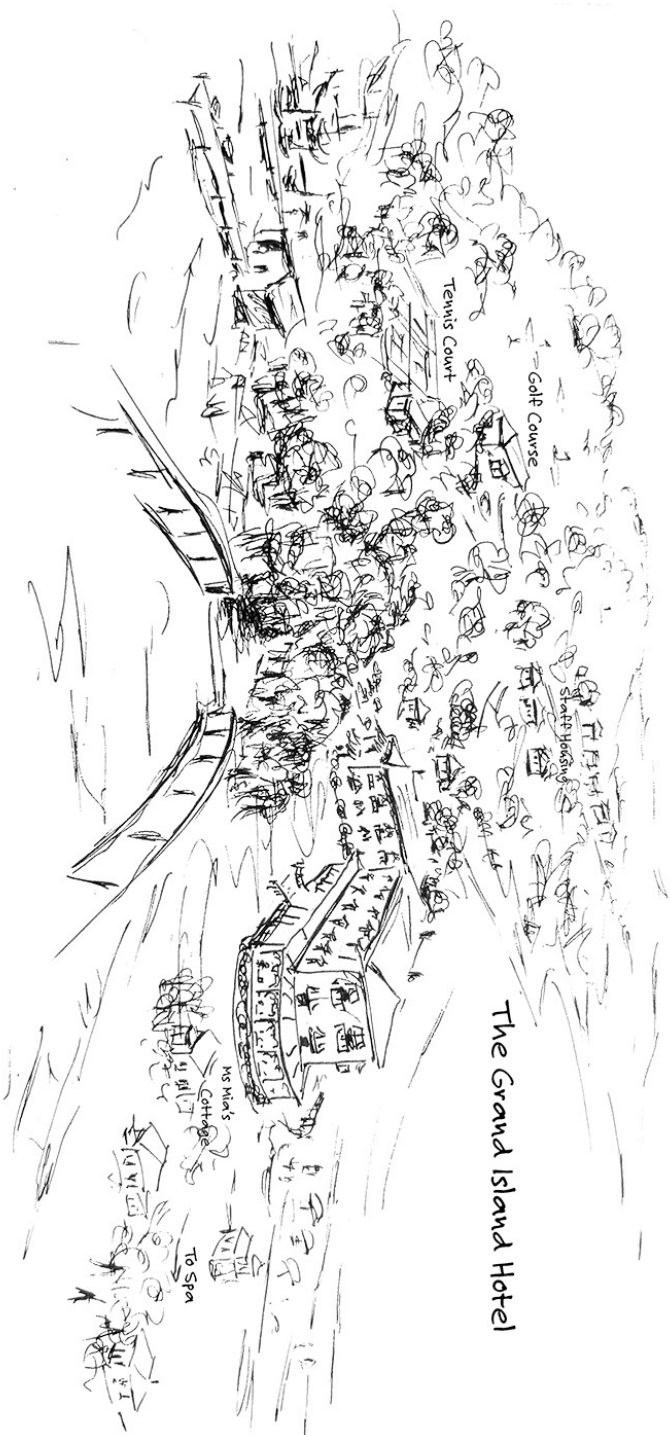


**Ms. Mia**  
and  
**Murder**  
at the  
**Grand Island**  
**Hotel**



**Jennifer Branch**



The Grand Island Hotel



## Welcome Home

**B**illy pulled up to the airport sidewalk in the hotel limousine and grinned at the mountain of luggage. Ms. Mia had brought everything with her, as usual. He held out his hand to the small woman beside the luggage tower, "Good to see you, Ms. Mia."

"It's been a few months, Billy. It's good to see you too." She got into the car with only her handbag, confident Billy would handle the luggage. She relaxed into the leather seat, patiently waiting for her driver.

The elderly driver took his time carefully placing each piece into the trunk, then swung into the driver's seat. "Have a nice flight?"

"Yes, thanks," Mia smiled at him in the mirror. "So, how are things? Are the kids doing well?"

"And their kids too. Five grandkids and the next on the way," he sighed. "I think the kids turned my hair gray." He smoothed his silvery crop, then propped his elbow on the window frame.

"Nonsense, Billy, my kids are grown and my hair's not gray." She patted the defiantly blond strands and laughed. "I know Jolie is having the time of her life."

"She is indeed. Never seen so many kids running through the house," Billy told her. "And the house always smells like fresh cookies." He grinned, his network of wrinkles mapping his face. "I even get to some before the grandkids."

"Just a few?"

"Well, you know," Billy patted his stomach.

"How's the hotel?" Mia asked him. "Any complaints?"

"About the same as usual," Billy assured her. "Guests last week complained about the menu not having enough choices. They mostly wanted stuff not in season like lowcountry boil, and you know how Chef's picky about seasonal ingredients."

"I know, but that's a classic dish people want to have when they come here." Mia pulled a tiny notebook out of her purse and made a note with her rose pink fountain pen. "Even when the closest fresh corn is from South America. Maybe Chef can modify it for the season. He could call it Spring Lowcountry Boil or something." She saw him wrinkle his nose in disgust.

"That's about it with the hotel, ma'am. Maria handles the hotel beautifully." He frowned a little, creases merging into new networks. "There's something odd about some of the guests right now, though."

"What's going on?" She cocked her head to one side.

"Well, you know Rebecca and Sam Forrest, of course?"

"Yes, she runs HR out of Atlanta," Mia smiled. "Nice girl. We've worked together a lot."

"Hardly a girl," Billy returned. "But very nice. She and her husband are supposed to be recreating their honeymoon for their anniversary. It's definitely not going well." He shook his head. "She mostly sits on the beach and reads, and he sits in the room and reads. About as miserable as a honeymoon gets. I don't think that marriage is lasting long." He sighed. "It's too bad. Nice couple. Young kids."

"Hmm," Mia said. "I'll have to find out what's going on there." She looked up. "Is that what's worrying you, Billy?"

"Well, that's not good, of course. Not with one of our own. But they're not the only people who aren't having much fun at our beautiful hotel."

"That famous writer, Harold Stone, is staying with us. His assistant's not having much fun, but I can't imagine any of his assistants ever do. So I'm not worried about her. She'll have fun when she quits and finds an employer who doesn't treat her like dirt. But he's always blowing up at the hospitality team, in public too, and seems miserable. Can't nothing make him happy."

"He's a big name," Mia tapped her pen thoughtfully. "It wouldn't be good if he badmouthed Spinel Hotels."

"No, it wouldn't." Billy agreed. "Well, there are a few others that seem like they might become a problem, but Mr. Stone is the only real trouble, I think. The rest are some nice couples having a good time, a few families, some weddings. A few people just enjoying the coast in the spring. They're mostly just having fun."

"Well, that's what we want," Mia said. "I plan to do a lot of relaxing myself this trip."

"Where are you coming from?"

