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Opening Extract from...

Sweet Salt Air

Written by Barbara Delinsky

Published by Canvas

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BARBARA DELINSKY

Sweet Salt Air

Canvas

Constable & Robinson Ltd
55–56 Russell Square
London WC1B 4HP
www.constablerobinson.com

Published in the US by Thomas Dunne Books,
an imprint of St Martin's Press, New York, 2013

First published in the UK by Canvas,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd., 2013

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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication
Data is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-47210-457-1 (paperback)
ISBN 978-1-47210-459-5 (ebook)

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Prologue

Charlotte Evans was used to feeling grungy. As a freelancer, she travelled on a shoestring, getting stories other writers did not, precisely because she wasn't fussy about how she lived. In the last twelve months, she had survived dust while writing about elephant keepers in Kenya, ice while writing about the spirit bear of British Columbia, and flies while writing about a family of nomads in India.

She could certainly survive a *mizzling,* as the Irish called it, though the heavy mist seeped through everything – jeans, boots, even the thick fisherman's sweater she wore. The sweater was on loan from the woman under whose roof she was sleeping on this least populated of the three Aran Islands, and though Charlotte did have a fireplace in her bedroom, hot water was in short supply in the small stone cottage. She could have used a steamy shower, a thorough washing of her clothes, and a solid day of sun.

Her assignment was to write about the youngest generation of Inishmaan knitters, women who were

adapting traditional patterns in breathtaking ways, and, as with the pattern on her own sweater, she could now describe moss stitch, panel repeats, right and left twists, and cable designs. It was time to leave. She had to go home to put the story together and get it to *Vogue Knitting,* before heading to the Australian outback to do a piece on aborigine jewellery-making for *National Geographic,* a coup that one. Still, she stayed here.

Part of what kept her was the woman who owned the house, as warm and motherly as any she had ever met; part was the craft that permeated the place. No knitter herself, she could watch these women for hours. They were at peace with themselves and their world, enviable for Charlotte, who had no roots at all. So close to her age that they might have been schoolmates, they were trying to teach her to knit. She told herself this was cause enough to stay.

Bottom line, though, it was the island that kept her here. She had loved islands from the time she spent her first summer on one. She was eight at the time. Thirty-four now, she still felt the island aura – an isolation that made worries seem distant, a separation from the real world that lent itself to dreams.

Her eyes went to the horizon, or where the horizon would have been if the mist weren't so dense. *Thick o' fog* they called it in that other place, and it lent a sheen to her skin and a bulk to her hair here as it did there. She pulled those dark curls back now, fingers lost in the damp mass, and turned just enough on the scruffy cliff to face a few latitudinal degrees south.

There, on the far side of the Atlantic, would be Maine, but despite the shared ocean, her island and this one were

worlds apart. Where Inishmaan was grey and brown, its fragile man-made soil supporting only the hardiest of low-growing plants, the fertile Quinnipeague invited tall pines in droves, not to mention vegetables, flowers, and improbable, irrepressible herbs. Lifting her head, eyes closed now, she breathed in the damp Irish air and the bit of wood smoke that drifted on the cold ocean wind. Quinnipeague smelled of wood smoke, too, since early mornings there could be chilly, even in summer. But the wood smoke would clear by noon, giving way to the smell of lavender, balsam, and grass. If the winds were from the west, there would be fry smells from the Chowder House; if from the south, the earthiness of the clam flats; if from the northeast, the purity of sweet salt air.

Oh yes, across the Atlantic would be Maine, she mused, as she opened her eyes and tried to penetrate that great distance through the fog, and this being April, she would think of it regardless of where she was. That was ingrained. Spring was when she started to plan her Quinnipeague summer.

Or used to. But no more. She had burned that bridge ten years ago with one stupid act. She couldn't go back, though she wished it sometimes. She missed the spirit of summer on Quinnipeague, so much more intense for being apart from the rest of the world. She missed Quinnie lobster rolls, which tasted better than lobster rolls anywhere else. Mostly, she missed Nicole, who had been as close as a sister to her once. She had never found another like her, though Lord knew she had searched.

Perhaps that was what staying on Inishmaan was about. The women here could be friends. They understood independence and self-sufficiency. Charlotte had felt such

instant rapport with several that she sensed they would keep in touch.

Would? Maybe.

