

## CHAPTER ONE

My mother used to always tell me that I should have been a fish because I loved water so much. In any form. Ice, the sea, a shower, rain—any form. That's how I got my nickname, Lily, short for water lily, those floating flowers. Everyone called me that, even in school as a child and later in the church as a woman. I can't count more than four people who know my real name is Harriette. Of course, after I met Colvin, even fewer knew me as anything other than Miss Colvin.

I didn't mind it too much, though. Well, just now and then I would have liked to hear someone shout, "Hey, Lily!" or "How ya, Harriette?" when they saw me. Tell the truth, I would have even settled for just "Hey, Miss."

There were times, before I met Colvin, when I would go down to the beach and not return home for hours. I would just go down there to watch the tide roll in, dig for different shells, and soak up the lives of tourists as they soaked up the sun. I would often position myself under a shaded area, somewhere out of the hot sun, so they would have to stop and ask me a question, like, "Say, there, madam, where can I find something to eat?" Or, "Excuse me, do you know where the nearest bus stop is?" Just to hear them say, "Thank you, luv."

I've been doing it for so many years that I can only imagine the amount of tourists who found that nearby shop or bus stop and then their way home because of me. It still makes me feel good today, all things considered.

Quite often, those tourists would strike up short talks with me about the "wonderful weather," or about the sweet coconut water or flying fish they tried for the first time last night. In fact, once

a couple invited me to dinner with them, but knowing my place, I declined.

The best part about talking with those foreigners was when they'd ask what my name was and then thank me with it. "Thanks for all your help, Harriette."

They were so mannerly. "Please." "Thank you." "Goodbye." And smiles, always smiles. The Kirthgards were the most pleasant. Strange, but still polite. At least Mr. Kirthgard was. Mrs. Kirthgard was, as old Bajans would say, a real bibber. She drank nuff. Most Englishmen like their tea, but this lady could put back the rum. And from early o'clock, too.

"Please, just a little drip more, dahling," she would say whenever Mr. Kirthgard refilled her plastic cup with the light, yellowish liquid from the tan wine skin hanging from his shoulder. They travelled, it seemed, with their own personal rum shop on a strap.

"I'm a social drinker," she said of her frequent sips, but her breath always told the truth.

I spent nearly all of their month-long vacation with the Kirthgards. Mostly on the beach. There was nothing particularly special about them, to tell you the truth. Mr. and Mrs. Kirthgard weren't nicer or more fun or more giving or any different than the other white people that I met at the beach, just passing through Barbados on vacation. But having somewhere to go in the afternoons was what I enjoyed about them most. Ever since I left secondary school, I have been making regular trips to the beach, to see who I see. Plus, I stopped going to Wednesday-Friday Bible classes when Mother took ill last May. Her sugar was real high, and she passed out at the market one day. Doctor Brathwaite said she should get bed rest and gave her tablets to take. I had to stay home to help her to the toilet and bath. I just never went back. Mother never said anything about it, either, so I figured it must be okay. I call her Mother, but actually

she's my grandmother. My real mother, they tell me, died shortly after I was born. But I once overheard my Uncle Arthur say that she ran off with another woman the day I turned three months.

The mornings are good; there's cooking and cleaning and listening to *Farmer's Corner* on Voice of Barbados to keep my mind busy in the house. Sometimes, there is a good topic on the talk show on CBC radio, people from all over the island calling in and thing. I get a good laugh from that at times. And I can always find a station that is playing old soca or country music to sing along to. Many mornings, I'd head down to Netty's cart—the old vendor by Westbury Cemetery—buy a newspaper, and listen to the neighbourhood talk for a bit. But the afternoons.... The afternoons would give me a hard time. I thought about asking Mother to tag along with her to the market, make a little pocket money, but she told me many years ago that it was more important for me to learn how to cook and keep house than work. Plus, I wouldn't be able to get to the beach stuck beside Mother and her wood cases under the hot sun anyway.

At first I felt a way about buzzing 'round them all afternoon, but the Kirthgards did enjoy my company. They told me so many times. Once, they asked me to meet them at the hotel they were staying at on St. Lawrence Gap in Christ Church.

"You made it down safely, dahling," said Mrs. Kirthgard loudly when she answered my phone call from the lobby. They were very tight on security there. No one could walk off the street and into the place just so. You had to know a person or have a real reason for walking up the fancy rock path to the marble front desk.

"Come right up, sweetheart. David is in the shower, and I'm having a little morning sip before we head out. Do join us," she said in one heavy breath before hanging up in my ear. The receiver probably slipped, because she was too mannerly to not say goodbye.

“Room 354. Turn right at the fountain, go up the steps, turn right again, and then follow the numbers,” the front desk lady said as she snatched the receiver from my hand. She never looked up at me. Not once.

I followed her directions. Before I reached the top of the steps, Mrs. Kirthgard was there.

“Don’t be shy, luv. C’mon up. David’s still having a shower.” She grabbed my hand and led me to their open door. The carpet was white as pearls. I didn’t want my dirty shoes to even touch it.

“Oh, don’t worry, dear heart, it’s only a rug. Someone here will take care of that, I’m sure,” she said, pulling me in, sandals and all. She let go of my hand and continued to the wide, tiled kitchen. I stood where she left me, not knowing what I could do, what I should do. I just stood.

“Would you like something cold or perhaps a spot?”

Distracted by the distant sizzling sound of the shower, I didn’t answer.

“Luv, I’ve asked you a question. Would you like a spot of tea or something colder?”

