all

summer long

*Dorothea Benton Frank*



All that glitters is not gold; Often you have heard it told: Many a man his life has sold But my outside to behold: Gilded tombs do worms enfold Had you been as wise as bold,

Young in limbs, in judgment old, Your answer had not been in’scroll’d

Fare you well: your suit is cold. Cold, indeed, and labour lost: Then, farewell, heat and welcome, frost!

*—The Merchant of Venice,* Act II, Scene VII WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

prologue

*Easter Monday, April 6, 2015*

*Manhattan*

Whether the subject of change was partners, possessions, or places, some people had an easy time letting go. A fixture in the crown of Manhattan’s classic interior designers, Olivia Ritchie was not such a person.

Over the years she had enjoyed the privilege of observing the private and personal habits of the *one percent* through her work. She was surprised to discover that there were people— many of them, in fact—whose closets weren’t jammed to ca- pacity with twenty-year-old garments they thought would come back into vogue. Hers bulged with a kind of weird fe- rocity, as though the closets were populated by tiny, possessive museum demon docents that guarded the history of her style. These same people with the organized closets, whose clothing and accessories were usually spread over their other residences, which helped to explain why they were so neat, actually re- placed the contents of their spice cabinets and pantries annu- ally, and over-the-counter medicines were tossed out by their expiration dates, just because it seemed like a good idea. Ac- tually, someone on their payroll did it for them. Olivia didn’t do any of those things. To begin with, she had only one home. And only a part-time housekeeper.

Olivia Ritchie wasn’t technically a hoarder, but she loved her collections and the precious possessions she had amassed over decades. She saved garments and linens simply because she loved the fabric or the workmanship. You could find them wrapped in acid-free paper and packed in acid-free card- board boxes under the bed and stacked in the very top of the linen closet and armoires. There were scores of handbags and scarves and mountains of costume jewelry that had been out of style for a very long time. Sometimes she would use a detail from one of them to represent a motif in a custom wallpaper or fabric. Sometimes she used the object for color. She squirreled away all sorts of things because they could be an honest cat- alyst for inspiration. And if she truly tired of something, she managed to sell it to a client.

Olivia had dozens of objets d’art and curiosities from all over the world, ranging from a sixteenth-century Italian saltcel- lar sometimes attributed to the school of Benvenuto Cellini to dozens of ivory Japanese netsukes. She had miniature cloi- sonné boxes that played sweet music, tiny French clocks that chimed assertively on the quarter hour, and dozens of hand- carved Chinese puzzle balls. The intricacies of the puzzle balls never ceased to amaze her. They seemed impossible to her— impossible to envision as an artist and impossible to render. All of these belongings, down to the most humble buttons in her button box, were poised to ignite her creative spark. These tools inspired Olivia’s magic. She made the dreams of other people come true. At least that was the pleasant rationale to keep them all.

But she couldn’t keep her first husband, the philandering, financially irresponsible medical student she had married in her mid-twenties against the pleading of everyone she knew.

Two years into it she came home one night to an empty apart- ment. All he left her was a note on the kitchen counter along with ten milligrams of Valium. The note read: *Sorry. I can’t do this anymore. You’re too demanding and controlling. You really ought to get some help.*

He took every stick of furniture, the contents of the kitchen and linen closet, and needless to say, all the music. Oh, he left the wedding album on a windowsill in the living room, a choice that stung. She ripped the pictures into shreds and threw them off the balcony, watching as pieces of her dream floated down to 73rd Street. It took her a while to get over it.

Olivia buried herself in work and built her business, one gnarly client at a time. After being single and, she would admit, very lonely, Olivia achieved extreme success and married again, this time with the blessing of everyone she knew. But she vowed never to answer to anyone again. There would be no mingling of resources this time around. She was in charge of it all and the happiest she had ever been. People said she had dreamed Nick into her life—Olivia was a lucid dreamer, something that drove her crazy because her dreams were so vivid it was hard to tell the difference between a dream and reality. Nick teased her without mercy about them, comparing her to a New Zealand tribe of indigenous people who confused them also.

Her safe and jovial (much older than her) second husband— darling, poetic, professorial, and ever the perfect gentleman— Nicholas Seymour, was a lifelong student and teacher, and he didn’t particularly care about power. Well, he was happy to cede control of their money as long as things went well. For fourteen years of bliss they had been flush and pretty much able to do as they pleased because her business thrived.

Nick was like Olivia in that he also collected things. Nick had shelves upon shelves of gorgeous handmade leather-bound books whose spines were hand tooled in gold leaf. His small study that held these treasures had a tiny woodburning fire- place, a luxury in their type of building. The combination of the lingering ghosts of wood fires over the years and old leather laced with the occasional Montecristo smelled better than any perfume on this entire earth. And Nick had an army of tiny cast lead Confederate soldiers placed in battlefield dioramas on a few shelves, lit and protected by glass walls that looked like small aquariums. To his everlasting delight, the Union troops of General William Tecumseh Sherman did not and would never reflect actual history in *his* depictions.

“It’s a mighty powerful feeling for a modest man like me to be able to change the outcome of a war,” he would say with a wink to a guest. “May I offer you a measure of my oldest bourbon?”

Who could refuse? He and his visitor, usually a colleague or a graduate student, would sink into Nick’s well-worn and cracked leather armchairs and sip away into the evening tell- ing stories about the South or European wars or just about the great beauty to be found in a line of Seamus Heaney’s poetry. Nick, who could have been the prototype for Oscar Madison, was a man of many interests. The walls and file drawers of his study were filled with ancient rare maps used by explorers in ages long gone. His favorites were classified as *cartographic cu- riosa*, a term that referred to maps with geographical inaccu- racies such as misshapen continents or ones that showed places

like California as an island.

