

Beside the Sea

David walked out onto the back porch, holding a cup of fresh hot coffee. He sat down on the steps, where a beautiful golden retriever soon joined him. This was his favorite time of day. He sat and watched the mist melt off the water as the sun climbed higher. Waves rolled lazily in as gulls circled, hunting for food. Soon his neighbor would run by and he would know it was time to get up and get started with his day. You could set your clock by her morning run, he often thought.

He reached over and scratched Goldie's head. The dog set her head on his knee and looked adoringly into his eyes, but not for long. At the first sight of the neighbor lady, the pup took off at a run, barking excitedly.

David stood and stretched, then set his cup down on the porch.

"Goldie, get back here," he called half-heartedly, not wishing to seem neglectful. He knew the woman would greet the pup warmly. He watched out of the corner of his eye as she lavished Goldie with attention and started on her way again.

He had never really seen her up close, only from this distance. This morning, she wore the pale blue outfit. It seemed to glow in the early sunlight. He went to work on the boat that was sitting upside down on sawhorses. David wanted it to be perfect, so he was hand-sanding it, taking his time. It was a labor of love, an all-consuming hobby since he had returned to the seaside cottage.

Goldie came bounding back up the beach to flop down in the shade beneath the boat. She seemed quite satisfied now that she had done her duty in properly guarding her master. A little siesta was in order.

David watched as the woman slowed to a walk and stood looking out over the water. She stretched and then turned to walk up to her cottage. He wondered whether she had purchased the house, or was renting from the Barnwells. He could have asked, but held back. She was obviously alone and he didn't wish to alarm her...or start anything. She seemed a pleasant enough sort of person. She certainly was fond of Goldie and Goldie returned that affection. No other passer-by received such personal attention.



It was early November and the ocean breeze could sometimes be a bit nippy. Alice went straight for the coffee maker when she had finished her run. She poured a cup of the fragrant liquid and added a small amount of low fat creamer. Then she stepped back out on the porch and sat facing the sea, leaning against the porch railing. She could see David, bending over his work, so intense. She often wondered about him. It was the same every morning except on Sunday. She never saw him on Sunday, but every other day of the week, he was out there working on that old gray boat with his beautiful dog at his feet.

The smell of fresh paint roused her from her reverie. The painters were already at work. She finished up her coffee and rose to go inside. Time she got started, too.

All that week, the painters worked and Alice cleaned and prepared the inside walls for painting and papering. It felt good to be busy. She had agreed to come and oversee the remodeling work for Tom and Rebecca Barnwell a little reluctantly, but it turned out to be a blessing. Rebecca always admired Alice's decorating abilities, so had asked her to make a few changes and purchase some additional things, like curtains and bedspreads. The Barnwells were planning to rent the beautiful old cottage to a more discerning clientele this year, which would bring in more revenue as well.

It was a beautiful cottage, open and airy. It stood against numerous hurricanes over the years with little damage, no doubt due to the sturdy stone structure of the outside walls. The house sat upon a rise whose banks were covered by sea oats that drifted lazily in the breeze. Alice loved to sit and watch them sparkling in the sun. It was mesmerizing.

She was taking down the bedroom curtains when she saw the neighbor out on the beach playing with his dog. The pup was getting quite good at catching a Frisbee. Alice smiled to herself as she watched. There was a part of her that wanted to go out there and introduce herself to the man. She would love to be a part of that happy scene. But she held back. Her heart still ached with loneliness, after the loss of her husband and best friend. It had been nearly two years now and she still longed for him. Besides, that man had ample opportunity to make the first move. She was just old-fashioned enough to expect that from a man.



The phone rang early and David jumped up to answer it. He knew who was calling, and knew why.

"Hello darling," he said.

"Dad, what if it was someone else?" Amy replied, sounding a little put out with him.

"No one else knows I'm here, do they?"

"Well, no, I guess not. Anyway, Dad—have you decided—about Thanksgiving?"

"I don't know, Sweetheart. I don't think I'm quite ready for society."

"It's not exactly society, Dad, just family. Your daughters...you remember us?"

"Don't be facetious, Amy. I'm doing so much better, I just hate to interrupt this idyll...it's been good for me."

"You do sound better. How's Goldie?"

"Rambunctious and growing more so every day, I'm afraid," he said, chuckling softly.

"She'll settle down. Retrievers are great pets and companions. Tessa and Davy are missing you."

"I miss them, too. Give them a kiss for me. And Amy, I will call you with a final decision..."

"I need to know soon, Dad. We have to make plans—open up the house."

"I'll call you Friday morning, then."

"Promise? You won't forget?"

“I will call, Amy. I love you. Give everyone else my love...and don’t worry about me.”

He set the phone back down on the counter and sighed deeply. If only this had all come about at a different time. The holidays loomed ahead like dark storm clouds on the horizon. He dreaded them. He loved his daughters and missed his grandchildren, but the thought of being around them all...it was almost unbearable.

He fixed himself a bite to eat and moved out to the porch. Goldie ran up and plumped down beside his chair. She was almost tall enough now to set her ample head on the table. He must be careful to train her not to do that. Someday they would have to be among people again. If he decided to go home for Thanksgiving, what would he do with her? He did not relish the thought of spending several hours in the car with an energetic dog. He looked up at the stone house across the way. If the woman who was staying there was not busy, perhaps? How could he even ask her, when he had not even met her? He had meant to have no complications in his life for some time in order to allow himself to heal, and now—here were several—all at once. The holidays with the demands of his family, and this dog, beautiful and great company, but an obligation all the same.

The next morning, he was out early. He had determined in his mind what he needed to do. He would go and spend Thanksgiving with his daughters. He took up the Frisbee and whistled to Goldie. He would position himself in a place where he would be able to introduce himself to the woman next door.

