

RAT ISLAND

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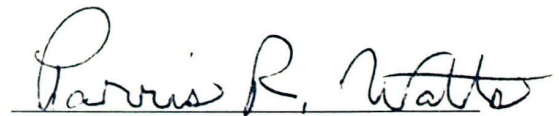
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Rat Island

A Thesis Presented for the
Master of Arts Degree
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Judi Mitchell-Mobley

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by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband

Steve Mobley

to my son,

Jason Mobley,

and to my parents

Daniel A. Mitchell

and

Rebecca A. Mitchell

For their love and support.

ABSTRACT

This work consists of a collection of chapters from a novel. These chapters consist of events that are important in the identity of the protagonist. The story is presented in first person; however, the protagonist's life unfolds through events that have shaped who she is. Her name is rarely mentioned, and she associates her identity with others, their identities being stronger than hers. These events shape the decisions she makes.

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INTRODUCTION

“Rat Island” is a novel, partially presented here, exploring the identity of Mrs. Hasley. She struggles with finding who she is by questioning her relationship with her dead father through his dying request. The fulfillment of her father’s dream takes her on a journey to assert her identity and put her father’s death behind her.

Island Life

We had given up hope of making it home before dark when the wind picked up. At first it was a strong continuous breeze that pushed the boat smoothly through calm waters. At our current speed, we would be home within an hour. When the wind turned fierce, we slipped our arms through our life jackets, preparing for the worst, but hoping for the best. We worked together to keep the boat on course. I had always enjoyed our trips to Rat Island, but as we battled the brewing storm I remember wishing we had stayed at home.

I'm not sure when Daddy began including me in his project to restore his family's property, but I believe it was about the time I became obsessed with the two "Bs," boys and breasts. I had turned fourteen and was without a boyfriend, which I associated with my lack of breasts. Megan, my best friend, and I spent hours talking about our bodies. I was no taller nor shorter than she. My legs were long and muscular from walking the length of Belle Isle in search of loggerhead turtle nests. Megan's were longer and slightly pudgier. Megan had long thin arms. My arms were a bit flabby, but not so much that she teased me about being fat. I noticed that my waist was not as well defined as hers, but my stomach was flatter.

What bothered me more than anything else was that Megan had developed breasts in the eighth grade. I continued to wait for them. By

the time we entered the ninth grade Megan was overly blessed with breasts. Mine were two fried eggs. She tried to make me feel better by downplaying her endowment, but I could tell she was happy to have them. She was especially pleased to be blessed when the boys at school gave us nicknames. They called Megan Chesty. My nickname was Chester.

“Why don’t I have breasts?” I asked my father one afternoon while we were on the beach.

“Breasts?” His voice went up an octave and he sputtered unintelligible words for several minutes.

“You want to know about the ‘birds and the bees’. Well when a man and woman fall in love . . .”

“No Daddy. What does sex have to do with breasts? Were Mother’s breasts large or small?”

“Sex? You know about sex? Have you had sex? Where did you learn about sex young lady?” Words spewed forth like an erupting volcano. The more he asked the louder and angrier he got.

“Home Ec,” I said.

“What is Home Ec?”

“You know Home Economics class. We learned about where babies come from in Home Ec.”

“Oh. Well okay. Let’s just forget our little conversation. It’s getting late.” He looked at his watch. “I’m heading home to fix supper. You coming?”

“Not yet. I have a few more nests to check.”

“Don’t be long. Supper should be ready in forty-five minutes”

I watched my father hurry down the beach. When did he stop being smart, I thought? I walked in the opposite direction, thinking about my father’s actions. We used to talk about everything. When I was eight and asked him if heaven was a nice place, he took down his mother’s Bible and told me all about it. I was relieved to know Mother was in a wonderful place. When I was seven and asked him if the hatching turtles would come back and visit me, he went to the bookstore and bought several books on the habits of the Loggerhead turtle. Daddy made sure the answers he gave me were a mix of his own knowledge and expert information. As I searched the dunes, it came to me that Daddy was just taking time to gather information and then he would get back to me in a few days. I walked home relieved that my father wasn’t ignorant.

I waited patiently for three days for Daddy to get back to my question. He avoided me for those three days. He went out of his way to steer our limited conversations to safe ground. He stopped asking me about my day at school, or my friends, or the turtles. One night during supper, I asked if he had found any information on my question about breasts. My question sent him over the edge.

“Turtle, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Why Daddy? You know so much. I know you can find information about my question. Why won’t you talk to me about breasts?”

“It’s not a question you ask fathers. It’s a question you ask mothers.”

“But Daddy . . .”

“I know, Turtle. I know,” he sighed. “But that’s the way it is.” His words and actions told me our conversation was over.

I left the table, and spent the rest of the evening closeted in my room. For the first time in my life, Daddy had pushed me away. I was unsure about my newfound independence.

Funneling clouds on the horizon caught my attention. The wind picked up, then quickly died. Dark clouds swirled above us. The temperature dropped. The compass showed we were still heading north, but it was a struggle to keep the boat on course. The wind blew in gusts. One moment Daddy was trimming the sails and the next moment he was letting them out. We spent desperate minutes working to keep the boat aright. A blast of wind dipped the mainmast toward the sea. Almost immediately the wind calmed.

Dad was all I had. We had always been close. Throughout my childhood we had enjoyed swimming, searching for seashells, and sailing to Rat Island. Daddy had raised me since my mother's death when I was three years old. He did the best he could, raising a young daughter by himself, and running his own business.

My earliest memories were of Daddy making a game out of our morning routine before he either dropped me off at Aunt Tiny's house or took me to the harbor with him. The daily washing of my hair, getting dressed and making my breakfast became a game. Each morning after I bathed, I put my gown back on and met him in the kitchen where he was waiting for me. My little legs struggled on the rungs as I climbed the stool set in front of the sink. I situated myself on my knees. Daddy gathered my already dripping long hair in his callused hands, pulling it over my head. I squealed as water ran down my scalp and around my ears, while he choked off laughter that threatened to burst from him. It took me a long time to realize he doused me with cold water on purpose.

The cold water was just the beginning of his teasing. Daddy poured enough shampoo on my head to wash it four times. He worked shampoo into my head until suds filled the sink. As the suds were rinsed away, Daddy took the spray nozzle and held it against my head to rinse the shampoo imbedded in my hair. The warm spray tickled my scalp while rivers of water ran down the back of my head and around my

ears. My giggling and squealing encouraged him to get wild. He shot water on the back of my neck, behind my ears and near my forehead.

Getting dressed was just as adventurous. Daddy laid my clothes on the bed every morning while I was taking a bath. They were always folded and smelled clean and fresh. My clothes were not always free of wrinkles. Daddy wasn't good with the iron, but he got most of the wrinkles out of my shirts and pants. Not only were my clothes slightly wrinkled, they were often a mismatch of colors and fabrics. When I was very young, the different colors were exciting. The pinks, oranges and reds suited my gregariousness and I often stood out like a neon sign. Wearing bright colors to the marina helped my father keep an eye on me. I helped him unlock the fueling station and open the tack shed when we arrived, but if we weren't going out on the boat, I disappeared down the docks to watch the Trampers get their boats ready for the day's catch.

However, when I began school, the eclectic style that I had acquired under my father's tutelage sometimes caused problems. I became ashamed of the clothes my father put out for me to wear. The other kids teased me about my clothes. I understood why the girls made fun of me, but when the boys joined them, I knew I had to do something. It wasn't until I was in the second or third grade that I began exchanging items of clothing. Most of the time I changed the shirt to match the color of my pants. And some days I wore the odd colored clothes that Daddy put out for me just to please him.

I remember the first time I put away the clothes he picked out and chose what I was going to wear. It was an unseasonably warm February day. Daddy had put out a yellow sweater and red corduroy pants. The sweater was made of velour, which was too hot for me even on the coldest of days. For Christmas, Aunt Tiny had given me a nice pink and purple flowered dress with a large white collar that was bordered with lace. I had been dying to wear it, but it was too cold to wear a short-sleeved dress. When I walked into the kitchen that morning the reaction I got from my father was not what I had expected.

“That’s not the outfit I put out for you to wear. It’s not warm enough for you to wear your new dress.”

“But, Daddy it’s so pretty. And look, I don’t have to worry about it matching the purple socks you picked out.” The words rushed out of my mouth in such excitement that I never once thought about his feelings. When I looked into his eyes to let him see my excitement, I saw a glimpse of the pain I caused. His eyelids blinked closed a few times as he turned toward the sink to put dirty dishes in them.

“Okay, you can wear it, but put on a sweater.”

“Oh Daddy, do I have to? Nobody will be able to see my pretty flowers. Besides it’s nice and warm outside,” I argued

“Put on a sweater, Turtle. It may be warm now, but it’s winter. The weather can turn cold any time. You know that. Hurry now or you’re going to be late for school.”

That was my first taste of independence. It felt different when we disagreed over my question about my breasts. That February day, in my excitement, I chose to ignore my father's disappointment. That day on the beach when I first questioned him and earlier in the evening when I left the table, I saw the same disappointment in his eyes when he couldn't answer my question. At seven, my newfound independence to choose my own clothes was different from a fourteen-year-old being given independence from her father.

The wind burst upon us furiously, forcing my attention back to our situation. Daddy raced around The Madeleine checking her sails and securing ropes. The sky changed from light blue to dark blue then black in a matter of minutes. Daddy tied down the foresail. I steered the boat and checked the coastline. The mainmast dipped toward the water again. I steered the boat closer to shore in case we had to swim for it. The boat dipped once more and then righted itself before the wind let up. We were dangerously close to shore, but we dared not take the boat back to open waters. Lights blinked onshore as we rushed past, reminding us how close civilization actually was.

Not long after I asked him that disturbing question, Daddy requested, for the first time, that I help him organize the photographs he took on our last trip to the island. It was a gesture of truce. As I sat

beside him discussing our trip and organizing the pictures, Daddy talked about the changes we would make in a few years. For a few weeks, we tested each other over the items we cataloged. In the months following, we settled into a life that was mainly separate, but we came together over his project.

In late July, before my fifteenth birthday, we spent the weekend at Rat Island. The property had been in his father's family for hundreds of years. Although he had never lived there, his heritage was important to him. We had visited the island numerous times. Daddy had spent time photographing the house and land. I spent time searching the beach for turtle nests with the lighthouse standing guard in the cove. That day Daddy asked me to accompany him on his tour of the house and property. He was excited that some day his family would once again live on that piece of land between Rat Creek and Lighthouse Inlet at the northern end of Folly's Island.

That afternoon we toured every inch of the property. As we walked along the beach, we spotted broken seashells, seaweed, and driftwood. The amount of debris came from not only the sea, but also the wooded area surrounding the beach. At high tide, water covered the northern tip of the beach up to the cypress trees along the edge of the forest. The path leading into the forest was overgrown with sage scrub. Pine trees towered above us, carpeting the sandy ground with needles. The trees

were gnarled and twisted from blowing winds of the ocean. Spanish Moss draped the trees, adding a grayish tint to the leafy limbs.

The house sat at the end of an oak-lined drive near the marsh, but at one time also had a view of the ocean. It was built in the Greek Revival style. The ornate columns had rotted, the red brick was falling off and the geometric styles of the cornices were riddled with gaping holes. Except for the oaks and the occasional seedling sprouting up, the land on both sides of the drive was bare. Dips in the road that once puddled after a summer rain were now filled with weeds. The drive circled around the front of the house and ended near the edge of the woods. The house itself was still impressive even though it had fallen into disrepair. The two wooden porches on the front and side of the house were rotten. The front door hung on one hinge while the back door had fallen on the stone porch. The tall narrow windows were missing most of their panes on the front, back and south side of the house. The north side of the house was in the best condition. The panes in the windows were still intact, the mortar between the red brick had not dried as much, nor had the termites eaten much of the woodwork.

Behind the house, a brick walkway led to the dock where *The Madeleine* was moored. The property continued one mile on the other side of the marsh. Pine, cypress, oak sage scrub, tangled vines and thorn bushes encroached upon the house on the southern side of the

property, making it impossible for us to walk through them. The property continued to the main road two miles away.

