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Mary Alice Monroe

Beach House Memories



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*Beach House
Memories*



Mary Alice
Monroe



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This book is dedicated to Marguerite, my dear sister and brilliant muse.

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Those who come together to walk a turtle beach, to excavate a sea turtle nest to save some hatchlings, to work to stop fishing practices that kill turtles are part of a family. The very act of doing something for the turtles is an expression of faith in something larger than oneself. The reason that I have hope is that there is a large family of people who all do their part to save turtles for one more day.

—JAMES R. SPOTILA,
Saving Sea Turtles



Lovie Rutledge believed memories were like the tides. Sometimes they rushed in with a pounding roar to topple you over. At other times they gently washed over you, lulling you to complacency and then tugging you back to halcyon days that, with the passing of years, seemed ever sweeter.

She seemed to spend more time with her memories of late, especially on evenings such as this one when the red sun lazily descended over the Intracoastal Waterway, and the jeweled tones of the sky deepened. From the trees, the pensive cries of birds called all to roost. Lovie sat on the windward porch, still and silent, attuned to the moody hour. Sunset was her favorite time of the day, an introspective hour when the sky brought down the curtain on what she knew were her final days.

Lovie leaned her snowy white head against her chair, gave a slight push with her foot, and sighed as she rocked rhythmically back and forth, like the waves slapping against the shore. A small smile of relief eased across her face.

Peace at last, she thought.

The wailing winds of the hurricane that had blown across her small island a week earlier had left in their wake the incessant guttural roar of chain saws. The Isle of Palms had been pummeled as had most of the South Carolina coast. It would take months to clean up. As though in apology, Mother Nature graced the island with crisp after-storm breezes that spurred the populace to a frenzy of repairs. Lovie was glad for the activity—the bellowing of voices, honking of horns, laughter of children, whoops from the beach, high-pitched calls of greeting as families returned home from evacuation. She heard in the clamor the shared exuberance of hope.

And yet, Lovie longed for the hush and lull of pace that came at the day's end.

Stop your complaining, old woman, she admonished. You should be grateful that you wake up at all! Birdcall or hammering on wood—whichever! The sounds of life around her were welcome—especially now as death hovered like a thief, waiting for its opportunity to snatch away her last breath.

Lovie sank deeper into the cushion and let her tired body ease as she stared out again at the smattering of yellow flowers that had managed to cling to the vines during the storm, and beyond them, the sea. The Atlantic Ocean breathed like a beast snoring serenely in the distance. The gentle rolling water cloaked the secrets it held, while the earth revealed all. Ah, but she wasn't fooled by her old friend.

I thought you were going to take my house with this last storm—and me along with it, she thought with a faint chuckle. *Well, I thank you for leaving us be. At least for a little while longer.* She sighed and kicked off again with her foot. *I've known you too long and too well not to be wise to your mercurial nature. You appear so gentle and peaceful tonight. But Lord help the fool who ignores you.*

Lovie suddenly coiled in a spasm of coughing that racked her frame, so thin now she could be mistaken for a child. When at last the fit subsided, she bent forward, clasping the arms of the chair, gasping for air.

“Mama! Are you okay?”

Lovie turned her head to see Cara's worried face inches from her own. She felt Cara's large hand tighten over hers in a reassuring squeeze. *Dear, sweet, daughter,* she thought as her pale blue

eyes found refuge in Cara's dark brown ones. There were crow's-feet at the corners, adding maturity to the wide-eyed worry. Cara had been dismayed at turning forty, crying that her youth was over and now she was on the downhill slope. Lovie knew better. Cara was still so young! So strong and confident.

Lovie felt the panic that always came with the coughing spells loosen its grip. Gradually her breath came more easily. She nodded weakly.

Cara's eyes narrowed, quickly checking for signs that Lovie needed oxygen or a dose of pain medication. "Mama, it's getting chilly. Let's go inside."

Lovie didn't have the breath to answer, but she weakly shook her head.

Cara hesitated, then with a *tsk* of mild frustration, she didn't force the issue, as she might have just months earlier.

Lovie leaned back again in her chair. Staring at her from the settee across the room was a large calico cat. The cat had mysteriously appeared after the hurricane, lost and mewling pitifully. Cara fed her daily, cleaned up after her, and petted her long fur whenever she passed. Cara called the cat the Uninvited Guest and pretended not to care one way or the other about her. But Lovie could tell she was secretly pleased the cat had decided to stay. It was Cara's first pet.

Cara was rather like that cat, Lovie thought with some amusement. The previous May, Lovie had asked her only daughter to come home for a visit. She hadn't thought Cara would come. They'd been estranged for some twenty years. Cara was always too busy, too involved in her career to find time to come back to Charleston. If Lovie was honest with herself—and this late in life why be anything but honest?—she had to acknowledge that Cara just plain didn't want to return. She preferred the crispness of the North in all its forms. Lovie had prayed that she and her headstrong daughter could patch up their differences before she died. She took a long breath and exhaled slowly, feeling the weariness of her years. How did one reconcile after so long a time? She was in faith that she'd written, and in a twist of fate, Cara had returned.

Cara had been laid off from her high-powered job at an advertising agency in Chicago. She had arrived at Lovie's door at the onset of summer, feeling lost and restless, uncharacteristically adrift. She'd stayed the summer on Isle of Palms, ostensibly to take care of her mother. And yet, over the past months, Cara, like the lost cat, had been cared for, stroked, needed. The summer had made Cara wiser and more content—not so quick to chase the mouse.

And in the process, she'd rediscovered her mother's love. This had been the answer to Lovie's prayers.

It was autumn now, however, and like the season's end, Lovie's strength was ebbing with the receding tide. She had terminal cancer, and both she and Cara knew that soon the Lord would call her home.

"Okay, Mama," Cara conceded, patting Lovie's hand. "We'll sit out here a little longer. I know you hate to miss a sunset. Would you like a cup of tea? I'll make you one," she went on, not waiting for an answer.

