

A LOWCOUNTRY WEDDING

by

MARY ALICE MONROE

*Save the date!*

*Celebrate the weddings of*

*Carson Colson Muir  
to  
Blake Waring Legare*

*Saturday, May 28th*

*and*

*Harper Muir-James  
to  
Taylor Archibald McClellan*

*Sunday May 29th*

*Charleston, South Carolina*

## Prologue

*Be kind, my darling girl. And be happy!*

Spring was in the air--ripe, verdant, full of promise. And with the spring came the rush and clamor of weddings.

Marietta Muir stood on the porch of her cottage in her nightgown and robe. Across the gravel drive was the main house--her Sea Breeze. The old white wooden house with its black shutters and gabled windows was dark and quiet in these early hours. It was a handsome house, she thought, taking in the gracious staircase that curved out like a smile of welcome. To the left was the unsightly, leaning wood garage. In the center of the courtyard an immense, ancient live oak tree spread low drooping boughs that to her appeared as a great hand protecting them all from harm. The tree and the house had survived generations of Muir ancestors and countless storms and hurricanes. That it could weather them all, scarred and bent perhaps, yet endure, was testament to the strength of the family.

Marietta lived in the small white cottage that had once been the home of her longtime maid and companion, Lucille. To her mind, it would always be 'Lucille's cottage.' Marietta had moved to the cottage when her granddaughter, Harper, had purchased the house from her, thus keeping Sea Breeze in the family. It was a good decision. Living in the quaint guest cottage, Marietta was free of the hassles and distractions of caring for that big house and all those possessions. She'd spent a lifetime tending the house, closing shutters for rooms filled with antiques, cooking meals, presiding over parties or going to parties, decorating for holidays, and celebrating the milestones of her family's lives. She no longer had the energy, or in truth, the desire to do all that. Running a household and raising children were tasks for the young!

She held a cup of coffee in hands and sipped slowly, enjoying the warmth. Now she could enjoy the peace of a lowcountry morning such as this when the air was heady with scents. She lowered her cup from her nose and breathed deep. Coffee still lingered in the air, but there was the pervasive scent of pluff mud this morning and the cloying sweetness of jasmine and other spring flowers that tickled her nose. Salt tinged the moist breezes from the ocean. Smacking her lips, she could almost taste it. And, too, there was that delightful freshness of mist and dewy grass that lingered like spirits at dawn.

Marietta awoke with the sun most mornings now. Nights were restless and she was eager to rise from her bed and greet the new day. At eighty- one years of age, each day granted was a blessing. And today was especially exciting. Carson was arriving home. Harper and Dora were positively spinning with anticipation. Now they could begin the wedding festivities in earnest, for in only two months' time, both Carson and Harper would be celebrating their weddings.

Just the thought gave Marietta palpitations. There was so much that had to be done. So much that she wanted to say to the girls before they took this important step in their lives.

But *what?* What wise words could she share with them that would inspire? What words could she say that they could pull from their memories when times were tough and they needed reassurance and guidance to persevere?

When Marietta was soon to be married her mother, Barbara, had taken her to tea for a private, mother-daughter tete a tete. Marietta's wedding day was only a week away and there was a flurry of parties given by friends and family. Barbara had set aside this time alone with her daughter, to share with her the advice that only a mother could. That afternoon over Darjeeling tea, her mother had presented Marietta with a book of etiquette by Emily Post. Now that Marietta was setting up a home of her own, her mother said, she wanted her to have

guidance at her fingertips for any question she might have regarding the correct deportment of a lady with a well appointed house. Marietta had already been thoroughly instructed on the rules of conduct, customs and expectations of Charleston society. "Yet," her mother had told her, "refinement and charm were more elusive."

She had placed the book in Marietta's hands and said, "My dear girl, remember that this book only outlines for you the thousands of detailed instructions and protocol of polite society. But at the root of all etiquette and manners is kindness. These rules were not contrived to make one feel important or better than another. Rules can be learned by anyone. Every human being—unless dwelling alone in a cave—is a member of society of one sort or another.

"Rather, think of etiquette as a philosophy of living and enjoying life with grace, compassion and respect for others. If, say, someone at your dinner table uses your bread plate, do you make a fuss? Of course not. You must be gracious and make no mention of it. Why? Because you would not want to embarrass the other guest. To do otherwise is the gravest breach of etiquette. You see, while etiquette provides the rules for socially accepted behavior, good manners are how we apply those rules. Being a gentleman or a lady is a code of behavior that draws on decency, integrity, and loyalty-- not only to friends and family, but to principals. So be kind, my darling girl. And be happy."

Marietta had held her mother's words close to her heart throughout her long marriage. Emily Post's Etiquette had guided her through thank you notes, birth announcements, the introductions of dignitaries, baptisms, weddings and funerals. But her mother's words were the spirit behind them.

Mamaw smiled and snapped to action. With two weddings approaching, she knew exactly what she had to do.

She closed her robe tight and hurried back into the cottage. Inside the walls and sparse furniture were all white. Splashes of color brightened the room in the lowcountry art and the blue linen drapes at the windows. She went directly to the one wall lined with bookshelves. This was the only change she'd made to the cottage after her granddaughters had redecorated it following Lucille's death. Marietta loved her books and had a difficult time choosing which to keep from her vast library. The furniture she had no difficulty parting with. But the books were like old friends.

Marietta knew the book was here somewhere. She'd never throw it out. Her fingertips slid over the spines of dozens of books packed side by side on the shelf. At last she found it. Emily Post's Etiquette. She pulled it out and caressed the well-worn blue binding with satisfaction. Opening it, she found the folded book cover and the inscription on the opening page, *With best wishes! Emily Post.*

She went to the sofa, flicked on the lamp, crossed her legs and, after slipping on her reading glasses, began to read, going through the chapters: Introductions, The Art of Conversation, Entertaining at a Restaurant, Balls and Dances Preparations for a Wedding, Table Manners, Protocol in Washington, and so on. The tone was encouraging and concise, the instructions thorough and direct. She felt again the same awe and wonder--and trepidation-- at reading the countless rules for specific situations that she had experienced as that young bride fifty some years earlier. Marietta had to admit she'd forgotten some--like calling cards-- but for the most part, the rules of etiquette were as ingrained in her as her DNA. She read until the sun brightened the sky, her coffee cup was empty, and eyes grew weary. She paused, slipped off her glasses and let her hand rest on the book.

Were these rules relevant to a young bride today? she wondered Would Harper and Carson find them daunting? Would Dora have utilized these in her marriage to Cal?

They were not her daughters, but her granddaughters. They affectionately called her Mamaw and their bond was strong, indeed. She had done her best to instruct the girls in proper manners when they'd spent summers with her at Sea Breeze, but she didn't oversee their upbringing or guide them on a day to day basis. Harper she had no worries knew her etiquette. In England, her family was in Debrett's. Dora's mother, Winifred, bless her heart, did her best. Even if Winnie knew the letter of the law and not the spirit. Carson, however, was her wild card. Raised by her son, she might as well have been raised by wolves. Looking back, she saw that she'd failed Carson by not insisting that the young girl live with her in Charleston rather than with her father in Los Angeles. Yet the girl had a natural grace and a passion for living that no amount of education could teach. Carson knew enough manners to get by. Marietta sighed. How to set a table, at the very least. The rest, Marietta knew, she could learn.

Mamaw tapped her lips, considering. Certainly for the parties, and the wedding ceremonies protocol played an important role. Especially in the church. Goodness, without them they'd all be walking around utterly clueless what to do next. Protocol was reassuring in such times and Mamaw was confident that she could guide the fledglings in the proper procedures for the ceremonies. With a slight lift of her chin she thought that sometimes there was an advantage to being old.

As for the rest...It may be true that some of the rules of etiquette from the past were outdated. Yet didn't etiquette, like language and customs, evolve and adapt to current times? Treating others with kindness, consideration, and respect was timeless. They should all be aware of how their actions affect others in their daily lives.

Marriage was hard work. Like the vows the young brides and grooms were going to say, there was indeed *sickness and health, poverty and wealth, 'til death do us part*. Only in the wisdom of experience could one hear those words and understand the depth of their meaning.

Marietta had lived a charmed life in many ways. Yet she'd also endured the sadness of miscarriages and the crushing blow of the deaths of her only child. Edward had been her support during those trials, but when he died, it was her dear friend, Lucille who had seen her through the darkness to the light. Then Lucille, too, had passed and Marietta was alone again. Her granddaughters were a solace, true, but she'd also discovered a different sort of comfort and companionship in an old friend, Girard.

So perhaps, marriage wasn't the only answer for a compatible relationship? she wondered. Partnership and friendship were important ingredients. Still, she believed marriage was an institution set up by society to protect the concept of family. Marriage offered security and stability in a world quickly losing values, customs and traditions. This she wanted for her granddaughters.

And yet, in the end, her mother had only wanted Marietta to be happy. Happy with her husband, happy in her society, happy in her home. Isn't that what every mother wished for her daughter? Shouldn't she wish only that for her Summer Girls?

She sighed and cupped her chin in her palm. So what to say? Lord, she prayed, help me find the words. Then she smiled again and the answer came readily. She would tell each young bride the same words her mother had told her so many years ago. Simple words that had withstood the test of time. *Be kind, my darling girl. And be happy.*

## Chapter One

*It's never too late. Not to begin again. Not for happy ever after.*

If the lowcountry was her heart, then the saltwater that pumped through all the mysterious and sultry creeks and rivers were her life's blood.

