

From modern-day Roanoke Island to the sweeping backdrop of North Carolina's Blue Ridge Mountains and Roosevelt's WPA folklore writers, past and present intertwine to create an unexpected destiny...

Restaurant owner Whitney Monroe is desperate to save her business from a hostile takeover. The inheritance of a decaying Gilded Age hotel on North Carolina's Outer Banks may provide just the ray of hope she needs. But things at The Excelsior are more complicated than they seem. Whitney's estranged stepfather is entrenched on the third floor, and the downstairs tenants are determined to save the historic building. Searching through years of stored family heirlooms may be Whitney's only hope of quick cash, but will the discovery of an old necklace and a depression-era love story change everything?

*For those who chased stories,
Where none had gone before,
The Federal Writers.*

*May history remember you kindly.
But most of all,
May history remember you.*

*The one story you didn't tell
Was your own.*

I hope this tale does you justice.

Chapter 1

Perhaps denial is the mind's way of protecting the heart from a sucker punch it can't handle. Or maybe it's simpler than that. Maybe denial in the face of overwhelming evidence is a mere byproduct of stubbornness.

Whatever the reason, all I could think standing in the doorway, one hand on the latch and the other trembling on the keys, was, *This can't be happening. This can't be how it ends. It's so . . . quiet.* A dream should make noise when it's dying. It deserves to go out in a tragic blaze of glory. There should be a dramatic death scene, a gasping for breath . . . something.

Denise laid a hand on my shoulder, whispered, "Are you all right?" Her voice faded at the end, cracking into jagged pieces.

"No." A hard, bitter tone sharpened the cutting edge on the word. It wasn't aimed at Denise. She knew that. "Nothing about this is *all right*. Not one single thing."

"Yeah." Resting against the doorframe, she let her neck go slack until her cheek touched the wood. "I'm not sure if it's better or worse to stand here looking at it, though. For the last time, I mean."

"We've put our hearts into this place. . . ." Denial reared its unreasonable head again. I would've called it *hope*, but if it was hope, it was the false and paper-thin kind. The kind that only teases you.

Denise's hair fell like a pale, silky curtain, dividing the two of us. We'd always been at opposite ends of the cousin spectrum—Denise strawberry blonde, pale, and freckled, me dark-haired, blue-eyed, and olive-skinned. Denise a homebody and me a wanderer.

"Whitney, we have to let it go. If we don't, we'll end up losing both places."

“I know. I know you’re right.” But still a part of me rebelled. *All* of me rebelled. I couldn’t stand the thought of being bullied one more time. “I understand that you’re being logical. And on top of that, you have Mattie to think about. And your grandmother. We’ve got to cut the losses while we can still keep the first restaurant going.”

“I’m sorry,” Denise choked out. With dependents, she couldn’t afford any more risk. We’d already gone too far in this skirmish-by-skirmish war against crooked county commissioners, building inspectors taking backroom payoffs, deceptive construction contractors, and a fire marshal who was a notorious good ol’ boy. They were all in cahoots with local business owners who didn’t want any competition in this backwater town.

Denise and I should’ve been more careful to check out the environment before we’d fallen in love with the vintage mill building and decided it would be perfect for our second Bella Tazza location and our first really high-end eatery. Positioned along a busy thoroughfare for tourists headed north to ski or to spend summer vacations in the Upper Peninsula, Bella Tazza 2, with its high, lighted granary tower, was a beacon for passersby.

But in eleven months, we’d been closed more than we’d been open. Every time we thought we’d won the battle to get and keep our occupancy permit, some new and expensive edict came down and we were closed until we could comply. Then the local contractors did their part to slow the process and raise the bills even more.

You’re not the one who needs to apologize, I wanted to say to Denise, but I didn’t. Instead, I sank onto one of the benches and surveyed the murals Denise and I had painted after spending long days at Bella Tazza #1, in the next county over.

I felt sick all over again.

“The minute we have to give up the lease, they’ll move in here.” Denise echoed my thoughts the way only a cousin who’s more like a big sister can. “Vultures.”

“That’s the worst part.” But it wasn’t, really. The worst part was that it was *my* fault we’d gone this far in trying to preserve Tazza 2. Denise would’ve surrendered to Tagg Harper and his hometown henchmen long ago. Denise would’ve played it safe if only I’d let her.

Yet even now, after transferring the remaining food inventory to the other restaurant and listing the equipment and fixtures we could sell at auction, I still couldn’t accept what was happening. Somehow, somehow, Tagg and his cronies had managed to cause another month’s postponement of our case with the state code commission. We couldn’t hang on that long with Tazza 2 closed but still racking up monthly bills. This was death, at least for Tazza 2, and if we weren’t careful, the financial drain would swallow Tazza 1, leaving our remaining employees jobless.

“Let’s just go.” Denise flipped the light switch, casting our blood, sweat, and tears into shadow. “I can’t look at it anymore.”

The click of the latch held a finality, but my mind was churning, my heart still groping for a loophole . . . wishing a white knight would ride in at the eleventh hour, brandishing sword and shield.

Instead, there was Tagg Harper’s four-wheel-drive truck, sitting in the ditch down by the road. Stalker. He was probably scratching his belly while sipping a brewski and smiling at himself.

“Oh, I hate that man.” Denise’s teeth clenched over the words. “I’d like to . . .”

I couldn't help myself—I took a step in Tagg's direction.

“Whitney, don't get into it with him. There's no telling what he's capable of.”

My despair morphed into a feverish anger. I'd never hated anyone the way I hated Tagg Harper.

Denise's hand snaked out and grabbed my jacket. “Don't give him any more satisfaction. It's bad enough that he'll see our equipment on eBay as soon as we post the listings. Jerk. Honest competition with his restaurant, I can handle, but this . . .”

“I'd just like to . . . walk down there and nail him with a kick to that great big gut of his.” The past few months' drama had driven me to think about refresher courses in Tang So Do karate, a pastime I'd given up after leaving the high school bullies behind, twenty years ago. I hadn't told Denise, but someone had been prowling around my cabin at night.

As usual, my cousin was focused on the practical, on achieving *containment*. “We need to concentrate on digging out financially and keeping the first store alive.”

“I know.” The problem was, I'd been adding things up in my head as we'd made our auction list in the mill building. What we'd get for the supplies and equipment wouldn't even take care of the final utility costs here, much less the legal bills we'd amassed. With the flagging economy and the need to absorb as many Tazza 2 employees as possible into the other restaurant, I wasn't even sure we could make payroll. And we *had* to make payroll. Our employees were counting on it. They needed to pay their bills, too.