"Spinel London," Mia grimaced. "I had to find a new manager. The one there came with great recommendations, but just wasn't up to our standards. It was a very long trip." She sighed, "The island always feels like coming home."

"It would, wouldn't it?" Billy said with a grin. "You were one of the first managers here. Before my time, of course. I was still in the Marines then." He had retired from the Marines years ago and had worked at several of the Spinel Hotels. This was his home base, where his very extended family lived. He called his various years working abroad, "sabbaticals." With all the grandkids, he and his wife needed them.

"Yes, and I met Leo here." Mia smiled fondly. Her husband of over thirty years had died two years ago, leaving her with happy memories, two wonderful stepsons and her daughter. They had lived in the company's hotels most of their married life except when the kids were young. They spent a few months setting up or improving a hotel, leaving when everything was perfect and moving on to the next hotel. Every day had been an exciting adventure with her husband. After his death, she tried to keep that same adventurous approach to life.

"Here's the bridge," Billy called as they drove across the metal span connecting Grand Island to the mainland. "Welcome home," he grinned at her.

"Home sweet home," Mia agreed, looking at the still green azaleas lining the main road through the island. Live oaks garlanded with Spanish moss met overhead, framing the road. A few more weeks and the azaleas would be in full bloom. Mia planned a short stay, for her, of three weeks. Then the hotel would hit high season, and she would be off to the next hotel. It was gorgeous in early spring on the Georgia coast.

The Spinel Grand Island Hotel took up the entire small island. Being just a few miles long, it wasn't really a grand island except for the name and the tremendous live oaks. But Grand was definitely the right name for the hotel. Going there felt like stepping into an older, more luxurious era. You could stay in adorable cottages or extravagant villas, play on a superb golf course and bike oyster shell paths through the palmetto palms to the beach. A huge new fishing pier was attached to one side of the island, with an attendant boat house for those who took their fishing and boating very seriously.

And there was the main hotel complex. It was a robber baron's dream come true, quite literally. Turrets and bay windows bulged out from the main facade, painted a putty white. You could stay in one of the little round tower rooms with a view encompassing the

entire island. Or perhaps in one of the larger suites a few stories down with a private balcony shaded by gaily striped awnings and a sweeping view of the seashore. There were no small rooms at the Spinel Grand Island Hotel.

Mia smiled at her first sight of the extravagant building. Large columned porches wrapped the building. Rocking chairs with plump cushions sat easy on the porches and great ferns hung from the high haint blue ceilings. Ceiling fans lazily turned, making sure there was always a faint breeze. It was good to be back.

"I'm not sure where they've put me this time, Billy."

"You're in Rose Cottage this trip, ma'am. It was redone about a month ago so it'll be nice, and you can help to polish off any rough edges. Where do you want to go first?"

"Oh, the main building as usual. Can you please drop my bags off at the cottage?"

"No problem. I'll see you around, Ms. Mia."

Billy drove off, leaving Mia standing outside the big double doors which were promptly opened for her.

"Mrs. Spinel," the young man greeted her with slick enthusiasm. "I'm so glad you've arrived. The driver's taken your luggage to Rose Cottage?"

"Oh yes, Billy has taken care of it." Mia looked around the lobby. It was set up as an old grand hotel, lots of conversation areas and a concierge desk to the side that actually was an antique. Huge French doors swung out onto the porches, bringing a sea breeze inside in good weather. The hotel felt like staying in a very expensive private house in the roaring twenties, which was what the core of the house had been before it became a hotel.

She loved the luxurious casualness of the big open room with the grand staircase at one end. It was a wonderful place to sit, people watch and maybe meet new friends. The small groupings of comfortable chairs encouraged conversations between strangers.

"I'm the assistant manager, Trey Sulley." He shook hands. His hand was hot and dry. He wore the Southern uniform of chinos and a not quite as classic formfitting button down shirt in a burgundy red. His dark hair was exquisitely sculpted into the latest mens style. "I'm so glad to finally meet you, Mrs. Spinel. What would you like to do first? Is there anything I can bring you?"

"I'd love a glass of sweet iced tea," She'd missed sweet tea in the past few months. Sweet iced tea was just not done in London.

Trey motioned to a waitress, "Sweet tea for Mrs. Spinel, Dorrie."

She smiled and nodded at Mia, glossy black hair swinging as she turned towards the kitchens.

"What else would you like?" Trey clearly wanted to be noticed by the boss.

"I'm going to just find a nice place to sit and relax for a bit, Trey." She nodded dismissal, and he went away, looking a little disappointed at not being able to immediately impress her.

Mia looked around and found a good vantage point to see the entire room. She settled into the tall linen wingback chair and smiled. When she arrived at a new hotel, she always spent some time just sitting in the public areas and getting a feel for the place. A few hours at different times of day in the main lounge could tell her most of what she needed to know about any hotel.

Dorrie put down a bright silver tray with a coolly sweating glass of ice tea and a fluffy biscuit on a thoughtfully placed table. "I thought you might want a little something to tide you over until dinner, Ms. Mia. I always forget whether jet lag is coming or going to England, but planes aren't fun to eat in either way."

"Thanks, Dorrie, the biscuit smells wonderful." She placed a little butter from the porcelain dish on the biscuit and breathed deeply. The first bite was as good as it smelled. Flaky and fluffy at the same time. She sighed in delight, "There's nothing like real Southern food, is there?"



"No, ma'am," the young waitress bustled away, looking pleased she'd thought to bring the biscuit.

Mia slowly finished her biscuit and sipped her ice tea, surveying the room. It was still early for people to gather for pre dinner greetings. Most people would be out biking, golfing or walking on the beach. That was why they came to the island, after all.

A few people sat around the lounge already. A red faced, overstuffed man sat solidly next to the empty fireplace talking to a limp woman overshadowed by big glasses. They were clearly arguing about some paperwork, and doing it loudly.

Mia frowned. Why argue in the lobby? She was old school enough to believe arguments, if they had to happen at all, should take place in private. She looked with concern. The man was clearly drunk.

As she watched, Dorrie went over to the couple, proffering a plate of biscuits. Smart girl, Mia thought. Get some food in the drunk.

The man grabbed the tray from her and shoved a whole biscuit in his mouth. He chewed roughly, crumbs dribbling down his shirt. He washed the biscuit down with what looked like straight bourbon.

His companion cautiously took a biscuit on a plate and broke off a small piece, eating it, but crumbling the rest of the biscuit with a thin hand. She spoke to the man, clearly trying to soothe him.

He barked at her, but seemed to calm down a little with food.

Dorrie came around to Mia. "Is there anything else you'd like, ma'am?"

"No, that was perfect." She nodded discreetly at the couple. "What's going on there?"

Dorrie said in a soft voice, facing away from the group in question, "That's Harold Stone, the writer, and his assistant, Sylvie

something. He comes in every day after lunch and starts his serious drinking. She comes along so he can yell at her, from what I can see. He's supposed to be finishing a book, but I don't know when he has the time."

