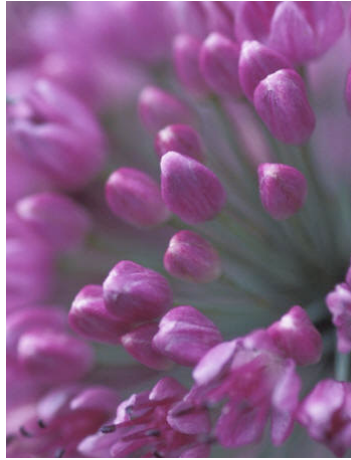


An Ocean Between

Bonnie Stuart MacDougall lived in a small cottage on the sea side of Dorset. Though tiny, the house was warm and inviting, filled with precious mementoes. A cottage garden surrounded the house. It was filled with flowers of every size and color. There was no set pattern and it was certainly not a formal garden, but it made Bonnie happy. Especially when people came by to look at it and during the season, they came by in droves. They came in off the beach or walked in from the village. She talked to them and most times, sent them away with a beautiful bouquet.



This particular summer season was proving to be one of her favorites. The stocks were up well over her head and blooming like crazy and her grandnephew Freddie had come to stay. Freddie was nine, quite precocious and a joy to have in the house, though he didn't spend much time there. He loved the beach and rain or shine, he went there everyday. He was a remarkably good boy, Bonnie thought. He never ventured out of her sight and was very polite.

At that moment, Freddie was lying on his stomach down on the beach, watching a fish that had been caught in a tidal pool. He had his chin propped on his hands and he was concentrating so on the fish that he did not notice the approach of the woman in the pink hat. He had been watching her for days, as she walked along the beach in the early hours, which was when he liked to come out. That was the best time to find things on the beach. She was older, but she was very pretty and he thought he would like her. She had come to stay in the cottage next door and he had heard that she was an American.

"What is it?" she asked, startling him.

He looked up quickly and jumped to his feet, startling the fish, which darted quickly to the other side of the pool. "I believe it may be a kind of perch. It's a rather common fish in these parts. Are you familiar with them?"

The woman smiled at him, because he spoke like a grown up, though he was obviously so young. “Yes, I’ve seen them. When the sun comes out full, he’ll probably die. Perhaps we should move him?”

“I thought of that. I’ve got my bucket here and when I have finished looking at him, I’ll scoop him out and take him down to the water. Would you like to watch with me?”

“I’d love to. My name is Hannah, by the way.”

“You’re American, aren’t you?”

“Yes, I’m from a small town in Virginia.”

“Virginia was one of the original colonies.”

“Yes, it was.”

Freddie brushed off his hand and held it out to her. “My name is Frederick Ronald Allen Thatcher, no relation to the former Prime Minister.”

Hannah smiled broadly as she shook his hand. “I’m pleased to meet you, Mr. Thatcher.”

“Oh you may call me Freddie, but I’m afraid I may not call you Hannah. My Aunt Bonnie would be shocked. She’s a bit old-fashioned.”

“Then you may call me Mrs. Lacey.”

“That’s a very pretty name...Mrs. Lacey.” Freddie crouched beside the pool and watched in silence. Hannah crouched beside him and he asked her, “Shall we name him, do you think?”

“How do you know it’s a male?”

“By the color, males are often more colorful, you know.”

“Ah, yes I have noticed that.” She smiled as she pointed to an elderly man with a pot belly who was walking down to the water. He wore brightly striped swim trunks and a neon yellow tank shirt. Freddie laughed, sitting back on the sand.

“You’re funny! I knew you’d be friendly when I first saw you.”

“Oh, you did?”

“Yes, I did and I had planned to make your acquaintance quite soon.”

Hannah smiled down at him. After a moment, he jumped up and grabbed the pail. “I suppose it’s time to move the little shaver, before he gets too hot.”

“Shaver, is that to be his name then?”

Freddie gave her a puzzled glance and then smiled. “I guess that’s as good a name as any. It’s what my Aunt Bonnie calls me sometimes.” Hannah corralled the fish with her hands while Freddie scooped it up in the bucket. Then the two walked down to the water where Freddie deposited the fish with a great deal of ceremony.

Afterwards, they walked along the beach for a bit, until it began to be too busy. “Come up and meet Aunt Bonnie,” Freddie insisted. “She loves to have guests.”

“I suppose I could, for just a few minutes.”

Aunt Bonnie’s kitchen smelled wonderful. “Oh my dears, I’ve just taken a lovely apple loaf out of the oven. It’s a recipe I found in the ladies’ magazine I take. Let’s try it, shall we?”

Hannah quickly realized that one was immediately accepted into the household at Bonnie’s. Within moments, they were all seated at the garden table, enjoying a cup of tea and fresh apple loaf.

“Your garden is so beautiful,” Hannah remarked. “You must spend all your time out here.”

“Oh yes, I’m afraid I do spend quite a large block of time out here. It never ceases to entertain me from day to day. And I do love the visits from neighbors and tourists. They are so admiring!”

“I imagine they are. I’ve wanted to come over ever since I arrived, but there seems to always be someone here and I did not want to disturb you.”

“Oh, never think that! You may come anytime, dear. Are you acquainted with the Wallaces?”

“Yes, they’re friends of mine. They live just a few houses down from me.”

“I remember they were transferred over with his company. They were hoping to come back here when he retires.”

“That’s what I was told. It was very good of them to let me have their cottage this summer.”

“I’m glad too, though I shall miss them. Will they be coming later in the year, do you think?”

“They hope to, though they were not certain. They’re spending their holiday this year with their daughter in Florida.”

Bonnie laid a finger lightly against her cheek. “Yes, she must be all grown up now. She was a lovely girl.” She sat back in her chair and looked at her nephew. “Freddie, if you’re quite finished, you may go wash up.”

“Yes ma’am.”

Hannah smiled as Freddie left the table with his dishes, which he set gently in the sink before leaving to wash up. “He’s a very intelligent young boy.”

