

# Chapter One



*Isle of Palms, South Carolina*

*April 2016*

**T**HE BEACH HOUSE sat perched on a dune overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. Small and yellow, it blended in with the waves of sweetgrass and sea oats and the delicate yellow primroses for which the cottage was named. For eighty-five years it had endured the fury of hurricanes, the rush of tidal surges, and the ravages of the salt-tinged air. It had withstood the test of time.

The beach house was a survivor.

As was she, Cara Rutledge thought, staring up at the house. She held a paintbrush in one hand and, shading her eyes from the gentle rays of the sun with the other, surveyed the fresh coat of gleaming white paint she'd just finished applying to the front porch and railings. How many times had she painted these porches? she wondered. Or repaired the pergola, fixed the plumbing, trimmed the shrubs and trees? Living by the sea was a constant exercise in the art of nip and tuck, especially for an old cottage like Primrose. But she didn't mind the time or expense. She would repair and paint it every year she could still lift a paintbrush or afford a plumber.

Because even more than the historic house on Tradd Street in Charleston, or the treasured, centuries-old family antiques that filled the Rutledge family's home, this modest 1930s beach house held the real memories of her family.

Only the good memories, she corrected herself with a wistful smile as her thoughts floated back to the halcyon days of her childhood.

When she was growing up, summer meant leaving the bustle and noise of Charleston and coming out to Primrose Cottage on the Isle of Palms with her mother, Olivia, and older brother, Palmer. It might have been only a trip across the Grace Bridge, some twenty miles, but back in the day, the change was so significant they might as well have journeyed to another country. Many of the girls she knew from school spent summers at family cottages on Sullivan's Island. But her mother claimed she preferred the relative isolation and the maritime forest on Isle of Palms. Cara, too, had preferred the Huck Finn lifestyle of Isle of Palms, where her mother would open the screen door and let her children run wild till the dinner bell at 5 p.m.

Cara sighed, slipping into the vortex of memories. Her gaze scanned the quaint cottage under the brilliant azure sky. She had achieved many lifetime firsts here. She'd learned to swim on the beach just beyond the house, kissed her first boyfriend on the back porch, confided secrets with her best friend, Emmi, over cookies and sweet tea in the kitchen, broken her first bone falling from the live oak tree that thrived until Hurricane Hugo blew it down. She'd caught her first fish from Hamlin Creek on the back of the island, and made love with Brett amid the clicking sea oats on the dunes. Of all her memories, those of the man

## Beach House *for* Rent

she'd fallen in love with late in life, married, and forged a new life with here on Isle of Palms were the sweetest.

Cara closed her eyes and took a deep breath, inhaling the sweet sea air. She heard the sounds of the island—the soft humming of bees, the purr of the ocean. She felt the caress of a breeze ruffle her hair. Whenever she had memories of the beach house, the image of her mother formed in her mind. Olivia Rutledge, affectionately known as Lovie—slight, ageless, her blond hair pulled back into a stylish chignon, her blue eyes shining with warmth. Opening her eyes, Cara almost expected to see her mother walking around the corner carrying the red turtle team bucket.

Primrose Cottage had been her mother's beach house. No, Cara thought on reflection. More than her house. The cottage had been her mother's sanctuary. Her place of refuge. Her source of inspiration. Lovie had come here to escape the burdens of her social obligations in Charleston. On the island she was free to pursue her passion—sea turtles. Lovie had been the Isle of Palms's first "sea turtle lady." She'd formed the first turtle team. She'd even named her only daughter Caretta, after the Latin name for the loggerhead, much to Cara's lifelong chagrin.

They'd been close when she was young, but as Cara grew tall and statuesque, her opinions matured as well. She'd found herself growing increasingly distant from her mother—in fact, from both her parents.

Especially her father.