Lovie didn't want tea just now, but Cara needed something to do. Though they didn't say the words often, Lovie knew that Cara expressed her love with action. Cara rose effortlessly from the chair, a move Lovie could hardly recall being able to make.

Cara was strikingly good-looking, tall and slender with glossy dark hair she usually wore pulled back in a carefree ponytail. But tonight was cooler and the humidity low so she let it fall unkempt to her shoulders. It swayed in rhythm with the few long strides it took her to cross the wooden porch.

Lovie's gaze swept across the porch of her beloved beach house that was showing signs of age. Time . . . it passed so quickly! Where did all the years go? How many summers had this dear house survived? How many hurricanes? Two white wooden rocking chairs sat side by side where mother and daughter sat most nights to enjoy the Lowcountry sunset. The recent category one hurricane had destroyed her pergola, and the new screens Cara had just installed hung in tattered shreds, waving uselessly in the offshore breezes. She heard the teasing hum of a mosquito in her ear.

Her little house on Ocean Boulevard had always been a place of refuge for Lovie, a sanctuary through good times and bad, ever since childhood. In the twilight, the quaint and tidy lines of her 1930s beach cottage appeared part of the indigenous landscape beside the tall palms, the raucous wildflowers, and the clumps of sea oats on the dunes. From her seat on the porch, she could see straight out to the Atlantic Ocean without the obstruction of one of those enormous houses that bordered the island's coastline. It was the same view she'd always had, all these many years. When the wind gusted, it rippled across the tall, soft grass like rosy waves and carried her back to happier days when the island was a remote outpost.

Lovie's parents had given the modest prewar cottage to her when she'd married, and she, in turn, would leave it to her daughter. Her house on Tradd Street in Charleston with the heirloom furniture and silver she had already handed down to her son, Palmer. Once upon a time she'd loved that house with a grand passion, yet never as steadfastly as she'd loved Primrose Cottage. She'd created wonderful memories here. The best . . .

But her days were fading as quickly and surely as the sun. In these final precious moments Lovie sought to divest herself of the encumbrances that held her to the present, tugging at her attention, diverting her from the path her heart wanted to follow.

As the sun lowered in the west and purpling sea met the horizon to blend into one vast vista, Lovie felt the line between the past and the present blur as well. She allowed her thoughts to turn, as they often did at this moody hour, to Russell Bennett.

He was waiting for her. Somewhere out in the vast purpling expanse of water, Russell was biding his time. She sensed this with every fiber in her being. Russell had been the love of her life. She'd lived long enough to say so, though one summer was all they'd had. In retrospect, with the passage of time and grace, Lovie understood that she'd been pulled toward her fate as surely as the tides were pulled by the moon.

She felt it now. She could sense herself slipping again in the insistent undertow of the past calling her back. There was no use fighting it. It was so easy to simply close her eyes.

And relinquish.



June 1, 19

Lovie was thirty-eight years of age. “In her prime,” her mother had declared. Her mama liked particular phrases. She spoke them with authority, as though she’d just made up the clever phrases herself. No matter how described, it was true that Lovie’s looks had at last blossomed from the sweetness of her youth into a more mature beauty. Or as her mother had pronounced, “From a sweet blossom to a fine example of the flower of Southern womanhood.”

Lovie could smile at that description now, but at the time it had filled her with wonder and even pride. She was the wife of a successful Charleston businessman, the mother of two beautiful children, and the mistress of a beautiful house in the golden area of Charleston known to the locals as South of Broad.

Lovie’s life circled around her husband, her children, her home, her church, and the endless myriad responsibilities and obligations each entailed. She didn’t complain. Rather, she gave of herself with an open heart and mind, to her fullest. She’d been raised in a proper Southern household and appreciated the importance placed on a well-run home. Her mama had told her again and again that “the woman was at the heart of every home.”

Yet, at the onset of every summer, Lovie crossed off the days on the calendar, feeling a growing desperation to shed the demands and expectations of her role in the city and run, feet bare and hair streaming, to her beach house.

And now, at last, she was ready to go. Lovie slammed the hatchback of her Buick station wagon and slapped the dust off her hands with satisfaction. Her final social duty of the season was a dinner party for Stratton’s business tonight. Tomorrow she would escape across the Cooper River Bridge on a beeline to the Isle of Palms.

“I’m all packed,” she said. “We’re off to the beach house first thing tomorrow morning.”

“That’d best be everything, Miz Lovie, ’cause I don’t think you can squeeze one more thing in,” Vivian said. She stood beside Lovie with her arms crossed, shaking her head in doubt as she surveyed the big car with its faux wood siding. “That car look like a suitcase bulgin’ at the seams.”

Vivian Manigault had been employed as the Rutledge maid since Lovie first set up house in Charleston as a young mother fifteen years earlier. Vivian’s primary task was to mind the two Rutledge children, Palmer and Cara, but she also tidied the house, did some laundry, prepared lunch, and, when Lovie was out, started the occasional dinner. For this she was paid a standard wage, had weekends off, and earned an extra fee for working evenings, such as tonight’s party. But Lovie felt there was no amount of money that could equal Vivian’s worth as a trusted ally.

“How’re you gonna squeeze Palmer and Cara in that car?” Vivian continued. “Better not feed ’em too much tonight.”

Lovie chuckled. “Every summer I tell myself that I don’t need to cram everything in the day I leave. That if I need something I can always just drive back to the city to pick it up from the house. But once I’m at the beach house, it’s like I’m a million miles away. I can’t bear to leave. So I can’t really blame the children for packing everything they own.” Her gaze lifted to sweep across the backyard. “Where are those two? They should be home by now for dinner.”

“Palmer’s back. That boy came saunterin’ in an hour ago smelling like one of those boars he so fond of huntin’.”

“And Cara?”

“She’ll be here.”

Lovie caught the quick defense in Vivian’s voice. There was a bond between those two that Lovie was sometimes a little jealous of. “Well, she’d better. She knows I have an important dinner party tonight. And I’ll be waking her early in the morning.”

