

A night scene featuring a large tree on the left, string lights with colorful and white lights, and a dining table with a white tablecloth and chairs on the right. The background is dark with bokeh light effects.

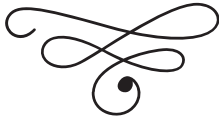
All Right Here

a Darling Family novel

CARRE ARMSTRONG GARDNER



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All Right Here is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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CHAPTER

1

A decorative flourish consisting of several elegant, overlapping loops and curves, centered below the chapter number.

NICK WAS GOING TO HATE his birthday gift. Even as she taped down the ribbon and set the wrapped package on the kitchen table, Ivy Darling was already sure of this. It was a book of Mark Strand's poetry, and although she had gotten her husband a book of poetry every birthday for the six years they had been married, he had yet to open the front cover of one of them. That did not stop her from hoping, nor from appropriating the books for her own collection after a decent waiting period. Gifts, she thought, sometimes said more about the giver than the receiver. When you gave something you loved and thought beautiful, you were inviting another person into your world. You were saying, *Here is*

something that brings me joy. I want to share that joy with you. She couldn't help it if her husband had never been all that much into joy sharing.

To be fair, it was also important to give something the other person actually wanted. With this in mind, Ivy had bought Nick a year's membership to the Copper Cove Racquet and Fitness Club, which he would love, as well as a bathrobe, which he needed.

She would give him all three gifts when he got home from work, before they went to his parents' house for dinner. She did not want him to unwrap the things she had chosen in front of his mother, who would be hurt if her own gifts were upstaged. Nor did she want to give them in front of Nick's sisters, who would diminish them by being bored with everything.

She found the broom and swept up the scraps of wrapping paper, then emptied the dustpan into a plastic shopping bag and carried it to the back porch. The five o'clock sunlight flashed off the windows of the vacant house next door, making her squint. The place had been empty as long as she and Nick had lived here. It was a depressing sore on the pretty neighborhood: the house bleached and shabby in the summer sunshine; the grass growing high against the warped and splintered front steps, unstirred by human movement. A faded For Rent sign sagged in one window. She turned her back on it and went inside.

Ivy was sprinkling chopped nuts on top of the iced birthday cake when she heard Nick's car in the driveway. She met him at the door with the remains of the frosting and a kiss.

“What’s this?” he said, frowning at the sticky bowl.

“It’s your birthday icing. Did you have a good day?”

He stepped around her and set his briefcase under the hall table. “It was all right. What are you doing?”

“Making your cake. We’re going to your parents’ for dinner, remember?”

He ran a hand through his thick hair. “I forgot. I was hoping to go for a run. What time do we have to be there?”

“Six o’clock. I wanted you to open your presents here first.”

He went through to the kitchen and began washing his hands, eyeing her over the top of his glasses. “You’re not wearing that to my parents’ house, are you?”

Ivy looked down at her T-shirt. It was yellow, with a picture of half a cup of coffee over the words *Half Full*. Below that, her faded cutoff shorts ended in ragged hems. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?”

“You look like a slob.”

She gave him a gritty smile. “You say the nicest things.”

“I’m only saying it for your own sake. Don’t you have anything with a little shape to it?”

“Yes, but it wouldn’t be nearly as comfortable.”

“Come on, Ivy.”

“All *right*, I’ll change before we go. But if we’re going to be on time, you have to open your presents now.”

He dried his hands and turned to survey the packages on the table. “What’d you get me?”

“A present you’ll love, a present you need, and a present you’ll learn to love.”

“Hmmm . . . ,” he said, pretending to think. “A Porsche, a Porsche, and a book of poetry.”

“Close. Come on, you have to open them to find out.”

She sat down across from him while he opened the packages. She had been right on all scores. He was indifferent to the poetry, satisfied with the bathrobe, and pleased with the gym membership.

“There’s no excuse for me now,” he said, pulling his wallet from his back pocket and tucking the envelope into it. “I’ll be in shape before you know it.” Nick, who was already in great shape, was the only person Ivy knew who thrilled to the prospect of more self-discipline.

“You look great just the way you are,” she said, standing and kissing him on the top of his head. “But if you want to half kill yourself in the gym five days a week, knock yourself out. We should probably leave in fifteen minutes, unless we want to give your mother an ulcer.”

“Okay. Just . . . don’t forget to change your clothes.”

