

*The  
Summer's  
End*

by Mary Alice Monroe

## Chapter One



*T*he dawn of another summer day. Mamaw tightened the soft cashmere throw around her thin shoulders. Slivers of light pierced the velvety blackness over the Cove, and pewter-colored shadows danced on the spiky marsh grass like ethereal ghosts.

Mamaw sat huddled on an oversize, black wicker chair on her back porch, her legs tucked beneath her. The fog was moist on her face and the predawn chill seemed to penetrate straight to her bones. She couldn't seem to get warm with Lucille gone. Since her dear friend's death, many nights she'd awakened from a fitful sleep and come outdoors hoping the fresh air would settle her. She'd found scant warmth or peace in the chill of predawn. In the distance, the Atlantic Ocean, her mercurial friend, roared like a hungry beast. The waves were devouring the dunes in a relentless rhythm. Echoes reverberated over Sul-livan's Island.

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Over a week had passed since Lucille's death. Yet she still felt her old friend's presence around her, hovering in death as she had in life. Dear Lucille. Death came to us all. She knew that. Mamaw was no stranger to death. At eighty years of age, she could hardly have been spared the loss of loved ones. She'd buried her parents, and, too early, her son and husband. Tonight she felt the past was more alive than the present. Memories of her loved ones played vividly in her mind.

Mamaw drew a long, ragged breath. From far away, she heard the mournful bellowing of a ship's foghorn. From a nearby tree, a bird began calling out his strident dawn whistles . . . a cardinal, she thought.

She listened, stirred from her lethargy by the dawn song. She watched as the morning light, in degrees, brightened the skyline, revealing the ragged tips of green sea grass, palm trees clustered on a hammock, and the towering Ravenel Bridge, appearing as two great sailing vessels, in the distance. Slowly, the rising sun illuminated the darkness, peeling away the shroud from her heart. She felt her despair dissipate with the mist. Mamaw said a prayer of thanks to the rising sun and took a deep breath of the cool, mud-scented air.

Another day was dawning. The worst was over.

*Foolish old woman*, she chided herself as the gray sky shifted to blue. *Look at yourself, sitting in the dark, mourning your friend. Wouldn't Lucille give you what for if she spied you moping like this outdoors in the damp chill, still in your nightclothes?* Who had time to lollygag? Their plan for the summer was not finished! She'd invited her three nearly estranged granddaughters to Sea Breeze in May—and they'd come. The first time they'd been together in over a decade. True, it had so far been a tumultuous

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summer of change and growth, ups and downs, joys and heart- aches. But it was her triumph that they'd weathered the vicis- situdes *together*. Eudora, Carson, and Harper had rediscovered the sisterly love they'd shared as children when they played together during the summers here on Sullivan's Island. Howl- ing at the moon? She should be crowing like a rooster!

Yet, much was still to be done and she was running out of time. It was already August. The sea turtles were finishing another season, the children would be heading back to school, the ospreys would soon head south with the other migrat- ing birds and butterflies. Summer's end was fast approaching. Soon, too, her Summer Girls would be leaving.

Mamaw felt a twinge of loss at just the thought. She would miss them—their sweet faces, their chatter, tears, laughter. The footfalls in the house, the drama, the hugs and kisses liberally offered. What a summer it had been!

Her smile slipped. Not only would her granddaughters leave in the fall. She, too, would be leaving Sea Breeze. Mov- ing to a retirement home when Sea Breeze was sold. With her granddaughters and Lucille gone, she would, she thought with a shudder, be utterly alone.

Mamaw lowered her cheek to her palm. She at least knew where she would go at summer's end, but where would her girls go? Each of the women was unsure of what her next step would be when she left the safe embrace of Sea Breeze. Dora's divorce was pending, Carson was pregnant, and Harper was, for lack of a better term, completely adrift.

"Ah, Lucille," she said aloud to the presence she felt hover- ing in the pearly light. "You were the one who always rallied me in my dark moments. We lured them here. And there is still

much yet to do to finish our plan.” She sighed. “I don’t know if I can do it alone. But I must try.”

Mamaw’s eyes rose to the sky, where great shafts of pink and blue continued to break through the horizon. A smile eased across her face. The moon might be gone, she thought. But the sun was rising on another day.

In another room of Sea Breeze, Harper lay on her bed in the steely light, her hands tucked beneath her head, listening to the mighty roar of the ocean. How loud the sound of the waves was this morning, she thought. The echoes reverberated in the still night. She thrilled to the sound, so different from what she was accustomed to in the city.

In New York, Harper awoke to the blare of police sirens, honking horns, and banging garbage trucks. So much was different here. *She* was different here. Over the past few months since she’d arrived on Sullivan’s Island, her body had slowly acclimated from the fast pace and sense of urgency she experienced in the city to the slower, quieter rhythm of the low-country. She no longer went out to parties or bars until late at night, nor did she charge out of bed in the morning at the sound of an alarm. At Sea Breeze her days were ruled by the sun. Early to bed, early to rise.

Harper smiled, wondering if she’d ever foreseen how much she’d enjoy this lifestyle. No, she didn’t think she had. In fact, initially she had quite dreaded the prospect of spending time at Sea Breeze this summer. She recalled her outrage when, only a few days after her and her sisters’ arrival, Mamaw had announced her true intentions: that the women stay the entire

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summer. Harper stretched languidly while the light brightened to give the room a pearly glow. As she turned to her side to look out the window, her hand brushed against something. Surprised, she sat up to investigate. Sheets of paper lay strewn across her bed and scattered on the floor.

She rubbed her eyes as understanding took hold. Her book . . .

She must've fallen asleep while reading her manuscript, she realized, yawning. She rose from her bed and gathered the two-hundred-some sheets into a pile, taking her time to put the pages in order. As she did, her eyes reread a sentence here and there. Not bad, she thought to herself. The emotions in the words felt true. Then again, she was a biased judge. Her mother had made it brutally clear when she was just a girl that she didn't have talent. Just like her father, her mother had said dismissively, waving away Harper's fledgling attempts at short stories and poems. Her mother was a renowned editor, so Harper had taken her words as fact. Those fateful words still stung, even after decades.