Bonnie’s eyes sparkled. “Indeed he is and such a joy. His father was much the same. I’m so glad he’s turning out so much like my dear nephew.” She leaned in and whispered conspiratorially, “I never like to speak badly of anyone, Mrs. Lacey, but his mum...well,” she seemed to think better of what she was about to say and leaned back again. “I suppose it’s best if I don’t say. She up and left the two of them, you know.”

Hannah frowned, “Oh, no.”

“Oh yes, I’m afraid it’s true. She’s an actress, though you’ve probably never seen her. She dropped out of it for a time after Freddie came along and then last year—poof! She was back in again. That’s why Freddie’s here for holiday. His father is a busy man, a very important man in the corporate world. He visits weekly and calls every day without fail.” Bonnie shook her head sadly. “Mum calls occasionally and she hasn’t seen the poor little chap all summer.”

Hannah frowned. “That really is too bad. I don’t know how a mother could leave her child.”

“Nor do I, though I never had any of my own. Do you have children Mrs. Lacey?”

“Yes, two sons—both grown and married—I’m a grandmother, actually.”

Bonnie smiled and brought her hands together in delight. “Oh, splendid!”

“What’s splendid?” Freddie asked as he swooped back down on them from the house.

“Mrs. Lacey is a grandmother!”

Freddie’s eyes grew large. He had known she was old, but he hadn’t considered that she may this old. Hannah knew by his expression that he wanted to comment on that, but his conscience was detaining him.

“I was very young when my children were born and my eldest son was only 21 when he became a father for the first time. So I became a grandmother at 40!”

Well, Freddie thought, that’s not so very old. His own father was over 40. Bonnie laughed at his obvious confusion and began to clear away the tea things. Hannah got up thinking perhaps she should go.

“Oh you needn’t leave yet, Hannah. You haven’t had the grand tour yet,” Bonnie called over her shoulder. “Just let me set these things inside and I’ll rejoin you.”

Hannah stood for a moment, wondering if she should help with the clean up. It must have been obvious by her expression, because Freddie leaned forward and whispered, “Aunt Bonnie has a domestic.”

“What?”

“A maid, who comes by in the evening and cleans up the kitchen, you see. My dad provides that for her. It was the only compensation she would take for keeping me all summer.” He straightened up quickly as Bonnie came out again, closing the door gently behind her. She took a pair of shears down from a hook beside the door and moved forward, a contented smile on her face.

They moved slowly through the labyrinthine paths of the garden, seeking out treasures that lay hidden in the depths. All along the way, Bonnie cut flowers and chatted happily, relating numerous episodes from her long and interesting life. From time to time, they were joined by other friends. They came and went in a friendly fashion that impressed Hannah, very much. At the end of the “tour” Bonnie gave Hannah a beautiful bouquet. “All of those will last very well.

Lila Wallace should have a vase to hold them. If not, pop back over and I'll loan you one." Then she turned her attention to a new drove of guests and Hannah made her way back across to her cottage.

Long after she had gone, Bonnie worked in her garden and sang. She sang aloud, her voice echoing out over the close vicinity. When she stood, she cast a glance across the way at the small cottage that now housed her new friend Hannah. "The Lord bless you and keep you," she prayed, "and make his light shine upon you, and show you the way."

The morning sun shone through the front window, illuminating the beautiful colors of the flowers in the bouquet from Bonnie's garden. "If only I could paint," Hannah thought, "that would be such a beautiful picture." As she stood admiring the scene there was a soft knock at the back door. She opened the door to Freddie's smiling face. They'd met every morning that week.

"It's Saturday!" he announced.

"Yes, it is."

"My dad is coming today!"

"Wonderful! Would you like to come in?"

"Oh no, I was waiting about for you to come out, but when you didn't, I decided to knock and make sure you were okay. You're usually out early, like me."

Hannah laughed and picked up her hat. "I'm a bit late this morning. I guess, because it's Saturday!"

They set off down the beach, laughing and talking. Freddie was more animated than usual. "I believe you're looking forward to seeing your father."

"Oh yes! It's been ever so long."

"Bonnie says you're a lot like him."

"I know, she tells me that and then Dad says I'm like my mum. I guess there's a bit of both in here." He pointed at his chest and sighed.

Hannah longed to ask about the boy's mother, but refrained. If he wanted to talk about her, he certainly would. He talked about everything else. "What will you do while your father's here?"

"Oh, he'll have some sort of plan. He always does. He likes to run about and see the sights."

Hannah nodded. "There is a lot to see around here." Bonnie's cry and whistle could be heard. She had a special combination of the two that brought Freddie to her. The sound always made Hannah smile. "My grandmother used to call almost like that—but without the whistle. Actually, it was a little like calling hogs, but it worked."

Freddie dissolved into giggles. "Did she say sue-eee?"

Hannah laughed. Together, they walked back toward Bonnie's cottage and when they reached it, Freddie waved his hand and ran up the incline. "I will see you after my dad's visit."

"Have a wonderful time!"

Hannah observed his arrival. It was too far away for her to tell much about him, other than the fact that he was tall and had dark hair. She knew that because his head was well above the stocks that grew in Bonnie's garden. She settled back down on the chair, drew out a novel and began to read. It would be a quiet weekend.



"I don't know if I like it," Ronald Thatcher told his aunt. "She's all he talks about."

"She's a very nice young woman, Ronnie. You mustn't worry so. It's the most natural thing in the world for him to be drawn to her."

"I'd rather he be drawn to you, Aunt. That's why he's here."

"Oh there's such a scowl on your handsome face! Why not take a minute to meet with Mrs. Lacey? I think you'll change your mind, dear. She's quite suitable."

"It's not her suitability which troubles me, Aunt Bonnie."

"Hmmm...I see." Bonnie smiled and her eyes twinkled.

Ronald glowered at her as he let himself out. He would just go for a stroll and if he ran across Mrs. Lacey, then so be it.

