

Lissa Bryan

Ghostwriter

The Writer's Coffee Shop 
Publishing House

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Chapter One

It wasn't getting any easier.

Sara sat transfixed, staring at the white screen before her with the flashing cursor over on the left margin of the blank page.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

She shoved her hands into her hair and gave a groan of frustration. Writing a biography shouldn't be so hard, damn it!

Sara pushed her chair back, went into the kitchen, and found herself doing the same sort of staring at the paltry contents of the refrigerator. She noted her problem was similar: Just like she couldn't make a meal out of scraps, neither could she make a glowing biography out of the sparse details she'd been given.

Sara was about to give up all hope when she noticed there was a jar of pickles in the back. She opened it and fished out the contents: two limp dill pickle spears of indeterminate age. They could have dated from the time Richard still lived here, though she didn't remember buying them. Sara wasn't particularly fond of pickles, but they were just about the last edible thing she had. The rest of the refrigerator's contents were mainly comprised of desiccated takeout leftovers waiting for trash disposal day, and a permanent colony of rarely used condiments in the refrigerator door.

Sara checked her wallet again, as though the Money Fairy might have made a deposit overnight, or she might have somehow overlooked a wad of cash in the corner. She found only the eleven cents it had contained yesterday. She wouldn't be able to make it to the end of the month with only ketchup in the refrigerator, but she couldn't keep breaking into her emergency fund. Sara had carefully calculated each month's expenses, down to the last dime, yet she was always running short by the third week of the month. She sometimes felt like she was living in a sitcom because every week a new crisis popped up, and it would end up sapping her dwindling savings.

She had a small advance from the publisher, though her rent would quickly eat through it. Her apartment had been affordable when Richard had paid half

the expenses, but Sara simply couldn't handle it alone now. Tomorrow, she was going apartment hunting again. It was her new weekend occupation. Every place she had found thus far was either too expensive, or was in a questionable location. It felt like an exercise as futile as staring at the blank, white screen.

But Sara didn't have to go hungry. She could turn to her mother and ask for help. The only drawback was the grocery money would be served with a large helping of humble pie. She could see her mother's smirk already. She'd told Sara she was going to fail and she was right.

Sara decided on the limp pickle spears.

She put her meager dinner onto a paper towel and went back into the living room. Her computer stood on the card table, the white word processor screen's glare seeming almost accusatory. For two weeks now, she'd been doing the same thing. In the morning, she would wake energized and determined to pound out a chapter or two, and by midday she'd erase it all. She was the literary version of Sisyphus.

It was ridiculous. In her short and uncelebrated career as a journalist, she'd had many assignments she disliked, yet she'd managed to sit down and grind out the necessary word count, even if she did so while gritting her teeth or rolling her eyes.

She'd been fortunate enough to get a job right out of college as a reporter for the Danvers Times-Recorder, a small newspaper which would never launch her into her dream job at U.S. News and World Report, but it was a paycheck. Many of her fellow students didn't have one. Newspapers all over the country were shrinking, dying, as news media transformed in the digital age.

And then senator Lucy Bridges came to town in a campaign stop. The story should have been covered by their senior reporter, but he had been in the hospital having a bypass operation and the next in line had been out of town at a wedding. It came down to Sara, the only one available, and though it probably made her boss gnash his teeth, she was the one who went.

She dutifully reported on the rally and Lucy's speech, then on Lucy's visit to a local diner where she shook hands and nodded sympathetically to the

people who expressed the same concerns she probably heard everywhere she went. The plant had closed and there were no jobs, illness without insurance, fuel prices, foreclosure, and adult children moving back in with their parents—the issues which afflicted average Americans, whom Lucy said were her primary concern. Sara had been granted a twenty minute interview with Lucy herself, though it had been a challenge to come up with interesting questions which weren't on the extensive list of forbidden topics.

Something about the resultant articles must have impressed either Lucy or her handlers, because the same day Pete Johnson had regretfully informed her they had to “let her go” due to budget cutbacks, she'd gotten a call from Lucy's media consultant who asked her if she'd like to be the ghostwriter for Lucy's autobiography. Lucy had grander political aspirations than the incumbent senate seat for which she was now campaigning, and a well-written and laudatory biography would further those ambitions.

Looking down a long and scary vista of unemployment lines and reams of resumes mailed all over the country, Sara had immediately accepted. She could knock it out quickly, she thought, and the money would be enough to tide her over until she found something else. Just what that something else would be, she was not sure, because she had yet to even get a courtesy call of rejection from any of the papers to which she'd sent her resume.

