

SWEET SALT AIR

A novel by Barbara Delinsky
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PROLOGUE

Charlotte Evans was used to feeling grungy. As a free-lancer, she traveled on a shoestring, getting stories other writers did not precisely because she wasn't fussy about how she lived. In the last twelve months, she had survived dust while writing about elephant keepers in Kenya, ice while writing about the spirit bear of British Columbia, and flies while writing about a family of nomads in India.

She could certainly survive a mizzling, as the Irish called it, though the heavy mist seeped through everything – jeans, boots, even the thick fisherman's sweater she wore. The sweater was on loan from the woman under whose roof she was sleeping on this least populated of the three Aran Islands, and though Charlotte did have a fireplace in her bedroom, hot water was in short supply in the small stone cottage. She could have used a steamy shower, a thorough washing of her clothes, and a solid day of sun.

Her assignment was to write about the youngest generation of Inishmaan knitters, women who were adapting traditional patterns in breathtaking ways, and as with the pattern on her own sweater, she could now describe moss stitch, panel repeats, right and left twists, and cable designs. It was time to leave. She had to go home to put the story together and get it to *Vogue Knitting*, before heading to the Australian outback to do a piece on aborigine jewelry-making for *National Geographic*, a coup that one. Still, she stayed here.

Part of what kept her was the woman who owned the house, as warm and motherly as any she had ever met. Part was the craft that permeated the place. No knitter herself, she could watch these women for hours. They were at peace with themselves and their world, enviable for Charlotte, who had no roots at all. So close to her age that they might have been schoolmates, they were trying to teach her to knit. She told herself this was cause enough to stay.

Bottom line, though, it was the island that kept her here. She had loved islands from the time she spent her first summer on one. She was eight at the time. Thirty-four now, she still felt the island aura – an isolation that made worries seem distant, a separation from the real world that lent itself to dreams.

Her eyes went to the horizon, or where the horizon would have been if the mist weren't so dense. *Thick o' fog* they called it in that other place, and it lent a sheen to her skin and a bulk to her hair here as it did there. She pulled those dark curls back now, fingers lost in the damp mass, and turned just enough on the scruffy cliff to face a few latitudinal degrees south.

There, on the far side of the Atlantic, would be Maine, but despite the shared ocean, her island and this one were worlds apart. Where Inishmaan was gray and brown, its fragile man-made soil supporting only the hardiest of low-growing plants, the fertile Quinipeague invited tall pines in

droves, not to mention vegetables, flowers, and improbable, irrepressible herbs. Lifting her head, eyes closed now, she breathed of the damp Irish air and the bit of wood smoke that drifted on the cold ocean wind. Quinnipeague smelled of wood smoke, too, since early mornings there could be chilly, even in summer. But the wood smoke would clear by noon, giving way to the smell of lavender, balsam and grass. If the winds were from the west, there would be fry smells from the Chowder House, if from the south, the earthiness of the clam flats, if from the northeast, the purity of sweet salt air.

Oh yes, across the Atlantic would be Maine, she mused as she opened her eyes and tried to penetrate that great distance through the fog, and this being April, she would think if it regardless of where she was. That was ingrained. Spring was when she started to plan her Quinnipeague summer.

Or used to. But no more. She had burned that bridge ten years ago with one stupid act. She couldn't go back, though she wished it sometimes. She missed the spirit of summer on Quinnipeague, so much more intense for being apart from the rest of the world. She missed Quinnie lobster rolls, which tasted better than lobster rolls anywhere else. Mostly, she missed Nicole, who had been as close as a sister to her once. She had never found another like her, though Lord knew she had searched.

Perhaps that was what staying on Inishmaan was about. The women here could be friends. They understood independence and self-sufficiency. Charlotte had felt such instant rapport with several that she sensed they would keep in touch.

Would? Maybe.

More likely not, the realist in Charlotte admitted. For all the writing she did for a living, she was a lousy correspondent. Within a day or two, she would leave Inishmaan behind and return to Brooklyn, and from there? In addition to Australia, she had go-aheads to do stories in Tuscany and Bordeaux, the appeal of the latter being the lure Paris before and after. She had friends there – a writer, a ceramist, and a would-be fashion designer whose clothes were too bizarre for mass appeal but whose personal warmth was winning.

Would it be the same as Quinnipeague time? No.

But this was the life she had made.

Nicole Carlyle lived in blissful ignorance of the past. She had enough to handle in the present, though no one knew it, and that was the problem. No one knew. No one *could* know, which meant no outlet, no emotional support, no badly-needed advice. Julian was adamant about silence, and, because she loved him, she gave in. *She* was his lifeline, he said, and what woman didn't want to hear that? But the strain was awful. She would have gone out of her mind, if it

hadn't been for the blog. Whether she was writing to tell her followers about a local cheesemaker, a new farm-to-table restaurant, or what to do with an exotic heirloom fruit that was organically produced and newly marketed, she spent hours each day scouring Philadelphia and the outlying towns for material. As spring took hold, the local offerings were growing.

On a different mission now, though, she sat in front of an iMac in Julian's study. There was no view of the Schuylkill from this room, as there was from most of their 18th floor condo. There were no windows here at all, simply walls of mahogany shelves that held medical books Julian had either inherited from his father or collected before publications had gone digital. Nicole owned shelves here, too, though fewer in number. Hers were filled with the novels she couldn't part with, and books about entertaining that were both resource and inspiration.

Organized as she was, the papers to the left of the computer – jottings, printouts of fan comments and endorsement requests from vendors – were neatly arranged. Her camera sat behind them, hooked to a USB port, and, in a ceramic bowl on the computer's right, lay the newly-photographed subject of her upcoming blog – a head of purple cauliflower, still cupped by the veined green leaves within which it had grown. A leather sofa, with a matching side chair and ottoman, filled the room with the smell of lemon oil and age.

But that smell wasn't foremost in her mind as she read what she had already typed. "I go to farmers markets all the time. Field-to-table is so my thing. But none of the herbs at any of them come close to island herbs. Those herbs *make* Quinnie food – well, those herbs and freshness. Quinnie was growing organic and cooking local before farm-to-table was a movement, but, still, we think of the herbs first. I can't write about island cooking without talking about them, but I can't not talk about the people, either. That's where you come in, Charlotte. You've eaten Dorey Jewett's lobster stew and Mary Landry's clam fritters, and you always loved the fruit compote that Bonnie Stroud brought to the Fourth of July dinner each year. These people are all still around. Each has a story. I want to include some in the book, but I'm better writing about food than people. You write about people. And you're so good at it, Charlotte. I google you all the time. Your name shows up in the best of the *best* travel magazines."

