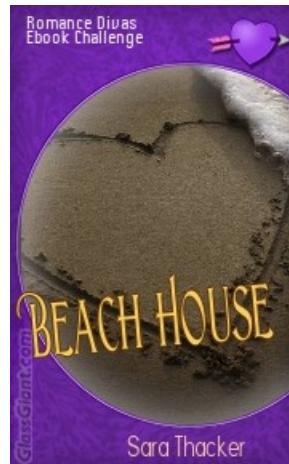


Beach House

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1

“It’s not a palace.” Katy threw her bags onto the low bed. She turned slowly, noticing the peeling paint and the stain in the corner. The stale air made her nose twitch. “Kind of what I expected. Hold on Kurt, I need to open the shutters and get a breeze going.”

“I can’t believe that you’re going to live in the Florida Keys for the winter. It’s so, backwards.” Kurt’s voice sounded thin over the phone.

What had she ever seen in him? “You’ll survive Kurt.”

Waves danced and dolphins played in the surf. Her heart sang with happiness. How would she ever leave this place?

“But what if I need someone to go to a premier with me?” Kurt whined.

“Please don’t pull that on me. We broke up. I’m through being a convenient date. I want a life of my own.”

“You honestly think you’re going to find your life living in a conch house on an island with no civilized people? Think again. In a week you’ll be begging to be taken back to the mainland and deposited at my side. I guarantee it.”

“Kurt, go bug some other girl. I’m done with it.”

“Katy, you can’t survive without a guy on your arm. You were meant to be eye candy and that’s it. Come home now while you still have some self-respect.”

Katy’s blood boiled. The worthless string of men who’d supported her through her late teens and early twenty’s had convinced her that she was only good enough to be a girl on their arm. They were wrong. She may not have a degree in marine biology but she could observe the manatees and report her findings to the conservation group she’d hired on with.

“Katy, you still there?”

“No Kurt, I’m no longer there for you.”

2

The first two weeks flew by. A horrible sunburn had left her red and achy the first week, now she covered up each time she went out on the water. The physical exercise from rowing the kayak around the mangrove covered keys had kicked her metabolism into overdrive and for the first time in her life she could eat like a man.

Working on the conservation project gave her a sense of accomplishment. Katy stowed her gear in the small shed, pulled her hair out of her ponytail, and headed for her small house. Tonight she’d celebrate. She’d finally gotten the hang of getting a lobster out of the trap. The last two she’d lost when they’d come at her with their big red claws. She heard the chirp of her cell phone and ran to answer it.

“Hello, Katy here.”

“Katy luv, I’ve missed you terribly.”

Her excitement waned. “Kurt, why are you calling me?”

“I know how much you must hate it down there. I understand that you had to prove your point. Now it’s time for you to pack up your stuff and come home.”

“Kurt, I love it--”

“You don’t have to gush all over me. I’ll be there on Wednesday to pick you up.”

Anger boiled inside of Katy. She wouldn’t leave her new home. The more she stayed on the small, sandy island the more she wanted this job to be permanent. She’d only signed up for three

months but recently she'd been thinking about staying here forever. Kurt's voice cut through her dreams of sun and surf.

"Katy luv, it's time you start acting like yourself. I mean really, you living in a hut and having to cook your own meals. How much weight have you lost? We both know you're hopeless in the kitchen? You need to stop being foolish..."

Footsteps scratched on the sandy porch outside her door, penetrating Kurt's rant. Katy turned and gasped. Her mouth hung open and her muscles turned limp. The most gorgeous man she'd ever laid eyes on blocked her doorway. He had a wild look, his shirt hung open and she could see a dark trail of hair teasing her from the waistband of his pants. Katy swallowed hard. The man's six pack abs called for her touch.

She raised her eyes, heat spread across her face and down her neck. Dark blue pools of liquid fire made her body heat more. He'd seen her interest and his heat matched hers. A moment of fear welled up inside of her and then she remembered that she wasn't in New York, this was the Florida Keys where life moved at a slower pace.

Kurt's voice droned on and she heard him say something about a wedding. She held up a finger to tell the stranger at her door to wait one second and tuned back into what Kurt was saying.

"Listen I know a wedding at the Plaza isn't what you wanted, but there's an opening in a month for a bargain price. Leslie caught Max and she canceled their wedding so I'll be there in two day's to get you and then you can stop this foolishness."

