of the boys said. He gave one last quiet shove, though, like a puppy frolicking.

Giselle meant to turn her attention back to Coco, but found herself unable to take her eyes off this newest appearance, captivated by his perfect chest, his square jaw, the rock-shaped shoulders. His body was a gorgeous color—a golden brown, with tinges of smoky red at the tops of his shoulders. Giselle thought it would be perfect to paint. Her second thought was that it would be perfect to photograph. And her third was

that it would be wondrous to touch.

As her mind lingered on the last thought, imagining her finger running along that ridge that defined his shoulder from his biceps, he met her gaze.

She averted her eyes. *Sweet criminy*. She pulled her cardigan closer and smoothed her hair. She was a stay-at-home mom from Indiana. Comptroller for the PTA. A *scrapbooker*. And he was just a kid. What was wrong with her?

She clasped one of Coco's shoulders and leaned toward Rabbit. "We need to get going."

She'd had enough of the surfer underworld for one day. And this California sunshine was frying her brain—staring at a twentysomething surfer. Was she losing her mind?

Rabbit unfurled his legs. "Join us. We're cooking out."

"Can we, Mommy?" Coco begged.

Giselle ran Coco's braid through her hand. "I'll think about it." But she'd already dismissed it. Drinking beer and eating hot dogs with a bunch of sandy boys that looked barely out of high school was probably not what she and her five-year-old daughter should be doing. And she didn't need that Fin kid distracting her with his golden shoulders and strange blue eyes. Maybe she'd find a nice, clean Olive Garden nearby.

She gathered Coco's shoes, grabbed the empty cookie plate, and hustled out of the room, trying not to look back toward Fin. The other boys called out good-byes—she thought one called her "Betty"—but mostly she focused on getting Coco to the patio without any more gawking.

As she passed the doorway to the bedrooms, however, her curiosity ran rampant against her better sense. Suddenly, wildly, uncontrollably—her gaze swept back.

But he wasn't there.

She couldn't tell whether the air whooshing out of her lungs was from disappointment that she didn't get another glance at his sculpted chest or relief that she wouldn't embarrass herself any further. Either way, she gave up a prayer of gratitude that her decency had remained intact for the next sixty seconds.

After Rabbit and another boy laid the surfboard in the center of Lia's living room, Giselle closed the door and leaned her head back.

She took twelve cleansing breaths.

Starting a new life might have to come in smaller steps.

CHAPTER

Two

Giselle and Coco enjoyed a quiet dinner at the Olive Garden that felt, momentarily, normal. They played tic-tac-toe with straws and sugar packets. Giselle thought about how Roy would get annoyed that they were making such a mess, especially when one of the sugar packets might open. She wondered, ridiculously,

whether that might be why he left. But then she caught herself. That was exactly the kind of thinking that was keeping her stagnant.

After dinner, she steered the rental car into a curbside parking space after circling the beach city blocks at least four times to find one. She pulled up on the brake, wiped away a tear that sometimes appeared when she was in silence and darkness, and glanced into the rearview mirror: Coco's blond bangs had fallen across her forehead as her head lulled to one side, resting on Ninja Kitty.

Giselle sighed. When Coco used to fall asleep in the car as a toddler, Roy would carry her. Now that her little girl wasn't so little anymore, putting her on her hip was like carrying an octopus. But she hoisted Coco, tucked Ninja Kitty between them, and trudged back the two blocks to the apartment, tucking her daughter's gangly legs around her waist.

As she got nearer the apartment, the smoke of a charcoal grill coiled through the salty air. She managed the last few pebbled-concrete steps and dragged herself to the crest of the railing.

"Hey," shouted one of the boys, "it's Donna." He snapped his bangs to the side and pushed up from the wall to help her unhinge the gate.

She didn't bother to correct him. He probably didn't remember her name because he didn't care. She did welcome his help with the gate, however—it felt like Coco weighed two hundred pounds all of a sudden.

"Big day for the little dudette." He thrust his chin toward Coco.

Giselle smiled tiredly and shifted Coco's legs.

As a riotous cheer erupted over her shoulder, several hypercharged bodies spilled out Rabbit's front door—all shoving onto the patio. Another of the boys, who looked Hawaiian, stood guard over the smoking grill. "Easy." He pressed them back with his elbows.

As Giselle turned from the scent of grilled sausage to fumble for her front-door key, Rabbit appeared.

"Shhhhhh," he told the louder boys, pressing his palms toward the ground. He strode across the patio and took the key from Giselle to unlock her door. While she shuffled into the dark living room, Rabbit leaned in the doorway. Coco's braids flopped across her neck as Giselle laid her on the couch with Ninja Kitty.

"Join us," Rabbit said, tilting his curls toward the patio.

