

BEACHED

Chapter 1

Figures something like this would happen.

I'm walking on Beach Zero with Dreamer, my dog. It's six a.m.; the sky is pink. It's late June in Florida, and the heat is starting to buzz.

They call it Beach Zero because it's the last beach on Placido's southern border, before Placido turns into the town of Sumner, before the landscape of sand becomes a tangle of mangrove swamp. They also call it Beach Zero because it's where things end up. The swirl of currents and wind and tides makes everything converge on the shore here. It's a popular place to go shelling. There are piles of broken conchs and whelks. There's also driftwood, plastic Coke bottles, deflated helium balloons, yellowed baby binkies and, today, there's a human arm.

I see it but it doesn't register at first. It looks like a branch, but then I see the hand. It's bloated and pale, and there's a ring on the middle finger.

Dreamer tucks her tail between her legs and sits down and howls. I'd like to sit down and howl too. But I'm a private investigator, at least that's what I've been for the past two months, I should have more self control. Still, my knees get wobbly, and it takes me three tries before I can actually dial 9-1-1 correctly on my cell phone.

Then I call Detective Johansen. I just left his place, and this is awkward. It was our first night together, and it was kind of a disaster. I left before he woke up.

"Dave?" I say.

"Lola, where'd you go?"

"Well," I say. I pause. "I found this arm..." I say.

"What?"

“On the beach. I was taking Dreamer for a walk, and there’s an arm.”

“Where are you? I’ll be right there. Don’t move.”

He has a tendency to tell me what to do, which is one of the things that wasn’t so good about last night. I have a tendency not to listen, which didn’t help last night either. Not that anything really happened between us... But I can’t think about that now.

I have to go get a better look at that arm. I pick my way to where it’s nestled in a blanket of grassy seaweed. It seems like it just washed up. The waves from the incoming tide nudge it a little. I hope I won’t have to move it to save it from getting swept away before the cops get here. I don’t think I could touch it.

It’s really just a forearm, not the whole arm. And the thumb is missing on the hand. The rest of the hand is outstretched, palm up and looks unbearably sad. Like a plea for help—way too late.

It smells really bad. The skin doesn’t look like skin anymore. It looks like a white sponge. I hold my breath and lean over to take a look at the ring. It’s a wide silver band and it has the word “LOVE” etched on it.

I look up. There’s nobody around. That’s good. Really, the last thing I want is to see some guy running out of the palm trees wielding a huge machete. Maybe there’s a serial arm slicer loose! I always get a little hysterical when I get nervous. But now, I can hear a siren in the distance. It’s a comforting sound. Dreamer is no good at all at times like this. If a dog could cover her eyes with her paws, that’s what she’d be doing. She’s a large scary looking dog, but, truth be told, she’s afraid of everything.

The sun is edging up in the sky. A little breeze is stirring the palm trees. Since I’ve become a Private Investigator, bad news has been following me around. My father,

who owns the detective agency where I work, says I'm good for business. I glance again at the arm. There can't be anything good about this.

Chapter 2

I should be thinking about the arm. Instead, I'm sitting under a palm tree worrying a coconut is going to fall on my head or one of those huge palmetto bugs is going to skitter down my shirt. See, I hate nature. But here I am, trying to be a private investigator in the one of the most teeming-with-nature places on earth—south Florida. One step away from the God-awful equator, to my way of thinking. A little green lizard darts under a sea grape bush to my left. I try not to scream. I'm not gonna let myself lean back against this tree, that's for sure.

Dave told me to wait here until he was done. So I watch the cops cordon off the area, photograph the arm and collect bits and pieces of stuff nearby. The whole idea of the arm is making me sick, but not knowing what's going on over there is driving me crazy. I think I've been a model of patience, if I do say so myself, although I did go to my car and get my mini binoculars so I could see what's going on. I'm a person that needs action. This sitting-around-waiting stuff allows me to think too much, and thinking too much is dangerous for a woman like me. "Thinking leads to emotion leads to disaster," is my motto.

When Dave finally walks up, I ask, "Where's the rest of the body? You have any missing persons?"

"We always have missing persons." He looks around at the thin peninsula of beach, the wild fringe of palms and grasses, the powdery stretch of sand tapering down to nothing but sea. "What were you doing out here anyway?"

Good question, I think. I've been in Florida two months now, and I've been to the beach exactly once. And I have to end up here, on THIS beach, with THIS arm? "I was driving away from your house, and I got lost," I admit.

He looks at me kind of pityingly. It doesn't surprise him; I'm always a little lost these days.

"And Dreamer needed a walk..."

That's not entirely true. I walked Dreamer before I got in the car. I followed the sign with the arrow to BEACHES because I couldn't resist.