Sara had a foot-thick pile of material given to her by Lucy's publicity team, which contained about half a page's worth of biographical information. Lucy was born. Lucy grew up in a perfectly average middle-class family. Lucy went to college and got a degree in business administration. Lucy got married and had two well-behaved and immaculately groomed children. And that was about the sum of it.

There was nothing about how Lucy had developed her political views, no mistakes she'd made, or lessons learned from them. When Sara had called to ask, Lucy had seemed offended by the implication she could make a mistake. Judging by what she'd been given, Lucy had burst into the world full-fledged, like Athena, from the forehead of some political deity, equipped with an endless stream of quips and slogans devoid of any real value other than to ensure her presence on the ten o'clock news.

Sara had to do this. Somehow she had to make an autobiography out of a pile of catchphrases and a thimbleful of vague antecedents, but it was like trying to piece together a cogent policy analysis from campaign commercials. She tried to cheer herself with the thought that if she could create a book from this, it would be proof she could write anything, and it might broaden her career prospects.

She assured herself there had to be a bright side.

Sara woke feeling groggy and grouchy the following morning. She trudged into the bathroom and fumbled in the medicine cabinet for some pain killers. Her head thumped dully, and she told herself she had to give in and buy a new pair of eyeglasses. Her last pair had been broken in the car accident three months ago, and she hadn't replaced them. Now, she really wished she'd taken the time to get them replaced while she still had health insurance. At the time, she'd been dealing with the recent break up with Richard and was thrust into the role of unwilling moderator in the bickering between her health insurance company and the auto insurance company as to whom should pay what. Getting the glasses replaced had seemed like more trouble than they were worth.

Sara felt marginally better after a hot shower, but after wiping the mirror free of steam, she cringed at her reflection. She was too pale, and with her platinum blonde hair and light blue eyes, she was almost colorless. The dark circles beneath her eyes accentuated her pallor and made her look like she was at death's door. She had tried covering them with concealer, but she had never been able to find makeup that actually matched her skin tone. It looked fine in the bottle and it might even look okay in the store if she smeared a dab on the inside of her wrist, yet as soon as it was on her face, it turned a horrible orange-beige. Ditto with lipstick. Anything other than the lightest shades looked like clown makeup on her.

She ran a brush through her hair and tied it back into a ponytail. Her hair was baby-fine and had no volume whatsoever. Curling irons could not persuade it, and blow-driers simply insulted it into an indignant frizz. She had the choice between a ponytail or a headband. Anything else incited rebellion.

After she pulled on a pair of jeans and a T-shirt, Sara slid her laptop into her canvas tote and then walked down to the apartment complex's parking lot. She put on her sunglasses before stepping from the building's shelter. She already had a headache and knew from experience the bright light would make it worse, which is why all of her apartment windows were covered with thick curtains.

Sara's trusty little Geo Metro waited for her in its assigned parking spot. Richard's spot sat empty as it had for three months now, except for the occasional bold foray of a space-stealer. The Geo's air conditioner was broken and it was old enough to feature a tape deck in the stereo, but its gas mileage was incredible and got her around with reasonable reliability. She considered herself fortunate to have gotten such a good car with the little she'd been able to afford after the accident. She'd had the misfortune of being the driver of a new car struck by someone who had state minimum coverage which barely covered the cost of paying off her totaled car, let alone the medical bills from all the tests at the emergency room.

She supposed, in retrospect, she was better off not having the new car any longer. She wouldn't have been able to afford the payments now, but it had been her first new car and she mourned for it. The way things were going, it would probably be the only new car she ever owned.

Sara slid into the driver's seat and rolled down the windows to let out the baking heat which had gathered from the morning sun. She propped the newspaper classified section against the steering wheel and read the address from the first circled ad. She'd mapped out the route of her loop around the city this morning, to make it as efficient as possible. Every penny counted.

The first place was a bust. Sara knew it as soon as she drove into the neighborhood. If there was graffiti on the apartment building's door and trash scattered in the vestibule, it was best to move on. Her second stop of the day was at a real estate agent's office which was handling the applications and showings for cost-efficient apartments.

When she pulled up in front of the building, Sara checked the paper again to make sure she had the right place. It was a sleek, ultra-modern structure of chrome and glass and the lobby looked like a movie set, with leather furniture and glass tables without a speck of dust in sight.

An unoccupied wide, semi-circular reception desk with a burnished metal front stood sentinel in front of a dark wood wall with silver letters, which spelled out the words Fortner and Associates Realty. The name would be easy to remember, as it was the same as Sara's favorite author. The wall was flanked on either side by doorways, but going around the desk to peek into the back offices seemed rude.