"I can't," Giselle whispered.

"She'll be fine. You can sit in front of the door—we'll leave it open."

"No."

"Just one beer."

She took the key from him and smiled apologetically. "Thanks anyway."

I'm too old, was what she was thinking. *And someone's mother. And I need to make the rest of the cookies.*

He nodded and looked at her soulfully. For a young guy, Rabbit looked like he had a lot of years in him.

“Where does your name come from?” She took off her jacket. She could make a little conversation. She sort of welcomed the company tonight.

“It’s a nickname I had since I was a kid.” His syllables fell into a long drawl. “When I was first learning to surf, I used to do my pop-ups really fast, and I guess I looked like a rabbit.”

Giselle tried to picture a tinier mop-topped version of him and smiled. “What’s your real name?”

“Henry.” He laughed abruptly, as if he hadn’t heard it spoken aloud in a long time.

“Does a person ‘pop up’ fast when he’s scared?” she teased.

Rabbit’s head jerked back. “*Scared?* No. I was just small and skinny.” He slumped into the doorway and then seemed to realize she was razzing him. He grinned and inspected the beer bottle in his hand. “I like your sister,” he announced.

“It’s hard not to like Lia.”

“She told me to watch out for you, but you seem to be doing okay for yourself.”

She adjusted her jacket on the barstool and sighed. The idea of Lia asking someone to “watch out for her” embarrassed her. They all worried about her now—her mom, her sisters—they all acted as if she were going to fly apart any minute. Sometimes, actually, she did—there were moments after Roy’s sudden disappearance when she thought she was looking down at herself from above, watching a complete stranger. But it bothered her that they all knew. As the oldest child, she’d always been the levelheaded one, the responsible one, the one who had it all together. But now they knew she’d lost her footing. It made her feel revealed and vulnerable, like a rabbit herself—exposed out of its den.

Giselle cleared her throat. “Yes, I’m sure I am.” She began organizing her belongings along the countertop.

“Lia said she set you up with Dan the Man.”

Dan. That was his name. . . . “Yeah, I guess so. Thursday night.” She was dreading it, but one date wouldn’t kill her. Lia said she had to start somewhere. “What’s he like?”

“He’s okay. He’s a real estate guy here. Lotsa money.”

Giselle nodded. Sounded like Lia’s type, actually. But he obviously didn’t impress Rabbit here much.

“Fin was asking about you, though,” Rabbit said.

Giselle’s heart skipped, right there, as she stalled with her key ring halfway into her purse.

She went back to fussing with the place mats on the breakfast bar. There must be some mistake. Surfer boys with rock-shaped shoulders did not ask about PTA moms from Indiana.

“I didn’t know how much you might want to be bothered during your weeks here, though,” Rabbit continued, shifting in the doorway, “so I didn’t know what to tell him.”

She brushed a few breakfast crumbs off the countertop so she wouldn’t have to meet Rabbit’s eyes. She didn’t want to know whether he thought it was weird for a friend of his to be asking about an older, divorced mom from suburbia. Fin must have been asking about her regarding *work*, or the photographs. Maybe he had

wanted a cookie.

“What did he want to know?” she asked.

“If you were married.”

Giselle knocked over a saltshaker. Surely, this must be a mistake. Rabbit must have misunderstood. Perhaps Fin needed someone to sew a button on his swimsuit or something.

“Rabbit, how old are you guys?” She rearranged the salt and pepper shakers. She needed to restore a little balance to her universe. “Some of those boys looked like they were barely out of high school—are they old enough to drink?”

“I’m twenty-three—old enough to drink.” He winked. “Most of us are twenty-two or twenty-three.”

Giselle took her time before asking the next question. “And Fin?”

“Ah, Fin’s an old man. He’s not one of us.”

Giselle wasn’t sure which of those two statements interested her more. She cleared her throat while she assembled her next question, but Coco stirred on the couch and wriggled into a sitting position.

“Mommy.” Coco shoved her bangs back with her palm. “Can I have water?”

“Sure, baby.” Giselle hustled into the kitchen, relieved to be back in her own world.

As she rounded the kitchen corner, her cell phone rang, pulling her even further back into normalcy—it was a tinkling piano sound, Beethoven’s Fifth, which her ex-husband had programmed nearly a year and a half ago.

“I’ll go.” Rabbit ducked his head and waved. “Anything you need, Giselle, just ask.”

The door clicked behind him as Giselle rummaged through her purse for the jangling phone. She wished Rabbit hadn’t left. Despite how young he seemed, he felt kind, and comfortable, and Giselle had the urge to sit on the floor with him and ask a million questions, as if he held the key to a new world she might want to hear about right now—something foreign and fascinating that could dangle a little magic before her eyes. She knew she couldn’t stay in that world, but hearing about it would do her well, like a child who wants a bedtime story about princesses to ward off any monsters that might show up instead.