She paused, thinking about those pieces as she studied the mirror of her own eyes in the gloss of the screen. Just then, they were sea-green with worry, wondering what the chances were that her friend would accept. Charlotte was big-time professional, certainly used to having her own byline. She would have to split the billing here, and Nicole's advance wasn't all that much. If the book sold well, there would be more, but for now all she could offer was a small stipend – plus room and board in one of the nicest homes on the island – plus reading and talking and hanging out, all that they used to do before life got in the way.

She typed in the thoughts, rewording once, then again. Finally, tired of parsing, she added a blunt, "I need you, Charlotte. A Quinnie cookbook won't be the same without your input. I know you're busy, but my deadline is the fifteenth of August, so it's not the entire summer, and you'll get stories of your own out of this. It'll be worth your while. I promise."

Her eyes rose above the computer screen to find Julian in the open doorway, and she felt a visceral flicker of warmth. It was like that whenever he caught her unaware – had been since the first time she'd laid eyes on him in a Starbucks in Baltimore twelve years before. Back then, as a new environmental studies graduate of Middlebury, she was getting her feet wet writing publicity pieces for a state agriculture organization. Hoping to work during her afternoon break, she had set down her grande-caramel-frappuccino-with-whip on a table without noticing much of her surroundings, until she opened her laptop and became aware of an identical one, identically opened and angled on the table beside hers. Having made the same observation seconds before, Julian had an amused smile waiting.

He was a surgeon, in town from Philadelphia for a seminar at Johns Hopkins, and he had a quiet strength. That strength had been sorely tested in the last four years and yet, seeing him in the doorway of the study, she still felt the pull. He wasn't a tall man, but his bearing had always been regal. It was no less so now, though regular workouts helped with that. His hair had grayed in the last year or two, but even after a full day at the hospital, he was a good-looking forty-six. Tired, always tired now. But good-looking.

Wearing a smile, he approached. "Doing a write-up of last night?" he asked. They had eaten at a new restaurant with friends, a working night out for Nicole, who had insisted that everyone order different dishes and evaluate each while she took notes.

By the time she shook her head no, he was facing her with a hip on the desk by the keyboard. "The cookbook, then," he said as his smile grew knowing. "You always get that look when you think of Quinipeague."

"Peaceful?" she acknowledged. "It's April. Two more months, and we're there. You're still coming with me, aren't you?"

"I told you I would."

"Willingly? It's an escape, Jules," she urged, momentarily serious. "It may be only for a week, but we need this." She recaptured lighter thoughts. "Remember the first time you ever came? Tell the truth. You were dreading it."

His brown eyes laughed warmly. "What wasn't to dread? A godforsaken island in the middle of the Atlantic –"

"It's only eleven miles out."

"Same difference. If it didn't have a hospital, it wasn't on my radar screen."

"You thought there'd be dirt roads and nothing to do."

He gave a wry chuckle. Between lobstering, clamming, and sailing, then movie nights at the church and mornings at the café, not to mention dinners at home, in town, or at the homes of friends, Nicole had kept him busy.

“You loved it,” she dared.

“I did,” he admitted. “It was perfect. A world away.” His eyes saddened. “And yes, baby, we need this.” Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her, but there was sadness in that, too. Hoping to banish it for a few more seconds – especially in the wake of the *baby* that always turned her on – she was reaching up when he took her hands, pressed them to his lips, then smoothly slid behind her. With his arms braced on either side, cheek to her hair, he read the words on the screen. “Ahh,” he sighed. “Charlotte.”

“Yes. I really want her on board.”

He angled away only enough to meet her eyes. “You don’t need her, Nicki. You can do the cookbook yourself.”

“I know that,” she said as she had more than once. “But she’s an accomplished writer, and she has a history on Quinnipeague, too. Add her people pieces to my food ones, and the book’s that much better.”

“She hasn’t stepped foot on the island in ten years,” he said in the measured way that spoke of knowledge. Oh, he was knowledgeable – a pioneer in his field, always savvy on a personal vein.

But Nicole wasn’t deterred. “How better to lure her back? Besides, if you’re gone after a week, and mom won’t be there, I want Charlotte.”

He was quiet. Nicole heard the argument even before he said, “She hasn’t been the best friend. She called your dad her surrogate father, but she didn’t even make it to the funeral.”

“She was in Nepal. She couldn’t possibly get back in time. She did call. She was as upset as we were.”

“Has she called again since?” he asked, though they both knew the answer to that.

“We email.”

“Often? No. And you’re the one who initiates it. Her replies are short.”

“She’s busy.”

He touched her cheek. “You haven’t seen each other in ten years. You have different lives now. If you want to lure her back to recapture what you once had, you may be in for a fall.”

“I miss her.” When his expression grew guarded, she insisted, “No, it is not about that. I promised you. I will not tell her.” She grew pleading. “But it’s like all the stars are aligned, Jules. There’s the cookbook, and your being in North Carolina for the month, and Mom not wanting to go to Quinnipeague and needing someone to pack up the place – like I want to do

it? That'll be bad enough, but being *alone* there while you're away? This is the last summer I'll ever have at the house, and Charlotte is part of what that place means to me."

He was quiet. "You don't even know where she is."

"No one does. She's always on the go. That's why I email. She'll get it wherever. And yes, she always answers." He was right about the brevity of her replies, though. Charlotte never shared much of her life now. And yet, from the first mention of this project, Nicole had pictured her taking part in it. Oh yes, Charlotte knew Quinnipeague. But she also knew Nicole, and Nicole needed to see her. She and Julian were going through a rough patch, tender moments like this one – once commonplace – now farther between. A month at Duke training incoming doctors in the technique for which he was known would be a much-needed distraction for him. And for her? Charlotte could distract her. The memories were good; she and Nicole had always been in sync. If there was any fun to be had this summer, Charlotte was her one great hope.

Julian tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear. His expression was aching – and Nicole might have reached for him again if he hadn't cupped her head. "I just don't want you hurt," he said and kissed her forehead. Then he held her back. "Do you think she'll accept?"

Nicole smiled, confident in this at least. "Absolutely. I don't care how much time has passed. She loves Quinnipeague. The temptation will be too great to resist."

CHAPTER 1

Quinnipeague lay eleven miles from the mainland. With a year-round population of nearly three hundred, it was serviced by a daily mail boat that carried groceries and a handful of passengers, but no cars. Since Charlotte had one of those for the first time in her life, she proudly booked the ferry, boarding in Rockland on a Tuesday, which was one of only three days each week when its captain cruised past Vinalhaven to islands like Quinnipeague. Nicole had offered airfare to speed up the trip, but Charlotte flew everywhere else in life. This summer was to be different.