Her smile felt grittier this time but she did as he said, reminding herself that he was only trying to protect her from his mother, who had a finely tuned radar for her daughter-in-law’s every shortcoming, fashion or otherwise.



Nick’s parents lived across town, never a long drive even at the time of day considered rush hour in bigger cities. For three-quarters of the year, Copper Cove was small even by Maine standards so that now, in June, when the tourist

season had filled the beach houses and hotels along the water, the town still did not feel crowded. Cars moved lazily along High Street, pulling in at Cumberland Farms for gas and at Blue Yew Pizza or Salt Flats Seafood for supper. Traffic, Ivy was sometimes surprised to realize, was just not something you ever thought about here.

At Nick's parents' house, his sister Tiffany met them at the door. "Oh, it's you."

"We thought we might show up," Ivy said. "You know, since it's Nick's birthday party and all."

"Happy birthday," Tiffany said grudgingly. "Everyone else is already here. The guys are watching the Red Sox game with Daddy." She aimed this bit of news at Nick. "And Mumma's in the kitchen," she added, a clear hint that Ivy should join her mother-in-law there and *not* join her sisters-in-law at whatever they were doing.

They followed Tiffany through to the kitchen, where Nick's mother, Ruby, was emptying fish market bags into the sink.

"Oh, wow, lobster," Ivy said. "Thanks for having a birthday, Nick."

"Nicholas!" cried his mother, turning from the sink and drying her hands on a towel. "Happy birthday, sweetheart. Thirty-two years old!" She tipped her cheek up for a kiss, smoothed down the sleeves of his shirt, and straightened his collar. Ivy had an image of a plump, pretty wasp buzzing around a pie at a picnic.

She set her cake carrier on the sideboard. "I brought the cake."

“Wonderful.” Ruby brushed imaginary lint from Nick’s shirtfront. “What kind is it?”

“Carrot cake with cream cheese frosting.”

Ruby turned from Nick and eyed the cake as though Ivy had said it was made of sand and seaweed. “Oh . . . ,” she faltered. “I *was* afraid one cake wouldn’t be enough for all of us, so I *did* ask Jessica to make a cheesecake to go along with it.” She smiled damply at her son. “You know how Nick loves cheesecake.”

Ivy felt her nostrils flare. As a matter of fact, Nick did *not* love cheesecake. He preferred *carrot* cake. It had been one of life’s long lessons, however, that objection was always futile with her mother-in-law. She felt her mouth twitch in a rictus grin. “Can I help with dinner?” she managed to choke out.

“You might set the table. We’ll use the good china. The cloth is on the ironing board in the laundry room. You’ll have to put the leaves in the table, but Nick can do that for you.”

Nick trotted off to find the extra leaves and Ivy, having retrieved the tablecloth, began counting out forks and knives from the sideboard. The familiar task calmed her. “It’s quiet around here,” she observed as her mother-in-law added salt to two enormous canners full of hot water on the stove. “Where is everyone?”

“The men are watching television, and the girls are looking at Jessica’s new scrapbook.”

Nick had three sisters. His family, the Masons, and hers, the Darlings, had always belonged to the same church. In her growing-up years, none of Nick’s sisters had seemed to object to Ivy as long as she had been just another girl

in youth group. But from the moment Nick had brought her home as his girlfriend, Jessica, Angela, and Tiffany had circled like a pack of she-wolves guarding their kill. Together, they presented a solid, hostile wall designed to keep Ivy on the outside. They whispered with their heads together when she was in the house and stopped talking when she came into a room. They planned sisters' shopping trips in front of Ivy and did not invite her to come along. When Nick and Ivy were engaged and a family friend hinted that the groom's sisters might want to throw the bride a shower, they'd been offended and told Ivy so, with the greatest of umbrage.

Ivy liked people—all kinds of people—and in general, people liked her back. She was unused to having her friendliness met with such stubborn, protracted rejection, and at first she had been bewildered by Nick's sisters' antagonism. "They hate me for no reason," she had once wailed to her own twin sister, Laura. "I can't understand it. It's like being in eighth grade all over again." By the time she and Nick had been married a year, however, she was wiser. Nick's mother doted on him, and this was at the root of her daughters' treatment of Ivy. Nick's sisters were not horrible to her because of anything she personally had done; they simply resented Nick for being their mother's favorite and were punishing Ivy for being his wife. It was a situation Ivy had gotten used to.

More or less.