When Cara was eighteen, to her traditional father Stratton Rutledge's disappointment, she had refused to become the southern belle she was expected to be. Her hair was too dark,

her feet too big. She was too tall, too bookish, and far too independent-minded. After graduating high school with honors, Cara had informed her parents, in a tone of voice that implied she was well aware they would not approve, that she wasn't going to the local college they'd selected for her but would instead attend a northeastern college. Perhaps Boston University. Maybe even Harvard. She was proud she'd been accepted. Her father, however, wasn't accustomed to back talk, especially from his daughter.

"Who the hell do you think you are, little girl?" he'd roared, his voice echoing in the large dining room of their grand home. Her mother had sat quietly at the other end of the table, her eyes meekly downcast. "You'll do as I say. And if you step one foot outside this town—out of this house—that'll tear it between us, you hear? You leave and you'll not get one dollar, not one stick of furniture, not so much as a nod of the head when you pass me or your mother on the street, hear?"

But Cara was more like her father than he'd realized. She'd turned heel and run as far away from her parents, that house, Charleston, and all the expectations and demands of a southern woman from South of Broad as she could get, heading to points north to seek her freedom, fame, and fortune. Her father was as good as his word. He'd cut her off and never looked back. He refused to pay her tuition, so she'd never gone to a prestigious Boston college. Instead she'd nailed an interview for an entry-level position at an advertising firm in Chicago, and had gone to night school for seven years while working full-time, finally earning her degree in communications. She'd climbed the corporate ladder and, though she wasn't wealthy, she'd achieved success on her own merit. Cara

had come home only once, for her brother's wedding, and sent a handful of Christmas and birthday cards over the years. There was the occasional phone call with her mother. Her relationship with her family was polite at best.

When her father died, Cara returned home for his funeral. Like the man he'd been throughout his lifetime, his will was cold and vindictive. As Stratton had sworn all those years ago, he didn't leave her as much as a stick of furniture. Cara had neither expected nor wanted anything from him. But the silence from her mother upon finding out that he'd made good on his pledge had hurt.

Then, on Cara's fortieth birthday, her mother had written asking her to come home for a visit. And she'd obliged. A weekend at the beach house had turned into a summer of reconciliation.

"Oh, Mama," she whispered so softly that her voice was carried off by the breeze. Cara had lost Lovie again to cancer right after they'd found each other once more. Even after ten years, Cara's heart yearned for her.

Her father had left everything to Palmer. But the beach house was her mother's, and when Lovie died she'd left it to Cara, knowing she would care for Primrose Cottage—and all the secrets associated with it—with the love and attention to detail that Lovie herself had exhibited. And Cara had fulfilled that promise.

Studying the beach house in the softening light of day's end, Cara shook her head ruefully. If someone had told her when she was eighteen that decades later she'd be back on the Isle of Palms as mistress of Primrose Cottage, she would have laughed out loud with disbelief.

But here she was, turning fifty, living on the Isle of Palms again, married to the love of her life and giving Primrose Cottage yet another coat of paint. “What goes around comes around,” her mother used to say. Cara chortled and shook her head. As usual, her mother was right.

Cara rolled her stiff shoulders, then traipsed across the sand and wildflowers to the waiting bucket of soapy water. She set her brush to soak, then put her hands on her back and once again stretched her aching muscles. Fifty certainly wasn’t the new forty, not in Cara’s opinion anyway.

*No more daydreaming*, she told herself as her usual practical, no-nonsense attitude kicked in. Rental season was around the corner and there was a lot left to do—and she couldn’t afford to hire anyone else. She was committed to keeping the beach house up to the standards set by her mother. Still, she’d miscalculated the strength of the early spring sun and she could feel the pinpricks of sunburn on her arms.

The sound of a car pulling up the gravel driveway distracted her. She stopped studying her arm and looked over her shoulder to see her brother’s gleaming white Mercedes sedan easing to a stop. He gave a gentle toot of the horn to herald his arrival. She chuckled, thinking Palmer always arrived with fanfare. She removed the man’s denim shirt irretrievably splattered with paint, one of Brett’s rejects, from over her black T-shirt and tossed it on a nearby wheelbarrow. The front car door swung open and one polished slip-on tasseled loafer peeked out from the car, then Palmer Rutledge hoisted himself out with a muffled grunt.