Carson sat in a window seat of the small jet staring out at her first glimpse of the lowcountry in six months. From the sky she stared out the portal window at the estuarine waters snaking through the wetlands looking every bit like veins and major arteries. Carson was heading back home. Back to Sullivan's Island, South Carolina, like so many migrating birds and butterflies journeying along the coast. She was so close she could almost smell the pluff mud.

Carson had been traveling for over fifty hours from New Zealand to Los Angeles, then from there to Atlanta, and now, at long last, on the final puddle jumper to Charleston. The past days had been one long blur of plane changes, long lines, endless waiting and hours cramped in crowded airplanes. She thought she might sleep on the red-eye from Los Angeles but she'd reached that odd point of being too exhausted to sleep. She couldn't turn off her brain.

She was drained after four months of film photography in the wild forests of New Zealand followed by extended post production work. Her life had been a series of breakfast, lunch, and dinner meetings where the powers-that-be debated over the best shots for the film's press and publicity. The film's star was a major A-list actor with a high "kill shot" allowance, which meant he could select those photographs he liked and reject those he did not. This prima donna had killed 75% of Carson's best work because he had an issue with his nose. In all that time Carson didn't have a free moment to surf, kite, or even stick a toe in the Pacific Ocean. Not even during her two day stop-over in Los Angeles. She'd packed up her few belongings from

storage, had them shipped them to Sullivan's Island, knocked on a few doors to bid farewell to friends, then called a cab and headed to LAX . Too long a time away from the water put her in a dismal state of mind. She felt fried. She couldn't wait to get home to the good ol' Atlantic.

Home.

Carson tried to stretch her impossibly long legs in the cramped space of economy seating, wondering again if she'd really been so clever to exchange her first class seats and pocket the money. Resting her chin in her palm, she stared out the small oval window, marveling how, after years on the road, she'd actually been homesick. Carson was lucky to have had a successful run of gigs involving shooting on location and long flights back to LA. She'd been very good at her job, cooperative, indefatigable on the set. Her personal life consisted of long term friends and countless short term suitors. By the time she hit thirty-four, however, the long hours and endless partying, the ever present alcohol and drugs began to take its toll. Her work got sloppy, she was drinking too much, and her work ethic grew lazy. When she'd overslept and missed a major scene, it was the last straw for the director and he fired her on the spot. Word got out and her reputation was ruined. No one would hire her.

It had been a long dry spell until that same director, Kowalski, himself a recovering alcoholic, learned Carson had joined AA and offered her a second chance. Carson had given this film her best work and, despite the frustration of the many setbacks and the prima donna actor, she'd stayed clean. Kowalski noticed. At the film's closing he shook her hand, then offered her another film job. That offer had meant the world to Carson. Not only had her reputation had been restored, but she'd proved to herself she could stop drinking under pressure. She'd felt validated and proud--and hopeful.

Carson blew out a stream of air. Now she was in a quandary. She'd promised Blake that this would be her last film gig. The she would end her wandering, return in four short months to settle down with him in Charleston to marry and start a new and different life. A life that meant she'd have to begin the dreaded task of searching for any work she could get in a tight job market. That was the plan. Yet when Kowalski offered her another film job, she couldn't flat-out refuse. Instead, she'd asked him for time to consider the offer.

She shuddered at the thought of once again joining the ranks of the unemployed. She'd been out of work so long she'd lost her self esteem. This time, rather than spend recklessly, Carson had saved money from this gig to tide her over until she got another job. Whatever and whenever that was. But it wasn't enough. Not nearly enough. She had to land a job soon. Carson was too proud to enter a marriage penniless, jobless, and completely dependent on Blake.

Carson looked down at the small diamond bordered on either side with two sapphires resting on her ring finger. Her engagement ring had been Blake's mother's ring and her mother's before her, thus all the more meaningful to her. This symbol of his love, of continuance and commitment, had been her touchstone during the six months they'd been apart. She'd held tight to the ring and all the promises it held whenever she'd been tempted to drink--and she'd remained sober. It had been hard, there was no denying it. There were times she'd almost slipped. But she'd held onto the promise of the ring.

She covered her hand with her other palm, squeezing tight as she took a deep breath. Was love enough to calm her fears? Could she maintain her independence, her sense of self, if she relinquished her career? She couldn't bear falling back into the wallowing self pity of the previous summer.

Her racing thoughts were jarred by the grinding noise of the wheels lowering beneath her. Her heart quickened as touchdown approached. Almost there. Across the aisle a young couple sat, shoulders touching, holding hands. She recognized them as a couple that had boarded the plane with her in Atlanta. The young man's hair had been shorn by an energetic barber. He wore a crisp blue gingham shirt under his navy blazer and a sweet smile as he looked into the woman's eyes. Her blonde hair was long and curled, and she wore the classic pink Lily Pulitzer dress and matching sweater, and the ubiquitous pearls at the ears and neck. Looking up at him, she beamed. They had to be newlyweds, Carson thought. Or another in a long line of couples who came to Charleston to get married.

Like me, she thought and the notion surprised her. This was more than a return home to Sea Breeze. She, too, was a young bride to be flying in to get married. Carson studied the young woman. She was very young, in her early twenties, and fresh as a dewdrop. Utterly enamored by her beau. Is that what I should look like, Carson wondered? Brimming over with dew and sunshine?

She glanced down at her California chic style of clothing. Faded jeans torn at the knees, a long boyfriend shirt, rows of bracelets on an arm and strands of beads at the neck. Turquoise and silver hoops at the ears and cowboy boots on her feet. Her long dark hair was twined into a thick braid that fell over her shoulder. She hardly thought that 'dew and sunshine' was a description anyone would use to describe her. To begin with, she was at least a decade older than that sweet Georgia peach. Studying her dewy eyed expression, Carson couldn't help but wonder if the young woman shouldn't wait a few years before getting married. Experience more of life before settling.

After all, girls were getting married later now. She'd read that twenty-seven was the average age of today's bride, closer to Harper's age. In bigger cities like New York, Washington DC, and Los Angeles women were disinclined to tie the knot before they are well into their thirties. At thirty four, Carson wasn't completely sure she was ready even yet.

With a great thump and screeching of brakes the plane landed at Charleston International Airport, jolting Carson's thoughts. Soon the plane was filled with the sounds of seat belts clicking and rustling as restless passengers stood and anticipated an escape from confinement and to continue their journeys. She felt herself awakening at the prospect of seeing Blake again. She needed to freshen up before she faced him after so long a time.

In the ladies room Carson stood in front of the industrial mirror under the harsh light. She saw the ravages of long hours of travel and exhaustion in the chalkiness of her skin. Her blue eyes, usually brilliant, appeared dull and bruised by the dark circles. After rinsing her face with cold water and patting it dry with paper towels, she dug into her large leather bag and pulled out her makeup. She added just enough blush to look healthy, a smattering of shadow and lip gloss. Then she untwined her braid and brushed it until it fell like dark, glossy silk down her back. Blake loved her hair, liked to wrap his fist in it when he kissed her.

She stuffed everything back into her bag and straightened her shoulders.

"Dew and sunshine," she said, feeling the bride to be at last. She grabbed her suitcase and strode into corridor. When she reached the exit guard to the terminal she heard Blake's voice.

"Carson!"

She swung her head toward the sound, surprised. She'd expected him to pick her up at baggage claim. But there he stood at the exit, looking very much the same tall, slender and

tanned man she'd left last fall. Over the winter his dark hair had grown longer. Thick curls amassed on his head, not yet shorn for the summer. His eyes were the color of chocolate and they were warm now, bubbling over with anticipation. When their gazes met he lifted his hand in a boisterous wave, revealing an enormous bouquet of white roses.

All her nervousness, worries and fatigue fled the moment she saw him. Like a light at the end of the tunnel, his gaze called to her.

"Blake!"

Suddenly she was grinning wide, face flushed, trotting in her boots to close the distance between them. In a rush his arms were around her, holding her tight, her lips smashed against his in a devouring kiss that was filled with discovery, reconnection, and promise.

"Baby, you're home," he said against her cheek.

Hearing the words, she felt the truth in them. She was home.

He grabbed her bags, eyes only on her, oblivious to the glances they were gathering, mostly from young girls and older women with smiles on their faces.

The drive from the airport in Blake's pick-up truck was filled with catch-up conversation, questions fired and answered mixed with laughter. Outside the day was dreary. Rain whipped the windshield while the wipers clicked like a metronome. They crept along Coleman Boulevard, past shops lit up like night, though it was barely one o'clock in the afternoon. Blake kept a firm grip on her hand, releasing it briefly only to shift gears, then clasped it again, as though afraid the bird would fly off again. As they left the mainland and headed over the wetlands she looked out to see that the tide was so high only the tips of grass were visible, like some great green lawn seemingly ready to overflow with the rain. She knew that in twelve hours the powerful tides would turn and the water would recede again, exposing mounds of mudflats

with glistening black, sharp-tipped oyster shells, an army of fiddler crabs and, if the storm was over, regal snowy egrets. These, she thought, were the seaside sentinels welcoming her home to the lowcountry.