Guilt fell hard and heavy, settling stone by stone as I crossed the parking lot. If I hadn't moved back to Michigan five years ago and convinced Denise to start a restaurant with me, she would've still been in a nice, safe teaching job. But I'd been sailing off a big

win after quitting an upper management job, opening my own bistro in Dallas, proving it out, and selling it for a nice chunk of change. With three hundred thousand dollars in my pocket, I'd been so sure I had the perfect formula for success. I'd told myself I was doing a good thing for my cousin, helping her escape the constant struggle to singlehandedly finance a household, take care of her aging grandmother, and pay for Mattie's asthma care on a teacher's salary.

Denise, I had a feeling, had been hoping that our starting a business together would somehow defeat the wanderlust that had taken me from culinary school to the far corners of the world, opening world-class kitchens for a multinational restaurant conglomerate.

“See you in the morning, Whit.” A quick shoulder-hug and she disappeared into her vehicle, cranking the engine, then crunching across the leftover ice runoff of a polar-vortex winter. Rather than disappearing down the driveway, she stopped at the curb, near Tagg's truck. Through the cold-smoke, I could feel her watching, waiting to be sure I made it to the road without spiraling into a confrontation.

It was so like Denise to look after me. Since her long-ago days as my after school babysitter, she'd always been fiercely protective. Like the rest of Mom's family, she worried that I was stuffing down the aftereffects of my father's death, and that Mom was making a mistake by exposing me to my grandmother on far away Roanoke Island. It was no secret that Ziltha Benoit held my mother responsible for the untimely loss of her son.

Denise had silently understood all the things I couldn't tell my mom, or anyone—the painful inadequacy that had haunted my childhood, the sense that I could never be good enough, the ridicule in the exclusive private school across town, where Mom's music teaching job came with free tuition for me. The awkwardness of not fitting in with the

silver-spoon kids there, even though my last name was Benoit. Denise had always been my oasis of kindness and sage advice—the big sister I never had.

Passing by her car on the way out, I couldn't even look at her. I just bumped down the winter-rutted drive, turned onto the road, and headed toward home, checking once in the mirror to make sure Denise was out of the parking lot too.

Tagg Harper's taillights came on just after her vehicle pulled onto the road. My anger flared with tidal force, and I was starting a U-turn before I even knew what was happening. By the time I made it back to the restaurant, Tagg was positioning his truck in the middle of the parking lot. *Our* parking lot. The driver's-side door was just swinging open.

I wheeled around and pulled close enough to prevent him from wallowing out. Cold air rushed in my window, a quick, hard, bracing force.

"You even set *one foot* on this parking lot, Tagg Harper, I'll call the police." Not that the county sheriff wasn't in Tagg's pocket too. Tagg's dumpy pizza joint was the spot where all the local boys gathered for coffee breaks . . . if they knew what was good for them.

Lowering his window, he rested a meaty arm on the frame, drawing the door inward a bit. The hinges groaned. "Public parking lot." An index finger whirled lazily in the air. "Heard a little rattle in my engine just now. Thought I'd stop and check it out."

"I'll bet." Of course he wouldn't admit that he wanted to get his meat hooks on this place. He was probably afraid I'd be recording on my cell phone, trying to secure proof of the threats, the bribes to officials and contractors, the constant harassment.

Which was why he was smiling and blinking at me like a ninny now.

“It’s *my* parking lot, until this is all settled. We reserve the right to refuse service to *anyone*. You’re not welcome here.” *Don’t back down. Not this time. Don’t let him bully you.* Gripping the steering wheel tighter, I swallowed hard.

“Heard you were moving out early to save on the rent.” His breath drew smoke curls in the frosted air. I smelled beer, as usual. “Expensive to keep a building for no reason.”

“Well, you heard wrong, because we’ve got a hearing with the state code commission in six weeks, and with that little bit of extra time to prepare, there’s not a way in the world we won’t win our case.”

His chin receded into wind-reddened rolls of neck fat before he relaxed in his seat, self-assured and smiling. He knew a bluff when he heard one. “It’d be a shame to drag yourself any deeper under . . . what with your *other* business to think about and all.”

What did *that* mean? Bella Tazza #1 was outside the county. There wasn’t anything Tagg could do to affect it, other than posting derogatory food reviews online, which he and his peeps had already done.

But he was thinking of *something* right now. That was clear enough. His tongue snaked out and wet his lips and then he had the gall to give the mill building a leisurely assessment before turning his attention to me again. “Guess I’ll wait until the carcass cools a little more.”

Pulling the door closed, he rolled up his window, and then he was gone.

I sat alone in the moon shadow of my dying dream, once again feeling like the little girl who would never be worthy of dreams, the Benoit name, or anything else.

No matter how far I traveled, no matter what I achieved, the girl remained just a few inches beneath the skin.

Right now, she was telling me this was exactly what I deserved.

* * * * *

Rounding icy curves as the headlights glinted against dirty mounds of leftover snow, I had the urge to let go of the wheel, close my eyes, and just stay wherever the car came to rest . . . until the cold or carbon monoxide put an end to all of this. In some logical part of my brain, I knew that was an overreaction, but the idea of going broke and taking my cousin with me was unbearable.

There has to be a way out. There has to be something I can do. . . .

Yet no miraculous possibilities came to mind, during the thirty-minute drive home. Finally, the surface of Lake Michigan glinted through the trees, and I looked toward it seeking the comfort it usually provided. This time, all I could see was a vision of myself, floating cold and silent beneath the surface.

Stop. That. The words in my head were a reprimand, strong and determined like my mother's voice. *You are not your father.*

But occasionally over the years, I had wondered—was there, inside me, the same demon that had taken him from us before I was six years old, leaving me to remember him as a feeling, a snatch of sound, a mist of memory?

Could I, without seeing it ahead of time, come to a place where giving up seemed the best option?

How was the thought even possible for me, knowing firsthand the pain a decision like that left behind? Knowing what happened in the aftermath when a person you loved entered the cold waters and swam out to sea with no intention of returning to shore?

Someone should tell the dead that saving the living isn't as simple as leaving a note to

say, *It's no one's fault*. For the living, it's always someone's fault.

Turning onto the cabin road, I cleared my head and felt the tears beginning to come, seeking to cleanse. Tears seemed like the only thing I had left. They swelled and pounded in my throat as I drew closer to the little lake cabin that had been home since I'd moved back to Michigan. Fortunately, Mrs. Doyne, who lived in the house out front, kept her cabin rentals at 1950s prices. She was more interested in having responsible, long-term tenants than in making money off the property.