At fifty-two, Palmer was two years older than Cara, but he looked a good decade older, thanks to the bloated, florid face

and the paunch at his waist from his lifestyle as a businessman and successful real estate maven. While his habits had led to a less-than-healthy physique, Cara couldn't deny that Palmer had an enviable sense of style. Even as a boy he'd always been an impeccable dresser, a sharp contrast to Cara's tattered, beachy sartorial choices. Today he wore a tan golf jacket over a polo shirt and pressed khakis. Cara wiped the flecks of paint from her hands onto her torn jeans and took a step toward him, a smile of welcome spread across her tanned face.

"Palmer!" she exclaimed with an exuberant wave. "Come to see how the other half lives?"

Her brother held out his arms and she walked into them for a bear hug, highlighting the physical ease and sense of closeness that they shared as children remained. Cara believed their mother's death had made them not simply orphans, but all too aware of their own mortality.

"That's enough of that," Palmer said with a low laugh, gently disentangling himself. "You smell ripe, sister mine."

"Thanks," Cara replied breezily, not in the least embarrassed. "Comes from decent hard work."

"Mama never lifted a paintbrush in her delicate hands."

"Mama had more money than me. And, brother mine, I believe you do, too. So if the sight of my chipped nails and paint-splattered clothes offends you, kindly offer me the funds to hire out."

"I'd love to, honey, but we both know Julia spends every penny I earn faster than sand through fingers." Palmer rolled his eyes as he so often did when speaking of his socially conscious, designer-driven wife. His gaze shifted to the cottage. "Nice job," he said. Then he slanted her a look. "Do *you* hire out?"

Cara slapped his arm teasingly. "Don't get me started."

"Seriously," Palmer said, crossing his arms over his belly, "the place looks good. Real good."

"It's a pretty place," she said, looking again at the beach house. And it was true. With its mullioned windows and broad porch filled with baskets of ferns and white rockers, she'd always thought that it was a picturesque image of a lowcountry cottage. "Say what you will about all these mansions," she said with another wave of her hand, indicating the enormous newer houses. "You can't buy that old-world charm."

"You ever been in those big houses?" Palmer teased. He looked around, searching. "So where's your better half?"

"Brett is out back building a new pergola over the enclosed back porch. He's worked so hard on it. It's almost done, and I have to say it turned out so well."

"Wait," Palmer said, holding up his hand. "What enclosed porch?"

"You haven't seen it yet, have you?" Cara asked in surprise. Though Palmer and Julia lived just over the bridge in Charleston with their two children, Linnea and Cooper, she and they didn't spend time together outside of family events and holidays. Cara doted on her niece and nephew, but with school and social schedules it seemed everyone was always too busy. "Come on 'round. Brett will want to show it off. He did all the work himself."

"That man sure is handy," Palmer said as he followed her.

Cara knew he meant it as a compliment. Palmer had tried for years to get Brett involved in flipping houses, especially on the islands. But Brett was as stubborn as he was talented. He

## Beach House *for* Rent

truly loved working with wood. He was as much a craftsman as a builder. Like so much else in his life, he did things his own way and wouldn't be hurried.

She led the way around the cottage, her shoes crunching in the dry sand and shells. Cara kept the property wild, as nature had intended. Only palm trees, wild grasses, and flowers sprouted on her property, especially in the spring, when the island was practically bursting with life. Wildflowers colored the dunes with soft yellows, vibrant blues, and fiery oranges. In the trees birds sang out mating calls, while overhead migrating birds soared, returning home from southern climes.