Beethoven’s Fifth pealed again, and she looked at her phone with resignation. “Hello?”

“Giselle,” came the voice on the other line. His flat intonation registered right away, even though she hadn’t heard much of it in months. Four, to be exact. Four months, two weeks, and two days. She was amazed he could still make her hand shake.

“Yes?” She tried to keep her voice steady, uninterested. She wanted him to think she didn’t know who this was. She wanted him to think she had men calling her cell phone all the time, at eight or nine o’clock, and she couldn’t differentiate between all their voices.

“He’s dead,” he said.

Giselle breathed in, let another breath out.

“The funeral is Tuesday. I’m flying out tonight. I know you left a message saying you and Coco would be in Sandy Cove all week, so I’d like you to be there. It’s only about thirty miles from where you’re staying. It would mean a lot to Mom. And Ray-Lynn.”

Giselle’s world kept closing in, the voices and names from the past, trying to edge into the new world she was trying to create. She had the foreboding sense that the voices and names wanted to fill her new space, push her out. She imagined herself falling over a cliff.

“Roy, why aren’t you returning my calls? I’ve been calling—”

“This isn’t the time, Giselle. My father just died. Are you going to be there?”

She gripped the counter to steady herself. She didn’t know what to respond to first: his typical reprimand, the fact that he was forming real sentences to her on the phone for the first time in four months, the fact that Joe had finally passed from cancer, or the uneasy awareness she was going to have to come face-to-face with Roy again, right here in California, just as she was just starting to get her life back together.

“I’ll be there,” she said.

He gave her the details; then she put the phone down and went to get Coco her glass of water. She sat on the couch and stroked her little girl’s hair until she fell asleep. Giselle’s tears these days had a few different wellsprings, but the main one, right now, was the fact that Roy hadn’t even asked about Coco.

...

The squawk of seagulls woke her.

Giselle lay in bed and watched Coco’s profile, listening to the gulls’ cries and thinking about how different morning sounds were in different parts of the country.

She didn’t know how she was going to face Roy. She hadn’t seen him once since that humble day when she’d found the note underneath the cantaloupe next to the bowl of breakfast bars: *“I’ve met someone else, G. I’m so very sorry.”*

Since then—since the floor had fallen out from underneath her—she had never managed to put all the pieces back together. He had run away. Their accounts had closed. He hadn’t explained. He never returned her calls, only texted her from time to time so they could set up a visit with Coco, which they handled by switching pickups after school. She was served divorce papers in front of the grocery store about four weeks later.

Giselle turned her head on the pillow and studied Coco. She was so bold, so carefree. Giselle wanted, more than anything, for Coco to regain her life. She had been such a trouper with all the Roy hoopla: Her little life was turning upside down, and she rarely cried or complained. She asked for her dad from time to time, but when Giselle said he wouldn’t be returning for a while, Coco simply shrugged. She’d been without him enough evenings in her five years to not have it make much difference. In the meantime, Giselle tried to do normal things as often as possible—serve fish sticks on Fridays, get ice cream after kindergarten on the last day of every month, and play at the park on Saturday mornings.

And this getaway, by token of being a getaway, was Giselle’s chance to welcome new traditions. It was time to start their new life together, just them.

But now—with this funeral invite—Roy was going to send her two steps back again.

Coco's eyes fluttered open, and her lips curled into a sleepy smile. "Hi, Mommy."

"Hi, baby."

"Why are you looking at me?"

"I'm looking at how wonderful you are."

"You can see that?"

"Mommies can always see that."

Coco unfurled her body into a long cat's stretch. She kicked off the covers and stretched as far as she could, then snapped back into a coil on her side and faced Giselle over her pillow.

"What's a fish with no eyes?"

Giselle frowned. "Is this a joke, or do you mean seriously?"

"It's a joke."

"Hmmm . . . a fish with no eyes . . . I give up."

"A fsh." Coco laughed and threw her legs over the side of the bed. "Can we go down to the water this morning?"

Giselle smiled. "Let's eat breakfast first."

They ate plain Eggo waffles from Lia's freezer while Giselle made a list of groceries they'd need, with a little help from Coco, who quietly suggested hot dogs and fruit roll-ups. Giselle crinkled her nose. But then, at Coco's hopeful eyes, she stopped. A new life. New traditions. She wrote "fruit roll-ups" next to the apples and grapes, and Coco touched her lips and giggled.