Mia nodded, "That's too bad. I loved his last few books." She looked at the red faced drunk. "Of course, I hadn't met the author yet."

"Put that off while you can." Dorrie hurried away on her next errand, taking Mia's empty tray.

Mia looked around at the rest of the big room. A nice looking old man sat discreetly snoozing in a cozy chair in a corner, resting up for dinner. A family with at least five kids came chattering through the lobby, carrying tennis rackets. She hoped they'd remembered to reserve enough courts. An elderly couple, dressed in sensible walking shoes with binoculars around their necks, came through on their way to dress for dinner. Birdwatchers, she thought.

An obviously honeymooning young couple walked toward the beach, hand in hand. A woman with long black hair and an expensive bathing suit wrap strolled in from the pool and paused by the reception desk for a moment.

The assistant manager, Trey, commanded the reception desk. That was a little odd for an assistant manager to be manning reception. She wondered if it was for her benefit or if they were short staffed. He smiled obsequiously, obviously interested in the attractive woman.

She was just thinking about wandering down to the beach herself when she heard a loud hail. "Mia!"

A tall young woman with brown hair and eyes to match strode briskly toward her, smiling warmly. She had on wide loose white pants, a cranberry colored top and carried a striped beach bag on her shoulder. She wasn't exactly pretty, but she glowed with health and a love of life.

"Rebecca," Mia smiled back. "Billy told me you were here on a getaway with Sam. I'm so glad to see you!"

Rebecca collapsed gracefully into the chair next to her and said in her warm honey voice, "I'm glad to see you too. It's been ages since you stopped for long in Atlanta."

"I'm just going up from reading on the beach. It's so nice to breath in the salt air and hear the waves splash." She continued, warm voice darkening, "Sam doesn't like sand in his book or he's had one client emergency or another, so he's stayed in the room most of the day. Some second honeymoon."

"You've had a nice day, though," Mia reminded her.

"Yes, I just wish Sam had been there more." Rebecca sighed, "Oh well, that's Sam."

"Husbands always have their quirks," Mia commented. Mine certainly did, she thought privately. She'd adored Leo, but no one was perfect.

"Yes, it's just supposed to be a romantic trip." Rebecca looked around the lounge discontentedly. "It's such a nice hotel, always been one of my favorites, besides the fact that it's so close to home."

Most Spinel Hotels employees chose to vacation at other hotels in the company, where they got considerable discounts in the off season. It was a much loved perk of the job, and there was considerable friendly competition about outdoing their fellow employees on a stay.

"So have a romantic dinner tonight," Mia suggested. "Pull out all the stops. Dress in something gorgeous, drink champagne. The little fancy dining room should have some soft piano music and delicious food. Or you can order room service and cover the room with roses. Pretend it really is your honeymoon."

Rebecca smiled her wide warm smile, "I will. I think Sam needs to leave the room for a little, so I'll go change and drag him to the

dining room." She looked hopeful. "A nice dinner together, no kids asking for stuff constantly, that should bring some romance out."

"Just relax and have fun, Rebecca. Remember it's a vacation." Mia smiled at her. "Go change and have a nice night." She stood up and stretched a little. "I'd better go change myself."

"Changing for dinner is one of the lovely things about staying in hotels, isn't it?" Rebecca swung her bright beach bag on her shoulder. "It feels wonderful to choose special clothes and have someone else make dinner for a change. I'll see you later!" She bounced away with new enthusiasm.

Mia walked over to Trey at the reception desk. "Would you send a chilled bottle of a nice champagne up to Rebecca and Sam Forrest's room?" she asked. "Pull out a few stops with a cheeseboard and a big bouquet of red roses and put it on my tab."

Trey frowned a little at the favoritism but said efficiently, "Yes, Mrs. Spinel. I'll do that right away."

"Yes, I want them to get it immediately. And make sure they have reservations in the small dining room in that quiet corner and tell them I made them."

"Yes, Mrs. Spinel, Mrs. Sotos wanted to have dinner with you at six thirty in the Grand Palmettos Dining Room if that's convenient for you?"

"I'd love to, but I'm going to take a quick nap to get over jet lag. Tell her eight o'clock would be perfect." Mia looked forward to seeing the hotel manager again.

"Yes, ma'am," Trey picked up the phone efficiently and Mia went to her cottage.



Rebecca hummed as she went up the stairs, skipping the elevator. Thank goodness Mia was here. She could be a very

demanding boss, but if you did the work, it paid off. Mia also meddled in everyone's private life, which was one of the reasons her loving family loved her traveling around the world, interfering in the family hotels rather than in their love lives.

But Rebecca had reached the point where she desperately needed help in her marriage and Mia might just be it. They had two adorable but demanding kids and that certainly cut into their love life. In the past year, they'd grown distant, Sam almost pushing her away and retreating into his shell. He spent more and more time in his office, less at home. Being the new junior partner in his law firm took all of his time. She didn't think he was having an affair in the hours away from home. He had just been depressed and seemed so far away.

She'd planned this trip to rejuvenate their marriage but all it was doing was touching the sore spots. On the island, away from home, there wasn't the excuse of kids' activities or the office. There was just them, Sam and Rebecca, and they seemed like distant strangers instead of the best friends they had been. She'd escaped to the beach today because she couldn't stand the stress of being so close and feeling so distant. She'd needed a break.

She would take Mia's advice and treat tonight like a date night. Rebecca took a deep breath and opened the door to their suite. Tonight was date night and they were going to have fun, no matter what he felt like.

"Hi honey," she sang. "I'm home."

"Out here," he called from the balcony off the living room of their suite. She smiled at him, sitting in the deck chair in the waning sun and enjoying the sea air. "Did you have a nice day, dear? I saw you head for the beach, but couldn't spot you out there, even with that bright bag."

She smiled back at him, liking his lean black legs and long intelligent face. He looked in better spirits than he had when she'd

left. "I walked for a bit then camped under a palm tree. It's still pretty hot in full sun, even in March."

"Yes, I enjoyed reading on the balcony. I even took a nap. Pleasant shade and breeze." Sam was tall, like Rebecca, but without her relaxed charm. He was stiff and very precise around most people, but he used to be relaxed around her.

They smiled a little hesitantly at each other and both started to speak at the same time. There was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it," Rebecca dropped her bag and opened the door.

A white jacketed waiter wheeled in a cart with champagne nestled in an icy silver bucket and a covered tray of hor d'oeuvres. The smell of red roses filled the room. "Courtesy of Mrs. Spinel. She says you have reservations at eight o'clock in the Hammock Dining Room."

Sam came inside, "Wow, that looks good."

"I ran into Mia in the lobby. Wasn't this sweet of her?" Rebecca smiled her warm happy smile just for him and he smiled back at his wife. This was going to be a wonderful evening.