They went directly to Blake's apartment on Sullivan's Island. Once a military barracks, the long, white wood building had been converted to apartments. The history of a military presence on the island went back to the Revolutionary War. Passing Fort Moultrie, Stella Maris church, her hand went to the window, as though to caress these touchstones. If she turned here toward the back of the island, she'd head toward Sea Breeze, she thought. But Blake drove straight down Middle Street.

They held hands as they climbed the stairs to Blake's apartment, then paused at the door and smiled. They both knew what awaited them on the other side. Once the key entered the lock, Hobbs began barking his deep throated huff of warning. They heard the dog's nails clicking on the hardwood, then the exploratory deep sniffs at the door.

"Are you ready for your welcome?" Blake asked, inserting the key.

Carson smiled and nodded, bracing herself. When the door opened the giant golden Labrador licked Blake's hand then immediately went to sniff the new person--Carson's boots, her jeans, her extended hand. Then, with a high yelp of recognition, Hobbs began barking and whining with excitement, his tail waving back and forth. Carson couldn't have asked for a warmer homecoming. She bent low to scratch behind his ears and pet his fur.

After Blake settled his dog and they entered the small two bedroom apartment there was a moment of tension between them, the first since she'd seen him. The air around them felt charged with energy and want.

"I'll put the flowers in water," Blake said, taking the roses from her.

She brought them to her nose, inhaling their heady scent once more before relinquishing them to Blake. He was watching her, his pupils pulsing. He stood motionless for a second, then in a sweep tossed the roses to the nearby sofa and stepped forward to place his long hands on her cheeks and draw her lips to his.

His drank from her lips like a man parched. His tongue probed, separating her lips and plunging into the moisture he'd not tasted for months. She welcomed him, clasping herself tighter to him with a soft moan in her throat. It was always like this with them. A kiss was like spontaneous combustion. Neither of them could stop now, nor would they want to. Outside lightning flashed and seconds later, thunder rumbled closer, louder. The lights flickered. Hobbs whined and curled up in his bed.

Blake pulled back from Carson's lips and let his hands slide down her arms to her hands.

"I've missed you," he said.

"I've missed you, too."

He took her hand and without another word spoken, led her to his room and to his bed. The cold front gusted at the windows, rattling the frames as rain sluiced the air. But inside, the small apartment welcomed the lovers and protected them from the storm.

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"It's still raining," Carson said.

She lay on her back, her long dark hair spilling over the pillows, one arm flung over her forehead. Her breathing has calmed and, spent, she felt suddenly very tired, like she could sleep

for hours listening to the rain pattering outdoors. Lovemaking often had this effect on her. Wound like a tight coil, the passion gave her a great release.

"It's supposed to rain all day, then move on tonight. Tomorrow should be sunny. Today..." Blake rolled to his side and propped his head on his palm. He reached out to shift the sheet up over her naked breasts. "You must have jet lag. Rest."

"I *am* tired," she confessed.

"It was a good idea to stop here first, before going to Sea Breeze. Give you time to decompress. Besides, I want my time first, before I have to share you with everyone else."

Carson lifted her arm to gently slide her hand along the side of his head. "True, though I miss them. Especially Mamaw. But, yes, we need this time alone. To talk."

"And sleep. It's a good day for sleep."

"Yes." Her lids blinked slowly, listening to the patter of rain on the roof. She felt safe here, with Blake, protected from whatever ill winds blew outside this apartment.

"Oh Blake," she said in a choked whisper. "I'd forgotten what it was like here with you."

He smiled. "Then don't go away again."

He gathered her closer to him so she could rest her head on his shoulder. They lay entwined in each others arms, listening to the softer roll of thunder compete with Hobbs' snores.

Carson's fingers played with the hairs on his chest, furrowing her brows in consternation. She sighed heavily.

"What?" he asked, alert to her shift in mood.

"Oh, I've been wondering..." She looked at Blake and saw his alert expression. Like a man waiting for the other shoe to drop. She paused. Carson had hurt him before. She couldn't hurt him again. She tried to couch her words.

"While I was away, the work was hard, yes. Demanding. Frustrating. That cyclone that hit really slowed down production. I've lived through category one hurricanes here on the island before, but this cyclone was worse. There were moments I wasn't sure we'd make it. We were all pretty scared." She snorted. "I don't know if Kowalski was more afraid of the storm or the cost of the delay."

Blake waited without speaking, his hand stroking her bare arm.

"All those delays. I know I swore I'd be back in four months. I couldn't help them. I'm sorry."

"I know. We talked about it. It's done. You're here now."

Carson hesitated. "I also said that I wouldn't take another film job."

Blake's gaze sharpened. "Did you?"

"No." She took a breath. "Not yet. But Kowalski offered me another job. A good one, with good pay. He told me I did an excellent job. Her lips turned up. "That applied to my not drinking, too."

Blake nodded slowly, his brow furrowing as though he wasn't quite sure what she was getting at, but he knew he didn't much like where it was going. "That's what you wanted. Validation. Your self esteem back. You succeeded."

"Yes. And it feels wonderful. It's like I got myself back." Her hand touched her heart. "The strong, confident me. Feeling that again, I..." she took a breath. "I can't go back to the way I was last summer. Lost, penniless, unable to get a job. "

"The way you felt last summer had a lot more to do with all that you learned about yourself than the job issue. You joined AA. That took a lot of personal strength. And your bond with your sisters. I like to think I was part of that, too."

"You were. Of course you were," she added "But learning that about myself and going out into the world, testing myself and succeeding, are two different things. I'm a recovering alcoholic. I'll never be cured. The temptation to drink is present every day and every day I have to have the personal strength to say no. To do that, I have to be centered and strong. Blake, I'm terrified of going back to that woman I was last summer-- broke, wallowing, unemployed. So I'm wondering... why do I need to go through that when I was offered another job? One perfectly in line my career, too. I know people who would kill for that job offer."

Blake gently disentangled himself from her arms and rose to sit on the bed. He crossed his legs and looked out the window a moment, but she knew he wasn't looking at the rain.

"How long would this job take you away for?"

"I'm not sure of the details, but probably two months."

"Does that mean four?"

"Hey, a cyclone doesn't usually hit while filming."

"But there are delays."

"Sometimes. Of course."

Blake shook his head. "You said this was your last film job."

"I know. At the time I thought it was. But I'm not sure now. I have nothing else here."

Blake snorted derisively.

"I don't mean you. You know that."

"You haven't looked."

Carson scrambled to rise and sit across from him, unaware, unconcerned about her nakedness. "Yes I have! Last summer. All summer. I had to take pity donations from Harper."

She shook her head violently. "I can't do that again. And why should I? Why should I take a job I don't love when I have a job that I do love?"

"Aren't you forgetting something?"

She looked at him questioningly.

"We'll be married. You'll be my wife. You won't be penniless. What's mine is yours. That's what a marriage is."

Carson took a deep breath and turned away from the sincerity on his face. The room was half dark with the lights off and the dark sky outdoors. "Please understand," she began, trying hard to keep her voice calm and reasonable, "that I appreciate that. But I can't sit back and let you take care of me. I need to feel I can take care of myself. You know how I grew up—my father took me away from Mamaw when I was a little girl and moved me to Los Angeles where he was going to make his name and fortune. He was always trying to write or sell something. By then he'd given up on his dream to write the great American novel and got into screenplays, magazine pieces, ghost writing, anything he could so that he could pay the rent. And when he couldn't, he took what little money we had and got drunk. I learned pretty early to depend on myself. I had to hide his money to buy groceries. I cooked, cleaned, got myself to school. I was more the parent that he was. When I turned eighteen, I'd had enough and left. When he died a few years later I was sad. But I also felt a little relief." She shrugged, a physical effort to remove the guilt she carried. "It's always been me, taking care of me. That's all I've ever known."

"First, I'm not your father," Blake said. "I come from a long line of steady, hardworking stock. Secondly," he said with a hint of humor, "independence isn't the key to a good marriage."

Carson shivered, feeling chilled. She reached out to pull the sheet up over her shoulders. Carson knew that commitment of any kind, much less marriage, was very difficult for her. She

didn't like long time leases, jobs that kept her tied to one city, one place. In the past, whenever a boyfriend started getting serious or mentioned the word *ring*, she ran. Only with Blake had she found herself able to consider a pledge of commitment. For better or worse, through sickness and health, till death do us part. Blake never had any doubts, was steadfast in his belief in her. In them. But she was beginning to feel shackled by the promises she'd made last fall, bound not only to marry, but to give up her independence.

Carson answered seriously. "I know you're not my father. You're as far from him as a man could be. But..." She looked down and tugged at the sheet, pulling it closer.

"But what?" he prompted.

"But as for my independence, I'm worried." She twisted the sheet in her hands then, taking a breath, looked up and met his eyes. "I'm not prepared to give it up."

Blake's dark gaze sharpened. "What are you saying?" Then, visibly paling, he said with caution, "Are you breaking our engagement?"

## Chapter Two

*It is always a stressful situation when the wedding of a daughter--or a granddaughter--brings together parents who are divorced. It is especially difficult when both families are bitterly estranged.*

To Harper's mind, planning a wedding was not much different from studying for an end of term exam. There was considerable research to do-- traditions, venues, music, cake designs flowers, recipes, decor, goodie bags. Though she admitted to being surprised by how many books and magazine articles had been written on the topics. She'd always been an excellent student and felt up to the challenge. There were people to consult, lists to make, files to keep.

What she had been unprepared for, however, was the emotional challenge involved with wedding plans.