Since then, Harper hadn't shown her writing to anyone. She'd pursued a career as an editor, discovering she had a talent in assisting others with their stories, with taking their innermost thoughts and putting them onto the page.

Yet she'd found editing others' words didn't bring her the same satisfaction as writing her own. So she'd continued writing—in her room, in coffee shops, on trains—in secret. Like a sinful pleasure she could indulge in when she wanted to dish out her anger or amusement. Not until this summer, this block of time she'd given herself without interruption—or rather, the time that Mamaw had thrust upon her, not taking no for an

answer—had Harper decided to write a book. A whole body of work with a beginning, a middle, and an end. She would never know whether she could actually write a book until she'd finished one. And, she thought, picking up the papers in her hands, she was nearly done.

Harper rose and placed the manuscript on her desk, resting her hands on the pile of papers, overcome with a sense of ownership and pride.

*Her book.*

Her sisters thought she'd been taking the summer off, shamelessly idle while they scrambled to find jobs and apartments. True, she'd been enjoying her break at Sea Breeze, gardening, swimming, talking with her sisters, and roaming the far ends of the island. But she'd been privately working, too. She didn't dare tell anyone about it, because if she did, she knew they'd want to read it.

No, she thought, slipping the manuscript into the desk drawer. She would keep her manuscript all to herself. She wasn't as outgoing as her sister Carson, who was quick-witted and clever. Nor was she as bold as her eldest sister, Dora, who had strong opinions on every subject, even when unasked. Harper expressed herself best on paper.

And, she thought with a rueful smile, her sisters wouldn't be pleased to learn that she was writing about them.

Outside her window she heard the strident dawn whistles of a bird singing in a nearby tree. She paused to listen, wondering what kind of bird it was that awakened her most mornings. She vowed to find out. She wanted to learn the names of the birds and the trees and the plants of this island that she'd come to love. She'd spent all of her twenty-eight years in beautiful

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places—her mother's fashionable apartment overlooking Central Park in New York City, the house in the Hamptons, and her grandparents' manor house in England. Not to mention the exclusive boarding schools and Ivy League college she'd attended. But nowhere did she feel so at home or content, or as much herself, as she did here in the lowcountry, by the ocean, at Sea Breeze.

She'd be leaving soon.

The thought came unbidden and struck a chord of sadness in the morning's sweet music. Harper went to the window and opened the wooden slats of the plantation shutter to peer out. Pale gray light illuminated the shadows. Carson was always nattering on about how glorious it was to be out on the water when the dawn exploded over the ocean. How it was her favorite time of the day. Carson could be so passionate about anything connected to water.

Harper suddenly felt a stirring to witness that sight for herself. Why not now? she asked herself. Before it was too late. What was she waiting for?

She quickly slipped into a swimsuit and denim shorts. Laced up her running shoes. As quietly as the mouse she was nicknamed after, she slipped open the sliding door that separated her bedroom from her grandmother's. It rattled on the track, and grimacing, she paused. She didn't hear Mamaw stir in her dark bedroom. Harper tiptoed quickly across the carpet, closing the door behind her.

The house was quiet, everyone still asleep in the wee morning hour. Even Carson, who, for all her talk, had begun sleeping in after announcing her pregnancy. Making good her escape, Harper flew out the front door, aware that the sun waited for

no man or woman. She was met with cool and sweet-tasting morning air. The wind that had roiled the ocean all night had chased away the humidity and heat, leaving the morning air unusually refreshing for August. In the quiet, all sounds were amplified. Above her, the leaves of the great oak tree rustled in the breeze and the palm fronds rattled. Beneath her feet the gravel crunched loudly as she hurried across the driveway to the garage. The rusty, trusty old bicycle leaned against the wall. She pulled it out from the garage, swung her leg over the seat, and took off.

Despite her twenty-eight years, Harper felt no older than thirteen as she pedaled furiously along the streets. The neighboring houses appeared blanketed in the shadows, their occupants still asleep in the hush over the island. Only a few feral cats darted soundlessly across the roads. She hadn't seen as many of them clustering on the island this summer as she remembered from her girlhood summers spent at Sea Breeze. People said it was the coyotes. She kept her eyes peeled as she pushed on along the muted street. Past Stella Maris Catholic Church, with its hallowed steeple. Past the ominous, giant molelike burrows of Fort Moultrie. Past the tight cluster of restaurants, shuttered now and deserted. Only a few joggers and an occasional automobile shared the road with her.

At last she reached the northern tip of the island, where Carson had told her the surfers gathered. She turned off Middle Street toward the sea. Several cars, all with roof racks for surfboards, crowded the narrow side streets. Harper pushed the wheels of her bike through the soft sand of the path past the tall barrier of shrubs. The surf was unusually loud this morning.

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When at last the path opened up to the beach, she stopped to catch her breath.

The dusky blue sky and gray sea came together to form one infinite horizon line. The sun did not rush to her glory. She rose at her own pace, imperious, radiant, bursting in her display of achingly beautiful pastels that were reflected on the water. Harper felt small in the presence of a view so profound. Yet at the same time, she felt connected to it. Empowered to be part of this godlike perpetuity. In that dazzling moment she felt the glistening light enter her soul to fill her with hope. Harper understood at last why Carson so loved this moment, had risen early to catch it day after day. It truly was spiritual.

Harper clutched the handlebars of her beach cruiser tight. The new day was spread out before her like a blank page, ready for her to fill with her words, thoughts, feelings. She'd given herself this one summer to discover—at long last—what *she* wanted to do with her life. No longer would she continue meekly following what *her mother* had planned.

She didn't know what her future would bring. Standing in the glow of the rising sun, Harper was filled with a tingling sensation that her future was only just beginning.

The sea was calling her. Carson lay in the dim light of her bedroom listening to the incessant roar of her old friend the ocean. It was rare for the waves to come in hard, as they were now. When they did, Carson had always grabbed her board and gone to the water. It was in her nature to do so. Salt water ran in her veins.