The waiter popped the cork with a muffled bang and poured their glasses, bubbles sparkling, then left. They clinked glasses. "To us," Rebecca said and he repeated hopefully, "to us."



## Glamour and Strife

Mia loved dressing for dinner. Her cottage had a small dressing table in an alcove with very flattering lighting. She perched on the little pink stool and ran a touch of mascara on her eyelashes. She liked wearing makeup, but gave her blue eyes and skin just a bit of enhancement. She saved the color for her lips. She swept cherry red lipstick on her still full lips and smiled at herself in the mirror.

Finishing with two large blue spinel and diamond earrings, she remembered Leo, her husband. He'd always given her spinels, because of their name. He'd presented her with these for their tenth anniversary and they were gorgeous. She clasped a matching necklace around her neck and slipped into a simple deep blue dress she'd bought in Paris last year.

If Leo were alive, he'd smile and toast her, "Here's looking at you, kid." Since he wasn't, she toasted herself, sipping from a champagne flute.

She smiled, thinking of how she'd surprised Rebecca and Sam with champagne. There was nothing like champagne to make an evening go smoothly, give a bit of glamorous sparkle. Mia was going to make it her mission to fix that marriage. She remembered how hard life had seemed when Leo was gone all the time. It had taken time to settle into her new role as mother to her stepsons, with her husband absent. If they hadn't been able to get away together and relax sometimes, life then would have been much harder. It was important to take time to enjoy life. So few people practiced the art of savoring life now.

She hoped this trip to the Spinel Grand Island would be a relaxing one for her. The manager, Maria Sotos, was an old friend and usually had everything absolutely perfect. So far, everything seemed to be running well. She'd know after a week here what changes needed to be made, if any.

She touched up her bright lipstick one more time and closed the door of the cottage behind her.

The Grand Palmettos Dining Room was warm and inviting, a gorgeous glittering ballroom with crisp white tablecloths and sparkling silver candlesticks. Every surface reflected the candle light, creating a warm glow. A pianist played discreet classic music from the rear of the room on a small stage.

"Mrs. Sotos will be here shortly, Ms. Mia," Bernard, the headwaiter, informed her, pulling out her chair at her usual corner table where she had a good view of the dining room. "May I bring you some appetizers and champagne to begin?"

"That would be lovely," Mia smiled at him, enjoying herself.

It really was a lovely room. The tall French doors lined two opposite sides of the room, open during the day, but now covered in rich blue velvet drapes, the same color as her dress. She looked down at her dress, pleased at the planned coordination.

Light sparkled around the room and made it seem like an intimate dining area as well as a wonderful place for a party. There



seemed to be two large wedding groups here, Mia noticed. One group was herded to a private alcove just off the main dining room and the other smaller group shepherded to a large round table in the center of the room.

She liked having wedding groups at the hotel, but she always hired a separate expert wedding planner at hotels to handle the incredible planning involved. And they usually had an assistant or two during their local high season as well. In the Georgia Sea Islands, that would be April through June. It was incredible what brides and their mothers could want at the last minute - and the Spinel Grand Island delivered. Having two families and all their friends together to celebrate such an important life change was a very special event.

The headwaiter brought her a crystal glass of champagne at the perfect temperature and some small pastries to nibble on. "Is there anything else, ma'am?"

"Thank you, Bernard, this is perfect."

The elderly man she'd noticed napping in the lobby now had his family with him. No wonder he'd been asleep. Three very active boys and probably the man's daughter all talked at once to him. He'd needed a few minutes away from the crowd.

The birdwatchers had settled into a corner table, observing people instead of birds. She was in discrete black plumage, with a strand of pearls hanging low instead of her binoculars. He was in a proper grey evening suit with a bright red tie, polished ebony cane hooked over his chair arm substituting for his trekking pole. Mia met their eyes briefly, and they smiled at each other, politely curious.

Maria Sotos came hurrying across the room, dressed in an elegant black dress with a silk scarf draping her neck, giving soft pink color to her complexion.

"Mia, I'm so sorry I'm late. There was a problem with the door systems. They got the computers sorted out, luckily, so everything is

working now." She sat down with relief. "I don't know why everything happens at once. One of the guests mislaid their laptop, but it turned out they'd left it in the lobby while they were working."

"That's fine, Maria, you know the hotel always comes first." Mia smiled in greeting. "Is everything okay now?"

"Oh yes, no problems now," Maria reassured her. "It's good to see you. I think it's been at least six months since you were here, hasn't it?"

"At least," Mia replied. "So what new dishes do you have to taste?"

"Mmm," Maria mused. "There's a lovely shrimp dish. Not quite Shrimp Étouffée, but in that direction. The chef calls it Grand Island shrimp and serves it with some of the locally grown lowcountry rice. It's just the right amount of spicy."

"That sounds perfect." Mia loved trying new dishes.

Maria motioned the headwaiter over and ordered for them. Mia watched her, smiling. Who would have thought little Maria the receptionist, with her big smile and long bouncy ponytail, would now be running the hotel? She had started working under Mia, thirty years ago. The last fifteen she had been running the hotel as manager, incredibly successfully.

Maria had kind brown eyes and hair dyed still to her youthful brunette, but now shoulder length. She'd gained some weight over the years Mia had known her, but she'd also gained a warm motherly glow. That wasn't surprising since she had two almost grown children.

"How are the kids?" Mia asked.

"They're good, doing well in school. I'm hiring Jake to be a lifeguard at the pool this summer. Complete nepotism, of course," she dismissed the charge with a cheerful wink. "He did the county pool last year, so he's ready. Javier is so excited for him. We met when he was a lifeguard, you know, so I think he thinks Jake will

find the love of his life the same way." She laughed, "I tell him lightning doesn't strike twice."

"They grow up so fast, don't they?"

"Unbelievably. How are yours?" Maria asked.

"They're good. They asked me when you're accepting that promotion and coming to work in Atlanta." They both laughed at the thought.

"Yeah, right. Leave paradise? I don't think so," Maria was happy where she was, with her family and her hotel.

They looked around the room, commenting on the diners like they had years ago together.

Maria nodded discretely at a very polished blonde who was being seated a few tables down. A younger man accompanied her, paying quite a lot of attention to his companion. He fussed over her, pulling out her chair and arranging her gauzy wrap with care around her shoulders. "She's Hannah Winley, Arthur Winley's wife. Here for a long weekend with that extremely handsome young man while her husband's on some business trip."

"The billionaire?" Mia noticed the grotesquely big diamond weighing down her thin ring finger. "I think her hair must take at least an hour to do."

"Oh yes, she never comes to breakfast. Just has it in her cottage."

Hannah Winley was very pretty in a plastic sort of way, with absolute perfection of makeup. Her low cut sequined dress was skin tight to a perfectly sculpted figure, and her chest sparkled with diamonds. She glittered in the candlelight.