He saw her from a distance, wearing the blue again. As she approached, Goldie grew excited and took off at a run to greet her. David watched as she moved closer, running with the dog. She smiled when she saw him. Inside his chest, something sparked. He quickly crushed it, leaned down to pick up the Frisbee and moved towards her, and held out his hand.

“Good morning,” he said as she approached. “I’m David Collier. I hope Goldie’s not being too much of a nuisance.”

Alice reached out to grasp the proffered hand. “It’s nice to finally meet you, Mr. Collier. I’m Alice Reed, and...no, Goldie is a gem. I look forward to her morning greeting.”

Her smile was warm and genuine and David found himself, even before he realized it, inviting her up for coffee. She hesitated.

“I...” Alice started, and then swallowed. Why did she feel so afraid? She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Goldie jumped up, placing her big paws on Alice’s chest and Alice laughed. “Alright, alright, I’d love to have coffee with you, just call her off!”

David laughed too and detached Goldie. The three of them climbed the slope to his cottage. Alice had always wanted to see the cozy white cottage up close, but not nearly as much as she wanted to see this man up close. Now her curiosity about him was piqued.

He was tall, but not overly so, and slim with light, graying hair. Blue eyes looked out from behind round, wire-rimmed glasses. Alice thought the glasses made him look intelligent. He didn’t seem like a fisherman, though few others stayed on in these parts year round.

He went inside to get the coffee and she sat down at the wicker table on the porch. Goldie sat down beside her, as if guarding her. Alice stroked the beautiful head and scratched her ears.

"I'm afraid I'm a bit of a pushover," she commented when David returned.

He chuckled as he set down the steaming mugs. He took a small bottle of creamer out of one pocket and a sugar shaker and spoons out of the other and set them on the table.

Alice smiled at the typically masculine gesture. He caught the look and blushed slightly.

"I'm really not very good at this," he ventured. "The house is looking very nice. "These seaside cottages take a lot of maintenance."

"It does look good, doesn't it? The soft brown really complements the stone. I think Tom made an excellent choice, though Rebecca had her doubts."

"Oh," he said, looking up at her. "So you didn't buy the house?"

Alice looked confused at first, then shook her head and smiled. "Oh, no. The Barnwells are friends of mine. They asked me to come and stay while the repairs were being made." She paused and shrugged her shoulders.

That little gesture, along with a smile and the sparkle in her eyes made her look like a young girl, though David could tell now that she was not. He thought she must be at least in her forties. He watched her as she sipped her coffee, staring out at sea. She turned her eyes back to him and smiled again.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" she asked.

Caught in the act of staring, David shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. "No, no I was just..."

"You caught me day dreaming, then," she finished, when he hesitated. She felt that he was as uncomfortable as she and tried to put him at ease. It was a habit of hers, to try to make people comfortable. Even after her husband died, she had ministered to the needs of others around her, easing their pain and grief.

"It's the place," he answered. "Life slows down here. I have to make myself get out there and work on that boat every morning."

"Oh yes, the boat," she said. "Could I look at it? I've been watching your progress. How's it going?"

David slid his chair back and stood. Goldie jumped up and began wagging her tail, anxious to be off.

Alice followed the two of them down to the boat, where she could see that he had finished one entire side. She slid a hand lightly along the boards, amazed by the smooth texture of the wood.

"You've done a wonderful job. Is there a reason why you're doing it by hand?"

"It's a labor of love, so to speak," David admitted. "It keeps me busy and gives me a feeling of accomplishment."

Alice smiled. She wondered why he needed this boat to reassure him. He was such a handsome man and so well spoken. He had a soft, cultured way of speaking that

proved his origin—evidently a native to the area and quite at ease here. She had supposed that he was retired and guessed this boat was a hobby.

“Well, I guess I should be going,” she said at last. “Thanks for the coffee and...it was very nice meeting you.”

David returned her smile. “I’m glad we finally got a chance to meet. Perhaps we can do this again,” he offered. Whoa! He thought, slow down, man. Haven’t you learned anything?

“That would be nice,” she said, as she turned and started across the beach. Goldie bounded off after her for a while, then shot back across the sand to David.

“You better come back, you fickle beast,” he told her, reaching out to scratch her head. “Well, we better get busy, girl. He took up his tools, but he hardly had the heart for it. He kept thinking of Alice and those sparkling blue eyes. He would have to be very careful, keep his distance. He had been a fool once, but never again—he promised himself—never again.

The painters finished their work just in time. The week before Thanksgiving, it rained almost everyday. Alice still got out and ran every morning. She just threw on a slicker and pulled the hood up over her head. But on Thursday, it was storming and lightning touched the ground nearby several times, so she knew she must stay in. She missed the run. She was a creature of habit and it had become a part of her daily routine.

She was poking about the house finding little things to occupy her time when she heard a knock at the back door. Could it be David? Her heart turned a flip at the thought. She peaked out the window before going downstairs, but could see nothing. When she walked into the kitchen, she saw him. He waved at her through the window.

“I hope I’m not inconveniencing you,” he said as he removed the wet raincoat he was wearing. She hung it on a peg beside the back door. Rebecca called this the “sand room” so Alice didn’t think a little water would matter.

“Come in, I’ll put on a pot of coffee.” She waved off his objections, knowing they were only formal. “It’ll be nice to have someone to talk to, besides, I owe you.”

“Oh are we going to do that? I was just being neighborly,” he teased.

“So am I. Sit down, here at the table if you like.”

He pulled out a chair at the small marble-topped breakfast table. “The house is looking really great. Quite a bit different from the last time I was here.”

Alice smiled as she turned on the coffee maker. “Yes, it is. Where’s your companion?”

“She’s waiting outside, I’m sure. I tried to leave her home, but she wouldn’t have it. She took cover beneath the porch.”

Alice set out cups and spoons. “Are you hungry?”

“No, thank you. I just had lunch a little while ago.”

She sat down across from him, looking at him curiously. “What brings you out in this weather?”