My eyes were closed. I should have answered, but I just couldn’t break my attention away from the sound of the shower. She slammed down her glass and came closer. Her eyes were red and watery. Her breath was burning.

“Look, Harriette, I just asked you twice now, do—”

“Well, hello, Harriette! I didn’t even know you had arrived, m’ girl. I tell you, there’s something about having a lovely shower after being out in the sun for the morning. It is so refreshing and clean. You don’t want to come out—ever!” Mr. Kirthgard was dripping wet and covered with a big, fluffy, blue robe; his matching slippers looked just as comfortable.

“Now then, how have you been?” he said, smiling at me and tightening his robe sash. “Helen, dove, why haven’t you offered the dear girl something to sip? I’m sure it’s scorching out there.”

“I did, but—”

“Well, then, ol’ girl, get on with it. And what about a chair, for heaven’s sake? How long *have* you been standing there, Harry, my darling?” He went into the bedroom.

“I guess you’ll have something cold, then,” Mrs. Kirthgard said, staring at me hard. I didn’t look up at her. “You should probably have a seat, too.” She went to the kitchen.

I slowly moved towards the wicker-back chair. Mrs. Kirthgard came back with a half-filled glass of orange juice and set it down gently on the table in front of me.

“Helen, a half glass of warm orange juice? Where are your manners? Honestly,” said Mr. Kirthgard, startling us both. He had on a pair of white pants, a bright purple shirt, and a straw hat. “Harriette, please excuse Helen. She gets excited at times and forgets things.” He stared at Mrs. Kirthgard over the top of his square glasses. She came over to collect the glass and, without a word, returned to the kitchen.

I hadn’t planned to drink it anyway. The way this woman jumped from happy to vex, I didn’t trust her. I didn’t know what she might have done with that juice. Next thing you know, I’d find myself at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, puking up blood.

“Never mind all that, dear. So, you never did say how you have been since we last saw you,” Mr. Kirthgard said, drawing a chair next to mine. “Let’s hear about you. I mean, you’re always so delightfully helpful and kind, but we never hear what you’re all about. Now what of you, huh? Let’s hear about you.”

I didn’t know where to start. No one had ever asked me what I was about.

“David, shouldn’t we be running along now? I mean, first it was your very long shower. Then I was preparing and re-preparing drinks, and now there you are hosting a long, drawn-out conversation. Honestly, David, how long must a person wait before a person can go ahead with a person’s bloody plans?” Mrs. Kirthgard’s hands were red, sun-blistered, and trembling.

I felt nervous. They just stared at each other for what seemed like forever. He looked like he was going to give her one hard cuff. She looked hot and sweaty. What could I really be about, coming out here to these mad people’s hotel? I almost heard my grandmother cursing me for being so foolish.

“You’re right, dahling. How thoughtless of me,” he said. “You *have* been waiting long, haven’t you, Helen? Let us be on our way. Shall we?” He got up and softly placed his chair back in its original spot. She was still staring at him and trembling. Mr. Kirthgard walked over to his wife and kissed both the topsides and palms of her hands.

“I do apologize. Forgive me,” he said. He grabbed his rum pouch and the room key from the side table near the door. “Shall we, ladies?” he said as he swung open the door and pointed outside. I followed him. “Helen, don’t forget your cup.”

She did as told, and we left their clean ivory palace.

When we reached the lobby, Mr. Kirthgard turned to his wife, smiled, took the plastic cup from her hands, and filled it. She smiled back.

“Hello and good day, Mr. and Mrs. Kirthgard! Will you be needing a taxi today?” said the same busy lady at the front desk.

“Thanks, but no, we’re going to the beach today, and our dear friend Harriette is helping us there.”

“Very well. I hope the two of you enjoy your day at the beach, and we’ll see you and your wife later, then, Mr. Kirthgard.”

“The people here are so nice. Aren’t they, Harriette?” He took off his straw hat to wipe the sweat from his brow. “So very nice.”

My silence continued down the slanted steps of the hotel, up St. Lawrence Gap, all along Worthing, and on to the ZR van. I kept quiet all the way to the Hastings Rocks beach.

“You aw’right”—I turned around and parted my lips to answer—“Helen, dear? You look a little flushed.” Mr. Kirthgard stroked his wife’s hand. I turned back to look ahead again.

“No, I’m aw’right, David. It’s just that the ride down was so very bumpy, and all those people crammed into that tiny little van—truly stifling. I mean, honestly.”

“Well, you’re aw’right, then. No need to carry on about it,” he said, letting go of her hand, which he had been holding so gently moments before. “So, Harriette, you seem to love the beach, but what of the rocks? Do you have any interest in the stones you find here? Pure treasure.”

I made like I had no idea what he was talking about. Like I didn’t grow up on these beaches. Like he was teaching me something completely new. He talked about the island’s famous fossil coral reef and the black mud that were “the most spectacular of their kind on the globe.” He said he looked at rocks for a living. But he didn’t say anything I hadn’t heard before from Ikie Wong. And it sounded better—smarter—coming from Ikie anyway.

Ikie Wong was the wise, old Rastaman who lived by the sea. I saw Ikie at the beach every Thursday. He told me many things in our times spent on the water’s shores. But the one that comes to mind with the most ease is what he said at our very first meeting: “Is three things tourists come to Barbados, or most Caribbean islands, for—the sea, the sun and the people—and all of these could fit neatly under one word: Paradise. Whether it is lost or found depends completely on that man, woman, or child.”