"Sequins are a little much for this hotel in spring but she almost pulls them off," Mia commented. "I see Dr. Harris is still doing that nose."

Maria snorted, "You'd think women would want something no one else had. The little slope just gives it away." Her rounded face had smile crinkles around her eyes. She looked warm and happy.

"We have those two wedding parties now. One is going all out extravagance and hardly any bother. Just want things done right. Everyone's happy. That's the group in the side room." She nodded her head at them. "The other, wow, just wow. Nickel and diming everything and more trouble than three other weddings put together. If I didn't have Addie handling them, I know I'd blow my top." She smiled, "That's a job I was beyond glad to grow out of."

"I know, but weddings fill the hotel. And when everyone is happy, it's beautiful."

"Oh, I know," Maria agreed. "It's just sad when they aren't getting along. We do our best, but sometimes nothing's going to work."

"Now, I've had at least an hour of meetings with her today," Maria nodded discretely to a middle aged woman eating alone, dressed inappropriately in a long tie dye skirt with armloads of beaded bracelets.

"Why ever? Who is she?"

"Sissy Collinsworth. She runs fundraising for the Green Environmental Charity. They're planning a big fundraiser in a few months, and she's here to work out every detail." Maria emphasized, "Every single, solitary detail. I'm not totally convinced that she isn't staying as long as she can to vacation while the charity foots the bill."

"Is she nickel and diming us too?"

"No, nothing but the best for her charity. But every single detail discussed minutely, ad nauseum. She's planned everything perfectly with Trey and still took hours discussing it with me. She got in a few digs about not dealing with less than managers at the other venues she's used, which I highly doubt. I think Trey must have offended her in some way, to tell the truth. He can be a bit short tempered. He needs to learn that keeping the customers happy IS the job," Maria contemplated. "Oh, well, it's a big event for the hotel, even with the charity discount."

"That writer, Harold Stone, looked like he was causing a bit of trouble?"

"Oh, he is, and then some," Maria said with feeling. "He's always blowing up at the hospitality team. It was his laptop that was mislaid earlier and did he yell about it. After all that fuss, Trey found it in the lobby, right where Mr. Stone left it."

She shook her head, "You would not believe the state his room gets into. I swear it makes the maids cry. His credit card's good for it, but it's a shame." She leaned toward Mia confidently, "I don't think his books would get written at all except for his assistant, Sylvie. They meet every afternoon in the main lounge and discuss his book. I wish they wouldn't meet there, but I think he pulls it together a bit more in public. I doubt she'd want to be trapped in a room alone with him either. I make sure they're off to the side where the world isn't listening in," she shook her head despairingly. "Of course, a lot of guests are thrilled to see a famous writer, get him to autograph books and chat. The attention does tend to improve his mood." She pursed her lips in disgust.

"They're coming in now."

Mia and Maria watched the writer navigate, somewhat unsteadily, to a table with his assistant wispily trailing him. They sat with her back to the room and him blearily surveying it. The woman dithered over the menu and he bayed, "Steak, rare!" so loudly the entire room could hear.

Mia commented, "It's amazing how his books always hit the New York Times bestseller list. I think it's three in a row now. Really good books too."

"I know; impressive."

Their dinner arrived. Mia tasted the shrimp in its aromatic sauce, rolling it around her tastebuds. It was important that dinner should be a memorable experience at the hotel, and this was certainly delicious. "I love Chef's Grand Island Shrimp. It has a bit more depth than the typical étouffée."

"I know, he's very good."

"Chef François has been here about five years now? Is he still happy?"

"Yes, five years is when they really get creative and produce their best work, or they get bored and leave. François seems to be doing well here though," Maria savored a bite of her dish of pasta with an interesting sauce and tiny spring peas. "And his work is amazing."

Trey hurried over to their table, still dressed in his casual khakis, and greeted them. "Maria, I just want to tell you I've rebooted all the security computers, and everything is working perfectly now." He looked to Mia for approval.

"That's fine, Trey, I appreciate you letting me know." Maria nodded dismissal.

A high pitched, penetrating call of laughter rang out across the room, and everyone turned to the source of the exuberant noise. Trey stiffened, seeming to disapprove. He reluctantly left them and the dining room, hesitating a bit as if hoping to be called back to have dinner with his bosses.

The woman with long black hair she'd seen in the lobby was the source of laughter. The waitress must have said something funny because she still chortled, but much quieter than the first disruptive burst of laughter. She wore a very expensive, off the runway dress, with interesting inserts of unexpected reds into the hot pink sheath that highlighted her slim silhouette. "Who is she?" Mia motioned toward the stylish woman.

"Oh, that's Allison Jayton. She's been here a few days. Seems nice. Lots of money and a new outfit for every possible occasion. She and her partner owned a big online real estate firm, but her partner died. She sold the company for millions. She's spending as much as she can to make up for lost time. And grief too, I think."

"She has a Dr. Harris nose too."

"I know, everyone who's anyone flocks to the same doctor. It's a little ridiculous when you can spot four in a room. Who'd want a trendy nose? Allison spends a fortune in the spa too. Won't let one strand of gray show." Maria shook her brown hair. "Not that I will either."

"And I'm still a natural blonde," Mia agreed, smiling. Her hair was classically styled in a relaxed Grace Kelly bob. Not a gray would dare show in the soft ash blonde locks.

They had apple pies and ice cream for dessert. The delicate pies were a miniature version of the classic comfort food, brought to a superb level with flaky pastry and intriguing spices. They finished with satisfied sighs.

"Do you have any plans for tomorrow?"

Mia thought a minute. "I'm definitely making time for a long walk on the beach. That's one thing London was missing. Beautiful parks, but no beaches. I think I'll just wander around and absorb the hotel."

"Perfect," Maria said. "I'd love to know what you think of the tennis court renovation, if you head that way. And of course, I put you in Rose Cottage. It was just redone."

"I'd be glad to look them over," Mia made a quick note. "Anywhere else?"

"I've been wondering about an area for older kids when it's hot or raining. They get a bit cooped up on rainy summer afternoons, and it would be good to have somewhere to stash them that's not in the main areas."

"Not too far out of the way, either," Mia smiled, thinking of the trouble her step sons had managed to get in. Nothing too serious, but... "That's a good idea. I'll sleep on it." She rose, placing her linen napkin precisely beside her plate.

Maria stood with her. "Let me know if you need anything." They hugged, "It's great to see you."

They left the grand dining room and Mia walked through the soft southern night to her cottage. It was just a few steps away down a well lit sidewalk. It was pleasant walking through the huge live oak trees and seeing the long Spanish moss shimmering in the moonlight. An owl hooted far too close, and she jumped a little, laughing at herself.