This side of the beach house faced the long stretch of dunes that reached out to the Atlantic Ocean. The mighty sea reflected the mood of the sky—sometimes dark, turbulent, and gloomy, other times a soft, introspective gray-blue. Today the water was the color of unbridled joy and hope, a blue so vivid the horizon line disappeared where sea met sky, creating an infinite stretch of blue. Sunlight danced on the ocean, making it appear a living, breathing thing. Cara paused to stare out in awe. The dazzling sea always had the power to take her breath away.

“Beautiful day,” Palmer said with gusto, rocking back on his heels and echoing her thoughts.

“It is,” she replied softly, sharing the moment with her brother.

“And a stunning view. I've always said that,” he added, then gestured toward the ocean. “No houses standing in the way. You've got a straight shot to the sea with that vacant lot in front of you.”

His words broke through her quiet reverie as she realized

Palmer wasn't appreciating the spiritual quality of the view, but rather the commercial value. He spoke as if she didn't realize all these fine points of her own home. Going for the hard sell, as always. She turned her head to scrutinize him.

Her brother was, in fact, wearing business attire, she suddenly realized, not the sporty shorts and Tommy Bahama shirts he wore for leisure. His gold signet ring caught the sunlight and drew her attention to the papers he was carrying in his doughy hand. Cara sighed inwardly, even as she steeled her resolve.

This wasn't a social call. Palmer had come on business. Without speaking, she turned the corner of the house toward the back.

"Whoa," Palmer exclaimed. He paused, hands on hips, to take in the new sunroom attached to the back of the house, the new deck spreading the entire width of the sunroom, with stairs leading out to the dunes. "What have you and Brett been up to?"

"This is what I wanted to show you," she replied, excited to show off the project that had dominated their lives the past several months. "We enclosed the old porch and gained so much more space, all facing the ocean. We just love it. And then, of course, we will finish the deck. You can see the outline," she said, pointing to the wooden frame. "It will spread the entire width of the sunroom with stairs leading out to the dunes. Mama would roll over in her grave if we didn't have a proper deck overlooking the ocean. And if you recall, Brett repaired Mama's pergola every time the wind blew it down."

"I do recall."

“So after we enclosed the porch, Brett built this pergola in her honor.”

Palmer’s face softened. “Did he really?”

She nodded as she surveyed the thick, treated wood of the pergola. Once it was sun-cured, she’d paint it a glistening white.

“When Brett’s done with the pergola, we’ll put out the rocking chairs.” She smiled at the memory of sitting with her mother on the back porch in companionable silence night after night that final summer. “Mama would be so pleased.”

The sound of hammering drew her gaze upward. Brett was perched on top of a paint-splattered ladder, hammering nails into the pergola with focus. Brett was a big man, broad-shouldered and fit. He wore ragged tan shorts, a faded plaid shirt with rolled-up sleeves, and scuffed work boots, revealing the leathery, tawny skin of a seaman. Her mind flashed back to when she’d returned home that fateful summer and had seen him hanging on the nets of a shrimp boat, every bit as dashing as Errol Flynn. Brett Beauchamps was the love of her life, and even after ten years of marriage, bits of gray hair notwithstanding, the sight of him could still make her swoon.

She tented her hand over her eyes as she looked up at him in the fierce sunlight. “Brett!” she called. “Honey!”

The hammering stopped and he turned her way. She couldn’t see his eyes behind his Ray-Ban sunglasses.

“Palmer’s here! Come on down.”

Brett lifted his hand in acknowledgment. “Be down in a minute,” he called back. “Almost done.”

One of Brett’s strengths was his work ethic. He was tire-

less, pushing himself without pause. She knew he wouldn't stop until the job was done, and done right.

Cara chuckled. "That means he'll be a while. Let's go inside," she told Palmer. "I'll show you the inside of the sunroom."