Harper sighed and closed her laptop screen, then leaned back in her chair. It was no use pretending she was working. She'd spent the past hour searching the internet for still more ideas for her wedding bouquet. Her wedding was only two months away and she hadn't yet selected her flowers. And now there was a problem with her dress. She'd fallen impetuously in love with a traditional gown in a lovely bisque color. It was rather princess like, true, but that's how she'd dreamed of looking like on her wedding day since she was a little girl. Dora and Mamaw, who had accompanied her shopping, loved the dress. Carson had never replied to the photo she'd sent. But Granny James, who was paying for the dress, didn't care for it, saying it was far too formal for a beach wedding.

Her venue was decided on, thank heaven. Charleston was the number one destination wedding location in the country, an accolade that had venues booked two years in advance. This made it frustrating for local girls like herself hoping to plan their wedding within a year's time.

Harper's wedding was scheduled for late May--peak wedding season. She'd gotten lucky and scored a prime venue even though she was late booking. Some bride had cancelled a May date at Wild Dunes Resort for a Grand Pavilion wedding the very day her grandmother had called. So Granny James immediately booked it and laid down her deposit--without consulting Harper. Harper's fingers drummed the desk. Most of the wedding was being planned by Granny James, all the way from England. She sighed again. It was rather like studying for the exam and having someone else take the test.

Harper let her gaze wander across the room to the bookshelves. Dozens of wedding books lined the shelf. Burgeoning manila folders were stored in the pale Tiffany blue boxes, each neatly labeled and filled with clippings and photos. Her sisters teased her about her passion for organization and the pretty boxes she was always buying. Harper owned this was true. But what good were all those carefully filed ideas when no one was paying attention to them?

Granny James had been over the moon at the prospect of planning the wedding for her only grandchild. Harper's mother, Georgiana, was Imogene James's only child. Her wedding to Parker Muir was a hasty, impromptu affair in New York that had marked the marriage a disaster from the start. They divorced five months later, before Harper was born. Granny James had tucked away her visions of a formal wedding at the family estate, Greenfields Park in England, to save for her granddaughter.

Harper, however, became engaged to a lowcountry boy, moved into Sea Breeze as her home and intended to live out her life on Sullivan's Island rather than England. She wanted to be married here, too. On that point she would not budge.

Granny James took Harper's decision with disciplined good nature. Georgiana had prepared her well for disappointment. With her dreams of a staging a formal wedding unrealized, she had rallied and launched herself into the task of a beach wedding.

"We love the beach, don't we, darling? Just think. It will be a destination wedding for all the family in England," she'd exclaimed. "So different. We have to have it in the spring to escape all the rain. They'll all come. You'll see. What fun!"

A beach wedding was not what Harper had envisioned for herself. Still, knowing how important planning a wedding was to Granny James, she'd bitten her tongue and tried to remember all that Granny James had done for her. Georgiana, her mother, had distanced herself from Harper ever since the engagement. She strongly disapproved not only of the match but of Harper moving to the lowcountry. Georgiana had always been angry whenever Harper didn't meekly obey her wishes, but when she'd revealed to her editor mother that she was releasing a book with another publisher, the line had been drawn in the sand and it seemed neither woman was yet willing to cross it.

In contrast to her mother, Granny James had been there to wipe her tears all throughout Harper's youth and, after a testy period of interrogation, finally welcomed Taylor into the family. And most significantly, Granny James had adroitly engineered Harper's inheritance so that she could purchase Sea Breeze when Mamaw put the house on the market.

After all that, Harper didn't have the heart to tell Granny James that what she really wanted was a small lowcountry style wedding at one of the southern plantations in the Charleston area. She'd envisioned ancient oaks dripping moss, winding creeks, a long flowing dress and veil, flower-draped verandas.

The wedding that Carson was having, basically.

Her older sister had also gotten engaged at summer's end. After a tumultuous love affair, the capricious Carson had finally said *yes* to Blake Legare. Just before she took off for a job as a stills photographer on a film being shot all the way over in New Zealand. Carson was supposed to have returned at the end of January, Yet here it was, the first of March, and her feet hadn't touched the lowcountry. Not everyone was surprised. Money had exchanged hands with friends betting whether or not Carson would return in time for the wedding. Not that Harper placed a bet, but she had to admit that at almost two months late in returning Carson had everyone's teeth on edge. All except Blake, who'd maintained a stoic faith in his fiancé.

Oh, Carson, Harper thought with a shake of her head. Her heart pumped with affection. She adored her free wheeling sister. Envied her enthusiasm, her lust for life and fearlessness. It was Carson who taught her how to swim, to row a boat, to run wild along the coast of Sullivan's Island playing pirates. But that very independence carried a streak of recklessness that could be annoying, too. Their weddings were to be a means to play new games together--choosing wedding gowns and bridesmaid dresses, bouquets and goodie bag items *together*.

In typical Carson fashion, however, she found herself too busy and had blithely left her wedding plans to Mamaw and her future mother- in- law. In an email from New Zealand Carson wrote, "Do whatever you think best. I know it will be beautiful!"

What normal young woman would hand over her wedding plans to someone else, Harper thought. Then, with chagrin, Harper realized she had virtually done the same thing.

But all that was the past. Carson was coming home now at last and the wedding plans would kick into high gear.

Harper felt a fluttering in her stomach. Placing her palm there she wasn't sure if it was nerves, anticipation, or anxiety over what all was left to be done. Truth was, Carson's return

home after nearly six months signaled more than just the beginning of a blitz of wedding plans. Tomorrow night Harper was hosting the first family gathering at Sea Breeze since that mass departure last September.

She glanced at her watch, and with some alarm saw that it was nearing five. Her mind stopped dallying and sharpened on the immediate. Taylor would be home soon and there was still so much to be done for the party. She rose quickly and strode across the thick carpet to the door. Harper took a final sweep of her office. The hearty pine paneled floors, the walls of bookshelves, the Oriental rug, a painting of the sea. This had once been the house's library, the male bastion of her grandfather Edward and her father, Parker, complete with hunting paintings, mounted rifles, and the air redolent with pipe smoke. When she and her half sisters began spending summers at Sea Breeze, the feminine accoutrement of dollhouses and pink colored toys chased the men from their cave. Soon after it became Harper's makeshift bedroom. As years passed the west wing of the house became known as "the girls'" wing. Mamaw kept the paneling and books and the room was still referred to as the Library, but everyone knew it was de facto Harper's room.

Harper made her way down the west hall her gaze sweeping the rooms she passed to make certain all was in the ready. At the end of the hall was Carson's bedroom, the largest of the girls' rooms with a spectacular view of the Cove. This had been Carson's bedroom since she was four years old. Carson's mother had died in a tragic fire and Mamaw had stepped in to take care of the motherless girl. Mamaw had been more than a grandmother to Carson. She'd been the only mother Carson had ever known. Their relationship was uniquely special and neither she nor Dora resented their special bond...much. During the summers when the three young girls gathered at Sea Breeze, Carson naturally claimed her childhood room as her own. Harper had

every intention of reassuring her sister that this hadn't changed now that she owned Sea Breeze. Her sister would always have a place here.

She and everyone else was excited to welcome Carson home. But the elephant in the room that no one was mentioning was how Carson resented that her wealthy half sister could afford to purchase Sea Breeze-- the only house that Carson had ever considered home.

Harper didn't want any arguments or resentments to mar what she hoped would be a happy time for the family as the weddings approached. Satisfied that everything in the room was just as Carson had left it the previous September, Harper closed the door, reminding herself to add fresh flowers to the room before Carson arrived.

The second bedroom was smaller and faced the front of the house and the ancient live oak tree that shaded the house under its protective foliage. This was Dora's room, one Harper had shared with her sister for a time. Pink and French in design, it suited their oldest sister. Now living in her own cottage on Sullivan's island, Dora didn't need a bedroom at Sea Breeze. So Harper had decided this was where she'd put Granny James when she arrived in a few short weeks.

She entered the living room and paused. Carson would notice the changes here. A large, airy space with lots of large windows facing the front courtyard, Harper had freshened up the room a bit, making it younger in appeal with an icy blue and white trim palette. Mamaw's early American antiques were placed into storage for Dora and Carson. Having assumed ownership of the house, Harper felt it only fair that her sisters receive the furniture. Besides, she was inheriting a boat load of antiques from her grandmother's estate in England. More than she could ever use. Harper had selected a few favorites for Sea Breeze-- the gorgeous secretary, several side tables, a dining room table and chairs and paintings. She'd purchased two new down filled

sofas. She'd spent a lifetime growing up with hard, creaky antiques and she was determined to have a comfortable place to sit in her own home.

Home.

The thought never failed to take her breath away. Growing up she'd been carted from one home to another depending on the season, complete with an assortment of faceless nannies. She'd never felt that any one of them was home.

Except for Sea Breeze. The historic house was so named because it sat perfectly situated, high and proud on the southern tip of the island, facing onshore Atlantic breezes from the front and the racing currents of The Cove in back. This house felt like home because of Mamaw's consistent love and her sisters. And her ancestors. There were memories embedded in each nook and cranny of the house that went back more than a hundred years. Harper often felt the whisperings of the past when she wandered the halls, her fingertips delicately stroking the walls, the furniture, the glass.