Carson didn't jump from her bed this morning, however. She continued to lie still, her palms resting on her abdomen. She no longer was free to follow her whims. No longer the fearless surfer or world traveler, able to pick up and leave when she wished.

She let her fingers gently stroke her belly, still flat despite the life growing beneath the taut skin. So much for her womanly intuition. It had taken the echolocation of one very intuitive dolphin to tell her she was pregnant.

"Oh, baby," she crooned. "What am I going to do with you? I'm not married, I don't have a job, I don't even have my own place to live. How am I going to take care of you?"

She brought to mind her last conversation with Lucille, the night she'd died. Carson had been struggling with what to do about the pregnancy and went to Lucille to sit at her knee, as she had so many times growing up, and once more ask for advice. Lucille hadn't told her what to do. That wasn't her style. Instead, the old woman guided Carson's thoughts to find her own answer. Carson would never forget her words.

*You've got good instincts. Listen to them. Trust them. You'll know what to do.*

Carson knew Lucille was right. When she was surfing, Carson had to trust her instincts on the wave, to know when to step left or right. It was all a matter of balance.

She had to listen to her instincts now. It didn't make sense for her to have a baby now. All her rational arguments were against it. But over the rational thoughts her instincts spoke loud and clear. That and her raging hormones, she thought with a snort. Lying on the bed, listening to the echoing sound of the

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waves rolling to the shore, Carson knew she had to ride this wave home.

“Well, baby,” she said, patting her tummy, “it’s me and you now. I’m not running away.”

Dora’s arm shot out to silence the alarm clock. She groggily opened one eyelid: 7:00 a.m.

“Rise and shine,” she mumbled.

Dora moved in a stupor, accustomed to the routine. She dressed quickly in running clothes, splashed cool water on her face, applied SPF moisturizer, then did a few stretches. This past summer she’d learned that she had to get her exercise done first thing in the morning, because if she waited, she’d slip into a thousand lame excuses why she didn’t have time. She’d learned to make time for the things that mattered to her.

And nothing mattered more to her than her son.

Dora swiftly walked down the hall and gingerly pushed open the door to Nate’s room. She wrinkled her nose at the stuffy, closed-in smell. Nate, unlike the rest of the inhabitants of Sea Breeze, did not like to sleep with his windows open. He was adamant about his likes and dislikes, quick to let you know if something was right or, more often, wrong. She went to the side of his bed and stood for a moment, staring into her nine-year-old son’s face.

Her heart bloomed with love for him. Did a child ever look more angelic than when asleep? she wondered. Nate’s long, pale lashes fluttered against his cheeks. His lips were slightly parted as he breathed heavily. He was small for his age, but

his thin frame had filled out this summer at Sea Breeze and his skin glowed with a tan. Sea Breeze had been so good for Nate, on many levels. He loved the water now. Dora smiled. She called him her little fish. As her eyes hungrily roamed his face, she noted that his shaggy blond hair needed a trim, and she made a mental note to take him to the barber. It would be a fight, she thought with a sigh. Nate hated to have his hair cut. Poor little guy, she thought as she reached out to gently stroke hair from his forehead. She felt the perspiration at his brow. Cutting his hair was the least of the changes he'd be facing soon. Her obstinate, fretful son who hated any change would soon transition from homeschooling to a classroom. It was a big decision, long and hard in coming. She'd found a private school that specialized in bright children with special needs, like his Asperger's. The school offered highly individualized instruction and schoolwide positive behavioral support. Dora had to face the reality that Nate was older and needed more than she could offer. He needed to learn to communicate and socialize with his peers.

Dora sighed. They both did. Isolation had not been good for either of them.

On the heels of this decision was her intention to move to Mt. Pleasant, closer to the school. A new school . . . a new home . . .

She bent to gently kiss Nate's cheek, breathing in the scent of him. When he was awake, he didn't like to be kissed.

"We'll be fine," she whispered close to his ear. "Mama's here. I won't let you down."



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As Harper pedaled back to Sea Breeze, her mind filled with words that could capture that glorious sunrise: *iridescent, shimmering, glittering, ethereal, inspiring* . . . Harper parked the bike in the garage and hurried toward the house, eager to slip quietly back into her bedroom and begin writing. She wanted to describe what she'd seen and her feelings that had swirled like brilliant colors. As she made her way across the back porch, a cough drew her attention. Harper turned her head to the back corner of the porch and was surprised to see her grandmother sitting tall and straight-backed in one of the large, black wicker chairs. In the dim light, wearing her long, white cotton nightgown, Mamaw appeared almost ghostly.

"Mamaw!" Harper exclaimed. "What are you doing out here?" Mamaw smiled as Harper approached, but it was a tired smile. Her pale blue eyes were sunken and her arms were wrapped around her slender body as though she were chilled. "I couldn't sleep. I woke very early and my mind kept wandering." Mamaw shook her head. "It's so exhausting when that happens. A curse of old age. I just gave up and came out here to sit a spell. I thought the fresh air might help."

On the glass-topped table Harper saw a line of playing cards. Her heart pinged. Mamaw was playing solitaire. The image of Mamaw and Lucille playing endless games of gin rummy together on the porch at all hours of the day and night flashed in Harper's mind.

Harper hurried to put her arms around her grandmother's shoulders. "How long have you been out here?" she asked, alarmed. "You're chilled to the bone." She rubbed Mamaw's arms briskly with her hands, trying to warm her.

"Mmm . . . that's nice. Thank you, dear."

Harper pulled up a chair and dropped into it. She leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees. “What’s got your mind wandering?”

“Oh . . . I was thinking of Lucille,” Mamaw said wistfully.

*Of course*, Harper thought.

“It was a nice funeral, wasn’t it?” Mamaw asked.

“It was. I’d never been to a Gullah funeral before. So much song, tears, and rejoicing.”

“And *amens*,” Mamaw added wryly.

Harper smiled in agreement. She’d been moved by the unrestrained calling out at the service, the passion, the strong sense of community.