More likely not, the realist in Charlotte admitted. For all the writing she did for a living, she was a lousy correspondent. Within a day or two, she would leave Inishmaan behind and return to Brooklyn, and from there? In addition to Australia, she had go-aheads to do stories in Tuscany and Bordeaux, the appeal of the latter being the lure of Paris before and after. She had friends there – a writer, a ceramist, and a would-be fashion designer whose clothes were too bizarre for mass appeal but whose personal warmth was winning.

Would it be the same as Quinnipeague time? No.

But this was the life she had made.

Nicole Carlysle lived in blissful ignorance of the past. She had enough to handle in the present, though no one knew it, and that was the problem. No one knew. No one *could* know, which meant no outlet, no emotional support, no badly needed advice. Julian was adamant about silence, and, because she loved him, she gave in. *She* was his lifeline, he said, and what woman didn't want to hear that? But the strain was awful. She would have gone out of her mind if it hadn't been for the blog. Whether she was writing to tell her followers about a local cheesemaker, a new farm-to-table restaurant, or what to do with an exotic heirloom fruit that was organically produced and newly marketed, she spent hours each day scouring Philadelphia and the outlying towns for material. As spring took hold, the local offerings were growing.

On a different mission now, though, she sat in front of an iMac in Julian's study. There was no view of the

Schuylkill from this room, as there was from most of their eighteenth-floor condo. There were no windows here at all, simply walls of mahogany shelves that held medical books Julian had either inherited from his father or collected before publications had gone digital. Nicole owned shelves here, too, though fewer in number. Hers were filled with the novels she couldn't part with, and books about entertaining that were both resource and inspiration.

Organized as she was, the papers to the left of the computer – jottings, printouts of fan comments, and endorsement requests from vendors – were neatly arranged. Her camera sat behind them, hooked to a USB port, and, in a ceramic bowl on the computer's right, lay the newly photographed subject of her upcoming blog: a head of purple cauliflower, still cupped by the veined green leaves within which it had grown. A leather sofa, with a matching side chair and ottoman, filled the room with the smell of lemon oil and age.

But that smell wasn't foremost in her mind as she read what she had already typed. 'I go to farmers' markets all the time. Field-to-table is so my thing. But none of the herbs at any of them comes close to island herbs. Those herbs *make* Quinnie food – well, those herbs and freshness. Quinnipeague was growing organic and cooking local before farm-to-table was a movement, but, still, we think of the herbs first. I can't write about island cooking without talking about them, but I can't not talk about the people, either. That's where you come in, Charlotte. You've eaten Dorey Jewett's lobster stew and Mary Landry's clam fritters, and you always loved the fruit compote that Bonnie Stroud brought to the Fourth of July dinner each year. These people are all still around. Each has a story.

I want to include some in the book, but I'm better at writing about food than people. You write about people. And you're so good at it, Charlotte. I google you all the time. Your name shows up in the best of the *best* travel magazines.'

She paused, thinking about those pieces as she studied the mirror of her own eyes in the gloss of the screen. Just then, they were sea-green with worry, wondering what the chances were that her friend would accept. Charlotte was big-time professional, certainly used to having her own byline. She would have to split the billing here, and Nicole's advance wasn't all that much. If the book sold well, there would be more, but for now all she could offer was a small stipend, plus room and board in one of the nicest homes on the island – plus reading and talking and hanging out, all that they used to do before life got in the way.

She typed in the thoughts, rewording once, then again. Finally, tired of parsing, she added a blunt, 'I need you, Charlotte. A Quinnie cookbook won't be the same without your input. I know you're busy, but my deadline is the fifteenth of August, so it's not the entire summer, and you'll get stories of your own out of this. It'll be worth your while. I promise.'

Her eyes rose above the computer screen to find Julian in the open doorway, and she felt a visceral flicker of warmth. It was like that whenever he caught her unaware – had been since the first time she'd laid eyes on him in a Starbucks in Baltimore twelve years before. Back then, as a new environmental studies graduate of Middlebury, she was getting her feet wet writing publicity pieces for a state agriculture organization. Hoping to work during her afternoon break, she had set down her grande-caramel-

frappuccino-with-whip on a table without noticing much of her surroundings, until she opened her laptop and became aware of an identical one, identically opened and angled on the table beside hers. Having made the same observation seconds before, Julian had an amused smile waiting.

He was a surgeon, in town from Philadelphia for a seminar at Johns Hopkins, and he had a quiet strength. That strength had been sorely tested in the last four years and yet, seeing him in the doorway of the study, she still felt the pull. He wasn't a tall man, but his bearing had always been regal. It was no less so now, though regular workouts helped with that. His hair had greyed in the last year or two, but even after a full day at the hospital, he was a good-looking forty-six. Tired, always tired now. But good-looking.