Palmer followed her as they crossed the work zone, his gait slow and measured. Cara watched as Palmer walked around the sunroom, his head swinging from left to right to take in the new glass doors, swung wide open to admit the balmy breeze of the mercurial spring weather, the Mexican tile on the floor, the tall green plants and white wicker chairs with cushy, bright blue cushions. She'd decorated the space in clean lines to allow the undistracted eye to seek out the ocean beyond. This view was what the tourists came for, she knew. Twenty years as a successful advertising executive in Chicago had taught her a few lessons.

"Very nice," Palmer said after several moments of silence. He crossed his arms and faced her. "Must've set you back a few pennies."

Cara was disappointed by his lackluster response. "More than pennies," she replied soberly. "We found some termite damage on the porch and figured why not bite the bullet and build the sunroom we'd wanted to all these years, instead of making do with more repairs? Look how much more space we've added. And that's a sleeper sofa. So we can raise the rent a bit. We figure it'll all equal out in time." She shrugged. "Unless we get hit with another hurricane."

"Always a possibility."

"I know," she acknowledged ruefully. "With climate change

and the sea levels rising, I've seen for myself how much beach we lose every year. Of course, that's the job of the dunes, to protect the inland property. But we've never seen the dunes just swept clear away. It's becoming the new norm."

Palmer rolled his eyes and put his hands up in an arresting motion. "Now, let's not start talking climate change. We always lose some beach, and it always comes back."

Cara couldn't stand his patronizing tone, but didn't want to get into another round of debate on the reality of climate change with her older brother. It wasn't worth it, and she only ended up infuriating herself. He'd say the moon was a wheel of cheese if it sold a house. She allowed him the final word.

"How about some sweet tea? I made a fresh batch for Brett. Put a sprig of mint in it, too. My herbs are up. God, I love spring."

She led Palmer from the sunroom into the main house. Here nothing had changed since their youth, save perhaps for there being fewer of the knickknacks, family photographs, and books that her mother had cluttered the house with. Like many women of her generation, the older Lovie had got, the more reluctant she became to throw anything away. Every photo had to be saved, every memento ensconced on a shelf. When Cara inherited the house she'd promptly cleared away the clutter, painted the rooms a soft ocean blue trimmed neatly with clean white, replaced the family oriental rugs with ones made of grass, and selected only a few pieces from her mother's vast art collection to remain on the walls. But she'd kept the timeless chintz chairs and sofa with their Palm Beachy flowered pattern. The result

was a house still filled with her mother's furniture, art, and most prized possessions, but with a younger, fresher feel.

"The place looks good, Sister," Palmer said.

"Why thanks," she said, striding with her long legs to the small galley kitchen.

Here changes had been made as well from when the house had been under Lovie's purview. Even while her mama was still alive, Cara had repainted the old white wooden cabinets, but over the past few years she'd replaced all the old appliances with gleaming stainless steel ones. She opened the fridge and pulled out the pitcher of tea. Although she'd provided a new set of white dishes for the rentals, she still kept her mother's old china locked in an out-of-the way cabinet for her own use on the few nights she came here to sleep in her mother's bed. Cara retrieved a key from the back of a drawer and unlocked the cabinet. Smiling at seeing the mismatched china and crystal her mother had enjoyed using at the beach house, Cara reached for two of the old Waterford cut-crystal tall glasses. She quickly added ice, poured two glasses of tea, and handed one to Palmer. She watched, pleased, as he drank thirstily. When he finished, he released a long, satisfied sigh.

"Sister mine, you make some good sweet tea. You ought to give the recipe to Julia."

"She should already have it. It's Mama's recipe. It's making the syrup first that's the secret."

"Ah," he said with a sigh of understanding, adding with a sorry shake of his head, "she won't do it. She's always adding that fake sweetener to my drinks, telling me I've got to lose

weight.” He patted his belly. “I don’t need to lose weight. Hell,” he said proudly, “this paunch is a symbol of my prosperity.”

He laughed, a low, throaty chortle that prompted her to join in even as she inwardly agreed with Julia. Her brother had gained at least fifteen pounds in the last decade, but Cara wasn’t going to be the one to tell him. She suspected Julia told him often enough as it was.