Sara waited for a few minutes and then took a seat in one of the leather chairs lining the wall. There was a small glass table between them with a real estate magazine on top. She entertained herself by looking at the houses she'd never be able to afford. The Fortner logo was under several of the listings for multi-million dollar properties. She was really surprised a place like this would be managing efficiency apartments.

"May I help you?"

Sara looked up at the woman who stood in one of the doorways. She was in her late twenties, maybe early thirties. She wore a sharp gray suit and her dark hair was swept up into a French twist, not a strand out of place. Sara was suddenly very self-conscious about her jeans and T-shirt. She fumbled with the newspaper. "I'm here to see . . . um . . . Valarie."

"Valarie isn't here today." The woman was eyeing her with an odd, appraising look that made Sara squirm in her seat. Her eyes were dark brown, like her neatly coifed hair, and they seemed to bore into Sara, seeing more than the surface.

"Okay. I'll come back." Sara stood and retrieved her canvas tote bag from under the chair where she'd stashed it.

"Maybe I can help you." The woman transferred her files to her other arm and held out her hand. Her smile was warm and friendly.

Sara wondered if she'd misinterpreted her look of appraisal. It wouldn't be the first time she'd misread expressions and drawn erroneous conclusions.

"I'm Virginia Fortner. Call me Ginny."

"Sara Howell."

"Nice to meet you, Sara. Did you have an appointment with Valarie?"

“No, I saw her listing for the apartment on Saint Charles Avenue and I was hoping to see it.”

“I’ll be happy to take you over there,” Ginny offered.

The owner of the company taking me to look over a studio apartment?

“Oh, no. It’s okay. I can come back.”

“Nonsense. I’m not busy. Let’s go. Do you want to take my car?”

She should probably volunteer to drive, but Sara inwardly cringed at the thought of Ginny climbing into her crummy little Geo in her elegant gray suit and black stilettos. Her outfit probably cost more than Sara had paid for the car. “Sure,” she said.

Ginny drove a sleek, black Lexus, and Sara tried not to stare. She slid into the passenger seat after Ginny unlocked it. It smelled like new car and leather; it smelled like money.

“So, are you in college?” Ginny asked, backing out of her parking space.

It was an easy assumption to make, given her canvas tote bag and casual attire. “No, two years out, actually.”

“Oh? What do you do?”

“I’m a journalist.”

“Ooh, that sounds like a fun job.”

“Yeah, I thought so, too,” Sara said, her tone wry.

Ginny laughed. “Where do you work?”

“I’m sort of . . . working on freelance projects right now.” Sara felt heat suffuse her cheeks. She decided to be honest. “I’m looking to downsize, actually. I can’t afford where I’m living anymore.” Though the deposits she would have to pay on a new apartment would eat a large hole in her savings, it would be better in the long run.

“It’s rough out there,” Ginny said sympathetically. “Are you from around here?”

“No, I grew up in New Jersey and went to college in Ohio. They have an excellent journalism program.” Fat lot of good it had done her. She might as well have stayed home and attended community college. No one seemed to care her degree came from one of the best journalism schools in the United States.

“And now you’re in North Carolina. You must miss your family.”

“It’s just my mom, actually. I don’t have any other family.” Her mother came from a long line of single children and her father’s family had never been in the picture.

“Wow, that must have sucked at Christmas time when you were a kid.”

“Yeah, kind of.” When she was younger, there had been a time when she’d dreamed about having a large, loving, noisy, eccentric family like those she saw on television during the holidays. But honestly, she probably liked the idea of it more than she would have liked the reality.

Ginny pulled up in front of a beige, nondescript brick building. “Here we are,” she said cheerfully.

A sign located in the tiny lobby regretted to inform them the elevator was out of order, a situation which appeared to have persisted for some time if the weather-beaten look of the sign was any indication. Ginny took the stairs energetically. Sara trudged up them slowly behind her. A strange dreamlike feeling descended over her and she had to pause on the landing to fight off a wave of dizziness.

“Sara! Are you okay?” Ginny hurried back down the stairs and gripped Sara’s arm to keep her from tumbling backward.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

”You’re as white as a sheet! Did you skip breakfast?”

“Yeah.” She hadn’t had anything since the pickle spears the previous night.

“Here, sit down and rest for a minute.” Ginny carefully held onto Sara until she was safely seated on one of the treads.

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Listen, why don’t we go get some lunch after this?”

“I can’t.” Sara couldn’t afford it. Her ashen cheeks bloomed with blotchy red patches.

“Why not? Come on, my treat.”