Wearing a smile, he approached. 'Doing a write-up of last night?' he asked. They had eaten at a new restaurant with friends, a working night out for Nicole, who had insisted that everyone order different dishes and evaluate each while she took notes.

By the time she shook her head *no*, he was facing her with a hip on the desk by the keyboard. 'The cookbook, then,' he said as his smile grew, knowing. 'You always get that look when you think of Quinnipeague.'

'Peaceful?' she acknowledged. 'It's April. Two more months, and we're there. You're still coming with me, aren't you?'

'I told you I would.'

'Willingly? It's an escape, Jules,' she urged, momentarily serious. 'It may be only for a week, but we need this.' She recaptured lighter thoughts. 'Remember the first time you ever came? Tell the truth. You were dreading it.'

His brown eyes laughed warmly. 'What wasn't to dread? A godforsaken island in the middle of the Atlantic—'

'It's only eleven miles out.'

'Same difference. If it didn't have a hospital, it wasn't on my radar screen.'

'You thought there'd be dirt roads and nothing to do.'

He gave a wry chuckle. Between lobstering, clamming, and sailing, then movie nights at the church and mornings at the café, not to mention dinners at home, in town, or at the homes of friends, Nicole had kept him busy.

'You loved it,' she dared.

'I did,' he admitted. 'It was perfect. A world away.' His eyes saddened. 'And yes, baby, we need this.' Taking her face in his hands, he kissed her, but there was sadness in that, too. Hoping to banish it for a few more seconds – especially in the wake of the *baby* that always turned her on – she was reaching up when he took her hands, pressed them to his lips, then smoothly slid behind her. With his arms braced on either side, cheek to her hair, he read the words on the screen. 'Ahh,' he said with a sigh. 'Charlotte.'

'Yes. I really want her on board.'

He angled away only enough to meet her eyes. 'You don't need her, Nicki. You can do the cookbook yourself.'

'I know that,' she said as she had more than once. 'But she's an accomplished writer, and she has a history on Quinnipeague, too. Add her people pieces to my food ones, and the book's that much better.'

'She hasn't stepped foot on the island in ten years,' he said in the measured way that spoke of knowledge. Oh, he was knowledgeable – a pioneer in his field, always savvy on a personal vein.

But Nicole wasn't deterred. 'How better to lure her

back? Besides, if you're gone after a week, and Mom won't be there, I want Charlotte.'

He was quiet. Nicole heard the argument even before he said, 'She hasn't been the best friend. She called your dad her surrogate father, but she didn't even make it to the funeral.'

'She was in Nepal. She couldn't possibly get back in time. She did call. She was as upset as we were.'

'Has she called again since?' he asked, though they both knew the answer to that.

'We email.'

'Often? No. And you're the one who initiates it. Her replies are short.'

'She's busy.'

He touched her cheek. 'You haven't seen each other in ten years. You have different lives now. If you want to lure her back to recapture what you once had, you may be in for a fall.'

'I miss her.' When his expression grew guarded, she insisted, 'No, it is not about that. I promised you. I will not tell her.' She grew pleading. 'But it's like all the stars are aligned, Jules. There's the cookbook, and your being in North Carolina for the month, and Mom not wanting to go to Quinnipeague and needing someone to pack up the place – like I want to do it? That'll be bad enough, but being *alone* there while you're away? This is the last summer I'll ever have at the house, and Charlotte is part of what that place means to me.'

He was quiet. 'You don't even know where she is.'

'No one does. She's always on the go. That's why I email. She'll get it wherever. And yes, she always answers.' He was right about the brevity of her replies, though.

Charlotte never shared much of her life now. And yet, from the first mention of this project, Nicole had pictured her taking part in it. Oh yes, Charlotte knew Quinnipeague. But she also knew Nicole, and Nicole needed to see her. She and Julian were going through a rough patch, tender moments like this one – once commonplace – now further between. A month at Duke training incoming doctors in the technique for which he was known would be a much-needed distraction for him. And for her? Charlotte could distract her. The memories were good; she and Nicole had always been in sync. If there was any fun to be had this summer, Charlotte was her one great hope.

Julian tucked a long strand of hair behind her ear. His expression was aching – and Nicole might have reached for him again if he hadn't cupped her head. 'I just don't want you hurt,' he said and kissed her forehead. Then he held her back. 'Do you think she'll accept?'