When the lobsters were ready, Ruby sent her to call the family to the table. She found Jessica, Angela, and Tiffany upstairs, in Angela's old bedroom, looking at what appeared

to be paint chips from a hardware store. When they saw Ivy, they stopped talking.

“Yes?” said Angela, who was Nick’s middle sister, tucking the paint chips under one leg.

“Your mother says come to the table.” She would not give them the satisfaction of being asked what they were doing.

“Thank you, Ivy. Tell Mother we’ll be there in a moment.” Angela stared at her until she took the hint and went back downstairs to the kitchen.

Nick’s father, Harry, had muttered a long, rambling grace and they were all cracking their lobster claws when Angela rapped her fork against her water goblet. “Everybody! Everybody,” she called, half-rising from her chair. “Vincent and I have an announcement to make.”

“Angela, that goblet is *crystal*,” her mother protested.

“Well, it’s an *important* announcement, Mother.”

Some blessed instinct of self-preservation warned Ivy of what Angela was about to say and gave her a heartbeat of time to compose herself for it.

“Vincent and I—” Angela looked around the table in delight—“are *pregnant!*”

It was evident that Jessica and Tiffany already knew, but that to the rest of them, it was a complete surprise.

“And here’s the best part,” Angela said, looking at Vincent and gripping his hand atop the tablecloth. “We’re having the baby at *Christmas!* My due date is the twenty-fourth, but the doctor says if I haven’t had it by then, he’ll induce me so the baby can be born on Christmas Day. Won’t that be so much *fun?*”

“Tell them how you planned it, Ange!” Tiffany said.

Angela looked around, ready to implode with pride. “Okay, ready for this? We knew we wanted to have the baby at Christmas, right? Because . . . *so* meaningful. Like Jesus. And obviously that meant we would need to get pregnant in March. But I didn’t want to get really gross and fat while I was pregnant. So last January I went on this diet—”

“I remember,” said Ruby, frowning. “I didn’t approve. You’re thin enough as it is.”

“Right.” Angela snorted. “I thought so too, because that’s what everybody tells me? But then I thought, *Just wait until nine months from now*. So I went on this diet and got down to a size four, which was my goal, and *then* we got pregnant. Now it’s just gotten warm enough to go to the beach, and . . . look!” She stood up and turned sideways, smoothing her T-shirt down over her stomach, and Ivy saw what she had missed before. A small but very definite baby bump.

“So . . . showing, right? But still cute!” Angela beamed around at them.

Ivy stared back. She felt powerless over her own facial expression and could only hope she didn’t actually look as though she wanted to vomit all over her lobster tail.

Angela was impervious to disapproval. She bubbled on. “You should see my maternity swimsuit. It’s *so* cute! And by having the baby in December, I’ll totally have time to get back in shape by next beach season!”

Her husband, Vincent, a caustic CPA who sipped black coffee as incessantly as most people breathe oxygen, said, “Tell them about the nursery.” It turned out that the paint

chips Angela and her sisters had been looking at were for the nursery, which would be done in a Beatrix Potter theme. . . .

It went on and on. The problem with Angela and Vincent reproducing, Ivy thought bitterly, was that they would create another person every bit as narrow and self-absorbed as themselves. Sometimes the world—or at least Nick’s family—did not seem large enough to hold another person like that.

Nick had little to say on the drive home.

“The woman from Family Makers e-mailed me yesterday,” Ivy said at last, breaking the silence. “She asked if we would consider foreign adoption.” She looked at her hands but watched Nick from the corner of her eye.

He kept his own eyes on the road and did not answer her.

Which, she reflected, her heart lying in her chest as cold and heavy as one of Ruby’s lobsters, was more or less an answer in itself.



It had been an especially good summer so far, with hot blue days subsiding to brief rain showers nearly every evening, and the garden showed it. The colors were reaching toward their peak, an untidy riot of blossom, which was how Ivy loved it. Along the split-rail fence, the red bee balm and pink tall phlox clashed in a kind of reckless ecstasy. Black-eyed Susans nodded in some faint, unfelt breeze—rogue wildflowers among the more genteel daylilies, gayfeather, and baby’s breath. In front of these, the cheery yellow cinquefoil bush rustled and the hostas waved their pale-purple arms in greeting.

The afternoon was alive with the hum and drone of insects

hidden in the tall grasses beyond the flower bed. In the clean, baking heat, the brilliance of her garden was as refreshing as a glass of cold water. Ivy had planted all of it and knew each of the flowers by heart, like old and well-loved friends.