Father told me, for the hundredth time, of his dream while he showed me around the place. He told me of the history associated with the house and lands. He talked with pride as he recounted the story of his ancestors being given this land by the King. He had forgotten which King, but he was quick to point out that his family sided with the colonials when the revolutionary war broke out.

Daddy talked on and on about his family. Most nights, as he sat and studied the hoard he had gathered, he answered me in cursory sentences. That day, he couldn't tell me enough about his grandfather's father obtaining land through false pretenses; or his great-great-grandmother marrying three brothers each of them dying before the marriages were six months old; or his aunt Audrey who moved to New Orleans to open a bordello. His family was quite colorful, but I only half listened to his stories. My only concern was to get to the beach and check the nests that would be hatching hundreds of turtles this fall.

"Turtle, all of this belongs to you."

"What did you say, Daddy?" I had been thinking about one particular nest and hadn't heard him.

"The house, the land, the beach to the north and even the lighthouse belong to you."

“But Daddy, I have to finish high school and I want to go to college and study marine biology.”

“Wait a minute, honey, I’m not asking you to drop all of that. You have your whole life ahead of you. You can come back here after you’ve finished college. Don’t worry, I’ll help you.”

But I was worried. I knew my father. He spent night after night looking through the same picture albums, reading the same stories published on the family and Rat Island, reorganizing the same old stuff. I saw myself spending my summers sailing to the island, at my father’s insistence, to make plans on work that had to be done. I saw myself graduating from high school and Daddy asking me to take a year off before I went to college to continue the work we began during the summer months. I saw myself never making it to college.

“Daddy,” I queried hesitantly, “why don’t you keep this place until after I marry and have kids?”

“Turtle, don’t you want this place?” His gaze told me I had erred. He stopped, and threw his hands up. “I don’t understand you anymore. I’m giving you a place you will have for the rest of your life.” His hands swept out from him, encompassing the area around his body. “Hell, for the rest of your children’s lives and their children’s lives. Girl, I have spent most of my adult life obtaining information just to pass this place on to you.”

"I know, but I'm not ready. Please Daddy, keep the estate until after I marry." He didn't hear me.

"I've brought you down here twice a year for the last nine years to get you used to this place. We have spent weekends here inspecting the island. I've shown you the marshes and the beach and the lighthouse. I did all that so you wouldn't be surprised when I handed it over to you for you to renovate and care for. I'm truly disappointed in you."

"Daddy, please don't say that. I've enjoyed sailing to the island, and our weekends here, but while you were looking at the house and yard, I spent my time on the beach looking for turtle nest or taking the dinghy out to the lighthouse. You never said anything about me living here. I love Belle Isle. That's my home. I never thought of this island as a place to live, but a place to visit."

"It's already settled. This place belongs to you. I'll do most of the work. You can help during the summer months and after you graduate from college. You can move down while in college if you want to. You'll love this place. Wait and see. Run along and check your nests. We'll be leaving in a few hours."

The wind died down, leaving us floating on smooth water again. Daddy and I waited to make sure the wind wasn't picking up before we let out the sails. The boat slowed, but was still on a northern course. I headed the boat away from shore as Daddy unfurled the sails. The

mainsail caught the wind and pushed the boat forward. We sailed in calm waters for fifteen or twenty minutes. Clouds gave way to a starry sky. We were on our way home.

I watched him walk toward the back of the house. He pulled out a notepad and wrote. I could only guess that his notes included my participation in the renovation. I walked away, thinking about his statement. My heart was heavy. For the sixth time in the last year, Daddy and I had had a major argument. Each time, I felt us pulling apart.

I found the nest I was concerned about. It had signs of disturbance from the outside. Animals were trying to get to the eggs. I forgot our conversation as I dug through the sand to make sure the eggs were still intact. Farther down, dry sand turned into wet sand. My arms disappeared into the hole for the thirtieth time, pulling out wet sand. As I lay the sand on top of the pile, my hand brushed against an egg. Brushing away the wet substance, I inspected the egg for damage. It was intact. I pulled the flashlight I kept with me from my pocket. The light was bright against the dark gray sand. The hole was three feet deep and two feet wide. I wiggled my head and shoulders down into the opening searching for eggs. They lay, intact, under a fine layer of sand. I carefully replaced the sand into the hole, packing it down and smoothing it over to hopefully keep away the animals that had been digging there.

I spent the next hour walking along the beach, watching the water swirl around the lighthouse. My father wasn't the only one pulling away. Keeping the loggerhead turtle safe, and preserving the lighthouse in the bay was more important to me than anything else. I remembered that day a year ago when I was so obsessed with boys and breasts, my question that began my independence. My breasts had eventually gotten larger, by a small amount, and I'd had several boyfriends since then, but they were no longer so important to me that I forgot my passion. I also remembered the nights Daddy and I had spent working on his projects. The time I spent helping him had dwindled down to an hour one night a week from the two hours two nights a week I spent in the beginning. The realization that one day I would be totally independent from my father was exciting and frightening. My mind was on these thoughts when we prepared to leave.

"Turtle, take her out of the bay," he called from the front of the boat. I eased the boat from the dock and guided her through the choppy waters. High tide assured me that I would have no problem with hitting the bottom. However, with the tide being high, I would have to take care to steer clear of the lighthouse. It would be tricky, but Daddy was a pro and I was beginning to be comfortable with sailing. Just past the lighthouse, the bay opened onto the ocean. At the mouth, Daddy unfurled the mainsail while I brought the boat hard starboard. The wind caught the sail and I cut the motor.

Sailing, like hunting for turtles, gave me a sense of peace. Daddy and I worked in comfortable silence. He hurried around the deck, unfurling sails, retying rope, setting the tension. I sat at the tiller, steering the boat into the open ocean. When all was ready, Daddy came and sat beside me. We talked of our trip as we sailed up the coast.

Daddy discussed the project we would begin next summer and I told him of the nest I had found. Eggs would hatch in a few months, and I hoped the nest would be left alone until then. Daddy talked of what he wanted to do with the island, while I talked of what I wanted to contribute. I felt that if I humored him in this way, then I would be able to convince him to postpone the project.

The light breeze that hot July day let the sails slump more than once on our trip home. The wind blew in spurts. At times, we sailed at a good pace, but at other times the wind slacked off or was nonexistent. Daddy was up and down checking the sails or letting them out. When we weren't busy with the boat, Daddy let me talk of my plans to become a marine biologist. He knew the safety of the loggerhead turtle was important to me. Not only were animals their enemy. Man was especially dangerous to the turtles. On Belle Isle, construction of houses encroached on their nesting areas. Tourists and part-timers covered the beach from June to September. They dug holes in the soft sand near the dunes in search of crabs, but many times they uncovered a nest. In

their haste, people never recovered the nest, leaving the eggs exposed to the elements, wild animals, and pets.

As Daddy listened to my ranting, he pointed out that I might want to study ecology as well. Marine biology would give me a clear understanding of the turtles, but ecology would enable me to help their nesting grounds on land. I was pleased that he was taking such an interest in me. When he added that by studying ecology, the project on Rat Island would benefit as well, I became skeptical and closed mouthed. As he talked about the restoration of the land surrounding the house, I grudgingly found myself fascinated. For the first time in my life I envisioned what he dreamed.

A burst of wind knocked me out of my reverie. The burst became a continuous blast that rocked the boat and white-capped the waves. We stirred into action. Daddy dropped the jib. He worked furiously to get the small triangle tied down. The boat rocked in the angry waters. It began to rain. Lightening streaked the sky. The wind blew so hard that thunder rumbling in the distance was swallowed in its sound. The wind grew worse. There was no indication of the hurricane being near that area. However, storms preceding hurricanes could become furious. The storm continued to worsen. Daddy yelled for me to head the boat into shore again. He was in the process of dropping the mainsail when the boom hit him in the back of the head.

Early in October we returned to Rat Island. We left home under strained conditions. This time we fought about boys. While my first love was the loggerhead turtle, I wasn't immune to my surroundings. A boy named Randy had asked me to the harvest dance and I had accepted. He asked if he could take me home. We drove by the marina, so I could introduce him to my father. Daddy was polite, but aloof. He kept eyeing the sports car Randy drove. After a few minutes I got Randy out of there. Randy and I drove off in a hurry, which did nothing to endear him to my father. We spent the next hour walking with our pants rolled up along the edge of the water. We talked of school, the dance and future plans of college. We were standing next to his car when Daddy drove up to the house. He hastily greeted us and went inside. Randy and I made plans for the next day. We kissed and he left.

I walked into the unlit, uninhabited house. Trouble was brewing. I prepared supper and ate it alone. Three hours after Randy left, Daddy still hadn't come in from the beach. I fixed him a plate and put it in the fridge. I slowly cleaned up the supper dishes, hoping Daddy would come in soon. At ten o'clock I went upstairs and got ready for bed. An hour later, I heard him open the French doors. He climbed the stairs, opened my bedroom door and said goodnight. He pulled the door closed and went to his own room. I lay there with tears running down my face. I was hurt. Why couldn't he accept my independence? My hurt turned to

fury. I had discussed boys with Daddy. He knew Randy. I was not allowed to date outside of school functions, but he had said it was okay for me to bring a boy to the house. What was his problem? I slept little that night.

His attitude left me wishing I had not agreed to go to the dance. Daddy was gone by the time Randy picked me up for school. The day dragged by. When Daddy arrived home for supper, leftovers greeted him. I was closeted in my room. I heard him rumbling around downstairs. He went from the kitchen to the living room several times. Usually he settled at his desk after supper, but that night he was restless. After hours of hearing him moving around downstairs, I went to bed. I was startled awake hours later with him standing by my bed.

“Daddy?”

“Turtle, I’m sorry I’ve been acting so badly. Let’s not fight about this. Randy is a nice boy and I don’t mind you seeing him.” With that little speech over, he left my room.

We had never discussed his reaction, but it hung in the air, separating us from one another. Sailing relaxed us. By the time we reached the island, some of the awkwardness of the last few days was gone. I was concerned that the nests were hatching properly and Daddy wanted to finish the boat dock he had begun months earlier. We spent most of our time apart, but managed to spend a few hours together those three days, swimming, building sand castles, and eating junk food.

During those three days, I helped him build the boat dock and he helped me clear debris from nests. Some nests were littered with trash. Since the wrought iron doors of the gate were leaned against the massive rock pillars at the entrance from the main road, teens used this place as a hang out. Daddy had put up “no trespassing” signs, but since we weren’t here to enforce it, they ignored them. We bagged the trash and dug down into the nest to make sure the eggs had not been crushed. At night we slept on the beach. During the day we went about our activities.

Hurricane season had begun, so we listened closely to the weather forecast. The day we left for Belle Isle, a hurricane was brewing two hundred miles southeast off the coast of Georgia, but was not expected to hit land until it reached North Carolina. The wind had picked up a bit, but was not threatening. We left Rat Island under partly cloudy conditions. The corn-silk-blue sky peeked out behind rapidly moving white cotton candy clouds. The wind was blowing in a northern direction, so our journey home would be swift. Daddy took *The Madeleine* out of the bay and into deep waters. I had sailed only in calm conditions, and the waters surrounding the lighthouse were treacherous enough without the added element of high winds.

Once in open waters, Daddy set about letting out the sails as I guided the boat toward home. Half an hour after we left Rat Island, the wind died completely. The air became thick and the boat slowed in the

water. As we inched our way north, time passed slowly. Daddy sat beside me and we talked of our weekend.

“Turtle, next summer I’m beginning the restoration of the Rat Island house. I’ve gathered enough information that I can complete the project by the time you finish college. You can move in once you graduate.” His words left me speechless. I checked the compass to get our bearing. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. The weekend had gone by without one argument. It had been like old times. I looked at the clouds drifting slowly along with the boat. If I responded to his statement, then surely an argument would ensue. I watched the sails for signs of wind movement. I searched the horizon. I looked everywhere but in my father’s direction.

“I’ve hired an architect firm to survey the property and house next spring,” he continued. “By the time school lets out next May, we will be spending most of the summer at Rat Island. Until then, I want you to spend as much time as you can reading the material I have collected. I want you to decide where you want those items put in the house. I know a man who will make furniture that replicates what was once in the house. We can supplement the few pieces I want made with antique furniture.”