“Yes’m. But that’s *tomorrow*. Tonight you best be watchin’ the clock. Your guests will be here afore you know it. You don’t want to be greetin’ them in your work clothes.” Vivian reached up to adjust her own pristine starched white collar.

Lovie thought Vivian looked positively regal in her formal gray uniform with the crisp white facing at the collar and cuffs. Tall and as slender as a reed, Vivian liked to say she had the bones of a sparrow and the strength of an eagle. She also had the binocular vision of an eagle, Lovie thought. Nothing happened in the Rutledge household that Vivian didn’t know about.

Lovie looked down at her jeans and the frayed white long-sleeved man’s shirt rolled up along her slender arms. Both were streaked with dirt from all the packing. She tugged off the cotton scarf from her head and shook out her hair as she mentally switched gears.

“Lord, it *is* getting late. You know how I hate to stop before I finish something. I’m going right up to change. Could you—”

She was interrupted by a short blast from a car horn.

“Yoo-hoo! I’m here at last!”

Turning, she saw her mother’s pale blue Cadillac convertible roll into the driveway. Lovie released a short puff of anticipation as she took off across the garden to the car. She arrived as her mother climbed from the white leather seats. Diana Simmons, Dee Dee to most, appeared as she usually did, trim and neatly dressed. Today she wore a pale beige linen dress with a strand of pearls at the neck and beige sling-back pumps. Not a blond hair was out of place, styled in the popular bouffant style, tucked behind pearl-studded ears. Dee Dee was still a pretty woman. Lovie had inherited her large blue eyes and petite Southern belle good looks. The singular difference between them was in expression—Lovie’s face was guileless and welcoming, while Dee Dee appeared strained and her eyes narrowed in perpetual scrutiny.

“I brought the flowers,” Dee Dee called out. She opened the back door of her enormous car and began pulling out a cardboard box holding a large silver urn overflowing with freshly cut flowers in an array of spring colors.

Lovie rushed forward to take hold of the box. “Mama, that’s too heavy. Let me.” Vivian was a step behind her to carry the second box, filled with another silver urn of flowers. “They’re beautiful!” she exclaimed.

“They are, aren’t they,” Dee Dee replied, allowing Lovie to take the box. She reached out to adjust a few blossoms. “It’s a vile day. In this heat I waited till the very last minute to cut and arrange them. Let’s get them out of this sun. And I want to see your table.”

They made their way single file along the narrow brick walkway through the walled garden. Lovie shared her mother’s love of gardening and had broken several nails bringing the ancient flower beds back to life. The garden had been in a shambles when she and Stratton had bought the wide-porch Georgian Revival house shortly after they were married. The three women passed neatly bordered beds of spring flowers blooming in full force. Breathing in, Lovie could smell the freshly mowed green grass and the blooming yellow jessamine vines.

“I hope it cools down enough that I can serve drinks in the garden,” Lovie said. “It’s so beautiful this time of year. Look, the magnolia is blooming!”

“My dear, it’s hotter’n hades! Maybe *after*-dinner drinks . . .”

Lovie imagined guests sweltering in suits and silks. “I suppose so . . .”

“Don’t frown, dear. It’ll cause lines in your face. I hear it’s supposed to cool down after sunset. You should think . . . Lovie!” her mother suddenly exclaimed. “You best stop and see this!”

Lovie stopped abruptly and turned to allow her gaze to follow her mother’s outstretched finger. She spotted a child scooting along the top edge of the high garden wall. It was a girl. As she reached their property, she dangerously reached far out to grab hold of a tree branch and then swung down to the ground with the finesse of a circus acrobat, landing squarely on her feet. She nonchalantly swiped the dirt from her hands on her torn blue jeans, then, looking up, her dark eyes rounded at seeing Lovie and Dee Dee staring at her a few feet away.

“Uh, hey, Mama, Grandmama,” she called out, wiping the thick shock of dark brown bangs back from her face, leaving a streak of dirt across her forehead in the process. She ambled toward them with her long arms swinging at her sides. Her T-shirt was splattered with dirt and her collared legs were scraped through the torn knees of her pants.

“Caretta Rutledge!” Lovie called out sharply in surprise. “What are you doing running along the garden walls like that? You could fall and break your neck!”

“Aw, Mama, no I won’t. It’s a shortcut.”

Lovie was astonished. “A *shortcut*? You mean you do this all the time? Vivian, did you know about this?”

Vivian twisted her mouth in a wry smile. “Let’s just say I’m not surprised.”

“Palmer taught me,” Cara added, as though that made everything all right.

“You mean Palmer runs the walls, too?”

“Why, sure. Everybody does it.”

Lovie closed her mouth to halt the laugh bubbling in her throat. Though she’d never admit it to her children, running around the neighborhood via garden walls was quite resourceful. Most of the gardens were interconnected by walls. It would, indeed, be a shortcut.

Dee Dee spoke in an admonishing tone. “Now, Cara, you know that’s very dangerous. Any one of those old walls could crumble at any time. And you look like a river rat, scuttling the walls like that. It’s . . . it’s just not ladylike.”

“No, ma’am,” Cara mumbled.

“When I think of you falling . . .” Dee Dee said, pressing her hand to her heart.

“You’re not to do it again, hear?” Lovie said firmly.

Cara looked at her feet. “No, ma’am.”

“That’s settled, then. Now run along upstairs for your bath. I’ll be up later. Vivian’s going to bring your dinner on a tray. I have guests tonight.” Seeing Cara’s slump-shouldered walk, Lovie added, “There’s a special treat for dessert.”

“What is it?” Cara asked, bobbing her head up. She pressed her dirty palms together as if in prayer. “Some of that chocolate cake you made? Please, please, please?”

Lovie saw the sparkle in her daughter’s eyes and felt the glow of it in her heart. Then her eyes narrowed. “Cara, where are your glasses?”

