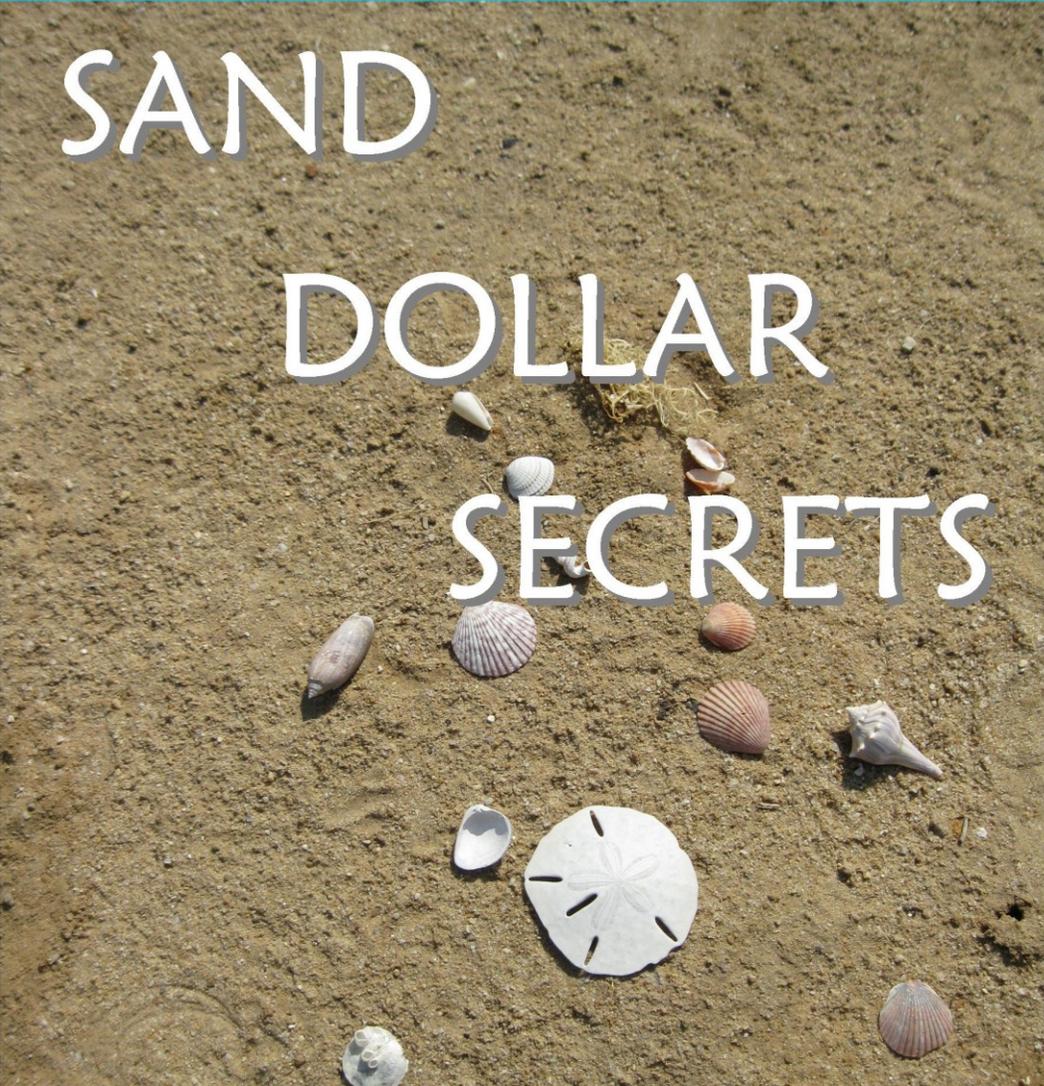


Maggie Toussaint

SAND
DOLLAR
SECRETS



A Cleopatra Jones Mystery

Sand Dollar Secrets

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Shadows edged the lacy moonlight on the crushed shell path. A strong ocean breeze rustled through palmettos with enough bite to make me wish I'd worn more than a shawl over my sundress. My golf pro boyfriend, Rafe Golden strode beside me, our fingers intertwined, but even that direct link didn't bridge the distance which had settled between us.