This house-- this *place* --had planted the seeds of her love for the lowcountry. A stirring passion that had bloomed with her love of Taylor. And, herself. Harper felt she belonged here. Here at Sea Breeze she'd discovered the strength of family. Continuity. Security. Harper was a wordsmith. And, as of last month, a soon to be published novelist. She wanted to write books that shared her love of these words, their profound influences, and of course, the lowcountry.

She caught her reflection in the large Venetian mirror. She saw the same, slender, fair skinned woman who had returned to the lowcountry the previous May. A clever but timid girl without direction. An obedient daughter seeking love. Her red hair was longer now, pulled loosely up in a clasp. Her eyes the same brilliant blue she shared with her sisters. But staring at herself Harper knew that she was not the same girl at all. She had grown up. She'd found her

voice. And regardless of what Carson or Dora or anyone else might want or say or think, she was the mistress of Sea Breeze now. Soon to be a wife.

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A short while later Harper was standing in the kitchen before the great Viking stove. A storm had blown in, coloring the sky a gunmetal gray. Looking out at the Cove, the choppy gray water mirrored the sky. A gusty wind whistled, rattling the windows. A cold front was moving fast over the island bringing with it icy rain. She shivered, feeling the damp to her bones. She looked in the nearby corner where Thor, Taylor's behemoth of a black dog, lay curled on his cushion. Part Labrador, mostly Great Dane, the dog curled up by the warmth of the oven in inclement weather.

"Don't you worry, boy. The weather promises to be all blue skies tomorrow," she told him. Thor raised his eyes to look at her with deep brown eyes and his tail thumped the floor in a heavy staccato. "At least I hope so," she muttered to herself. Carson couldn't abide cold weather, either, and Harper wanted her sister to be in the best spirits possible.

Harper's small hands moved quickly, efficiently, to add the sautéed okra, celery, bell pepper, garlic, onion and chicken to the roux. She lowered her head and inhaled the heady scents, tracing a finger over the gumbo recipe on the counter. It was an old recipe, one of dozens created by the family's former housekeeper, Lucille. The recipes were hand written on index cards and assorted sheets of paper. They were yellowed and stained and some of the pencil lettering was so faint she could barely read them. Harper had spent months attempting to recreate the recipes as a gift to her sisters.

Thor's head shot up, ears alert. In a leap he was on his feet trotting to the door, his nails clicking on the hardwood floors. A moment later the door swung open and gust of cold, wet air swept through the room.

"It's colder than a witches' tit out there."

Harper turned at the sound of Taylor's voice, a wide smile on her face. His tall, large frame filled the entryway. He carried a large green cooler in his arms. Thor whined with joy at his side, torn between greeting his master and sniffing the shellfish inside the cooler.

"You're home late."

"Crazy day. My meeting finished early, so I headed up to McClellanville and got that shrimp you asked for." He set down the large cooler on the floor, stretched, then slipped off his rain jacket. He stood a moment, shaking off water that splattered the floor. "Mama and Dad send their love."

Again she felt fortunate that Taylor's father was once a shrimper. Like many others, Capt. McClellan had tied his boat up at the dock and looked for work on land. He couldn't afford to stay in the business. Imported shrimp was priced too low and diesel fuel was priced too high. Shrimping was a vanishing southern industry. But he still knew the few shrimpers left and could always get his hands on fresh shrimp right off the boat.

Taylor hung his jacket on the peg and immediately crossed the room, slipping his arms around Harper's waist. "How's my girl?"

Harper leaned back against him, relishing the feel of his strong arms around her. Over six feet, his broad frame dwarfed her slender five foot two inches. From the moment she'd met him, Taylor had made her feel safe. It was a new sensation for a girl who'd never known security. She ducked away when he nestled his lips at his neck.

"Stop," she protested. "I'm cooking!"

"I'm starved." He leaned over her shoulder her shoulder and sniffed loudly. "Smells good."

"This isn't for tonight," she said, turning in his arms to slip her own around his neck. "It's for tomorrow night. For Carson's welcome home party. I thought..." she laughed when he dove in for another nibble at her neck.

"I told you I was starved."

She laughed again and pushed him, this time more firmly, away. "Bide your time, man. You're going to make me burn my gumbo." She turned again, this time successful in being released. "I thought tonight we'd have chicken salad."

"Nope," Taylor said, walking to the fridge. He tugged it open, pulled out a beer and flipped off the top. "Salad isn't going to do it. I need something that'll stick to my ribs."

"How about you order a pizza?"

"Done."

While she stirred at the stove she watched as he moved with easy familiarity to the kitchen drawer and drew out a wine cork, then walked to the pantry where bottles of wine were stacked. Such a domestic scene, she thought contentedly. They could already be husband and wife. Taylor had moved in to Sea Breeze last September after the papers were signed and Granny James returned to England, Carson flew off to LA and Dora moved to her own cottage on Sullivan's Island. Mamaw had promptly declared that she didn't want to be a third wheel in the main house and had taken up residence in the guest cottage. Taylor had felt awkward at first, tiptoeing around as though he were a guest. She enjoyed seeing him comfortable at Sea Breeze now, accepting that this was his home.

Pulling out an Italian red, Taylor's large hands moved with smooth experience to uncork the wine.

"Don't pour me any wine," Harper told him. She reached out to lift her mug. "I'm drinking hot tea. It's so chilly."

Taylor set the bottle down then returned to the stove. He reached for the spoon and dipped it into the gumbo. He blew on the sauce then tasted it, eyes closed. After a second he said, "Tastes good, baby, but it needs something. Not spicy enough."

Harper trusted his palate when it came to lowcountry dishes. She picked up a pen and bent over the recipe.

"I'm still making adjustments on Lucille's recipe. It's trial and error. She was, shall we say, creative in her measurements." She lifted the recipe and read aloud, "Toss in some oregano, basil, onions, garlic."

Taylor laughed as he walked to the wood kitchen table where a pile of mail sat.

"Lucille probably learned these recipes at her mother's or grandmother's knee. Watching them *toss* things in. She wrote those directions for herself. There was no need for her to be specific."

"I, however, have to make an educated guess. Thus lots of tasting." She brought the spoon to her lips, tasted, then reached out to add a generous pinch of oregano. "I want everything to be perfect for tomorrow's party."

"It will be," Taylor assured her, "You've been planning for weeks."

"It's the first time there's been a gathering here at Sea Breeze since we've bought it."

"Dora's been here plenty of times."

“Well Dora, yes. Of course. She lives so close. But not Carson. She’s the one who’s most attached. And the one who had an issue with me buying it.” Harper stirred more rapidly as she felt the nervousness tighten her stomach. “She’ll want everything to have stayed the same.” Including Mamaw still owning it, she thought.

“Hey, it’s done. All water under the bridge now.”

“She can’t help but resent the fact that I own the house she loves. Me, the least likely candidate.”

“Why the least likely?”

“I was the least connected to the house. To the South for that matter. I only came here as a child for a few summers. I was the sister from “off.” The Yankee from New York. Then I come barreling in last summer and buy the place right from under their noses.”

Taylor scoffed. “Hardly the scenario. You were the only one who could afford to rescue it. I figure they’re all thinking you came riding in on your white charger to save the day. Otherwise strangers would be living in this house right now. Carson has to accept that fact and be grateful.”

Harper didn’t reply. In her experience, emotions ran high in family matters and clouded judgment. “She’ll resent any changes I made. Think that it’s not my place, especially while Mamaw is still alive.”

“Maybe at first. It’d be only natural. But she’ll get over it.” He reached in for a second taste. “Better,” he announced. “But it still needs a little more heat.” He put the spoon on the counter and reached for the mail. “She’s getting married, too, don’t forget,” he continued. “She’ll be moving into her own place with Blake. He was talking about buying a house. She’ll have enough on her mind.”

“Blake’s not moving. He’s keeping his apartment on Sullivan’s.”

Taylor stopped sifting through the mail and set the pile back on the table. He and Blake had become close friends since the engagement. Their shared interest in dolphins cemented a natural affinity.

“Not moving? I thought he was heading out to James Island. Closer to NOAA.”

“Carson doesn’t want to leave Sullivan’s Island. At least she’s firm about something.”

Taylor kept silent but his brows gathered.

Harper turned off the stove and lay the wooden spoon on the counter. She knew Taylor’s silences held back a lot of words. As quick as Harper had been to imply one of Carson’s faults, her defense of her sister came naturally. “It’s not like Blake doesn’t want to live on the island, too. It’s *his* apartment.”

He took a long swallow from his beer. “When’s Carson arriving, anyway?”

"Tomorrow afternoon. Blake is picking her up from the airport, then bringing her here."

Harper chew her lip. "Her room is all freshened up. I'll put fresh flowers in tomorrow and some lowcountry snacks... benne wafers, pralines. And I have champagne chilling."

"You're doing a lot, honey. Is it really all necessary?"

Her face lit up as she caught his gaze. "I want to. Taylor, it's beginning. The weddings."

Taylor's eyes kindled. "I only care about the one wedding. Ours."

He went to collect his beer from the table, and after downing it, he leaned against the table and rubbed the back of his neck. Harper knew this as a signal that something was on his mind. She leaned against the counter, crossed her arms and waited for him to speak.

"I was talking to my parents," he began.

Harper said nothing.

"We were getting our ducks in a row. Your grandmother's coming when again?"

"March 15th."

Taylor nodded with a wry grin. "Beware the ides of March."

Harper ignored that.

"Do you know how long she'll be staying here?"