Dressed in her nightgown and probably ready to turn in, she waved from behind a picture window as I passed by the house. One of her ever-present crossword puzzles dangled in her hand.

I had the random realization that even Mrs. Doyne would be hurt if I lost myself beneath the lake's quiet surface. *Get your act together, Whitney Monroe*, she'd probably say. *Life goes on*. Mrs. Doyne had survived the death of her husband of fifty years, her one true love. She worked in her gardens, volunteered all over the area, and mentored a Girl Scout troop. She had the best attitude of any person I'd ever met and it went all the way through to the core. She was fearless, always up for a new adventure.

There had been a time when I'd thought that if I kept up the façade long enough on the outside, I'd become that on the inside, too. I'd opened world-class kitchens, driven others to keep up the pace, never let myself get rattled when a newbie on a hot line scorched a sauce or a waiter dropped a tray. I'd dealt with corporate higher-ups who weren't much different from Tagg Harper—bloated, self-important personalities bent on showing the world how special they were. I handled things well. I had things under control.

But what I'd never been faced with, what I'd avoided my entire adult life, was the

very thing that had been squeezing me dry these past months. I'd never allowed someone else's well-being to depend on my own. Even during a short marriage that had both begun and ended with disaster, I'd maintained my own finances, kept my own life, and so had David. Both of us seemed to prefer it that way. I'd never been faced with the knowledge that my choices, my actions, my *failure* would destroy another person's life.

Turning off the car, I rested my head against the steering wheel as the cold needled through the windows and the engine's chugs settled to dull metallic pings. A sob wrenched the air and I heard it before I felt it.

A breath heaved inward, stung my throat. Another sob pressed out. I lifted my head, let it bump against the steering wheel, thought, *Stop, stop, stop!*

The knock on the window struck me like an electrical pulse, catapulting me upright. Beyond the blurry haze, I made out Mrs. Doyne's silhouette against the security lamps, the fur-lined hood of her coat catching the light and giving her a fluffy halo.

My emotions scattered like rabbits, leaving behind only two that I could identify—horror and embarrassment. I didn't want *anyone* to see me like this, least of all Mrs. Doyne. It would only worry her. She'd been a godsend to me these past few years, and even though I'd tried to keep my financial situation under wraps as Bella Tazza 2 imploded, she'd figured out that things were bad. She'd started bringing me casseroles and offering to wait for the rent if I needed her to.

Like everyone else in town, she wasn't aware of the whole story. All she knew was that we'd had some trouble with the inspections on the new restaurant. I was careful not to reveal more. The truth about Tagg Harper's underhanded dealings would only hurt her. Mrs. Doyne's deceased husband had been one of Tagg's favorite uncles and ice-fishing

buddies.

Pretending to reach for my keys in the ignition, I wiped my eyes and then rolled down the window, hoping she wouldn't notice what a mess I was. Apparently it was obvious, even in the dark.

“Oh, honey.” She touched my shoulder, and I clenched against another rush of tears. “I guess you heard. I'm so sorry . . .” She seemed to leave the sentence unfinished, its meaning a mystery. What was she *sorry* for? Did she know about the postponement of the code commission hearing? Had she been in it with the rest of the Harpers all along?

Even the question hurt. I'd come to think of Mrs. Doyne as almost as a substitute for my mother. They enjoyed all the same things. They both loved music. They both played the violin. They had the same Upper Peninsula accent. Being around Mrs. Doyne was like having my mom back again. Mrs. Doyne was even a cancer survivor. Someone strong enough to defeat the disease that had taken Mom five years ago. It was after her funeral that Denise and I had reconnected and spent a long night talking about life, dreams, and Denise's struggle to pay Mattie's medical bills after her ex-husband refused to keep up the child support. Suddenly, the unexpected offer on my restaurant in Dallas had made sense. All of it seemed meant to be.

“Come on inside.” Mrs. Doyne's hand circled my arm as if she meant to forcibly lift me out the window. “You look like you need a spot of hot tea.”

I didn't argue. I didn't have the energy. I just went along.

Inside, the house smelled of cats, baseboard heat, and plants in fresh pots. When spring finally came, Mrs. Doyne's garden would be half-grown in the sunroom. How could anyone who lovingly nursed the tender shoots of new life be in on Tagg Harper's

dirty dealings? The bullies were getting the best of me again, making me paranoid. I couldn't let someone like Tagg make me lose hope in other people. Good people like Mrs. Doyne.

"Sit," she said, leading me to a sofa space between three curled-up cats. "Let me put the water on."

Sinking down with my cold fingers tucked between my knees, I let my head fall back, closed my eyes, tried to think. A cat crawled into my lap, nestled there and toyed with the zipper on my coat, its soft purr a lull of comfort.

"I tried to call you earlier when I got the message." Mrs. Doyne's voice seemed far away.

Another month . . . can we hang on another month? There has to be some way to get the money. . . .

Options and options and options cycled through my mind, ending in brick wall after brick wall after brick wall, and then the biggest one of all—the fact that if we went any further with all of this, we risked losing everything.

You can't do that to Denise. You can't do that to Denise and Mattie and Grandma Daisy.

You never should've come back here. You never should've involved them in all of this. It's your fault. It's all your fault.

"I say . . . I tried to call you on your cell phone when the message came,"

Mrs. Doyne's words pressed for a response.

"Message?"

The teapot whistled, the high, shrill sound causing the cats to stir.

A spoon clinked, the refrigerator door opened and closed. Cream and sugar. Mrs. Doyne knew. We'd shared more than a few cups of tea these past few years.

"It sounded as if the man had no idea who else to call. He left a message on the recorder while I was at the market. I suppose he found your cell number and reached you directly?"

Her slippers shuffled against the wood floor as she reentered the living room and handed over my tea. The cup was warm, comforting, its chamomile scent sinking in. "I left my phone in the car all afternoon." I didn't tell her I'd done that to avoid the constant flurry of bill collectors.

Mrs. Doyne delivered a perplexed look, settling into her recliner. "I know it isn't the sort of news you need right now, what with your restaurant struggles." Her head inclined sympathetically, her eyes compassionate behind thick glasses. "Are you close?"

"Close?"

"To your stepfather." Frowning, she looked into her teacup, as if she might find the answers there. "I assumed not, given that the neighbor had so much trouble contacting you."

"My *stepfather*?" The words struck like a ricochet baseball, drilling some unsuspecting fan in the head. I hadn't seen my mother's late-in-life husband since her funeral.