Sara hesitated, but only for a moment. “All right.” It could be fun. She had never spent any time around someone sophisticated and wealthy like Ginny. As embarrassing as it was to admit, she had assumed Ginny would fit the stereotype of snobby, wealthy, fashionable women who judged others by their shoe brands. Taking several deep breaths, Sara’s head cleared and she pushed herself to her feet. “I’m better now.”

“Sure?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Let’s go look at the apartment.”

Ginny led her up the last few stairs and unlocked the door. Sara stepped inside and peered around.

The apartment was so tiny it could have fit into Sara’s current living room, but she didn’t need much space, she reasoned. Just enough room for her bed and computer. It smelled of fresh paint and carpet shampoo.

“It’s a pretty quiet neighborhood,” Ginny said. “Good amount of closet space for such a small apartment. What do you think?”

Sara felt relieved to have found something suitable at last. “I’ll take it.”

“We’ll fill out the papers once we get back to the office, okay? Now, let’s go get something to eat. I’m starving.”

Through the quiet drive, Sara had been worried Ginny might take her someplace upscale where she’d feel even more uncomfortable in her casual clothes, but Ginny suggested a quaint little diner down at the beach. Sara could see the ocean through the window beside their booth. She gazed at it for a few moments while Ginny debated between her favorites.

Sara had always found something soothing about the ocean. Her childhood home in New Jersey had been only about half a mile from the shore. She used to take the bus there and sit atop the dunes, staring out at the sea. At the time, she'd lacked the vocabulary to articulate how its eternal nature comforted her so. Storms would come and go, kingdoms would rise and fall, and the monuments of man would crumble to dust, but the tides would always continue their precise rhythm. The waves would still lap the shore, no matter what shape it took.

Across the road from the diner, a mesmerizing scene of sand dunes covered in long seagrass dancing in the breeze caught Sara's attention. Reluctantly, she pulled her attention back to her companion when she heard her name.

"Sara?"

"Hmm?"

Ginny's appraising look was back. "Do you have your heart set on living inside the city?"

"Not really." It wasn't as though she had to commute.

"My family has a place they've been trying to rent for a while, but it's in a remote location. It's on its own little island along the Outer Banks."

"Really? Those places cost a fortune!"

"Not this one," Ginny said. "Too far out. We don't even get many vacationers because it's only reachable by boat, not exactly convenient for shopping or nightclubbing."

It sounded wonderful to Sara. Privacy. Silence. Though she doubted it would be in her price range. Ginny's idea of "expensive" probably varied greatly from Sara's. "How much?"

Ginny named a figure so low, Sara's eyes bulged. It was even less than the little studio apartment.

"Really?"

“As I said, most people aren’t interested because it’s so remote. No telephone, internet, or cable. It’s solar powered, but if there are a few cloudy days in a row, you might have to fire up the generator.”

That wouldn’t bother Sara. Since Richard had moved out, she hadn’t been able to afford cable or internet, and had learned to live without them.

“Would you be interested in looking at it?” Ginny asked.

“Sure!” Sara could survive even longer on her savings with the price Ginny had quoted. And the idea of her own little island was appealing.

The waitress brought them their requested drinks and Ginny thanked her with a smile. Another point in her favor. Sara hated when people treated servers with indifference, or worse, imperiously. Her mother, for instance, never deigned to thank a server for bringing her something, and never spoke to them unless to issue another demand never a request or to complain when something was not up to her standards of culinary perfection. It had always embarrassed Sara, who often slipped back to the table and tipped extra, trying to make up for it.

“So, how long have you been here in Danvers?” Ginny asked. “Two years,” Sara replied, tearing the paper from her straw. “Since right out of college, then?”

Sara was surprised Ginny remembered. “Yeah. It was my first job after graduation.” She gave a small grimace. “I probably won’t be able to stay here though, because it’s highly likely I’ll have to move to get a new job.”

“It must be hard, having to make friends all over again every time you move,” Ginny said sympathetically.

“Well, I . . . um . . .” Sara mumbled. “I’m sort of a loner.”

Ginny seemed pleased by her response. Sara supposed she must be worried about her family’s house getting torn up by numerous guests, wild parties, and the like. Sara could certainly put her mind at ease in that respect. “I don’t expect to have a lot of visitors. Maybe my mom. But that’s about it.”

“You don’t have a boyfriend?” Ginny asked, as if it were the oddest thing she’d ever heard.

“I did, until a couple of months ago.” Sara poked her straw around in the ice floating at the top of her Coke.

Ginny’s expression turned to one of sympathy. “What happened?”

“He said we needed to spend some time apart to evaluate where we wanted to go with our relationship.”

“Another girl?”

“Last I heard, they were engaged.” Ginny winced. “Ouch. That was fast.”