Hannah was digging about among the gnarled old plants at the back of the tiny garden outside the cottage. Bonnie had inspired her to make a few improvements and the Wallaces had given their permission. She was surprised when she looked up and saw Mr. Thatcher. She had not even heard his approach. She stood slowly and removed her gloves.

“Mrs. Lacey?” At her nod, he continued, “I’m Ronald Thatcher, Freddie’s dad.” He held out his hand to her.

She reached out to accept his offered hand. “Yes, I heard you were coming.”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, but I was wondering if I could speak with you?”

Uh oh, a little voice said inside her. “Of course, would you like to sit? I have lemonade...”

“No, thank you. I...what I have to say won’t take long. I just wanted you to be aware of something. I suppose you know...uh...he may have told you, his mother left?”

“I heard that, yes.” No need to mention that it was Bonnie who told her. She didn’t want to cause trouble.

“He’s in quite a...vulnerable state right now...”

“He’s a very intelligent boy.”

One eyebrow went up. “Yes, he is that. He’s quite advanced, but he is still very much a child.” He stepped nearer, but still seemed quite remote. “I am concerned that...he may form an...attachment...ah...to you and that...when his holiday has ended he will suffer yet another loss. I hope you can understand, Mrs. Lacey.”

Hannah straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin as she leveled her gaze at him. She understood very well. He was trying to discourage her friendship with his son. “So what would you have me to do, Mr. Thatcher?”

Ronald cleared his throat. This was not going quite as well as he had hoped. “Well, I...I suppose you could, ah...see him less.”

She relaxed and let her head fall slightly, tilting her face up to look at him. “And you think that would help? Perhaps...a very gradual withdrawal of my...friendship would hurt him less?” She watched his apparent discomfort. He struggled with concern for his son, something with which she was quite familiar. She laid her gloves down on the wicker table beside her and smiled. “I know you do not know me sir and I understand that you have no reason to trust me. I have raised two sons of my own, so I can imagine your pain.”

“Then you will know what is best to do,” he said, a bit too sharply. His hazel eyes watched her intently as she deliberated over her answer. She really was quite pretty when she smiled.

“Are you sure you won’t have a glass of lemonade?”

Against his will, a smile broke across his own face. He was just about to politely refuse when they heard a familiar sound.

“Yoo-hoo!” Aunt Bonnie called from across the way. She was waving a large white kerchief in the air, no doubt to get more attention. “Ronald! Bring Hannah over for tea! It’s all ready!”

Ronald looked back at Hannah and shrugged his shoulders. “We have our orders, then.”

Hannah smiled. “I’ll just wash up. You needn’t wait.” But he did. She was surprised to find him still standing there when she returned.

“If I do not escort you, Aunt Bonnie will be upset. Also, I wanted to be certain that I had not offended you.”

“You have not offended me. I understand completely. I’m just not sure I agree with your solution.”

Ronald was a bit surprised. He was not used to having someone disagree with him regarding his personal life. “I see. Well then, may I hear your point of view?”

“I have only known your son for a week, but in that time, we have gone from mere acquaintances to fast friends. I believe it was borne out of his need for just such a relationship. But, he is an intelligent young boy and he knows that it is only short term. I made sure of that.”

As they neared the walkway that led through Bonnie's garden, he stopped and stood still for a moment. "So all of my...ranting back there...must have seemed pretty foolish to you," he said quietly.

She lowered her head and smiled. "Not at all, Mr. Thatcher. You are concerned, as you should be. You have...both...been through a lot." They continued on their way, presently coming to the edge of the porch, where Bonnie had a very nice spread prepared for them.

"Oh, how nice of you to pop over for tea!" Bonnie pronounced with great delight, as if she had had nothing at all to do with that. "Isn't it a lovely day? Oh, Ronald dear I wish you could stay a bit longer. Must you go home tonight?"

Ronald pulled out a chair for Hannah and when she was seated, he did the same for Bonnie. "Actually Aunt, I had thought about driving back in the morning, if it is all right with you of course."

"Splendid! Absolutely you may. Oh what a wonderful surprise. Freddie will be jubilant."

Ronald frowned suddenly. "Where is Freddie?"

"He fell asleep on the sofa. Poor dear, you quite wore him out with all your gallivanting. I left him to rest for a while. He's always up so early."

"He loves to be out by the sea at sunup," Hannah added.

"As did his father, at one time," Bonnie commented with a smile as she passed a plate of cakes to Hannah.

"I still do, when I'm not too tired."

Hannah kept her head lowered to hide the smile. This was evidently a domestic ribbing over sleeping late. Ronald leaned back in his chair and stretched his long legs out before him. He watched Hannah as she chatted with Bonnie. He decided that he must get to know her, since his son was so attached to her. He would certainly know if there was anything to be alarmed about, other than the fact that she was an American. He was always distrustful of Americans, for some reason.

It had not been an American, but an Englishwoman who had brought so much misery into his life. He tried not to think of her, but it was impossible. She still colored his life in many ways. He had loved her with abandon—which in his opinion—had been a mistake. One should never trust another person with such a huge chunk of one's own heart. She had taken it and then cast it off as if it were nothing. The loss was too great. He would never do it again.

“He's day-dreaming, I believe. Perhaps Freddie is not the only one who needs a nap?”

Ronald realized that they were talking about him. “What? I beg your pardon, I must have been...I was thinking about something else. Did I miss something?”

The two ladies laughed. Bonnie rose and began clearing away the tea things. This time, Hannah felt completely free to help her. After only a week, she was almost like one of the family. With the exception of that one over there she thought, looking at Ronald. He looked back at her inquisitively. “Your aunt was just telling me about the time you landed a shark.”

He sat up quickly. “I really thought it was a shark. It had teeth.”

Hannah laughed as she pushed through the door into the kitchen. Freddie was awake and was very upset to learn that he had missed tea.

Bonnie spoke gently to him. “I am sorry dear, but you were sleeping so soundly, I hated to wake you. Your dad's still outside if you'd like to join him. I'll bring you something out there.”