It was no accident that my stepfather's neighbor had trouble finding my number among his belongings. The man wanted nothing to do with me.

"Mrs. Doyne, I'm completely lost here. I haven't heard from my stepfather in almost five years. There's no reason he'd be getting in touch, believe me."

“Oh . . .” A hand-to-chest look of surprise. “When I saw you crying in the car, I just assumed the message had gotten through to you. I’m sorry to be the deliverer of such news. The call was from your stepfather’s neighbor on the Outer Banks of North Carolina . . . Roanoke Island, I believe he said. He thought you should know of the situation. Apparently your stepfather is in the hospital. He took a fall in the bathroom . . . and he laid there for nearly four days before anyone found him.”

Chapter 2

“I know it sounds nuts. Just hear me out, Denise.” In better days, I might’ve rethought the idea, especially given Denise’s opposition to it, but right now I was elbowing doubts out of the way like a *Titanic* passenger trying to make it to a lifeboat. “Keep in mind that we’re talking about an old man who fell in the bathroom and was trapped for four days. Yes, I know that Clyde Franczyk isn’t just *any* old man, but I think I’m safe enough going there. Someone needs to, and obviously his sons still don’t have anything to do with him, or the neighbor wouldn’t be calling me.”

“So you’re . . . going to the Outer Banks to save Clyde Franczyk? The man who hoodwinked your mother into leaving *him* what should’ve belonged to you?” Denise was halfway through prepping the morning bread-basket dough. A cloud of flour poofed from her hands as she flailed them. “Have you forgotten how he acted at the funeral—waving the will in our faces and telling us that we couldn’t come get any of your mother’s stuff?”

“Of course not.” Thanks to Clyde, the graveside service had ended up one step short of an all-out family brawl. “But that building in Manteo is still technically mine. Yes, he has the right to live there as long as he wants, but he can’t legally stop me from going in. I might not have been ready before, but it’s time to *be* ready. My mom begged me for years to go through my grandmother’s things. I just . . . didn’t have time to deal with it.”

“And now you’re going to . . . what? Just march right in there, sort the family heirlooms, sell some stuff, and sink the money into fighting Tagg Harper? Maybe you can talk your stepfather into shuffling off to a nursing home while you’re at it, so you can

sell the building, too.” She coughed on a breath of flour dust. Her eyes were watering when she came up for air—watering and filled with doubt that I could handle the building and all that remained inside it, including Clyde. “Come on, Whit, this is the man who wouldn’t even let you see your mother’s body until the funeral service. At the very least, he’s selfish and possessive and mean. At the worst, he’s a con man and a crook. You need to stay away.”

“I need to *go*.” I didn’t want to do this without Denise’s blessing. I already felt like I was abandoning her by leaving Bella Tazza.

In reality, I didn’t want to go to the Outer Banks at all. Part of me—the old part that had traveled around the world, never staying long enough to form close associations—wanted to turn tail and run away to a whole new life. If it weren’t for Denise, Mattie, Grandma Daisy, and the Tazza employees, I could’ve done it. I wasn’t even forty yet. There was plenty of time to reinvent. The restaurant conglomerate I’d worked for would’ve taken me back in a heartbeat. I could land on my feet someplace far away, let life go on without a thought about Clyde Franczyk and the old waterfront hotel that held over a hundred years of the difficult, often tragic history of my father’s family.

“Believe me, Denise, I’ve thought this through. In the first place, there’s more than one possibility here. At his age, Clyde would be better off if he’d reconcile with his sons and move back to Raleigh. Maybe I can help to make that happen. Not that *they* like me either, but Mom always hoped she could do something to mend those fences. She felt like she was the cause of their issues even though she didn’t mean to be.”

“So you’re doing this for your mom now?”

“It’s the best thing for everyone involved. And whether Clyde can be reunited with his

family or not, there isn't *just* the building in Manteo to think about; there's all the stuff in storage on the second floor. My dad's family was very well off. Grandmother Ziltha came from money, and she married a Benoit. The Benois had shipping interests all over the Eastern Seaboard. You can't imagine what was in the penthouse residence when Mom and I worked all those summers at the hotel. There's no telling what might be left."

Denise quirked a brow, her lips forming a narrow, skeptical line. "Whitney, based on what happened at the funeral, you're liable to get shot. And have you even considered that Clyde may have sold anything of value? The man was perfectly happy to live upstairs for free, *and* collect the rent on the retail space downstairs. Who says he'd stop there?"

"I won't know until I see for myself." My spine and my resolve stiffened. "I have to try to do what I can, Denise. It's what my mom would've wanted, and it could make the difference for all of us." I swept a hand toward the empty kitchen, where our blood, sweat, and tears were evident in every nook.

Denise portioned dough into gelatinous blocks, dropping them on rack sheets as she mulled her answer. "I don't know. Thinking of you going to Manteo gives me a bad feeling. Maybe some of that's just the history. I was always jealous of you and your mom, taking off to spend summers on an island. It sounded so romantic—ghosts and sea captains and all that stuff. But I'm also being honest here. I'm worried about this and I'm worried about you. I've been worried for a while. Have you thought at all about the fact that you're not just talking about old family heirlooms in that building? Your mom's personal items are there. You haven't visited that place since. . . . Whit, the Excelsior was the last place you saw her before she died. Are you sure you're . . . in the right frame of

mind to be going there now?”

“Now is when Clyde’s health issues came up.” Given my breakdown last night, I wasn’t sure I was in shape to take this step at all . . . but it was the right thing to do. “I’m *fine*. And believe me, you have nothing to be jealous of, in terms of the Excelsior building. My grandmother worked us like dogs. Those romantic tales I always told were more fairy tale than reality.” I could imagine what my cousins in Michigan must’ve thought back then. Desperate to diffuse the family feud over whether my mother should be taking me to spend time with Grandmother Ziltha at all, I’d concocted wild stories about my gilded summers on the Carolina coast. I’d become so good at invention, I’d halfway convinced myself.

Denise lifted a hand, forming a dough-covered, five-fingered stop sign. “Okay. All right. If this is what you think you need to do, I’m behind you. I’ll hold down the fort . . . but I just want you to be careful.”

“I will be.” But I had no idea what I might be walking into. I’d repeatedly tried the number on the message Mrs. Doyne had given me, and no one had answered. I’d also tried calling the phone number for the third-floor residence—my mother’s old number. No response there, either. The hospital in Nags Head wouldn’t release any information.

“How long do you think?”