Mamaw looked back out over the water. “I was sitting here, looking across the Cove, and it brought to mind what the preacher talked about at Lucille’s service. How their ancestral spirits who came to the lowcountry—those by force and those who came after—lived, thrived, and died here. They worked hard, cooked rice, cast nets for shrimp, raised children, and now they’ve all moved on to the bounty of the afterlife. That’s what Lucille believed, you know. She was tired at the end, I daresay looking forward to crossing the water.” Mamaw sighed, remembering. “I confess, lately I might be ready, too.”

Harper leaned forward to grasp Mamaw’s hand. “Don’t go yet. We still need you.”

Mamaw’s lips slipped into a wobbly smile, briefly, then fell again. “I’m having a hard time believing she’s really gone.”

“It all happened so fast.” Harper also felt deep sorrow at Lucille’s swift battle with cancer.

Mamaw looked at Harper. “Do you believe in an afterlife?” she asked pointedly.

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Harper released Mamaw's hand, leaned back, and scratched her head, thinking this was a heavy conversation to have before a first cup of coffee. She'd never warmed to the idea of a God that rewarded the good with heaven and the others with an eternity of brimstone and fire. It seemed so unforgiving. Still, after much soul-searching, she'd come to believe there was a higher being. She'd felt a connection to that infinite power this morning while staring out at the sunrise.

"I guess so," she said with hesitancy. "I don't think much about it."

Mamaw smiled ruefully. "You're young. You think you're immortal. When you get to my age, you'll think about it . . . a lot."

"I don't like to see you out here alone, playing solitaire and thinking of death. It's a tad morbid."

"I'm not feeling the least bit morbid. Quite the opposite." Mamaw patted Harper's hand with a weary smile. "Death is becoming an old friend."

Harper rose and tugged gently on Mamaw's arm. "Come inside and I'll make you a nice breakfast. Something warm."

Mamaw resisted, leaning back in her chair. "I'm not hungry. I've just got the dwindles."

"How about I bring you a nice hot cup of coffee?"

Mamaw perked up at the suggestion. "Well, I wouldn't say no to that."

"Coming right up." Harper paused. Mamaw was always an elegant woman who took great care with her appearance. She had been a leading Charleston socialite known for her extravagant parties as much as her polished beauty. To see Mamaw sitting on the porch still in her nightclothes, her white hair

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flowing unbrushed, wrapped up in a coverlet like a bag lady, shook Harper to the core. This was an outward sign of the state of Mamaw's mind.

Harper made a bold suggestion: "Mamaw, while I make coffee, why don't you get dressed?"

Mamaw turned her head to deliver a stern face with a brow raised. "I beg your pardon?"

Harper rushed on, "Don't you remember, you used to tell us how Thomas Jefferson wrote his eleven-year-old daughter letters on deportment from France? He admonished her to always rise and dress promptly. Neat and clean and tidy." Harper paused, pleased to see her grandmother was listening. "You told us your mother read your letters, and you read them to us. Why, if you caught us lying about in our jammies, you sent us straight to our rooms to get dressed."

"I'm delighted to learn you paid attention." Mamaw offered her hand in a regal manner. Harper took it and helped Mamaw to her feet. "Very well. The sun is up and so I should rise with it. It is, to paraphrase Scarlett O'Hara, another day."

## Chapter Two



*T*he kitchen was as quiet as a tomb.

Here, in the kitchen, Lucille's absence was most felt. Every morning during Harper's childhood summers spent on the island, she'd wander sleepyheaded into the kitchen to be greeted by the clanging of pots, the smell of coffee, biscuits in the oven, bacon sizzling on the stove, and a hearty hello from Lucille. The comparative silence now caused an ache deep in her chest.

Harper stood at the threshold and looked at the dimly lit, empty room through her pragmatist eyes, not clouded by the blur of nostalgia. It was the classic kitchen found in a house that once held a staff. It had what people in real estate called good bones. The room was big, with windows that overlooked the Cove. A butler's pantry with glass-front cabinets separated the kitchen from the dining room. It was all charming, if out-

dated. To her, the room was like a vintage dress that needed a good cleaning and maybe a new zipper.

The once-butter-colored walls now appeared rancid, and the appliances were terribly out-of-date. Harper frowned to see dirty dishes in the sink and, on the long wood table, an empty package of fig cookies, crumbs scattered. Wouldn't Lucille claim she was going to "look for a switch" if she saw the state of her normally spotless kitchen?

Harper entered the empty room, wrinkling her nose at the smell of bitter coffee grinds and day-old garbage. She tossed the cold filter, then went to the sink for water to make a fresh pot of coffee. As she lifted the sponge in the sink, out from under it skittered an enormous brown cockroach. Harper screamed, dropped the coffeepot into the sink, and leaped back. The commotion sent the enormous bug flying past her head.

Dora came running into the room, her eyes wide and searching. "Harper? Are you all right?"

"Yes," Harper said breathlessly, her hand over her pounding heart.

"You screamed bloody murder!"

"I just saw the biggest cockroach. At least I . . . I think it was a cockroach. I swear . . . it *flew* past me!"

Dora's face shifted as she burst out laughing.

"It's not funny," Harper fired back, sourly eyeing Dora in her perky running outfit with her blond hair pulled back in a pony-tail. Ironically, Harper had been the runner out of the three sisters at the beginning of the summer, but since Dora had taken up regular exercise, she'd been—literally—on Harper's heels.

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Her older sister only leaned against the doorframe and laughed harder.

Carson rushed into the room looking as if she'd leaped from her bed. She was in her pajamas and her long, dark hair was loose down her back. "What happened?" Her eyes were wide with alarm. "Is anyone hurt?"

Dora muffled her laugh and waved her arm in a calming gesture. "No cause for alarm." She caught Carson's eye and added with a smirk, "Harper saw a palmetto bug."

"Not *just* a bug," Harper said in self-defense. "It was as big as a rat."

A smile of genuine amusement spread across Carson's face. "Ah, so our little sister's met our state bird?"

The laughter erupted again.