The car was an old Jeep Wrangler, bought from a friend of a friend for a fraction of its original cost. Giddy with excitement, she stashed the soft top in back, and, as the warm June air flowed freely through windows and roof, drove up from New York herself. She welcomed the time it would take. After a frantic two months of work to free herself up, she wanted to slow down, decompress, and maybe, just maybe figure out why she had agreed to a last summer on Quinnipeague. She had sworn she wouldn't return, had sworn off painful memories.

But there were good memories as well, all of which had flooded back as she read Nicole's email in Ireland that day. She replied instantly, promising to phone as soon as she returned to New

York. And she had. Literally. Right there in baggage claim while waiting for her duffel to come through.

Of course, she would come, she had told Nicole, only afterward doing the reasoning. For starters, there was Bob. She hadn't gone to his funeral because she hadn't had the courage to face even a dead Bob after letting him down – letting them *all* down – so badly. So she owed Nicole for the funeral, and owed her for the betrayal.

But obligation wasn't the only reason she had accepted the invitation. Relief was another; Nicole herself had suggested the collaboration. And nostalgia; Charlotte missed those carefree summers. And loneliness; she spent her life with people, but none were family as Nicole had once been.

And then there was the book. She had never worked on a book, had never actually collaborated on anything, though it sounded like a piece of cake, having someone else run the show. When she thought about the people she would interview, Cecily Cole came to mind first. Talk about compelling characters. Cecily *was* island cooking in many regards, since her herbs were what made the food special. She had to be the centerpiece of the book. Talking with her would be fun.

Charlotte could use a little fun, a little rest, a little make-believe – and Quinneapolis was the place for that. Even now, as the ferry passed in and out of fog, reality came and went. *You can't go home again*, Thomas Wolfe had written, and she prayed he was wrong. She expected some awkwardness; ten years and very different lives later, she and Nicole couldn't just pick up where they'd left off. Moreover, if Nicole knew of her betrayal, all bets were off.

But if Nicole knew, she wouldn't have asked Charlotte to come. Nicole Carlyle didn't have a devious bone in her body.

Leaning out from the side railing, she caught a breath. There it *was* –

But no, just an ocean mirage quickly swallowed by the fog.

After moving past empty benches, she held tightly to the front rail. Anticipation had built since leaving New York, accelerating in leaps after New Haven, then Boston. By the time she passed Portland, impatience had her regretting the decision to drive, but that changed once she left the highway at Brunswick and started up the coast. Bath, Wiscasset, Damariscotta – she loved the names as much as the occasional view of boats, seaside homes, roadside stands. FULL BELLY CLAMS one sign read, but she resisted. Clams served on Quinneapolis were dug from the flats hours before cooking, and the batter, which was exquisitely light, held bits of parsley and thyme. Other fried clams couldn't compare.

The ferry rose on a swell, but plowed steadily on. Though the air was cool and the wind sharpened by bits of spray, she couldn't get herself to go inside. She had put on a sweater over her jeans when the ferry left Rockland, and while she had also tied back her hair, loose tendrils blew free. They whipped behind her now as she kept her eyes on the sea. Some called North

Atlantic waters cold and forbidding, but she had seen others. Turquoise, emerald, teal – none moved her as gray-blue did. Seventeen summers here had made it a visceral thing.

Her camera. She needed to capture this.

But no. She didn't want anything coming between her eyes and that first sighting.

Having relived it dozens of times in the preceding weeks, she thought she was prepared, but the thrill when the island finally emerged from the mist was something else. One by one, as the fog thinned, the features she remembered sharpened – jagged outcroppings of rock, a corona of trees, the Chowder House perched on granite and flanked by twin roads that swung wide for a gentle descent from town to pier, like symmetrical stairways in an elegant home.

That said, there was nothing elegant about Quinnipeague, with its rutted paths and weathered docks. But Quinnipeague wasn't meant to be elegant. It was meant to be authentic. Shutters were practical things to be closed in the fiercest of winds, and, when open, hung crooked more often than not. Wood was gray, clusters of buoys tacked to the side of the fishing shed were bright despite their chipping paint, and the gulls that swooped in to perch on tall pilings always left their chalky mark.

Sailboats grew distinct from power ones as the ferry neared. There were fewer lobster boats than Charlotte remembered, fewer lobstermen she had read, though those who remained would be out pulling traps this Tuesday, hence moorings with only dinghies attached.

Her pulse sped when she saw a figure running down the pier, and in that instant, the bad of the past blew right back out to sea. She waved frantically. "*Nicki! I'm here – here, Nicki!*"

Like there were other people on the ferry. Like Nicole could possibly miss her. Like Nicole could even *hear* her over the thrum of the boat and the slap of waves on pilings. But Charlotte couldn't help herself. She was a child again, having traveled alone from Virginia with her heart in her mouth and here, finally, so relieved to have reached the right place. She was a teenager, a seasoned flier now from Texas, electrified by the sight of her best friend. She was a college student who had taken the bus up from New Haven to summer with a family that wanted to hear about her courses, her friends, her dreams.

For all the places she'd been in the ten years since that wedding summer, no one had ever been waiting for her.

In that moment, seeing Nicole bubbling with excitement on the pier, her own relief was so great that she forgave her the timidity, the docility, the sheer agreeableness that had made her such easy prey for betrayal – traits Charlotte had seized on over the years to forgive her own behavior.

But this was a new day. The hovering fog couldn't dullen the reds and blues of the boats. Nor could the smell of seaweed overpower that of the Chowder House grill. Bobbing on her toes, she clutched her hands at her mouth to contain herself, while with agonizing precision and a grinding

of gears, the ferry slowed and began to turn. She moved along the side to keep the pier front and center in her sight.

Beautiful Nicole. That hadn't changed. Always petite, she looked positively willowy standing there on the pier. Always stylish, she was even more so now in her skinny jeans and leather jacket. The wind whipped her scarf, which likely cost more than Charlotte's entire summer wardrobe – the latter being vintage L.L. Bean, emphasis on *vintage*, having traveled with Charlotte for years. Style had never been in her lexicon. The closest she came to it now were her flats, bought three years before at an open-air market in Paris.

Chug by chug, the ferry backed its snub stern to the end of the dock. The instant the captain released the chains and lowered the ramp, Charlotte was off and running. Throwing her arms around Nicole, she cried, "You are the best sight ever! You look amazing!"

"And *you*," Nicole cried back, clinging tightly. Her body shook. She was crying.