"Excuse me? I'm not leaving here," Katy squeaked.

"Oh stop being childish and listen to me. I know what's--"

"Don't say it Kurt. I am not--"

Katy's breath hitched. The man at the door had moved close, his body only inches from her. He smelled of warm beaches and salty water. The urge to reach out and touch him came out of now where, sweeping rational thought from her mind. The scruff of his beard darkened his cheeks and his eyebrows slanted down, giving him a menacing look. Katy's body tightened and her pulse raced.

Kurt's voice broke through, "Katy, you are being unreasonable. I've already ordered the invitations."

“Stop,” Katy said to both Kurt and the amazing man before her. Kurt continued droning on about a wedding and how he’d take care of her as long as she listened to him.

“Kurt, stop it. I’ve met someone.” Katy stared into the stranger’s eyes, begging him to play along with her ruse.

“What? You can’t have met anyone.” Kurt’s voice went high, a trait that Katy hated.

“I’ve fallen for him Kurt.”

“Oh please Katy. This is just like when you started dating Tommy. You know I forgave you for that.”

“No Kurt, I won’t go along with your farce of a wedding. This guy is the real deal. He’s here now, and I have to go.” Katy mouthed ‘say something,’ pleading with the stranger even though the man owed her nothing.

“Hey gorgeous, I’m starving. I’ve got the fire going, but before we eat I want to kiss you until you beg me to stop.” His deep voice rumbled, sending vibrations through Katy.

She mouthed her thanks and relief coursed through her. “Kurt I have to go.”

“Let me have that darling.” The phone was out of her hands before she could protest. She reached for it but his strong arm held her at bay.

“Hello Kurt. Sorry to cut you short, but I have a night of passion planned with Katy and it doesn’t include you. Goodbye.”

The stranger flipped her phone closed and tossed it on the bed. Katy wanted to move away from him but he’d blocked her into the corner of the room. Why hadn’t she realized that before?

“Now that we’ve dealt with that problem why don’t we tackle the other thing’s I’ve got on my mind?”

His brilliant smile was contagious and Katy couldn’t help but smile back. Reality hit her, she was still trapped. “Could you please step back. Maybe we could go outside and finish this conversation.”

“It’s hot outside, then again it’s hot in here.”

Katy flushed, her body heated and she had to will herself not to reach out and touch his chest. “I don’t even know your name. I’m Katy Isenberg by the way,” she babbled trying to fill the uncomfortable silence with words.

“Derek Ramsey. How about we shower and then get some food started.”

“What? I can’t--” Katy saw the teasing glint in his eyes. “You didn’t mean that we’d shower together.”

“If you insist, but for now I think it would be best if I went back to my place and got ready there. Then I’ll take you out for a night on the town.”

“I don’t know. I have a lobster waiting for me and I had planned on finishing my reports before bed.”

“You can’t stay here alone. I told Kurt that that I had a night of passion planed, and you don’t want to make a liar out of me.”

“Which town?”

“Marathon.”

“That’s too far. I don’t really want to wait that long.”

“So you want me here and now?”

“What?” Katy clutched her neck, her arm brushed Derek’s chest bring an infusion of flames to her skin.

“You want me to eat here? I have two fish I can prepare for us.”

“I don’t know.” Katy raised her finger to bite at her nail but caught herself before she’d inflicted any damage.

“It’s your decision. But Katy,” Derek’s eyes went serious and for a moment Katy thought he would lean in and kiss her, “my fish won’t last forever. You have to decide if you want delicious filet of fish or should we throw them back to the ocean where they’ll probably be eaten by a shark.”

For some reason Katy thought of Kurt when Derek mentioned the shark. She didn’t want to be thrown back out there into the shark infested waters. She wanted to spend the evening with Derek and forget about Kurt.

“I’ll shower quickly and then you can use the bathroom. We’ll eat out on the sand bar. It’s lovely at sunset.”

The sun dipped below the horizon, leaving the sandbar in almost total darkness. Katy turned to study Derek. His eyes had dropped closed and his face relaxed. Her finger itched to reach out and trace the curve of his lips. They looked soft and inviting. It had been a while since she'd been kissed. Kurt had given only air kisses so he wouldn't ruin her makeup. She and Kurt hadn't slept together either. She couldn't imagine how stale their marriage would have been.