Harper didn't enjoy being the butt of their lowcountry jokes. Though the three half sisters shared the same father, each had a different mother and they'd thus grown up in different parts of the country. Dora and Carson were both raised in the Carolinas; Harper in New York. They loved to tease their Yankee sister about her city ways and her unfamiliarity with all things southern.

"If you're so familiar with them, go catch it," she challenged sullenly.

"I'm not going after that thing." Dora shook her head. "I always send a man after that. They're the hunters, right? My job is to jump on a chair and scream."

"Don't look at me," Carson said.

"I thought you were nature girl," Harper said.

"I'll take a shark any day over one of those critters. But

I think Mamaw has one of Papa Edward's hunting guns. You could shoot the thing."

Dora joined Carson in a renewed bout of laughter.

Over the past months working in the garden, Harper had become all too familiar with the wildlife that teemed in the lowcountry—insects, anoles, frogs, snakes. She'd learned to deal with them, but she didn't think she'd ever get used to their jumping out at her. Once, she was pulling weeds from the grasses in her garden when a snake shot straight out from the grass. Lucille had told her the grasses were a favorite hiding place for snakes, which is why the basket weavers always had their men go fetch the sweetgrass for them.

"I think I'd rather face a poisonous snake than a palmetto bug," Harper said. "But I'm not about to be made a laughing-stock by no friggin' roach." She grabbed a thick wad of paper towels, set her jaw, and marched with purpose to the sink, where she thought she'd seen the bug land.

"What are you doing?" Dora asked. "What do you think I'm doing?"

Her sisters watched as she went to the sink and, with an outstretched arm, poised to leap back, nudged the dirty pot. Then the sponge. Suddenly the bug bolted. But not fast enough. Harper pounced and heard a gross pop that had her stomach reeling. In a rush she dispatched the bug to the trash. When she turned back to her sisters, she saw with great satisfaction the look of shock mixed with awe on their faces.

"Don't throw it out," Carson said. "You should cut off its head and wings and stake them around the perimeter of the house as a warning to all the other bugs out there to what happens if they come inside."

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Dora laughed. "Good one."

"I'll tell you what's *not* funny"—Harper frowned—"the state of this kitchen." She waved her arm, indicating the dishes and food scraps on the table, then the sink overflowing with dishes. "Dirty dishes left in the sink, crumbs on the table. No wonder we have bugs." She shook her head. "Lucille must be rolling over in her grave."

Dora and Carson were immediately chastened. They gazed around the kitchen with somber expressions.

"It's not only the kitchen," Harper said. "There's a film of dust on all the furniture. Dust bunnies on the floor."

"Mamaw had to cancel the cleaning crew," Dora said. "She said she had to cut back. All of us living here, eating her food, using her hot water, has really upped her monthly expenses."

"Not to mention the bedrooms she created for us," Harper added.

Dora shook her head. "We're still acting like those little girls who used to come here in the summer. All we did was play and eat and fight and think of ourselves. We didn't do a lick of work, not really. And here we are, doing the same thing. Only we aren't little girls anymore, are we?"

Harper walked to the table and lifted the nearly empty carton of cookies. "Okay, who ate all the cookies and just left the package out, crumbs and all?"

With her long hair flying Carson looked like an Amazon princess on the warpath as she stomped to Harper to snatch the carton from her hands. She took out the final fig cookie and popped it into her mouth. "I'm sorry," Carson snapped. "I was hungry. Hey, I'm pregnant. Didn't you ever hear of midnight cravings? It happens."

Harper looked at Carson's abdomen and wondered again how a baby could be growing inside that flat, taut belly.

Dora said, "We don't care about you eating the cookies. Eat as many as you want. Just clean up after yourself! We're not your maids. Besides, it's not just Carson making a mess. It's all of us."

Carson looked at her older sister. "You're right, of course. We can't expect Mamaw to take care of us. Nor should she. We should be taking care of her."

"Amen," Dora said.

"I wanted to talk to you about that," Harper said, warming to the topic. "I'm worried about her. Want to guess where I found her this morning?" She paused, watching them shake their heads with curiosity. "Sitting on the porch. Playing solitaire."

Dora's mouth opened in a silent gasp.

Carson looked stricken. "Playing solitaire? That's just too sad."

"She even asked me if I believed in an afterlife." "No . . ."

" . . ." Carson breathed.

"Bless her heart," Dora said with a sorry shake of her head.

Harper continued, "She's having a hard time with Lucille being gone."

"Lucille doted on Mamaw," Dora said. "And when Lucille got sick, Mamaw doted on her. I 'spect she's lonelier than God right now."

"She shouldn't sit around all alone," said Carson. "Maybe we can think of things to do with her. Get her out of the house."

"We can go on a shopping trip to Charleston," suggested

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Dora. "Then have tea at Charleston Place. Maybe a little champagne. Girl stuff. She'd like that."

"We can play gin rummy with her, like Lucille did," said Carson. "Mamaw loves to play cards."

"I don't know how to play gin rummy," said Harper.

"It's easy. I can teach you." Carson's voice quickened with excitement. "How about we all play cards together, like we used to in the summers when we were little? I loved that. What was the name of the game we played . . . ?"

"Canasta!" said Dora, her eyes gleaming. "Yes, that's it!" Carson said.

"I don't remember how to play that, either," said Harper. "Anyone know bridge?"

Carson shook her head. "It's got to be canasta . . ."

"Or hearts. We played that, too," Dora added with authority. "Hold on," Harper interjected. "Before we start playing, can we talk about working? We have to divvy up the chores." "Right."

Carson gave a military salute and smirked as she walked to the small desk. "Since when did you become the little general?" She rummaged through the drawers. "We can make a schedule, like I made for Nate in Florida."

Dora called after her, "I don't think we need drawings of stick figures, suns, and moons."

"Ha-ha," Carson quipped, returning to the table, hands filled with supplies. "Okay, I've got some paper, markers, pens." She pulled out a chair and sat, spreading the materials in front of her with enthusiasm. "You two muddle about who does what. I'll make the chart."

Dora caught Harper's eye and they smiled. It was amusing

to see the freewheeling Carson get behind something as orderly and routine as a schedule.