I look around at a seagull swooping in the vivid sky. It's all so free here. It's everything I wish I could be, and I'm not. These days, I spend all my energy trying to feel nothing. I'm like a hummingbird--my wings spin a million miles an hour just trying to go nowhere. Still, I wanted to see the beach to try to breathe some peace in.

Dave looks down and kicks his black shoe into the sand.

"What about that girl that supposedly jumped off Jasper Bridge last week..." I say.

There was a 20 year old that disappeared--a possible suicide. There was no suicide note, but they found a pair of her sneakers neatly lined up the highest point of the pedestrian walkway on the bridge. There have been two other suicides from the college this month alone, both jumped from the Jasper Bridge.

"The thought has occurred to me."

There's an uproar over what happened to this girl, Candace Hawley. Her father does investment banking in Ft. Palms, and he owns a minor league baseball team which is very popular in town, so it's big news.

I watch the cops wrapping the arm in a body bag and folding it over and over gently. It looks like they're handling a baby, it's so small. Dave's watching too.

"Can you come in later and give a statement?" He's got his terse cop voice going, his cop stance on.

"I don't have anything to say," I confess.

"You didn't see anything else?"

"Like what?"

He looks out at the horizon. The sun is fired up now and doing its typical Florida breathing-like-a-dragon thing.

"I'm sorry," I say. I don't know what I'm apologizing for. I'm sorry that I found an arm...I'm sorry that I don't know anything else...I'm sorry that I ruined our date...

I look at his profile. He's got a sturdy neck and a wide face with etched cheekbones. He's got a steady even blue gaze and a body like a tree trunk--a good tree, if you know what I mean, not one of these swaying Florida trees. A tree you might want to climb all over.

"How's your stomach?" he asks me.

I shake my head at myself. I'm such an idiot. Yesterday, we played six holes of late afternoon golf. It was our first date. Unfortunately, he started giving me pointers on hole number five. I'm no good at receiving pointers.

Instead of taking his advice or ignoring him, I steamed, and my game went right down the tubes. On hole six, I sliced the ball wickedly onto the next fairway. The men playing that hole allowed me to interrupt their game to hit my ball back. They paused as

I whacked my ball into a pine tree and it ricocheted back and hit me directly in the belly. Serves me right, I thought, as I sat down hard and wheezed.

“It knocked the air out of you,” Dave informed me after he came running over. His eyes were glassy and his lip was jittering like he was trying hard not to laugh.

I glared at him.

“Do you want to try to hit out of this?” he asked me.

I rubbed my belly pointedly like a pregnant woman.

“OK,” he said, “Let me take you back to my condo,” he gestured vaguely behind us. He wound us down an endless maze of fairways and curvy streets. Florida is the Land of a Million Speed Bumps--I thought I was going to throw up on every one we hit.

By the time we got there, I could talk. Somewhat. “I should go home,” I kind of croaked.

“How ‘bout I go get us a pizza? I’ll pick up Dreamer and bring her back here. This is all my fault,” he said.

I nodded. It WAS all his fault.

I gave him my trailer key.

I knew I should have gone home. I left my husband only four months ago. I know I’m not ready for a relationship. Truth be told, I may never be ready for a relationship again.

But Dave is cute. Stunningly cute, actually.

So I sat there in his gleaming kitchen waiting and feeling stupid. I mean, who hits themselves in the stomach with a golf ball? It’s not what you want to do on a first date.

I was dying to snoop around Dave's house, but I felt too woozy to move. The black granite countertops sparkled; the stainless steel appliances winked at me. Everything in his condo was about a hundred times nicer than mine.

By the time Dave got back with my dog and the pizza, I was feeling totally inadequate. Like, I-don't-deserve-love-because-I'm-bad-at-golf-and-I-live-in-a-trailer kind of thing. We sat on his creamy leather couch, Dreamer put her head on my feet, and Dave turned on the TV to the Florida Marlins, opened the pizza box, and I fell asleep instantly. Like blacked-out, sound-asleep sleep. I'm chalking this up to stress. But it could be that my denial mechanism kicked in. I'm very good at sabotaging myself when it comes to love.

Anyway, I didn't wake up until 5am the next morning. It was still dark. I had a pillow under my head and a blue plaid blanket draped over me. I also had that oh-no-where-am-I, I'm so embarrassed feeling, a sore stomach, and a desire to run. Which is what I did.

Unfortunately, lately when I've been running, I've been running into dead bodies.

"I'll be at the station around 10 o'clock," I tell Dave. I stand up and brush the sand off my checkered golf shorts. I don't want to think about the arm, but I think about the arm. It gives me this real lonely feeling inside.