He took another long swallow from his drink, then smacked his lips, his gaze sweeping the rooms again. “This house isn’t worth putting any more money into.” Palmer turned to face her. His blue eyes shone under brows gathered in concern. “I’ve told you time and time again, the value of this place is in the land.”

Cara groaned loudly, shaking her head. *Here we go*, she thought. Their mama had once told her that Palmer was the sort of person who was always hungry for more, in both a literal and a figurative sense. He was never satisfied. Palmer was like their father this way. Palmer had been angry when he’d learned that Mama was leaving Cara the beach house, even though he’d already inherited the big house on Tradd Street and all its expensive contents. But Palmer wanted the beach house, too. Not because he loved it, but because he’d always had big plans for developing the property.

“Hell, one of these days you’re going to listen. Look at that empty lot out there. It’s a gold mine.”

“And one of these days you’ll accept that lot can’t be touched,” she fired back. “Russell Bennett left that land in conservation.”

“We might could get around that,” he said with a dismissive wave. Whenever her brother slipped into the vernacular, she knew he was deep in thought. Palmer looked out at the empty lot in front of them the way Cara looked at the ocean. Where she saw beauty and felt a near-spiritual sense of awakening, he saw dollar signs.

“It’s got to be the only waterfront lot left on this entire island. Even if you don’t build on it, you’ve got this house with guaranteed views. His eyes were brightening as he got deeper into his sales pitch. “The real estate market has bounced back, and strong. The demand is high. Now’s the time to act.”

Cara didn’t grace him with a reply. She picked up her glass and turned her head away to look out the window as she sipped her tea.

Palmer sighed and put his hands on the table. “Okay, okay. I’ll give up the hard sell. But listen to me, Sister. The reason I’m trying to get you to sell the beach house now—aside from the fact that it’s a good idea—is because I’m involved with a new business venture that should reap big profits.”

He paused and waited for her to look back at him. His eyes gleamed.

“I’m talking really big. This one investment could put you in high cotton. For life. Now,” he drawled and lifted his palms. “What kind of a brother would I be if I didn’t share the opportunity with my beloved sister?”

Cara looked at him with thinly veiled interest. “What business venture is this?”

Palmer leaned in and talked in a lower, more urgent voice as though in secret. “It’s a new housing development.”

Beach House *for* Rent

“I thought you just flipped the occasional house. This sounds risky.”

He shook his head. “No, ma’am. The location is going to explode. It’s all hush-hush until word of the new highway extension is announced. But the inside scoop is that it’s a done deal. I know this town and I’m telling you, I’m all in.”

Cara listened, chewing her lip. She’d love nothing more than to get in early on a deal like this. Palmer had good contacts that went deep in the city’s politics. The kind that were forged in school days. God knew, she and Brett needed the money. But their financial situation wasn’t such that they could consider big investments.

“We don’t have any money to invest,” she said. “Frankly, we’re strapped.”

Palmer leaned back, clearly disappointed. “I’d loan you some. That’s how much I believe in this project. But all my money is already tied up in this deal.”

“Doesn’t matter,” she said with a hint of annoyance at her situation. “We couldn’t pay you back. Our money’s completely tied up in the business.”

Palmer turned his head to spear her with a no-nonsense gaze. “So I’m left to wonder . . . why are you wasting good money fixing up this old cottage, when you could make a fortune tearing it down and selling the land.”

When her brother talked like this, his tone and body language eerily reminded her of their father’s. And a more pugnacious, proud, callous man she’d never met.

“Palmer, just stop,” she shot back in a tone that brooked no argument.

A voice broke the sudden, awkward silence. “Palmer, are you still trying to convince Cara to sell this house?”

Brett stood at the sunroom entrance, a lazy grin on his handsome face. His long arms stretched out as he leaned against the doorframe. The man filled the doorway with his size. His face was flushed from exertion, but Cara immediately recognized the relaxed manner that always came from having finished a tough job to his satisfaction.