She opened the cottage door, and let herself in. It had been a long day, and she was ready for bed. She changed out of her dress into a long soft pink silk nightgown, taking off her jewelry and makeup and gently patting her face with her expensive and lusciously scented serum. Her silk pillow was already placed on the turned down sheets. She laid her head on it and fell fast asleep to the distant sound of ocean waves.



Mia began the next day with a brisk walk down the beach. Walking was her primary exercise, and she loved exploring new places. This beach appeared familiar, but beaches were in a state of constant change, renewing themselves with every storm that passed. Rolling dunes backed the smooth sand beach, making it a wonderful place for long walks.

Not too many people had emerged yet this early in the morning. She nodded to a few of the wedding guests out walking before the weddings this afternoon. She passed Sissy Collinsworth walking in the surf, batik printed skirt dragging the water behind her. Allison Jayton ran by in bright running gear, her long black ponytail streaming past her like a banner.

Sam Forrest slowed from his loping jog to a walk as he passed her. "Mia, good to see you." Mia was one of the few people he was



relaxed with. They'd worked together on a few lawsuits over the years, and they'd gotten to know each other well.

"And you too, Sam. I had a nice chat with Rebecca yesterday."

"Thank you for the champagne. It was very thoughtful of you and set a perfect mood. We had a wonderful dinner too." He smiled fondly.

"I'm glad," she twinkled at him. "You two need a break."

"Yes, my work has been very long hours since I made partner, and Rebecca's been bearing the brunt of childcare. She's exhausted, I know."

"You both need to have some fun. That's the point of a vacation," she urged. "Take her out on a boat today."

"You know, I think I'll do that. Rent a boat and just play," he grinned like a boy, relaxed and happy, with a fun new plan.

"Nothing like messing about in boats, is there?"

"Have fun," she called as he ran in long strides back toward the main hotel, intent on his boat outing treat.

Their marriage would be all right, she thought warmly, enjoying the feel of the sand sliding under her sandals. She walked for a few more minutes, then stopped and looked out to sea. The sky looked bright and blue and the ocean endless. She breathed in the salt air. A few dolphins played in the channel, jumping in the waves. She sighed in happy appreciation.

Sam arranged a sailboat rental with the concierge, then went to tell Rebecca. He opened the bedroom door with a happy call, "Time to rise and shine, beautiful! We're going sailing!"

His wife opened her eyes and rubbed them, like a sleepy child waking, then stretched, her long tanned legs contrasting with the crisp white sheets. "Sailing?"

"Sailing," he said firmly. "It's time to really have a vacation."

"Oh, Sam," she looked at him with warm brown eyes and his heart melted.



Mia got back to her room with renewed spirit, changed to pink tennis shoes and patted her hair into sleek waves. She swiped on bright pink lipstick to match her flowing silk blouse and felt ready for the day.

Her feet padded cheerfully on the sidewalk as she headed to the Grand Palmettos Restaurant for breakfast. The morning mood was completely different in the room. Open tall windows flooded the room with bright morning light. Silver still sparkled the tables, but the candles were gone and discrete daylight lighting made the room a bright awakening. She was ushered smoothly to the same table she'd sat in last night, and she surveyed the room again.

A few of her fellow beachgoers were settling in for their well deserved breakfasts. She didn't see Sam and Rebecca. She hoped they'd had breakfast in the room, after his jog. The birdwatching couple perched at a table next to the window, bird books and map laid out between them, planning their attack. Hannah Winley wouldn't emerge for breakfast, from what Maria had said, but the handsome young man accompanying her was there, still in sweaty running clothes. She couldn't believe he hadn't bothered with a shower first.

She summoned the headwaiter and motioned to the young man. "Did you suggest breakfast in his room?"

"I suggested the terrace too, several times," the well groomed young woman sighed. "I didn't like to make a scene since he's here with Mrs. Winley. I finally just seated him as out of the way as possible." He was next to the hospitality team door.

"You did your best," Mia commiserated. "There's not much you can do when guests choose not to behave appropriately." She surveyed the wonderful menu options. "I don't think I'll

experiment today. Just a plain omelette and coffee, please." She felt like comfort food, and it was always good to check the basics were up to standards.

"Right away, Ms. Mia," the headwaiter gave orders to a waitress who bustled off.

The day was going to be a lovely one, Mia thought. She'd take one of the hotel bikes on a trip around the island. The wide flat paths were perfect for leisurely bike rides, and it would be a fun way to check out the outlying areas.

Her waitress filled her cup with coffee. She added just a touch of sugar and milk, barely lightening the steaming brew. "Delicious," Mia nodded approval to the waitress, and she bustled away to fill another cup.

The waitress was new, like a lot of the less senior resort team. People would work at a hotel for a while, then move on to another hotel or job. It was a business with a lot of transient workers but senior team members did tend to stay. The only new senior employee here was Trey Sulley, the assistant manager, she thought. She might see if he was available for lunch, since she liked to get to know all the resort team.

The omelette arrived, delivered with an uncertain flourish by the waitress, who seemed to know how it would be judged. Mia approved of the simple garnish of a bit of fine herbs, but the omelette itself looked dry and rather disgusting. She took a bite to make sure. Definitely not what should be served at a Spinel Hotel.

She took the plate and walked her pink sneakers back to the kitchen, bumping through the hospitality team door. She called out in a clear voice, designed to cut through the kitchen noise, "Who cooked this?"

There was a shuffle for who was in trouble and a young man in a tall chef hat came shyly forward, "I did, Mrs. Spinel. Francisco González."

"Mr. González, did you go to culinary school?"

"Yes, of course, Mrs. Spinel. I went to Le Cordon Bleu. I did the program in Mexico City," he said with nervous pride.

She pointed to the omelette, "And they didn't teach you to make an omelette?"

"To tell you the truth, ma'am, this is the first day I've done breakfast. I usually work at night under Chef François. I did the extra Pâtisserie course so Mr. Sulley put me on for breakfast when the breakfast chef called in sick." He pointed to a gorgeous tray of croissants waiting on the counter.

"I see," Mia was disappointed, but not surprised. There were always gaps in even the most trained chef's education. "It's surprising how often they teach the showstoppers but not the basics." She looked around, "Where's an omelette pan?"

The resort team crowded around, watching the show. The young chef looked very awkward and handed her a small carbon steel frying pan. "Here, ma'am." His hands tucked in his apron.

"So, this is how you make an omelette." Mia put the pan on the hot flame. "Two eggs, please."

He handed them to her nervously, eggs juggling in his shaking hands.

She broke them into a bowl, added salt and whisked briskly. "You don't want a froth, just light and well mixed." She dropped a large pat of butter in the hot pan and moved it around. "Brown the butter lightly, then add the eggs." She did so and they started cooking as they hit the hot pan. "Now, shake like crazy." She took the pan off the stove and moved it around at a furious rate. "That creates layers in the omelette. You don't want a fluffy, dry omelette, you want a delicately layered one. When it's cooked barely enough, flip it," she tossed it up in the air and caught the eggs neatly. "Cook it just a tiny bit more, then roll it gently onto a plate, folding it into thirds as you roll." She suited her actions to her words. "Sprinkle the herbs, and you're done."