“Look at this,” he said to Olivia one night, carefully lifting the brown paper away from a new acquisition—a seventeenth-

century map detailing North America. “This fellow de Lahon- tan was a French military officer stationed in Quebec. After he fought the Iroquois, he made this map.”

“Amazing!” Olivia said. “Gosh, honey, didn’t you wear that shirt yesterday?”

“Yes. Is it a capital offense to wear a shirt a second day?” “No, but it’s wearing yesterday’s lunch.” Olivia said and

touched the rather large stain left by the drips and splatters of the red sauce from spaghetti Bolognese they had shared the prior day at a charming neighborhood restaurant.

“Oh. I’ll change it in a moment.”

“No, you won’t. I know you. It would take an act of Con- gress.”

“I *will!* But listen to this.” He shuddered and thought, *Women!* “What’s truly amazing is that the literature he pub- lished along with it described a mythical place, one inhabited by a large and lavish tribe of Native Americans.”

“Mythical? You mean it’s a lie?”

“Yes! Yes! Yes! In those days, who could call you out?” “Well, they didn’t exactly have Google Earth in the 1600s,”

Olivia said, and smiled.

“No, they surely didn’t.” Nick shook his head and looked at Olivia. “God, I just love this stuff.”

Although she didn’t quite understand his fascination with old maps, Olivia and Nick shared an appreciation for fine craft in any discipline. Their treasures were an extension of who they were professionally and spiritually. They were an ideal couple, except that he was truly a bit of a slob and she wasn’t exactly forthcoming about their finances.

They forgave each other their indulgences and almost any- thing really, but unfortunately for Olivia, the dreaded moment

of truth had arrived. It was time for her to downsize with Nick, which meant selling their apartment and moving. *Downsiz- ing.* It was a terrible term, one that woke her up in the middle of the night with visions of misery along with her serious fi- nancial problems and gave her cold sweats. Downsizing. Even the sound of it was depressing. It implied all sorts of terrible things. Failure to maintain their lifestyle as it was. Getting out of the game. Yesterday’s news. Done. Finished. Old. Down. What was down? Hell was down. She was going to hell.

This terrified her, and for good reason. Nick thought they could both afford to retire, but Olivia knew they could not. And if the concept of downsizing didn’t fill her with enough dread, they were moving to Charleston, South Carolina. She, a fourth-generation New Yorker, was walking away from the bright lights of the center of the universe. Her fingernails would be found embedded in the cement in front of the Dec- oration & Design Building. This could easily prove to be the worst decision of her life. It was professional suicide.

In the minds of her clients she would be washed up. Moving away from New York would surely be a death knell! *It tolls for thee, Olivia.* Why in the world would a client in Manhattan hire an interior designer from anywhere else? New York still had all the edge, didn’t it?

But this was the agreement she had made with Nick, a con- firmed bachelor, when they married fourteen years ago. They sold his studio apartment and he moved in with her. When the time came, they would retire to Charleston, the land of his ancestors and his boyhood. He was beside himself, giddy with joy.

“I’d go anywhere with you,” she’d said fourteen years ago, and meant it.

Then.

“By God, you’re wonderful. You’ll love a simpler life!” Nick bellowed with thunderous affection on so many occasions, and he always meant it too. “You’re an angel! And I am a lucky man.”

But Nick, with his salt-and-pepper closely clipped beard and blue eyes filled with mirth, lived in the world of poetry and history and didn’t have an inkling about how money or the world worked. He depended on Olivia’s business acumen to manage their money, and she had done a splendid job of it. She said all their success was due to being lucky. And she was. Until recently.

It didn’t take too many mistakes to throw her business into a downward spiral. And even though the mistakes weren’t always hers, she ultimately took the fall. First, there was the thirty-thousand-dollar sofa that came in two inches short that the manufacturer wouldn’t take back and the client wouldn’t accept. That sofa was now in a storage unit in Secaucus along with other problematic items, and they all irritated the living hell out of her every time she saw them.

“Some people are just dreadful,” she’d think to herself every time she made a delivery.

Truculent behavior was one of the ugliest characteristics of the entitled and vastly wealthy. Sometimes her clients were completely unreasonable just because they could be.

Next, there was a contract for a total renovation of an eleven-room apartment on upper Park Avenue. The profits from that job would have covered their living expenses for two years. But then the sudden stunning news of that client’s explosive, tabloid-documented, acrimonious divorce hit the news as though a gigantic rogue meteor had crashed in Time

Square. From every corner of Manhattan tongues were wag- ging like those of dogs galloping toward an overturned street vendor’s pushcart. All of that anticipated income and all those deposits for fabrics, furniture, lighting, and rugs slipped right through her fingers and dissolved into a nasty puddle of her growing anxiety and despair. The identical thing happened when a major client was transferred to London and another to Sydney. Plans had been drawn by an award-winning architect to reconfigure the footprint of their apartments, in addition to plumbing and electrical plans. Fixtures had been ordered, exotic wood floors and paneled walls had been bought at auc- tion, and then wham! The rug was unceremoniously pulled from under her feet, like Lucy with Charlie Brown’s football. No one cared how this would impact Olivia professionally or personally. She gave the impression, because it did not pay whatsoever to ever lose your cool, that her business was so suc- cessful their cancellations wouldn’t change a thing. It wasn’t true. And she never told Nick.

Bad things come in threes, she said to herself.

No, they didn’t. They came as frequently as the fiendish gods of trouble could hurl the disastrous lightning bolts to earth.