This afternoon he'd surprised me by flying us to an island off the coast of Georgia for a weekend getaway. Who knew he could pilot a plane? And where'd the plane come from? He'd shrugged off my inquiry with "I know some people."

You'd think it would be heaven because we were finally alone. There were no kids, no mama, no St. Bernard with insecurity issues. Just the two of us. But it wasn't wonderful, at least for me.

My name is Cleopatra Jones, and I'm an accountant in Maryland. This summer I started dating again, finally getting past my messy divorce, and I'd thought Rafe might be my Mr. Right. My heart said yes but my head said no way. I sighed out my confusion.

Our steps echoed on the wooden stairs of our coastal cottage. Even in this faint light, I sensed something was different. As the hairs on the nape of my neck snapped to attention, I noticed the front porch looked bare. Why? The rocking chairs and hanging baskets of ferns were there. A glance at the front door confirmed what my intuition knew. "Ledbetter's missing." The wooden sea captain statue had been guarding the door when we left for dinner.

"He can't have gone far." Rafe's white teeth flashed in the darkness. "Not with two wooden legs."

An owl hooted in the nearby woods. I prowled the length of the porch, my pulse jumping. "We're responsible for your cousin's place while her son's in Atlanta. We should call the police."

With a groan, Rafe leaned against the porch rail. "No one expects you to solve crimes here. You're off-duty from sleuthing. This weekend is about us."

Torn, I stopped a few feet away from him. "We should report the theft."

"Cleo—" He held onto the last vowel of my name.

"At least phone your cousin and tell her the statue is gone."

Rafe shrugged and made the call. "I'm getting her voice mail."

"Leave her a message."

"You'll abide by her decision?"

I nodded.

"I'm holding you to that promise." Rafe left a message and pocketed his phone. He walked toward me, drew me into his arms. "I've got my own mystery to solve."

"Oh?" My pulse quickened at the sensual charge in the night air. Sensible concerns faded. This man had a power over me I didn't understand.

"I've been wondering all evening how this spot on your neck would taste in this salt air."

A tiny voice said I should make a stand. A louder voice shouted how much fun we were going to have. I summoned my best come-hither smile. "Go for it, big guy."

* * * * *

Kaitlyn called back on Saturday morning while we enjoyed a late breakfast on the terrace. Rafe switched the phone to speaker mode, and I listened intently, my fingers gripping a china coffee cup. Overhead, birds trilled in the oak canopy.

"Your guy is missing," Rafe began.

His cousin chuckled. "Honey, my guy has been missing for years. If he doesn't find me

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soon, it's gonna be too late. But enough about me. You called about Ledbetter. I'm worried about him." She was silent for a beat. "He's a broken man."

Rafe laughed aloud. "Kidding aside, what should we do? Cleo wants to call the cops."

"Not much point in doing that," Kaitlyn said. "Ledbetter is a party animal, thanks to my youngest son."

Intrigued, I leaned forward. "This happened before?"

"Yeah. The cops write up a report, but Ledbetter wanders home eventually."

"Who took him?" I asked.

"I don't know." Kaitlyn chuckled. "There's probably a class reunion of twenty-somethings, and they've come by for Ledbetter."

Shafts of sunlight dotted the shaded lawn. "You said the statue was broken. How did it happen?"

"Robbie had Ledbetter extending out of his moon roof, and he stopped short. Ledbetter broke at the waist. Good thing I didn't get him reglued yet because Robbie dropped him again on Wednesday. Claims he was distracted by a girl jogging by. Broke the poor guy's wooden nose."

I nodded, remembering the lighter area on his carved face. "We shouldn't worry about the statue?"

"Nah," Kaitlyn said. "He'll turn up. Y'all relax and enjoy yourselves."

Rafe shot me a gotcha look as he concluded the call.

Doing nothing wasn't in my vocabulary. Granted this wasn't life or death, but it was a puzzle I'd like to solve. "We could look for him on the island."

He snorted. "Finding Ledbetter will be like finding a turtle egg in a shoreline of sand dunes."

"Are you letting a couple of kids get the better of us?"

"Your kids get the better of us routinely. Charla invites her father over all the time, and Lexy wants you to date her tennis coach."

"Wishful thinking on their part. They know I'm crazy about a certain golf pro."