Daddy took my silence for acquiescence. He planned my future for the next hour. I nodded at appropriate times and kept my eyes on the horizon. The boat had all but faltered in the windless condition. I

wanted to jump in the water and swim home just to get away from my father's voice. By three-thirty, we had only made it halfway home. Daddy decided to use the trolling motor that enabled us to maneuver around the marsh, but it wouldn't start. After a while, he gave up and we drifted slowly northward.

I struggled to pull Daddy's body out of the water and up the beach. I turned him over and checked his breathing. He was alive. I raced to The Madeleine to get the first-aid kit and blankets. The wind drove rain into my body. I frantically raced around the boat, obtaining my supplies. A blast of wind pushed the boat farther up the beach. The waves beat against the stern, wreaking havoc on the wood. I attempted to contact the coastguard, but the wind blew so much that I couldn't reach anyone. I set the homing signal, hurriedly dropped the mainsail and went to help Daddy. I covered his body with the blankets and waited for dawn.

Daddy spent three months in the hospital in a coma. He awoke two days before he passed away. He told me he loved me and that the dream he had planned for me was now my responsibility. The pain I felt could not be expressed. I had cried my tears month's earlier, tears of pain and guilt. Pain had filled my heart, knowing I might have to live without him. I had also been wracked by guilt because moments before the storm broke, I had wanted to get away from his endless dialogue

about his plans for the island and my future. My actions toward him on the boat tore through me. I held his hand, and told him over and over again how much I loved him.

We buried Daddy beside Mama on the nineteenth of January.

Belle Isle

Mounds of sand covered the wide veranda at the front of the house. Narrow, faded, white shutters were closed over the windows to keep out debris and salt spray blown in from the sea. Shingles had blown off the gray roof, while the light blue paint had flaked off revealing dark gray boards in the fading light. As I unlocked the door, sand crabs scurried to the farthest end of the porch, shifting their antenna eyes back towards me. Sand had filtered under the door leaving a fine line of grit inside the doorway. I expected to see ghostly shapes of furniture under dust-covered sheets. Instead, I was greeted by clean upholstered couches and chairs. The curtains on the windows had been laundered and the windows and French doors sparkled in the light.

I dropped my bags inside the door and muttered to myself. "I knew Tiny couldn't leave the house for me to clean." Tiny doubted my ability to clean anything. While I lived in Florida, she came down twice a year just to clean my apartment. "As it should be cleaned," she would inform me. I really didn't mind Tiny cleaning the house. I had only insisted on cleaning the house in order to give me something to do when I became fed up with working on Daddy's project. I would have to remember to ask Tiny if she had purposely left the sand inside the doorway and on the porch, or if she had lost her touch.

I walked from room to room only stopping long enough to switch on the lights in all the downstairs rooms and on the stairway. Normally

dark rooms did not bother me. However, tonight I was not ready to confront my past in a darkened home. The house and all it represented was what I wanted to keep at bay. A lighted room was the best way to do that. Just by my cursory inspection, I could tell that Aunt Tiny had cleaned the entire house. The thought of sinking into bed between clean sheets made my tense shoulders relax.

Within a few minutes, the house was bathed in the warm glow of light. The three-bedroom cottage was small. The combination kitchen and dining room made up half of the lower level, while the living room, half bath and utility room made up the other. A screened porch was located off the living room. The pine floors, pickled wood walls and open floor plan made the place look larger than it was. On my drive through the island, I noticed developers had replaced the older cottages of the 30's and 40's with three-story homes with fancy scrollwork, wide verandas and flat-topped roofs substituting for observation decks. I also noticed that these same houses were rentals, and not primary residences as in the past. Gone were the days when native South Carolinians called the island home. Today, vacationers invaded the island every week, visiting the rental homes that now filled the island. Tiny had informed me that the island had drastically changed. She also told me that my cottage and the Danforth cottage were the only two houses still occupied by the original owners.

The white cabinets shone brilliantly in the light. Again, I stared at Tiny's handiwork. The only thing missing from this homecoming was bread baking in the oven and a pot of frogmore stew simmering on the stove. I opened the refrigerator door hoping to see a container sitting on the shelf. Aunt Tiny knew how much I loved that concoction of shrimp, potatoes, cob corn, kielbasa and seasonings. Since she had already cleaned the place from top to bottom, I figured that she had stocked enough food in the house to last a month or so.

Frogmore stew did not await me, but Tiny had filled the fridge with a few staples, including my favorite red wine. I grabbed a bottle and a package of cheese and slammed the door shut. The white chrome table still sat in the middle of the kitchen. I pulled open the drawer to see if the corkscrew was still there. A new corkscrew lay in the place where its predecessor once resided. The table was the only piece of furniture in the room besides the cabinets. Bare countertops looked eerily strange in the face of all of Tiny's efforts.

I grabbed a wine glass from the cupboard that still held my mother's china. I hastily opened the bottle of burgundy, and the herbed cheese spread, not caring whether the two were compatible.

I carried the food through the living room out onto the porch. Tiny had cleaned this area, as well, knowing I would not be able to see it from the road. For the moment, I planned to forget why I returned home after ten years' absence. I intended to forget that I came home to fulfill a

promise to bring life to an obsession that possessed my father his entire life. I planned to forget a promise that a fifteen year old had made to her father on his deathbed. That I promised him, as he lay dying, I would continue his dream of restoring his ancestral home. Tonight, I intended to drink myself into oblivion. I was glad Aunt Tiny, or Uncle Earl, had put several bottles of wine in the fridge.

I poured myself a full glass of wine, reflecting on my drinking habits in the recent past. In the last month, I had consumed more than my share of wine. In fact, my friends commented on this same fact at the dinner they gave me before I left Florida. Anger and guilt had led me to this place. Anger controlled my emotions concerning my father's request, and guilt nagged me daily for not undertaking his dream as soon as I graduated college. Deciding to return home and fulfill his dreams sent me to the liquor store more often than I cared to admit. I took a long drink of the wine, inhaling the fruity aroma, and letting its warmth spread through my body. Pushing back disturbing thoughts of my drinking habits, I settled into the cushioned rocking chair, letting the sound of the surf tumbling onto the beach wash over me. I vowed that tomorrow or the next day or even the next, I would start living my father's dream.

I sat sipping that wonderful dark liquid and eating cheese dip with my fingers. I sat rocking listening to the rhythmic sound of the waves. I sat waiting. Waiting for the wine to work its warmth into my taut

muscles and ragged nerves. While I waited, I tried to push back thoughts that had nagged me on the drive home, actually thoughts that had been with me since I left Belle Isle. Yet while I waited for the numbness that only wine can give a person, nagging thoughts came tumbling into my head. One thought kept turning over and over in my mind. The project would take more than ten years to complete. It was for that reason alone that I had not returned to Belle Isle sooner. It was for that reason that I had not come back to the island to begin a refuge for the loggerhead turtles that flocked to this island yearly.

I drained the last of the dark elixir into my glass and forced my thoughts to listen to the hypnotic drone of the sea. No matter how hard I tried to fight off my anger, I found it rising with each incoming wave. I couldn't shake the responsibility of my father's request, nor could I resign myself to undertake this task. How dare he ask me to keep alive the only thing that kept him from me? I sat seething over his request for the hundredth time. As always his dream became the lost hours we missed as he spent all his spare time sitting at his desk pouring over the past. I downed the last drop of wine and turned toward the house in the hope of going for another bottle. I saw my father standing at the bar, his dark hair in disarray. He wore the shorts and t-shirt he usually slept in. A cup of coffee was in one hand. With the other he pushed a bowl of oatmeal towards an eight-year-old me. I got up and walked into the house waiting for them to disappear. I didn't have to see inside the bowl

to know what was in there. He had made a smiley face out of raisins, bananas, and strawberry jelly.

"That little girl in the porridge is you," he said.

"It can't be," the little girl replied.

"Why not?" he asked. "She has the same pretty smile and button eyes."

"She can't be me because I don't have red hair and black eyes. My hair is blonde and my eyes are green."

"Technicalities." His shoulders raised in a shrug. "Eat your oatmeal, honey, we've got to get moving."

"No. I hate oatmeal."

"Eat it anyway."

I charged into the kitchen, breaking the reverie I had fallen into. I thought I would be drunk before I started hallucinating. I didn't realize the strength of the memories I had blocked for so long. I opened the second bottle of wine and headed back to the porch. Shaking off the memories of that day, only served to bring on another. I watched with growing fear as the two of them ran onto the porch, water glistening on their wet bodies.

"I beat you. I beat you," she shouted. "I won."

"You don't play fair," he cried. She giggled and wrapped the towel he threw on her shoulders tightly around her body. "See how many things I had to carry to the house?"

She danced around him, swaying her hips and pumping her arms under the towel. All the while she cried, "I won. I won. I'm number one, you're number two." He dropped his towel, and the pail and shovel in his left hand and the basket and chair in his right. He swooped her up in his arms, joining in with her chant.

Their bodies faded into air as I walked through them to the porch. I put the bottle to my lips and sucked on it. Why didn't I hallucinate about my father sitting at his desk ignoring me? Why was I hallucinating about the good times and not the bad as well? I took another long drink. It was a shame I no longer tasted the liquid. I tried to read the label as I reached for the bottle, hoping the wine was an inexpensive brand. By now the wine had spread its warmth into my muscles. I sat in complete silence for a few moments, my eyes riveted toward the darkness in front of me. The grass rustled in the wind. If I kept my eyes on the dunes beyond the porch, I reasoned, I could hold these hallucinations at bay.

I had finished half of the second bottle of wine when I heard sounds coming from the living room. At first the sounds blended with the waves, making it hard to discern them. The sounds grew louder as the minutes passed until the noise enveloped my whole body. The sound of the waves diminished as the lights in the living room dimmed. I turned toward the living room to see that it had changed from the scene that had awaited me upon my arrival. On the couch lay a ten-year-old me. She was crying. She lay stomach down and her face was buried

into the pillow underneath her. Kneeling on the floor beside her was my father.

“What’s the matter honey?”

“Go away Daddy, I don’t want to talk about it.” Her ten-year-old body shook with her ever-increasing sobs.

“Turtle, sit up here and tell me why you’re crying. If you’ve done something wrong, I’ll understand. Now stop crying and tell me what’s happened.”

She lifted her head slightly from the pillow. “Daddy, I just can’t. Please don’t ask me to tell you. I’m only trying to keep you from getting your feelings hurt.” She put her face back in the pillow and cried harder. The man continued to kneel beside her, stroking her hair with his large calloused hand. For a while, he comforted her in silence, and her sobs began to subside. Finally the girl sat up and wiped the tears from her eyes on the sleeve of her shirt. She picked up her notebook from the coffee table, opened it to the middle and pulled out a piece of white paper. Silently she handed it to him. He took the paper from her and slowly unfolded it. A left over-sob escaped her throat. Tears welled up in her eyes and were threatening to spill down her cheeks as he read the note. A look of realization came over his face as he read the invitation.

“See Daddy, I told you it would hurt you more than me. I asked if I could bring you, and Mrs. Humphries told me the banquet was strictly

for mothers and daughters.” With those words the girl jumped from the couch and raced out of sight.

The man stood. The paper fluttered to the floor. Slowly he turned to face me. The smile that creased his face reminded me that although he was gone, his love for me remained. I pushed myself gingerly out of the chair and made my way toward him. By the time I reached the doorway he was gone. The room began to sway. Hot tears filled my eyes and stung my cheeks. I stumbled toward the couch and fell onto it, crying into the same pillow I had cried into years earlier.

The ring of the phone came to me in a fog. Its incessant trill became louder and more intolerable with each passing second. I slowly opened my eyes, testing to make sure I could still see. I lay very still, taking care not to move my body. My tongue filled my mouth. It pushed against my teeth, gluing my mouth together. I needed water, but knew from experience that water would only make me sicker than I already was. By working my tongue back and forth between my teeth, I was finally able to open my mouth. I tried to scream at the still ringing phone, only to utter a weak squeak. I tested my limbs to see if they would move. I was lying on my left arm, and was just now realizing that it tingled in the numbness of sleep. My fingers worked perfectly; however, my right arm refused to move from my side. This would cause a problem if I needed to get up any time soon. The phone stopped

ringing while I tried to shift my weight off my left arm. I concentrated on getting my body to respond to my will. I moved my feet back and forth, hoping that it would take away the dead weight that emanated below my waist. The few minutes that it took to get my legs out from under me seemed like an hour. By the time I was in an upright position, sweat dotted my forehead and I quickly had to drop my head between my knees to keep from throwing up.