“I’ll make coffee.” Harper headed to the sink with renewed purpose. “I’m no good making any decisions without my caffeine jolt.” Harper approached the sink hesitantly and plucked up the sponge with two fingers. She looked over her shoulder to see her sisters watching.

They burst out with renewed laughing.

“It’s not funny!” But this time Harper laughed as well.

“I’ll pass on the coffee,” said Carson, patting her abdomen. “Makes me nauseous.”

“Would you bring a cup up to Mamaw?” Harper asked. “I sent her to her room to get dressed. Poor thing was just lying about in her nightclothes.”

Carson’s face registered shock. “Really? Damn, she must be seriously out of sorts. Let’s do this.”

After Harper made coffee, Dora cleared the long wood table and wiped away the crumbs. Soon, steaming mugs were on the table, and a stack of raisin toast. The scent of coffee and cinnamon filled the air as the three women sat together and began making plans. First they created a formal schedule of chores to be done daily and those to be done weekly. Allocating the workload took a little more time as they argued about who did what chore best. Finally they set up a schedule for cooking meals and shopping. In the end, no one complained. Harper felt buoyed by the sisterly cooperation.

As they worked, they reminisced about the meals Lucille had prepared, the homespun advice she’d offered, and laughed at the shared anecdotes. Harper thought to herself how talk-

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ing about Lucille kept her memory alive in their hearts and memories. When the schedule was finished, they posted it on the fridge with magnets and stood back to admire it.

"I don't think there's anything on that schedule that will help organize my life," Carson said with a rueful grin. "But at least the house will be clean."

"I hear you," Harper added, and the two women clinked mugs.

"Speaking of schedules." Dora carried her mug to the sink. "I hate to throw a wrench in our newly laid plans, but I don't know how much longer I'll be on your work team."

"Why not?" Carson swung her head around.

Dora set her coffee mug on the counter and took a deep breath. "Well, I've made some decisions."

Her sisters sat staring at her silently with rapt attention. "I'm not moving back to Summerville. I've decided to stay close by. Mt. Pleasant probably."

"Nate will be happy," Carson said. "He loves the water." "Nate's the main reason I'm staying."

"And Devlin . . .," added Carson mischievously.

Dora laughed in acknowledgment. "Him, too. But . . . the main reason is that I've found a school for Nate. It starts next week."

The announcement was met with surprised silence.

Harper was delighted with the news but had to ask, "You're not homeschooling anymore?"

Dora shook her head and turned to the sink. She squirted soap into it and turned on the hot water. Water gushed through the faucet as the sink filled.

“No. I’ve decided to send Nate to the Trident Academy. It’s a private school that has a wonderful program for children with Asperger’s syndrome.” Dora turned off the tap and turned to face her sisters. “I’ve given this a lot of thought. It’s time for Nate to mingle with other children. And it’s time for me to get out more, too.” Dora picked up the sponge and studied it. “So I’ve begun looking for a place in Mt. Pleasant, and let me tell you, it’s hard to find a rental I can afford.”

“Aren’t you worried about all these changes for Nate? All at once?” asked Harper.

“Of course I am.” Dora’s face was troubled. “Leaving Sea Breeze, a place he loves, to move into a strange place will be tough for Nate. But on top of that, he’ll be starting a new school, a whole new program.” Dora turned back to the sink and began to wash dishes with vigor. “That’s why I need to get him settled in a permanent place as soon as possible. We all know how difficult transitions are for him.”

Harper rose to collect the dishes from the table and carry them to the sink. “How can we help?”

Dora returned a grateful look. “Just asking him about it, bringing the school up in conversation, reminding him how many days till school begins. That kind of thing. We just have to get him used to the idea so it’s not a sudden shock. He’ll have a tour of the school at the end of the week. I’m hoping Cal will join us for that.”

“Cal supports your decision?” Carson opened a drawer to grab a towel. “That’s a switch.”

“You know Cal. He’s got to feel in control.” “What does control mean in this scenario?”

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“He put up a fuss initially about the cost of tuition.” Dora handed Carson a wet dish. “It’s high. There’s no sugarcoating that. But when I told him that I was getting a job to pay for half the tuition, he quieted down. Now he can tell everyone how he’s such a good father, putting his son through private school.” Dora made a face. “That wasn’t very nice, was it?”

“Just honest,” Carson quipped. “Are you looking to buy or rent?”

“Lord, I can’t afford to buy a birdhouse until my divorce is settled and the house in Summerville sells. It’s all kind of scary, but also exciting.” Dora laughed shortly. “I’m thirty-eight, and for the first time in my life I’m getting my own place.” Dora pulled the plug in the sink and, turning, grabbed the towel from Carson.

Harper saw a new confidence in Dora’s face. “You sound happy.”

Dora snorted and dried her hands briskly. “I think that’s hysteria you’re seeing.” Her arm dropped and the towel hung limp from her hands. “It’s not a happy thing to go through a divorce. Ten years of marriage . . .” She snapped her fingers. “Over. There’s a world of hurt mixed up in all of this. But,” she said with an optimistic tone, “it’s a new start. The end of a long period of unhappiness.”

“I’m proud of you, Sis,” Carson said.

“I’ve a lot to do in a hurry. Seems to be my mantra lately. At least I can carpool to the school from here without trouble till I find a place.” Dora looked around the room. “Thank God for Mamaw and Sea Breeze. It’s been all of our saving grace. But the sale of this house is imminent. We all have to face the fact we’ve got to move.”

There followed a long silence.

Dora tossed the towel on the counter and turned to Harper. “What about you? Where are you headed at summer’s end?”

“Don’t know yet,” Harper answered evasively, leaning back against the counter. Inside, her thoughts were roiling. She’d been searching the Internet for possible editorial positions, writing, all the while keeping physically busy in the garden. Nothing she could report. Certainly nothing as life changing as Carson’s baby or Dora’s moving forward in her life, full steam ahead. “Still figuring things out.”

“Everything okay?”

“Everything is copacetic.” Harper forced a noncommittal grin.