To round out her worries, their apartment on East 86th Street sold for much less than she anticipated. While the apart- ment, as you would expect, was a metaphoric jewelry box, the building itself was an unrenovated post–World War II ugly white brick monstrosity with low ceilings, clanging pipes, and no parking garage. These days, people wanted a view, a media room, and a health club in addition to every other amenity you could name. Dog walkers and concierge services? Yes. These days, people flocked not only to the West Side but to areas downtown and in Brooklyn where you would not have touched

your Manolo Blahnik/Warren Edwards–shod foot to the pave- ment a mere ten years ago.

Things just weren’t going her way. At all. So while Nick might have been getting used to the idea of retirement, she was anything but. She *had* to work and somehow make up her losses. If Nick knew how close they were to bankruptcy, he would die. Her insides quaked at the thought of the truth being discovered. Thankfully she had a loyal client who didn’t care if she lived on the moon. Hopefully that client would not abandon her when Olivia gave up physical proximity to her.

So as it got closer to Nick’s retirement, she took a deep breath and they put her co-op on the market. They got a buyer who was happy to pay full market value, but they couldn’t get board approval. It finally sold but not well. After ten months and no offers, she signed a contract for a pittance. All cash. They would close in ninety days. She began to panic. Moving was no longer a promise but a reality. One last worry? She had made the final decision about which house they bought in South Carolina on her own. She knew the house she chose was far too grand for Nick’s taste. But that particular house was what she needed for herself and for the image of her business she hoped to build there.

“This is a disaster,” she said, referring to the sale of their co- op. “It’s like being robbed. Not to mention, how am I going to unravel years of pack-rat habits in three months?”

“Better days are coming!” said her assistant, Roni Larini. “Besides, I’ll help you.”

They were sharing a large Greek salad and a liter of spar- kling water delivered from Viand Café around the corner, at the tiny but beautiful office she rented in a discreet residential townhouse on East 58th Street.

“Thanks. I know you will. You always do. And I’ve got the lease on this place until October.”

“Maybe you should keep it,” Roni said.

“Maybe,” Olivia said, but she knew she could not afford to sign another lease. Not without new projects on the books.

Roni could almost read Olivia’s mind. She knew Olivia was completely overwhelmed. And it took something as cataclys- mic as the nose dive she was experiencing to unravel Olivia.

“I’ll check the fine print. Maybe you can sublet.” “There’s a thought.”

“What’s the rent?”

“Four, including maintenance.”

“We could get six on a sublet. Easy. Or! How’s this? We fix up the back rooms into bedrooms and you’ll stay right here when you come to town.”

“We’ll see.”

“You’ll be fine, Olivia. We’ve been to the edge before. Are you getting any sleep?”

“Not much. Nightmares like mad.”

“You should start doing yoga again. It makes you put every- thing into perspective.”

Roni often referred to herself as Olivia’s *office wife*. She may have been only thirty, but she had made herself indispensable. In truth, Olivia wondered how she would live without her when she moved. But they had sort of a loose but optimistic plan to hold their relationship together by employing the ser- vices of frequent emails, FedEx, FaceTime, and Skype. And she would fly to New York twice a month and stay at the Cos- mopolitan Club. Lord knows, she’d paid membership dues for years but was always too busy to enjoy the benefits. Or maybe she should give up the Coz Club, put a bed in the storage room

as Roni suggested, and save some money. It had been decades since she’d had to reconsider her overhead.

It was true that her expenses would be much lower in South Carolina, which would help their financial constraints. But could she generate enough business from there to get her out of debt? Could she generate any business at all? Would she really be as efficient without Roni by her side in flesh and blood? She had asked Roni to consider moving south with them, but Roni could not. The timing was all wrong. Roni was firmly tied to New York. Her eighty-five-year-old mother was in assisted living, dealing with all the horrors of Alzheimer’s. Her two useless siblings and their useless spouses lived in the Midwest in oblivion, pretending no responsibility.

“I know you’re right. I should go back to yoga,” Olivia said and fished out a large black olive from among the lettuce and tomatoes, popping it into her mouth. “I wish they’d pit these things.”

“I wish a lot of things,” Roni said. “Me too.”

CH A P T E R 1

rats

heir small commercial plane was about twenty minutes north of Charleston, descending through a thick blanket

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of cumulus clouds to an altitude of ten thousand feet. Once they cleared the clouds, the landscape of the Lowcountry burst into view. Waves of bright-green spartina covered former rice fields and marshlands, their blades standing in sharp contrast against the sparkling blue majestic waters of the Waccamaw River. Olivia was mesmerized. Nick’s delight at the scene, and most especially at her reaction, was very nearly a tangible thing.

“Behold paradise!” Nick said dramatically, exhaling a gush of relief. “The sluices of water cutting through the marsh grass in tendrils . . .”

“Just like the ringlets on the back of Miss Scarlett’s pretty little head,” she said in a terrible southern accent. Then she cut her eye at him and smiled. “I’m sorry. I don’t mean to be so cynical.”

“You’re going to love living here. I swear you will,” Nick said, saying a silent prayer that the Lowcountry would work its

magic on her. “And your pretty cynicism will roll away on the turn of the next tide.”

“I’ve always enjoyed the time we’ve spent here,” she said. But it was one thing to stay at the gorgeous Charleston Place

Hotel and have room service and quite another to live on the tip of an island in a funky old beach house.

Her eyes were focused on the landscape as it rose to meet them. His eyes were focused on her. (Cue up the theme song from *Out of Africa*.) Her thick blond hair was pulled back in a ponytail that drifted down her back. She was wearing a straw fedora and all white linen, even though it was before Memo- rial Day. A bona fide New Yorker, Olivia didn’t give one tiny damn about when she wore white. She had her own rules.

He loved her in hats. And in white—it reminded him of her tangled in their sheets. Nick was all too aware of her shaky feelings about the move. That’s why he went along with the house she chose. To be honest, he was uncertain about which house she actually *did* choose! They had looked at so many he couldn’t remember. To be more honest, he didn’t care one whit. He was one step closer to coming home, and that was all that mattered to him.