Mia displayed her perfect omelette to the restaurant team. "Try it." They clustered around, tasting spoons ready.

"That's perfect," said the young chef. "Just a few changes makes all the difference, doesn't it?"

"With eggs, little things make all the difference," Mia agreed. "So now you make me one."

He followed the steps exactly, and she had her perfect omelette. "I'll just eat while I'm here. Would you mind getting me another coffee?" she asked a waitress.

"No problem, Mrs. Spinel," her waitress brought her another perfect cup. "Where did you study for culinary?" she asked curiously.

"All over," Mia told her. "I never had time to do a full program anywhere, but I've taken classes almost every place I've lived. I actually took the Mexican Cuisine Diploma at the Cordon Bleu Institute in Mexico City while we were there for a few months opening a new hotel." She smiled as she remembered a very busy few weeks in the kitchens.

"I'm also lucky enough to get to watch all the hotel chefs at work behind the scenes. There's always so much to learn in a kitchen." She smiled at the waitress. "Whenever I'm home, which isn't often any more, I love to cook what new dishes I've found."

"Sounds like fun." The waitress hurried back to the dining room with the fresh coffee.

Mia enjoyed her omelette and lingered over her coffee, watching the kitchen. The young chef, Francisco, had the kitchen under control, and wasn't as nervous now. The omelette seemed to be a small stumbling point that a short lesson had fixed.

He offered her a still warm croissant diffidently. As the delicate flakiness melted on her tongue, she knew why he had chosen pastry as a speciality.

"That is absolutely perfect, Francisco. I haven't had a croissant that delicious outside of Paris."

He blushed and mumbled something and went back to his work. The kitchen was running beautifully. As she watched, she saw another perfect omelette go out the door, this time by a junior chef who grinned when he saw her watching. Francisco was stepping up to the challenge now and learning from a small mistake. Good, she thought.

"Thank you so much," she said to all, like a guest leaving a party.

"Bye, Mrs. Spinel, see you at lunch," they chorused, keeping to their work.

Leaving through the service door, she walked over to the side building where the bikes were stored. She checked one out from a cheerful girl in a neat blue hospitality uniform and long ponytail.

As she pedaled down the bike lane on the main drive, she looked around, planning her route. The bike was a fifties baby blue cruiser and fit well with the old fashioned atmosphere on the island. She passed the golf course on the right and waved to Billy in his limo, out to gather another group of guests.

Later she would play a round of golf to check the course, but it wasn't her favorite activity. Leo had always been the one to check those out, and now his sons made sure their golf courses were world class. They loved golf. She preferred the spa.

Live oaks met over the road, blocking out most of the sunlight with their trailing Spanish moss. A few rays of light streamed through, dancing spotlights through the shadows on the oyster shell road. She heard birds singing, getting ready for spring. She pedaled along briskly, enjoying the easy movement on the flat road.

She saw the first group of resort team cottages on her left and turned in to the little loop. They were pleasant cottages, in the same style as the rest of the hotel cottages, but a little bigger since people lived there full time.

Hospitality team in management positions lived in these if they chose to. Since sometimes they had to be on duty at odd hours, it made their lives easier.

Maria Sotos, as general manager for the hotel, had her house a little separated from the others off the next turn. At the far end of the island was some tiny apartments the junior hospitality team were generally queuing up for. An apartment within walking distance from the beach was a nice perk of the job, even if it came with occasional late nights. Any hospitality members not living on the island would have a twenty minute commute each way to the nearest town.

The cottages on this loop would be the homes of the two head chefs and assistant managers, all of whom worked late. Addie, the wedding planner, who needed to be there at unexpected hours to reassure brides, had the smallest cottage with bright red geraniums in pots next to the front door. Addie herself was heading out the door as Mia pedaled around the loop. She waved, "Hi, Ms. Mia! Good to see you! I'm off to finish the weekend's first wedding."

Mia waved, "Good luck!"

"Fingers crossed as always!" She walked briskly down a direct path to the main hotel, her high heels barely slowing her at all.

The houses on this loop seemed to be in good repair. The hotel landscapers took care of the yard maintenance, though some, like Addie, planted their own personal touches. She nodded to herself in approval. It was important to have every bit of the grounds perfect at all times. You never knew where guests would turn up. The little bike paths crisscrossing the island were meant to be used, after all. These cottages were part of the landscaping.

Trey Sulley wandered out of his little house, Allison Jayton at his side. She was still in her bright running clothes. They were walking very close and talking softly to each other. He leaned in to whisper in her ear, laughing, then released his hand from her waist.

She brushed him off with a smile and waved as she followed the path Addie had taken.

Hmm, Mia thought. She wasn't at all surprised the assistant manager would have an affair with a guest. She just hoped he wouldn't do anything to cause the woman to take offense with the hotel if it ended badly.

Trey noticed Mia biking around the circle and held up a hand. "Mrs. Spinel, good to see you! How are you?" He came forward to greet her as if she'd biked directly to his house to visit.

She stopped politely, "Hello, Trey. I'm well, and you?"

"Just perfect, Mrs. Spinel." He came and held her bike's handlebar, smoothly preventing her from moving unless she rudely jerked it away.

Mia prepared herself to listen to whatever he had on his chest. "I'm so glad you came to see me, Mrs. Spinel. I knew we would get along," he smiled disarmingly at her.

"I was just out biking, Trey."

"Oh, of course, Mia," he agreed, clearly thinking it was his charming self she'd come to see. He continued to hold her bike hostage. "Such a pretty name, Mia. I could show you around the island some, if you'd like. I've worked at hotels all over the world. I have a lot of ideas for fixing this place up, trust me. I know a few places not too far away where we could have a quiet," he smiled seductively, "conversation."

Mia stiffened slightly. She disliked anyone calling her by her first name until she asked them to. She preferred to maintain that little bit of distance until she knew people well. And she was not going off anywhere alone with this particular employee. "I'm making a loop around the island so I'll just get moving." She looked determinedly at the exit to the cottage loop.

"You stay very active for a woman your age, Mia. Takes a lot to keep that figure going," he boldly looked her up and down.



Okay, that was enough. She rudely jerked the bike away and started pedaling in one smooth motion.

He didn't say anything, just laughed knowingly as she pedaled away. "Bye, Mia. I'll see you later."

What a creep, Mia thought. She couldn't believe someone as pretty as Allison Jayton would slip off to meet him. Of course, redoing your nose implied a certain lack of confidence.

She was going to have a serious talk with Maria about her creepy assistant manager choice next time she saw her. She pedaled through the dappled shadows of the main road, relaxing into the steady rhythm of the bike.