“No, Aunt—it's all right. I'll just take this cake with me.” He picked up one of the cookies from the plate and stuffed it in his pocket, then set off for a jaunt on the beach, where he was joined by his father.

“They look like two peas from the same pod, don't they?” Bonnie asked Hannah. “The same tousled hair and lumbering gait. The boy will be tall, like his dad.”

“Your nephew seems very nice. Why would a woman leave the two of them?”

Bonnie gave her a sideways glance. “A sane woman wouldn't think of it. But then, how do we know what the circumstances were? She is an actress, after all. She made a choice.”

“Yes.” It would be a difficult choice to make, Hannah thought, if one was torn between their career and their loved ones. She believed there must have been more to it than that. Mr. Thatcher seemed a little bitter, but that was to be expected, she supposed and that was none of her concern. She was only a friend of the family and a new friend, at that.

Early on Monday morning, Hannah made her way down to the sea, following the echo of voices through the mist. Down at the water’s edge, she found them. Freddie was there with his dad. Hannah hesitated a moment, wondering whether she should stay or go. “Mrs. Lacey, come see what we’ve found!” She crossed the short expanse of sand that separated them. The two were bent down over a crevasse in a rock. A great starfish lay in a small pool of water.

“Oh my, that’s a wonderful find. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen one so big.”

“He’ll die unless we move him. But we must be careful,” Ronald instructed softly.

“They can grow new arms,” Freddie observed.

“Yes, but you don’t want him to have to go through that, now do you?”

“I suppose not,” Freddie told his father. Freddie looked very thoughtful for a moment.

Hannah was struck with the impression that he understood very well, the pain of separation and replacement. For the first time since she had known him, she wanted to take him in her arms and comfort him, as a young boy should be comforted over a loss so great. She wondered how many times he had been held like that since his mother left. Perhaps very little, but then he may never have had that kind of affection from his mother. The English were so different. She watched the two as they worked together to rescue the starfish. The father was gentle with his son. She stepped away for several moments, looking out over the dark water. She wiped away the tears that had formed.

“Are you all right, Mrs. Lacey?”

She turned to look at Ronald. “Yes, I’m all right, thank you.”

“I suppose I’m interfering in your routine.”

She smiled up at him. “Not at all, Mr. Thatcher...I was just...feeling a little homesick.”

“Really? Do you live near the sea?”

“Not far from it.”

“She lives in Virginia, Dad. It was one of the original colonies.”

“Yes it was. Virginia, isn’t that where the Wallaces moved?”

“They’re neighbors of mine.”

“So that’s how you came to be here?”

“Yes, it is.”

“I’ve known the Wallaces all of my life. How are they?”

“Quite well and about now, they’ll be in Florida with their daughter.”

“Trudy, how is she?”

“Very well, last I heard. She has two children, a boy and a girl and each has...very white hair!”

Ronald grinned. “Yes, they have the Wallace genes, very good! Well, give them my regards when next you see them.”

“I will.”

“Are we going to walk, or not?” Freddie called out.

Hannah laughed and started off in his direction. Ronald ran up and grabbed his son, carrying him on his back. Freddie laughed loudly and beat his father’s arm. “Giddy-up!”

Hannah was quite content, observing the affection between the two. She knew then that Freddie would survive.

It was a glorious summer for Freddie, filled with adventure and excitement. Each new day brought new discoveries and long golden moments spent with Bonnie and Hannah. When his father came on the weekends, they now spent most of their time at the cottage or on the beach, instead of driving around the countryside. On Sunday mornings, they all walked up to the church on the corner. Afterwards, they would either return to Bonnie’s for dinner or sit upon the wide porch at the Philanderer, enjoying steamed clams and other regional dishes.

Only once did Freddie’s mother send for him. He spent a short weekend with her in London. When he returned, he was so melancholy that Hannah began to be concerned.

They were sitting on a rock, looking out over the darkened waters. The day was overcast and you could see the rain out over the water in the distance. It was a sight that Freddie usually loved to watch, but he had hardly spoken all morning. Hannah looked at him, concern in her eyes. “Do you miss her?”

Freddie didn’t turn to look at her; he just kept his eyes on the horizon. “Yes,” he said and then let his body fall back to rest his head on Hannah’s lap. She stroked his hair in silence, waiting to see whether he would continue. “She’s going away.”

“Going away...where?”

“She has a job—acting in a television show in Australia.”

“Australia, that’s such a long way. When will she be going?”

“She’s gone already. She left this morning.”

So that was why his mother had sent for him. She was leaving. She wanted to see him before she left. Hannah hardly knew what to say. “I’m so sorry, Freddie. It must be so difficult for you.” To her surprise, he curled up next to her and began to cry. She pulled him up and held him for several moments until the tears subsided. How long had he been holding that back?

After a while, he sat up and wiped his eyes. Again he was silently staring out to sea, but he had changed. “I think she doesn’t love me, Mrs. Lacey.”

“Oh no, Freddie—you mustn’t think that!”

He sighed. “Dad says I mustn’t think that too and he says I mustn’t think she left because of me. But I think she doesn’t want to have a son at all.”

His voice was light and circumspect, as if he had given this a great deal of thought. Hannah sat quietly for a moment, whispering a silent prayer. She needed just the right words to encourage him. “You could be partly right, but I cannot believe that she doesn’t love you. Mothers love their children. Especially good children, like you.” She leaned forward and kissed the top of his head. “I loved my sons, even when they were...not at their best.”

“But I think you would never leave your sons. Not when they were nine.”

“No, I would not, but I am not your mother. People are individuals, Freddie. God has given us all the ability to make our own choices. We are all quite different. Sometimes we make bad decisions. There may come a day when your mother greatly regrets the time she lost with you. What you must do, I think is forgive her and try to love her in spite of what she has done.”

Freddie took a deep breath. A stiff wind blew, caught his hat and flipped it right off of his head. They both jumped up and he caught it just as the first raindrops fell. Then they ran for Bonnie’s cottage where she stood, holding the door open for them.