He knew the renovation of any of the old houses would be a huge project, and Olivia loved nothing better than a huge project. Nick thought, if he was right, that the house she did choose was hideous, but she said she saw potential everywhere. Where? He thought. He couldn’t see potential in any of them. The good news was that all the houses were in such disrepair that his relatives, distant as they were, and old friends wouldn’t be offended by a vulgar display of wealth. At the heart of it all, he was an island boy, a Geechee boy, a Lowcountry boy. Low-

key discretion was the name of the game for his tribe.

Olivia had made at least a half a dozen trips without him back and forth between New York and the island to work on the house, staying in a hotel close by. Surely, just the time spent there on renovations had made her feel some ownership, some affection for the island. Nick felt certain that if he could get her to walk along the ocean with him as the sun was set- ting, the salt water would exorcise her urban demons, maybe through her feet, pulling them right out to the endless sea like a magnet. Over time her heart would soften. It had to or what?

“Why can I never remember how beautiful this is?” she asked in a whisper.

“Because it changes with the seasons and because it’s really just so glorious our brains can’t hold the entire memory.”

“Maybe.”

“You know, when I was a boy someone told me a story about how angels have different jobs. Some watch over drunks and babies, but others paint sunsets and color landscapes. That would be a cool job, wouldn’t it?”

“If you believe in that stuff.”

“Ah, my lovely, doubting Thomasina!” He took her hand in his and patted the back of it. He meant the gesture to say that here in God’s country she would find faith. “In time you will see wondrous things. My daddy called it reading the signs and wonders.”

Nick was ready to wax euphoric then. He could have gone on for hours. But the flight attendant picked up the micro- phone to address the passengers, and although there was an onslaught of static and blank moments of completely missing communication, he knew exactly what she was saying. It was time to close the germ-ridden tray table, press the swarmy,

germy button to raise his seat back, and yes, to check the germ-infested-with-something-really-scary buckle on his seat belt to be sure he didn’t go flying when the pilot stomped on the brakes as though he was going to slide into the face of the Rocky Mountains at the Telluride Airport, one of the scariest landings he had ever endured. He worried about plane crashes and sometimes obsessed about germs. Okay, he was a germa- phobe. Normally he had a pack of sanitary wipes in his pocket. Somehow he had forgotten to bring them. But other than these two minor but troublesome issues, Nicholas Seymour was not neurotic in the least.

The plane landed smoothly and stopped at the gate. Nick smiled with relief as though he had dodged a bullet. Okay. He worried about death too. And he hated to fly. But life wouldn’t be so cruel as to snuff out the flickering wick of his breath when he was this close to living in the Lowcountry again. Would it? No, he thought, and pushed away a sorrowful and painful mental image of his own wake and funeral. God, how he struggled to disguise his litany of anxieties from Olivia! He knew that she knew all about them, but he pretended she did not. And she did indeed know every single tic of his but over- looked them because she knew that she wasn’t perfect either.

They gathered up their things, deplaned, and stood beside the jetway with about fifty other people waiting to reclaim their gate-checked bags. After ten minutes or so, their luggage appeared and they began their way through the terminal toward the rental car counter. The airport was going through a massive renovation, but there were so many people milling around that it seemed Charleston’s airport had already seri- ously outgrown its expansion.

“I remember the days when this airport had only two gates,”

Nick said. “Then it opened a restaurant that merely served fried chicken, deviled crabs, and sweet tea. It was fabulous.”

“Airport food? Fabulous?” “Hard to imagine, but yes.”

“Wow. And then they invented air conditioning and the whole world went to hell?”

“Yes, ma’am! The next thing you know we had the pleasure of blue and pink Princess phones and another network on the television.”

“Yeah, and right after that Ed Sullivan went off the air and Michael Jackson was performing ‘Thriller’ on MTV ten times a day.”

“You’re right! How could you remember that? You could hardly have been born! I recall watching it with some students and wondering how long it took to put that makeup on.”

“Yellow eyes. True, I was just a girl of twenty-one, fresh out of school. I always thought he was a fabulous entertainer. Okay, our car rental is at National.”

Olivia loved being that much younger than Nick. In an odd way it was nice to be thought of as somebody’s pretty young thing. She had been on her own with all the struggles of main- taining her detail-oriented business for such a very long time. The only person she had ever had on whom she could depend was Roni, but she didn’t come along until a few years ago.

It was an incredible luxury to believe there was someone in this cold and lonely world who cherished her. Nick’s love was the greatest gift she’d ever known. She did her best to recip- rocate, but sometimes—well okay, *often*—the stress (and the nut balls who were her clients) of her business got in the way. She could be described as bitchy on occasion. Okay, somewhat often. Actually she was a worrier, and sometimes she may have

appeared to be aloof or maybe ill humored when she was just worried. She didn’t mean to seem to be the flavor of cranky that gave certain female New Yorkers their reputation. It was really her obsession with self-preservation that meant she came across as buttoned up or frosty in conversation when you first met her. But when she needed to, she could channel Grace Kelly.

The nature of their professional lives was polar opposites, his being far more predictable than hers. He had known dif- ferent kinds of stresses in academia, to be sure—publishing and all that—but he had been a tenured professor for ages. And as everyone knows, there was no tenure in the world of interior design, no safety net. But on the positive side, as dif- ferent as their careers were, they still found time for their first passion—travel. They would drive up to Millbrook to shoot birds at Mashomack in the fall. Or hop on the Jitney to visit friends in the Hamptons in the summer. The more sponta- neous the decision was, the more they relished it.

“No self-respecting New Yorker spends weekends in the city anyway,” she would say.