“A week, maybe a little more, depending on what shape Clyde is in and whether I have any luck in getting some dialogue started with his kids . . . and on the condition of the storage in the second floor of the building. It could take me a while to figure out whether there’s anything of value left. I don’t want you to think I’m abandoning you, but there is an upside. With me gone, we can give my spot to one of the cooks we had to

release from Tazza 2. Every little bit helps. If things go well on Roanoke, maybe we can make it until the state code commission hearing, win our case, and hire the whole crew again. I know it seems like a wild scenario, but at least it's . . . hope of some kind."

A long sigh, and then, "Maybe Clyde's kids will come to their senses. I know they were offended when he re-married and sold their mom's land, but family is family."

I went back to measuring ingredients for the morning's run of marinara sauce as Susan, our baker, wandered in the door carrying marscapone and lady fingers for tiramisu. She dropped a receipt on the prep table as she passed by. "Had to pick up a few things at the grocery store. Sorry." Her gaze strained toward the receipt. We'd started buying some supplies piecemeal because our credit with the food service vendors was shot.

"I'll get a reimbursement to you as soon as I open the safe and stock the cash register."

"I don't have to have the money back today. . . ." Susan deposited the supplies, then snagged an apron off the wall and slipped it over her head. "Just whenever."

I knew better, of course. Susan's husband was semi-unemployed after losing his factory job. They lived paycheck to paycheck, like most of our staff. But also like everyone else, she was devoted to Bella Tazza and to keeping it going. Twice recently, I'd found waitress tips piled beside the cash register. No explanation as to how they'd gotten there, and nobody would claim them. Now Susan was trying to pay for our groceries.

"It's not a problem, Suz. I'll get it as soon as I'm up front."

Denise shot me a frown, and I saw the same sad, nervous feeling that'd been curdling

my stomach for a couple months. Were we doing people a favor by trying so hard to hang on? Or was their belief in Bella Tazza cheating them out of the chance to find new jobs before the inevitable happened?

I tucked the receipt in my shirt pocket, right behind the custom-embroidered Bella Tazza logo. There was a time when we hadn't thought twice about ordering fancy embroidered uniforms.

One step at a time, I told myself as I finished the sauce and left it to simmer in the boiling vat. *You can do this. Just take it one step at a time.* As much as I dreaded seeing Clyde, the return to the Outer Banks at least opened up new possibilities. Unfortunately, those new possibilities came wrapped in a layer of old pain.

I tried not to overanalyze as I went up front to stock the cash register. Meanwhile, the hot-line crew was trickling in to do the day's kitchen prep. Soon enough, the front-end crew would straggle in, and the usual organized chaos would ensue, its white noise and immediate needs eclipsing all else. Bella Tazza #1 had been busy since the day we'd remodeled an old café building and introduced our mid-priced Italian menu to the community. With ski slopes, a manufacturing plant, and a massive retail distribution center nearby, there were plenty of hungry mouths to feed, and in this county, no political issues barred the way of good business.

Standing at the register, I counted cash to reimburse Susan for the groceries, then dialed the number from Mrs. Doyne again. The more I could learn ahead of time about what I'd be driving into, the better.

When he answered, Joel Coates sounded friendly and laid-back in the way of Outer Banks full-timers. He also seemed really young. Almost like a teenager.

I heard a door chime in the background as I explained who I was and why I was calling.

“Morning. Welcome to the Rip Shack,” he said.

“Pardon?”

Joel chuckled. “Sorry. Had a customer come in. So, yeah, the old man doesn’t get out a lot. But the dude never skips the Saturday buffet down on the corner. Like, he’s there every week. Table by the window. Orders two meals. Eats one. Brings one home in a box. Usually hangs in Creef Park awhile, sits on the bench, scopin’ the boats and stuff. Jamie down at the bookstore says that was, like, *their* thing, back before his old lady died.”

The flow of conversation stopped suddenly. I felt a sting behind my eyes, realized I was just standing there staring at a handful of dollar bills. I couldn’t remember how to count them.

“Awww, man, that was rude. I’m sorry. That was, like, your mom, huh? I remember her a little from before my boss started the shop here. She was real cool. She had lights on the Excelsior building at Christmas and a reindeer sleigh thing on the roof and stuff. At Halloween, she always set up a big ol’ table at the curb and gave out candy. Even if you were, like, too old for trick-or-treat, she was super cool with it.”

“She loved kids. She was a teacher . . . a music teacher,” I choked out, unprepared for the sudden flood of emotion. You never get over losing your mother. The emptiness has ebb and flow like a tide, but it’s not controlled by the phases of the moon or anything else you can predict.

Joel filled the void with more information. “Well, listen. I don’t got a whole lot else to

tell ya. I was workin' here solo Saturday 'cuz it's off-season and it's slow. When the old man missed the buffet down the street, I figured I better just go upstairs and see, so I did. Doors weren't locked, and I thought, *Man, if he went outta town or somethin', he wouldn't leave the doors like that.* So I, like, hollered and I heard somethin', so I went in. Dude was in a heck of a mess. You can kinda guess what somebody looks like after layin' on the bathroom floor four days. He was pretty out of it, but the really whacked thing was, he didn't want an ambulance to come. I called my girlfriend. She works with the hospital, and she was like, 'Get the ambulance *now.*'"

"It sounds like you did the right thing." I tried to imagine the man my mother had reconnected with and married only four years before her death, now frail and old. I couldn't. At the funeral, he'd been in good enough shape to yell at me in front of everyone. His full head of white hair had been neatly combed, his suit crisply pressed, his posture straight, unyielding, testifying to a long military career. He and my mother had dated when she was just in high school, before he went overseas with the Army.

I couldn't picture him in the condition Joel was describing, but I didn't dwell on the image either. As horrible as it was for anyone to be left lying injured and helpless for four days, I still wanted—needed—to keep the walls of resentment in good repair. It wasn't hard. Clyde was the reason I wasn't there when my mother died. It was *his* fault I'd had no idea how serious the return of her cancer was. He'd helped her keep secrets. He'd supported her in refusing further treatment while there were still options available. He'd taken her home to just . . . give up. Which wasn't like her. My mother was a fighter. She loved life.

She loved me.

But she'd been under Clyde's control, somehow. I'd never understood why, after being single since I was five years old, she'd married in a whirlwind, so late in life.

Joel Coates knew none of that, of course. He sounded concerned and sympathetic toward Clyde, as anyone would be, observing the situation from the outside.