The waitress came to take their orders. Still stuck on the “rich girl” stereotype, Sara was surprised when Ginny ordered a cheeseburger and fries. She would have expected Ginny to order a salad or something. Sara asked for the same.

“You won’t be sorry,” Ginny told her. “Their burgers are awesome. But they’re also enormous.”

“You’ve kept the conversation on me,” Sara said. “What about you? How did you get into real estate?”

“Family business,” Ginny shrugged. “My cousin owns the apartment building you were interested in.”

“Oh, I see.” Things started to make sense. That certainly explained why Ginny’s well-heeled agency would be dealing with apartment rentals. “If you don’t mind me saying so, it seems like it’s been rather . . . lucrative.”

Now, it was Ginny’s turn to poke her straw around in her drink. “My family has money.” She didn’t seem particularly happy about that fact, and her next words confirmed it. “It’s a curse.”

Sara, who had grown up in a one-income household where every penny counted, had often fantasized about being rich, as many people do. She honestly didn’t understand how being well-off could be a burden to the point of calling it a curse. The writer in her was immediately curious, and in the back of her mind, she began to weave a story about a cursed fortune—

maybe a pirate's treasure or blood diamonds—but the compassionate side of her decided not to pry. It looked like it was an unpleasant topic of conversation for Ginny.

The waitress returned to their table with oval-shaped plates bearing giant hamburgers and a pile of fries roughly the size of a Thanksgiving turkey. Sara's eyes widened.

“Yeah, they load you up,” Ginny chuckled. “I always end up with a doggie bag.”

Sara decided to eat the fries and save the burger. The latter could be warmed up again, and it looked like it might make two, or even three meals. There were more than enough fries to stuff her stomach to the point where she wouldn't be hungry for supper tonight. She began munching contentedly. She had something to eat for the rest of the weekend, thanks to the leftovers, and the prospect of an inexpensive house on her very own island. Things were finally starting to look up.

Chapter Two

The next morning, Ginny picked Sara up at the front door of her apartment building. Ginny wore a flower-print dress with a loose, full skirt and she had a straw hat lying on the passenger seat, which she tossed into the back when Sara opened the door. It landed next to a picnic basket. “I brought lunch in case we get hungry while we're there,” she told Sara.

“Thanks!”

“I warn you, though, I'm not very handy in the kitchen, so you have the choice between a peanut butter sandwich, or a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.”

Sara's stomach rumbled in response and they both laughed.

“Want to stop at a drive-thru before we head out?” Ginny offered. “There's a McDonald's on the way.”

“No, I’m fine,” Sara insisted. She was eager to see the house and the island and didn’t want to delay their trip. It was all she had thought of last evening. When she lay in her bed last night, she had listened to the thumps and thuds ubiquitous to apartment living, along with music, the faint wails of a baby down the hall, the honking horns on the street outside her window, squealing tires, trains, and sirens. Sara wondered what would it be like to hear nothing but the waves and the wind through the grasses. She imagined it would be serene, almost spiritual.

They pulled into a parking lot beside a small marina. The wooden dock was silvered and warped with age. It creaked ominously as they walked toward the waiting fishing boat. The boat was bigger than Sara had expected. Its back was open, with racks and supports for fishing poles. The controls and instruments were on the second story, and a small set of stairs led up to it. Through the small window on the door, Sara could see what looked like a living room and a hallway beyond.

A woman stood in the open back area of the boat, dressed like Sara was in jeans and a T-shirt. The woman had the kind of lush, rounded figure Sara had always envied. Silver streaks ran through her dark hair, which she looked far too young to have come by naturally. Sara offered her a smile and the woman looked away.

“My cousin, Becca,” Ginny said.

Sara stuck out her hand. “Hello.”

Becca ignored it and cast a sour look at Ginny. “Well, if we’re going to do this, let’s go.”

Okay, that was odd. Sara had never had someone be so openly rude to her, but Ginny didn’t seem troubled by it, so Sara decided to take it with a grain of salt. Perhaps Becca was just shy and hid it under a mask of hostility.

“Would you think I was pathetic if I told you this was my first time on a boat?” Sara asked Ginny.

“Don’t worry. We have a life jacket for you,” Ginny said. “All you have to do is hang on. It’s pretty calm today, so I don’t think the ride will be rough.”

Sara hoped like hell she didn't get seasick, fall off, or any of the thousand-and-one other things she could do to embarrass herself. She stepped carefully into the boat and accepted the bright orange life jacket from Becca, who didn't respond to her thanks.

Sara climbed the stairs behind Ginny to the second story. She took the seat Ginny indicated and held on to the edges of it as Becca started the engine. They pulled away from the dock at not much faster than a walking pace. This isn't bad at all. I might actually enjoy this.