Nicole smiled, confident in this at least. 'Absolutely. I don't care how much time has passed. She loves Quinnipeague. The temptation will be too great to resist.'

Chapter One

Quinnipeague lay eleven miles from the mainland. With a year-round population of nearly three hundred, it was serviced by a daily mail boat that carried groceries and a handful of passengers, but no cars. Since Charlotte had one of those for the first time in her life, she proudly booked the ferry, boarding in Rockland on a Tuesday, which was one of only three days each week when its captain cruised past Vinalhaven to islands like Quinnipeague. Nicole had offered airfare to speed up the trip, but Charlotte flew everywhere else in life. This summer was to be different.

The car was an old Jeep Wrangler, bought from a friend of a friend for a fraction of its original cost. Giddy with excitement, she stashed the soft top in back, and, as the warm June air flowed freely through windows and roof, drove up from New York herself. She welcomed the time it would take. After a frantic two months of work to free herself up, she wanted to slow down, decompress, and maybe, just maybe figure out why she had agreed to a last

summer on Quinnipeague. She had sworn she wouldn't return, had sworn off painful memories.

But there were good memories as well, all of which had flooded back as she read Nicole's email in Ireland that day. She replied instantly, promising to phone as soon as she returned to New York. And she had. Literally. Right there in baggage claim while waiting for her duffel to come through.

Of course, she would come, she had told Nicole, only afterward doing the reasoning. For starters, there was Bob. She hadn't gone to his funeral because she hadn't had the courage to face even a dead Bob after letting him down – letting them *all* down – so badly. So she owed Nicole for the funeral, and owed her for the betrayal.

But obligation wasn't the only reason she had accepted the invitation. Relief was another; Nicole herself had suggested the collaboration. And nostalgia; Charlotte missed those carefree summers. And loneliness; she spent her life with people, but none were family as Nicole had once been.

And then there was the book. She had never worked on a book, had never actually collaborated on anything, though it sounded like a piece of cake, having someone else run the show. When she thought about the people she would interview, Cecily Cole came to mind first. Talk about compelling characters. Cecily *was* island cooking in many regards, since her herbs were what made the food special. She had to be the centrepiece of the book. Talking with her would be fun.

Charlotte could use a little fun, a little rest, a little make-believe – and Quinnipeague was the place for that. Even now, as the ferry passed in and out of fog, reality came and went. *You can't go home again*, Thomas Wolfe had

written, and she prayed he was wrong. She expected some awkwardness; ten years and very different lives later, she and Nicole couldn't just pick up where they'd left off. Moreover, if Nicole knew of her betrayal, all bets were off.

But if Nicole knew, she wouldn't have asked Charlotte to come. Nicole Carlysle didn't have a devious bone in her body.

Leaning out from the side railing, she caught a breath. There it *was* –

But no, just an ocean mirage quickly swallowed by the fog.

After moving past empty benches, she held tightly to the front rail. Anticipation had built since leaving New York, accelerating in leaps after New Haven, then Boston. By the time she passed Portland, impatience had her regretting the decision to drive, but that changed once she left the highway at Brunswick and started up the coast. Bath, Wiscasset, Damariscotta – she loved the names as much as the occasional view of boats, seaside homes, roadside stands. FULL BELLY CLAMS one sign read, but she resisted. Clams served on Quinnipeague were dug from the flats hours before cooking, and the batter, which was exquisitely light, held bits of parsley and thyme. Other fried clams couldn't compare.

The ferry rose on a swell, but ploughed steadily on. Though the air was cool and the wind sharpened by bits of spray, she couldn't get herself to go inside. She had put on a sweater over her jeans when the ferry left Rockland, and while she had also tied back her hair, loose tendrils blew free. They whipped behind her now as she kept her eyes on the sea. Some called North Atlantic waters cold and forbidding, but she had seen others. Turquoise, emerald,

teal – none moved her as grey-blue did. Seventeen summers here had made it a visceral thing.

Her camera. She needed to capture this.

But no. She didn't want anything coming between her eyes and that first sighting.

Having relived it dozens of times in the preceding weeks, she thought she was prepared, but the thrill when the island finally emerged from the mist was something else. One by one, as the fog thinned, the features she remembered sharpened: jagged outcroppings of rock, a corona of trees, the Chowder House perched on granite and flanked by twin roads that swung wide for a gentle descent from town to pier, like symmetrical stairways in an elegant home.