Something in his voice made Harper glance up sharply. There wasn't love lost between the two when she and Taylor were dating, but peace had been made.

"She'll stay until the wedding for sure. After that, as long as she cares to." Her voice sounded more unyielding than she'd intended.

"Of course," Taylor hastened to reply. He looked down, his fingers drumming the table behind him. "The reason why I was talking about dates with my parents is that my mother thought it might be nice for me to return home for awhile. Before the wedding. Sort of a last chance to be with her boy again before I become your husband."

Harper relaxed again and moved closer to Taylor to slip her arms around his waist. "I've always assumed you go back home for a while before the wedding. It'll be a flurry of estrogen and lace here. But I'll miss you. How long would you guess? About a week?"

He looked down and his eyes caught hers. "Actually, I was thinking of leaving soon. Before Granny James arrives."

"What? But that's next week!"

Taylor nodded.

Harper was stymied. "But...but why? There's no need for you to leave that early. It's insane. Getting to work every morning all the way from McClellanville will add hours to your commute."

"It'll only be for a short while."

Harper released him and strode across the room for her tea, feeling a sudden need for its warmth. She closed her hands around the heated ceramic and stared at the dark brew. "I don't understand," she said softly.

"You remember how things were between your grandmother and me," he began to explain.

"That was last year. She loves you now."

"Love?" he said dubiously. "Tolerates, maybe. Accept, possibly. She raked me over the coals."

"Granny James was just being protective. She didn't know you and wanted to be sure...well..."

"That I deserved you."

"Yes." Her lips twitched.

"And that I wasn't after you just for your money."

Harper shrugged. "That, too. And you passed with flying colors. So what's the problem?"

"I don't think it's a good idea for me to stay here, living in this house, sleeping in your bed, before we're married."

"It's no secret. She knows you're living here."

His eyebrows shot up. "She does?"

"Oh for heaven's sake. She's no prude."

"She is when it comes to you. I don't want to be on the receiving end of her cool glances. That woman could kill a charging rhino with one look. I'd rather deal with hours of traffic. Or rent a room for a few months."

Harper put her cup on the counter and crossed her arms against an irrational panic growing inside her chest. She felt her heart beating faster and it felt like all the worries she'd squelched deep inside were pounding to get out.

"I can't be left alone here! They'll all be here-- Carson, Blake, Granny James, Mamaw, Girard, Devlin, Dora, Nate...They'll be constantly in and out, asking for things, meals to prepare, laundry. Not to mention the wedding plans. How will I ever cope?"

"You don't have to take care of everyone. They can take care of themselves. It'll be the same as last summer."

"But it won't! This is my home now. It'll be expected that I make the decisions. Plan the meals. Be the one in charge. I can't, Taylor," she blurted, tears springing to her eyes. Taylor came forward to put his arms around her. As always, she felt safe in his arms. She needed him now more than ever.

Taylor smoothed the hair from her face, damp with tears.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I don't know why I got so emotional. I'm actually very happy they're all going to be here. I just feel a bit overwhelmed. It's just, I can't do it without you here. I need you. Especially now."

Taylor's hand stilled. He slid back, holding her arms in his hands and studying her face. There was a brief silence and he said faintly, "Why especially now?"

Harper drew a breath and wiped her face with her fingertips. Her face broke into a smile.

"Because," she said with a gleam in her eyes. "We're going to have a baby."

### Chapter Three

*Like any young Southern bride, she had visions of being the perfect wife, the best mother, and a creative hostess worthy of the pages of Southern Living magazine.*

The streets were collecting water on Sullivan's Island by the time Dora made her way home. It had been raining like the Lord's flood all afternoon without sign of stopping. It didn't make her life any easier on a day Dora had to rush all morning arranging after school care for Nate and squeezing in a few extra, much needed final minutes of study. Now the day was done, the test taken, and she was on her way home. It felt as though all the energy she'd bottled up had spilled out on the test, leaving her feeling empty. All she wanted to do on this chilly, wet night was to change out of this constricting dress into comfortable clothes and slippers, drink a glass or two of wine, curl up on the sofa, and watch mindless television.

The cold rain splattered the windshield of her car so hard she could barely see the little house nestled among clusters of palms, oleanders and old oaks. She turned off the engine and sighed in the sudden silence, eyes closed. The rain beat the roof of her aging Lexus like a drum. This was the first moment of peace she'd had since she'd opened her eyes this morning. She felt weary, like she'd run a marathon-- only, she thought with chagrin, without having lost an ounce.

Her brief moment of peace concluded, Dora began to revisit in her mind the questions on the exam, second guessing her answers. Dora had never been a great student. Not like Harper with her razor sharp intellect and Ivy League education. Dora had to study, hard, for a test. And yet no matter how much she studied, when the test was put before her she felt a panic build in her chest and a pounding in her ears that made it difficult to think clearly. Her teachers had called her a "poor test taker." Because of this her grades had suffered in school, but that was a lifetime ago and she'd never been all that worried about her ranking in academics. She was bright

but preferred the arts. She hadn't finished college so she could marry Calhoun Tupper after her junior year. As her friends had joked, who needed a BA when she got a MRS?

This test was different, however. Passing the real estate exam meant the difference between starting a new career that she loved and trying to support herself and her son on minimum wage.

She placed her fingertips to her temple, feeling the old fear of failure rear up in her heart. It was a cold shiver, a tightening in the chest. Paralyzing.

Her marriage to Calhoun had been a dismal failure. For the ten years of their union, Dora had struggled to be the wife she'd always believed she should be. She had exalted expectations set by her mother and her mother before her for generations. She and Cal had pulled together their savings and borrowed to the hilt to purchase an old Victorian house in the historic section of Summerville, South Carolina. They'd thought it was the first step toward the life they'd planned for themselves. Like any young Southern bride, Dora had visions of being the perfect wife, the best mother, and a creative hostess worthy of the pages of Southern Living magazine. With the naïve excitement of youth they'd made great plans to lovingly restore what they saw as a Grande dame of an old house. Oh, the plans Dora had! All she'd needed was a little money and a little time for her dreams to come true.

Time, however, had not been kind. The old treasure of a house was in fact a money-pit of mold, rotting foundations, and rats in the attic. Cal's meager salary and lack of promotions at the bank meant there was never the money to begin restoration. And Cal, it turned out, didn't know a hammer from a paintbrush. They lived in a run down house in an aura of disappointment. If that wasn't depressing enough, she'd had one miscarriage after another. When at last her prayers were answered and she gave birth to her son, Nate, she'd thought things

would at last improve. But she knew there was something off about her son and at three years of age, Nate was diagnosed with Asperger's, a high functioning autism.

Naturally, Dora lost interest in the house and focused on what was important-- helping her son. She'd withdrawn from local volunteering and began home schooling. She didn't realize that she was becoming isolated and lost interest in herself, as well. Meanwhile Cal too lost interest, not only in the house but in his wife and son. Then, last summer, he had asked for a divorce.

When Cal left, Dora had felt she'd failed at everything that had mattered to her and fell into a deep depression which led to Broken Heart Syndrome, also known as cardiomyopathy, that landed her in the hospital. It was Mamaw's invitation to Sea Breeze that had saved her. She'd moved to the safety of her grandmother's and sisters' arms. With their support, she'd begun her long journey to healing.

Now, a year later, her divorce was final. She was, for the first time in her life, truly on her own. It was both a heady and daunting sensation. Dora knew she had a lot to prove-- to herself, and too, to her son. Yet she'd never felt so stressed. Money was tight. The tuition for Nate's private school was costly and Cal was often lagging behind in contributing his share of the payments. He kept telling her he had to spend money to get the house in shape for sale. That albatross had been on the market for nearly a year without a serious offer. If only it would sell, she'd be free of it and maybe have a little money left over. *Don't count your chickens before they hatch*, her mother would tell her. It was true, Dora knew that. She had to concentrate on what she could do right now. Like getting her real estate license.

Dora squeezed her eyes tight and said a quick prayer. She just had to pass this exam. For once in her life she didn't want to depend on anyone or any turn of fate. She wanted to make it on her own.

But it was hard being a single parent. Between caring for Nate, cleaning the house, shopping and cooking, working full time and finding time to study, the one she'd stopped taking care of was herself. Again. She was falling into a dangerous trap. She'd stopped exercising on the excuse she didn't have time. She ate take out food. And the wine... The pounds she'd lost were slowly piling back on. She felt like such a failure for slipping into old, bad patterns.

*Relax. Don't beat yourself up,* Dora told herself. She took a deep cleansing breath then exhaled out the noxious feelings of self hatred and failure. She looked out the car window and saw the little cottage peeping out from the wet, drooping foliage. *You're home now,* she told herself.

This feeling of homecoming was hard won. She loved this little cottage. Devlin, her boyfriend, had purchased it a year earlier when the real estate market crashed. When they'd started dating she'd helped him with the decorating, even rolling up her sleeves and working alongside him. Dora had poured into the cottage all she'd dreamed of doing all those lonely years in Summerville. Devlin not only appreciated her suggestions but had incorporated them. And more, Devlin knew how to wield a hammer. Together, they'd rehabbed the house by the creek into something very special. This cottage was one of her successes. Devlin had then let Dora rent the house at an amount she could afford while he waited for the market to improve. They both knew it was his way of helping her through this rough time.