Dora turned her questioning gaze to Carson.

Carson held up her hands like a shield. “It’s free rent. I’m staying here for as long as I can.”

Harper thought that sounded defeatist. “Any luck on the job front?”

“There’s not a big demand for a stills photographer in Charleston,” Carson added sarcastically. Then more seriously: “I’m knocking on everyone’s door in LA but nothing’s turned up yet. I’ve called everyone I know, and I mean everyone. It’s embarrassing. But I need to get *something*. I’m not kidding when I say the coffers are empty.”

“I could lend you some money,” Harper hesitantly offered. She averted her gaze. The subjects of her wealthy family and her trust fund were touchy between her and Carson.

“Thanks, Sis, but no. I don’t want to feel beholden to you. Our relationship is too important to me to risk.”

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Harper could appreciate that. She glanced back at Carson with a sly smile. “How about I pay you for a job?”

Carson cocked her head. “Like what?”

Harper considered. “Like surfing. I’ve always wanted to learn. I could pay you up front for a series of lessons. How does that sound?”

“I’d love to,” Carson replied soberly. “But surfing isn’t exactly recommended for pregnant women. In case you forgot . . .” She motioned toward her belly.

“But I thought—” Dora blurted.

Carson sent Dora a level gaze. “You thought what?”

Harper heard the cold challenge and tensed, fearing the abortion argument between conservative Dora and liberal Carson would erupt again.

Harper jumped in the fray. “She thought, as I did, that you’d decided not to have the baby.”

Carson’s face was difficult to read. “I wasn’t aware that I’d decided anything.”

“Oh.” Harper picked up her mug and took a quick sip.

An awkward silence followed, a sharp contrast to the easy banter of only moments earlier.

Carson’s face changed, seeing her sisters’ confusion. “I went to talk with Lucille, the night she died.”

“You did?” Dora tilted her head to catch every word. “What did you talk about?”

“Oh, we talked about a lot of things. Mamaw, Blake, the baby . . .” Carson looked at her sisters. “You two.”

They chuckled and muttered comments about what might have been said.

Carson added, “It seems like it was just last night.”

Dora sighed in commiseration. “I know. I miss her terribly. So does Nate.” She turned to Carson, truly interested. “So what did Lucille tell you?”

“She didn’t tell me what to do. That wouldn’t be her style. It was an emotional evening. I was teary and she was consoling.” Carson shook her head in disbelief. “She was the one dying, and she was consoling me.”

“That was Lucille,” said Dora.

“Lucille told me how she used to watch me surf.” Carson picked at her nail, trying to keep her voice level. “All these years and I never knew that.”

“Sounds like something she’d do,” said Dora.

“She and Mamaw both. We talked about the waves, and how when she watched me, she could tell that I knew instinctively how to move, where to place my feet to keep balance. She told me to remember that I had good instincts. And that I had to trust them. Now more than ever.”

“What are your instincts telling you now?” Harper asked softly.

Carson rested her hands over her belly. “My instincts are telling me to stop obsessing over this decision and to just *be*. To live and let live. This baby is here.” She patted her belly softly. “I’ll just have to work out the details as they come along.”

There followed a moment’s stunned silence.

“You mean . . . you’re keeping the baby?” Dora asked. Carson nodded.

Dora’s eyes widened as comprehension sank in. “We’re having a baby!” she hooted, clapping and practically bouncing in her chair.

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Carson put up her hand to still the explosion. "Let's not start all that again. I'm trying to get used to the idea. You know me. Just the thought of being tied down to anything, anyone, makes me panic." She put her hand to her heart. "Oh, God, my heart's pounding at the thought. I'm not sure I'm ready. If I'll ever be ready. I worry if somehow I'll lose myself. Become invisible."

Dora grabbed her hand. "You won't disappear. We won't let you."

"You'll shine," added Harper.

"Promise me you'll keep reminding me of that," Carson entreated.

Dora put her hands to her cheeks in wonderment. "We're having a baby!"

"Slow down, sister mine," Carson admonished. "Let's take it one day at a time, like you said."

Dora asked, "Does Blake know?"

Carson shook her head. "And you're not going to tell him. Or Devlin."

Dora opened her mouth to argue but, on second thought, snapped it shut.

Dora's come a long way, Harper thought, pleased to see her eldest sister showing some restraint where, only a short time earlier, she would have plowed full steam ahead with her unwanted advice.

"Okay," Harper said to Carson. "I guess I'll pay you for the surfing lessons *in advance*."

Carson laughed with resignation and relief. "Yeah, okay. And thanks."

“If you really want to thank me, you can start vacuuming.” Harper pushed off from the counter. “Don’t think being pregnant gets you off easy. Dora, you’ve got garbage duty. FYI, it’s recycling day tomorrow. I’m going to start in the kitchen. Come on, girls.” Harper clapped her hands. “We’re wastin’ daylight.”

Dora looked at Carson, her arms spread out in a gesture of incredulousness. “Who *is* that girl?”

Hours later Mamaw walked into the kitchen to prepare lunch. She was arrested at the threshold by a vision of utter chaos. The entire contents of the cabinets—boxes of food, tins, spices, and all the dishes—had been emptied out and grouped into piles on the kitchen table and counters.

Mamaw put one hand on the doorframe and stared in mute shock at the pots and pans littering the floor. “What on earth . . . ?”

Harper was scrubbing the inside of a cabinet. Hearing her grandmother’s voice, she crawled out from deep inside and raised her head. The sponge in her hand dripped water to the floor.

“Hi, Mamaw,” she called in a cheery tone. “Child, what in heaven’s name are you doing?” “I’m cleaning the kitchen.”

Of course, Mamaw thought ruefully, it wasn’t enough for Harper to simply tidy the kitchen. She had to disassemble it, scour it, then reorganize it. Where did she get her energy? Mamaw wondered. She couldn’t ever remember having that kind of energy. It seemed as if all Harper’s domestic talents, dormant all these years, were bubbling out at Sea Breeze.

