

CHAPTER



PART OF ME STILL REJECTS THIS AS IMPOSSIBLE. BUT the proof of these feelings is right here, in these words I'm writing. Because, as you will see if you keep reading, the downstream events which followed this seminal moment ruined everything.

To begin with, she was beautiful. Not a gym-trained beauty, like my wife, but soft and subtle. There was something warm and forgiving in the vibe she sent me. She wasn't wearing a dental-floss thong, like Evelyn always did. This was a modest two-piece swimsuit. But her flawless skin and sun-kissed complexion were sexier to me, by far, than anything Evelyn had accomplished with hours of grunt work under Mickey D's supervision, pounding out reps in our basement.

She was just coming out of the pool, shiny black hair wet and pasted back against her head, her natural beauty radiant, without benefit of makeup or jewelry. Long legs . . . slender arms, and a

mouth that . . . well, it defied description. Okay . . . I'll use my feeble skills and try. Happiness lurked in both corners. Full lips, but no collagen, no artificial enhancements, just slightly pouty but without a trace of petulance. How's that? Her eyes were blue . . . not just the blue of azure skies or clear crystal lakes, but the intense blue that speaks intellectual honesty and purity of soul—that kind of blue.

I can already hear you laughing, because you're right—how could I know of her intellectual honesty? I hadn't even said one word to her yet. But trust me here, some things defy the norm. Some things are transcendental. I just knew.

I sat in my wife's power cabana while she was in the gym pumping up, getting ready for her first grand entrance—her first cartilage-popping pool strut—and watched this remarkable creature. I fantasized what it would be like to possess such a beauty. But you must understand that it wasn't lust alone that fueled these thoughts. Okay, there was some lust, I'll admit; but what I was experiencing was . . . well, it was also deeply spiritual. There was a communion of souls here, a connection deeper than anything I had ever felt before, and, I remind you again, this was with somebody I had yet to speak to. But I knew when I did speak to her she would be everything I'd hoped for, and more. Don't ask me how I knew this. I can't tell you. I just knew.

For at least two hours, I sat and watched, trying not to be obvious about it. She caught me once, and I looked away, my ears turning red. My face felt thick, as if it belonged to someone else. I got up, walked to the pool concession, holding my stomach in like a fucking

idiot, and bought a pair of large sunglasses. I went back the long way around to my power cabana. I put the glasses on a little crooked, so I could pretend to read my book, but I was really just looking at her.

Then I had a very uncharacteristic moment—a very un-Chick-like thought. I wondered if she knew that only very important people got issued these high-ground cabanas. No kidding, that's what I thought. I was that fucked up.

About ten o'clock, disaster struck.

A man came down from the hotel and sat in the pool chair next to her. Husband? Boyfriend? I didn't know. She wasn't wearing a wedding ring. I'd already checked that. But he had one, so he was married. But who was he? Her secret lover? No. She wouldn't date another woman's husband. She was too well-adjusted, too pure. I already knew this about her. I know, I know, this sounds like a verse in a Barry Manilow song or the flap copy on a Danielle Steel novel. Silly. But I knew. I could feel it.

I watched in dismay and anger as they held hands and kissed. They swam in the pool together; they laughed at each other's jokes. I forced myself to stop looking at her for a minute and take inventory of this asshole who had joined her.

The problem here was the guy was gorgeous, younger and much better looking than me . . . fit, but not gym-fit. He had an athlete's build, teeth square and straight as a row of tombstones—shiny and white as a porcelain toilet—curly copper hair and a strong hero's jaw. I hated him. I wanted to vomit.

Then Evelyn saved me from further tragic comparison as she plopped down next to me. I'd missed her grand entrance, but she didn't mention it because she was already angry about the cabana.

"This isn't the one," she growled. "The best cabana is that one over there." She pointed with a muscular arm at another tent that maybe, if you had a calibrated altimeter and a topographical survey map, you could prove was a foot or two higher than the one we were in. I'm not kidding. These are the things Evelyn worries about.

"Honey, Melissa couldn't . . ."

"Don't gimme any more Melissa b.s. That girl just sleeps and eats. You ask her to do one damn thing, it's worse than a root canal. She wants to be paid for sitting down here. Ridiculous. After all we do for her we're supposed to pay her for helping us out? She knows which cabana I want. This is just her bitchy way of getting back at me. How many times have I discussed it?"

It went on like that for almost ten minutes. I had learned years ago not to fight with Evelyn because she is an emotional terrorist. You take her on, she escalates the battle way past ground you're prepared to defend. She's capable of throwing an ashtray or a drink in public. I hate public confrontations. Public anger conveys weakness. My father raised me to show no weakness—no vulnerability. Good advice until you get sloshed and pile your fucking Jag into a bridge abutment. In case you're some kind of amateur psychologist, I'll cop to it now. I've got some major abandonment issues over Dad's death, but we'll get to that later.

"Y'know, I've been thinking . . ." I said. "Maybe I will ask Mickey D to fax over a workout routine." Me, searching for a safer topic.

That shut her up. “Really? You’ll start weight training?”

“Yeah, I think I should tighten up this stomach a little, work on the old peccs, whatever . . . ”

“No kidding?” I really had Evelyn’s attention now. She stared at me hard, studying me, using the look she wore when picking out diamonds. “You’re serious? You’re not kidding?”

“As serious as Robert Schuller interviewing Pat Robertson on the *Hour of Power*,” I quipped halfheartedly.

So I spent the afternoon in the gym with Mickey D’s workout regimen and a twenty-year-old kid named Brian. Sit-ups, flies, dead lifts—two hours of torture. Two hours spent getting the old bod tuned up and ready for what would come next.

You see, I already knew I had to meet her.