Her sister Sephy was finally home from college and had called to say she was coming over in the afternoon. Sephy had stayed on in Ohio an extra month to take a summer school course and to babysit some professor's kids, and Ivy had missed her.

Ivy was up to her elbows in an azalea bush when the familiar dark-green Corolla pulled into the driveway. She shaded her eyes with a gloved hand, extracted herself from the bush, and hurried over.

"Sephy! How was the babysitting?"

Her red-haired younger sister got out of the car with some difficulty and hugged her—a soft, comforting hug with no thought of the dirt Ivy was undoubtedly leaving on her clothes. "Fine, thanks. And it was *nannying*, if you please, not babysitting."

"Oh, excuse me. What's the difference?"

"You get paid more for nannying. And you get to go to Cedar Point with the family."

"Sounds like a good gig. How about an iced coffee?"

"It's the only reason I came over."

They went into the house, and Sephy found the pitcher of coffee in the refrigerator while Ivy washed her hands. "Are you exhausted?" Ivy asked over the sound of the running water.

"Completely. I worked on Tuesday and took my last

exam. On Wednesday I drove halfway home and spent the night with a friend in Rochester. I drove the rest of the way yesterday. Kids, exams, then eight hours in the car each day. It's been a long week." She yawned. "Are those brownies?"

"Help yourself." Ivy opened the plastic container and handed it to her. "What are your summer plans?"

Sephy ticked them off on her fingers: "I'm taking two classes online—statistics and nursing management; I'm working as a CNA at the hospital; and for the next four weeks, I'm giving piano and voice lessons for the youth program in Quahog."

"Wow, no rest for the wicked. Why are you taking summer classes?"

Sephy bit into a brownie and rolled her eyes in bliss. "They're about half the price if I take them online, for one thing," she said around a mouthful of chocolate. "For another, it'll loosen up my schedule next year. Not much, but a little. They say the two years of clinicals are brutal, so I may as well get ahead if I can."

"Any thoughts about what you want to do after graduation? I mean, I know it's still two years off. . . ."

"I'll come back here and work at Coastal, I hope." Coastal Maine Regional Health Care Center was the hospital in nearby Quahog, the closest thing there was to a city in this part of the state.

Ivy was surprised. "You could work anywhere, be a traveling nurse, make a lot of money, see the world. Why would you want to come back here?"

Sephy took tall glasses from the cupboard and ice from the freezer, considering the question. “I love home. I don’t want to see the world.”

“Good. Call me selfish, but I like the thought of you living nearby.”

Sephy handed Ivy’s coffee to her black and added cream and sugar to her own.

“Sit down,” said Ivy, pulling out a chair at the small kitchen table. “I’ll tell you all the gossip. What do you want to know first?”

Sephy pulled out a chair for herself and, settling into it, asked, “Has Amy started her job yet? She was still out when I went to bed last night, and she was gone by the time I got up this morning. But she e-mailed me that she’s working at the music store for the summer.”

“And giving drum lessons on the side.”

“She’s manic.”

“In a way she is, really. Or maybe she’s just too brilliant to be satisfied with a normal pace of life like the rest of us.” In the spring, their youngest sister had earned her associate’s degree in theater and fine arts—this after finishing high school in three years. “Did she tell you she’s starting at UMO in the fall for her bachelor’s degree? With a full academic scholarship, mind you.”

“Amy’s smarter sound asleep than the rest of us are wide awake.” Sephy took a sip of her coffee. “What about Laura? I don’t hear from her much.”

“Same,” said Ivy. “Still working for the door company. We’re going to the mall tomorrow night. Want to come?”

“Let me see how tired I am by then. How’s David? Does he have a girlfriend yet?”

“Ha! Mom wishes. He goes on the odd date here and there, but there doesn’t seem to be anyone in particular.”

“I hope Mom’s not breathing down his neck about it. He’s only thirty.”

“Practically past his expiration date.”

“Poor David!”

Ivy shrugged. “It doesn’t seem to bother him. He just rolls with it.”

They sipped their coffee in companionable silence.

At last, Sephy ventured, “Any news on the adoption front?”

Ivy shook her head. “The waiting list for newborns is miles long. They suggested we start thinking about international adoption.”

“And are you going to?”

“Not yet. Nick’s nervous about adopting a baby who looks different from us. He’s afraid he wouldn’t be able to love it.”

“Are you serious?”

Ivy looked into her coffee. “I suppose it would be a constant reminder that it’s not his.”