After they left the mouth of the small harbor, the boat began to bob with the waves and Becca increased the speed.

Sara's stomach lurched. Take deep breaths, she counseled herself. You're not going to get sick. Deep breaths. You're not going—

Sara hopped off her seat and leaned over the side, clutching the small rail across the top with a death-grip as she retched. Her stomach was empty, which probably made it worse because her body kept trying to expel what wasn't there. With her eyes closed, it felt like she might be tossed overboard at any moment. And just to keep her stomach company, her head began to pound in time with the beat of her heart. She raised her head and saw they were still within sight of the dock. This did not bode well.

Ginny brought her a bottle of water and a small, white tablet.
“Dimenhydrinate. Best stuff for nausea there is.”

“Thanks,” Sara said. She took the pill with the tiniest sip of water she could manage and waited while her stomach decided if it would tolerate this intrusion or not.

“There's a new toothbrush in the medicine cabinet down in the bathroom if you want to use it.”

“Yes, please.” Sara covered her mouth as she spoke and wondered if it were possible for a person to literally die of embarrassment.

“Downstairs, straight down the hallway,” Ginny said. “Can't miss it.”

Sara carefully made her way down the small, narrow set of stairs and went through the door into the cabin area. The rocking of the boat seemed more pronounced down there, but the lighting was dim and it was blessedly cool, which helped with her headache. She headed down the hallway. On her right was a small bedroom with a queen-sized bed and a flat screen television mounted on the wall. On the left was the bathroom. It was tiny, but it had a shower and a full-sized vanity covered in so many toiletry items that Sara wondered if Becca lived on the boat.

Sara grimaced at her pasty-white reflection and pulled open the door of the medicine cabinet. Sure enough, there was a toothbrush sealed inside a plastic package. She opened it and used the tube of toothpaste on the shelf above. Whomever it belonged to had a bad habit of squeezing from the middle.

After she finished, she didn't know what to do with the toothbrush. Throwing it away seemed somehow rude, but it wasn't like she was going to put it in her pocket and take it with her. She finally slid it back into its package and laid it on the counter. For all she knew, she'd need to use it again.

When she opened the bathroom door, she heard angry voices coming from above. Becca and Ginny seemed to be having some sort of heated religious debate because Sara caught words like "free will" and "the afterlife." Sara paused in indecision, wondering if she should stay below until the argument was over. She finally opted for stomping up the steps loudly so they'd know she was coming. The voices cut off abruptly.

"Feel better?" Ginny asked her.

"Yes, thank you." Either the pill was working, or she had sufficiently distracted her stomach with her anxiety over whether or not to interrupt the argument.

Ginny pointed to the horizon. "You can see the island now."

It was just a faint, dark smudge against the horizon. As they got closer, Sara could make out more details. The island was mostly wooded with a clearing at the north end where a little house sat atop a hill.

"Oh, it's lovely," Sara breathed as their boat slid up beside the dock and they walked up to the front door.

It was Cape Cod style, with dormers peeking from a sharply-slanted roof of slate shingles. Weather-beaten gray boards clad the sides and there was a large bay window on either side of the front door, which was shaded by a porch with white painted railings.

Ginny pulled out a set of keys on a nylon coil and unlocked the door, then slipped it over her wrist like a bracelet. It was hot and stuffy inside the house, but Sara barely noticed, as she was so enthralled with the beautiful interior.

The first floor was a single, large room, built around a central staircase. The living and dining room areas formed an “L” shape which spanned the width of the front of the house, and on the left side of the house, from front to back. The wall to the left boasted a stone fireplace with a log mantle still wearing its bark. Ginny assured her the fireplace worked and Sara had visions of sitting in front of it with a cup of cocoa and a good book on a snowy night. The kitchen and a small half-bathroom were tucked behind the living room. Both were small, but perfectly adequate. There was a cast-iron rack above the stove, from which pots and pans dangled.

It was decorated in a charming mixture of rustic, early American and modern style, a combination Sara would have never believed would work together unless she’d seen it herself. The coffee table was a large piece of driftwood, bleached white by the sun, which held aloft an oval of smoked glass. The sofa was a long wooden bench, ornately carved on both ends, its smooth seat covered in soft pillows.

“It comes furnished?” Sara asked.

“Well . . . um . . . I guess if you’re really attached to your furniture we could arrange for a boat—”

“No, this is fine,” Sara said. More than fine. She didn’t have any furniture with which to replace it, unless you counted the card table her computer sat on and the elderly sofa with sagging springs. She drifted around in a daze, half in awe at the house’s beauty, half in shock she could actually live here if she wished.