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Mamaw stuck out her hands toward the table. “I came in to fix some lunch, but there’s no room to make a cup of tea, much less a meal. Everything is everywhere!”

“Is it lunchtime already?” Harper looked around at the mess. “I guess I lost track of time. I started cleaning the drawers and . . .” She made a face. “Oh, Mamaw, they were so dirty and dusty. That led to the cabinets. Do you even know how long it’s been since anyone scrubbed those out? And there’s no rhyme or reason to where things are put. Everything is helter-skelter. And”—Harper shivered in disgust—“I’m putting roach traps everywhere. It’s war.”

Mamaw felt a twinge of guilt that Lucille’s kitchen was being criticized, as if she should defend Lucille somehow. Yet, truth was, Lucille had been so ill before she’d passed on that she hadn’t even had the energy much of the time to leave her little cottage, let alone march into the house and whip things into shape. Even before that, she’d lost her zeal for cleaning and projects. Not that Mamaw could find fault in that. She felt the same way. Old age had a way of taking the starch out of one’s sails.

She pointed to a specific trash bag. “Why are the pots and pans in the trash?”

Harper had the grace to look sheepish. “Yeah, about that.” She sat back on her heels. “Honestly, Mamaw, some of these have to be tossed.”

“No! You can’t throw them away. Lucille used these for fifty years.”

“My point exactly. They’re no good any longer. Take this iron skillet, for example.” Harper dug it out from the trash bag and held up a rusted iron skillet with a long wooden handle, distaste skittering across her features.

Mamaw, her face reflecting her horror, rushed to grab the skillet from Harper's hands. "This was my mother's skillet! Her mother gave it to her when she was married, and she gave it to me. I was saving it to give to one of you girls. It's an heirloom!" "Oh." Harper looked slightly ashamed. "But, I mean, who'd use it? It's all rusty."

"It simply needs to be reseasoned with oil," Mamaw said with a hint of scold. "Any good southern housewife appreciates the sentiment of an iron skillet that's been passed down. Knows how to maintain it. I tell you, this skillet is perfectly good. I'll show you how to season it. You should know."

Harper looked at the rusty skillet with an expression of doubt, but didn't want to fight Mamaw on it. "Thank you," Harper had the manners to reply. "Okay, the skillet is a treasure. But these aluminum pots," she continued, not to be deterred, "they're hopelessly battered, and frankly, they're not safe to use anymore."

"Lucille cooked some very good meals in those pots."

"This is no comment on Lucille's cooking, Mamaw. I know you have an emotional attachment to them, but look at them. They've worn down to nearly nothing. I've gone online and learned that not only are these old aluminum pots and pans leaching dangerous metal, but research has linked aluminum cookware to Alzheimer's."

"Oh," Mamaw said, her complaints suddenly silenced.

"I'm going out today to buy some stainless steel pots and pans."

"You mustn't spend your money—"

Harper put up her hand to stop Mamaw's objections. "I'll need them anyway if I'm going to set up my own place."

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Mamaw's attention sharpened. "You're making plans, are you? Going back to New York soon?"

Harper shrugged. "I suppose so." She looked at her grand- mother. "I better start firming up those plans, I know. But till then," she said in a more upbeat tone, "Dora, Carson, and I hud- dled together this morning like a bunch of old crones. We had a good heart-to-heart."

Mamaw brightened. "Really? I'm so glad."

"There was a method to the madness. We know you've let go the cleaning service and we haven't done our part. So we put on our big-girl panties and divvied up chores. We've orga- nized the cooking, too."

"Mercy!"

"Brace yourself, Mamaw. It's time to get a food processor."

"Whatever for? I won't cook in the old-folks home I'm heading to."

Harper scoffed at the term *old-folks home*. The place Mamaw was intending to go to was lovely and up-to-date. "Like I said, I have to buy this stuff anyway for wherever I'll set up a kitchen."

Mamaw's attention riveted on that comment. "You're not going back to your mother's apartment?"

Harper shook her head firmly. "No way. I won't go back there. Looking forward, Mamaw." She gave Mamaw a kiss.

Mamaw put her hands to her cheek where Harper's lips had been. "Well, if you think so . . ."

Harper seized the moment. "While the cabinets are empty, wouldn't it be a good time to give everything a fresh coat of paint? What do you say?"

"Paint?" Mamaw said feebly against the onslaught of energy and ideas.

“Absolutely. A clean white. Let’s do the walls, too, while we’re at it. They’re dreary.”

Mamaw looked around at the dingy walls. “I’ve always wanted to freshen things up a bit, but Lucille chased me out every time I suggested it. It was *her* kitchen, you know.”

“Let’s do it now. There’s no hope for the appliances, but it’s probably not worth replacing those if you’re moving.” Then Harper’s voice changed, softening. “Other than that fabulous old Viking oven. It’s built like a tank. Anyone who buys the house will probably gut the room and build a kitchen around the oven.” She sighed and let her gaze lovingly linger on the mammoth appliance. “I know I would.”

Mamaw felt suddenly as ancient as the oven. “But the cost . . . I’m afraid I have to be, shall we say, conservative now.” “It’s my idea, thus my expense.” Seeing Mamaw open her mouth to object, Harper pushed on, “No arguments. Consider it rent. And tuition for the cooking classes that I’ll be getting from you and Dora.”

Harper noticed the confused look on Mamaw’s face and changed the subject. “Enough about the kitchen. Let’s do something fun today. What would you like to do?”

“Oh, I feel a bit tired. I might lie down after lunch.” Harper came closer and her eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. “Perhaps after dinner we could play cards.” “We?”

“All of us. You, me, Dora, and Carson. Like we used to.” Mamaw rallied. “Oh, that would be nice. All right, dear. But”—she looked around the disarray in the kitchen—“what should I do about fixing our lunch?”

“You don’t have to do a thing.” Harper hugged her. “I’ll

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order something. You just relax and I'll get this mess all tidied up in no time."

Mamaw cast a final glance at the trash bag filled with the old and worn aluminum pots. Useless. Outdated, and ready to be tossed out.

Like her. She turned and walked slowly from the room.

# # #