“And that matters to him?”

“I guess so.”

Sephy digested this in silence. She was the most restful of Ivy’s sisters because she knew when to keep her opinions to herself, which was more than could be said for Amy or Laura. Just now, Ivy was more grateful than ever for this quality.

After a bit, Sephy said, “And it has to be a newborn?”

“Yes. Same reason.”

“But if it were up to you—completely up to you—what would you do?” her sister asked gently.

Ivy looked up from her glass. “I’d take the first child that came along—any age, any race, any sex—and I’d take as many of them as they’d let me have.”



Ivy set her purse and a shopping bag down on the table and scanned the mall food court. Her twin sister was late, as usual, and Ivy was irritated. She hated sitting by herself at a table. Besides being a waste of time, it made her look lonely and pitiful, as though she had no friends. Luckily she had reading material.

She groped in one of her shopping bags and pulled out a tiny book, three inches square, that she had bought on impulse in the register line at T.J.Maxx: *God’s Little Book of Promises*. She had picked it up thinking her mother-in-law might like it. Since Nick’s birthday, she had been feeling guilty about her attitude toward Ruby, who was always much more likable from a distance than she was when you were actually having dinner at her house. The book consisted of a short Bible verse and a one-sentence homily on each miniature page. It was fairly pedestrian reading—exactly the kind of thing her mother-in-law would love—and she was halfway through it when she heard Laura say, “Hey, you.”

Her sister slid into the chair across from her, cool and slim and smelling like a bouquet of freesia. “Have you been here long?”

“Ten minutes. Where have *you* been?”

“Having my eyebrows threaded and getting a manicure.” Laura stretched out a hand and wiggled her French-tipped fingers. “What are you reading?”

Ivy showed her the tiny book and explained.

“How is old Ruby?” Laura wanted to know. “Still nagging you to change your name?” She pursed her lips up at the corners and spoke in a fussy voice. “Come now, dear, why do you insist on keeping your maiden name? It’s so *worldly*.”

“I kept the name Darling because I like it so much,” recited Ivy, playing along.

“But I’m sure it makes poor Nick feel like you’re ashamed of being married to him.” Laura’s imitation of Ruby was uncanny.

“Nick and I discussed it before we got married. He’s perfectly fine with it.”

“But what do *other* people think?” Laura leaned forward and pointed a finger in Ivy’s face. “And there *is* that verse in the Bible, you know, about a wife leaving her parents to cleave to her husband.”

“Actually, it’s the other way around. It says the husband should leave his parents and cleave to his wife.”

Laura snorted and spoke in her normal voice. “You didn’t really say that to her, did you?”

“No, because it hasn’t ever come up. I mean, she’s never played the Bible card on the subject before. But I would if I had to.”

“Well, let’s hope you have to someday. I’d love to see her face. Old cow.” Laura turned her attention to the ring of restaurants surrounding them. “What are you having? Sushi?”

“Mall sushi, are you kidding? I’m having an eggplant parmigiana sandwich from Amato’s. How about you?”

“Something from Fresh Express. I need to drop a few pounds.”

Ivy rolled her eyes. “From where?” She and Laura were fraternal twins and hardly even looked like sisters. Of the two, it was always Ivy who needed to drop a few pounds, but always Laura who was trying.

Laura shrugged. “Meet you back here in ten minutes?”

They got their food and met accordingly. “Seph’s home from college,” Ivy informed her, blowing on her sandwich to cool it off. “She stopped by yesterday.”

“How does she look?” Laura pried the plastic lid off her very small salad. “Still as fat as ever?”

“Laura! That’s *mean*.”

Her sister raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow. “It’s true. She’s what, five foot four? And she has to weigh over 250 pounds. What else am I supposed to call that?”

Ivy put down her sandwich. “But it’s *Seph*. Our sister. Surely that’s not the first thing that comes to mind when you think of her.”

“Of course it is. It’s the first thing everybody thinks of.” Laura watched Ivy’s face and said, “Isn’t it the first thing *you* think of?”

“No. Never. I mean, obviously it’s . . . obvious. But when I think of Sephy, I think of her kindness. Her beautiful singing voice. Her generosity. She’s the sweetest person I know in the whole world.”

Laura reached for her Diet Coke. “She may be sweet, but

she's still fat, and I think I'm doing her a kindness by calling a spade a spade. The rest of you tiptoe around the fact and pretend it's not there, but in the end you're not doing her any favors." She paused to take a bite of salad, bare of dressing, and chew it before going on. "For instance, how many dates do you think Sephy has been on during the two years she's been away at college?"