Cara’s smile dropped as she mulishly kicked a pebble on the slate walkway. “Oh, I took them off. Just for a little while.”

“The doctor said you have to wear them all day or you won’t get used to them.”

“Aw, Mama, they keep getting in my way. Besides, school’s over. I’m on vacation. What do I need them for?”

“Maybe to see where you’re going when you run along a stone fence?”

“I hate them,” Cara blurted. “I look like such a dork.”

Lovie’s heart lurched for the little girl, and were it not for the box of flowers she was carrying she would have bent to wrap her arms around her daughter. “You look beautiful to me,” she said. “Underneath all that dirt. Go on, now. Run along to your bath. And give your hair a good washing. Lord only knows what’s tangled in there. And I don’t want you sneaking downstairs during my dinner party, hear?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cara called back as she took off toward the house like a gazelle.

“Lord help me, what am I going to do with that child? She’s such a tomboy,” Lovie said walking toward the house.

“A firmer hand, perhaps?” Dee Dee suggested. “I’ve said it before, but you don’t pay me mind. You allow that girl to run around like a boy.”

From behind, Lovie heard Vivian mutter, “She just a girl that knows her mind.”

“For pity’s sake, Mama. The child’s only ten years old,” Lovie said.

“That’s plenty old enough for her to learn to mind her manners. Lovie, dear, as your mother, I can tell you that you need to rein her in some, offer her more guidance.”

Lovie’s cheeks flushed. Her mother was banging the belle drum again, and any insult against Cara felt like an insult against her mothering skills. She rushed to defend her daughter. “You let me play wild when I was a girl.”

“Not in town. Only at the beach house. That’s the proper place for such behavior. Besides, you could always count on you to be a lady in public. Cara’s another thing altogether. Climbing trees and fences . . .”

“She’s just high-spirited.”

“Headstrong is more like it. *Too* headstrong. It might’ve been cute back when she was in pigtails, but it’s not any longer. It’s high time you rein her in.”

“What would you suggest?” she asked tersely.

“Cotillion, perhaps?”

Ah, yes, she thought. Legions of young girls and boys from “good” Charleston families endure hours of schooling on manners and protocol. Lessons on how to sit, stand, and greet were drilled into them along with table manners and ballroom dancing. It was expected, if not *de rigueur*.

“I’ve already scheduled Cara to begin junior cotillion in the fall.”

“Oh? Well, good,” she replied, appeased. “That’ll teach her some deportment and etiquette. Girls are getting far too opinionated and outspoken these days. I swanny, I don’t know what’s happening in the world. Women protesting in the streets . . . burning bras . . . Not in Charleston, I can tell you that!”

“Mama, Cara doesn’t even wear a bra yet!”

“You know what I mean.”

“Don’t worry so much. For all her headstrong ways, Cara is a kind, smart, and sensible girl. I have complete faith in her.”

“Be that as it may, she *is* growing up. It might help if she stops hanging around the boys all the time this summer.”

“Yes, Mother,” Lovie replied, swallowing the annoyance bubbling in her chest. Cara was her daughter. She didn’t care for her mother’s opinions, and she didn’t have time to listen to them.

now. Besides, there was no winning. Nothing would change her mother's mind . . . or her own, for that matter.

Lovie knew in her heart that this was Cara's last summer to be wild and carefree, and she was determined to let her have it. Next season she would change schools, enter junior cotillion, and the subtle shift from childhood to adolescence would begin. She loved her daughter's independent spirit, her sense of adventure, and her courage to speak her mind, sometimes with her dukes up. Lovie couldn't remember ever being that strong. Her mother had drummed into her head how a proper lady did not speak out of turn or voice her opinions too strongly, nor should she toot her own horn. Rather, she should allow her home and family to reflect her accomplishments. Likewise, a woman should never seek to overshadow her husband but put her efforts into helping him shine.

Yet as a young girl at the beach house, she was allowed every freedom. She ran wild on the beach, her bare toes digging in the sand and her hair flying behind her. On the waterways, she was Tom Sawyer to her brother's Huck Finn. The beach house had become not only a beloved place but also a symbol of freedom. Only once she reached Cara's age was she firmly, lovingly guided into the responsibilities of her sex. There were days when Lovie longed for that young, outspoken, courageous girl and wondered if she didn't still reside deep within her, waiting for an opportunity to reemerge.

Lovie was determined to give Cara this last summer of childhood.

She led her mother from the walled scented garden into the large, airy kitchen. Old houses could be charming with grand living and dining rooms, but the historic builders gave little thought to the cooks and the maids. The kitchens and third-floor bedrooms, not to mention the back servants' stairs, were cramped and dark. When Lovie and Stratton bought the house in 1960, the kitchen was insignificant and the appliances were antique. Lovie had shocked her mother by ripping out the butler's pantry and a small sitting room to create the open, sunny kitchen that was the heart of her home.

The caterer had taken command of the space and scowled at the intrusion of boxes on the counters. The delicious scents of roasting meat and garlic filled the room, and steam was rising from pots on the stove. Lovie and Dee Dee lifted the urns from the boxes and carried the flowers directly to the dining room, setting one on each end of the long stretch of polished mahogany. Dee Dee stepped back, crossed her slender arms, and surveyed the dining table. Lovie swallowed her sudden nervousness. Lovie handled her dinner parties with the efficient calm of a seasoned hostess. Her husband's import-export business often brought important guests to the Holy City, and this year alone she'd hosted six parties, and it was only May. And yet her mother still had the power to make her stomach clench.

"You know I'm a perfectionist," Dee Dee began, circling the table. She reached out, grasping a crystal champagne glass and holding it up to the light with her pink-nailed hand. "Spots."

Lovie paled, mortified.

"They'll all need to be wiped with a linen cloth," Dee Dee added with hauteur.

Lovie caught the cloying scent of the flowers as she signaled to the uniformed waiter in the pantry. He hurried to her side, eyes alert as Lovie gave him instructions. Dee Dee moved from one place setting to the next, reaching out to adjust a fork, rearrange a rose in the vase, straighten a place card.