The phone rang again. She's persistent, I thought. I was going to have to find my answering machine when the movers arrived with my stuff. The sound of the ringing phone seeped into my nervous system, reworking my electrical responses to coincide with the ring . . . ring . . . ring . . . of the phone. Standing was not an option I entertained at this time. I let the phone ring itself out. A long hot shower was the only thing I wanted. However, that was going to take some doing. The bathroom was up a flight of stairs and through the bedroom. I couldn't see how I was going to maneuver something that difficult when I couldn't even stand. I lay back down on the couch, gathering my thoughts, focusing on standing.

While I lay there I began to familiarize myself to my surroundings. It had been ten years since I had lived here. Some changes had occurred. Pictures were missing as well as some lamps and books. Tiny had claimed a few things after Daddy died, but I never took the time to see what she had taken. If my memory was correct, she took a picture of

her and my father, one of Dad in a uniform, and one of Dad and Tiny and the rest of the family. I would have to remember to take a look at those and make sure I didn't need any of those pictures for this project.

My thoughts touched on the subject that had brought me here, and my temples throbbed. I was going to have to deal with the fear and dread seeping into my body if I was going to make Dad's dream come true. My head cleared a little as I planned my course of action. By the time I had decided to pull out Dad's notes and albums and catalog what he had accumulated, I had choked down my anger and was able to stand. I slowly made my way to the stairs, making lists in my mind. At some point in time I would have to make a trip to the island, but I planned to put that off as long as possible.

Refreshed from the shower, I pulled on a pair of tan boxers and green sweatshirt and tennis shoes and headed to the beach. A deck stretched past the screen porch for twelve feet. A walkway extended from the deck over the dunes down to the shore. I spent the next two hours exploring the dunes for signs of turtle nests. A few nests had already hatched while most of the nests were still intact. After inspecting the nests around my property, I checked the dunes along the rest of the beach. My body had limbered from my search for nests, and my mind had cleared. However, my thoughts settled on the subject I least desired.

It was early autumn, yet vacationers lounged in chairs, searched

for shells near the water's edge, or ran by me in their quest to stay fit at the beach. Since the beach was crowded, I decided to walk back home and grab some food. I checked the cabinets to see what Tiny had stocked in them. Rows of soup, vegetables, tuna, rice, spices, syrup, chips, peanut butter and jelly met my eyes. I found a box of crackers, grabbed the peanut butter and headed to the bar. Pouring myself a glass of water, I settled down to some serious eating. I had called Uncle Earl and Tiny right after I got out of the shower, letting them know I arrived safely, and was settling in. By early evening I had both porches clear of sand. I took an inventory of food in the fridge and in the cabinets and made a list of what I needed. By the time the sun had set, the van had arrived with my furniture, and I set about reclaiming my presence in the house.

The rest of the week passed with little incident. I unpacked my belongings, and spent my evenings with Tiny and Earl. My days were filled with treks to the beach in search of Loggerhead turtle nests, and collecting pictures from albums, clips from newspapers, and articles on my father's family. I discovered more turtle nests and inspected them for any damage. Unlike some of my colleagues who wished to dig up turtle eggs in order to aid the turtles in their battle for survival, I liked to help Mother Nature, by covering the nest with netting to keep out scavengers of all species. With my main goal realized, I returned to the nests daily to

check for signs of disturbance from within. At the first sign of life, I repositioned the nets to allow the turtles safe passage to the water.

In the back corner of the living room near the French doors, sat Daddy's desk. The wall behind the desk was one large bookshelf. Over his forty years of life, Daddy spent most of his time obtaining material concerning Rat Island and his family's relationship with that island. The rest of the bookshelf contains mariner's charts of the tidal flow around Rat Island, books on sailing, the civil war, slavery and novels by Poe and Hawthorne. I pulled the boxes and albums from the bookshelf and arranged them in order of size. Daddy had inventoried most of the boxes, but a few were left without name or year on them. I sat them aside to be sorted last, understanding that my time would be better utilized if I sifted through known territory.

Daddy's collection was only this thorough because he examined it daily. While he was alive, every available space in the living room was stuffed with memorabilia, boxes of collectables, notebooks strewn from one end of the coffee table to the other. Stuff that eventually ended up in the trash. I was the one who threw it away. Daddy believed each item was vastly important. I felt, and continued to feel, that all could be tossed so that we could get on with our lives. Impudent thoughts tripped through my mind unashamedly as I worked.

Next I tackled the desk. Here he kept notebooks filled with information on his favorite subject. I remember night after night he sat

at his desk or the dining room table or the couch and searched the articles, pictures and newspaper clippings, making notes in notebook after notebook. There were times that I spent my entire evening beside him helping him arrange his precious memorabilia into some semblance of order, just to get him to talk to me. Other nights I spent seething on the couch while I pretended to watch TV because of his need to inspect his work nightly.

Early in his obsession, at the age of six, was when I first discovered a Loggerhead turtle nest. I had been fascinated by turtles for as long as I could remember, but that day was my first sighting of a turtle nest. I slipped out of the house one October afternoon to run away from home. Daddy had just found a trunk of Grandma's at the old mansion on the island. He brought it home and spent the rest of that day, all the next day and into that night pouring over the contents. So enthralled was he with his new toy, that I had to feed and bathe myself and get Aunt Tiny to take me to school. When I returned home from school, and saw him at the table for the third day in a row, I decided to run away. I ignored him while I fixed a snack. I rattled the silverware drawer, I slammed the cabinets shut, I purposely scraped the chair along the floor as I pulled it over to the counter. I made as much noise as I possibly could. He never looked up.

I made four peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, two for me and two for him. I added a bag of chips and two colas. Then, I added four

candy bars. I ran up the stairs and pulled my bathing suit from the dresser drawer and put it on. I put on a pair of shorts and shirt and then over that a pair of pants and a jacket. I pulled on socks and shoes and headed back downstairs. I stuffed my food in a paper sack and headed toward the living room with his two sandwiches in hand. I had to pass by Daddy, so I stopped, put his sandwiches on the desk and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

"I'm running away," I said. Without looking in my direction he said, "Hmm?"

"Did you hear me, Daddy? I'm running away. I'm sailing across the ocean far far away never to return." I stepped closer to him putting my face near his. "Goodbye."

"Bye, Sweetie," he said. I stared at him for what seemed an eternity. My eyes scanned the debris on the table. I looked at him again and then marched past him and out the French doors. I made my way toward the beach. A brisk wind blew in from the ocean. Since it was October, the weather could turn fast. For a moment I hesitated. I looked back only to see daddy searching through the documents on his desk. My resolve returned. I turned my face toward the water vowing not to look back.

I walked south along the beach looking for a good place to sit and eat my lunch. I was near the end of the island. I had never been this far away from home by myself. The beach was deserted. To my left was the

wide ocean making its way inland as the tide came in. To my right lay high dunes covered with grass waving at me in the breeze. In front and back of me, lay empty beach. I started to cry. I stood in the middle of the beach with tears streaming down my face.

I'm not sure how long I stood there. I felt something tugging on my pants leg. I looked down and noticed baby turtles surrounded me. Through my tears, I could see tiny green turtles crawling rapidly toward the water. I watched in amazement. One by one turtles disappeared into the rising water. I dried my eyes and ran up the beach looking for more turtles. I remember sitting near the dunes that day, watching as turtle after turtle emerged from the depths of the soft sand. I was so enthralled with my discovery that I ran home to share my news with Daddy.

"Daddy, I'm back." To my disappointment he was still scrutinizing each item from that trunk. I skidded to a halt in front of the desk. "I decided not to run away after seeing those baby turtles. They came out of holes, hundreds of them, and crawled to the water." In my excitement, I knocked papers to the floor. I picked them up.

"Daddy did you hear me? I came back because of the turtles. I'm not running away." I dropped the papers on the desk, concealing the photograph he was looking at.

"That's nice honey." He patted my arm without looking up. "Why don't you go outside and play for a while." He pushed aside the papers,

picked up the photograph, lay it in a pile, and took another item out of the trunk. I was so mad I ran to my bedroom.

For the next few days, I spent my time alternating between my bedroom and the beach looking for turtles. I reasoned that if Daddy could stay home from work, I could stay home from school. My love for turtles was born. It wasn't until my school called to see if I was ill that Daddy realized he had neglected me.

My thoughts returned to the situation at hand. While searching through several boxes and some of his notebooks, I noticed that Daddy had devised a flawless system. I opened those labeled boxes and found pictures, diaries, announcements enclosed in plastic bags. Each box held a different year's worth of memorabilia. Those items that didn't have a particular year, Daddy guessed by observing the style of the pictures, or the age of those in the pictures.

After several days of searching through the labeled boxes, I realized they were well organized and didn't need my attention. I put them aside and decided to tackle the unlabeled boxes. I opened the first box and was shocked to see the contents. Inside the box I found pictures of daddy and me. I found report cards, birthday cards, school pictures and birthday gifts I had made for Daddy. I quickly opened the other boxes and confirmed my suspicion. Each box contained memorabilia of my early childhood. Two of the boxes contained pictures of Daddy and Mama before I was born and then pictures of us after my birth. The rest

of the boxes contained pictures of my family after Mama's death. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I never thought for one moment that Daddy could be looking at pictures of me and Mama all those nights he sat absorbed in his project. Tears flowed down my face. Tears of relief softened the bitterness that had gripped me since Daddy made his request just before he died. I sat in the middle of those boxes and reacquainted myself with my father.

The Cat and Irby

I had just passed one of the few empty lots left on the island. Palmettos dotted the lot. Brown fronds, leftover from winter, clung to several limbs on the trees waiting for new green shoots to shake them loose. Beside the empty lot sat a three-story pink house trimmed in white with an extended deck off the veranda on the ground floor and full verandas on the second and third floor. A boardwalk ran the length of the lot from the end of the house down to the beach. At the end of the boardwalk a covered pavilion housed green metal patio furniture. As I passed the house, I noticed a man running on the boardwalk, then jumping over the railing onto the dunes.

Dunes on Belle Isle span the island. They range from three to six feet wide and are four to six feet high. Sea grass grows along the dunes and looks like wheat in its maturity. The grass grows more sparsely than wheat. However, it seeds at the head like wheat and sways in the breeze creating a sea of grass.

The man chasing the cat was a newcomer. April was well on. Within a month tourists would flock to the island in droves. A ball of white fur jumped nimbly through the grass heading in my direction. The young man ran from one place to the next in futile attempts of catching the cat, trampling sea grass in his wake.

That furry feline, in its element, teased the guy into following him all over the sand. When the cat became bored with the game he made a

beeline toward the beach and jumped off the six-foot-high dune landing at my feet. I bent down and gently picked up the cat, waiting for the owner to join us. He noticed me standing on the beach holding his cat. The smile he flashed me revealed sparkling white teeth against his already tanned skin. He jumped off the dune as nimbly as the cat, extending his arms as he came toward me.

"Thanks for catching her for me," he said. His breath was coming a little hard, but not too hard. His green eyes reflected the smile on his face. "I'm not sure what I would have done if I'd lost her. She belongs to my friends." He pointed toward the large house standing behind him. "I'm house-sitting for the next few months. My name is Irby. Irby Hasley." I dropped the cat into his extended arms.

"Do you have any idea what you were doing?" I asked. "Did you even think before you jumped over that rail onto the dunes? You do realize the grass you just tramped over is endangered? Don't you care about the erosion problems our state experiences each year? And that the dunes house several endangered animals like the Loggerhead turtle and the red fox, not to mention the ducks who hatch their eggs at the edge of the dunes." With each question, the smile on his face disappeared a little more. The pleased look he gave me became one of confusion and finally settled into a sorrowful, troubled look. I shot question after question at him, never giving him the chance to answer.

“Obviously the habitats of the animals nor the erosion problem we experience on this island aren’t as important as your precious cat.”

“She belongs to my friends,” he said lamely.

I ignored his weak interjection and continued my sermon. “You may want to consider the animals I mentioned the next time you go chasing your cat in endangered areas.”