And Devlin was waiting for her inside now. Feeling buoyed by the thought, she pushed open the door and ran along the winding walkway, clutching her raincoat close to her neck to the front door. It was thankfully unlocked so she pushed it open and scampered into the dry shelter.

“Surprise!”

Dora stopped in the entryway, mouth agape. Yellow light from the lamps filled the small living room with golden light. Hanging from the ceiling, from corner to corner, were ribbons of crepe papers in blue and white and under them, her boyfriend and son stood wearing party hats and blowing paper horns that sounded like duck calls. Dora brought her hands to her cheeks.

“What’s all this?” she exclaimed, dripping in the front hall.

“Congratulations, baby,” Devlin shouted out as he came to her side and planted a firm kiss on her cheek.

“You don’t even know if I passed the exam,” she protested.

“I know you will,” he replied confidently as he helped her out of her raincoat. “You studied harder than anyone I’ve ever seen, plus you had me as your tutor. You’re a shoo-in.”

Nate hurried toward her and looking down she saw his face flushed with a wide grin of excitement. That in itself was unusual and she felt a rush of love. She wanted to bend to hug him in her arms, to squeeze his small, slender frame with all the love she had to offer, but she held back. Dora knew that part of his autism meant that her son didn’t like to be hugged or touched and accepted rare kisses only when he was in the right mood. She played fair and instead lowered to meet his gaze, matching his smile.

“Are you surprised?” Nate asked her.

“I am. Very.”

“Was it a good surprise?”

Her heart melted at seeing his blue eyes, the same Muir color as her own, shining.

“The best.”

“I have another surprise. I’ll show you!”

“Hold on, fella,” Devlin told the boy. “Give your mama a chance to take off her coat and get dry. We’ve plenty of time for more surprises.”

Nate’s face clouded. He didn’t like to wait. But to his credit he didn’t begin a litany of stubborn whines. He merely frowned and nodded his head, then stomped off to the table to wait for dinner.

“I’m hungry,” he announced.

“I am, too, pal,” Devlin said.

Dora was still surprised at Devlin’s effect on her recalcitrant son. Cal had never spent time with Nate. He saw his son’s autism as some kind of failure, hers naturally. Cal never attempted the normal father-son activities or explored other possible ways to connect. In contrast, Devlin accepted Nate for who he was, appreciated Nate’s unique talents and more, enjoyed his company. He took Nate fishing and taught him how to clean a fish and steer a boat. How to ride a bike and not cry when he fell off. How to identify snakes and spiders, set up a tent, body surf the waves. Thanks to Devlin, her pale, thin child was becoming a golden skinned, wiry lowcountry boy. Although Nate rarely displayed affection, she knew her son liked Dev, even respected him. Devlin was the male influence—she didn’t dare say the father—that Nate so desperately needed.

“Come sit down, pretty lady,” he said to Dora, walking to the table and pulling out a chair. “I fixed us something special. Your favorite. Shrimp and grits...the good grits, too. Not that watery stuff you make. Stone ground cooked with cream and bubbling with cheese. Now

don't give me that worried look," he said, waving his hand dismissively. He was in the kitchen, visible from the dining room. She watched him hover over the stove, giving his grits a final stir before preparing the plates. Devlin loved to cook, and though most of the time he was mindful of her healthy heart diet. They'd all been frightened last summer after the scare that had put her in the hospital. But he knew she yearned for butter, bacon fat and any meat that came from a pig.

"Your diet can skip a day," he went on. He went to the gleaming stainless steel fridge to pull out a bottle of champagne. With the speed of experience he twisted the cork and they cheered at the sound of the reassuring pop. "Tonight's special," Devlin continued, walking over to hand her a flute of the bubbly. "You're a bona fide real estate agent!" Devlin bent to kiss her lips with a proprietary air.

"Almost," she reminded him, accepting his kiss. She was touched at his thoughtfulness. It was typical of Dev to prepare an impromptu party. He loved a good time. Thought life was too short not to enjoy the special moments. She got swept up in his enthusiasm and felt the anxiety of her worry ease.

"Hey, Mr. Cassell, I guess this means you're my new boss."

"Welcome to Cassell real estate. Where *Your home is your castle*," he added, raising his glass with mock seriousness as he recited his company's slogan.

Dora always thought the phrase a bit corny but it seemed to work. People remembered his name and his was the most successful real estate company on Sullivan's Island. To her, though, Devlin would always be the adorable surfer that she'd fallen in love with at sixteen years of age.

She enjoyed the delectable shrimp and grits, forcing herself to ignore the calories. She saw tonight as a well earned treat, promising herself she'd got back to her diet the following day. Across from her Nate was wolfing down the grits, a food on his select list of approved foods. Though he wouldn't allow the shrimp to touch the grits or a drop of the gravy. She drank another glass of champagne, then another, enjoying the buzz after the months of studying and the completion of her course. Once she got her license her plan was to quit her job at the clothing store and begin her new career as a real estate agent. She lived in a house she loved, a man she loved, and a son she loved more than anything in the world. She felt her world shift and suddenly life looked very promising.

Nate squirmed in his chair and kept eyeing the hallway to his bedroom.

"What's putting ants in your pants?" she asked Nate.

"All right big guy," Devlin told him. "I reckon it's time to give your mama your big surprise."

Nate's face lit up as he bolted from his chair and ran down the hall.

"What in the world?" Dora turned to Devlin. "Please don't tell me he's giving me a video game. That was the only thing that fires up the boy up like that."

"You'll see," he replied mischievously, a grin playing around the corners of his mouth.

A moment later Nate returned, walking slowly, cautiously, down the hall carrying something in his arms. Closer, she heard a faint, high pitched mewling. Dora glanced sharply up at Devlin to see him looking at the boy, grinning. Whatever it was, Dora knew that Devlin was part of it.

Nate stopped before her, his blonde head bent, cradling a small ball of fur—white, black, and brown. He held it so tight she didn't know if the poor thing could breathe. Her heart sank

and she didn't know what to think. They'd never had pets, afraid of how Nate would react to anything climbing on him, or worse, licking him. Not to mention the hair, the litter box. A kitten was the last thing she'd expected to see Nate walk in with tonight--and her face showed it.

"Look!" Nate exclaimed.

"A...a kitten!" she stuttered.

"Yes," Nate replied matter-of-factly. He was looking at the kitten. "It is a calico kitten. It's a girl. Did you know that all calico cats are girls? I learned that."

"Where did you get her?" Dora asked, trying to keep her voice cheery.

"We got her at the animal shelter. The ASPC." Nate looked at Devlin for confirmation.

"That's right," Dev said.

"It's your present," Nate told her.

"Mine?"

"Yes. But I will have to take care of her. She needs a lot of care. I will give her food in the morning and at night, too. It's dry food. They call it kibble. We also got some cans because she is so little. And a litter box. Dev got you the litter box. That's his present for you and the kitten is from me. But I will take care of it for you," he repeated.

Dora shot a level glance at Devlin. He was still smiling and winked at her. "Wait for it..." he said sotto voce.

"She got her shots already," Nate continued. "And she's really good. She already peed in the litter box." Only then did Nate look up, slowly, his eyes shining in appeal. "Do you like her? Do you want to keep her?" His brows knit and he reminded her, "She is *your* present."

*Her* present? Dora almost laughed aloud. She peered at Nate clutching the kitten as if his life depended on it. The mother in her knew that in fact *she* would be the one caring for the

kitten. She would be the one to change the litter box, to pick up the hairballs, to despair at the tears in her curtains and newly upholstered sofa. The kitten was one more responsibility for a single mother. Dora didn't think she could handle one more responsibility.

Dora shot a glance at Devlin laced with accusation that he put her into this position of being the one who had to say *no*. Devlin stared back at her with wide eyed innocence while a small smile of encouragement lingered on his face.

When she turned back to Nate she watched as the kitten began crawling up his chest. Its tiny claws dug into his sweatshirt as she made her way up to his neck. Dora tensed, poised to leap, waiting for Nate's scream of "Get her off!" There would be tears, maybe even a meltdown.

But none of that happened.

The kitten reached Nate's shoulder and after mewling a bit, settled there, curled beside his neck. Nate reached up as though it were the most normal thing in the world to have a cat curled by his neck and stroked her gently. In the stunned silence, Dora could hear the kitten's soft purring. She sat staring, not believing what she was seeing. Her son, a boy that didn't like to be touched, was allowing this kitten's claws to dig into his clothes and its fur to rub along his neck. And he was petting her! He seemed to be enjoying the physical contact. Her heart expanded with wonder and in that moment Dora knew she would keep that sweet calico kitten no matter if it tore up the whole cottage. Turning again to Devlin, tears of disbelief in her eyes.

"There's your gift," he said softly,

Dora loved Devlin in that moment more than she ever had before. He really got her son. Knew what he needed and how to handle him. He knew, too, what made her world light up.

"Thank you," she mouthed.

He smiled and nodded in mute acknowledgement.

“Yes, of course you may keep her,” Dora told Nate. “She’s very sweet. I’ve never received a better gift. And I know you’ll take very good care of her. Thank you.”

“Good!” Relieved, Nate slowly extricated the kitten from his neck as it mewled piteously. Nate was not the least off put by the kitten's complaints. He put the kitten firmly back into his arms, holding tight. “I am going to put her to bed now,” he told them. “Oh,” he added before leaving. “She needs to sleep in my room. So I can take care of her.”

"Does she have a name?" Dora wanted to know.