Charlotte might have cried, too, her throat was that tight. Ten years and such different lives, yet Nicole was as excited as she was. Grasping at everything that had been so right about their summers together, she just held on, swaying for another few seconds until Nicole laughed through her tears and drew back. Running her fingers under her eyes, she explored Charlotte's face. "You have not changed a bit," she declared in the voice Charlotte remembered – high, not quite childlike but close. "And I still love your hair."

"It's the same old mess, but I love yours. You *cut* it."

"Just last month, finally. I mean, I may still sound like I did when I was ten, but I wanted to *look* like an adult at least." Blond and straight, her hair had always fallen to mid-back. Cut now in a wedge, it was shaped neatly around her face in a way that gave focus to the green of her eyes, which were luminous with lingering tears and suddenly anxious. "Was the trip okay?"

"It was fine –"

"But it was long, and you're not used to driving –"

"Which was why I wanted to do it, and it was good, it really was – and for the record, Nicki, you always looked gorgeous, but this cut is very, very cool." By comparison, Charlotte might have felt unsophisticated, if she hadn't known that women paid big bucks for hair like hers, and as for her voice, which was neither high nor distinct, it got her where she needed to be.

Nicole was eyeing her shoes. "*Love* those. Paris?"

Charlotte grinned. "Absolutely."

"And your sweater? Not Paris, but fabulous. So *authentic*." Her voice grew urgent. "Where did you get it? I need one."

“Sorry, sweetie. It’s a hand-me-down from a woman in Ireland.”

“So perfect for this place. It’s been a dismal, cloudy June. I should have warned you, but I was afraid you wouldn’t come.”

“I’ve survived dismal and cloudy before.” She glanced up the hill. “The island looks just the same.” Past the Chowder House were the general store left and the post office right, both buildings long and low so as not to tempt the wind. “Like nothing’s changed.”

“Little has. But we do have wifi at the house. Got it set up last week.”

“For just us two?” she asked to be sure. Nicole had initially told her that Julian would be up with her the week before, but was planning to leave before Charlotte arrived. If he had decided to stay on, it would change the tenor of her visit, putting the fragility of her relationship with Nicole front and center.

But Nicole was all cool confidence. “Hey. We deserve it. Besides, if I don’t keep blogging, people will lose interest and wander away, and then there won’t be as many to hear me when I start pitching our book – which I feel a hundred percent better doing now that you’ve agreed to help. Thank you, Charlotte,” she said earnestly. “I know you have more important things to do.”

Charlotte might have insisted that this was as important a project as she’d done in a while, if a gruff call hadn’t cut off the thought.

“Hellooo.” The ferry captain shot a thumb at her Jeep. “Gonna get it off?”

“Oh.” She laughed. “Sorry.” Releasing Nicole, she ran back onto the ferry and slid behind the wheel. By the time she revved the engine, Nicole was in the passenger’s seat, sliding a hand over the timeworn dashboard. “I am paying you for this.”

Charlotte shot her a startled look and inched forward. “For this car? You are not.”

“You wouldn’t have bought it if it weren’t for my book, and you won’t take money for that.”

“Because it’s *your* book. I’m just along for the ride.” She laughed at her own words. “Can you believe, this is the first car I’ve ever owned?” She eased it onto the dock. “Is it real or what?”

“*Totally* real,” Nicole said, though momentarily wary. “Safe on the highway?”

“It got me here.” Charlotte waved at the captain. “Thank you!” Still crawling along, she drove carefully off the pier. When she was on firm ground, she stopped, angled sideways in the seat, and addressed the first of the ghosts. “I’m sorry about your dad, Nicki. I wanted to be there. I just couldn’t.”

Seeming suddenly older, Nicole smiled sadly. “You were probably better off. There were people all over the place. I didn’t have time to think.”

“A heart attack?”

“Massive.”

“No history of heart problems?”

“None.”

“That’s scary. How’s Angie?” Nicole’s mother. Charlotte had phoned her, too, and though Angie had said all the right words – *Yes, a tragedy, he loved you too, you’re a darling to call* – she had sounded distracted.

“Bad,” Nicole confirmed. “They were so in love. And he loved Quinipeague. His parents bought the house when he was little. He actually proposed to Mom here. They always said that if I’d been a boy, they’d have named me Quinn. She can’t bear to come now. That’s why she’s selling. She can’t even come to pack up. This place was so him.”

“Woo-hoo,” came a holler that instantly lifted the mood, “look who’s here!” A stocky woman, whose apron covered a tee shirt and shorts, was trotting down the stairs from the lower deck of the Chowder House. Dorey Jewett had taken over from her father midway through Charlotte’s summers here and had brought the place up to par with the best of city restaurants. She had the gleaming skin of one who worked over steam, but the creases by her eyes, as much from smiling as from squinting over the harbor, suggested she was nearing sixty. “Missy here said you were coming, but just look at you. All grown up.”

A lifelong Mainer, she talked the part. Loving that, Charlotte laughed. “I was twenty-four when I was here last, no child then.”

“But *look* at you. That’s some sweater!” The sheer ebullience of the woman made Charlotte laugh again. “And Missy? Well, I’ve seen her these last years, but I tell you, the two a’ you put the rest of us to shame.” Her brows went up. “You hungry? Chowder’s hot.”

Chowdah, Charlotte thought happily. It was late afternoon, and she was starved. But Nicole loved to cook, and Nicole was calling the shots.

Leaning across the stick shift, Nicole told Dorey, “To go, please, with corn bread and fiddleheads.”

“You’ll be taking the last a’ those,” Dorey confided. “I had a vendor try to convince me to shrink wrap and freeze, but they’re never the same. I only have ‘em now because they’re from up north – ” *nauth*, “ – and the growing season was late this year. They’d have been gone a week ago, if business hadn’t been slow, but the price a gas is so high, and no one’s out day-cruisin’ anyways when the wind’s so mean. Think you can tough out the chill?” she asked, seeming impervious to it herself with her bare arms and legs.

But Charlotte was still focused on hunger. “Maybe a couple of clams, too?”

“You got ‘em. Drive up top. I’ll bring ‘em out.”

CHAPTER 2

The island was long and narrow, undulating on the surface of the ocean like a kind and gentle cobra. Its broad head, which faced the mainland, was raised to support the center of town. Once a fishing village, its narrow streets remained home to a handful of lobstermen and clammers, though most of the property was now owned by the locals that serviced newer residents. The latter, whose homes descended along the neck, included artists, businessmen, and computer programmers, all drawn to the island for its peace.

Beyond the neck was the body of Quinipeague, accessed by a single sinuous road that slithered past mud flats, sheltered beaches, and rock ledges. The dirt drives leading to summer homes were marked by mailboxes that, come July, would be nearly hidden by wild roses and geraniums.