"It's the details that matter," Dee Dee told her daughter with a hint of scold in her voice.

"I'm well aware of that, Mother. But with the packing, and school finishing up, and Palmer

sports, I've been very busy."

"So has your husband," Dee Dee admonished. "He expects you to show his home at its best at these affairs."

"It's not *his* home, Mama. It's *our* home."

Dee Dee tsked with impatience. "It's no good getting caught up in semantics."

"I'm sorry. I'm just so tired of entertaining. Stratton sets these dates without any idea how much work each party is."

"But Cara, dear, why should he? Isn't that your duty? You are Stratton's wife, the mother of his children. He's the breadwinner, and if you don't mind my saying so, he's provided you with a very nice lifestyle. It's up to you to create a beautiful home and to run it smoothly. To make your dinner parties appear effortless. And," she added pointedly, "to raise your children to be a gentleman and a *lady*."

Lovie pinched her lips tight. Her mother was a social butterfly. She'd spent most of her adult life in their large historic home in Aiken with beautiful grounds and meticulous gardens. When Michael Simmons died suddenly, Dee Dee surprised everyone by selling her beautiful house at the peak of the market for a terrific profit. She promptly moved herself and her favorite furniture and possessions to an extremely choice condominium on East Bay in Charleston overlooking the harbor. She told all her friends with a sigh of loneliness that she'd needed to be near her daughter now that she was a widow. Before long, Dee Dee was ensconced in a new group of friends in her ladies' clubs, tennis, theater, and church events. Lovie and the children rarely had visits from her. The truth was, Dee Dee had no idea of all the pressure and strain Stratton's business demanded of Lovie.

Nor, sadly, did her husband. Stratton's lack of appreciation stole the shine from her accomplishments. If the party appeared effortless, he, too, thought it was just that. Effortless.

"Well, it is a beautiful table, my dear," Dee Dee said. "You have outdone yourself."

Lovie caught the glint of envy flash in Dee Dee's eyes. The Simmonses were a proud family whose ancestors wore gray in the Great War, but the family did not hail from Charleston. By contrast, the Rutledges were an old and proud Charleston family. The pedigree opened doors Dee Dee's wealth could never crack. Dee Dee had been thrilled with Lovie's match. The success of her daughter's marriage was her success.

Lovie had come to her marriage with a substantial inheritance, enough for the down payment on their house and to help fund Stratton's import-export company. Still, they had to be frugal. Lovie's gaze swept the room as she recalled the years she'd spent working on the poor, neglected house. She did all her own decorating, sewed by hand the yards of fabric and fringe for curtains, painted and stenciled walls. Room by room, she'd brought this neglected old house back to its former glory. She'd given the task ten years of her life, and it would, she knew, never be finished. These old houses always had some task needing doing.

The waiter finished polishing and stepped back. "Ma'am?" he asked.

Lovie shook away her reverie to step forward and cast a final, proprietary glance over the twelve place settings. The Chippendale dining chairs lined up evenly, the crystal gleamed, the silver shone, and the salt cellars were filled. Tall white candles awaited her signal to be lit.

"Much better," she said. "Thank you."

Dee Dee tapped her lips. "Except, of course, you know Stratton is going to say something about those place mats. He prefers the white damask tablecloth. Well, it's too late to change now. Speaking of late, shouldn't you go upstairs and change?" She leaned closer to deliver a chaste kiss.

on Lovie's cheek. "I'll be on my way. Good luck tonight. And have a good time at the beach house."

"You won't come by this summer?"

"We'll see," Dee Dee replied with a wave as she strolled from the room.

Lovie doubted her mother would come. She always managed to create one excuse or another. She'd never enjoyed the beach house. It was her father who had looked forward to their summer vacations at the sea with the same relish she did.

With a last, sweeping look at her table, Lovie hurried up the front stairs.

A short while later, Lovie stepped from her marble bathroom wearing a full slip, hair and makeup in place. She opened the French doors that overlooked her garden. It would be a perfect night for a party, she told herself. The heat would fade with the sun. They'd have drinks in the garden. Closing her eyes, Lovie could smell her beloved magnolia blooms. Their broad, glossy leaves would look striking in the candlelight. She stood for a moment and allowed the sweet-scented breeze to dry her freshly showered, perfumed skin.

"You're letting all the air-conditioning out!" Stratton strode briskly into the room, startling her.

Lovie promptly closed the doors and turned to see that he had already changed into a fresh, crisply ironed shirt.

"When did you get home?"

"While you were in the shower." He scowled, struggling with his gold cuff link. "Damn things, I don't know why I bother."

She came directly to his side and brushed away his hand. He had the fresh soapy scent of his shower, yet she could feel his tension radiate from his body into her own. It was unusual for Stratton to be nervous for a dinner, signaling to her the party's importance. Stratton was a social being. He was a good conversationalist—smart, witty, and quick with that stinging retort that could make a group laugh, often at someone's expense. Sometimes she envied his ability to never meet a stranger.

As for Lovie, on a soft night like this, she'd rather sit in her big wicker chair in the garden with a book.

"Stand still, Stratton," she said, clasping the thick gold link that bore the Rutledge family crest.

"You're not dressed yet?"

"I just have to slip into my dress. I didn't want to crease the fabric."

"When are the guests due to arrive?"

"Not until seven. I'm hoping the night will cool a bit before we serve dinner."

"You're going to keep the air-conditioning on, aren't you?"

"Of course, if that old thing will make it. I say a prayer every time I turn it on. One of these nights it's going to fail."

"It's got lots of life still in it," he said, offering his pat answer whenever she wanted to replace an appliance.

"There," she said, finishing the second cuff link. "You're all set." She stood back and surveyed the man who had been her husband for fifteen years.