Nick strongly disagreed but went along with her when she announced upcoming plans. He would’ve been just as happy to stay at home and read. He hated to admit it, but he especially loved it when her billionaire clients invited them on their drop- dead-gorgeous three-hundred-foot yacht for a sail around some heralded playground of the rich and famous, which happened a couple of times each year. Olivia adored the spectacular thrill of the yacht and all that came with it too. The outrageous be- haviors of the yacht’s owners and other guests left Nick com- pletely agog and spouting his favorite line: “I should’ve been a shrink.” He would say this and Olivia would respond, “Come

on, Nicky. They’re my best clients.” She always hoped those trips would evolve into more business.

Actually, at the present time the yachtsman and his wife were her only active clients, but the project was winding down soon and there was nothing on the horizon. Obviously, not every getaway was on a private jet or a yacht. So, even though it was on a much less dramatic scale, they were really looking forward to their weekend escape to Charleston. Nick was ex- cited to see the progress on the house and Olivia felt there was finally enough progress to show him.

Nick brought out the best in her, just as a truly great teacher should. She was her most gracious when she was with him. In return, she had introduced him to other worlds that were com- pletely unattainable on a professor’s salary. But perhaps most important, she made him feel young again. There was no price tag for rediscovered youth.

They stepped up to the car rental counter and a very cordial man named Ed greeted them. They signed the waiting paper- work, took the keys, and left.

“Boy, that was easy,” Olivia said. “Everything should be so easy,” he said.

It was after one o’clock. Outside, the sun was so intense that they stopped midstride on the sidewalk to fish out their sunglasses and quickly put them on. Their sunglasses were in roundish tortoiseshell frames, another preference they shared. Hers were oversize, like Jackie O or Iris Apfel might have worn. His were strictly Ben Silver Charleston gentlemanly style, owlish and the kind a professor would choose. Often, in matters of their own personal taste, they lived up to their ste- reotypes. One would never mistake her for an academic or him for a designer.

“I’ll drive,” he said.

“Great! Then I can do my email.”

The air was warm. There was a nice breeze and just enough humidity to throw her off balance. Olivia hated humidity. It did grotesque things to her hair and made her perspire in places that should not be discussed in polite company. How she would survive in this climate without a shower four times a day, she didn’t know. Nick seemed impervious to sticky jungle weather. In fact, his linen shirt and trousers were barely wrinkled even though he’d been squished into a tiny seat for two hours like a human sardine. She marveled at that because her linen looked like she’d slept in it for a week. At least she thought so.

They found their sporty red SUV, lifted their luggage into the hatchback, cranked up the engine, and backed out of the space.

“You hungry?” Nick said. “Not especially. Are you?”

“No, but I know from experience that I will be eventually.”

Olivia giggled, and she was not a woman given to easy or frequent giggling before she met Nick.

“Well, listen,” she said after deleting thirty-something pieces of junk mail and dropping her phone back into her bag, “I’m just a little anxious to see our house. So if your tummy can hang on a little while, let’s drop off our stuff and then we can go grab a bite.”

“All I want is a plate of fried shrimp at the Long Island Café,” Nick said, adding, “But I can wait a bit.”

“Okay,” she said. “Thank you.”

“And a chilly glass of a crisp sauvignon blanc.” “Mmm. That sounds delicious.”

“They stop serving lunch at two-thirty.”

She looked at her watch. It was already one-forty. She knew he was smiling without even looking at him.

“Well then, sir, we’d better hurry up and get there!” You see? She wasn’t always inflexible.

Soon Nick was opening the restaurant’s front door for Olivia and then holding her seat for her at the table. In a matter of minutes, after he inspected and wiped the silverware with his napkin out of habit, they were eating the most perfectly fried shrimp in the entire South and the first tomatoes of the season. The tomatoes were reasonably good even though they were from Florida. An unspoken battle exists among the southern states about who produced the best tomatoes. If you are from Charleston, the richest tomatoes blossomed in the enchanted dirt of Johns Island just like Jack’s beanstalk. There was a strong argument to be made for the tomatoes from Estill or Florence, but all these harvests wouldn’t come in until the middle of June. This was late April. So until June, the nit- picking South Carolinian tomato aficionado had to step back and make himself happy with the fruits of Florida.

“Just think,” Nick said. “Down here we can thrive on the Mediterranean diet and get really healthy. No more soufflés at Le Bernardin or cholesterol killer gargantuan steaks at Del Frisco’s! None of those decadent cheese and charcuterie boards at Gramercy Tavern or chocolate death warrants from Daniel! No more, I say! We’ll live to be one hundred and one!”

“I’ll sort of miss the soufflés,” Olivia said in a quiet voice. “And the chocolate.”

Nick’s enthusiasm evaporated as he realized yet again that Olivia wasn’t one hundred percent bought into his monastic vision of their future. He really believed that refined sugar was a killer, but she’d never been particularly grateful for his lectures

on topics that were not within the realm of his professional ex- pertise. She should’ve been, he thought, but she just wasn’t.

“Well, we’ll just have to scour the town to find the perfect delectables for you! Surely someone in this town can make a soufflé?”

She smiled at him in a weak attempt to restore his mood. “I’m sure there is,” she said. “Aren’t there, like, three James Beard chefs here?”

“I think you’re right!” Nick said, perking up again. “Maybe more. I think I read that somewhere. Don’t worry, sweetheart. We’ll find the devils and coax all manner of gourmet tempta- tions out of them. I’ll make it my personal mission.”

“It’s not the end of the world,” she said.

“Well, if they can’t be found, I’ll learn to make a soufflé myself!”

“This I have to see,” Olivia said and had a quiet chuckle over the mental image of Nick in a toque and a long apron to the floor, whipping egg whites in a copper bowl large enough to double as a baptismal font in a kitchen that looked like a bomb had exploded in it. She dipped the corner of her napkin in her water glass and wiped some tartar sauce away from the front of his shirt. He smiled at her. She smiled back.