"Miss Calico," he replied.

"Will you call her Callie for short?"

"What do you mean? Like a nickname?"

"Yes. Something short and easy, for when you call her."

Nate considered this. "Okay. Callie for short."

They watched him walk with care from the room and close his bedroom door behind him.

Dora turned to Devlin. “How did you ever manage that? I want the whole story. All the details.”

They went back to the table and each took a seat. The candle was burning low and the rain continued to patter on the tin roof, a mild drumming that was a soothing white noise. Devlin poured more of the champagne into their glasses then put his elbows on the table and leaned forward.

“Are you really okay with the kitten?” he asked her.

“It means a bit more work. But I couldn’t refuse. My lonely, remote, difficult to touch son was just cuddling that kitten. He was hugging it!” Dora sipped her wine. “That’s a first. To see him love like that meant the world to me. Of course I’m okay with it.”

“I thought it might. But hey, if it doesn't work out, I'll take the kitten. Seems only fair.”

Dora set her elbows on the table and leaned toward Devlin. “So tell me.”

Devlin swirled the wine in his glass. “Well, you know I’ve been looking for a rescue dog. So I go to the pound from time to time, to see if one speaks to me. Last week I took young Nate with me. He was curious and wanted to go. There we were walking around and looking. Truth be told, I was hoping he’d find some dog he liked and I could get that one. But what happens? I turn around and find him squattin’ down in front of a kennel filled with a litter of kittens staring like a coon dog on the scent. He was smitten, I could tell. I tried to persuade him to come see the dogs but you know Nate when he’s got his mind made up. He wanted a kitten. Period. And not just any kitten. There was a black one, a gray one and a gray and white striped one. All furry and bright eyed, one cuter than the other. But he had his eyes set on that there calico.”

“So you asked the attendant to let him hold it.”

“Sure I did. I couldn't refuse. I was a mite worried, him being so skittish and all about touching. The minute he held the kitten in his arms he started petting it. And that kitten just sat there and licked his fingers. I knew he had to have it. I saw what you just saw, and I’m not ashamed to tell you I had tears in my eyes.”

Dora reached out across the table and took his hand in hers. She squeezed it tight.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah,” he said. Then leaning back he crossed his boot over his knee and said with a sorry shake of his head. “But I’m still lookin’ for a dog.”

Dora picked up her wine glass and leaned back in her chair. “Maybe I should return the favor and find you a dog.”

“No ma’am. A man’s got to choose his own dog.”

“Is that some unwritten code in the world of men?”

“It is for a lowcountry man.”

“I see,” she said, then rolled her tongue in her cheek. “Well just remember that you’re responsible for my gift,” she said, exaggerating the word *gift*. “And you’re also my landlord. So I don’t want to hear one peep from you about litter box smells or accidents on the carpet.”

He laughed his low, rumbling laugh. “I know, I know.” He paused to swallow a long drink from his wineglass. “That brings up another subject. Hear me out before you jump to conclusions, okay?” He looked at her, demanding an answer.

His tone had changed. She could tell that he was a bit nervous when he sat down and it wasn't about the kitten. "Okay, you've got my attention."

"Good. Real good." He set his glass on the table and left his hand there, his fingers drumming. "You remember how we arranged things for this cottage. I told you I'd have to put the house on the market when things picked up."

Dora froze.

"Well, this spring things have really picked up. The market's good. Especially for a house on the creek.”

Dora’s heart beat harder, fearing where this was headed. “You’re selling the house?”

“I might have to.”

"Oh." She felt all the joy of the evening fizzle.

"Honey, I have no choice. I’m carrying a lot right now after a slow season, including two houses. This one and the one I’m living in. Ocean front usually sells good but the price on my

place is a lot higher than this one and the damn beach is eroding. Dora, the simple fact is I can only afford keep one. One has to go."

Dora crossed her arms across her chest. She knew the day would come that this cottage would have to be sold. Her rent didn't nearly cover the mortgage. It had all been arranged from the start. But the thought of losing it...

"I'll buy it," she said.

Devlin's face softened. "You can't afford it, baby."

As much as it hurt to hear, Dora knew that was true but had to ask. She found her voice. "Can I pay a higher rent? At least until I sell my house in Summerville? I could give you a down payment then."

"I don't want to do that to you. You're stretched so thin as it is."

She looked out the window. The night was dark and rainy but in her mind's eye she could see the grassy slope to the salt marsh, the long wooden dock that stretched far out into the creek. All her dreams for this place were like driftwood, caught in the racing tide. She chewed her lip, lest she burst into tears.

Devlin reached out and took her hand. "Hear me out, now," he said, gently reminding her of her promise. "See, then I thought...if we moved in together it wouldn't be an issue. We'd sell one, but still keep one. Together."

"Dev," she said near tears. "You know we can't live together. Not with Nate. The scandal..." She didn't need to elaborate. This was still a small, old-fashioned town at heart, and gossips would reach his school eventually. Kids could be cruel.

Devlin sat for a moment looking at her hand, playing with her fingers. Longer than normal.

Dora was attuned to a subtle shift of mood. She waited, breath held. He lifted her left hand and held it in his, letting his fingers stroke her ring finger. Then Devlin reached into his pant's pocket and pulled out a small black velveteen box and set it on the table in front of her.

“I understand that you don't want to live together. And I don't want to be your landlord no more,” he told her. “I want to be your husband.” He paused. “You know how I feel about you, Dora. I've loved you and only you since we were sixteen years old. When you came back into my life I swore I'd never let you leave me again. I got to thinking.... Your two sisters are getting married. I know how close y'all are. Why don't we join them? Make it a threesome? It'd solve everything. Aw, baby, say you'll marry me and make me the happiest man in the world.”

He flipped open the jeweler's box and slid it closer to her.

Dora gasped. The ring was stunning by any standards, but more, she recognized it as one she'd admired in a magazine ad months earlier. He'd casually shown her the ad in the Sunday New York Times and asked her which of the four rings pictured she liked best. She'd told him not to get any ideas, but when he prodded she'd pointed to the three carat cushion cut stone wreathed with small pave diamonds. What woman wouldn't want that?

And there it was, sitting before her. All she had to do was pick it up and let Devlin slide it on her finger. Dora looked at Devlin's face, flushed with anticipation. So sure of his answer. When she'd first fell head over heels for the wiry, tanned surfer boy on Sullivan's island he'd been poorer than a church mouse. Devlin Cassell was a self made man. She saw in his face the pride that he could buy her such a ring now, when years before, back when they'd dated, he didn't have one dime to rub against another. She hoped that he knew she'd accept a ring from a Cracker Jack box when the time was right.

But the time wasn't right.

"Oh Devlin," she said. "It's a beautiful ring. The most beautiful ring I've ever seen."

"You did see this one," he said, pulling the ring from the box. "In that ad, remember? You told me how pretty it was. I kept that ad and ordered the ring in your size."

She smiled tremulously.

He reached for her hand. "Let's put it on and see if it fits."

"Wait," she said, sliding her hand back. Her heart was pounding in her ears in a way that felt very much like panic.

Devlin froze and studied her face. There was an awkward moment. Then his face fell and he put the ring back into its place in the box. "Right."

"I love you Devlin. You know that."

"But you're saying no."

Dora shook her head. "I'm not saying no. I'm saying not right now."

"Aw hell, woman. We've been through this before. You told me last September that you needed to wait till the divorce was final and I waited. Did I pester you to get married? No. I bided my time. Dora, you're a free woman now. I waited," he said again, frustrating bubbling under his words. "Your divorce is signed, sealed, and delivered."

"I'm only just divorced. The ink's barely dry. I still am figuring out who I am, what I want out of life, what I can do on my own. I need to love *me* before I can give myself to you. Fully and without doubt. It's not about you. It's about me."

"That's not what I'm hearing. I hear you saying that you don't love me enough. Not yet."

"That's not at all what I'm saying."

"Well, that's what I'm feeling."

“Dev...”

“What's next, Dora? Tell me. What are you going to need before you say yes?”

“I don't know. I...” She thought. “My starting work as a real estate agent is a big step closer. That's good, right? I suppose the last thing I need is to be financially settled. Once that damn house sells in Summerville I can pay off my debts and feel like I'm well and truly done with the past.”

Devlin furrowed his brows, listening hard.

“Dev, honey, I love you. I want to marry you. I just need to stand on my own two feet. I want you to be proud of me. Then I'll wear that ring. I'll hoot and holler and show it off to anyone and everyone. I promise.”

Devlin closed the top of the box with a snap. It sounded ominous to her ears. He tucked the ring back in his khaki pants pocket, then rose from the table.

“Well darlin', you put me between a rock and a hard place. Something's got to give. I'll put my house on the market. And I'll put the cottage on the market. As planned. See what happens.”

She knew impatience, with herself and with him. “Fine.”

He pursed his lips and looked at her, as though holding back words. In the end he only looked toward the door and sighed. “It's getting late. I have an early showing.”

Dora watched him walk to the door and grab his jacket from the hall tree. “Don't leave mad.”

Devlin slipped into his jacket, stuck his hands in his pockets and pulled out his keys. He looked at them in his palm then lifted his head to her.

“I’m not mad. I’m disappointed,” he said. in a flat voice “I just asked you to marry me and you turned me down.”

Dora lowered her head but didn't respond, wincing as she heard the front door shut firmly behind Devlin’s retreating figure. There was nothing more she could say.