“I was trying to wait for it to clear up, but it doesn’t look like it’s going to,” he said, clasping his hands.

The coffeemaker sputtered and hissed. Alice brought the pot over and filled both their cups, then set it back on the plate. They sat in companionable silence as they stirred their coffee.

“Will you be going home for the holidays?” he asked, watching her face.

“No, I don’t think so,” she answered. “I live in Tennessee. I don’t think I want to make the trip, just to turn around and come right back. Besides, my sons will be with their in-laws. This way, they won’t feel guilty about that.”

“I remember those days,” he said, looking at her. He thought he detected a note of sadness in her voice. “Torn between my family and my wife’s. She usually won.”

Alice smiled. She took a sip of coffee and leaned forward on her elbows. “Did you mind it much?”

David shook his head. “No, to be truthful, I liked her family better. There was too much discord among my relatives.”

“Will you be going away for the holidays?” she asked, hoping that she wasn’t being too nosy.

David shifted in his chair. “My daughters want me to come home. It’s only a three-hour drive, so I thought I might. They’ll weigh me down with all kinds of guilt if I don’t.” He smiled sheepishly.

Alice laughed. “How many daughters do you have?”

“Two—Amy and Constance. They’re both married and have children, so you’d think they’d be too busy to bother about me.”

Alice shook her head. “You never get too busy to worry over your parents. It’s a fact of life.” After a moment’s silence, she looked up at David.

“Will you be taking Goldie?”

“Well, that’s kind of the purpose of this visit,” he said. “I was going to ask a favor.”

“I’d love to,” she interjected.

David sighed. “Great. I...was a little shy about asking. I haven’t really known you long enough to impose on you.”

“Oh, it’s not imposing. I love Goldie.”

“Well, that’s a load off my mind. There are just so few people about this time of year, I didn’t know what I’d do, but I did not want to take her with me. Not without drugs, at least.”

Alice laughed out loud.



David only stayed a few minutes longer. She stood and watched as he walked back across the sand. The rain had slowed some and she could see Goldie jumping about from side to side, excited to be going somewhere. She smiled to herself and pulled her sweater closer. It was getting chilly.

All through the long weekend, David longed to return to the sea. He loved his home in the Appalachian foothills, but it was not where he wanted to be now. He wondered how much it had to do with...Alice. He hesitated even to think of her. She was like sunshine. He could see her now, in her light blue sweater, smell the scent of her...oh, he was in trouble. He must stop this before it went too far. It was too soon.



Alice loved taking her morning run with Goldie. The pup energized her, along with the crisp, cool morning air. This was the first time she had been near the sea in cold weather. It was invigorating. When they came back to the house, she tossed the Frisbee for a few minutes before going inside. Goldie stayed in the sand room. Alice knew the pup could easily jump over the kinder gate she was using to keep her in, but she was obedient and stayed put. She would miss Goldie when David returned for her. At least the dog was company through the long lonely Thanksgiving Day. Never had she longed so much for human companionship. She baked a chicken breast with some instant dressing and opened a can of cranberries.

On Thanksgiving evening, her sons called. They were on a conference call and often, both of them talked at once. They meant to cheer her up, but the call only made her lonelier. Perhaps she should think of returning soon, but...she didn't feel ready. She had been happy here.



David started back early on Sunday morning. When he pulled into the drive at the cottage, he could see the whitecaps on the sea and knew the breeze would be brisk. He got out and stood, breathing deeply. The salt air had a healing effect.

He stepped to the trunk to open it and as he did, he heard Goldie barking down on the beach. He reached in and pulled out his suitcase and took it in the house. A few minutes later, he emerged on the other side of the house and looked down the beach to where Alice was cavorting with Goldie. Neither saw him until he was quite near.

Goldie almost bowled him over with her happy greeting.

"Well, you'd think I tortured her," Alice said, laughing. "She's much too happy to see you."

David laughed with her. "Down, girl! I think I really must enroll her in obedience school. She's getting too big for this. I hope she was all right for you?"

"We had a wonderful time together, though she did miss you, especially at mealtime. I had a hard time getting her to eat."

"No doubt, she'll make up for that," he replied, still scratching the dog's ears.

"How was your trip?" asked Alice.

"Not too awful. I suppose now the girls will leave me alone—at least until Christmas."

"Hmm..." Alice replied, thinking about Christmas. It seemed such a long way off, but she knew it would be here before she knew it. She must decide what she would do for the holidays. The thought of leaving...

“So,” David was saying, “let me treat you to dinner.”

“What? Oh no—you don’t have to do that—I loved keeping Goldie.”

David laughed. “I know I don’t have to do it, but I want to. Besides, I hate eating alone.”

Alice finally agreed and David took Goldie home. They would leave at six. He knew of a nice restaurant open all year round, only a 45-minute drive. So she had something to look forward to—something pleasant.



How long had it been since Alice had spent time alone with a man she wasn’t related to? She couldn’t quite remember, but she was enjoying herself. They had kept up a conversation for the first few minutes of the drive, and then lapsed into a companionable silence. After what seemed a very short time, they pulled into a quaint seaside village where several cars were parked out in front of a tiny, weathered, wharf-side building. The sign out front said, “Stan & Andy’s Fresh Seafood Café”.

The interior was quaint and charming. They were shown to a table that overlooked the harbor, which was nearly in darkness now. Lights twinkled all along the shoreline.

Alice sighed. “It’s so beautiful here,” she said. “I love everything about it.”

David smiled. “You’re becoming quite the old salt, eh?”

She chuckled softly as she stirred sugar into her hot tea. “I never thought I could ever be happy so far away from my family.”

“I know the feeling,” David commented quietly. A feeling of regret cast a temporary shadow over his expression as he looked at her calm face. If only he were free to pursue a relationship with this lovely woman. If only he hadn’t been so stupid. If only...