"I have no idea. She hasn't told me."

"She hasn't told you because there's nothing to tell. And don't get me started on the health problems she's going to have." Laura punctuated her words by jabbing her fork in the air. "Diabetes, heart disease, high blood pressure . . . it's disgraceful for a nurse."

Ivy very much wanted to end the conversation. What Laura was saying was true; there was no denying it. But she was making it sound so ugly, and Sephy was . . . *Sephy*, after all. Their sweet younger sister would never think of talking about either of them—or anyone else, for that matter—in this way.

"I think I'll get some frozen yogurt for dessert," Ivy said pointedly.

"Go ahead and change the subject, Ivy, but it's not going to change the truth. I love Sephy as much as you do, but protecting her is never going to help her. And yes, I'll have some yogurt with you. As long as they have something fat-free."



Jane Darling was tearing lettuce for a salad when Amy stalked into the kitchen and collapsed onto a stool. Slumping

forward, she lay sprawled across the counter, her head on her arms, and let out an agonized groan.

“Bad news?” Jane said mildly. She was used to her youngest child’s mode of expressing herself, and it did not worry her.

“College,” said Amy, without looking up.

“What’s wrong with college?”

“They’ve changed my room assignment *again*.”

“Ah. And what did they say this time?”

“Nothing! Just . . . ‘Your room assignment has changed. Name and contact information for new roommate listed below.’ This is the *third* time.” Amy whimpered and knocked her forehead on the countertop.

“It will all work itself out.” Jane began to peel a cucumber.

“How much confidence am I supposed to have in a university that can’t even get its student housing act together?”

“They’re only human, just like you. I’m sure that with all the incoming students, there are a lot of logistics to sort out.”

“Oh, please. If I were in charge, I would *so* have the housing problem solved by now.”

“I don’t doubt it,” said Jane, who rather shuddered at the notion of the University of Maine, Orono, housing office with Amy at its head. The image of an Army boot camp sprang to mind. She instantly, and guiltily, quelled it.

Amy sat up and pulled a letter from the pocket of her shorts. “‘Heather Vonderheide-Smythe,’” she read. “What kind of name is that? She sounds rich. She sounds like a *prom* queen.”

She would have wilted against the countertop again, but Jane, having covered the salad with plastic wrap, handed the bowl to her. “Find a place for that in the fridge, will you?”

“Guess where Miss Heather Vonderheide-Smythe’s from?” Amy took the bowl and went to the refrigerator. “And there is no room for *anything* in this refrigerator.” She set the salad bowl on the counter and began to rummage through the shelves, rearranging things. “Falmouth!” came her voice from within the fridge. “Falmouth, *Maine*.”

“So?” said Jane. “What does it matter where she’s from?”

“*Mo-ther!*” Amy emerged from the refrigerator, set the salad inside, and closed the door. “It’s one of the most affluent towns in the *state*.”

“It doesn’t follow that she’s a snob.” Jane dampened a sponge and began to wipe the counters. “Listen to yourself, Amy. You know nothing about this girl, yet you’ve already labeled her. Boxed her up and written her off. That’s not like you.”

Amy was silent, and Jane went on. “Think about this: maybe Heather what’s-her-name of Falmouth has just gotten her letter saying she’s to be the roommate of Amy Darling of Copper Cove. What do you suppose is going through *her* mind right now?”

Amy resumed her seat on the barstool and laid her cheek against the granite countertop.

“You two may end up being the best of friends.”

Amy snorted. Then, very quietly, “I wish I didn’t have to go away to college.”

“Oh, my dear.” Jane came and sat at the bar across from her. “You don’t *have* to do anything you don’t want to do. Least of all go away to college.”

Amy raised her head and glared at her mother. “Well,

what other choice do I have? I've exhausted all the opportunities here in Copper Cove." With the grace of a dancer, she unfolded herself once more from the stool and stood up. "How else am I supposed to get a good education? On a *full scholarship*? It's this or nothing." She stalked from the kitchen much as she had entered it.

Alone, Jane Darling retrieved a jar of sun tea from the reorganized fridge and poured herself a glass. She raised her eyes ceilingward. *Would You mind soothing her nerves a little? I mean . . . so the rest of us can bear her for the next few weeks?* She sipped her tea. *Just asking. That's what You tell us to do, after all.*