“So, Kayla, my girlfriend, does social work counseling. She tried talkin’ to him yesterday, but dude wasn’t into it. He wouldn’t give her anyone to get in touch with for him. That’s when I went upstairs and found your number and called. Kayla says that this morning, the old dude, like, ordered himself a cab and busted outta the hospital. I would’ve gone and picked him up if he needed it. Anyway, that’s all I know. Guess he’s comin’ back here sometime, but he didn’t show up yet. No idea how he’s gonna make it up those steps, though.”

Joel paused to help a customer, while my thoughts and emotions swept in and out rapidly and randomly, like waves rushing ashore, depositing flashes of color and shape only to sweep them away again.

“So . . . you’re gonna come see what he needs . . . or get him somebody . . . or somethin’, then? Kayla was worried.”

“Yes. I’m leaving later today to drive out. I’ll be there sometime tomorrow. Joel, would you do something for me? Could you call me if you see Clyde come back?”

A strange pause held the other end of the line, and then, “Well . . . ummm . . . I can write a note for my boss, I guess. I’ll be gone taking the surf wagon to a trade show for a couple days. Hope you can talk some sense into the old guy.”

“I hope so too.” But everything I knew about Clyde told me that he wasn’t a man to be talked into anything by anyone. Especially not by me.

Chapter 3

A seventeen-hour drive with only a short stopover for sleep gives you plenty of time to think. By the time I wound my way down the last finger of the mainland to Point Harbor and then crossed the Wright Memorial Bridge onto the Outer Banks, I'd cycled through every possible version of the upcoming conversation with Clyde. For some reason, it hadn't occurred to me until I was over the glistening waters of Albemarle Sound that I should've asked Joel Coates not to tell my stepfather I was coming. By now, Clyde might be locked and loaded.

The traffic was surprisingly light on the bypass that traversed the Outer Banks end to end. I cut over to the beach road before Nags Head and took the slow way along the narrow two-lane, passing rows of aging saltbox houses that clung doggedly to the dunes.

Maybe in a way I was stalling for time, but it was more than that. Mom had always told me that these particular beaches were special. My father had rented a cottage for the two of them here, years ago. He'd brought her home to meet his mother, but he wanted to have her all to himself first. Instead of traveling directly to Roanoke Island, they'd come to Nags Head. Perhaps he was afraid, even at almost forty years old, to deal with his mother's reaction to a hasty four-month courtship and a sudden marriage, particularly considering that his bride was fourteen years his junior. My father had given a benefit violin performance at the University of Michigan and taught a music theory seminar afterward. My mother had been involved in both. He'd noticed the pretty grad student with the thick auburn hair and big brown eyes. The rest was history.

On their first trip to the Outer Banks, they'd shared an idyllic spring day along the

shore. An off-season day like this one. The type of afternoon when the water was cold, but the sand was warm and the sky a pristine, clear blue.

Heaven, she'd told me. I thought I'd stepped right off the map and into heaven. Of course, I was crazy in love too. . . .

But as evening set in and they traveled to Manteo, the story had taken a darker turn. There, my grandmother quickly ferreted out that her son's surprise guest was not only much younger, but descended of factory workers and farmers and housewives who did their own cooking—men with grease under their fingernails and women with dishpan hands. It became clear that my mother wasn't *the right sort*. She wasn't welcome in the Excelsior or in the family.

I'd always had a feeling, reading between the lines as an adult, that the objections only made my dad more determined to finally stand up to his overbearing mother. Perhaps he shouldn't have. Perhaps, after a lifetime of dealing with my father's intense mood swings, Grandmother Ziltha had a right to fear that my mother's innocent infatuation with him would end in disaster. Mom had never said it, but in so many ways, the two of them were like sun and moon—two things existing at opposite ends of the universe. She was gritty, tough, practical, determined, passionate about having a teaching career. The first in her family to even attend college. He was contemplative, wildly artistic, reckless. A violinist of no small repute. A composer. A dabbler in the art of watercolor. Completely unprepared to live outside the insular world of privileged music schools and concert venues.

Never fool yourself into believing that love conquers all, Grandmother Ziltha had told me when I was thirteen and sweeping sand off hotel balconies in the summer heat while

watching local teenagers pass by on their bicycles. *Those without the proper commonalities will only destroy one another. Do not marry out of your sort, should you decide to marry one day.* She'd always made it clear that, as the poor relations, we were to live by different rules.

The insults stung, even though Mom had encouraged me to make allowances for my grandmother. It was no secret that, despite her wealth, Grandmother Ziltha's life had been hard. Her long-ago marriage to Girard Benjamin Benoit, Jr had been short and had ended in tragedy. Benjamin had died at sea the year my father was born. My mother was sure that the losses in Grandmother's life were the reason for her constant frown and unwelcoming personality, and that it was important for me to come to know her as a way of remaining close to my father.

But my grandmother seemed disinterested in forming bonds of any kind. She made polite acquaintance with the hotel guests and the members of her social circle but maintained no intimate ties. She'd raised my father in the finest boarding schools, and the walls in her cavernous library, filled with his certificates, awards, and concert photos, were evidence that she'd made certain her son had the best of everything. His dark hair, blue eyes, and soft features had marked me since birth, but that didn't seem to endear me to Grandmother Ziltha. By all appearances, she tolerated my mother and me because she felt it was her duty to do so. Or because we were all she had left. She'd long ago cut ties with her own relatives in a dispute over inheritance. She'd managed to alienate herself from the family she'd married into as well.

Thinking of her now brought to mind the hot, vibrant Outer Banks summers, when tourists came searching for a haven in which to leave the world's troubles behind. As a

child, I'd always arrived here filled with anticipation and determination. Each year, I'd spun fantasies of finally doing something to make my grandmother like me. Inevitably, the season ended in disappointment and the ultimate conclusion that I just wasn't good enough to love.

The islands had changed over the years, but in all the ways that mattered most, the Outer Banks was still the same. The spring air flowing in the window grounded me, swept away the sense of being exhausted and out of body. Anticipation sprinkled through the car like salt spray, tickling my senses as I made the turn at Whalebone Junction and crossed the causeway onto Roanoke. Maybe it was just adrenaline, but I felt almost giddy as I pulled into Manteo and passed by the grand old houses there. To my right, Shallowbag Bay peeked between buildings, and a squatty, rebuilt version of the old Roanoke Marshes Lighthouse waited to greet tourists and boats arriving at Manteo's historic waterfront.

Only when I pulled up to the Excelsior building, its elaborate façade and lurking stone gargoyles softened by early evening light, did I recognize my budding anticipation as what it was.