Nicole’s house was second to last, a full seven miles from the pier and two shy of the tip of the tail. Though less ostentatious than some of the newer homes that had been built since Charlotte had visited last, it was a grand white house two-stories high, with a widow’s walk, black shutters, wide porches, and arms skimming the ground on either side. Those arms held guest rooms that had, on occasions like Nicole’s wedding, slept twenty.

The main house was for family. Bedrooms here were on the second floor to optimize their view, while the first floor, originally broken by doorways and walls, had been reconfigured into two large rooms, one for eating, one for living. Both opened to a wide patio that led to the sea.

Whereas life in the kitchen revolved around a trestle table of pickled oak, the Great Room was furnished to take advantage of the fireplace, which was floor-to-ceiling native stone. This was where Charlotte and Nicole now ate, sitting side by side on the floor at a huge square coffee table. Nicole had insisted on setting beautiful places, arranging their food just so, and photographing it before they started, but the camera was set aside now and the napkins unfolded.

Those napkins picked up the colors of the sofas, throw pillows, and rugs – all vibrant blues and greens that were lush against the fog outside. The logs on the grate had caught; while the heat slowly built, the chowder picked up the slack. Nicole’s jacket was gone, the scarf loosely looped on her silk shirt. Likewise, Charlotte had tossed her sweater aside.

Conversation was sparse, since Charlotte could do little but moan in delight at the food. At one point, after swallowing the juiciest clam belly she’d ever had, she laughed. “How can anything taste this good?”

Having dispensed with a spoon, her elegant friend was drinking the last of her chowder straight from the bowl. She finished, put it down, and wiped her mouth. “Dorey says the key to chowder

is letting the ingredients cure in the pot for a day before dishing it up, which is counterintuitive, since fried clams are best right after they're dug. Personally, I think it's the chives in the chowder." Pensive, she studied her empty bowl. "Or the bacon. Or the parsley." Her eyes rose. "Maybe it's just be the butter. Since Dorey's chowder is Maine style, more milk than cream, the butter shines."

Charlotte took a simpler approach. "Maybe it's just that we haven't had Dorey's chowder in so long," she said, but Nicole gave a quick headshake.

"I had it two nights ago. I have it all summer long, and it's as good in August as it is in June."

"Then you still come for the whole summer?" Charlotte asked in surprise. She had always gotten an email or two from Quinipeague – quick little holiday greetings or thinking-of-you notes – but had assumed Nicole's visits shortened after the wedding. Julian certainly couldn't be gone from the hospital for three months.

"I actually do. I started coming up with the kids," there were two from his first marriage, "because what else were preteens going to do in Philly, and this place was perfect for them. That kind of set the pattern. When they got older and had jobs at home, I kept coming. Julian comes weekends or sometimes for a week. Same with Kaylin and John. Mom and Dad like the company." She flinched. "Liked." Looking around, she said a sad, "It'll be hard not having this."

Charlotte squeezed her arm. The house was only one part, she knew. The rest was Bob. Every available space held photos taken here, so many including him, pictured at various stages of his life. It was more a celebration than a shrine, though she knew Nicole was mourning still.

They were silent for a bit, eating more slowly now. Having finished chowder and clams, Charlotte ate the last of her fiddleheads. There had been summers when she had come too late to catch these before they leafed out into ferns, but once tasted, they were never forgotten.

Wiping her fingers on a moss-green napkin, she cradled her wine glass and rested against the skirt of the sofa. "I feel your dad here. He was a wonderful man. I'm not sure I'd have gone to college without his pushing it. I don't think I'd have had a career. I didn't have a clue what 'work ethic' meant." Bob Lilly was a lawyer, and though he had been adamant about spending summers on Quinipeague, he was up at dawn every day to study the packets delivered by the mail boat the previous day. In the last of Charlotte's years here, there were a fax machine, a computer, and email – and always the phone. Bob insisted on satisfying his clients before he ever went out for a sail. Charlotte remembered times when they had waited for him to finish. In each instance, when he finally joined them, he shared the bare bones of the case so that they understood the urgency. "He set an example for me that I didn't see anywhere else."

Nicole was suddenly on her knees, reaching across the table to straighten the thick candle that stood in an even thicker glass pillar. When she was done, she settled back on the rug. "Your parents died too young."

Charlotte had freed up her hair when they came inside; now she gathered the mass in a single hand and pulled it away, needing clarity against the clutter of her parents' memory. Their lives had been an ongoing orgy of self-absorption and excess. She was a freshman at Yale when they died in a fiery car crash that they might have survived, had one or the other of them been less stoned.

She took a sip of wine, briefly reflecting on what might have been if they had lived longer. The reflection held little optimism. And she was a realist. "They were never role models, Nicki. I try to romanticize them sometimes – y'know, their being gone and all – but I keep coming back to the mess of their lives. They were married three times, including twice to each other, and in between there were affairs and divorces and bankruptcies. They could act a part, like that of respectable renters of the house beside yours in Baltimore, but it was superficial. I was thinking about this while I was driving up today. When my parents met yours, they had just been kicked out of their apartment in Virginia, which, of course, the rental agent didn't know, because back then, there was no quick way to do background checks, and she had a high-end house that needed a short-term renter, and – voilà – in walked my folks. Your parents saw through them, but they kept up the charade. Why did they do that?"

"You."

"I'm serious."

"So am I. They loved our being together. They loved that you looked up to them. They saw your potential. Besides, your parents did great barbecue. I remember those ribs."

"Likely lifted from the gourmet section of the supermarket," Charlotte muttered. She was uncomfortable with praise. It put a spotlight on the guilt she was trying so hard to suppress.

"You're too harsh."

Releasing her hair, she let the other go. "I guess. And even if they did steal the ribs, I met you in the deal, so it wasn't a horrible thing." She and Nicole had hit it off from the start, becoming inseparable during the year they were neighbors. After Charlotte moved away, there were overnights, though always at Nicole's house, and, of course, there were summers on Quinnipeague. "My parents would have been at a loss to find something for me to do. Your parents were a windfall when it came to that."

"But it worked both ways. My parents got me a sister at a time when my mom was still having miscarriages. I think your being here helped her accept that I would survive without a sibling. Besides, they trusted you more than they trusted some of the island girls." Eyes wide, she clamped her mouth shut against a smile that escaped anyway. "Remember Crystal? And *Brandy*?"

Charlotte laughed. "Bizarre Brandy. To this day, I've never seen so many piercings. What's she up to now?"

“She’s a hairdresser on the mainland. Crystal’s still here. She married Aaron Deegan, who lobsters with his dad. They have five kids.”