She shivered with disgust. What a waste she'd become. There'd been no passion with Kurt, only money. Hell, she'd been no better than a call girl, accepting his generous gifts so he could present the 'right' lifestyle.

Katy hopped up from her chair and walked to the waters edge. The cool waves lapped at her feet, rolling up the beach then away. Already, the calming ocean had begun to heal her, making her realize that she had a purpose.

"He doesn't know you." Derek touched her shoulder and spun her around.

"Neither do you."

"No, but I bet I know you better than he does."

"Give it a try," Katy challenged.

"You like physical exercise and wonder how your muscles became so weak and limp. That's why you use the kayak instead of the small Boston Whaler the conservationists have supplied."

"That's one right. How did you know I use the kayak?"

"I see you all the time."

"Are you spying on me?" Katy stepped back, putting more distance between them.

"No, I take people out on fishing tours. I pass by here in the early morning."

"Okay, what else do you know about me?" Katy's interest was piqued. She felt warmed by Derek's observation of her. How much more did he know?

"You would rather spend the night at home, curled up with one man than at a party with thousands."

"Hmmm."

"I take that as a yes."

"Okay, that's two," Katy conceded.

"You are horribly intelligent but hide your smarts from the people you hang with."

"I wouldn't say I was that smart." Katy began to feel uncomfortable. He had her pegged.

“See, you try to hide it. You crave a man who will let you be you but will love you with passion that burns your toes.”

Katy opened her mouth but she couldn't deny his words. Hanging with the rich and famous had dried up all the passion she ever held. Her heart had become a hollow place where cobwebs cluttered instead of a place where love beat out a staccato rhythm that had her body screaming for more.

“Shhh, let me finish. You really want me to take you into my arms and kiss you until you fall at my feet and beg me to make love to you, but I'm not going to do that.”

Horror washed over Katy. He spoke the truth, but she was glad that darkness surrounded her so Derek couldn't see the disappointment that clouded her eyes. His hand touched her cheek and she jumped back. He caught her arm and pulled her close. Tension thickened around them and Katy wanted to run from this powerful man, but she stayed put.

“Don't confuse what I want to do and what I'm going to do. I am going to walk to the dock, untie my boat from the moorings and leave. I'll be back tomorrow and every day that I can.”

“You don't have to.”

“No, I want to. I want to get to know you and I don't think that making love to you tonight would be fair to either of us.”

Katy stayed on the sandbar and watched Derek disappear into the darkness. The motor of his fishing boat cut through the silence and disappointment filled her. She sank to the sand and cried. Her body strained for release. Derek's presence had put her on edge.

His words echoed in her head. He would be back. A cry escaped her lips. Was this another promise made by a worthless man, or would he be true to his word and return to see her.

Katy's heart sunk as the sun dipped below the horizon. Derek hadn't returned. All day she'd wondered. Her emotions rolling like the waves she'd encountered on her return trip. If the waves continued to grow she'd have to pull out the Whaler and use it. Just another thing to be disappointed about. Using the kayak took almost all day to check on the animals that the center

wanted her to keep track of, but she hadn't come down here to sit on a beach. She wanted the exercise and the hardships of rowing everywhere.

She flung a small shell into the water and watched it slip into the waves as the last rays of sun slid away. She extinguished the tiki torches and pulled them from the ground. The door to the storage shed squeaked as she stowed the torches. Tomorrow she'd take care of maintenance and oil the door. Another long day awaited her. It was time for bed.

Katy dropped her clothes on the floor and turned to the bed. Restlessness kept her from slithering between the soft sheets. She raised her arm and sniffed. Salt. She'd dipped into the water more than once today and it had been two days since she'd washed with fresh water.

She sighed as warm water cascaded around her. Experience had taught her that the water would only stay warm for a few minutes. She cut the hot water, letting the icy flow cool off her body. Derek's words came back to her. He could have screwed her silly last night and left her forever, at least she didn't have the shame of sleeping with a stranger haunting her.

She turned off the water and grabbed a towel from the rack. Drying quickly she pulled on a t-shirt and shorts. A quick stroll along the beach would calm her before she slipped into bed for the night.

A light breeze blew in off the ocean. Katy closed her eyes and breathed in the calming salty scent. When her stint was up with the conservationists she would find some other place to live. She could get by for a while without a job and if she played it right, she could probably survive on a part time job for a long, long time.