Alice saw the look and wondered what sadness lay buried there. She quickly changed the topic of conversation, turning instead to her weekend with Goldie. After a few minutes, the darkness lifted from David’s eyes and she relaxed a little. Her tactic had worked for now, at least.

On the way home, he fell into a brooding silence. Alice cast sideways glances at him from time to time, but did not try to interrupt his reverie. Perhaps he had had a difficult visit with his children. If he did not want to talk to her about it, she would not pry.

David pulled into the drive of the Barnwell’s Cottage.

“Thank you for a wonderful dinner, David.”

“I’m afraid I wasn’t very good company,” he began.

“Oh, but you forget,” Alice interrupted. “I’ve been eating alone for quite some time. I just appreciated the fact that you were there.”

David smiled as she opened the door and got out.



David sat in the drive until she was inside and had turned on the lights. Then he slowly backed out and drove the short distance to his own cottage. He could not stop

thinking about her. He had been unable to resist her contagious joy. What was it about her that gave his heart such a lift? He remembered her smile and his heart skipped a beat. He would have to be very careful. He could not afford to make another mistake.

Goldie greeted him joyfully at the door. He unhooked the dog's chain and opened the door to allow her in. She would be hungry and then she would need a walk before bedtime. Sometimes it was good to have this distraction. There were still so many things he did not want to think about.

When Goldie had been taken care of, David sat out on the back porch in the darkness. It was a quiet evening, but quite cool. He watched in silence as the last light went out next door. He leaned his head back against the chair. Stars sparkled overhead among wisps of clouds that stretched their fingers across the night sky. Now, in the darkness and all alone, he could let his mind wander. If an occasional tear stole down his cheek, who would know?

He thought about the weekend, spent with his daughters and their families. He felt pride in the knowledge that his girls were well married and happy in their chosen fields. Amy was a stay-at-home mom, raising her two children and, in her words, "dreadfully happy." Constance was serving her apprenticeship in a law office in Raleigh. Little Danielle, a year old last September, was left in the care of a very respectable nanny.

David sighed. There was no need for anxiety there. It was only himself that he needed to worry about—the stupid mistake he had made—a misjudgment that could have cost them all dearly. It could have been much worse, he told himself.

He got up suddenly and stretched. Enough of this wallowing in self-pity. He would simply go on as he had planned, get through one day at a time, until the pain subsided and he could, once again, trust his own judgment. He allowed himself one more glance at the neighboring cottage, then whistled to Goldie and went up to bed.



Alice knew she was nearing the end of her stay at the Barnwell's cottage. Everything was done, as the Barnwells had requested. They would soon be coming to see how it looked, and then they'd be scheduling rentals. Alice was dreading it already. Her days had been full and she was feeling strong and healthy from all the outdoor activity. Her routine had changed only slightly after David's return after Thanksgiving weekend. Now Goldie ran with her every morning. It seemed like a good thing. The young dog needed lots of exercise and David seemed more obsessed than usual with finishing his boat. He worked as if he were running out of time. This worried Alice, since she had gotten to know him. He had become a good friend and she would hate to learn that the cause of his sadness had anything to do with his health.

There were many times that she would like to have spent more time with him, but lately he seemed so remote, she held back. But then he would surprise her, like that very morning, when he had come by with a sack of apples to share with her. He had found them while he was away on Sunday. Alice made an apple cake and took several slices over to him.

He smiled more brightly than usual and her heart leapt. It was funny, she thought, what small things could spark such large hopes.



David's anxiety had lifted a little. He had gotten some good news from his business partners and had reason to hope. He felt good enough to stop at a mall on the way home Sunday to do a little Christmas shopping. He hadn't really thought about it until Alice said something about picking up a few regional things for her children. He knew she was planning to go home. His heart constricted at the thought of her leaving. Did he dare ask her plans?

He lingered over a late lunch, savoring the wonderful flavor of the apple cake she had baked. How he would miss her.

Goldie pressed up against him, whining and he reached down to stroke her silky coat. "You'll miss her too, won't you, girl?"

The sound of a car in the drive caused the dog to jump up, nearly knocking over a chair in the process. She practically flew out the back door and around the side. By the time David got there, Amy and her two children were already out of the car and being enveloped by Goldie's tongue.

"Down, girl!" Amy cried, laughing. "Oh Dad, you really ought to get her trained!"

"Yes, I know, I just keep putting it off." He bent down to scoop up the children and carried them into the house. "This is a nice surprise, what brings you down this way?"

"Oh, it was such a beautiful day, and the kids were restless. I thought I'd like a drive, and this is where we ended up," Amy finished with her usual flourish.

David glanced at her, wondering if that was really all there was to it.

"Really, Dad, there's no other reason! It's just so lovely here. It feels almost warm." She was looking out the window at the waves rolling in. "How's the boat coming?"

David peeled Tessa's arms away from his neck and set her down. "Very well, actually. I'm over half done. Perhaps by spring, I'll be able to take you out in her."

Amy's expression changed. "By spring? Do you intend staying that long?"

David averted his gaze. "I...am not quite sure yet, hon."

"I was hoping, after your news this past week, you might go back to work."

So that was what had brought her here. She was curious. He looked up at her.

"Can I get you anything, Amy?"

Amy saw the expression on her Dad's face and knew she had pressed too far too soon. She quickly changed the subject.

"No, I'm fine. I would like to take the kids out on the beach, though, if you don't mind."

David relaxed. "Sure, honey. Let me get my shoes and I'll come with you."



Alice was sweeping sand off the walkway when she saw the children jumping down off the back steps next door. A young woman followed close on their heels and soon afterwards, David, pulling on his favorite sweater. She watched as he caught up to the children and lifted the smaller up onto his shoulders. Alice could hear the laughter and the sight struck a chord in her heart. She stood slowly, wishing more than anything that she could be a part of that scene. Perhaps this was why he had been happier this morning. He was expecting a visit from his family. Alice smiled as she went back to her work.