He covered my hand with his. "And I'm crazy about the sexiest accountant in Hogan's Glen. What do you say to us hitting the beach before lunch? We could come back here and lounge by the pool in the afternoon."

After dealing with the IRS for years, I knew a thing or two about stalled negotiations. "Sounds good, as long as we cruise the island on the way back."

"Done."

His gleaming eyes and disarming grin made me think I'd been outmaneuvered. What else did Rafe have up his sleeve?

* * * * *

We parked at the old Coast Guard station and strolled down to the beach. Billowy clouds sailed the crisp blue sky. Sandpipers chased the ebbing waves at the distant waterline. Higher up on the shore, sunbathers staked their claims on the sun-kissed beach.

Not far from the water's edge, I found a perfect sand dollar. Cradling the treasure in my palm, I showed it to Rafe. "I never find these things in one piece. You're my good luck charm. It's so beautiful."

"You're beautiful. The sexiest woman on the beach."

The old Cleo would have told Rafe thirty-five year women with teenaged daughters and crazy mamas weren't sexy. The new Cleo smiled.

"You're good for me," I said.

He drew me close. "Feeling's mutual. I could get used to this."

Caution shivered through me at the tenderness in his voice. I'd trusted my heart before and when that trust shattered, so had my self-confidence. Each moment I spent with Rafe, I fell more in love with him.

If only he didn't have so many secrets.

He wouldn't talk about his family. Or the past. Or how he knew how to fly planes. Every time I probed, I hit a brick wall. If he wasn't so reliable and such a great kisser, I'd walk away. A man's secrets nearly killed me before. But, if I was being honest, I didn't want to walk away.

As we returned to the parking lot, a flash of blue caught my eye. A familiar captain's cap protruded from a passing convertible. I tapped Rafe on the arm. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Looks like Ledbetter to me." His pace quickened. "Let's follow that car."

We hopped in the Jeep, but two families with rafts and small kids crossed in front of us. "Darn," I said. "Where'd they go?"

We cruised Beach Drive and then followed Oceanview to Ibis. No sign of a blue convertible or a wooden statue. With that, we took King's March to Fort Road and our island hideaway.

Rafe pulled into the driveway. "Sorry I lost him."

I smiled at his regret-tinged voice. "Next time."

"Fruit smoothies and lunch by the pool?"

"Sounds good."

* * * * *

After a shrimp dinner and dancing at Clarice's, we strolled along the breezy fishing pier. Rafe's arm encircled my shoulder, and I leaned into him. This place was special. This man of mystery was special.

"Why did you pick me?" I asked. "Out of all the women at golf club, why me?"

"You're nice."

My good mood tanked. Nice was for cardigans and cuts of meat.

"You're pretty," he added.

An afterthought. Not that I was vain or anything. I sighed long and slow. At least he hadn't said I was sexy.

"You're sexy, too. But you know that."

I gulped. Sexy was third in his list of why he dated me? It could be worse. He could have said convenient. Or desperate.

He halted and took my hand in his. "I have the feeling I've offended you."

Moonlight shimmered on the ocean. Waves lapped at the pier supports. "I'm not good at this," I hedged.

"Sure you are. Nothing stops the intrepid Cleopatra Jones."

"Seriously, I need to know. Why me?"

"I told you. You're nice."

I glared at him. To my horror, tears blurred my vision.

His thumb rubbed across the back of my hand. "Nice. You help people. You don't put yourself first. You care about your friends. You know what's important and stick with it."

The sting washed out of nice. "Go on."

"Nice because you don't flaunt your beauty. Nice because you are so hot I melt inside each time I see you. Nice because I can't stop thinking of you."

Turning to study the dark sea, I nodded. "I'm liking nice."

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“Nice because when you look at me I feel like the most powerful man in the world. Nice because you’re the kind of woman I’ve always wanted. A woman who makes me feel at ease, who doesn’t play games, who doesn’t squeeze me like I’m some damned money machine.”

I shot him a sidelong glance. “You don’t think I’m nice like a cardigan or a hunk of roasted meat?”

He stilled. “No. Should I?”

“Never mind. Nice works for me.”

“My turn. Why’d you pick me?”

Uh oh. I could be honest. I should be honest. “Your hands.”