I'd expected, for that brief span of time while passing into Manteo, to find my mother here. I'd imagined her on the Excelsior's third-level balcony, leaning over the scrollwork railings that faced the bay, waving just as she had during my final visit here. That day, she'd tied a bright scarf around her short, cancer-ravaged hair and put on makeup and a colorful sundress. It was all a disguise, an act contrived to hide the truth of how sick she was.

She'd smiled and told me she was excited about the success of the new restaurant in

Dallas—the first place I’d ever opened that actually belonged to me, not the corporation. She was delighted to see me settling down at thirty-three and finally giving up the traveling life for something of my own. She understood how hard it was for me to get away to visit, especially now that there was no paid vacation time. I shouldn’t worry about it. She was done with the chemo, her hair was even growing back a little. . . .

If only I’d realized, at the end of the visit, that I was sharing a final hug with my mother, I would’ve held on longer, come back sooner, stopped raising our family’s concerns about her marriage and Clyde’s insistence that they move halfway across the country to live in Manteo.

If you could know—if you could *always* know—when the *lasts* in life are coming, you’d handle them differently. You’d savor. You’d stop. You’d let nothing else invade the moment.

My emotions ricocheted now. The euphoria of seeing the Outer Banks again dissolved into a soft weepiness. Exactly the kind of thing I couldn’t afford.

There wasn’t time for it.

The salt breeze served as a distraction, a comfort, as I rolled down the window and slowly circled the building, looking things over. Manteo was so startlingly beautiful these days, clean and well-manicured—a far cry from the commercial waterfront town my mother had first seen when my father brought her to visit as a new bride. With its old, New England-style homes freshly painted and ready for tourists and the harbor filled with expensive pleasure boats, the place lay blanketed in an old-world charm, a sense of being far from modern life and its concerns.

The appeal had apparently sparked an economic boom in the years since my last visit.

Sleek, multistory condos towered where the old drugstores and fish houses of my childhood had once leaned away from the sea. The condos were designed to fit in seamlessly, but neither my mother nor Grandmother Ziltha would've approved. The new construction undoubtedly blocked part of the harbor view from the Excelsior's roof garden, for one thing.

The uptick in construction probably meant that the aging Excelsior, one of only two turn-of-the-century originals to have survived repeated waterfront fires, was worth far more than it had been five years ago. No wonder the first floor retail space was full, despite the fact that the place looked tired and ragged, as if it, too, were mourning the loss of my mother, who'd dreamed of restoring its Gilded Age glory. At street level, an upscale ladies' boutique, a jewelry shop dealing in vintage and artisan works, and a small gallery, so narrow that it was little more than a runway with a door on one end, were all closed for the evening. No doubt the store owners were still keeping off-season hours at the first of May.

Around the corner, the Rip Shack was also dark. *Surf-n-Sand*, read a blinking neon sign in the window. The shop was the typical kind of seaside place, offering everything from actual surf equipment to paddleboards, beach chairs, flip-flops, swimsuits, T-shirts, and items in between. A hand-written sign wavered in the breeze, clinging to the window by a bit of tape. I let the car roll almost to a stop, read the message. *Back in one hour-ish.*

No time of departure was listed. The loose way of doing business seemed to fit my image of Joel Coates, the young surfer-voiced neighbor who'd called about Clyde's fall. Since all the other shops were closed for the evening, the Rip Shack probably was too, but no one had bothered to take down the sign.

An SUV and a Volkswagen Beetle sat in the rear alley of the Excelsior. Neither was familiar, but that didn't mean one or the other wasn't Clyde's. I hadn't seen him in five years, after all.

I rolled into an empty spot, climbed out, stretched the kinks from my back, and studied the third-story windows of the Excelsior. No lights, no movement, no signs of life beyond the wavy plate glass. Nothing but the silent reflections of rooftops and sky. The fire escape tempted me briefly. Back in the day, it had been my preferred method of sneaking to and from the building—less chance that I would run into Grandmother Ziltha, assigning me yet another job to do. Escaping her was my greatest pleasure.

Unfortunately, catching me was hers. Every summer when we made arrangements to come here, my mother gently reminded my grandmother that *Mom* was the one coming to work. I was here to visit with my grandmother. Every summer after we arrived, it was made clear that my grandmother wasn't interested in a visit; she was doing us a favor by providing an opportunity for extra income, and she expected me to earn my keep, as well.

The hard work didn't hurt me, in truth. It taught me things. Not the least of which was that I wanted to be the boss someday . . . and when I *did* become the boss, I would treat people with respect, not condemnation. Life at the Excelsior had been good training for life in general.

“Looking for someone?”

I stumbled backward, lost my balance, bumped into a trash can, and made a racket that probably echoed for several city blocks.

There was a guy standing in the back door of the surf shop. Tall, good looking, wearing a T-shirt. The wetsuit rolled down at his waist was still slick with water.

“Joel?” I asked, but he was older than I’d pictured. Probably a little older than me—forty-something perhaps. Longish, slicked-back hair outlined his face. Brown, but sun-bleached lighter on the ends. He obviously spent a lot of time by the water.

“Mark. Mark Strahan.” He stepped forward and extended a hand, but the gesture wasn’t welcoming, exactly. More like curious . . . or suspicious. His chin lifted as he sized me up.

Mark had the kind of rich caramel-brown eyes a girl shouldn’t gaze into very long. A shock of damp hair fell over them after he shook my hand. He swept it out of the way, seeming to wait for me to make the next move. When I didn’t, he said, “You the stepdaughter?” It sounded more like an accusation than a question. Something inside me bristled. It also confirmed that he wasn’t glad to see me here. “My Saturday clerk said he’d called you about Mr. Franczyk’s accident.”

“Yes. I appreciate that he did.” I squinted toward the third-story windows again, wondering if Clyde was watching us, even now.

“No one’s up there.” He seemed to read my thoughts. “Mr. Franczyk hasn’t shown up since he walked out of the hospital. Not unless he came and went in the middle of the night.”

“Do you have any idea where he is?” According to Joel’s description, my stepfather didn’t socialize with anyone or maintain friendships, and he wasn’t even supposed to be out of the hospital. Where would he go?

“I don’t.” Mark studied me in a way that asked a question, but I couldn’t tell what the question was. This guy wanted something. “I’ve never known him to be gone like this. Not since his wife passed away.” Unlike Joel, he didn’t apologize for mentioning my

mother. Maybe it hadn't occurred to him yet.

"There was no indication of where he was headed? Did he mention any contact with his sons?" Maybe they'd come to get him after all.