“Can I get y’all anything else?” the waiter said, presenting the check. “Dessert? Coffee?”

Nick knew that if they wanted a piece of key lime pie or the bourbon chocolate pecan pie, the waiter would not have denied it to him in a million years, but it was getting on to three o’clock and he knew they had overstayed their welcome. The busy restaurant was empty of patrons except for them. And he was pretty sure the down-home desserts at that restau- rant, wonderful as they were, couldn’t compete with Daniel

Boulud’s or Thomas Keller’s sublime confections. It was an apples-to-oranges situation and unfair to compare.

“No, thank you,” Nick said, handing him back the bill with his credit card. “But this was delicious. I dream about your shrimp.”

“They truly are incredible,” Olivia said, smiling honestly. “Well, thanks! I’ll tell the chef and I’ll be right back with

your receipt.”

Nick leaned back in his chair and looked intently into Olivia’s brown eyes. While their new locale might have lacked culinary arts to dazzle her Big Apple palate, his Lowcountry offered other, more deeply meaningful experiences. He was holding fast to his conviction that over time she’d understand the wisdom of his decision. And he would investigate the cu- linary scene. He remembered reading something in *The New York Times* about it not that long ago.

“I’m so crazy about you I don’t know what to do with myself,” he said.

“I feel the same way, sweetheart. Speaking of crazy, let’s go see our crazy new house.”

“Let’s,” he said and got up to pull her chair back. “You know, I didn’t even think to ask. Are we going to be able to stay at the house tonight? Or did you make a hotel reservation for us?”

“Thank you, my love,” she said and gently hung her hand- bag over her shoulder. “I have a surprise for you.”

“Really? What’s that?” “We’re glamping tonight.”

“Oh! That sounds like something painful. You haven’t been reading that *Fifty Shades* thing, have you?”

Olivia shook her head, smiling. They walked out into the parking lot.

“No, baby boy. It’s a combo of glamour and camping. Glam- orous camping!”

“Ah! Will your clever ways never cease?”

“I only hope you’ll always find them to be clever,” she said. “Me too,” he said and put his arm around her waist. “It would be a terrible thing to kick you to the curb and spend the

rest of my life alone.”

“Hush your mouth, Nicholas Seymour. You’ll do no such thing! Tonight we will spend our first night in our new home together!”

“Get in the car, woman, and let’s go see what horrors await us.”

“Nothing like an old house when you’re in search of hor- rors,” Olivia said, shaking her head in agreement. “I just hope we have water and power. Jason promised we would.”

“Yes, but let’s get our priorities in order. Do we have a bed?” A few days ago she brought huge shopping bags from Gra- cious Home into the office. The store was having a one-day sale and Olivia took full advantage of it. She asked Roni to ship

the contents to Sullivans Island.

Of course Roni nodded her head and said, “No problem.”

And they ordered a king-size mattress and box spring that her contractor promised to set up on a frame.

“What do *you* think? You mean, you don’t want to sleep on the floor with me?” Olivia said, smiling.

“I’d sleep on a pile of rocks with you,” he replied. “Precious,” she said and ran her perfectly manicured finger

along his chin line.

The drive to their new/old house would take them a long ten minutes. They crept through the business district on the Isle of Palms across Breach Inlet, on the lookout for the police,

who were infamous for pulling people over if they drove one hair over the speed limit. Sure enough, they spotted a patrol car hidden behind an overgrown oleander.

“Shouldn’t they be out solving crimes?” she asked.

“That’s the whole problem,” Nick said. “They don’t have enough crime here.”

“Oh, brother!” she said. “Now I’ve heard it all.” That just can’t be true, she thought.

Moments later they rolled through the tiny business district of Sullivans Island. A casual observer might have thought the restaurants were giving away free food. Poe’s Tavern and Home Team BBQ were filled to capacity with patrons, while scores of other people waited around for a table or crossed Middle Street, paying no mind to the traffic. Maybe they were getting ice cream or a newspaper or perhaps they had a hair appointment at Beauty and the Beach. Or maybe they were just so drunk on carbohydrates they were in a wheat stupor. It didn’t matter. People were walking around in the street as though they were in the French Quarter post a Mardi Gras parade in New Or- leans, utterly oblivious to cars, bicycles, and golf carts, which crawled, bobbed, and weaved to avoid hitting them. Strangely, no horns blared. People, pedestrians, and those with vehicles merely threw up the wave of a hand to say *Go ahead* or *Thanks*. “I can remember when people referred to this island as

sleepy,” Nick said.

“Must’ve been a long time ago.” “Yeah, I guess it was.”

“If this had been Manhattan, EMS would be doing triage.” “Truly. But the crowds are amazing. Did I ever tell you

about the brilliant sign my old man made?” “A sign?”

“Yes, he had a little workshop for himself in the back of the garage. I must’ve been a teenager because I was old enough to be embarrassed by it. This was when we had that house on Jasper Boulevard, and it was long before they built the connec- tor bridge on the Isle of Palms.”

“Nixon was in office?” Olivia wiggled her eyebrows, teasing him.

“No, FDR, thanks. Anyway, on the weekends the beaches on this island and the Isle of Palms were absolutely packed. Around four in the afternoon, traffic would start backing up, and if the Ben Sawyer Bridge opened, it got worse. People would get out of their cars and use your yard as their personal comfort station.”

“What? *What* are you telling me?”

“Exactly what you think! These people would go to the beach and drink beer all day. Then they’d get in their car and get stuck in traffic. So when their eyeballs started swimming in their heads, they’d sneak around your oleander bush and, you know, *go*!”

“That’s disgusting!”