“I saw you coming! I’ve got water on for tea. Here, put this shawl over you till you’re dry, Hannah. Freddie you go in and put on dry clothes. I’ll have a treat for you when you’re ready!”

Bonnie’s effervescence always lifted their spirits. Hannah removed her hat and then sat down and pulled the shawl around her shoulders.

“May I assume that he was talking to you? I was hoping he would, poor little shaver. I saw him leaning on you. He does love you, you know.”

“Yes Bonnie, he talked to me a little and yes, I know he loves me; I love him too. I just hope he won’t have a difficult time when he must go home.”

“I’ve warned him all along. I remind him day by day that summer holidays will end and he’ll be back at school. But I tell him that he can write to you and you will write to him. Truth be told, I’m hoping you’ll write to me also. I shall miss you both, terribly.” The kettle began to whistle and Bonnie moved to the stove and prepared the tea.

Hannah looked up at Bonnie and smiled. “Of course I will write. I’ll miss both of you too.”

“Let’s not speak of it, then. Let’s just enjoy our last several weeks together and not be sad until the very end, when there’s no help for it!”

When Ronald came next, he was not so light-hearted about the whole thing. “He’s angry with Freddie’s mum, is what it is,” Bonnie whispered after he left the room. “And who could blame him, poor boy? His heart was broken several times over.”

“I just wish I didn’t feel so badly about it. I feel as though I’ve made a mess of things.”

“Don’t you do that, now. Freddie is so much better off with you here. And so is Ronald, though he doesn’t know it yet. He’ll realize it one of these days, you’ll see.”

Hannah was sitting in the sun, looking at a magazine when Ronald appeared on the other side of the hedge. “Knock-knock.”

She looked up and smiled. “Come on around. I’m not busy.”

“I was hoping I could have a moment alone with you before I leave for London. Freddie’s been like a fly on honey with me this weekend.”

“I noticed that.”

“I suppose it’s to be expected. Did he tell you about his mother?”

“Yes, he did. He was quite troubled about it.”

“It’s been a difficult time. I know that in the beginning I was a bit...well, I was rude. But I really am glad you were here. He talks to you...so much better than Aunt Bonnie or me. It can’t have been easy for you, being caught in the middle and you on your summer holiday.”

“Oh please don’t feel badly. I’ve loved being here. I don’t know when I’ve had such a good time. Sometimes it’s just nice to be needed.”

“I hope we may call you when you’re home. I promised Freddie I’d ask.”

Hannah was surprised, but recovered herself quickly. “I suppose that would be all right.” She wanted to add that it was quite expensive, but she figured he already knew that. “I had promised to write.”

“Yes, he said that. But I suppose he wanted to talk to you as well. I think he prefers talking to you over talking to his mum, which is understandable, in such circumstances as these. I’ve tried to maintain a positive attitude, but it is difficult.”

“I imagine it would be.”

“You are a widow, I believe?”

Hannah was surprised by his question. “Yes.”

“I’m sorry. I’m not wanting to pry, I just....I didn’t think you were divorced.”

“No, I didn’t have to go through that. I think death is easier, in a way.”

“I definitely agree. When someone leaves of their own accord because they no longer prefer you...it can be devastating.”

There was such a depth of pain in his eyes that Hannah had to look away.

“I’ve made you uncomfortable. I’m sorry. That’s not really what I came to do. I’d best be on my way.” As he rose to go, Hannah followed.

“Thank you, Ronald.”

He turned to look at her. “What for?”

“For allowing me to be with Freddie this summer, it’s done me a world of good.”

Ronald smiled and nodded, but made no answer. She was surprised by his expression. A few minutes later, his car pulled away from Bonnie’s drive and she wondered if she would ever see him again.

Bonnie strove valiantly to make their last week together so grand that they’d have no time for remorse. Every day they had an adventure that she had planned to the minute. They had picnics and went for drives in the country. They visited around the villages and ate in quaint little pubs. It was as if she had saved all the best things for last. Freddie was well entertained and for a time, seemed to be able to forget his troubles.

“I am looking forward to seeing my friends at school,” he admitted to Hannah. “I know I shall have had the best summer of all and I have so many grand things to show them.”

On the day that Bonnie and Hannah would put him on the bus to London, Bonnie surprised him with a poster she’d had made up of a collage of photographs from their summer together.

“I shall put it on the wall beside my bed!” he told them excitedly. “I shall never forget how much fun we had. I’m glad mum left, because if she had stayed, I would have been stuck away in our house all summer. I’d never have met Mrs. Lacey!”

He kissed them both before he left and promised to write. He straightened his shoulders, raised his chin and said, “I won’t cry, because I’m much too old for that.”

Bonnie’s lip quivered a bit as she said, “I think it would have been much better if we had gone in with you. Call us when you’ve arrived, so we’ll know you made it safely.”

“It’s better this way. I like the ride and by the time I get there, I’ll be all over the sadness of leaving and I won’t be a drag on Dad. He needs me to be strong.”

Hannah looked at Bonnie, who was dabbing at tears with an embroidered handkerchief. They stood waving until the bus was out of sight. “Well, now what shall we do? My goodness, I never expected to become so attached to the little shaver. I told myself I wouldn’t do it.”

Hannah put her arm around Bonnie’s waist. “You can’t help it. He’s a wonderful boy and he needed us so.”

“We make a good pair, you and I. Now you’ll be going and I’ll be all alone.”

“You’ll be all alone, except for your millions of flowers and visitors. They must still come around, even when the season is ended.”

Bonnie laughed. “Yes, they do. I do love visitors.”

A light breeze stirred the tallest of the flowers and sent loose petals flying. Bonnie’s silver head bobbed among them, as she worked to cut away the dead heads. She stood for a while, watching and remembering. It was almost as if she could hear him calling. “Aunt! Look what I’ve found!” Oh, she missed him so. A moment later, a tiny blond-haired beauty skipped down the lane beside her mother and Bonnie’s day began. Even in winter, folks came, so she would never be lonely. For that, she was glad.

