

Rising Tides

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Dried rose petals, vetiver and death. The three scents pooled in the sultry May air until there was no escape from them. After her first waking breath, Aurore was frightened to take another. More disturbing still was the knowledge that, once again, she had dreamed of Rafe.

As always, he had come to her when she least expected him. Others sometimes came, apparitions who stalked her dreams and the lucid moments when she dared to count the days left to her. But it was only Rafe who came when she was sleeping soundly, Rafe who gathered the events of her life like wildflowers in a summer meadow and presented them back to her.

She forced herself to breathe, but as she did the air seemed to grow more oppressive. She had forbidden her household staff to turn on the air conditioning in this wing of the house, and the ceiling fans whirring above her mixed warm air with warmer. Someone had closed her windows as she napped, afraid, she supposed, that she would awaken if a mockingbird shrieked a crow's call from the branch of a magnolia. Her staff didn't understand that each waking moment was *lagniappe*, an unexpected gift appreciated only by the old.

She was old. She had denied the truth for years, convinced at sixty that activity was an antidote for aging, convinced at seventy that she could ignore death as she had sometimes ignored the other unpleasant realities of life. Now she was seventy-seven, and death wasn't going to ignore her. Death had loomed beside her bed for weeks, ready to pounce if her will faltered. Had there been one such moment, she knew that she would be

gone already, and she hadn't been ready to die. Not then. Not with stories waiting to be told, secrets waiting to be revealed.

She had almost waited too long. Years ago she could have called her family together, summoned them like an imperious matriarch and forced them to listen to an old woman's tales. They wouldn't have dared disobey her summons.

But she had waited. Now, with death waiting to claim her, she knew she could wait no longer. She opened her eyes and saw that the room was growing dark. Twilight had always seemed like God's indrawn breath, a pause in the progression of time. But there was no time to pause now. Never again.

Something rustled at her bedside, the unmistakable crackle of a starched white uniform. She turned her head and saw that the woman standing there was the gentlest of the nurse-companions who charted the ebb tide of her life. Aurore struggled to form words. "Has Spencer arrived?"

"Yes, Mrs. Gerritsen.

To Aurore her own voice seemed a profane rasp in the stillness, but she was pleased it was audible. "How long?"

"He's been here nearly an hour. I told him you'd want me to wake you, but he wouldn't let me."

"He protects me." She moistened her lips with her tongue. "He always has."

"Would you like some water?"

Aurore nodded. She could feel the head of the bed lifting as the young woman cranked. "Just a sip. Then. . . Spencer."

"Are you sure you feel well enough?"

"If I waited until I felt better. . . I'd never see him."

The nurse made sympathetic noises low in her throat as she poured water from a pitcher, then lifted a glass to Aurore's lips. The water trickled in drop by drop until Aurore signalled that she was finished.

"Do you want anything else before I get Mr. St. Amant?"

"The windows. I don't want them. . . closed again. Never again."

"I'll open the French doors, too."

Aurore listened as the rustle circled her bed. She heard the slide of windows, and then from outside, the chirping hum of the year's first cicadas. The air that drifted in was damp against her skin, primeval in its rain forest scent and sensation. For a moment she was seventeen, standing on the Mississippi river bank, and river mist was rising to envelop her. She was leaning forward, watching barge and steamer make their way against the current. She was leaning forward, waiting for life to begin.

"Aurore. . ."

Aurore turned her head and gazed at the man who had been her attorney for nearly fifty years. "How are you, dear?" Spencer asked.

"Old. Sorry I am."

Spencer slowly lowered himself to the chair the nurse had placed at the bedside. "Are you really sorry? I remember when you were young, you know."

"You remember too much."

"Sometimes I think so." He took her hand. His was dry and trembling, yet still strong enough to enfold hers.

Her mind drifted again as it sometimes did now. She remembered a day so many years before at Spencer's office on Canal Street. The office was still there, despite Spencer being well past the age of retirement. She didn't know why he hadn't passed on his practice to one of his younger partners, but she was glad, so glad he hadn't.

"You were elegant," she said. "Compassionate. I still thought. . . you would turn me away."

"The first day you came to see me?" He laughed a little. "You were so pale, and you wore a hat that cast a shadow across your forehead. I thought you were lovely."

"But . . . you couldn't have liked what you heard."

"It wasn't my place to like or not like what you told me. I promised you I would never betray a word of what passed between us. You played with a long strand of amber and jet beads while we talked."

"Amber and jet." She smiled. "I don't remember."

"The beads passed between your fingers, one by one, like a rosary. There was time for a hundred pleas for intercession before you left my office."

She lifted her gaze to his. "I've learned since that no one. . . will intercede for me."

His hand tightened around hers. "Then you've learned more than most people ever do, my dear."

"I want you to file the new will. Just as we wrote it. I want. . . the old will destroyed."

Seconds passed by. "You've thought this over carefully?"

"It is all. . . I've thought about."

"Things may not turn out as you wish. More harm than good could result. At the very least, people you love could be hurt."

"My whole life. . . I've been afraid to tell the truth."

"And you're not afraid now?"

"I'm more afraid." He sat forward, cradling her hand in his lap, but she continued before he could speak. "But even more afraid. . . the truth will never be told. Others must have the chance to be courageous now. . . as I never was."

"This is an act of courage."

Her mind drifted to two men she had loved. Rafe. And her son, Hugh. Two men who had known what courage was. "No. Not an act of courage," she said. "The last, desperate act of a coward."

Twilight deepened into night as they sat together. Finally he spoke again. "Shall I come back tomorrow to see if you've changed your mind?"

"No. Will you do this for me, Spencer? Just as we talked about? You'll go down. . . to Grand Isle?"

"I'll do whatever you wish." He paused. "I always have."

"No one ever had a better friend."

"Yes. We've been friends." He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed it. Then, gently, he placed it at her side. "I have an address for Dawn. She's in England, taking photographs for a magazine in New York. I could ask her to come home."

For a moment Aurore was tempted to say yes. Just to see Dawn, to have her beside her bed, to touch her one last time. Then to be forced to reveal everything to her granddaughter, much as Dawn had once revealed childhood secrets to her.

Everything.

Aurore couldn't bear the thought. She was the coward she had claimed to be. "No. It's best she not come home until. . ."

"I understand."

"There's only so much I have the strength to do."

Spencer rose. "Then I'll send her your letter and send the others theirs. . . when I must.

"Yes. The letters." She thought of the letters she had dictated herself. And all the lives that they would change.

"You're tired. And you still have another visitor."

Aurore didn't ask who the visitor was. She was certain from the sound of Spencer's voice that it was someone she would be glad to see.

Aurore knew when Spencer left the room, although her eyes were closed by then. The cicada song grew louder, and she could picture the insects' hard-shelled, alien bodies sailing from limb to limb of the moss-covered live oaks bordering her Garden District yard. With the windows open the evening air was redolent with the last of the sweet olives and the first of the magnolias, and it masked the fragrances of an old woman's life and impending death.

She heard footsteps, but she didn't have the strength to open her eyes once more. A hand took hers, a firm, strong hand. She felt lips, warm against her cheek.

"Phillip," she whispered.

"You don't have to talk, Aurore. I'll stay for awhile anyway. Just rest now."

The voice was Phillip's, but for a moment it was Rafe by Aurore's side. In that instant she was no longer old, but young once more. Her life was ahead of her, her decisions not yet made. As she drifted toward dreams the cicada song became one dearer and more familiar. Phillip was humming one of the songs his mother had made famous when Aurore fell asleep.