“No argument there. And it also breaks a whole lot of laws. Never mind. Anyway, after my father catches this guy water- ing our yard, he got this ingenious idea to paint a sign.”

“Which said?”

“It said, *Next Weekend Try Folly Beach!* It was enormous. My mother and I were horrified. Not Rick. He thought Dad was a riot.”

“That is very funny,” Olivia said. “Your dad must’ve been a character.”

“He sure was. He was a great guy. My brother Rick is a lot like him.”

“Isn’t it funny how personalities are inherited? How’s he doing?”

“No. He and Sheila are in Reno at an RV convention.” “They really love that whole RV thing, don’t they?” Olivia

said, and thought she’d rather sleep in a ditch than in an RV but she had enough elasticity in her to respect their choices, and some RVs were actually gorgeous.

“Yeah. They go all over the country. They have more friends than anyone I know.”

“Probably because of his sense of humor. He’s such a char- acter.”

“Just like our father was. But the personality thing? Yes. It is funny. Haven’t you ever noticed that musicians give birth to musicians and engineers to engineers?”

“And I must come from a long line of pack rats. Whoa, this light is so bright!”

Olivia raised her hand to shield her eyes. Sunglasses alone were not enough to block the merciless glare of the Lowcoun- try’s afternoon sun.

“It’s almost summer. We should go into the awning busi- ness,” Nick said. “We could make a killing.”

“Maybe we should,” Olivia said. “Awnings would sure make a lot of these houses more energy efficient.”

“That’s why people build houses with deep porches.” “Oh. But what about the second floors?”

“They need awnings.”

They moved past the fire department and another small strip of stores and farther down the island to Fort Moultrie. They passed Stella Maris Church on their right and veered to the left.

“Next driveway,” Olivia said.

“So this is it?” Nick said in surprise. “It’s huge! I didn’t re- member it being this big!” What the hell has she done? he thought.

“It’s deceiving because it’s on stilts,” she said, knowing he was right. “You’ll see. It shrinks.”

“I don’t know, Olivia. I thought we agreed on something more modest.”

“Listen, Nick, we both know that if I’m to continue to work, we have to have a statement property. I can’t live in some ratty old cottage with lopsided floors and warped walls and then tell my clients they shouldn’t.”

“Right. Right.” He knew it was true. “I have to set a certain tone.”

Nick inhaled and exhaled a sigh powerful enough to launch a paper ship across a swimming pool and said, “I suppose.”

The yard was filled with trucks. A landscaper was consult- ing with someone from an irrigation service. Men on ladders were painting the sides of the house while others were walk- ing across the roof. There were still other men throwing old insulation and other debris into a Dumpster and there was an outdoor toilet from Nature’s Calling. And, as one would hope, they were all wearing sunglasses.

“Well, one thing’s for sure. You know you’ve arrived when you have your own portable john,” Nick said.

“Should have put one in your daddy’s yard,” Olivia joked. “Truly,” Nick said, “with a coin slot.”

When he saw their SUV pull in, a handsome young man began walking toward them. Nick turned off the engine and got out, raising the hatchback with the click of a button. Olivia hopped out and joined him to retrieve her bag.

“Here’s Jason,” Olivia said. “He’s our contractor.”

“Really? He seems awfully young to me.” “No, he’s not. We’re just awfully old.”

“Well, I just hate the hell out of that,” Nick said.

Nick squinted his eyes in the young man’s direction. In her peripheral vision, Olivia noticed Nick sucking in his stomach and standing up a little straighter. She bit the insides of her cheeks to hold back a burst of laughter.

“Let me help you with that, sir,” Jason said, taking Nick’s suitcase from him. “Ms. Ritchie? Let me take yours too.”

“Thanks, Jason,” Olivia said and handed over her duffel bag. “Nick? Say hello to Jason Fowler. He and his dad Sam own Sea Island Builders. And they do gorgeous work.”

“I sure hope so,” Nick said and shook Jason’s hand.

Olivia thought, This place is a money pit. It was going to be a while before she would do more to the house than had already been done. How was she going to tell Jason that they had to stop for a while? How embarrassing would that be? It wouldn’t be good for her business reputation, that much was certain.

“Nice to meet you, Mr. Ritchie.”

“Seymour. My wife is Ritchie. She’s liberated.” “Sorry?” Jason said.

“Honey? He’s too young to even know what *liberated woman*

means. Everybody’s liberated these days.”

Nick was smiling, but behind that smile Olivia knew Nick was irked. It was bad enough to have his students defer to him. His position and years on the faculty demanded it. But when it happened in his personal life, it startled him, and not in a good way. She began to think that neither one of them would ever adjust to the fact that middle age had arrived, even though on an actuarial table middle age was well behind both of them.

“Well,” Jason said, “let’s get your stuff inside. I’m anxious for y’all to see all we’ve done.”

“Great,” Olivia said.

They climbed the long flight of steps made of handmade bricks. Jason pushed the front door open and stepped aside for them to pass.

“Oh, Jason. The door looks really, really good,” Olivia said, smiling and running her hand across the sheen of the varnish. “Thanks! I had the guys refinish it and put the new/old

hardware on it.”

The heavy front door was made of oak, with raised panels on the bottom half and a large beveled leaded glass window framed in on the top. The handle was reclaimed, estate-sized, and made of solid brass that had been polished to a worthy shine. They stepped inside.

Olivia gasped and then smiled wide in surprise.

“Wow,” she said, walking around the rooms near the en- trance, staring from the floors to the ceilings and back to Ja- son’s face. “Wow, Jason, nice work! It’s amazing what you can do with a paintbrush, isn’t it?”

“And about five hundred gallons of paint,” Jason said with a grin.

“It’s hard to believe it’s the same place,” Nick said. “I’m as- tonished!”