A brilliant yellow maple lent its light to Hannah’s kitchen in Virginia. It was one of the things she liked best about her house and one of the things she would miss the most. It would be hard to leave, but she knew she must. She had made up her mind not long after arriving back home. Her younger son Jonathan had found her a small condo near his house in Florida. It had

taken the summer in England to convince her that she did not want to be alone. She hoped that being near her family would ease the deep loneliness that had descended over her.

She missed her friends. Freddie had already called once and they had spoken briefly. He was doing well in school, but he missed her. He had not heard from his mother. Hannah wrote him long letters and he answered her with short notes written in his very childish but very proper script. Bonnie's letters were comical and filled with pressed flowers and leaves from new cuttings she had gotten.

The house sold quickly, almost too quickly, Hannah thought. She had not had time to adjust to the change. As the leaves were falling, she was packing boxes. When the phone rang, she supposed it must be Jonathan, calling to check on her progress. So she was surprised to hear Ronald's voice.

"I've a huge favor to ask," he began.

"What is it?" She knew it must be something terribly important for him to take the time to call.

"Well, I've just heard from Lila. She won't be coming back."

"Oh?"



"She's...getting married again. Some guy there in Sydney. He's a producer or some such thing. Anyway, she called to say she wouldn't be back.

"But what of Freddie—oh Ronald—she didn't want Freddie?"

"Heavens no, she called to let me know she'd be signing over full custody." He hesitated for a moment. "Her new husband can't stand kids."

"Oh how awful for Freddie. Have you told him?"

"No, that's why I called you. I wanted to have something to drop in front of him after the news I have to tell him. I was wondering if we might visit you over the Christmas holidays. I know it's asking a lot. We'd stay in a hotel of course. It'd be just a few days; I know you're moving..."

His voice trailed off in uncertainty. “Oh Ronald, I’d love to see you both.” She began slowly and then with growing enthusiasm. “It would be wonderful. I should be settled in by then. I’ll be near the sea, which should please Freddie. You could get a room right on the ocean, if you like.”

“I’m quite relieved. I didn’t know how I would get through this, otherwise. He’ll be devastated when he hears the news that she’s left for good. He’d been planning on seeing her over the holidays.”

“I know, he’s told me several times.”

Ronald promised to call her when the arrangements were made and she went back to her packing. In just two days, the movers would be there and she must be ready to go. She thought about Freddie and the shock and sadness he would experience when he heard the news from his mother. He was strong and he had a good relationship with his dad, so she trusted that he would get through this. “Father prepare his heart,” she prayed. “Give him strength and courage.” He will need it, she thought. Ronald called twice more that week.

“He took it very well really, better than I expected, actually. I didn’t tell him about my plans yet. I thought I’d better give him time to recover from her news. We’re spending the weekend with Aunt Bonnie. That’ll help to cheer him up. While we’re there, I’ll tell him about Christmas with you.”

Freddie called on Sunday, catching her just as she was going out to the evening church service. She put her things down and gave him all of her attention. He was so excited. “I can’t wait to see you, Mrs. Lacey! I’ve told all my friends about you. Wait until they hear about this! They will be so envious! Will you be living near Disney World?”

Clara McNerney sat on the stone wall beside Bonnie’s garden, watching as Bonnie wrestled with a bunch of iris bulbs she was thinning out. Clara generally stopped by every day and frequently

joined Bonnie for tea in the afternoon. The two had been friends for a very long time. “So do you think it is over then? Have we seen the last of ‘er?”

“She says she won’t be back, not for a long time. Freddie’s the only one that wants to see her anyway. I’ve no desire to meet with her and Lord knows dear Ronnie won’t miss seeing her about. She treated him meanly all those years. She tried so hard to get him and then cared nothing for him, other than what he could give her. She traded on his name; she did, and spent his money. More of it than he would ever say. No telling how much he had to give her when she left.”

“How could a mother leave her son? That’s all I want to know—such a good little thing too and handsome like his dad. Most of us would give our eye teeth for such a one as that. Well and what of the other? Have they heard from her since she returned home to the ‘States?”

“They have. They talk to her now and again and she writes regularly. I have a letter from her almost every week. She’s a sweetheart, that one, with no designs on our Ronnie whatever. I believe she has no idea who he is, nor that he cares for her.”

“Are you quite sure he does, or is it just another of your inklings?”

Bonnie’s laughter echoed out over the yard. “I know, I know. My old noggin doesn’t always work so well. But yes, if I know anything of the lad at all after all these years, he’s got a swelled heart over that one. All the more so because she doesn’t chase after him like some young thing would. She’s got a good head on her shoulders.”

“But she’s an American. She might not want to give that up.”

“Oh, I think she would. I think she would in an instant if she had the slightest idea how much he cares for her. She loves Freddie so.” Bonnie paused in her work and looked out toward the dark waters of the sea, deep in thought. “Yes, she’d come be with him, I’m sure of it.” At that moment, the tough roots suddenly gave way and Bonnie fell backwards on her bum. Amidst the cackling laughter that ensued, Clara hopped down from the wall to help her friend and make sure she was all right.

By Thanksgiving, Hannah was already settled in her new home. Her family joined her there to celebrate the holiday. From her balcony, they could see the dark blue water of the Atlantic.

“So when are your friends coming over from England?” Kevin asked.

“In about three weeks. They’ll be staying at the Baytown Resort.”

“That’s a nice place. They must have money.”

“I really don’t know about that. I guess he does.”

Jonathan came up to stand behind his mother. “Does this guy have an interest in you?”

“None other than friendship, his son and I are very close. I told you about Freddie.”

“Yes, but I did wonder if Freddie’s dad was sweet on you, since he’s coming all this way.”

Hannah blushed as she turned to face her son. “I think I would know that, Jon. I never had the slightest hint of any attraction and he’s only recently divorced.”