They wandered through the corner beach market in sun hats and flip-flops, dropping obnoxiously colored prepackaged items in the basket along with Giselle's fresh fruit. As Giselle stood in front of a display of apples, she thought about how similar and different the experience was at the same time: This was Lia's market, next to the ocean, so different from hers, and yet the Lean Cuisines were still next to the Smart Ones; the Jif still next to the Skippy. Same. But different. It brought her an odd comfort.

"You girls visiting?" asked the elderly lady at the checkout line. She smiled at Coco, whose white-blond waves were barely contained in the narrow braids that bobbed just below her shoulders. Giselle had plaited them while Coco sat in the middle of the surfboard this morning.

Giselle nodded as a rack across the aisle caught her eye.

Hair color. Every color imaginable. She darted across the line and grabbed the first that called to her. Although she'd always been a blonde, the color she held was an intriguing reddish tone. Strawberry, it said.

"And this."

The woman added it to the bag. "You girls have a wonderful time," she said, throwing the color into a bag. "Do you need help to your car?"

“No, thanks,” said Giselle.

They were, she decided, fine on their own.

• • •

The surf grew louder as Giselle and Coco trekked the few blocks to the ocean. She’d left half the groceries on the kitchen counter—she wanted to mimic Coco’s spontaneity, rushing back through the door with only a clear mind and a beach towel—but now she couldn’t stop making a mental list of what had been left on the countertop. She didn’t leave the frozen strawberries out, did she?

“Mommy, look!” Coco pointed to a caged iguana on a tortilla-colored patio. The home had a Spanish-tile red roof. Hot-pink bougainvillea exploded along one side.

Giselle stepped closer to the waist-high wrought-iron gate and peered over it with Coco, smiling at the funny pet. They decided his name should be Iggy.

Giselle had walked these same sidewalks in Sandy Cove about six years ago, visiting when Lia had first moved in. They had strolled next to these same stucco homes—each a paler shade of sand than the last, with low-walled patios lined with potted succulents. Iron lounge chairs, padded with striped-green cushions fading from the sun and salt, still lay in wait for their owners. Giselle had been about eight months pregnant with Coco then. Rabbit and the boys were probably still living with their parents. Roy was still kind. And the world seemed like it was a flower waiting to unfurl.

She took a deep breath and fought back the heavy pang in her chest. Her sisters had been right about Roy. It was terrible that she’d let him isolate her. Roy had never “approved” of them, and she’d let herself become more and more pulled away, wanting to please this man she’d so admired. He rolled his eyes when Giselle mentioned Lia—saying her independent ways were never going to win her a husband—and spoke with disdain whenever Noelle’s name came up—a “girl with her head in the clouds.” Then he’d grab Giselle and tell her that he would never be able to stand the idea of “those girls” rubbing off on her. Soon, Giselle began to see the pattern of conversations about her sisters being followed by Roy being particularly paranoid, then demanding, in bed—ordering her clothes off, with a resentful, irritated bark, and throwing a certain aggression into sex that made Giselle’s teeth grind. Over the years, she found it simply easier not to talk about them. And certainly not to visit them. It was just one more thing she’d grown to resent.

Coco sank her bare toes in the sand, and they weaved their way past a quilt of colorful beach towels to find a spot near the water. Giselle tilted her head back to the late-day sun, letting it warm her until it reached all the way down to a calming spot in her chest. She sprayed sunblock all over Coco, plus on the few patches of skin she herself revealed—her wrists and ankles—then let Coco make elaborate sand castles near the water.

“You know who lives here?” Coco asked Giselle, pointing at her largest castle. She had just trudged back up from the water’s edge for the millionth time with another pail full of sandy, murky water. The sun was sitting low on the horizon.

“Who?” said Giselle.

“Me.” She readied her pail with both hands to pour into the moat she’d created around the sand mansion.

“And you. And Iggy. And a prince.”

“A prince?”

She nodded solemnly. “For you.”

Coco poured the water into the moat and sat back on her haunches, the sand granules sticking to her legs in circular patterns, while the water swirled briefly, then disappeared into the sand.

“Oh.” The wind swept the tendrils of yellow hair around her ears while she put together what just happened. “I guess we need soldiers.” She scrambled to her feet and ran back to the foamy surf to look for pebbles and shells, which she collected the rest of the afternoon. She spent the good part of the next few hours making sure they all had a specific place to stand guard.

• • •

A knock sounded on the front door as Giselle lined the fish sticks along the cookie sheet. The sun cast a golden glow through the curtains.

She padded across the floor in her bare feet, pulling her cover-up tighter, and flung open the door.

“Heeeey,” Rabbit drawled.

Giselle smiled. She liked Rabbit.

Coco ran up from behind and peeked her head around the door.

“I came to ask you two about a party tonight,” he said.

“Oh, no, thanks, Rabbit.”

“It’ll be fun.”

“No, thanks.”

“You have something against having fun?”