Gone were all the zany colors and dated window treatments that Nick recalled. Everything was painted in parachute white or linen white with warm tone-on-tone accents. The effect was quietly soothing and somehow regal. Yes, the old house that held nearly one hundred and fifty years of secrets, bad deci- sions, and, one had to assume, moments of great happiness had been coaxed back to life with countless swipes of paintbrushes.

The old dame was issuing a statement that she wasn’t done living quite yet.

“It’s beautiful, Jason. Simply beautiful! Have you started the bathrooms?”

“Just the one in the hall. What do you want to do with the swan?” Jason said.

“‘Leda and the Swan,’” Nick said.

The reference sailed over Jason’s head, but Olivia gave Nick a death look.

“I don’t know. It’s too passé to use, but too campy to just ditch.”

“And weird,” Jason said. “It’s kind of creepy.”

“Aha!” Nick said. “You see, Olivia? I told you that thing was, well, a *bothersome* talisman.”

Nick loved the naughty implications of Yeats’s poem and was always happy to debate whether what went on between Leda and the swan was consensual or rape.

Olivia shot Nick a look as if to say, *Let it go, okay?*

“Why don’t we just ask one of the guys to clean it up and store it away. It might be fun to use as a spigot on a footbath or something,” she said.

“A footbath?” Nick said.

“Yes, when you come off the beach, you can rinse your feet in a small basin,” Olivia said. “Then you don’t track sand into the house.”

“Lots of people have them these days,” Jason said.

“I see,” Nick said while wondering, *Whatever happened to using a garden hose? Or a puddle of standing rainwater?* And, he thought, the elegant swan will be reduced to washing feet. A sad fate for Leda’s lover indeed.

Olivia rolled her eyes at Nick, then went from room to room,

thrilled with the outcome of her choices and Jason’s work. Months ago she had asked Nick to choose drawer pulls and knobs for the kitchen and backsplash tiles. He had chosen well. Now, there they were, all in place, including the easy-care an- tibacterial Silestone quartz countertops that he loved.

“I can’t wait to get in here and make a mess,” Nick said. “My sweet husband is the cook in our family,” she said. “It’s

critical for him to love the kitchen. Otherwise we eat my cook- ing and die.”

“I’m thrilled with this kitchen,” Nick said. “Are you kidding me? It’s gorgeous!”

“Well then, I’m thrilled if you’re thrilled,” Jason said.

Olivia thanked Jason over and over, and he just beamed with pride and relief. True to his word, there was a mattress and box spring on a metal frame in the bedroom.

“This house has great bones,” Jason said. “I sure couldn’t see them,” Nick said.

“That’s why you have me,” Olivia said and blew Nick an air kiss.

At 4:01, pretty much on the nose, the yard was a ghost town. Everyone was gone. They finally had the house to themselves. “I’m glad you’re happy with the house,” Olivia said, her eyes

sparkling with tiny gold flecks.

“Well, I’m really happy to be here with you.” Nick said, thinking, There’s no way we need a house this grand.

After a dinner of crudo and tilefish at Coda del Pesce on the Isle of Palms, and a glass of wine on the front porch over the water, counting the stars and watching the moon rise, they drove home, turned off the lights, and went to their new bed- room and almost collapsed in their new bed.

Olivia had dressed the bed as though *Southern Living* mag-

azine was coming in to do a shoot. It was covered in all white Sferra linens, embroidered with French knots and open fret- work on the borders. She’d bought unscented pillar candles, put them on plates, and covered them with hurricane globes. She’d brought in gorgeous white Turkish towels and beautiful hand-milled soaps and bathrobes with their initials on them. It was the last shopping spree she would have for a while, even if these items had been on sale.

“Glamping, you say?” Nick said, buttoning his pajama top. “Yep,” she said and blew out the last candle. “I need to buy

lamps.”

“I imagine there’s a long list of what we’ll need.” He kissed her forehead and slipped into bed, yawning loudly.

Yes, and I hate to think about what it will cost, she thought. The moon and the lights from the city across the harbor poured through their windows, making it possible for her to safely navigate the room. She was completely exhausted. Be- tween flying and decisions and wine, she knew she’d be asleep in minutes. Nick was already snoring like a baby panda, emit- ting small puffs with the tiniest snorts. She climbed in bed and pulled the covers over her shoulders. Just as she was drift- ing off, she heard a thump and her eyes sprang wide open. She lay as still as she could and listened. There was a scurry and

another thump. She gave Nick’s shoulder a shake.

“Nick!” she whispered. “Nick! Wake up! There’s someone upstairs!”

“What? What the devil?”

Then he was quiet and still and they listened together.

*Thump! Rustle! Thump!*

“Go on back to sleep, sweetheart. I’ll get some traps in the morning,” Nick said.

“For what?”

“Rats. Marsh rats. Not Jack the Ripper.”

Moments later he was snoozing again, but Olivia’s body temperature skyrocketed and she began to perspire. Rats? Rats in the house? More than one? Oh, God! Humidity? Okay. Mos- quitoes? Sort of okay. *But rats?* Rats were a DEALBREAKER. Oh? It’s *only* marsh rats? she thought. *Only* marsh rats? Oh, that’s good, because for a minute there, I thought it was, like, a serious problem! Exactly what distinguished a marsh rat from other rats? Size? The size of their teeth? Their preference for female human flesh? Face flesh? Her mind was racing and her heart pounding. Had she spent money she didn’t have to live in a house infested with Willard’s little friends? What had she done? She wanted to weep. Or scream. Or run. Instead, she crept from her bed and stuffed the bottom of the bedroom door with her brand new Yves Delorme towels and pushed their luggage against it. Then she prayed for her life. And of course she said a prayer for Nick too. She wasn’t even sure they could

afford the bait for the traps.