“Sounds eligible to me,” Kevin teased. “Mom, don’t get upset, we’re just having fun with you. I for one am looking forward to meeting them.”

“They’re looking forward to meeting you also. The boy has had a difficult time of it since his mother left.”

“I don’t know how a mother can leave her child,” Anna called from her seat just inside the door. “I don’t even want to leave Emily in daycare to return to work. The thought turns my stomach.”

“Be glad you don’t have to,” Kevin told her. “I certainly am.”

“Oh believe me, I am very thankful.”

“What’s this boy like?” Jonathan asked. “Is he a spoiled brat? Maybe she just wanted to get away from him.”

“He’s nothing like that. He’s a bit precocious, but he’s been around adults so much and he’s very intelligent.”

“A nerd? Maybe she couldn’t stand that. You never know. And what’s the father like? Maybe she couldn’t stand him either.”

“I don’t think it was anything to do with the two of them. She was an actress and she wanted to get back to her work. Perhaps she thought she could leave it behind and then discovered that she could not. Who knows?” Hannah didn’t like this line of conversation, but knew she should probably try to satisfy their curiosity before Ronald and Freddie came. She did not want that famous Lacey inquisitiveness to get out of hand.

Freddie’s cheeks were glowing and his eyes were like saucers as they boarded the Concord for the flight across the Atlantic. It was an extravagance, but Ronald had promised him two years earlier that they would someday fly on the Concord. He had wanted Bonnie to come also, but she had flatly refused to fly over. From New York, they flew to Atlanta and then to Miami, so they saw quite a bit of the country, if only from a very high altitude. Ronald woke Freddie as they were landing in Miami. He knew his son would not want to miss seeing the white sand and turquoise water.

The airport was very crowded and the security was high, so Hannah waited outside the baggage claim area. She scanned the crowds constantly, knowing that their plane had landed safely and they must now be on their way to her. She was anxious to see them. Finally she caught sight of Ronald’s head above the crowd, he was so very tall. He saw her and immediately turned in her direction, delayed only by the press of the crowd. Freddie ran to her and she threw her arms about him. “I cannot believe how much you’ve grown in so short a time!”

“Have I really?”

“At least an inch, and well on the way to reaching your father’s height, I’ll bet.” She looked up at his father then and was satisfied to see that he was well and seemed happy. “Hello, Ronald. You had a good journey, I hope.”

“It went well—no snags.”

“You’re lucky the weather held. It can be bad up north this time of year.”

“So I hear.”

Once the crowd thinned, they picked up their luggage and followed Hannah on the long journey to her car. From there, they had nearly an hour’s drive to the hotel, which was near Ft. Lauderdale. But the weather was beautiful and her visitors had a lot to look at on the way.

“Aunt Bonnie would have loved it here!” Freddie exclaimed. “There are so many flowers blooming, though it’s December!”

“We’re in a subtropical region,” Bonnie told him. “There’s something blooming year round. I wish Bonnie could’ve come. I miss her.”

Ronald looked at her. “Do you? She wanted to see you, but she has no intention of letting her feet leave the ground.”

“That sounds just like her.”

Hannah left them to get settled in and promised to call for them on the following day. They seemed almost reluctant to let her go, but she felt they should have time to adjust and rest. She gave them her phone number. “I’m only two blocks over that way.” She pointed northwest and then wrote down her address also, just in case they needed it.

“Your family seems very nice,” Ronald told Hannah. They were walking on the beach at sunset. Freddie ran up ahead, watching for stingrays, which often came in at night to feed.

“Thank you. I hope you enjoyed the day.”

“It was unlike any Christmas I’ve ever experienced. You do things quite differently here. Freddie and I enjoyed ourselves immensely. You made us feel very welcome.”

Hannah smiled. “That was our intent.”

Suddenly he stopped and turned to face her. “I’m tired of all this small talk, Hannah. I’ve been sidestepping an issue the entire time I’ve been here. I can no longer delay it.”

Hannah was surprised and dismayed. What on earth could be the matter? Had she offended him in some way? She tried to prepare herself for what was coming.

“I have fallen for you, Hannah.”

Hannah's eyes grew large. She could hardly believe what she was hearing. Could it possibly be true? He had never given her the slightest hint. She was speechless.

"I can see that you are surprised. I am not one to...show a great deal of emotion. I suppose that will have to change. I've watched you with your family and even with Freddie. He has taken to you and responds easily to your obvious affection for him. It has been very good for him and for me as well. I want that in my life, Hannah."



Hannah stood looking up at him and knew in that moment that her heart had been lost to him for some time. She just had not allowed herself to think of it. Her sons had seen it before she had.

"Dad! Mrs. Lacey! Come and look!"

Hannah smiled up at Ronald. "We'd better go to him." She reached out her hand to Ronald. He hesitated only a moment—smiled and took her hand.

Freddie was too busy watching the rays to notice that his dad was holding Mrs. Lacey's hand. It was only later, as they walked back toward the hotel that he saw a look pass between them and he wondered. It was just the beginning of an idea, but it was a thought that seemed to grow in his heart and mind as the evening passed. When Ronald came to say goodnight, Freddie decided to venture forth. "Dad, are you in love with Mrs. Lacey?"

Ronald was not really surprised. Freddie was a bright boy. "Of course I love her. So do you."

"Yes, but I love her like a friend. I think maybe you love her like you want to marry her."

"I had not planned that far ahead just yet, Freddie. There would be...problems to solve where marriage is concerned."

"Because she is an American?"

"Yes and she lives here. She may not want to come to England."

"But she loves it there. She told me so."

"She loves to visit, but will she want to come live there, so far away from her family?"

Freddie sighed. “I hope she will. I know she would never leave me. She would never leave you either.”

Ronald closed his eyes to hide the pain he felt in that moment. Freddie’s arms came up around his neck. “I love you, Dad.”

Nothing like this had ever passed between them. Ronald returned his son’s embrace. “Whatever happens, we will see it through together.”