“Of course not. It’s just . . . not my thing. . . .”

He smirked. “Fun is not your thing?”

“Parties are not my thing.”

A flash of honesty went through her mind, though, of the multitude of charity balls and hospital events she’d attended over the years for Roy, and she felt a pang of guilt for lying. She’d been attending parties for Roy’s medical colleagues for years, signing up for committees, standing around in floor-length gowns, doing him proud. “*Beach* parties are not my thing,” she amended.

“You have a lot of beach parties in Indiana?” Rabbit said, smiling.

“I just don’t—” She began to explain, but then stopped. She was tired of defending herself. She motioned toward the kitchen. “I’m putting fish sticks on.”

“Weeeell . . .” Rabbit followed her into the kitchen and glanced over her shoulder at her baking tray. “I’m pretty sure there’ll be something better than fish sticks there.”

“I have Coco.”

“There’ll be lots of kids.” He took a frozen fish stick off the tray and tried to bite into it.

She glanced at Coco. Rabbit had already found her weak spot.

Lia, too, had mentioned in her phone message earlier that Giselle should go out and have fun. Giselle had been so happy to hear from her—when she’d called back and gotten voice mail, she’d almost asked about Fin—*Have you seen this guy? Do you know who he is?*—but then she chickened out, embarrassed to ask such a thing of her younger sister, who was trying to set her up with a stable real estate investor. Instead, she left a message about Rabbit and how nice he’d been.

Rabbit waved a fish stick. “This is terrible. C’mon.”

Giselle felt something inside her give up. Maybe this was the reason Roy left her—maybe she was too cautious, too closed off. Maybe she was going to end up being some old lady, with just Coco and Iggy and some cats. Until Coco left her, too. And then it would just be Giselle. And the iguana. The crazy lady on the hill.

She turned off the oven and put the fish sticks back in the freezer like some sort of wild woman.

“Let’s go.”

CHAPTER

Three

Leaning forward to peer out the windshield of her rental car, Giselle followed Rabbit’s beat-up Volkswagen through the weathered streets of Sandy Cove.

The isolated town bore little resemblance to the flashier beach towns farther north, which she’d visited often when she stayed with her mom. Her mom and younger sisters had eventually made their home in Los Angeles shortly after her parents’ divorce, but Giselle had started college that year and fled back to Indiana, happy to be near her father. She hadn’t liked L.A. much: It was too pretentious, too much of a show-off. But Sandy Cove, farther south, was different. Weatherworn, with cliffs and hillsides setting it apart and an “Old California” vibe that was ceaselessly forgiving, the little town seemed made for people who wanted to hide.

Coco pointed to a bulletlike train that glinted in the sun, passing through. Giselle crossed the tracks and parked behind a community of narrow, aluminum-sided homes, laid along the sand like piano keys. The bases of the homes were permanent—some with Polynesian-style lava rocks, some with stacked stone. The entire community had a 1950s ambiance—the rental office was flanked by retro tiki torches and miniature palm trees, and many of the homes still had green-turf balconies and Plexiglas-panel windbreaks standing at attention against the ocean. It looked like a community that time forgot.

The party house boasted the same retro feel, but with an updated, million-dollar face-lift. A slate walkway led to a bright white door, and a vintage Sputnik-styled lantern hung in the doorway.

Giselle, Rabbit, and Coco stepped into a small, open living area. Dark wooden floors and wainscoting showed off sleek, masculine furniture. Eight-foot walls of glass showcased a long stretch of ocean and horizon, all the way north and south. The house perched right above the sand, only about twenty feet from the water, but elevated by a wall of rocks. A set of nautical-rope stairs zigzagged to the sand, where several children played. A second patio held a cluster of adults, who sipped colorful stemmed drinks and

complimented one another's bright tropical dresses and shirts over the steel-drum tunes that came from a live four-piece band.

Coco spotted a girl about her age sitting in the sand, playing with a bright pink sand bucket off the main-level patio. The girl looked up and asked Coco whether she would like to play.

Giselle wished it were that easy for her. She smoothed her spring sweater and cotton skirt and studied the clusters of absurdly beautiful people.

Rabbit had, as Giselle had feared, slipped away. She took a glass of champagne from a passing tray and wandered toward the patio rail, where she could keep an eye on Coco and her new little friend. The foamy waves of the Pacific rolled up behind the girls, the water glistening like gemstones. Giselle had told Rabbit she'd stay only an hour, but as soon as she saw the view, she decided she might wait until the sun went down. Watching it from here would be magical.

She leaned into the rail, letting the rhythmic roar of the sea envelop her, allowing her shoulders to relax for what felt like the first time in days. She let the seaside serenade lull her.

"You came," said a man's voice over her shoulder.