I turned and walked away from him, noting he was rooted to the spot with an astonished look on his face. I walked away happy as a clam knowing that he got my message. The walk back to the house became the longest of my life. The happy feeling I had just a minute ago soured. I remembered seeing his smiling green eyes behind thick blonde lashes turn to a stormy gray. I remembered how easily he jumped off the six-foot dune, his leg muscles bunching as he hit the ground. By the time I reached the house, the euphoria I had experienced settled into the pit of my stomach and soured in my mouth. I had been protecting the animals, I argued as I walked home. If every visitor to the island ignored posted signs of “keep off,” the wildlife of the island would soon become extinct. Still I had been too harsh. If our paths crossed I again, I would apologize for my behavior, I decided. While I hoped to see him soon, I also hoped that I would never see him again. I couldn’t believe my behavior.

Day after day, I turned my thoughts toward my father’s project. Pictures of Dad, Mom and me greeted me as I walked into the living

room. After sorting through boxes of personal interest to me, it was now time to start Dad's project. Dad had put the collection in boxes according to years. His notes were meticulous on where he acquired each piece, what year he acquired it and the date of each piece. To make this undertaking a success, I needed to group memorabilia by the date of its origin.

As I studied his notebooks, the suffocating dread that filled my heart lessened. The heart wrenching pain I suffered the last ten years slowly faded when I found those boxes of my father, mother and myself. I still couldn't shake the responsibility Dad pushed upon me at the age of fifteen, but now the burden was slightly lighter. I concentrated on the project with minor trepidation. Two or three bottles of wine were no longer a nightly occurrence, yet at times I counted on a bottle to get me over some tough times.

A few days later, I was cleaning debris from nests near the boat dock on the marsh side of the property when I saw the cat. She strutted down the embankment like she owned the place. Her blue eyes searched grassy areas looking for movement, while I searched the hill for her owner. When he didn't appear, I turned back to the task at hand. Seaweed and dead grass completely covered the sand, making it impossible for hatching turtles to make it away from the nest.

I finished two nests and had begun working on a third before I saw the cat again. She was at the nest I had just vacated, digging in the sand.

"Shoo cat," I said waving my arms at her. She paused for a moment then went back to work. I stood up and walked toward her. She raised her head, looked at me disdainfully and went back to digging. I reached for her, but she eluded me. I replaced the sand she had just dug out, but she was not having it. She pounced on the spot I was covering. I grabbed for her, but again she jumped out of my reach. I continued covering the hole while she tried to stop me. Finally, she jumped on my hands. I grabbed her. My hands covered her body. She hissed and spit at me for a few seconds then calmed down. I searched the dunes for that guy, but he was nowhere in sight. I was going to have to take her home. The third nest wasn't in as bad of shape as the first two, but I would have to return another time to finish the work I had begun.

As I walked along the boardwalk, I half expected to see the man running around the dunes. He was going to have a long summer chasing the cat, I thought as I knocked on the door.

"Hey," I yelled. "I have your cat." I dropped the cat, as he opened the door. "You really need to try to keep up with your cat. I found her digging up turtle nests. Can't you keep her in the house?"

"I thought she was in the house. I haven't been out yet," he said.

“Maybe you left a door or window open. Letting her run around free is going to get her into trouble.”

Over the next few months I was to see Irby Hasley on a regular basis. His cat followed me on my morning walks. I got up before dawn to check on turtle nests along the island. She followed me as I continued toward home. Many times she would jump out in front of me just past her house. The lot next to her house was empty and full of sea grass. She often played and foraged there. I noticed her hunting mice in the lot as I passed. On my way home, she lay in wait for me, and just at the right moment, she jumped at my feet making me stumble in order not to step on her. She followed me as I searched the south end of the island. At other times, I either saw her running around the houses near her home or jumping playfully over the sand dunes or trotting along the beach. I never saw the cat in the same place twice nor did she discriminate at what time of the day she planned to run away from Irby. I never took the time to stop and chat with Irby when I took back the cat, nor did I ask her name. I was in the middle of sorting my father's collection and driving to Rat Island to inspect the property.

Daddy grew up on Folly beach and spoke often about his childhood. He sat me beside him and opened one of the boxes and told me stories surrounding the contents. On one of our trips he showed me his childhood haunts. We sailed into Folly harbor around lunch. We ate at The Crab Shack then walked the narrow streets of the town's center.

Among the twisted live oaks, I learned that the thriving downtown once was bereft of houses save for a few shacks and the large plantation home of Jonathon Carter, a prominent figure in our state's history up until the Civil War. Mr. Carter's family leased Rat Island from my father's family and built the plantation that Daddy's great-grandfather lived in. Daddy showed me an empty lot where his childhood home stood. He showed me where he went to school, and the church his family attended. I could associate places with stories I heard of his past.

I had been searching through the notebooks for hours, when hunger attacked me. The books were arranged by date and I had begun with Dad's earliest ones. The first four notebooks recounted his trips back and forth from the island with bits of information on the condition of the house and its contents. I scanned the pages of one such book, and proceeded to the kitchen to fix myself a sandwich. As usual, no real food could be found in the house. Cooking had never been a strong point of mine. Rather, I spent my time and energy searching and researching for ways to conserve our natural resources. I nibbled on a hunk of cheddar cheese as I scanned the meager contents of my refrigerator. Wine, cheese, bread, mustard, eggs, pickles, grapes, wine coolers, pickled peppers, coffee, barbecue sauce and juice met my eyes. As I stood with the door open I realized that the fridge held more liquor than anything else. Scanning the contents of the cabinet yielded only a few more items of interest.

I was in the middle of making a peanut butter, banana and mayo sandwich when I heard a noise. I heard it and felt it at the same time. The soft meowing of a cat as it wrapped itself around my legs. I jumped, only to knock my peeled banana to the floor. I dropped the mayo-covered knife, barely missing the cat. She jumped onto the table, spitting and hissing. Mayonnaise splattered on my leg and left a trail of white goop on the wood floor. I tried to get her off the table, but she was still spooked. She jumped into my arms for comfort. I was in no mood to comfort the animal that had just ruined my lunch. I dropped her at my feet. She cowered around my legs. Untangling myself from the cat was an impossibility. The more I moved my legs the more she moved between and around my legs. I pushed her away with my right leg only to have her come back and wrap herself around my left leg. On my last attempt to release myself from this ball of fur, I slipped on some mayo. I let out a yell. My arms flailed the air. I grabbed for the countertop only to smash my hand down on peanut butter covered bread. I fell to the floor. I sat there with bread stuck to my left hand, mayonnaise slathered on one foot. The cat disappeared around the cabinets.

“Do you need some help?”

I looked up and there was Irby. I had yelled at him again last week when I saw him chasing the cat over the dunes yet again. The frustration I had just experienced turned to anger. I tried to respond but choked on my words.

"Here give me your hand," he said. He extended his hand toward me and I automatically put mine in his. His hand swallowed mine. He began to pull. "Wait," I said, "I have mayo on my right foot. Grab a paper towel from the roll on the counter behind me."

"Here, let me wipe it off."

"Thanks, but I can manage." Before I could grab the towel he had my foot in his hand. "There, it's off. Now give me your hand and I'll help you up." Again my hand disappeared in his as he pulled me to my feet.

"You have got to get that cat under control," I said, finally finding my voice. I unglued the peanut buttered slice of bread from my hand and put it on the mayo slice. "Help me find the banana," I said. "It's on the floor in here somewhere. I dropped it when your cat startled me."

"She's not my cat. Here's the banana." Irby had been fighting off the laughter that had been building since I wiped peanut butter off my fingers. At that moment he let go and laughed uncontrollably.

"What do you mean she's not your cat?" I asked, trying to keep a straight face. "You've been chasing her for the last few months. How can she not be yours if you two keep showing up together?" My voice went up an octave. I grabbed the banana from his hand and threw it in the trash. "Where did you find this?" I asked. "I want to clean up the floor." He pointed toward the corner where the cabinets join together. I wet the paper towel and wiped the area he indicated. I picked up the remnants of my sandwich and threw it in the trash.

“Every time we meet, you wind up yelling at me.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, while scrubbing banana off the floor.

“You yelled at me when we first met, when you dropped the cat off in the yard, when you had to bring her home when she tore up a duck’s nest, and you yelled at me just now.” I noticed that his eyes were the color of storm clouds again. His long blonde hair was fastened with a rubber band. He was wearing a white tank shirt and cut off khakis. On his feet were Birkenstocks.

“Are you from California?” I asked.

“No. I was born and raised in Charleston. What has that got to do with you yelling at me?” His eyebrows arched revealing his now green eyes.

“You just look like you rode in on the surf,” I quipped. “What do you do for a living?”

“I’m taking time off for a while. Why?”

“That doesn’t answer my question. You may be in between jobs, but do you have a vocation?”

“Odd jobs. I’ve worked on shrimp boats, mowed lawns, a cook. You know, anything available.”

“Uh huh. I would offer you something to eat, but as usual, I don’t have much.”

“What? Eat?” His voice went up an octave. “I don’t want to eat. I came looking for that stupid cat and happened to find her here in your house.”

“Yeah. Why is that?”

“Why is that what?”

“Why does your cat seem to always be running away from you?” I asked.

“She’s not my cat. I’m house sitting for my friends. The cat belongs to them.” He practically spit his words at me.

“Well, don’t get all steamed up about it. You need to take better care of her. By the way where is she?” The cat had been rubbing its furry body around our legs until we began to argue. “You look around down here and I’ll check upstairs,” I said. I sprinted up the stairs hoping the cat had left the premises.

Sure this guy was nice to look at, but Dad’s project took all my time. I didn’t need to add a man into the equation. I checked my room, searching under the quilt-covered bed. Next I checked the bathroom, but she wasn’t there either. I headed toward the back bedroom, the parents’ room, but was positive I wouldn’t find her there. I kept the door closed at all times. However, just to get rid of the guy, I would have to remember to ask him his name. I walked toward their door. As I extended my hand toward the knob, I noticed the door was ajar. I grabbed the brass handle and pushed the door inward. The cat was

lying on the multicolored quilt that covered my parents' bed. I scooped her large body up into my arms, carried her out of the room, closed the door securely behind me, and walked downstairs.

"Here she is," I called as I stepped into the kitchen. The man was not downstairs. From the kitchen I could see most of the living room. He wasn't there. I put the cat on the back porch and closed the French doors to the house. "Hey," I yelled up the stairs. "Hey, are you up there?" I called again. Silence answered me. I walked back to the porch, picked up the cat and headed for the beach. I scanned the horizon for his figure. He was nowhere. Why can't remember his name or the cat's name? Why hadn't I gotten the phone number where he was staying? I knew the location of the house, but hesitated to leave her there alone. I'd hoped to get rid of the cat immediately and get back to work. No such luck. I walked back to the house, dropping the cat back on the porch and went inside. Even if I couldn't get rid of the cat, I planned to work the rest of the day. The guy, I really was going to have to remember his name, would come back for her soon.

I found a box of photographs of the house when it had been livable. The house had been lived in until a fire in the late 1800s. Then my grandfather restored the house right before the depression hit. He was commissioned to man the lighthouse during WWII, but the money he received from the commission wasn't enough to keep up the repairs on

the house and bills that went with it. The family left the island in the late forties and hadn't returned.

I moved onto another box and was in the middle of separating photographs, articles and collectables into piles, and had several piles of each, when my stomach growled in protest. I checked my watch and was surprised to see it was three o'clock. I remembered the sandwich I had trashed earlier, and wished I had taken at least a few bites. There were only a few items left to separate and then I would search for food.

The pile in front of me proved to be hard to categorize. I had made other piles of trinkets; however, I didn't believe the jewelry in my hands could be categorized as collectables. My hands ran over a matching diamond necklace, earrings and bracelet. The setting was unusual and outdated. The necklace held ten small diamonds, each outside a large yellow square cut stone. Silver filigree connected each stone together. The bracelet was made of alternating diamonds and pale yellow stones, and the earrings held one large square yellow stone with a diamond situated above in a setting of silver filigree.