Freddie was convinced that Mrs. Lacey would want to go with them to England. How could she not? It was not as warm and sunny as Florida, but it was beautiful in its own way.

Ronald was wondering what Hannah was really thinking. They had not had the opportunity to talk privately after Freddie’s interruption. He wondered whether he ought to call her, but decided against it. He would give her time to think it through. She had been surprised. Of that he was certain and she would need time. He had no intention of rushing into anything, so time was something he felt he could give.

Hannah sat on the deck, enjoying the cool night air. She had a lot to occupy her thoughts and knew that she would not be able to sleep. Though the problems with a transcontinental romance would be great, she could not deny the warm feeling in her heart. She loved him. But did she love him enough? Could she give up her independence? She would be a mother again, to another young boy, and she was well aware of the problems that could come in the future as he grew. She had been through all that before.

Could she give up her country? This was the greater question in her heart. She knew she would have to leave. Though she had enjoyed her visit to England, she did not know if she could be content to live there always. And so it came back to the former question, did she love him enough? She closed her eyes and sent a prayer heavenward.

“If you are certain of his caring for you, Mom, I think it would be a very good thing. It’s a long way off, but you’re a long way from us now. Besides, Anna has always wanted to visit England.”

“Things haven’t really gone that far yet, Kevin. I just wanted to field the question. I wanted to know what all of you would think of the possibility—should it arise.” They were discussing the situation over breakfast on the morning after Christmas. Ronald and Freddie would not be joining them until later.

“I knew he was in love with you the first time I met him,” Shannon told her. “I think Jonathan knew it too.”

“I didn’t want to think about it. I just got you here and I’ve barely had time to enjoy having you close.”

Hannah leaned forward and placed her arm around his shoulders. “I love you all and I would miss you terribly.”

Anna spoke up then. “I don’t see how you could pass it up, if you care for him. To have a second chance at love, well...I’d jump at it.”

Kevin smiled at his wife’s comment. “She’s such a romantic. But I think I agree, Mom.”

“Jonathan?” Hannah looked at her youngest. He drew a deep breath and sighed heavily. “I want you to be happy, Mom.”

Shannon spoke up then. “You know, there’s no reason why we can’t keep the condo. That way you’ll have a place to stay whenever you come. You know you’ll want to visit.”

Hannah looked at her and smiled. “That’s one of the things I like best about you. You’re always thinking ahead. This may all just be the cart before the horse anyway.”

Kevin shook his head at her. “Ah, I don’t think so. I think he knows a good deal when he sees one. Do you know what he does for a living?”

“He’s a financier...of some kind. I know so little about him, really.”

“Mom—he’s an exec with Hawthorne & Associates! That’s practically the biggest firm in London. How could you not know that? He’s got money, old and new I’ll wager. I just wonder how much he lost to that first wife of his.”

“That’s none of our business. I guess it’s over and done now though, because she’s remarried.”

“Yeah, that usually settles things, which was fortunate for him and she didn’t keep custody of the boy.”

“Which was fortunate for Freddie,” Hannah finished. She paused to look at each one of them. “Well, I guess we’ve pretty much settled that subject. I won’t be making any sudden decisions, you can depend on that.”

Jonathan chuckled. “Oh, we all know that, Mom. Since when have you ever made a sudden decision? I used to hate waiting for you to make up your mind!”

The afternoon was overcast, but not terribly cold, though the winds off the water were a bit chilly. Freddie sat out on the sand gazing off into the distance. He was joined there by Jonathan. “Have you ever seen a Manatee, Freddie?”

“No! Is there one near here?”

“Not far from here, there’s an aquarium. They have several there. I thought you might like to go over with us. Kevin and I are taking Emily.”

“I’d love too if Dad will allow it. I’ll just go and ask.” Sand scattered in all directions as he jumped up.

Jonathan and Kevin had come upon this plan in order to give their mother time alone with Ronald. They figured it could only help matters. “We’ll be gone for several hours, I imagine,” he told Ronald. “We’ll get something to eat while we’re out, so you needn’t worry about that.”

Ronald looked at Hannah. “I find myself alone for lunch. Would you care to join me?”

“I’d love to.”

They walked along the beach for a while, in the general direction of a restaurant that Hannah wanted to visit. Her cheeks were rosy from the cool breeze.

“You look lovely today,” Ronald observed. “Is it only the weather?”

She looked up at him and smiled, then shook her head slightly. “I believe it may have something to do with you.”

“I was hoping you would say that. I didn’t know how you had received my confession. We had no opportunity to finish our conversation. There will be many times like that, you know.”

“Believe me, I do know. Which brings up another matter that I wonder whether you have considered? I am not young and I have had my family already. Will you be satisfied with only one child?”

He lowered his eyes. “I have considered it, Hannah. I thought about it quite a lot, because I wanted to be certain before I ever confronted you with my feelings. I can honestly say that I am content with Freddie. I’m practically the same age as you and to tell you the truth, I have no desire to go through all that baby stuff again. It was a lot more difficult than I had ever imagined it would be.”

Hannah laughed. “It is that. I have been quite content with being a grandmother.”

“We’ve settled that matter then, so on to the next I suppose and—it’s a big one.”

Hannah knew what was next, but she waited to hear what he had to say about it.

“If we should go forward with this...if you should find that you do love me and down the road a bit, we decide to...marry...would you be willing to come to England?” He waited uneasily for her answer.

“I’m an old-fashioned girl, Ronald. I believe that if you love someone, you must be willing to make sacrifices. You have a very important position at home. I have none here, other than matriarch of my family, which I can very well do from a distance. I will say, however that nothing but the deepest devotion could uproot me from my homeland.”

Ronald paused in his journey forward and smiled off into the distance. “Then I think I’d better get busy. I must make you so in love with me that you cannot bear to have an ocean between us.” He looked back at her, turned and took her in his arms and kissed her. For once, he was oblivious to his surroundings. He didn’t care who was watching.

The End.