She whirled, then tripped backward to see Fin.

He had clothes on today—a loose-fitting button-down shirt that draped off his shoulders, narrowing at his hips and falling over a pair of dressy shorts. He didn't have the air of a surfer about him today. He looked like a yachter, perhaps. Or some wealthy woman's boy toy, with his blond tips and expensive clothes. He was remarkably handsome up close—his face lean at the sides, with lines around his mouth—and he offered her the kind of grin that must stop many a surfer girl's heart. But the thing that stopped Giselle's was his eyes. She'd noticed them before, in Rabbit's apartment, but up this close they were stunning: bright blue, with an outline of navy.

Giselle glanced over his shoulder, almost expecting the wealthy woman he must belong to to materialize behind him.

"Rabbit invited me," she blurted out.

Fin seemed to find that amusing. He nodded and looked into the tumbler he held with an amber drink. "I'm glad."

"He said there'd be lots of kids," she babbled, "and that I could invite my daughter, even though we weren't going to come. I wasn't really sure. . . ." She lamely indicated Coco playing in the sand. "I don't even know whose party this is."

She was embarrassed she was talking so fast. She couldn't remember the last time a man had left her so flustered. And this one was so . . . *young*. Wasn't he? It was hard to tell. She stole a quick glance at his mouth, at his square jawline. He could've been twenty-two or thirty-two, really—he had one of those faces that made it hard to tell. But either way, he was clearly younger than she was. She took a deep breath and decided it was safer to simply not look at him.

Taking a sip of champagne, she kept her eyes on Coco. The flute stem provided a thankful distraction for her hands, and she grasped it tighter, as if she could harness some of the recklessness of her pounding heart—perhaps wrap it neatly around the stem.

The music lulled into a Caribbean-sounding number, and several guests began rolling their hips.

Fin leaned closer. “Can we go somewhere?” he said over the music. He reached toward her lower back, not touching her, but indicating he’d like her to move with him.

Her heart thumped again—flipped, really, right there in her chest—at his ocean eyes and coconut scent. She almost snapped her champagne flute.

“My daughter,” she choked out, indicating Coco. “I need to keep my eye on her.”

“Of course.”

The music grew louder and a young couple in matching red bathing suits did a rumba toward them. Fin smiled to the woman and stepped aside, then directed Giselle’s attention to a spot in the sand just behind Coco.

“How about there?” he said toward her ear.

A cluster of bright white beach chairs occupied the spot he indicated, just out of reach of the lapping foam.

Giselle nodded, her gaze skimming over his forearms—much too thick, too roped, to belong to a boy.

As she surreptitiously extended her inspection to his hands, he reached back to steer her across the patio to the steel-drum beat, turning sideways through several clusters of people. He nodded to several of them.

When they got to the chairs, she positioned herself to make sure she could see Coco, smoothing her skirt with one hand and balancing her champagne in the other. He studied her carefully. The sun was setting behind him, shining through the blond strands of his hair.

“I noticed you at Rabbit’s apartment yesterday,” he said.

The waves cracked, and Fin’s voice drifted on a current of wind. She pulled the comment back, letting it flutter about her, forcing it into her consciousness while she tried to filter it, process it, put it somewhere inside her normal view of herself. She couldn’t, exactly. She nodded, deciding to avoid mentioning that she’d noticed him, too, particularly his bare chest. She was pretty sure gorgeous surfer dudes didn’t care about being noticed by scrapbook moms.

She took another sip of champagne.

“I have this event to go to,” he went on. “It would be a favor.” He took a nervous sip. “I need someone to go with, and when I saw you, I thought you’d be perfect.”

It sounded like a compliment, but the fact that he wasn’t meeting her eyes indicated otherwise.

“I’m perfect?”

He nodded.

“If you tell me it’s a mother-son ball, I’m going to kick sand at you,” she said.

He squinted at her for several long seconds and then smiled. She had the strange thought that there was a lucky girl somewhere who got to see him smile like this all the time.

“Those boys at Rabbit’s must be doing a number on you,” he said. “Are they still calling you ‘Donna’?”

Her breath caught in surprise. “How did you know?”

“Donna Reed.”

The name hung in the air while Giselle assembled it in her mind. Slowly, inside, she began to crumble. She pulled her sweater tighter and looked away.

Fin did a double take through his bangs. “They mean it as a compliment.”

She nodded halfheartedly. Of course they did. A pearl-clad 1950s television housewife was exactly who everyone wanted to be compared to.

“You . . . just have an air about you.” He shrugged.

“An air?”

“Very maternal.”