The phone was ringing when she returned to the house.

"Mom! How are you?" she heard her oldest son say. She laughed, thinking how he must have sensed her loneliness.

"I'm doing fine, son, how are you? I hope the children are fine?"

"Oh yes—listen, Mom—Paul and I were talking, and we cleared it already with the Barnwells, I hope you don't mind. We'd like to come spend Christmas with you."

Alice was taken completely by surprise. It had never even crossed her mind to ask them. "That would be wonderful, Craig. I'd love it! It's so beautiful here."

The conversation turned to plans and by the time Craig hung up, her mind was reeling. What a lot she would have to do before next week!

She was putting on a pot of coffee and setting out paper and pen to start a to-do list when she heard a knock at the back door. She was quite surprised when she opened it to see the young woman from next door. She looked around, but could not see David or the children anywhere.

"Hi, I'm Amy Preston, David's daughter," the young woman told her. "I'm sorry to drop in on you like this, but I wanted to meet you."

Alice stepped back. "Please, come in. I...you wanted to meet me?"

"Yes, you're Alice Reed?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. You must think me incredibly rude. Yes, I'm Alice Reed." Alice held out her hand to Amy. "Please come in, I'm just making coffee."

"Oh, wonderful, that'll help take the chill off," she said, rubbing her hands together. "We've been walking on the beach. Dad took the children into town to see Mrs. Hathaway at the drugstore and fill them up with goodies."

Amy was smiling brightly. Alice liked her already, but why had she come? She pulled out a chair for her and then began setting out cups and saucers.

"I baked an apple cake this morning, would you like some?"

"That would be wonderful," Amy said. "I hope you don't think me too bold, coming over here like this, but I've heard so much about you. I just really wanted to meet you."

"You've...heard about me?" Alice asked, turning her head to look back at the girl.

Amy smiled. “Dad so seldom talks about anyone, these days, so when he mentioned you...”

“You were curious,” Alice finished, smiling broadly. She could not hide her pleasure at knowing that David had spoken of her.

“Yes, curious,” Amy said, smiling. “I hope you don’t mind.”

“Not at all. In fact—I’m happy for the company—whatever the reason.” She set the plates on the table and turned to get the coffee.

“You’ve done wonders with this cottage. It’s lovely. Dad said the Barnwells were remodeling. Did you do the design?”

“Some of it. Rebecca and I are old friends. They decided they wanted to rent to a...different clientele. That meant some changes, and they liked what I had done in my house.”

“Where are you from?” Amy asked as she stirred cream into her coffee.

“Tennessee, outside Nashville. I have a house in the country. Or at least, I did. My youngest son and his wife have pretty much taken it over. They’ve only been married a few months.”

“Oh,” she said, in between bites of apple cake. “Alice, this is delicious! Could I possibly get the recipe?”

Alice smiled. “Of course. It’s very easy to make. I’ll write it down while we talk.”

Alice wanted to get the conversation back to what David had said about her, but could not think of an opening, so she just listened. Amy liked to talk, that much was clear after only a very few minutes. But it was nice. Alice had missed “girl-talk”, chatting with her daughters-in-law. She listened with interest as Amy described her children and told how much she loved raising them.

“Dad said you have grandchildren,” she said, at last.

“Yes, I have two, a girl and a boy. Alex is five and Lesley is 18 months.”

“Oh, what wonderful ages! My Tessa is four and Davy just turned three.”

After several more minutes of talk about children, Amy rose to go.

“Well, I’ve imposed on you long enough,” she said.

Alice handed her the recipe for the apple cake. “You weren’t imposing. You made my day. It gets a little lonely here, sometimes.”

Amy lifted her eyebrows. “Does it?”

“Yes. Well, your father’s the nearest neighbor and he pretty much keeps to himself. Goldie’s a great friend, however.”

“She’s great, isn’t she? I’m glad we were able to persuade Dad to take her. He had no business being completely alone. That was what he originally wanted to do...”

Amy hesitated, looking up at Alice. For the first time, she looked a bit uncomfortable. “He’s had a tough time, Alice.”

“I kind of got that impression.”

“He didn’t tell you anything, then?”

Alice’s heart sped up. What was Amy trying to say? Was David ill?

“He hasn’t, no...” Alice answered, hesitantly.

Amy smiled and crossed her arms on her chest. "He's a little distant, sometimes. But...he could really use a friend. I got the impression that he considers you that."

Alice smiled in return. "I'm glad."

The boys brought Christmas with them. They swooped in with a tree and decorations, gifts and food, leaving Alice breathless. It was beautiful. A fire burned in the fireplace and candles burned on the mantle. The weather was clear but cold, with a frigid breeze blowing in from the north. It snowed in the mountains and you could almost feel it in the air. They walked on the beach, all bundled up in sweaters and windbreakers and came in with bright faces and huge appetites. It was wonderful.

The day before they were to leave, David came back from his holiday with the family. He stopped by, bringing more food and gifts from Amy. That night, they made a big bonfire on the beach and roasted hotdogs and marshmallows. Goldie darted gleefully from person to person, having the time of her life.

"I like him, Mom," Craig told Alice later that night.

Alice looked up from the towels she was folding. "You like him?"

"Yes, I do. I hope to see more of him in the future."

"What are you talking about?"

"David—I like him. He seems very nice." He looked at her and smiled warmly. "It's time you found someone else, Mom."

Alice was shocked. "Craig! I...we're just friends...neighbors...that's all."

Craig smiled and put his arm around her. "Mom, I've seen how he looks at you."

Alice quickly turned away. What could he mean? How had David looked at her? She tried to remember.

"It's been a long time, I suppose, since you've been wooed by a man."

"Who's being wooed by a man?" Paul asked as he swept into the room. He was so much like his father, so brisk and self-assured.