That said, there was nothing elegant about Quinnipeague, with its rutted paths and weathered docks. But Quinnipeague wasn't meant to be elegant. It was meant to be authentic. Shutters were practical things to be closed in the fiercest of winds, and, when open, hung crooked more often than not. Wood was grey, clusters of buoys tacked to the side of the fishing shed were bright despite their chipping paint, and the gulls that swooped in to perch on tall pilings always left their chalky mark.

Sailboats grew distinct from power ones as the ferry neared. There were fewer lobster boats than Charlotte remembered, fewer lobstermen she had read, though those who remained would be out pulling traps this Tuesday, hence moorings with only dinghies attached.

Her pulse sped when she saw a figure running down the pier, and in that instant, the bad of the past blew right back out to sea. She waved frantically. *'Nicki! I'm here – here, Nicki!'*

Like there were other people on the ferry. Like Nicole

could possibly miss her. Like Nicole could even *hear* her over the thrum of the boat and the slap of waves on pilings. But Charlotte couldn't help herself. She was a child again, having travelled alone from Virginia with her heart in her mouth and here, finally, so relieved to have reached the right place. She was a teenager, a seasoned flier now from Texas, electrified by the sight of her best friend. She was a college student who had taken the bus up from New Haven to summer with a family that wanted to hear about her courses, her friends, her dreams.

For all the places she'd been in the ten years since that wedding summer, no one had ever been waiting for her.

In that moment, seeing Nicole bubbling with excitement on the pier, her own relief was so great that she forgave her the timidity, the docility, the sheer agreeableness that had made her such easy prey for betrayal – traits Charlotte had seized on over the years to forgive her own behaviour.

But this was a new day. The hovering fog couldn't dull the reds and blues of the boats. Nor could the smell of seaweed overpower that of the Chowder House grill. Bobbing on her toes, she clutched her hands at her mouth to contain herself, while with agonizing precision and a grinding of gears, the ferry slowed and began to turn. She moved along the side to keep the pier front and centre in her sight.

Beautiful Nicole. That hadn't changed. Always petite, she looked positively willowy standing there on the pier. Always stylish, she was even more so now in her skinny jeans and leather jacket. The wind whipped her scarf, which likely cost more than Charlotte's entire summer wardrobe – the latter being vintage L. L. Bean, emphasis on *vintage*, having travelled with Charlotte for years. Style

had never been in her lexicon. The closest she came to it now were her flats, bought three years before at an open-air market in Paris.

Chug by chug, the ferry backed its snub stern to the end of the dock. The instant the captain released the chains and lowered the ramp, Charlotte was off and running. Throwing her arms around Nicole, she cried, 'You are the best sight ever! You look amazing!'

'And *you*,' Nicole cried back, clinging tightly. Her body shook. She was crying.

Charlotte might have cried, too, her throat was that tight. Ten years and such different lives, yet Nicole was as excited as she was. Grasping at everything that had been so right about their summers together, she just held on, swaying for another few seconds until Nicole laughed through her tears and drew back. Running her fingers under her eyes, she explored Charlotte's face. 'You have not changed a bit,' she declared in the voice Charlotte remembered – high, not quite childlike but close. 'And I still love your hair.'

'It's the same old mess, but I love yours. You *cut* it.'

'Just last month, finally. I mean, I may still sound like I did when I was ten, but I wanted to *look* like an adult at least.' Blonde and straight, her hair had always fallen to midback. Cut now in a wedge, it was shaped neatly around her face in a way that gave focus to the green of her eyes, which were luminous with lingering tears and suddenly anxious. 'Was the trip okay?'

'It was fine—'

'But it was long, and you're not used to driving—'

'Which was why I wanted to do it, and it was good, it really was – and for the record, Nicki, you always looked

gorgeous, but this cut is very, very cool.' By comparison, Charlotte might have felt unsophisticated, if she hadn't known that women paid big bucks for hair like hers, and as for her voice, which was neither high nor distinct, it got her where she needed to be.

Nicole was eyeing her shoes. '*Love* those. Paris?'

Charlotte grinned. 'Absolutely.'

'And your sweater? Not Paris, but fabulous. So *authentic*.' Her voice grew urgent. 'Where did you get it? I need one.'

'Sorry, sweetie. It's a hand-me-down from a woman in Ireland.'

'*So* perfect for this place. It's been a dismal, cloudy June. I should have warned you, but I was afraid you wouldn't come.'