Giselle sucked in as much air as she could, as every organ inside her seemed to deflate. She could almost feel her breasts flattening against her chest. She looked over the top of his blond head at the ocean, briefly, just to gather her senses, then forced herself to face the fact that whatever reason she’d hoped he’d invited her out here—that wasn’t it. Whatever reason he’d noticed her at Rabbit’s apartment—that wasn’t it, either. She looked away from his tousled hair.

“Do I need to bring cookies?” she said sarcastically.

He laughed. He had a nice, mature-sounding laugh. “I heard they were good, but no. It’s a wine tasting and art auction. I have to impress some people. I was thinking about asking your sister, but when I came by to see if she was there, Rabbit said she was gone for a couple of weeks.”

Lia? It hadn’t occurred to Giselle that Fin might date Lia. She tried to picture her extroverted, hair-flipping little sister on the arm of this magazine-cover surfer boy and felt, first, a stab of jealousy. But then she dismissed it. Lia wouldn’t date someone like Fin. Lia had liked serious boys when she was young, then moved on to serious men. First it was boys who wrote dark poetry and rode motorcycles to high school; then it was men who wore black suits and took over companies. Fin wouldn’t fit into her worldview at all.

“Do you . . . *date* Lia?” she asked anyway, unable to keep the incredulity out of her voice.

“No, no.” Fin shook his head as if the idea were preposterous. “She’s not—I’m not . . . her type at all.”

At least they agreed on that much.

“We’re friends. She’s helped me out of a few jams. But this one—even she wasn’t right for this. But you . . .” He looked her up and down. “You’re perfect.”

Giselle let the words settle over her for an instant, enjoying their flash of warmth. She didn’t hear compliments very often, particularly from her ex, who had looked at her as if she were simply part of the furniture for the last several years. But then she noted another of Fin’s skittish glances and reminded herself he was probably up to something.

“You must know a million other women.”

“Not old enough.”

Her extraordinary reserve allowed her to keep perfectly still. One didn’t get through excruciating high-school beauty pageants by letting hurt feelings show. Her eyes, however, must have given her away.

“I don’t mean—” Fin lifted his hand. “I just mean I need someone my own age.”

Clearly, he’d missed the mark on this one. “How old *are* you?” she asked.

“Twenty-nine . . . soon.”

Giselle looked at him skeptically. “When’s soon?”

“Next weekend.”

She raised her eyebrow. Twenty-eight? She had about seven years on him. Although at least he was older than she’d thought. He’d looked boyish from a distance, but up close he had all the strength that brings a man over the threshold from boyish to sexy. He was definitely already there.

But, even so, this wasn’t possible.

“Well.” She stood, brushing the sand off her legs. “I’m a little older than that. And besides, it certainly must serve you well to have a beautiful twentysomething on your arm?”

“Not at this event.”

He seemed resigned to the fact that she was leaving. He took a sip of his drink and looked, for the moment, terribly sad and lonely.

“You must know several sophisticated thirtysomethings.” She could see at least seven or eight from here—glowing tans, beautiful bodies, windswept hair in shades of gold.

“Too married,” he said without looking.

She watched him for a minute as the waves crashed behind them. She almost asked how he knew she wasn’t married, but then remembered he’d asked Rabbit. So *that* was it: She was the only thirtysomething who was still single in the state of California. Her fingers instinctively went to her wedding ring. It was a strange habit, keeping the ring on, and she couldn’t exactly explain why she did it. She knew it had something to do with Coco—she didn’t want people to look at her and Coco, alone, and think she was depriving her daughter of a two-parent home. It was strange and pathetic, but there it was.

“Yeah, that threw me.” He nodded toward her finger. “I double-checked with Rabbit.”

A quiet tingle ran through her at the thought of being discussed, privately, between two men. But then she told herself to ignore it. She was being discussed as Donna Reed, after all, not Pamela Anderson.

“Rabbit talks too much,” she said, with more irritation in her voice than she wanted.

Fin chuckled into his drink. A light breeze came up and blew sand across their shoes.

“Why do you still wear it?” he asked.

She felt her face flush. She didn’t want to discuss her personal choices with this surfer. What would he know about the difficulty of having your husband run away from you? Of not being able to face any of your friends or family because you didn’t even know what went wrong? Of feeling like you’d failed in a catastrophic way?

“It’s difficult to explain.”

“Try me.” He looked straight at her—as if he actually expected an answer—but Giselle shook her head.

He bobbed his as if to acquiesce that she didn’t want to say. The sunlight caught his face as he stared at the ocean. And, as soon as she was about to turn, his eyelashes lowered. He looked knowing, somehow. But also achingly, painfully lonely.

“When is this event?” Her words, now spoken, hung in the breeze between them, seeming like they belonged to someone else.

“Wednesday.” His expression shifted from doubt to hope. “Look, uh—Giselle, isn’t it?”