The last item in the pile was a ring. The stone was an oval amethyst surrounded by diamonds. I had seen this ring before. I couldn't recall when or where, but holding the ring in my hand brought a nagging suspicion that I had held it before. I put it on my finger, the third finger on my left hand. It fit. It felt like it was made specifically for me. I sat there admiring the color in the afternoon light. The nagging

sensation wouldn't go away. I had seen this jewelry in one of the photographs in my search. Excitement ran through me, as I pulled the ring off. I gathered up the other pieces, as Irby stepped onto the porch. I quickly put the jewelry in my pocket and motioned for him to come in.

"Did you find her?" he asked.

"Yes. She's on the porch." I pointed toward the screened porch he just vacated. "What's the cat's name?" I asked.

"Chien."

"Chien? Who would name a cat dog? You've got some strange friends. Where's the cat?" I asked as we stepped onto the porch. I stood there, stunned that the cat was nowhere in sight. "Look," I said, pointing to the slightly ajar screen door, "she's escaped."

"Shit," he exploded. He stomped around the porch for a minute, then went back into the house. I lamely followed him. He sat down on the couch and put his hands in his head.

"That cat," he muttered. He continued to mutter as I stood there and stared at him. "Do you know I spend more time chasing that cat than I do anything else? In the two months I've been housesitting, that cat has gotten out daily. I'm so tired of chasing her." He stood up and thrust his hand toward mine. "I'm sorry we keep bothering you." Again his hand swallowed mine. For the first time in my life I felt small and fragile beside someone. "I'll be going now. Again, I'm sorry."

"Let me help you find her." I heard the words come out of my mouth and couldn't believe what I was saying. His hand still covered mine. It was warm and alive. In that moment, I didn't feel alone. It was the first time in a long time that I didn't feel alone.

"No. I don't want to impose on you any longer."

"It's not an imposition," I said. What was I saying? I had been trying to get rid of Irby and his cat ever since I met them. I couldn't believe I was offering to help him.

"Are you sure? We've caused you a lot of trouble already."

"Yes, you have." I couldn't believe that came out of my mouth.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I apologize for being so horrible. I'm in the middle of a staggering project, and your, I mean Chien keeps interrupting my progress. Let me help you to make up for my behavior."

"Apology accepted."

We spent the next hour looking for the cat only to find her curled up on the deck of her own home. After finding the cat on the porch, Irby and I spent that evening talking. Over the months that followed, Irby assisted me with my father's project. He brought an objective point of view to it that I could not. He had an uncanny sense of what should be grouped together and what should be set aside for later or left in the boxes. He also helped out two days a week at the marina. He took out *The Madeleine* once a week to get her seaworthy again. I spent Wednesday mornings at the marina to help out while Tiny had her hair

fixed. Every Wednesday morning, Irby tried to get me to go out in the sailboat with him, but I refused. I watched him leave the slip with trepidation. I made it clear that I wanted nothing to do with sailing *The Madeleine*.

It wasn't until March that I consented to sail with him.

"Irby, I can't take this trip," I said. We were to sail in two nights time. "I haven't set foot on *The Madeleine* since Daddy's death. I'm not ready."

"Maddie," he called me by my name instead of my nickname, "everything's going to be fine. It's the middle of summer. We don't have large storms this time of year. Besides the weather reports call for sunny weather for the next week. We've checked the boat daily, and I've sailed her to the island three times in the last two weeks."

"Why do we have to sail to Rat Island?" I asked. "Why don't we take her up the coast to Myrtle Beach or even farther? Sailing to the island and back worries me more than just sailing."

"Sweetheart," he came up to me and put his arms around my shoulders. "I've asked you to sail around the island every week and every week you've refused. We're going to take *The Madeleine* back to Rat Island. That's the only way you will get over your fear of sailing."

"Yes, but you don't know what happened. I know that you've been told that my father died after we returned from the island, but I haven't told you exactly what happened. No one knows what happened, but me.

I've never talked about it." I sat down in the chair and tucked my legs under me. Irby sat down near me, his hand caressing my leg. The cat jumped into my lap and I turned my attention to stroking her white fur. The cat visited Irby and me often, searching for the field mice that lived in the dunes surrounding the house. That night she was a comfort to me as I told Irby what had happened on that trip.

We set off from Belle Isle late Friday morning. Our October trip was the last time we sailed to the island for the year. Usually I looked forward to our weekends, but on that particular trip I was wary of my father's intentions. For over a year I had been arguing with my father or not speaking to him at all. Although I wanted to spend the weekend at the island checking turtle nests, swimming in the ocean and camping on the beach, I didn't want to hear him discuss his plans for my future on Rat Island. At fifteen I had my own ideas about my future and renovating an old house was not on my priority list.

As we sailed to the island, we worked in silent harmony. That attitude continued in each of us throughout the weekend. We worked on our own projects, but I also helped Daddy finish the dock behind the house and he helped me clear trash from the nesting area. We swam in the ocean and slept under the stars. We didn't speak much that weekend, but I felt closer to my father than I had in a year.

We left the island around noon on Sunday. We spent an entire weekend without fighting. The vanishing lighthouse echoed the ghostly quality of our visit as we headed toward open waters. We left Rat Island under partly cloudy conditions. The wind was blowing in a northern direction, so our journey home would be swift, we thought. Around three-thirty, the wind changed. The erratic gusts of wind that had hit us throughout the day died down. In a matter of minutes it regained strength. No longer were we fighting to get the sails down then thirty minutes later having to let them out. For the next hour or more we battled an unpredictable sea.

What happened next I remember sketchily. Black clouds raced across the moon. The feeble light from the yellow-orange crescent was constantly being extinguished. My eyes kept darting from the compass in front of me to the distant coastline. The clouds continued to race silently, growing ever darker in the evening sky. The wind that pushed the clouds across the moon and raised the waves in the distance never seemed to reach us. The sails hung limp. This false calm only heightened our tension. We waited tensely for the storm to hit. I glanced at the compass to make sure we were still headed northwest. Condensation covered the face.

The wind began to blow. A strong continuous breeze that pushed the boat through churning waters. Waves crashed into the boat. I screamed, but my words were swept away. Daddy began trimming the

sails. I could see the black outline of the dunes, but I wasn't sure if we had passed Sutter's Point or not. Although I could see the coastline, I knew we were still far enough out that if the boat tipped over we had a long way to swim. The undercurrent in this area could prove deadly.

Another blast of wind caught the boat and tipped us over. Daddy clung to the mast. The boat began to upright when another wave hit us in the side. The force knocked Daddy away from the mast. The winds tore the foresail loose. Daddy grabbed for it. The boat righted itself. The boom came loose. It hit Daddy in the head. A wave pitched the boat, and his body slid overboard. I tied the rope of the life preserver to the rail, threw the doughnut to Daddy and jumped in the water. The water carried me away from Daddy. He had reached for the life preserver, but held on precariously. The storm grew worse. I tried once more to reach Daddy. He lost consciousness as I reached him. The boat carried us inland.

I pulled Daddy ashore. I ran to the boat that had run ashore, grabbed some blankets and brought them back to cover Daddy. I couldn't get anyone on the radio, so I set the homing signal. I searched the coastline. We obviously had beached at Sutter's Point. That area was deserted for miles. I went back to Daddy. I wrapped up in a blanket and waited for dawn.

"He died the following January after being in a coma."

"Don't blame yourself, honey. It was just an accident."

"I try not to, but at times I feel it was all my fault." I wiped tears off my face. "His obsession killed him."

"What? What are you talking about?" Irby asked.

"Blame. No, I truly don't blame myself. I blame him," I cried, ignoring his question. Tears streamed down my face as I continued. "If he hadn't insisted on sailing to Rat Island that weekend then maybe he would still be alive. He could be supervising this project instead of me. I could be fulfilling my own dreams instead of his. The coastline is eroding at a tremendous rate. With each new home built right on the shore, the erosion problem increases. No, I have to rebuild a house that hasn't been inhabited since 1850."

"Maddie, I didn't know you felt this way," he said weakly.

"I want to work on my projects, not his. I want to preserve the habitats of the endangered animals on Belle Isle. I want to keep our water safe, but no, because he died I have to fulfill his dreams instead of my own." I was clutching the cat so hard she mewed in pain. I loosened my grip and she jumped out of my lap. I sat there staring at Irby, shocked that my anger was still so strong. Until that moment, I thought I had laid my resentment to rest. I stroked Irby's hand lying in my lap.

"We'll cancel the trip. We'll drive to the island like always."

"No. No, we'll take *The Madeleine*," I said. "It's time I put my past behind me. This will be the beginning."

Two days later we sailed to Rat Island. The wind blew my hair, the sun warmed my face; the day was the same as it had been when Dad and I sailed for the last time. Once again I experienced the freedom that comes with sailing. For two hours it took to sail to the island, a steady breeze blew. The blue sky was virtually free of clouds, and the temperature rose at a rapid rate. The lighthouse greeted us, and I was saddened to see that it was still in need of repair. We spent a few hours walking around the island and had a picnic. We returned home late that evening. I was relieved the trip was uneventful.

RAT ISLAND

In the Low Country spring arrives long before its official day here. Crisp breezes blowing in from the Atlantic warm considerably by mid-March. By the time spring arrives, the cold night temperatures rise to the point of sweltering. Any breath of air that touches the skin is a welcome relief. The morning after the work party was one such day. I sat on the veranda of my father's ancestral home. Wind blew in from the creek, lifting my bangs off my face. Irby had left for home at daybreak, and Tiny and Earl were in the kitchen. The three of us were together again. The only one missing was Daddy. It seemed odd that the person whose dream had been realized was no longer alive. As I sat sipping coffee, listening to the birds and admiring the flowers planted along the walk, I felt Daddy's spirit in this place. He was here in the house he so wanted to restore. The spirit that enveloped me that morning was the same spirit that followed me throughout the restoration process.

His dream of making his family's home livable again was now a reality. The house, the land and the water were once again a part of each other, complementing one another with grace and beauty. After eight years of hard work, I could relax. As I walked into the house, I stopped once again to admire the handiwork. A wide hallway ran the width of the house. The pine floor, which had faded to a warm patina, glistened in the morning sun. The walls were covered with floral wallpaper similar to that of the late 1700s. The black and white photos

Daddy had studied night after night covered one of the walls. Color photographs of his trips to the island were interspersed between original photos. Farther back on the same wall, pictures of the original construction of the house were combined with the renovation pictures of the present. On the opposite wall, newspaper clippings of events relating to the home place faced the photographs. The wall going up the stairwell was empty of memorabilia. The front parlor contained two portraits, one of myself and one of Daddy's great great-grandmother, the only surviving portrait of Daddy's ancestors. Tiny had insisted that I have my portrait painted to represent the newest generation of our family. Seeing it hanging on the wall always made me stop with embarrassment.

"Good morning dears," I said walking into the kitchen. I bent down to kiss Tiny's graying head. Although she was in her late seventies, her hair had just a touch of gray. Tiny was Daddy's older sister by twelve years. She was a short, thin woman who acquired her name not because of her stature, but because she weighed only three pounds at birth. Daddy's older brother Tee gave her the name when she was brought home from the hospital.

"Have you eaten?" Tiny asked.

"How are you this morning, Earl?" I asked. "I had a cup of coffee."

"Fine, fine," he said. He patted the hand I placed on his shoulder.

"We didn't keep you up too late last night?"

"No dear. I found a corner and dozed off around nine. Tiny interrupted a good sleep when she made me get up to go to bed. She kept me up the rest of the night with her snoring." He winked at me and turned to her. "Isn't that right, old girl?"

"Earl, you're spreading lies again." She winked at both of us as she sat down in the chair.

Their banter left me thinking about the times we spent around her kitchen table. I went to live with Tiny and Earl after Daddy died. Tiny insisted that every morning and evening we eat together. Sitting with them here in this kitchen, listening to them tease each other made me realize how much they meant to me.

"Tiny, I saw a large trunk in the hall. Where did it come from?"

"I had it brought from home. It belonged to my Great Aunt Madeleine. She was Grandpa's aunt. She disappeared in the same spot your boat wrecked. She was sailing home after visiting friends in Nag's Head. Her brother and the captain were found near the boat when it hit the beach. The incoming tide broke the boat up within an hour. Her body was never found. This trunk was found on the boat."

"It looks like the trunk Daddy had at the house."

"It's similar. The trunks belonging to Madeleine have her name engraved on the lids. Granny Lawrence's trunk wound up at your house. After Madeleine disappeared, Granddaddy packed her things and locked them away."