"Take care of yourself," he tells me and plods back to the crime scene.

Fat chance of that, I think. Let's face it, I threw my life into the wind when I moved to Florida, and now I'm just waiting to see where what's left of me lands. My neighbor, Joe, tells me, "You're on a journey. And you haven't arrived at yourself yet." That's a very nice way of putting it.

Chapter 3

When I get home to my trailer, Miss Tilney is outside picking up the newspaper. She's my next door neighbor. Even though I'm 36, I live in a retirement trailer camp. It's called "Alligator Estates" although there aren't too many alligators around, and there's not an estate in sight. It's a tidy little place with a clubhouse and a pool and six scruffy holes of golf. The owner, Sal, is a friend of my father's and rented me my trailer here as a favor to my father when I first moved down from New Jersey. Nobody thought then that I'd actually STAY. Most of all, me. But here I am living month to month.

Miss Tilney says, "Where you been, Toots?"

"Nowhere," I tell her, lugging my clubs up the steps.

"Were you out with that handsome detective?" she asks.

"Well," I say.

"How is he in bed?"

Miss Tilney is eighty if she's a day. She's very skinny and bent over from osteoporosis, so she looks a little like a preying mantis. She wears blue eyeliner on her eyebrows and metallic embellishments on her clothes. It's a Star Trek kind of look. It always seems like she and her trailer just touched down from the planet Zar.

"I don't know," I admit.

"How do you expect me to live vicariously through you if you're not going to have an active sex life?"

I shrug.

"Put a little something into your appearance," she tells me. "That might help."

Ever since I've moved to Florida, things have gone awry with my look. I cut my hair really short and streaked it, and now it looks like there's a blonde porcupine sitting on my head. I'm a petite woman with curves, but I've lost some weight, and I look worn out. Actually, I look flattened, like I've been run over by life. And my nose is peeling from sunburn. I sigh.

"I found a body," I offer, pausing at the door. Miss Tilney helped me the last time I had to investigate a murder.

She loves living next to me. I'm her entertainment. No matter how much I try to have my own life, she's always nosing into things. I've kind of given up on the privacy thing.

"Body?" she asks eagerly, her eyebrows rising up like little blue spaceships.

"Just an arm," I concede.

"Wow!" she says. "How do these things happen to you?"

I open my trailer door. "I don't know," I say, and I don't.

"Where was it?"

"Beach Zero."

"That's a creepy place. Once I found a dolphin skull there. Whose arm was it?"

"I don't know."

"Didn't you find the rest of the body?"

"The police are looking."

"That's why I only go in the pool," she says.

I look at her.

“No dead bodies in there...yet,” she says to me as if I could remedy that with one flick of my hand.

I go into my tiny green and white trailer. On the knick knack shelf near the door there's a level. It's the only thing on the shelf. It's actually one of the only things in the whole trailer.

I got the level as a kind of house warming present from some of the trailer park residents after I kept insisting that my trailer was sinking into the adjacent swamp. The level shows a decided tilt to the left. Yet it stays that way. I don't think it's getting any worse. I check it all the time. I look at the yellow bubble like it's a mini crystal ball, like it could actually tell me what the heck I'm doing with my life.

“How come you're late?” my mother asks me when I get to the office at 11:30.

“It's a long story,” I tell her.

“That crazy client of yours has been calling.”

“Which one?”

“The one with the chicken on his head.”

“Oh him,” I say.

My mother sits peering at me from behind stacks and stacks of files. She's a compact woman, usually a model of efficiency, but I almost can't see her there are so many files piled on her desk.

“Why don't you file these away?” I ask.

“I don't have time. What with the typing...” she says trailing away forlornly.

I've seen my mother type. She uses two fingers and searches desperately for each consonant and vowel on the keyboard as she's never seen them before, as if there's no rhyme or reason to where they are placed. Which there isn't. "Why don't you let Squirt help you?"

"She's in Jacksonville following Marion Storm's husband on his business trip. It's a toothpaste convention. She'll be gone for two days..." she says tragically.

Squirt is the regular secretary at Polenta Brother's Private Investigators where I work. My father runs the place. He ran it for years with my Uncle Paulie, but when I came on board two months ago, my uncle left to work as a short order cook in a diner he owns. Now he's flipping pancakes, and I'm trying to pick up the slack. Although my father doesn't trust me to do much of anything. He just keeps giving me the chicken man kind of jobs and hoping that I decide to go back to my husband, back to New Jersey, back to my old job teaching High School English. He hates it that I moved to Florida and that I decided to become a P.I. He disapproves of everything that I do these days. And, honestly, it's hard to blame him.