“Five? Whoa. And Beth Malcolm? She was smart. I was always afraid you two would be friends, so you wouldn’t need me here.”

“Are you kidding? I was too shy to do much with her. I didn’t mix with locals until you showed up. You were bolder than I was. You got me out. My parents loved that.”

“Beth was a reader, too,” Charlotte recalled, then thought. “What are you reading right now?”

“*Salt*. It’s about – ”

“Maine!” she broke in, delighted. “So am I! It was on sale at JFK when I flew in from Australia, and when I saw the island on the cover, how could I not buy it?”

“It’s not our island – ”

“No, but you can feel it, smell it, almost taste it. Are you loving it?”

Nicole grinned. “Loving it. Loving the setting, the characters, the magic.”

Charlotte dittoed each point, which on one hand wasn’t surprising. She and Nicole had always liked the same books. They used to spend hours on the beach, passing them back and forth while the surf pounded the shore.

On the other hand, ten years had passed. While Charlotte was building houses in post-earthquake San Salvador or post-tornado La Plata, Nicole had been decorating a plush Philadelphia home. While Charlotte was in remote towns writing about doctors, farmers, and artists, Nicole had been in Center City blogging about food. Granted, *Salt* was on every bestseller list. But that they would both be reading it right now was evidence of ways in which they were still the same.

“At first I thought the author was a woman,” Nicole offered. “Chris Mauldin – it could go either way. There’s no photo, and the bio is vague.”

Charlotte had wondered it, too. The sex was powerful but exquisitely tender. She didn’t know guys who made love that way – which was probably part of the wide appeal of the book. Chris Mauldin was serving up dream stuff to an audience that craved it. At least, Charlotte did. She wasn’t sure about Nicole and certainly couldn’t ask. “Well, if he was trying to hide being male, he’s given up. I googled the name, and a ‘he’ came right up. Does anyone know his real identity?”

“Not on the forums. I swear that’s part of the phenomenon. Think about it. He’s self-published – ”

“Only in e,” Charlotte cautioned, sucking cornbread crumbs from her finger. “My hardcover copy has a big time logo.”

“Right, but *Salt* was an e-bestseller for weeks and weeks before he sold the print rights. Can you imagine his marketing genius? He knows how to work the web and does it in total anonymity from wherever.”

“Anonymity is part of what makes the success of the book such a phenomenon. It’s the big tease. Here’s this mystery guy serving up our dream, and we don’t know who he is, where he lives, or what he looks like.”

“Like it matters who he is?” Nicole asked. “He had me hooked on Page One. I mean, what a great first line. *Every man wants love, if he can get past the fear of exposure.* We like him because he’s honest. At least, I do.” Scrambling up, she added a log to the fire. “I like him because he’s willing to put himself out there and be vulnerable and maybe end up being hurt. Let me tell you, though, *I* would never hurt this man. I’d buy anything he writes – and I say that though I’m only halfway through *Salt*.”

Charlotte wasn’t even that far. “Is he working on a second book?”

“I hope so, but he’s being vague about that, too. One thing’s for sure. He’s blown away the competition. I’d love to do that with a book.” She jumped up. “Stay. I’m getting dessert.” She was off.

“Where am I supposed to *put* dessert?” Charlotte called after her. Nicole hadn’t finished fiddleheads or clams, but she was up and down, wearing off what little she’d eaten.

“You’ll find room,” came the voice from the kitchen, along with the open and shut of the refrigerator door. “I cannot have a guest here for take-in without adding something of myself to the meal.” She returned with snifters of small, wild strawberries. “These are the first of the season. I picked them this morning.”

“On the roadside?” Charlotte asked, tickled by a dozen memories. Nicole had always known how to spot the best patches, like her eyes could see the tiny red glow beneath the leaves from fifty feet away. She had been known to yell *Stop the car!* at odd times to fill either a bag or her hands.

“No. One of the families on the neck has wide open meadows loaded with fruit. They started a little pick-your-own business, with strawberries now and blueberries soon. They cultivate wildness, and they don’t use herbicides. I go there as often as I can.”

“These are *so* small,” Charlotte marveled, though she knew they’d be packed with flavor. “It takes forever to pick a pint.”

“It’s about the process,” Nicole said with a smile, seeming to relax just thinking about it.

So did Charlotte. And yes, she could find room. Slipping a berry into her mouth, she savored it, before returning to the interrupted discussion. “Maybe you will.”

“Will what?”

“Blow away the competition. I read your blog, Nicki. You get hundreds of comments on every post – and on Facebook, how many friends?”

“Seventy thousand.” This, said with quiet pride as she scooped up their chowder bowls and headed off again. “Cappuccino?”

“No, thanks. You are amazing, Nicki.”

“The machine does it, not me.”

“I meant your blog.” She had taken a more traditional route herself, studying journalism at Yale, followed by a post-grad year at Columbia. It was all very safe – precisely why, needing to break the mold, she had signed on as a web correspondent in Afghanistan, where danger was a constant. The deal was for six months. Back in the States, she poured herself into hands-on charity work while the nightmares receded. Writing was her therapy. Between pieces she did in Appalachia – or in communities struggling to rebuild after a hurricane or fire – and those from Afghanistan, she caught the eye of magazine editors, who signed on for the pieces she pitched.

It was a career trajectory that had been taken by scads of journalists before her. But Nicole – quiet, introverted Nicole was breaking new ground. “How’d you do it? How’d you get so big?” she called.

There was silence from the kitchen, then a dry, “God works in wondrous ways.”

“I want to know how it *happened*,” Charlotte insisted. “Nicole, are you going to come in here and sit?”

She reappeared with a small ceramic creamer from which she topped the fruit in each snifter with something that looked far thicker than cream. “Sabayon, made with Dad’s favorite Riesling,” her high voice announced. “I forgot how much wine he’d stored here.”

“Oh, yummm.” Forget the strawberries; Charlotte tasted the sauce. “*Yummm.*” Of course, a mouthful of fruit *with* sauce would be even better.

She was about to dig in, when Nicole said a sharp, “Wait!” Up again, she grabbed her camera, arranged the sniffers just so and took several shots, before setting the camera aside. They were on the sofa now, the fire crackling around another new log. She didn’t eat, simply sipped her cappuccino with her eyes on the hearth.

Charlotte sensed a melancholy. “Thinking of Bob?” Eating sauce made with his favorite wine would do it.

“And Jules.” She was suddenly teary. “He gave me the cappuccino machine a couple of summers ago. We have one just like it at home. He used to make cappuccino every morning and bring it to me in bed.” Darting Charlotte an awkward glance, she added a quick, “He’s too busy now.”