"Let's go through it before we leave. What else do we have to do?"

"Not much. The caterers cleaned up after the party, and Earl has to hang the last of the pictures taken of this place during its renovation. He can do that after his mid-morning nap."

After breakfast I walked over the grounds. I wanted to inspect the place in order to leave instructions for the caretaker. Grass grew on the lawn where bare spots and scrub had covered it a little over a year ago. The oaks framed a canopy along the drive. The landscapers took great care not to disturb the Spanish moss while removing dead limbs and shaping up the trees. Flowers and bushes were planted along the curve that circled the front of the house. Cypress, sea oats, and dunes encompassed the north and east sides of the property, exposing it to the breezes coming in from the ocean. To the south, one could barely see through the forest of trees. The backside of the property faced west and was enclosed by the marsh. When the tide rose, the creek, running through the marsh, made the swollen waters a teeming river. The back lawn extended down to the banks. A sandy path ended at a dock. The sailboat was moored there. The front lawn ended where sand dunes began. The drive came in from the south. It began where the coastal highway ended and ran parallel to the ocean. As the tide came in, the rhythm of the rising and receding waves were heard from the front porch.

I stood surveying the dunes and the water beyond. We had planted palmettos between cypress and pine near the dunes to help alleviate erosion problems.

I made my way farther down the path, checking the netting covering the grass on both sides of the path. Although Daddy's dream was to restore the house and land and for me to move to the place, the condition of the house and the remoteness of the property did not make his plan feasible. The house and the north side of the property sat on a rise. The property dropped sharply two hundred yards from the lawn's southern edge, making it a swamp during heavy spring rains. High tide also brought a lot of water into the creek.

When I hired architects and landscapers to assess the property, I gave them the same tour Daddy gave me on one of our last visits to the island. The problem was not isolated to the south side of the property. At Lighthouse Cove, five miles northeast of the property, the lighthouse, which was first built in 1767 and then rebuilt in 1876 after it was destroyed by union troops, stands on ground that once was part of the mainland. The lighthouse stands in the middle of a body of water between the mainland and Folly Island. Water covers the area around the lighthouse up to the bottom of the main door during low tide and halfway up the door during high tide. Erosion problems would occur on the property, if not maintained properly.

Instead of going ahead with the original plans, the team I hired agreed that the place would be ideal for a turtle refuge, something I had dreamed of building for years. While carpenters and landscapers restored the house and grounds, several of my friends and I prepared the dunes around the existing turtle nests. In a month, loggerhead turtles would come ashore to lay their golf-ball-sized eggs in the soft sand along the edge of the property. As soon as that happened, we would cover the nests with screens to keep out predators. As a result, the house not only gave information about life on an island plantation; we also carried information on the plight of the loggerhead turtle.

In May, after the turtles began laying their eggs, the refuge would open to the public. A part of the house and the lawn would be open for tours. For an extra fee, people could take a boat ride deeper into the marsh, to see wildlife in their natural habitat. Classes would begin in June, demonstrating the habits of the turtle. Later in the fall, tourists would be able to see a replica of the places where turtles lay their eggs before returning to the sea.

Spanish Moss dripped from the tangled bare oak limbs, providing a canopy over the driveway. I stepped from the protection of the trees and saw how grand the house looked today compared to my first visit. I saw the house, as it must have looked hundreds of years ago. For the first time, I realized the completion of this part of my life. Daddy's dream was now realized. I even made Aunt Tiny happy by promising to give some of

the proceeds from admission charges to her missionary society. The only thing left was for Tiny and me to inspect the trunk. Then we would sail back to Belle Island.

There was nothing left to fill my days. The thought sent waves of panic through my body. I sat down on the porch to contemplate the gravity of the situation. Panic and overwhelming fear overcame me. It was the same feeling I experienced when Daddy died and placed this burden on my shoulders. I was alone and didn't know what I was going to do.

"Turtle," Aunt Tiny called from the doorway.

"Yes, Tiny."

"We can open the trunk whenever you're ready," she said.

"I'll be there in a minute." I sat listening to the waves break over the beach. The sound soothed my irritated nerves. Maybe I could go back to teaching classes at the community college. Irby and I could take an extended vacation. Maybe I could talk Tiny and Earl into taking a cruise with me. All these ideas sounded good, but none of them were what I really wanted to do.

"Turtle, are you coming?" Tiny asked.

"Why don't you start without me? I forgot to check the nesting area. I'll be in to help just as soon as I finish there," I lied. I needed a few more minutes to collect myself without Tiny inquiring about me. She and Earl had been supportive the last twenty years. Irby was wonderful,

but many times he had no clue. Like Tiny and Earl and Daddy before them, they assumed their dreams were my dreams. The knowledge that I had support from the most important people in my life was comforting. But as I walked into the house, I found I was finished with a project that had consumed my life for the last thirteen years. The thought that I had just fulfilled someone else's lifelong dream haunted me.

These thoughts continued to plague me for weeks after we left Rat Island. My days became an endless cycle of dusting spotless furniture, washing and rewashing the same dish, and mopping clean floors.

Summer came to the low country. Tourists swarmed the beaches, restaurants, and parks. I couldn't take a quiet walk along the beach without stumbling over somebody. The marina was bursting with rentals, so Irby and Earl spent daylight to dark out on the water. Irby offered me a job at the marina, but I hadn't taken him up on it. I knew I should, but I couldn't shake the depression that weighed on my shoulders.

Twice a month, as I took highway 17 south, my mood lightened. The time I spent at the refuge was the only time I felt alive. I loved seeing people walking on the lawns. I loved paying admission and taking a tour of the house, listening to the comments and questions of the tourists. Barbara, my tour guide and manager, dramatized the history of my family well. I had hired her for that very reason. That and I knew her from school. Barbara and I were roommates in college. She majored in

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business and theater, and I majored in marine biology. After college I immersed myself in studying the habits of the loggerhead turtles and then married Irby while she opened a club in Myrtle Beach specializing in dinner theater. She sold her concept to a chain four years ago and spent her time as a guide for several ghost tours in Charleston. She cared for the refuge like it was her own.

Five months later, autumn winds blew from the west as I drove to the island. That day I planned to spend the morning checking turtle nests, searching for signs of hatchlings. During the months of September and October, the eggs deposited in the dunes in May began to hatch. During hatching season, I spent one day a week at Rat Island insuring that nature was taking a normal course and helping it a little if it didn't. The early morning drive was unmemorable, except for trying to keep cool during a hot dry spell. By the time I arrived at seven, my shirt and shorts were sticking to me. A fine layer of perspiration covered my body from head to toe. I drove the car to the back of the house and went in search of Barbara.

When she wasn't in the office, I suspected that she had gone to the nests without me. I started toward the front door intending to catch up with her when I heard scraping along the floor above me. I yelled up the stairs, and received more scraping noises in answer. I climbed to the second floor intending to check the rooms. Maybe Barbara had John

moving furniture before tourists began arriving in a couple of hours. The second floor consisted of four large rooms that held period furniture, mimicking the bedrooms and sitting room of long ago. The second floor landing opened up to a hallway that was a replica of the one on the first floor. As I stepped onto the landing I was met with stacks of boxes and three trunks. John and Barbara were bringing a fourth trunk down the third story stairwell.

"What's all this?" I asked.

"Junk from the attic," John said.

"We decided that we'd begin cleaning the attic to open it up, like we discussed," Barbara said.

"I had no idea there was so much stuff in the attic," I said. "When I first inspected it I didn't notice all this stuff."

"No, you wouldn't," Barbara replied. "We found this in a room off the main area. It's not much bigger than this landing. It's so dark up there we're lucky we stumbled on to it."

"Is that all you need, Barbara?" John asked. "I need to get back to digging up that new flower bed."

"That's it for now," she said. "I don't want to move the furniture we found unless the carpenters tell us to."

"Furniture?" I asked. "What furniture?"

"There's a desk and a couple of tables on the back wall of the room. You don't know they're there until you're actually upon them. I

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almost fell over one of them. It's spooky up there with just a flashlight. I say let's get electricity up there right away." She laughed a little nervously after her last words.

"I felt like I was being watched," she said.

"I feel that way every time I visit. It's my dad."

I inspected the condition of the trunks. They were replicas of the trunk Aunt Tiny brought from her home. The trunks were made of cypress. They were five feet in length and four feet high. The hinges were rusty and were locked.

"Did you find a key to the trunks?" I asked.

"No."

"Did you look?"

"We inspected the locks, that's all."

"What about the wall inside the door? I found a set of keys for the front and back doors inside the doorway near the kitchen. The keys were useless, though, since the doors were hanging on their hinges."

"I didn't check the walls. I didn't check the furniture either."

"Why not?" I asked. "Let's get back up there and see if we can find the keys."

"I'm not really comfortable about going back up there. The flashlight is getting weak."

"Did you put new batteries in it?" I asked, taking the light from her and turning it on.

"Yes. I put new ones in and checked it to be sure it was shining brightly. The farther from the door I walked the weaker the light got. After I put in the new batteries, I went back to the kitchen and replaced the new batteries with more new batteries. I tested them and they looked fine, until I got near the room."

"I think you're being a little paranoid," I said. "Have you checked the boxes yet?"

"No. I wanted to wait for you."

"We'll go through them after we look for the keys. Can we move the boxes into one of the bedrooms?"

"If we pick them up together. They're heavier than they look."

"Okay, let's move the boxes into the one of the front bedrooms. Then we'll search the attic."

We spent the next half-hour moving boxes into the largest front room. The room only had a rug, table and cradle. The small bed that should have been in the room was being repaired. An animal print covered the wall, as well as baby pictures of the family. I moved the cradle and rug to the side and we stacked boxes along the outside wall. Afterwards, I grabbed a flashlight and headed for the third floor, with Barbara right behind me. First, we searched the wall by the door. Next we searched the room where the trunks were found. The flashlight worked perfectly until we worked our way toward the farthest wall near the desk and tables. The closer we got to these items the weaker the

I shined the light in the cubbyholes of the desk. There was one large area for storing correspondence and lots of small areas for holding pens, inkwells, envelopes and stationary. A ledger and a book lay in the largest opening. But there were no keys to be found in any of the cubbyholes or in the desk drawer. I passed the light over the openings once more before closing the desk. The light was getting weaker, and I wanted to get out of the room before it went completely out. I don't know why but I picked up the book lying there before I closed the desk. We made our way back to the door.

"I'm glad to be getting out of here. It was so dark back there that I could hardly see you," Barbara said.

"Hardly see me, you were practically on top of me," I said. "We need to get new batteries for both of these lights."

"Why? There's nothing wrong with the batteries or the flashlight."

We were halfway across the room when the lights brightened to full strength. I tried to pass over it lightly. "It just seems lighter now because of the light shining in from the door."

"There's no light shining from the doorway," she said. "The floor inside the door is as dark as it is right here." We were standing several feet from the doorway. I looked to where she pointed and was surprised to see she was correct. It seemed impossible that light streaming in the French doors, gleamed off the floor just outside the attic, but didn't reach past the doorway. Neither Barbara nor I commented further on the

flashlight dilemma. We were eager to rid ourselves of any thought of why light didn't penetrate the attic.

"Let's get something to drink," I suggested. The words stumbled weakly from my mouth.

"My throat is parched," Barbara commented, just as weakly. She glanced once more over her shoulder to the attic door.

We hurried down the stairs to the first floor. Once in the kitchen, I said, "Call the electrician this afternoon and see if he can be here tomorrow to inspect the attic. Let's get electricity hooked up to that room as soon as possible. Also, call a locksmith and have him open the trunks for us." Barbara nodded her head and scribbled notes on a pad.

I picked up a towel and began wiping the dust off the book I had brought with me.

"Iced tea?" Barbara asked.

I turned the book over in my hands, studying the worn leather as I continued to wipe the dust off the cover. I wiped off the front cover carefully, all the while looking for a title.

"Yoo-hoo." Barbara cried, waving her arms in front of my face.

"What?" I asked startled at her tactics.

"I asked if you wanted some iced tea?"