Stratton Rutledge held his shoulders back with the pride of an illustrious history of ancestors. Though he was a hair less than six feet tall, his carriage combined with his booming voice gave him the semblance of someone *big*. At forty-four, he resembled the portrait of his great-grandfather that hung in the dining room. He had the Rutledge thick dark hair and eyes, the broad

forehead, and the proud, even arrogant, nose. Only recently had she seen the beginnings of graying at the temples, which Stratton liked because he thought it made him look older and wiser—good for business. The crisp fabric of his starched shirt rustled as he slipped his arms into his suit jacket. Peering into the mirror over her shoulder, he adjusted his collar and tie.

“You look quite handsome in your linen suit,” she told him.

“As long as I look prosperous.” He tugged his cuffs. His lips turned downward. “I noticed you used those damn flimsy mats for the table.”

“I thought it made the room feel somehow lighter. Cooler. The linen is of the finest quality,” she hurried to add, trying to deflect his ill humor. She could smell bourbon on his breath already. “Now please, Stratton, let’s not fuss about it,” she said, heading for the bed where her dress lay in waiting. “I have to hurry if you want me to greet our guests at the door.”

She turned her head away from his frown, wondering why he cared about such things. Thoughts of place mats slipped away as she slid into the spring green silk dress she’d purchased on King Street for the dinner. It was so lovely, an extravagant choice—rare for her and one that had crippled her budget. But she just couldn’t resist it.

“Zip me?”

Stratton obliged, his large hands struggling with the tiny zipper. So close, the bourbon on his breath made her stomach clench. She didn’t trust Stratton when he’d been drinking. She felt the constriction of the dress as the zipper hummed up, the fabric cinching her waist and accentuating her full breasts. Turning, her full skirt flared. She caught the gleam in Stratton’s eyes and knew he wouldn’t complain when he saw the bill.

“You look lovely,” he said with appreciation.

“Thank you,” she replied, blushing slightly at the rare compliment.

“But it needs something.”

She looked abruptly into the mirror over her bureau, checking her reflection. Her blond hair was sleek in a French twist, her peachy skin shone against the lush silk, and the mabe pearl and emerald earrings Stratton had given her for Christmas gleamed at her ears. She didn’t think of herself as a great beauty, yet Stratton had always told her she had a sweetness about her that was fresh and unspoiled. What did he think was missing?

Stratton came to stand behind her and his eyes held a spark of amusement. Lovie tilted her head, curious. He lifted his arms, and as he lowered them she felt his crisp linen sleeve against her cheek, smelled the sandalwood in his aftershave, then—in surprise—the coolness of pearls around her neck.

“Oh, Stratton . . .”

The cultured pearls were so large and lustrous—so extravagant—they took her breath away. Her hand shot up to touch them as her mouth opened in a soft gasp of surprise and a softening of her bones. She’d been wrong. Stratton *did* appreciate her efforts!

He finished clasping the necklace and stepped back to survey her appearance.

“Mikimotos,” he said, referring to the pearls. “The best of the best. They cost a small fortune, I can tell you.”

“They’re so large . . .” She turned, her joy bubbling up as she wrapped her arms around his neck to plant a big, exuberant kiss on her husband’s lips.

“One look at those babies and Bob Porter will know we’re a solid investment.”

Lovie’s smile wavered as understanding dawned. The pearls were more for show than a reflection of his appreciation for her. Ah, yes, that would be more typical of him.

“It’s an important night, Lovie. Very.” He held her gaze. “I need to make this deal. Be sure to talk to Porter’s wife, make her feel comfortable. Her name’s Ginny or Jeanne . . . I’m told she’s shy.”

“Of course,” she replied, slowly lowering her arms. She felt the pressure of her party’s success tighten her chest. “I’ve never let you down before, have I?”

He lowered to kiss her gently on the cheek. “No, you haven’t. I’m a lucky man to have you, Lovie.”

She smiled and cupped his cheek. “Thank you for the pearls. They really are lovely.”

He stepped back, his smile fading while nodding absentmindedly. His thoughts were already turned to the business he wanted to conduct that evening.

Lovie spritzed her signature Joy perfume on her neck and wrists. The scent of jasmine and roses filled the room. “Do you think the party will run late?” she asked.

“It shouldn’t. Why? Are you tired?”

“A bit, actually. But that’s not why I asked. I’d like an early start for the beach tomorrow morning.”

“What, tomorrow?”

“Yes, Stratton,” she replied with a slight tone of frustration. “I reminded you every day this week, three times yesterday.”

“It slipped my mind.”

Lovie opened her mouth to ask how that was possible, but closed it again.

“Do we have to leave tomorrow?”

“We’ve already put it off until after Memorial Day for this party.”

“It couldn’t be helped. You know how important this deal is.” He frowned and put his hands on his hips in thought. When he looked at her again, his face was as hard with resolution as granite. “Lovie, postpone the beach for a week. The Porters will be staying in town for Spoleto. It’s a good opportunity to forge a stronger relationship with them. I was thinking we could meet up with them again later in the week for a performance and dinner. His wife doesn’t know anybody in town.”

“She’s meeting five other couples tonight!” She saw temper flare in his eyes and her stomach clenched. She didn’t want to set him off in a foul temper right before the dinner party. Stratton was quick to rise and slow to cool. He’d blame her for any tension that could mar the evening mood.

“Stratton, it’s just that I practically killed myself today getting us all packed. I’ve all the food prepared. The car is ready. It’d be colossal to postpone now.” Seeing frustration in his scowl, she added in a conciliatory tone, “The children are so looking forward to their vacation.”

“Hell, summer’s just beginning! They can wait a few more days. You’re talking about vacation? This is important for my work. It puts the food on the table. And it’s not like *you* need a vacation.” He rolled his shoulders and said offhandedly, “You’re on vacation every day.”

Lovie felt her heart wither in her chest. With that one brief aside, he’d utterly diminished her. She fought the urge to rip the pearls from her neck and throw them back at him.

“Oh, yes,” she said icily. “That’s right. My life is just one jolly vacation.”