“Huh?”

I hastened to explain. “When you touch me, I light up inside. That’s never happened before.”

He ran his hand up my bare arm. “Very good answer.”

I shivered in anticipation of the pleasure his touch wrought. “You’re a caring person. You wouldn’t flaunt another woman right under my nose.”

“Never.”

He kissed me under the stars, to the gentle lapping of waves. Afterwards, we strolled slowly back to the Jeep. Mid-way there, Ledbetter cruised by in the blue convertible. His torso rested on the right rear seat, his upended feet were on the left side of the car. An athletic-looking blonde woman drove the car.

I pointed toward the disappearing vehicle. “There he is again.”

“He doesn’t appear any worse for wear, except for the two pieces thing,” Rafe said. “Want to chase them?”

“Nah. I’ve got other plans this evening. Plans that involve privacy.”

Rafe grinned. “Cool.”

* * * * *

We golfed at Sea Oaks on Sunday. I marveled at Rafe’s ease on the links, and his patience with my lousy game. As he drove us from tee to green, Rafe pointed out Ledbetter passing on a nearby road.

“That statue really gets around,” I said. “I think he has a nose again.”

“Every man needs a nose,” Rafe said. “Too bad our golf cart doesn’t have the power to catch a car.”

“No need. Ledbetter is having a fun outing.”

“He’s got excellent taste in chauffeurs.”

I glanced at him over the top of my sunglasses. “She’s a little young for you.”

“A lot young for me. Got a feeling she’s Robbie’s age.”

“A feeling, you say?”

“Hey, you’re good at mysteries. I’m good at women’s ages.”

“The missing statue isn’t much of a mystery, not that I’m disappointed.” I sized him up. “I’m having a great time.”

“You like the island?”

“Love it.”

* * * * *

The statue returned Sunday evening. I heard a thud on the porch as I zipped my suitcase. Sure enough, Ledbetter stood at his door-side post. A woman wiped his feet with a white cloth.

“Hello.” The buxom blonde brushed off her hands as she rose. Her tanned skin gleamed

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beneath a white tank, shorts and sneakers.

“You fixed him,” I said.

“It was the least I could do.” The young woman gripped her hands together. “Robbie dropped it when I jogged past him on Wednesday. Gramps carved Ledbetter a new nose. I’ve been driving him around all weekend, trying to get his glued-on nose to dry faster.”

She peered around me. “Is Robbie here? I’d like to speak to him.”

Rafe emerged with our suitcases. “We’ve got company?”

The blonde’s blue eyes warmed. She extended her hand to Rafe. “I’m Tanya Kessler. My grandfather lives at Hardy Point. Delighted to meet you.”

I stepped between them. “Robbie should be back from Atlanta any minute now.”

“Got your cell on you?” Rafe asked.

Tanya handed her phone to him.

Moments later, Rafe had Robbie on the line. “I’ve got someone here who wants to speak with you, cous.”

He handed the phone to Tanya and ushered me to the Jeep.

“That was nice.” I buckled my seat belt.

Rafe grinned. “Nice like a cardigan?”

“Nice like a decent person.”

* * * * *

As the plane lifted off from the airstrip, my gaze lingered on the island. So many beautiful homes, majestic oaks, and stunning beaches. And the tides. I loved the symmetry of the tides. That six-hour pattern was dependable.

Sure, there were secrets in the tide. All that power and strength. Hard not to be, all things considered.

Like Rafe. Power and strength with secrets.

But now instead of being frustrated by that barrier, I accepted them as part of the package. The man was entitled to his secrets. I had a few of my own.

“What’cha thinking?” he asked.

“We should do this again. Soon.”

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Toussaint writes mystery and romantic suspense. IN FOR A PENNY and ON THE NICKEL, the first two books in her popular Cleopatra Jones mystery series, are out now in hardcover and large print. MUDDY WATERS, a romantic suspense about a lost inheritance on the Georgia coast, is available in print and digital formats. A previous release, HOUSE OF LIES, won Best Romantic Suspense in the 2007 National Readers Choice Awards. Other published romantic suspenses include NO SECOND CHANCE and SEEING RED. Maggie freelances for a weekly newspaper. Visit her at www.maggietoussaint.com.