There were several bedrooms upstairs, one with a sleigh bed tucked under the slanting ceiling, one with a pair of twin beds and the last set up as an office with an old-fashioned wood desk. The dormers had window seats. Between

the bedrooms was a full bathroom featuring a claw foot tub with a shower nozzle on a hose.

This is what it feels like to be in love. Sara smiled as she followed Ginny back downstairs.

Ginny pointed out the closets and other storage spaces, the generator, and the various gadgets in the kitchen. “There isn’t a dishwasher,” she said in an apologetic tone.

“I don’t mind. After all, it’s just me here.” Sara had gotten used to washing the dishes right after she ate. Richard had taken most of them when he left, and if she simply stacked them in the dishwasher, she might find herself with nothing clean to use the next time she was hungry.

There was a radio in the cabinet beside the pantry which Ginny said she could use to call for help if necessary, in case of medical emergency, or if a storm was coming and she needed to be evacuated. Ginny gestured to Becca, who stood just outside the front door where she’d been since they arrived. “Every two weeks, Becca comes out to check on the place and she can take you to the mainland, or you could ask her to bring you the stuff you need on her next trip.”

Becca scowled at this, but Sara wondered which would be more inconvenient: bringing groceries when she came to check on the house, or having to make a total of four trips back and forth so Sara could get them herself. One thing was certain, she wasn’t going to treat Becca as her personal boat-taxi for pleasure trips to the mainland.

“So? What do you think?” Ginny asked.

“I love it!” Sara couldn’t believe her good fortune. She decided she’d have to take pictures to send to her mother. They would keep her smirk at bay for a few months.

Ginny tried to keep Sara distracted with chatter on the trip back, to keep her mind off her stomach. It worked until Ginny said to Becca, “Sara’s a writer just like Uncle Seth was.”

Sara nearly fell off her seat, and suddenly Ginny's last name gained special significance. "Uncle Seth? Do you mean Seth Fortner? Seth Fortner was your uncle?"

"Well, not really our uncle," Ginny explained. "Great-great uncle, or something like that. But everybody in the family just calls him Uncle Seth."

"Seth Fortner, the author of *The Precipice*?" Sara asked.

"Yeah, and some other stuff," Ginny said. "I can't remember which one he won the award for . . ."

"The Dawn King," Sara said through numb lips. "The Pulitzer." Ginny gave her one of those odd looks. "Are you all right, Sara?"

"Yeah, I'm just . . . I'm just stunned. Seth Fortner is my favorite author. I've read everything he ever wrote, including the articles he wrote when he worked as a reporter."

"Just like you." Ginny beamed. "Maybe you'll write your own novel while you're living there and become a famous author, too."

"Yeah, maybe." Sara gave her a noncommittal smile. "Hey, can I ask you a question? What happened to him? How did he die?"

"It's a difficult subject for my family and we don't wish to discuss it." Ginny's reply had the air of a line memorized long ago and used many times.

"Sorry," Sara said, though she really wasn't. She wanted so badly to know. What had happened to Seth Fortner was one of those literary mysteries, like the disappearance of Ambrose Bierce, or what killed Edgar Allen Poe. It had been the subject of a few books of its own, alleging everything from murder and wide-spread conspiracy, to his family locking Seth away in an insane asylum. She'd even read one book in which the author alleged Seth had faked his death and retired to South America.

His family had always remained tight-lipped about it. No one was even certain when he had died. The records had disappeared from the police files and he was buried under a simple stone in the family plot that read SETH. The best his biographers could do was say he probably died sometime in 1925.

“But it was his house?” Sara asked.

“Well, most of it, anyway. It’s been remodeled multiple times over the years, and it’s bigger than it was back then. From the pictures I’ve seen, it looks a lot different than it did back in Uncle Seth’s day.”

“It’s beautiful.” Sara sighed. “I can’t believe no one in your family wants to live there.”

“Our cousin Jerry used to stay there during the summers before he got cancer. But the rest of us, we’ve got jobs and school. It’s just too remote for people who have—” Ginny broke off the end of her sentence.

Sara thought with amusement Ginny was probably going to say, “. . . who have lives.” She wasn’t insulted. She was a realist.

Maybe once she got this book finished, she would go back out into the world, try dating again, make friends, and go clubbing—all the things people assured her were essential for a woman her age. But that would be later. Right now, she would take the whisper of the wind through the seagrass and the rumble of the waves over a date at a noisy club.



Sara had to give a ninety-day notice to break her lease and it was the longest ninety days of her life. She was impatient to leave. The noise and grime of the city seemed to bother her more than before.