"I was telling Mom how much I liked David. She swears it's only friendship."

"Uh-huh," Paul said, chuckling. He leaned over and kissed her cheek. "You always were naïve, Mom. There's nothing wrong with that."

"You boys are teasing me," Alice commented, sighing. She sat down on the couch and continued folding the towels.

Craig looked at Paul over her head and smiled. "I can see why you like it so much here, Mom. Think you'll be staying long?"

Alice shook her head. "I'll be leaving as soon as there's a renter. Rebecca asked me to stay until then, to make sure everything was perfect. She and Tom will be coming in late January, and they hope to have someone scheduled in the spring."

After a few more minutes, Alice excused herself and went up to bed. She had a lot to think about.



Life settled back into a routine after the holidays were over. He had decided that life was full of possibilities. A new year had brought hope and the desire on his part to make something better of his life. The decision had really been made after his return from Christmas with his family. As soon as he walked into the cottage next door and was almost overwhelmed by the glowing warmth there. When Alice entered the room, he knew he could no longer fight the inevitable.

He still had regrets. If only you could live over certain parts of your life, he thought, correcting the mistakes and smoothing out the wrinkles. He longed for that. He knew now that he should have waited. He should have waited for Alice.

When the Barnwells came for a week in late January, David knew that his time with Alice was limited. They had renters coming in mid-March and after that, she would go home to Tennessee.

He was almost finished with the prep work on his boat. Soon it would be ready to paint. He hadn't had much time for it lately, so when the weather cleared, he got back to it. When Alice returned with Goldie after their morning run, he laid down his tools and walked out to meet her.

"I've got coffee on, will you join me?"

"Love to!" Alice called out, laughing at the still energetic retriever. "Where does she get all that energy?"

David smiled as he led the way up to his cottage. Once inside, he poured the coffee and they sat down together at the kitchen table.

"I'm planning to take Goldie to obedience school this next week. I was hoping you might go with me."

Alice looked surprised. "Me?"

"Yes, you. You spend time with her also."

"I know, but...I'll be leaving soon," she said softly, dropping her eyes. It was something she really didn't like to think about.

David shifted in his chair. "You don't have to, do you? You could find someplace else to stay, someplace nearby."

Alice shook her head. "Not for long, I'm afraid. I can't...really afford it. I have a home."

"A home with Paul and...what was her name?"

"Corrine. Yes, with Paul and Corrine."

"I don't want you to leave, Alice."

Alice slowly raised her eyes to his. What was he saying? She swallowed hard.

"I don't want to leave. But...I'm afraid I must."

David got up and refilled their coffee cups. He turned and leaned against the counter, looking at her. "This place could use some work. I was thinking of fixing it up. I could use a little help."

Alice looked at him and shook her head. "What are you saying, David?"

He smiled and crossed to sit beside her. "I'm not asking you to shack up with me, Alice. I would never do that. I want...to be married to you, to be with you always."

Alice was too shocked to speak. It was all going so fast. Maybe too fast.

“David, I don’t know...”

“Don’t answer right away. Think about it. Give it time.”

Alice swallowed hard again. Until this moment, she had not really known what he was thinking. She had not known for sure how he felt about her. She didn’t know now. After all, he hadn’t said, but then he did.

“I love you, Alice. I think I have for a long time. I’ve just been a little slow about coming to my senses. There was a lot...involved.”

Alice reached out her hand and touched his face, something she’d wanted to do for so long. She knew there was so much there, stored inside; so much pain and she longed to get to the heart of it.

He leaned forward and kissed her gently. “You’ll think about it?” he asked.

“That would be the sensible thing to do,” she said, still feeling a bit breathless.

“Do you always do the sensible thing?” he asked, smiling brightly.

Alice chuckled softly as she glanced up at him. “I’m here, aren’t I?”

He watched her as she stood and walked about the room.

“What kind of changes are you thinking of?” she asked, running her fingers along the smooth wood of the windowsill.

David stood and followed her as she made her way into the front room. “I’d like for it to be more of a home. It’s a little rough, don’t you think?”

“Well, it is a bit...masculine. But it wouldn’t take much. It’s well built, that much is obvious. A little paint, maybe some wallpaper, and some...furniture...”

David laughed. “Now you’re getting the idea.”



They spent the next few days picking out paint and wallpaper. Painters came and work started on the exterior, which was mostly old, gray wood. They spent days on the road traveling about looking for furnishings. David liked antiques, so they spent a lot of time in little out-of-the-way spots, looking for just the right thing.

David looked happier than Alice had ever seen him.

They had just come in from obedience classes with Goldie when David’s phone rang.

“That’ll be one of the girls, I expect,” he said, leaving Alice reluctantly. He went inside and Alice could barely hear his voice as he spoke on the phone. When he came out, his face had changed, darkened, she thought.

“Is everything all right?” Alice asked.

“Yes, yes, everything’s fine.”

She thought his answer was a little abrupt.

“I have to go somewhere tomorrow—on business. If I don’t get back in time for Goldie’s class, would you take her?”

Alice looked at him. She still found it difficult to read his expressions. He had grown distant again. Could she live with these sudden changes?

“Of course,” she answered, smiling brightly in an effort to cheer him. “I’ll be glad to.”

He looked down at her and smiled, warming to her. "I'm sorry, Alice. I'm a clod sometimes. Someday I'll tell you all about it, I promise."

David drove mechanically, unable to avert his mind from the confrontation just ahead of him. The girls wanted to see him. His daughters were concerned. He had called them to tell them of his decision to marry Alice and they had probably gotten together and decided to confront him on that other issue. He knew it wasn't because of Alice. Amy had spoken nothing but praise for her. As he pulled into the driveway at Constance and Edward's house, he gritted his teeth. Then he put on his best face and was all smiles by the time Constance greeted him at the door.

As soon as he was settled with a cup of coffee and a muffin, they swooped in for the kill.