She turned away to the mirror and applied rose-colored lipstick. She was so hurt and angry her hand shook. Is that how he measured her? All the hours she spent creating and maintaining her home and family, didn’t they matter? True, she didn’t have a formal career, didn’t bring home a paycheck—no woman she knew did. Her mother had always told her that she shouldn’t work after

she was married. It was demeaning to her husband, implying that he couldn't provide. Yet did he do the domestic work, her countless hours of volunteering hold so little value in his eyes?

"I didn't mean it that way," Stratton said, his voice muffled as he put a cigarette in his mouth. He bent to light the tip, inhaled, then shook the flame out. Exhaling, he added, "You know I didn't."

Did she? Lovie glanced in the mirror to watch her husband smoking in a distracted manner. *Who was this man?* she wondered. He stood a few feet behind her, though the distance felt much farther. She didn't know him anymore. Worse, she didn't feel anything for him. Though they shared the children, the house, the business, and a whirlwind of business and social engagements, they didn't share any interests or hobbies. She couldn't remember the last time they'd had a good discussion or even shared a joke. Their dialogue was similar to that of a boss and his secretary—confirming dates on a calendar, gathering information, approving purchases.

Still, he was her husband and she felt sure time together at the beach house where they'd had such happy times would bring them closer together again. The months of summer were a relaxed hiatus for the family, a slower time that allowed for bonding. He'd drive to work from the island and return at night for a swim in the ocean with the children. The summer holiday at the beach house was as etched in tradition as Christmas on Tradd Street.

"You can always bring the Porters to the beach," she suggested. "It would be a nice change for them. I'll make barbeque. Won't that be nice?"

"Maybe . . ."

Lovie kept her silence.

"All right, you go ahead," he said summarily. "I'll manage here for a few days and come out later."

He looked her way. "You know, it's not a bad idea to bring the Porters, too. You'll be leaving Vivian, of course?"

"Well . . . she was going to join us at the beach house next week as usual. Then she takes her vacation."

"She'll have to change plans. I'll need someone to look after me while you're gone. Not only for this week, but later in the summer, too. I've got that trip to Europe in July, remember."

She did remember the trip. Six weeks across the Continent—and he did not invite her to accompany him for any leg of the trip.

"Oh. And I may go to Japan."

"*Japan?*"

He nodded in acknowledgment, his eyes gleaming. "That market is exploding now. There are a lot of opportunities. I want to get in there, and Bob Porter is my key to opening that door."

"Stratton, that's wonderful! Imagine, Japan! I'd love to go there with you someday. Could I? It's so exotic."

"Why, sure, honey. Not this trip, of course. This one is exploratory. Later, though. For sure."

Lovie felt a twinge of disappointment but shook it off. No wonder he was so preoccupied and terse tonight. Business always put him on edge. Perhaps she should postpone her trip to the beach house another week, she thought. If she could just help him a little more, he'd realize how valuable she was.

Her guests were due to arrive soon and she couldn't dwell. She'd discuss it with him later. "I'm going to say good night to the children now." She paused, a hand on the doorknob. "Don't you want to come along?"

“I’ll come by later. I’ve got a few things to tend to before dinner. Oh, that reminds me. I’ll be going to the club with the boys after dinner.”

Lovie felt her face heat with the sudden flare of suspicion that he would not be going to the club with *the boys* but with one particular woman. Gwendolyn Archer was an overprimpe underappreciated wife of a well-known Charleston lawyer. Charleston was a small town, and gossip flew fast.

“Careful there,” she said, eyes on the floor. Then, lifting them, she determinedly sought his gaze. “Don’t drink too much.”

Stratton’s eyes blazed and he growled out, “What are you implying? I’ll drink as much as damn well please.”

Lovie tightened her lips, feeling slapped. She turned and, without another word, left the room. She held her shoulders tight as she walked down the hall to her children’s rooms. She heard the high note of excitement in their laughter, anticipating their trip in the morning. Their innocent joy brought a smile to her face. Tonight, she would do her duty and play hostess at her husband’s business dinner. She would be gracious to Jeanne Porter—for that was her name—tidy the house afterward, and dismiss the hired staff. Tomorrow morning she would rise at dawn, tuck her children into the car, bid farewell to her husband.

Then come hell or high water, she would escape to the beach house.

The red-and-white Buick station wagon made its unhurried way under cloudless skies out of the city of Charleston toward the sea. It drove low to the ground, loaded down with overpacked suitcases, an odd assortment of dishes, books, and paint supplies, brown paper bags filled with groceries, coolers, and chatting away in the backseat, her two children.

Lovie glanced from time to time in the rearview mirror. Palmer was thirteen but apparently not too old to refrain from mercilessly teasing ten-year-old Cara, who was crouched in the corner back to her brother, obstinately trying to read. Palmer was complaining how she always had her nose stuck in a book. Lovie sighed and held her tongue, choosing her battles. In the city, her children were always testy with each other, quarreling over insignificant things.

Yet they were different at the beach house. There, they lived their lives not by the dictates of the clock but by the whims of the sultry summer sun. They rose when the bright sun’s glare shone like a bugle’s call, and once awake, the children were free to explore wherever their hearts led them, needing only to show up at Mama’s table for dinner. They fell asleep when the sun lowered, exhausted after a day of swimming, surfing, bicycling, fishing, or boating.

Lovie was a different mother at the beach house, too. She was more relaxed, more at peace without the constant stress of her busy schedule. She smiled more, found she could be more patient, and as the children didn’t argue as much, she rarely had to scold. Nor did she tell them to keep their feet off the furniture or to mind that they put a coaster under their glasses. At the beach house, there were no fussy antiques. Only the “not so good” antiques and dishes were at the beach, suitable for damp swimsuits, the ever-present sand, and impromptu visitors. The fridge always held a pitcher of sweet tea and the cookie jar was filled with sugar cookies.