Charlotte felt a twinge of envy. It wasn’t about Julian. It was about loving and being loved in return. “You miss him.”

“Yes.” She gathered herself. “Hence my blog.”

“Go on,” Charlotte urged gently.

Sitting straighter, Nicole wet her lips. “Well, you know I like to cook. And entertain.”

“Martha Stewart *Living*.” It had always been around the house. Even now, there had to be a dozen issues stacked on the coffee table. Granted, a second stack held copies of *New England Home*, *Summer Cottage*, and *Cooking Light*, but the *Living* pile was higher.

“My bible,” Nicole admitted. “It still inspires me, but since I never have exactly the same ingredients she does for, say, a roast duck or bouillabaisse – or the same materials for a centerpiece – mine come out a little different. So Julian and I were having people for dinner a lot – doctors, hospital administrators, friends who’d bring friends – and afterward they’d ask for recipes, or menu suggestions, or how to arrange wildflowers in a vase, or where to buy grass-fed beef. After a while, I thought it’d be cool to have a place to post the information so that everyone could read it. Suddenly people I didn’t know were emailing. They were picking up on organic and local and home-grown.”

“It’s a hot topic.”

“I wasn’t thinking about that when I started to blog, but by the time the site was built, most of my posts had to do with eating organic, buying organic, supporting local farms and markets and identifying restaurants that did the same, because that’s what people were asking about. I began tagging along with Julian when he traveled for work, so it wasn’t just Philadelphia, but Settle, Denver, and Chicago. And it was Quinnepeague. People here didn’t give it a name, but they were living farm-to-table before farm-to-table was a movement. They didn’t call their produce organic, but they let you know that they didn’t use artificial pesticides and fertilizers, and you knew the result – all delicious and safe. Organic was ingrained in me. Majoring in environmental studies at Middlebury was a logical next step, but, I swear I didn’t put two and two together until I started blogging about Quinnepeague. It’s amazing, Charlotte. Those blogs get the most responses. People love reading about local farms and hand-made goods and free-range chickens, and it’s all about farm-to-table.”

“Hence nikitotable.com.” Charlotte was still amazed. “How many people read you now? Say, a single post.”

“Over time, maybe thirty thousand.”

“And Twitter?”

“The same number.”

Charlotte sat back. “That’s *amazing*, Nicki. All from nothing in how long?”

“Six years. Mostly the last four.” Pushing up, she was off for the kitchen again. “I have cookies.”

“I’m *stuffed*,” Charlotte cried, but the words protest was barely out when Nicole returned with a dish of chocolate almond cookies.

“From the café.” Settling back into the sofa, she retrieved her cappuccino.

Charlotte took a cookie, but didn’t eat. “Did your dad know about the book?”

“He knew I was talking with a publisher. He’d have loved this.” She frowned at her cup and said quietly, “I think about your parents, who weren’t there for you. Then I think about Dad and me. To be so close to a parent – I was very lucky.”

“You still are. You have Julian and his kids. You have Angie. They keep you anchored. I envy you that.”

“You do not,” Nicole scoffed with a small smile. “You love freedom. You love *adventure*. I’m the one who needs support.” She stood, pausing as she reached for the fruit. “You’ve had enough, right?”

“For now.” But before she could tell Nicole to sit and relax, Nicole was collecting utensils and plates. “Did you finish the Australia story?”

“I did.” Gathering up wine glasses and napkins, Charlotte followed her into the kitchen. “Seriously. You have an incredible life. Freedom has its downside. There are times when I’d give anything for a real home. You – you have stability. I can’t believe you and Julian have anniversary number ten coming up. Will you do something big to celebrate?”

“Maybe. What did you do about France?”

“Postponed. I’ll go in the fall. But you need to do something for your tenth.”

“We were in Paris two years ago,” Nicole said as she loaded the dishwasher. “Julian delivered a paper there.”

Julian Carlyle was cutting edge when it came to prenatal cardiac surgery. A brilliant surgeon, he had been a rising star at the time of his marriage to Nicole. Charlotte assumed Paris wasn’t his only big-time venue. “How often do you two travel?”

“Every few months.” Her green eyes lit. “Want to take a walk?”

“Where?”

“Wherever you want.”

Having been in the car all day and just overeaten, Charlotte liked the idea. “The beach,” was all she had to say.

Bundling up, they slipped out the sliders, crossed the stone patio, and went down two wide granite steps. Typical of the North Atlantic, the shore was rocky. The beach grass that sprouted between boulders was its only softening touch. Even the sand at the water’s edge was hard packed and strewn with stones. But the ruggedness didn’t detract from its lure. Here was nature in its raw beauty. The tide had ebbed, leaving behind swathes of seaweed. Drawn by its fishy smell, gulls squealed as they dove to peck marine life from the tangle.

Since it was still light, they walked toward the tail of the island. Sand and surf were rougher at this end, but invigorating. The breeze was steady, blowing hair, scarf, and grass. When Nicole looped an arm through Charlotte’s, they walked as they had when they were kids – and for a time Charlotte was one again, on her own personal escape.

Then they passed the spot where she had been with Julian, and the escape turned dark. She had never retained the details of that hour. There had been too much wine, too much exhaustion, too much fog that night. There had also been subconscious baggage, at least on her part, though she didn’t admit that for weeks. At the time, all she saw was a gigantic mistake. Julian had sworn her to silence the next morning, and she had readily agreed.

His life hadn’t changed. He married Nicole a month later and had gone on with his career. For all she knew, he had convinced himself that nothing had ever happened.

She had tried to do it, too. There had been no love involved, no forethought. It was a gross error, a lapse in character, and while she might blame her parents for the example they set, she had no one to blame but herself. Julian had started it, but she had gone along.

Feeling ten years’ worth of guilt now, she freed her arm under the pretense of scrambling over a cluster of rocks. When she returned to Nicole, she walked sideways. “So, how is the good doctor?”

“Fine,” Nicole chirped. “Really busy.”

“Still working long hours?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Does that bother you?”

“He loves his work. What about you, Charlotte? Who do you date?”

“No one special. But you didn’t answer my question. Do his hours bother you?”

“How can they?” Nicole returned. “He’s in the prime of his career. He lectures, he sits on panels, and he’s even on tv now, which is a total no-brainer since he’s handsome and articulate. They call him when they’re reporting on anything related to fetal surgery. He’s their expert.” Her fingers quoted the word.

“So he’s in demand,” Charlotte said and couldn’t resist adding, “I’m glad. I was worried he’d have hung around here longer if I hadn’t been coming.” As tests went, it was subtle. His absence might be entirely innocent; any man would be wary of spending time alone with two women writing a cookbook. If Nicole knew about the sex, she hadn’t let on in any of their earlier discussions.