"Have you told Alice about Lisa, Dad?" Constance asked.

"I'm not sure that's any of your business, sweetheart."

Amy sat with her arms crossed over her chest, shaking her head. "You haven't told her," she said.

"Dad, you have to tell her. You can't start a marriage with something like that hanging between you. You'll regret it, believe me, if she hears about it from someone else," Constance argued.

David took a deep breath, looking down at the beautifully baked muffin in his hands. He had lost his appetite.

"I'm trying to put that chapter of my life behind me."

"Putting it behind you is a good thing. Hiding from it, or hiding it from someone else, is not."

"I'm not *hiding* it," he said, sounding slightly exasperated. "I just don't want to talk about it."

"Well, let me ask you this, Dad. Does Alice know who you are? Does she know about the house?" Constance asked, refusing to let go.

David looked at her and shook his head. "I can't, Connie, don't you see?"

"You don't trust her. You think all women are like Lisa."

David was shaking his head. "No, no..."

"Yes, you do," Constance continued.

David rose and walked over to stand in front of the kitchen window. When he turned around, his face was calm.

"I know what you're saying. Just please let me do this in my own way."

Amy got up and crossed over to her Dad and laid a hand on his arm. "We're only trying to help, Dad."

He looked down at her. She was so like her mother that it made his heart ache. "I know, dear, I know."

"Just don't lose her, she's too good."

"If she really loves you, she'll understand," Constance added. "At least, you'll know she really loves you."

David looked up at Constance. Then he bent and kissed Amy's cheek, walked past her and leaned down to kiss Constance. "You're going to make a wonderful lawyer someday, sweetheart."

All the way home, he thought about what they had said. They were right, but could he do what they asked? Could he trust again? He wasn't sure. Then his thoughts turned to Alice. How well did he know her?

By the time he reached the seaside cottage, his mind was settled. In his heart, he knew that he could never let her marry him without knowing all there was to know about the man to whom she was pledging her life. He could never lie to her, and as his daughter Constance had reminded him, to withhold the truth was the same as a lie.

Alice was not surprised when David proposed another trip. They had gone out often looking for furnishings. She was excited about the house. It was actually starting to look homey. She could really see herself living very happily there. Except perhaps, during hurricane season.

David wanted to leave early, so she decided to forego her morning run. They were taking Goldie with them, so the pup wouldn't miss it too much.

It was a beautiful drive, gradually climbing up into the Appalachian foothills. It would be even more beautiful later in the spring.

"How far is it?" she asked after they had driven for about an hour. She had expected to be stopping now and then at the occasional village to look around the shops.

"It takes about three hours to get where we're going," he answered vaguely.

Alice decided not to press for more information. He had seemed a little strange since he returned from his business trip, a bit distant and preoccupied.

David looked over at her and wondered what she was thinking. She was always so polite, so respectful of others' feelings. He laid his hand on hers, and she looked up at him.

"I love you, Alice," he said.

She smiled and her eyes sparkled. "I love *you*."

They passed through a small town then began to climb steadily. Soon, Alice could look out her window and over a beautiful, wide valley. She heard water and asked David what it was. He slowed the car and rolled down the window.

"It's a waterfall, just ahead," he told her.

The air was crisp and cold as they ascended. At the waterfall, he pulled off into a parking area. They got out, placing Goldie on a leash, and walked over to look at the beautiful scene.

"You should really see it in summer when everything is green."

After a few minutes, they returned to the car. David held her door open.

"We have only a few more minutes to go," he told her.

There were ten minutes, to be exact. On the crest of a hill, they turned into a narrow lane and followed it alongside a stream to a low point, where he slowed to a crawl and crossed the streambed. On the other side of the stream, the view opened up to reveal a lawn leading to a house.

Alice looked at David, who was watching her. Where was he taking her?

The house was a red brick colonial that overlooked the valley. They pulled into a circular drive and stopped.

"Where are we?" Alice asked.

"I want to show you something," he answered.

They got out of the car, releasing Goldie to bound across the wide expanse of lawn.

He led Alice to the steps and up onto the verandah. Then he turned to look out over the valley.

"This is where I grew up," he said, solemnly.

Alice's face registered her surprise.

He smiled down at her.

"My father grew up here, and his father as well."

"I'm amazed," was all Alice could manage.

David turned and unlocked the door, then held out his hand to her. "Come in, I'll show you around."

"Does no one live here now?" she asked.

David shook his head. "Not full-time. We spend our holidays here."

"So this is where you came for Christmas, and Thanksgiving?"

"Yes, there's plenty of room for the entire family," he told her.

The house was chilly, so Alice pulled her coat closer.

"I'm sorry it's so cold," David said.

When he had shown her the house, he led her out the back onto a large concrete deck overlooking the stream.

Alice turned to look at him. "Is this also where the girls grew up?"

David nodded. "I lived here until my wife passed away. After that, I...I couldn't be here."

He turned back to lean against the rail. "I moved into a condo in town, near my business."

"It must have been very difficult," Alice said.

David turned his head to look at her. "I know you've been through it, that's why I've never said anything. Sometimes, it still hurts."

Alice moved forward and placed her hand on his arm.

"What's wrong, David? Are you having second thoughts?"

He shook his head in answer to her question, but found he could not look at her. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"I need to tell you something, Alice. Something about myself that I'm not very proud of."

Alice waited in silence, barely able to breathe. It was several moments before he spoke again.

“I...was very recently...divorced.”

Alice’s heart paused its beating as she thought about what he had said. Was this the terrible thing that was hanging over him?

“I met Lisa at a gala given in my wife’s honor,” he continued, still looking out over the water. “We...the girls and I...had given a portion of my wife’s estate to the local hospital, to create a new wing for cancer patients. Lisa introduced herself to me and I...” he paused a moment and glanced around at Alice. “I was flattered, to be honest, by her attention. She was...quite a bit younger than I was and very beautiful. Valerie—my first wife—had been dead for nearly three years at the time. I was lonely.”