Palmer walked toward his brother-in-law with his hand extended and the two men shook hands warmly. Friends since they’d been surfing buddies in their youth, they’d followed diverging paths as adults when Palmer assumed his role in old Charleston society and Brett, indifferent to the social hierarchy, followed his passion as a boat captain on the sea.

“Brother, don’t you have any control over your wife?” Palmer asked jovially.

“Brother,” Brett replied with a slap on Palmer’s back, “don’t you know your sister yet? Nobody has control over her.”

“At least over her pocketbook.”

Cara was practically seething, but Brett just laughed. The guy was unflappable, just one of the many reasons she loved him. “She runs the books, did you forget?” Brett stepped to Cara’s side and slipped his arm around her waist, as though sensing she needed the extra comfort. “So what’s up?”

“I’m trying to convince the little lady that she needs to sell this place before dumping any more money into it.”

Cara knew he was prodding her, using phrases like “little

lady,” knowing they’d find their mark. “It’s our money. Don’t worry about it.”

“If you get off your high horse and sell the beach house and invest in this deal, you can make a fortune,” Palmer urged. “Hell, even if you don’t do the deal, you’d make a small fortune just selling the house.”

Brett dropped his arm from Cara and put his hand on his hip and looked at Palmer more attentively.

“Seriously?”

“I’m telling you . . .”

“The market’s that good?” Brett rocked on his heels. “How much could we get for this place? Just a ballpark figure.”

“Brett,” Cara interjected testily, trying to ward him off the topic.

“No harm in asking,” Brett said.

Palmer was like any fisherman who feels the first tug on the line. He rubbed his jaw and took a step closer to Brett. When he spoke, it was in that man-to-man tone that set Cara’s teeth on edge. Palmer didn’t even realize he’d turned his back on Cara.

Or, more likely, he absolutely did.

“Hard to be exact. Depends on whether you want to build a house yourself—and you could, you know,” he added in an encouraging tone. “The land alone is worth over a million dollars. The house . . .” He gave the rooms a cursory glance, then sighed. “It’d be considered a teardown.”

“That’s it,” Cara said sharply. “Don’t even suggest that.”

“Stop being so sentimental,” Palmer said, and this time his voice wasn’t teasing but more persuasive. “You’re just

going to turn down all that money? And for what? You don't even live in the house! You spend year after year patching the old place up. What for? The measly rent? What are you hanging on to? Mama is dead, God rest her soul. No one misses her more than me. But she isn't coming back to this house, Cara. She's never going to see everything you've done and tell you she's proud of you for it. Mama's gone. You've got to face that."

Cara swallowed hard. These rooms signified more than a house to her. This house was not just her mother's touchstone, she realized. It was hers as well. If she sold the beach house, she'd be selling a part of herself. The best part.

If Palmer had left it at that, peace would have prevailed.

"Besides, Cara, who are you saving this old beach house for?"

The pain came so quick and sharp Cara sucked in her breath. She felt Brett's arm settle on her shoulder with a reassuring squeeze. Palmer was unaware of the dagger he'd thrown. The father of two children, he couldn't understand her and Brett's sense of loss. Not having children was their single greatest regret.

Cara couldn't stop the anger that sparked from the comment. She stepped out of Brett's hold toward her brother. At five feet ten inches, Cara was eye-to-eye with her brother. Cara had moved on from her corporate life. Even though in the past ten years she had adopted Brett's more laid-back low-country lifestyle, vestiges of her former ball-busting self still emerged when pushed. Cara stared Palmer down with an icy glare that would have sent shivers through her former colleagues in the boardroom at Leo Burnett.

## Beach House *for* Rent

“Let me make myself perfectly clear,” Cara said, her voice more strident than she’d intended. She pointed a digit near his face. “This house is not now, nor ever will be, for sale. Got it?” Her rising emotion brought her to a shout. “The beach house is for rent!”