Lovie crossed over the narrow Grace Bridge from Charleston to Mount Pleasant and felt the tension ease from her chest with each mile past the Cooper River. Coleman Boulevard was a quiet road that led to the long, narrow Ben Sawyer Boulevard, which traversed a great, yawning expanse of green marsh. There was something magical about crossing this vast wetland that separated the mainland from Sullivan’s Island. She often felt like she was leaving all her problems behind when

the earth was rooted and solid. Ahead was the ephemeral sun, sand, and water—so much water. The glistening current of the Intracoastal Waterway raced behind them and just beyond lay the mighty Atlantic Ocean.

She turned off the car's air-conditioning and they all rolled down the windows to breathe deep the salty air. The breeze was warm on her face and immediately she felt the familiar tug of the islands. The tide was low, exposing mudflats spiked with sharp oyster shells, and the cordgrass where white egrets hunted. She sniffed, smiling when she caught the unmistakable, pungent scent of pluff mud. Anyone who didn't like that odor didn't belong here, she thought. Pluff mud and salt air smelled like home to Lovie.

Lovie crossed the Ben Sawyer Bridge to Sullivan's Island and continued past several quaint cottages with hanging baskets of flowers on the porches. In the yards, laundry flapped in the breeze, and in one, a large black dog slept in the sunlight. Her fingers danced on the wheel in anticipation when she reached the third and final bridge she'd cross this morning. The narrow Isle of Palms Bridge stretched over Breach Inlet, where many British soldiers had drowned in the treacherous water during the Revolutionary War. They were trying to attack Fort Moultrie on Sullivan's Island, crossing the inlet by foot when the unsuspecting force fell victim to the powerful currents.

In no time the station wagon was over the bridge and she was back on the Isle of Palms. Looking in the rearview mirror, she saw her smile reflected on Cara's and Palmer's faces. They were silent now, their eyes eagerly seeking out familiar touchstones. To their left was Hamlin Creek, lined with docks with boats at moor. The current was racing, and she felt her blood match the pace as she turned the car windward down the gently sloping road.

In a breath, she saw Primrose Cottage. She guided the car off the pavement to where the gravel was so sparse the wheels dug into sand as she parked. She turned off the engine, the car rumbled, and she sighed in the resulting silence.

"We're here."

In an explosion of cheers and yelps, the car doors flung open as Palmer and Cara leaped out and ran like wild Indians across the dunes to the beach beyond. Lovie laughed and placed a hand to her heart as memories played in her mind. That was just what she and her older brother, Mickey, used to do. Now, years later, her children loved it here as much as she did. She pulled herself from the car and set her hands on her hips, lifting her face toward her house.

Primrose Cottage was perched high on a dune overlooking the sparkling blue water of the Atlantic. It was the same pale yellow color as the primroses that grew wild on the dunes. With its blue shutters and doors, it looked like another of the wildflowers that surrounded it—purple petunias, sassy Indian blankets, and the lemon yellow primroses for which the cottage had been named. She lifted her hand over her eyes like a visor and searched for signs of wear and tear. The prevailing salt winds and the long winters were harsh on a house. A bit more paint was peeling, sand was thick on the stairs and porches, and there was yard work to be done, but all in all, the little house had survived another winter.

She felt the warmth of the sun as she pulled heavy brown bags of groceries from the car. It was just like the children to run off when she could use their help, she thought with a wry grin. She needed to get the milk, ice cream, and other frozen foods directly into the fridge. Her arms ached as she carried the bags up the precarious gravel path and struggled with the key. Pushing open the wood door, she was met by a wall of blistering heat and stale air in the closed-up house. She made a beeline to the small kitchen and, with a soft grunt, set the heavy bags down on the square pine

table. Then with a prayer, she opened the ancient fridge. She smiled in relief hearing the low hum of electricity and feeling the blast of coolness.

Sweat beaded as she hurried to the large patio doors, unlocked them, and pushed them wide open. Next she went around the room and one by one pried open the stubborn windows. The onshore breezes whistled through the little house, smelling of salt and stirring the curtains.

Despite all the changes in her life—growing up, getting married, having children—nothing ever seemed to change at the beach house. It was always here, waiting for her. Constant, fixed, and reassuring. She slapped the dust from her hands, then spread them far out at her sides in a welcoming, open-fingered embrace.

She was home at last! Home on the Isle of Palms.

In a burst of enthusiasm, Lovie felt the young girl hiding deep within her spring to life. Chores could wait. Unpacking the rest of the car could wait. Cleaning and dusting could wait. At this precious moment in time, her children were out on the beach, playing in the sun. This, she knew, she could not wait.

Lovie almost skipped to the linen closet to pull out three thick terry cloth towels. She didn't usually use her better towels for the beach, but sometimes one just had to break the rules. She tossed the towels in an empty grocery bag, grabbed her floppy purple hat, and hurried out the door.

Her heels dug deep into the soft sand as she raced along the narrow beach path. This early in the season, the sea oats were low and spring green, not yet the tall gold sentries they'd become as summer waned. She climbed the last dune . . . and suddenly the breadth of the ocean spread out before her. Her heart leaped in her chest. Above, the sky was impossibly blue with white puffs of clouds that matched the fringe of the surf as it rolled to the shore.

Immediately she spotted her children cavorting in the surf like shorebirds—Palmer a short-eared pale-chested sanderling, her dear “peep,” running on thin legs, dodging waves. Cara a sleek, slate-colored black hooded gull, raucously calling and laughing with joy.

Joy . . . It filled Lovie's heart as she sprinted toward her children. She paused only to slip out of her shorts and tug her T-shirt from her body to toss on the sand. Her simple black maillot molded to her woman's body, but she felt ageless as she raced to the waves. With a cry, she leaped into the water, splashing and surprising her children, who whooped in excitement at her arrival. She heard their calls—“Mama! Mama!”—as birdsong before she dove under the oncoming wave. The water was startlingly chilly yet refreshing.

Stroking beneath the water, she felt all the accumulated dust of the city wash away. Lovie kicked her legs, pushed with her arms, and burst to the surface. Gasping for air, tasting salt, she felt the warmth of the sun on her face.

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