Indeed, she seemed appalled now. “Oh no. He would have loved to see you, but he wants to be at Duke a week before the new doctors arrive, and he has to settle everything in Philly before he leaves.”

“I’m amazed he can leave his own work for a whole month.”

She waved a hand. “It’s for teaching, which is honestly and truly, I mean, *really* his strength. Hold on.” Digging the phone from her pocket, she saw the screen and picked up the call with a grin “Hey. She did, got here just fine. What?” She covered her free ear. “I’m sorry, the ocean is pretty loud. Oh, wow, that’s great. Beijing? You *should*. Uh, honey, we’re just walking the beach. Can I call when we get back?” She listened for a minute, bowing her head at the end. “Oh,” she murmured, walking faster, and said something Charlotte thought was *shit*, though Nicole didn’t usually use that word. “Okay. I’ll call. Love you.”

Ending the call, she stuffed the phone back in her pocket, and, head still down, strode on.

Charlotte’s legs were longer, but she had to hurry to catch up. “Everything okay?”

Nicole raised her head, eyes blank for a beat before refocusing. “He was invited to China. May have a conflict. It’ll be okay.” She didn’t sound sure, but before Charlotte could ask, she glanced at the sky. “It’s getting dark.”

“Rain clouds?”

“Or dusk.” She brightened. “Remember when we used to walk out here with the sun going down?”

“I do.” Charlotte smiled. “We were taking a chance, going a little farther, a little farther, closer and closer to Cole land.” She squinted, trying to penetrate the fog and spot the marker. “Cecily Cole is at the top of my list. I can’t wait to talk with her.”

Cecile's herbs grew in the garden of her home at Quinnepeague's outer tip, but to call her an herbalist was to understate her place in island lore. Her herbs were pure in flavor and powerful in use – and she knew how to use them, both gastronomically and medicinally. She had a way of appearing with remedies when they were needed most; this was the light side of Cecily Cole. But there was a dark side, or so island men claimed. They swore that when they suffered heartburn, it was one of Cecily's herbs punishing them for an alleged offense to their wives. A diminutive woman with silver hair that protected her back like a gossamer shawl, Cecile was alternately loved and feared.

“Oh Lord.” Nicole was gaping at her. “You don't know. Cecily died five years ago.”

Charlotte stopped walking. “Died? But she's key to cooking here. How can we do this book without her?”

“Her herbs are still around. Didn't the chowder and clams taste as good as ever?”

“Yes, but you can't talk about island food without talking about Cecily.”

“We can still talk about her. We just can't talk *with* her. Not that we ever really could.”

Charlotte remained stunned. As legendary as Cecily was, she had always been something of a mystery. She had come to the island at the age of twenty – or eighteen or twenty-two, depending on which version of the story you heard – after a disastrous love affair with an influential mainlander. Likewise depending on the story-teller, she had either chosen to leave the continental US or been driven away, though it was generally agreed that she bought her house with a pay-off from the affair. She had brought her plants with her, along with the seeds of legend, and lived quietly at her end of the island. Her interactions with islanders were limited to trips to the store for supplies and, increasingly, gifting herbs to those in need. Habitually distrustful, she did not welcome guests to her home. Rumor had it that she would put a curse on anyone who trespassed on her land.

But that was rumor, and in the interest of the cookbook, Charlotte had the perfect excuse to approach.

“I think we should go back,” Nicole said.

Charlotte had had done stories on some highly intimidating characters, not the least being a Native American on Martha's Vineyard, who claimed to be the descendent of Wampanoag medicine men and had a trail of miraculous doings to prove it.

Cecily Cole? She might have been an epic challenge, with the potential for information just as great.

But it was what it was. “She's dead,” Charlotte said. “She can't do anything. I think we should go see if those herbs still grow.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” Nicole warned. “Her son lives there now.”

“I thought he was in jail.”

“Not anymore. Come on. I’ll race you back.” She turned, facing home.

“Did he dig up the herbs, or are they still there?”

“I don’t know.”

“Someone must.”

“Well, I’m not asking,” Nicole said. “The last thing I need right now is more bad vibes.”

Charlotte studied her face. The sky was indeed darkening, taking detail with it, but she could see tension. It seemed out of place on such an innocent face.

Likewise, the awkwardness with which Nicole waved a hand. “You know what I mean – Dad dropping dead, our selling the house.”

“He would have loved your doing this book.”

“I could have used his encouragement.”

Charlotte slipped an arm around her waist. “You have me. I’ll be right here until the book is done.”

Nicole smiled. There may have been tears in her eyes, though it could have been the reflection of the ocean in the dim light. “I love you, y’know.”

Charlotte hugged her. A moment later, exhilarated to be the object of something so rich, she dared Nicole with a look. They set off down the beach at a fast jog, trading the lead as they dodged obstacles in the sand. By the time they reached the house, they were out of breath and laughing.

Their movement on the beach steps set off floodlights from the patio all the way around to the kitchen door. Nicole stopped, sniffed. “Strange,” she said and began walking toward the side garden, where a profusion of reds and pinks blurred at the edge of the beam. “I was out here this morning. The lavender was nowhere near being in bloom. It’s been way too cold. But how could I not have smelled this?”

Charlotte hadn’t smelled it earlier either, but she couldn’t miss it now. This lavender was in full bloom, its tall spikes clustered with purple flowers that looked too soft for the wind but apparently weren’t, since they held their form well.

“My mind must have been somewhere else,” Nicole said. “But this is *perfect*.” Moments later, she had clippers and began handing sprigs to Charlotte, who was absorbing their smell to the point of stupor. Finally, Nicole stood, closed her eyes, and inhaled. “Ahhhh. Amazing.” She took half of what Charlotte held and sang softly, “Those are for your pillowcase, these are for mine.”

“Don’t we have to dry them first?”

“And dilute the smell? Lavender has calming properties. I’ll take it full strength, thanks.”

Charlotte didn’t need calming – or rather, didn’t want it. She wanted to bask in the glow of hope. She was being given a second chance to prove she could be a loyal friend, which was more than she might have asked after living ten years and a huge secret apart. She had expected awkwardness, wariness, reticence – *something*. But her arrival on Quinnipeague had been as smooth as the ocean was not.

Besides, after leaving New York at dawn and driving for hours, she was exhausted. If the lavender sprigs did anything beyond make her smile, she had no idea. Minutes after her head hit the pillow, she had fallen into a sleep so deep that she heard nothing of the conversation coming from Nicole’s room down the hall.

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