Her apartment was mostly empty now, except for the sofa she’d used as her bed for the last week—she’d sold her bed, including the box spring and mattress to a couple down the hall—and the few bags of personal items she intended to keep. There wasn’t much, and Sara thought it was a little depressing her life could be summed up with the contents of two duffel bags.

Since she would be paying far less in rent now, Sara felt comfortable breaking into her emergency fund one last time to stock up on food. She was taking with her more groceries than personal items. Because of the possibility of being without refrigeration, should the generator fail, she had chosen dry and canned goods with a long shelf life. She wasn’t much of a cook and she

was relatively indifferent to food, so she'd have no problem surviving on cans of SpaghettiOs and boxes of flavored rice.

She loaded her e-reader—the only gift from Richard she'd kept—with as many books as possible on a limited budget. Thank goodness for free classics. She'd finally get around to reading *War and Peace*. It was good she'd gotten used to being without television and internet since Richard moved. She didn't even miss them anymore. But reading—she couldn't imagine her life without books.

On Friday evening, the night before the move, Sara had a little celebration. She ordered a small pizza, opened a bottle of wine and started a new book in a series she'd been enjoying. She hadn't even bit into the first slice before there was a knock at the door.

She figured it had to be the pizza guy. Maybe she'd given him too little money. She opened the door and gaped in surprise. “Richard? What are you doing here?”

Richard was wearing a polo shirt with a pair of khakis, as dressed-down as he ever was. He was fussy about his clothes and didn't even own a pair of jeans. “Hi, Sara. May I come in?”

Sara stepped back and let him pass. She closed the door and leaned against it. “What do you want, Richard?”

He glanced around at the room, devoid of contents except for the sofa and the bags and boxes on the floor. “You're moving?” he asked with a small amount of indignation coloring his tone, as if he had a right to expect she'd always be where he'd left her.

“Yes, I am.” She fiercely wished he would have come tomorrow, when she would have already left.

“Where?” he demanded.

“Away.” She stared at him until he dropped his gaze. “What did you want, Richard?”

“I wanted to talk to you.” He moved the pizza box to the floor with a scowl and sat on the sofa. He was lactose intolerant and seemed to resent the very existence of cheese and the fact others would eat what he could not.

“About what? I don’t believe there’s anything we need to discuss.”

He gazed at her steadily. “I’ve missed you.”

There had been a time when she would have given anything to hear those words. She’d loved him, or at least thought she had. With time and distance to put the situation in perspective, she wasn’t so sure. “Did We- Need-Space dump you?”

“That was . . .” Richard flushed. “She didn’t mean anything.”

“She meant enough that you dumped me for her and gave her an engagement ring.” Sara picked up her wine glass and took a swallow.

Richard glanced at the bottle and grimaced. “Moscato?”

Sara sighed, remembering he did not consider it a real wine. “Listen, Richard, you did me a favor and I recognize it now. You broke up with me because you wanted to be able to play around with a clear conscience. And I can respect that; at least you had the decency not to run around behind my back. The thing is, I think you were right to break it off. We’re not right for each other.”

“We could be,” Richard insisted. “Give me another chance, Sara, please. I made a mistake letting you go.”

“Do you remember the argument we had the night before you broke up with me?”

His answer was reluctant and sullen. “Yes.”

Richard had stomped into the living room with the toilet paper spindle in hand, upset Sara had put the roll on backward so the loose end hung down on the back of the roll instead of the front. He snapped at her, saying he once thought she was a smart girl, but he was apparently mistaken in his presumption since she couldn’t do something as simple as putting a roll of toilet tissue on the spindle correctly. From there, he launched into a tirade on

her general irresponsibility, lack of consideration, and her multitude of bad habits. It had ended with him shouting and Sara crying.

“Everything I did irritated you,” Sara said, pushing away the memory. “You didn’t love me. You loved the person you thought I could be if you changed me.”

“Every couple has to adapt.”

“All of the adaption appeared to be needed on my side.” She sighed. “I’m sorry, Richard, but the answer is no. I think you should leave now.”

“Please, Sara, come on . . .” He stood and then surprised her by pulling her into his arms and kissed her. His tongue prodded at her lips, trying to force them apart. Sara shoved him away so hard, he stumbled backward and stepped on her pizza box.

“I think you should leave,” she repeated. She wiped the back of her hand over her lips.

“Sara, I—”

“Just go!” Sara shouted, louder than she had intended. Her voice rang off the bare walls.

He nodded and left, pulling the door shut behind him.

Sara bent and picked up her pizza. She opened the lid and saw it was smashed to hell. A harsh, humorless laugh tore from her throat, and quickly turned into a sob.