"Sure. Sorry I didn't hear you." I put the book on the table and took two glasses from the cabinet. Barbara filled the glasses with ice and poured the tea while I cut up a lemon. I found meat, cheese, lettuce and

tomato to make sandwiches. I pulled them out of the fridge and put them on the table. I grabbed bread and cookies from the cabinet and added them to the growing pile. Barbara and I made our sandwiches in silence. I contemplated the events that had just taken place in the attic. My curiosity about the book heightened as the silence between us continued. "What do you want to do with the trunks?" Barbara asked.

Her words echoed loudly between us. They hung in the air and slowly died away. Our silence was still uncomfortable. I searched the corners of the room. Barbara's eyes followed my movement. I finished making my sandwich and pulled out a chair before I answered.

"We need to move them into another room until the locksmith can come by and open them."

"What about the contents?"

"It just depends," I said.

For the next hour we debated what to do with the boxes and trunks. There were three trunks and six boxes. We decided to work on the boxes first, since we could open them right away. Depending on what we found, we would group the contents into different categories, then at some point would decide where and how to display them. Finally we discussed the possibility that the contents of the boxes might not be fit to display. In that case, I determined I would speak with Aunt Tiny and see what she wanted to do with the contents of the boxes. We planned to treat the trunks the same manner, after they were opened.

I promised Barbara we would spend extra time sorting through the boxes as she left to give a tour, and I headed toward the turtle nests. At four o'clock I gathered my things and the book I took from the attic and left. The drive home during rush hour traffic took a toll on my already drained body. It was well after dark by the time I reached the house. Irby lay on the couch watching baseball.

"How was your day?" I asked.

"It was busy. We had a lot of tourists come in to fuel up and rent boats, as well as trawlers coming in to fuel up before they set out this morning. We had to weigh a lot of fish this afternoon, and I had five boats come back in needing repairs." I sat down in front of him and massaged his back. "What did you do today?" he asked.

"I spent the day at the refuge. Barbara found some boxes and trunks in the attic, and we talked about what to do with them."

"What was in them?"

"Not sure. We didn't get a chance to look in them yet. It took us so long to get them out of the attic and move them into rooms on the second floor that there wasn't enough time to go through them. Besides, the trunks were locked. Barbara's finding a locksmith. I'll be driving down day after next to help her sort through them. Who knows, the contents may be nothing but junk. I'm going to get something to drink. Do you want anything?"

"No. I'm fine."

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I poured myself a glass of tea and went in search of a bath. I made a list of possible contents and ways to display them as the steaming water relaxed my aching muscles. I must have fallen asleep, because Irby woke me up to let me know it was time for bed. I toweled my body off and walked to the bedroom. I nestled under the covers and fell asleep. I slept fitfully, dreaming I was locked in the room in the attic. My father appeared in my dream. He questioned why I hadn't fulfilled his dream? I tried to show him what we had accomplished with the property. He wasn't pleased. He was adamant that I had gone against his wishes. I awoke with his words echoing in my ears. He would only be happy when I moved into the house.

Late the next morning, I crawled out of bed, and the book that I brought from the refuge fell to the floor. I picked it up realizing that I had intended to look through it the night before. I put it on the kitchen table while I made coffee and toast. I sat at the table and opened the book. The pages were yellow and dusty from disuse. There was no title page nor was there an inscription on the face page. I closed the book and took a closer look at the cover. The condition had deteriorated so badly that I couldn't tell if there was a title imprinted on the front of the book. I carefully looked through several pages. They were blank.

I went in search of a shower. The hot spray did more for me than the two cups of coffee I had drunk. I pulled my hair back into a ponytail and put on a pair of shorts and top. I grabbed the book off the table,

went into the living room and sank down on the sofa. I opened the book again and carefully looked at every page. Those that were not torn out were blank. Chunks of pages had been ripped out at one time. I noticed writing on them. I could make out parts of words, but without the entire page the words and half words meant nothing. I continued my search to the back of the book. I noticed an inscription. I had inadvertently begun my search at the wrong end. I went back to some of the torn pages to see if I could read the words. I could make out a word or two, but for the most part they were illegible.

I went back to read the inscription. It read *To Madeline Lawrence From John and Mary Lawrence 1879*. The page following had been torn out and folded in half. I carefully unfolded the page, only to have it fall apart in my hands. On the page in a different handwriting were the words *I would rather live in anonymity, pursuing life's simple pleasures, than be a slave to fulfilling other's dreams. Madeleine.*

Over the next few months I became obsessed with finding out what happened to Madeleine. When we opened the trunks, we realized they belonged to her. The trunks and boxes contained clothes and toiletries. There were a few records of births and deaths of family members, but nothing on Madeleine. I remember Tiny saying the old man locked away all memories of Madeleine after she disappeared, but I wondered why. Was he so grieved by her disappearance that he removed all traces of her?

My search for information on her disappearance took precedence over my work at Rat Island. I neglected my turtles and let Barbara take over my small duties at the house. Irby came home to find stacks of papers, photos and notebooks on the kitchen table, sofa and on the floor by the bed. I went to Rat Island and looked through photographs of the family. I searched through notebooks I had left at the island. I found a reference to Madeleine in one of the Daddy's notebooks. The jewelry I had found, when I began my research of Daddy's belongings, was cataloged as Madeleine's. The jewelry was given to her by her Aunt Madeleine as a wedding gift. That wouldn't be possible, if she died in the wreck, I thought.

I went to Tiny to find out what she knew about Madeleine. She told me that Madeleine's father was a tyrant who refused to let her marry a farmer. He ordered her to marry a doctor, but she refused. Not long after their quarrel over her refusal to marry the doctor, the accident happened. Rumors circulated around the family that Madeleine hadn't died, but had left to marry her farmer. Her father refused to let anyone mention her name, so the information handed down might or might not have been true. She denied any knowledge of the jewelry.

I spent hours in the public library, searching the archives for information on her life and death. Birth certificates were rare in the 1800s, but death announcements would have been published in the local paper. I found neither. The only other item I found of Madeleine was a

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photograph I had seen years before in the trunk Daddy kept at our house. It was the only picture left of Madeleine. She had light hair and eyes. That much I could tell from the black and white photograph. She looked to be in her late twenties. She was wearing the jewelry I found in the trunk at my father's house and had three small children around her. They all had her coloring. I wasn't sure how old Madeleine was when the boat sank, but I assumed she was in her late teens or early twenties. The small house she stood in front of looked like any of the cottages on the island thirty years ago, not the mansions that graced the area in the late 1800s. My interest in Madeleine's life was heightened with the possible discovery of her life after the accident. Although I continued to search, I found nothing.

After locating the picture of Madeleine and supposedly of her family, I went to see Tiny again. She was reluctant to answer my questions. She didn't want to discuss her great-grandfather.

"Why won't you talk about him?" I asked.

"His spirit haunts the house," she said.

"The house or the attic? The room where we have trouble with the lights?"

"Yes."

"He's the one whose presence Barbara and I felt?" I questioned.

"You know I've had electricity put in the attic. Barbara has called the electrician four times to have them check the wiring in that room. Each

time they have gone to the property, the only problem they've found is the light bulbs have been unscrewed. Barbara refuses to enter the room. Why is he in the attic?" I asked.

"Turtle, some things are best left alone," she said.

"I need to know," I said.

Tiny poured herself a cup of coffee. She kept a pot on the stove. She pulled out a cup for me and took a plate of cookies out of the cabinet. She poured coffee in the cup and handed it to me.

"Let's go into the living room," she said. She carried the plate of cookies with her. For a few minutes she sipped coffee and nibbled her chocolate mint cookie. I waited impatiently for her to get settled.

"While grandfather Lawrence wouldn't allow anyone to mention Madeleine's name in his presence, he refused to let her go," she said.

"Madeleine was his little girl. He doted on her from birth. He never denied her anything until the day he refused to allow her to marry her farmer. Nine years after her disappearance, he found the letters.

Madeleine had been writing her mother on a regular basis. Also, it seemed, Grandfather Lawrence was the only one who had not known she was alive. Grandfather Lawrence was furious. He rode to Spartanburg where she lived, to force her to come home. He found her married and with three children. Madeleine was actually happy to see her father. Marriage to her farmer, eking out an existence, and three children was more work than she had expected. She wanted to return to her

childhood home, but the thought of bowing down to her father's will, admitting he was right, didn't sit well with Madeleine. An argument ensued. The husband threatened to kill grandfather Lawrence. Before he left, he insisted Madeleine return the jewelry that his sister had given her. It belonged to the family, he said, and she was no longer a Lawrence. Madeleine flung the jewelry in his face, cursing his existence.

After his return, he closeted himself up in the attic room. Madeleine's things were in there. He read and reread the letters she sent to her mother, until one day he burned them. He tore the pages out of her diary. He burned all pictures of her. Grandmother Lawrence hid the picture you found. Granny found it after grandmother's death and put it in the trunk."

"Tiny, what happened to Madeleine?" I asked.

"No one knows. After her father's visit she stopped corresponding with Grandmother Lawrence. Granny took a trip to Spartanburg some years later. The cottage had burned to the ground and the land had fallen into disrepair. No one had heard of Madeleine. Little was remembered about Madeleine's family. The neighbors believed the family that had lived there moved away from the area years ago. They believed the house burned after it had been abandoned."

I left Tiny feeling at ease. I could put Madeleine to rest, but could Grandfather Lawrence's spirit find rest? After six months of research, I packed away the photos, notebooks and papers. I took all the items that

I had taken off the island, and put them back in the room where Barbara and I found them. Barbara and I repacked the trunks. The boxes had been thrown away after we had emptied them. Although we had no boxes, we put those items into some of the trunks that hadn't been full. The trunks were being stored in the larger area of the attic. Although we had electricity installed on the third floor, we had no use for the two rooms. At that time, we were using the large room for storage. The back room had been left alone because we couldn't keep electricity on. After we packed the items away, Barbara and I dragged them into the room. Barbara wanted no part of it, but I had insisted we put the trunks and boxes back in their original place.

Grandfather Lawrence's spirit seemed to be somewhat at rest after the trunks were moved back into the room. I had to screw in the light bulbs each time I entered the room, but that didn't bother me. After arguing with Barbara I agreed to put the desk and tables back in the room. We had moved the desk to one of the second floor rooms, but Grandfather Lawrence wouldn't leave it alone. During tours, Barbara noticed that the drawer or panel was situated differently. Barbara had put writing utensils on the desk and they were usually strewn across the room. The tables had been put in the downstairs parlor. Grandfather never bothered them, but I wanted to please him.

I spent the next few hours in the room with Grandfather Lawrence. There were a few things left to do before his spirit would be completely

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satisfied. I brought a chair into the room and sat at the desk, writing a letter. I wrote a letter to my father and Grandfather Lawrence, sealed it and put it in the desk. I poured out my heart to my father, while I explained to Grandfather why I kept Madeleine's picture. I replaced the diary and ledger. I wasn't sure he would be put to rest, leave the house and return to wherever spirits go, but I felt that he would be able to spend the rest of eternity in that room, keeping vigilance over his daughter's possessions. I removed the chair from the room. I unscrewed the light bulb completely out of the socket. I closed the door to the room. I locked the door and left Grandfather alone.

I planned to get on with my life whatever that might contain. I returned home early and prepared my favorite dish for Irby and myself. While I chopped onions and boiled water, I had a nagging feeling I was missing something about Madeleine. I tried to put her out of my mind, but she wouldn't lay to rest. The potatoes, corn and kielbasa simmered on the stove while I racked my brain for what was bothering me. I added the shrimp, put the lid on the pot and turned off the heat.

I pictured Madeleine staging her own disappearance and living her life to a ripe old age. Madeleine and I were similar. She had broken free of her family ties, or had she? Marrying her farmer meant giving up her past. And I had spent every waking hour since my father's death thinking, escaping, then fulfilling my father's dream. If I was right, she gave up all she cared for to be her own woman. Did she ever taste true

freedom? I went to look at the photograph I found. It hung on the wall of my bedroom. Was the look on her face disappointment, or was it something else? I thought about all I had accomplished for my father-- and for myself. Madeleine might or might not have fulfilled her dreams. I would never know. I looked at her again. One thing was for sure; I realized I would never be free from the obligations my family expected of me, but that didn't bother me as much as it used to.

Back in the kitchen, I opened a bottle of wine, covered the table with newspaper and called Irby to dinner. I drained the water from the pot and poured the seafood concoction on the table. We ate until we were full, discussing plans to build the house I had always dreamed of.