David turned then and took Alice’s hand. He led her to a seat nearby, and then sat down beside her and looked at her.

“From the very first, she was trying to change me.” He looked up at the house behind them. “She wanted me to sell this place,” he said, shaking his head. “She hated the beach house. She would not even go there. She wanted me to sell it and buy a more stylish property up the coast.”

Alice reached out and took his hand, curling her fingers among his. He looked at her and smiled a little sadly. She knew there had to be more to it, something had to have gone terribly wrong for him to be so affected by it.

“The girls never liked her. They didn’t trust her from the beginning and tried to talk me out of marrying her. So Lisa talked me into a quick marriage. I was very naïve, Alice.”

“My children were concerned, because it was so unlike me. I had always been so careful. Even in college, I took my time, thought over each decision, attentive to every detail. Valerie—my first wife—and I were very well suited. We were always very close, liked the same things. I’m afraid I was ill suited for dealing with Lisa. She made me believe she was everything I wanted...and needed. But not long after the wedding, she began to change.”

He looked at Alice and shook his head. “I won’t go into all the details. I went merrily on my way, thinking everything would work out, when all the while...”

He took a deep breath and sighed. “I found her with another man.”

Alice felt his shock and sadness. She bowed her head and waited for him to continue.

“She didn’t know it at the time—I never made my presence known to her. But it didn’t take much to realize that it was not a one-time thing. I drove to Raleigh the next day and spent an entire night with my attorney. We fastened down everything that could be fastened down. I put this place in the girls’ names, along with my business and the beach property. I left myself with very little to live on. Then I filed for divorce, before she could get the chance.”

After several moments, Alice looked up.

“What happened?” she asked.

David looked startled, as if he had forgotten her presence. He smiled momentarily at the memory. “The judge awarded her \$25,000,” he said, glancing at Alice. “She contested, of course, but to no avail. My attorney had sealed everything up too tightly to be touched, tying everything in with Valerie’s estate. Of course this place,” he said, gesturing toward the house, “was pretty much tied to the family as it was. My grandfather wanted it kept in the family.”

Still, Alice was puzzled. Why was this still so traumatic? Did he really think that she would love him less because he was divorced?

“David,” she said, softly, “what is it that troubles you? Why were you reluctant to tell me this?”

David looked at her briefly, then stood and began to pace around the porch. Alice stood and walked to him, placing herself in front of him. She reached out to him and put her hands on his arms.

“David—please—tell me what it is that troubles you so.”

“What it is,” he explained, “is...shame, Alice. Shame that I put my whole family and their welfare in jeopardy. Shame that I...was so foolish. But most of all, I’m ashamed that I let it color the rest of my life. I did not trust you, Alice.”

He paused, looking into her eyes, watching her reaction.

Alice never averted her eyes.

“David, I...”

“No, please let me finish this,” he insisted. “I led you to believe that the beach house was my permanent residence, to prove that you loved me. I decided that if you were willing to live with me there—in the belief that I had nothing—then I could trust that you loved me...just me. Don’t you see, Alice? I did not trust you.”

“You didn’t know me, David. You barely know me now, and you had been hurt.”

He shook his head. His eyes were grave. “Don’t make excuses for me, Alice, please. I know that much about you, you always try to find the goodness in others. It’s one of the things that made me love you. I’m confessing all this because I need to ask your forgiveness. I wanted to get this all squared away, and then give you the opportunity to walk away gracefully...should you need to do so.”

Alice began to cry. She could not stop the tears. Surely he didn’t want her to walk away?

David folded his arms around her and held her tightly.

“Oh Alice, I never wanted to hurt you. I love you so. I don’t want you to leave. I just want you to know me, all about me. If you can forgive me, trust me—perhaps we can rebuild...”

“There’s nothing to rebuild, David,” Alice replied. “Nothing has changed. Of course I forgive you, you could not help what you were feeling.”

Alice pulled back to look up into his eyes.

“I was willing to marry you, believing that you were retired and living on a stipend. I didn’t care, just as long as we could be together. None of that mattered, and it doesn’t matter now. I’m glad, David. Glad you kept it a secret. Had I known who you were...what you were...I may have felt intimidated by all that.”

David bent his head to kiss her and then held her again for several moments. At about that time, Goldie came dashing through the hedges and jumped up onto the porch, looking quite excited.

“Gosh, I completely forgot about her!” David said, laughing.

“So did I,” said Alice, bending to ruffle the dog’s coat and pick leaves from her hair. “Where have you been, girl?”

David put his arm around Alice’s shoulders and led her toward the steps.

“Let’s get going, we have a long drive back.”

“I think we should stop somewhere along the way,” Alice said, taking his hand in hers. “Do you know where there’s a Justice of the Peace?”

David laughed. “No, but I have a friend who’s a mayor.”

They didn’t elope that day. They decided to wait and have the whole family together to witness the event. They did find an antiques shop to visit though, where they found several nice things for the beach house, which was to become their secondary residence. In the corner of the dusty old store, stuffed down in an old wooden box marked “Oranges”, Alice found a worn wooden placard. It had hung, perhaps outside an ancient pub or café. It read, “Beside the Sea” and above the name, stood a golden dog.

Alice rushed to show David.

“It’s perfect—we can hang it from the mailbox at the cottage.”

David agreed and they threw it in with the other purchases.

At home, David found chains to connect to the hooks in the sign and hung the cleaned and refinished board from the mailbox. Then the two stood back to admire it.

“Now the place finally has a name,” David commented.

“And so perfect,” Alice agreed. “We met here, beside the sea and we were brought together by a golden dog,” she finished, laughing.

Goldie barked and ran about them excitedly.

David put his arms around his soon-to-be wife and led her away down the beach, enjoying the warmth of the early spring sunshine.

The End