'I've survived dismal and cloudy before.' She glanced up the hill. 'The island looks just the same.' Past the Chowder House were the general store left and the post office right, both buildings long and low so as not to tempt the wind. 'Like nothing's changed.'

'Little has. But we do have Wi-Fi at the house. Got it set up last week.'

'For just us two?' she asked to be sure. Nicole had initially told her that Julian would be up with her the week before, but was planning to leave before Charlotte arrived. If he had decided to stay on, it would change the tenor of her visit, putting the fragility of her relationship with Nicole front and centre.

But Nicole was all cool confidence. 'Hey. We deserve it. Besides, if I don't keep blogging, people will lose interest and wander away, and then there won't be as many to hear me when I start pitching our book – which I feel a

hundred per cent better doing now that you've agreed to help. Thank you, Charlotte,' she said earnestly. 'I know you have more important things to do.'

Charlotte might have insisted that this was as important a project as she'd done in a while, if a gruff call hadn't cut off the thought.

'Hellooo.' The ferry captain shot a thumb at her Jeep. 'Gonna get it off?'

'Oh.' She laughed. 'Sorry.' Releasing Nicole, she ran back onto the ferry and slid behind the wheel. By the time she revved the engine, Nicole was in the passenger seat, sliding a hand over the timeworn dashboard. 'I am paying you for this.'

Charlotte shot her a startled look and inched forward. 'For this car? You are not.'

'You wouldn't have bought it if it weren't for my book, and you won't take money for that.'

'Because it's *your* book. I'm just along for the ride.' She laughed at her own words. 'Can you believe, this is the first car I've ever owned?' She eased it onto the dock. 'Is it real or what?'

'*Totally* real,' Nicole said, though momentarily wary. 'Safe on the highway?'

'It got me here.' Charlotte waved at the captain. 'Thank you!' Still crawling along, she drove carefully off the pier. When she was on firm ground, she stopped, angled sideways in the seat, and addressed the first of the ghosts. 'I'm sorry about your dad, Nicki. I wanted to be there. I just couldn't.'

Seeming suddenly older, Nicole smiled sadly. 'You were probably better off. There were people all over the place. I didn't have time to think.'

'A heart attack?'

'Massive.'

'No history of heart problems?'

'None.'

'That's scary. How's Angie?' Nicole's mother. Charlotte had phoned her, too, and though Angie had said all the right words – *Yes, a tragedy, he loved you, too, you're a darling to call* – she had sounded distracted.

'Bad,' Nicole confirmed. 'They were so in love. And he loved Quinnipeague. His parents bought the house when he was little. He actually proposed to Mom here. They always said that if I'd been a boy, they'd have named me Quinn. She can't bear to come now. That's why she's selling. She can't even come to pack up. This place was so him.'

'Woo-hoo,' came a holler that instantly lifted the mood. 'Look who's here!' A stocky woman, whose apron covered a T-shirt and shorts, was trotting down the stairs from the lower deck of the Chowder House. Dorey Jewett had taken over from her father midway through Charlotte's summers here and had brought the place up to par with the best of city restaurants. She had the gleaming skin of one who worked over steam, but the creases by her eyes, as much from smiling as from squinting over the harbour, suggested she was nearing sixty. 'Missy here said you were coming, but just look at you. All grown up.'

A lifelong Mainer, she talked the part. Loving that, Charlotte laughed. 'I was twenty-four when I was here last, no child then.'

'But *look* at you. That's some sweater!' The sheer ebullience of the woman made Charlotte laugh again. 'And Missy? Well, I've seen her these last years, but I tell you,

the two a' you put the rest of us to shame.' Her brows went up. 'You hungry? Chowder's hot.'

Chowdah, Charlotte thought happily. It was late afternoon, and she was starved. But Nicole loved to cook, and Nicole was calling the shots.

Leaning across the stick shift, Nicole told Dorey, 'To go, please, with cornbread and fiddleheads.'

'You'll be taking the last a' those,' Dorey confided. 'I had a vendor try to convince me to shrink-wrap and freeze, but they're never the same. I only have 'em now because they're from up north' – *nauth* – 'and the growing season was late this year. They'd have been gone a week ago, if business hadn't been slow, but the price a' gas is so high, and no one's out day-cruisin' anyways when the wind's so mean. Think you can tough out the chill?' she asked, seeming impervious to it herself with her bare arms and legs.

But Charlotte was still focused on hunger. 'Maybe a couple of clams, too?'

'You got 'em. Drive up top. I'll bring 'em out.'