“Well, it’s not Donna.”

He grinned. “Look, Giselle, I didn’t mean to insult you. I’m sorry if I did. I just mean that this event is important to me, and I need to bring someone who is beautiful and sophisticated, and when I saw you at Rabbit’s place, I thought you were perfect. Even better than Lia.”

She kept very still. She was afraid if she moved, her face might reveal her skepticism. He didn’t say it as if “sophisticated” were something he necessarily admired, but her heart hung a little over the “beautiful” part. She hadn’t heard that compliment from a man in quite some time.

And, really, who was she kidding? Spending an evening in this gorgeous man’s company, sipping wine and looking at art, didn’t seem like the worst idea in the universe. She could call Lia and make sure he was okay. And she and Coco had their own event to go to this week, after all, and Roy’s mom might want Coco to—

An idea hit her.

“Uh—Fin, isn’t it?”

“Definitely not Donna.”

“All right, Fin. I have an event myself this week. And *you*—” She let her eyes wander up and down, the same way his had, but she didn’t quite have the audaciousness to do it right. “You’re perfect.”

He regarded her with suspicion. “Perfect how?”

“Young enough. Hunky enough. Pro surfer enough.”

He laughed a little and stared at his glass. Clearly, he hadn’t seen this coming. “How do you know I’m a pro surfer?”

“Rabbit told me.”

“Did we already say Rabbit talks too much?”

“I think we agreed on that.”

He stared at the ocean for a second. “I’m not on the tour anymore.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

He shifted his attention and studied her suspiciously. “When is your event?”

“Tomorrow.”

“What is it?”

“A funeral.”

His eyebrows shot up. “Seriously?”

She nodded.

“Why do you need a pro surfer on your arm to attend a funeral?”

“Because I’m swimming with sharks.”

Several expressions crossed his face in rapid succession—doubt, humor, maybe even a hint of admiration. He settled on a hesitant smile. “I’m listening.”

“It’s at one o’clock. I just need you to come along, stand there, and look pretty.”

He chuckled at that. “All right. I guess I can do that. What should I wear, my nicest black wet suit?”

“Funeral clothes.”

His expression turned somber. He swirled his drink in his glass a few times. “Whose funeral is it?”

“My ex-father-in-law.”

He nodded slowly. “I suppose, then, there’s an ex-husband on the scene?”

Giselle paused. It hadn’t occurred to her that he might not approve of all the details. She nodded hesitantly.

He looked at her for a long time. “All right. As long as this isn’t one of those scenarios where you need a stand-in so he can beat the crap out of me.”

She laughed at the absurdity of it—her skinny, bespectacled husband taking a swing at anything besides a golf ball.

“I don’t think that’ll be an issue,” she said.

Roy had run away. He obviously wouldn’t be jealous. She simply wanted Fin to accompany her because she didn’t want to look pathetic. She wanted to look pulled together, like she’d moved on. And not just *moved on*, but moved on with *this guy*. She wanted to show his whole family that she had a new image now: one of strength. One of the ability to move forward, without them, without Roy. . . .

“Any requests for me, for your event?” she asked.

He took a sip of his drink. “Don’t look too sexy.”

Giselle suppressed a laugh and tightened her cardigan around her middle. As if that would be a problem. “This is a crowd that wouldn’t like that?”

“Something like that,” he said, avoiding her eyes.

They walked another four or five steps toward the house, until Fin became engulfed by a cluster of partygoers. He looked over his shoulder at Giselle and mouthed to talk to him before she left.

Giselle nodded, then searched for Rabbit. When she found him, she asked just exactly how famous Fin was.

“Pro All-American, World Cup, Brazilian Open, Azores Islands Pro, U.S. Open twice,” Rabbit said. “I could go on. He’s a god. I’d show you all his trophies, but he’s got them locked up in a closet.” He shoved his thumb over his shoulder.

Realization was slow in coming, but Giselle’s gaze followed Rabbit’s thumb. “This is *his* house?”

Rabbit frowned. “That’s why I invited you, Giselle. He asked me to.” His face took on an air of concern. “It’s okay, right? If you want him to just leave you alone, I’ll just—”

“No,” she interrupted. “It’s okay.”

She took a deep breath. All right. A gorgeous pro surfer, who had all these people here to see him—including at least forty stunningly beautiful women in very small bikinis—had just asked her on a date. Or, well, not really a date. An *event*. And she’d asked him to a *funeral*.

Giselle looked around and set her champagne glass on a table behind her. She took another breath and tried to speak rationally, like this all made sense and she fit in here. “He said he’s not on the tour anymore,” she said casually.

Rabbit rolled his eyes. “Unfortunately.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means he’s not on the Men’s World Tour anymore. He’s trying to get back on it.”

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