"Not according to Joel's girlfriend. He just told them, if they didn't remove the IVs, he'd do it himself. Kayla said he wouldn't give her or the hospital staff next-of-kin information. He told them his family didn't want anything to do with him and vice-versa. He left in pretty rough shape. Kayla says it happens, especially when someone's afraid social services might look into it as an adult well-being case."

Something acidic roiled in my stomach and bubbled into my chest. I swallowed hard, trying to quell it. I hadn't anticipated social services involvement or words like *adult well-being case*. "This just doesn't make sense." If one of Clyde's sons *had* finally come to take him back to Raleigh, why wouldn't they have picked him up at the hospital and stopped by here for some of his things?

"Kellie in the jewelry shop might have some ideas. She's been here the longest. But she's closed for a few days and gone across the bridge."

"All right . . . well . . . I guess I'll go look around upstairs and see what I can figure out." I didn't even have the phone numbers for Clyde's sons anymore, but with a last name like Franczyk, they couldn't be too hard to find. I could probably track down their contact information. . . .

"It's your building." The comment was surprisingly sharp-edged.

I turned, blinked at him. "*Clyde* told you that?" Somehow I'd always imagined my stepfather letting everyone believe that the building belonged to him.

Fingers braced on the rolled-down wetsuit, Mark surveyed the nearby ground, his lips

pursing in a way that deepened the dimple in his chin. I caught myself wondering what would happen to it if he smiled.

“When we leased the space, he said he only did contracts six months at a time. Said if something happened to him, his stepdaughter would be down here to sell the building quicker than spit off a griddle—his words, not mine.”

That analogy sounded like Clyde. No surprise that he would think of me as *spit* or that he would paint an unflattering picture for the townsfolk.

“It’s more complicated than that.” I wasn’t ready for questions about the building. I wasn’t ready for any of this. I’d imagined finding Clyde upstairs in the residence, a little battered, but still existing in his usual way. I’d hoped that, based on his health crisis, he might be persuaded him to move in with his sons or into an assisted living facility—someplace where he could get the help he needed. What if he was not only as stubborn as ever, but mentally off, now? What if he’d walked out of the hospital into no one’s care and was wandering somewhere, addled and battered? The nights were still cool here. What if he’d fallen again, in an alley or someplace, and couldn’t get up? The questions made my head spin, and I couldn’t answer any of them. The only thing I could do was go upstairs and wait . . . for what, I wasn’t sure.

“Everyone will be wondering about the building.” Mark broke into my thoughts. “I know this is a family issue for you, but for us it’s our livelihoods. We can’t just walk down the street and find another open space to put in a business.”

“I understand that.” If he knew how *well* I understood, he’d probably be shocked. On the other hand, the decision could come down to their businesses or mine. “I’m not prepared to talk about that right now. Thanks for the information.” Without waiting for

more questions I couldn't answer, I turned and started toward the side-street entrance to the old hotel stairwell. My mother's key was waiting on my key ring, right where it had always been. Removing it would've been like admitting she was gone forever.

Stepping through the door and starting up the stairs, I reminded myself again that she wouldn't be here. Whatever secrets this building kept, I would have to discover them on my own.

What was waiting here? What had Clyde left behind? Were there clues as to where he might be?

The door to the third-floor alcove was unlocked when I reached it, the cat flap in the bottom hanging slightly askew. At any given time, my mother had been a caretaker of one to a half-dozen wayward felines looking for permanent homes. Wherever she lived, she was involved with the animal rescue organizations. Perhaps Clyde was still sharing space with Oscar and Felix, the duo of tabby kittens I'd found on my first trip here to meet the old flame my mother had suddenly married. Oscar and Felix were an unplanned wedding gift. Being my mother's daughter, I couldn't just leave them in a ditch for the gators.

Maybe Clyde had found them another home after my mother passed away. He didn't really like cats.

When I turned the corner onto the balcony, Grandmother Ziltha's wicker porch furniture was still right where it had always been. In the hotel's glory days, the cushion covers had been regularly washed and the wicker repainted every few years to ward off the salt air. Now the cloth lay faded and threadbare, tiny moats of leaves and cricket parts gathered around the cording. The wrinkles formed dry riverbeds filled with sand. A saggy

lawn chair rested forlornly nearby. A matching one had been folded and placed against the front wall.

My mother's chair. Waiting, as if she were expected to return, open it, and sit watching the boats and the tourists come and go.

Beyond the leaded-glass front door, the interior lay shadowy and dim. A gasp trembled into the silence, and it was a moment before I realized that I'd made the sound myself. Everything in the front room was just as it had always been. All of my mother's belongings, still in place. Even a basket of organic knitting yarns and a half-finished angora hat remained neatly tucked beside a needlepointed wing chair in the ornate, bay-windowed parlor that my grandmother had referred to as *the receiving room*.

The click of the door latch made me jump, an eerie disquiet settling in its wake. The building creaked and groaned. It always had, but now each sound seemed piercingly loud.

"Hello?" My voice echoed against quiet walls, muted by a myriad of my mother's quilted hangings and fiber arts creations. "Clyde, it's Whitney. Are you here?"

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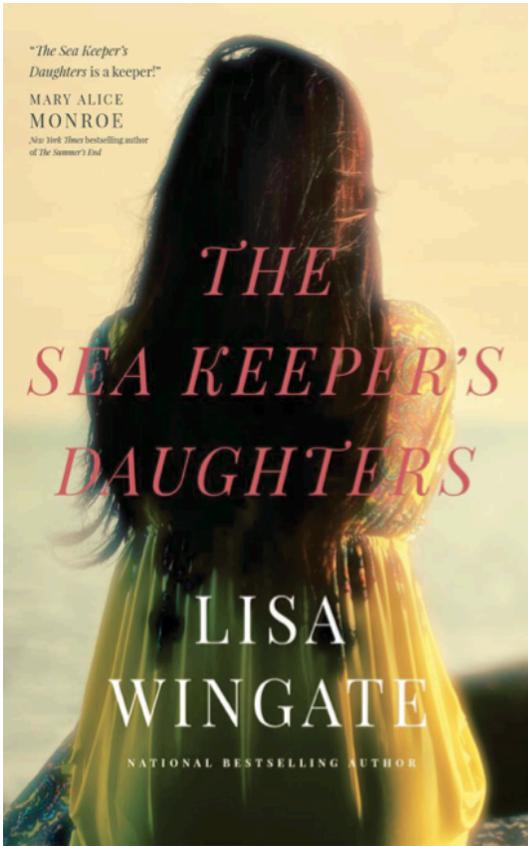
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