"That was a deep sigh."

Katy screamed and whirled around. Derek stood only inches from her, his brow was knit with concern. She reached up and smoothed away the worry. "I didn't think you were going to come."

"I almost didn't."

"Do you really want to be here?" Katy asked.

"I'm afraid that I'll never want to leave."

"Why?"

"I haven't had the best relationships." Derek reached up and pushed her hair behind her ears.

"Neither have I."

“I’m not rich.” Derek cupped her chin and ran a thumb over her lips.

“I am. Does that bother you?”

“I don’t know?”

“I don’t use my money unless it’s an emergency. I want to save it for when I have kids.”

Derek laughed, “I want lots of kids.”

“Are you saying that you want a future with me?” Katy reached out with a shaky hand and placed her palm on his chest. The warmth of his body raced through her, erasing the effects from her cold shower.

“God, I can’t believe it either. I’ve known you for only twenty-four hours and yet I feel connected.”

“What are you saying, Derek?”

“Don’t let Kurt talk you into leaving here.”

“I never--”

“Wait.” Derek placed one finger over her lips, quieting her response. “You have history with him. He’s been in your life for years and you’ve only known me for one day. I can’t promise you anything yet. I don’t even understand the way I feel about you. Just promise me that you won’t leave with him.”

“There is no chance of that happening.”

“I have to go now.”

Katy reached up and touched his cheek.

“Katy, please don’t try to stop me. I’ll be by tomorrow afternoon.”

“I’m going to use the Whaler so I can finish early tomorrow.”

“I don’t have any clients scheduled so I’ll swing by at noon. Let’s spend the day together.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Katy whispered.

Derek lowered his lips to her and brushed his mouth ever so gently against hers. He squeezed her neck and sighed. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The month had flown by. Her relationship with Derek had grown and now she knew where her life would be lived. Happiness filled her as she paddled her kayak up to the dock and saw that Derek had made it here first. They would spend the evening stretched out on a blanket, eating fish and talking about their future. She stowed the small craft and ran up the beach to her cottage.

“Derek,” Katy burst through the door and stopped dead in her tracks. “Kurt, what are you doing here?”

“Our wedding is tomorrow. You need to come home now.”

“Where’s Derek?”

“Who?”

“His boat.” She backed out of the cottage and stared at the boat sitting at her dock. Now she saw the difference. If she would have looked harder she would have seen that it wasn’t Derek’s.

“I’ve packed your stuff. It’s time to come home.”

“No Kurt. I won’t be leaving with you.”

“It’s almost dark and I’m leaving. You have no choice.”

“I do have a choice Kurt, and I am not going with you.”

“You bitch. I made you and I can ruin you.”

Fear sluiced through Katy and she backed away. Kurt reached out and grabbed her shirt. The sound of ripping fabric tore through the stillness of the island and Katy yelped. “Let me go.”

“You’re going to pay.”

Katy ducked and scrambled but Kurt pushed her to the ground. Her knee scraped on something hard and she cried out. She saw his foot swing back to kick her and she shut her eyes, hoping to block out the pain, but nothing happened. Blood roared through her ears as sweat beaded on her skin. She opened one eye and didn’t see Kurt anywhere. Then she saw him. Six feet away Kurt cowered in a ball on the ground. Derek stood above him, anger flashing in his eyes.

“It’s time for you to leave, Kurt. And never come back here again.”

“My lawyer will--”

Derek edged forward, cutting Kurt off. “Your lawyer will do nothing. You will do nothing. You will never speak of Katy again or you will pay.” Derek pulled Kurt to his feet and pushed him towards the dock. “Leave and never come back.”

Katy ran to Derek’s arms, hugging him close.

“We’re getting married,” Derek said.

“When?” Katy asked.

“I love you, Katy. I didn’t ask that properly.” He dipped down on one knee and smiled up at her. “Will you honor me by becoming my bride?”

Tears streamed down her cheeks. “Yes I’ll marry you. Oh Derek, I love you too.”

Derek pulled her to the warm sand and kissed her until she begged him to stop. She held him close, smiling to herself. “I never want to leave the Keys. I want to make our home here. I love you Derek Ramsey.”

“I love you Katy almost Ramsey.”

Derek pulled her closer and kissed her until they both felt the high tide lapping at their feet.

The End