Allison hurried down the oyster shell path, not sure exactly why she was hurrying. She'd just had a nice breakfast with Trey. He wasn't a great cook, but he'd cooked for her and that was nice. And he was handsome, in a male model sort of way, dark hair and blue eyes. A handsome man cooking you breakfast wasn't a bad way to start the day.

They'd met this morning when she'd paused to stretch at the furthest point of her run. Her legs and back didn't hurt as much when she paused for a stretch midway, even on a short run. Beach runs were definitely using muscles her treadmill had not.

Trey asked her to breakfast, and, after all, she was here to start finding a new life and friends for herself. So she'd said yes.

It had been pretty obvious he'd planned to cook breakfast, then she'd smoothly tumble into bed with him. He'd held her hand and just looked at her with those devastating blue eyes and said he understood.

And she'd run away. Why?

Allison slowed her pace a little on the path, then stopped and looked at the palmetto trees all around her. Bugs made noises in the leaf litter, scritch and scratch. A bird screamed harshly over her head, making her jump. She slowly turned around in a circle, looking at the live oaks and gray Spanish moss meeting over her head, trying to spot the screeching bird. The grey green world swirled around her, making her dizzy.



After her bike ride, Mia lunched on the terrace. It was a perfect day with fluffy white clouds making their stately procession against the deep blue sky. From the terrace, she could see a few shrimp boats out in the distant water, surrounded by gulls.

As she sat enjoying her salad and the ocean view, Sissy Collinsworth came up, still in the same batik skirt she'd dragged through the sand and surf that morning. She put her hand on a chair and sat down at the same time she asked, "Mind if I join you?"

Mia nodded noncommittally. She wasn't about to cause a scene in her own hotel, and she was almost finished with her salad.

"I'm Sissy Collinsworth," the woman stated. "From the Green Environmental Charity." She shoved her dirty hand above Mia's salad.

Mia took her hand gingerly, "I'm Mia Spinel." She wiped her hand discretely on the napkin in her lap.

"Yeah, you're one of the hotel owners, aren't you?" Sissy informed her. "I've been talking with your manager about my fundraiser in three months."

"That's nice," Mia said blandly. She took a few more bites of her salad, preparing for a quick getaway.

Sissy's face shown with ardent enthusiasm. "Yeah, it's going to be a huge event. People flying from all over the world to raise money for environmental causes."

Mia thought she saw a flaw in that, but declined to say so. Her business was travel, after all.

Sissy went on, bracelets jangling, "I just feel that for so worthy a cause - I mean, you don't want the icebergs melting and flooding this place in a decade - you might give us more of a break on the cost." She looked expectantly at Mia, sure of her emotional appeal.

Mia resented Sissy interrupting her peaceful lunch in order to circumvent her managers. She went on attack in the best sweet Southern lady tradition. "Oh, my dear, are you not getting our standard charity discount? I can't believe they didn't offer that to you." She shook her head in feigned disappointment.

Sissy looked uncomfortable, shifting her weight on the chair, "Well, yes, we're getting that but.."

"Oh, that's good," Mia said brightly, "but I can't imagine giving your group more of a discount than Save our Children. I know we hold one of their major fundraisers here every year, and we always give them our charity discount. To take away from a children's charity or other worthy causes wouldn't possibly be fair, would it?" She looked at Sissy with innocent blue eyes. Mia knew perfectly well they offered the same hefty discount to all charities. It generally prevented this sort of problem.

Sissy went on offensive, "Icebergs melting will cause so much more suffering..."

"Than children starving now?" Mia said with a sniff. "I hardly think so." She stood up, placing her napkin on the table emphatically. "I can't possibly offer you a better discount than any of the other charities who hold annual fundraisers here. It just wouldn't be right." She smiled sweetly, "If you have any further questions, please talk to Trey Sulley, the assistant manager you've

been working with. I'm sure he can answer any questions you have."

Sissy Collinsworth stood up and said in harsh judgment, "I can't believe you're refusing to give back to your community, to the environment."

Mia just looked at her, "Excuse me?"

"You won't give us even another percent off cost? It's for Mother Earth," she spread her arms wide, encompassing the landscape and knocking over a water glass with her floating sleeve. "Oh, sorry." A waitress hurried to clean up the broken glass.

Mia had had enough. "If you would prefer to go with a more environmentally friendly hotel, please do so. If you can find one," she added smoothly, knowing that would be extremely difficult in this area.

"Oh, well," Sissy backpedaled. "You don't even have solar panels," she accused.

Mia was abruptly sick of this woman. She felt no need to explain to Sissy that solar panels would have caused tremendous ecological damage to the island with relatively little benefit. She should know. The same eminent environmental architects had insisted on installing half a million dollars of them in their Arizona resort. She still cringed at that retrofit price tag.

She said firmly, "No, we don't." She smiled with sweet insincerity, "I do hope you enjoy your stay." She walked quickly away before Sissy could make more arrogant demands.

There was definitely a downside to people knowing you were one of the hotel owners. The discount for my very special event plea happened fairly often, but she had heard everything from "my pillow is too soft" to "I don't like the room color." She tried to politely listen. It was her family's hotel, after all, and she was here to improve it, if needed. If the complaints were valid, she wanted to know about them, but the number of people wanting special treatment for no valid reason was always annoying.

Mia decided her next stop would be the newly renovated tennis courts. That should be far enough from the terrace to avoid Sissy. She liked watching tennis a lot more than watching golf. It was fun when the players were skilled, lunging for impossible shots and sending them shooting across the court. It was almost as entertaining when they weren't so skilled and swung their racquets ineptly at open air. She smiled, thinking of her children's first tennis lessons where they whacked the ball at nothing.

She might play a game or two herself if she could find a partner. The soft grass of the courts here was a pleasure to play on.

She wandered through the locker rooms, placed thoughtfully so players could leave racquets and anything they might need at the courts and not have to carry them back and forth from the hotel.

The tennis courts backed up to the golf course so the pro shops and locker rooms flowed into each other, allowing employees to man both. She fussed with a few displays, the slightly more experienced clerk obviously telling his junior to just leave her alone. When she had the store displays looking like she wanted, she nodded to the two gawking boys hiding behind the counter. "Take care, boys."

"Yes, Ms. Mia," they chorused, grinning with relief she was going.

The newly renovated courts were gorgeous, lushly green. The precisely mown grass (eight millimeters in height) was perfectly maintained and constantly refreshed, with bright white titanium dioxide lines renewed at least daily.

Four members of a wedding party played doubles on the green courts, with one player on each side playing well and the other missing even the easiest of shots. The carefree, laughing party didn't seem to mind either way.

Hannah Winley and her handsome companion played a different sort of game. Hannah's tennis dress was fussily adorable,

white with a short skirt and pink ruffled shorts showing every time she moved. Her game was not up to her youthful fashion choice.

Mia sat in the low row of stadium seats for a minute, watching. She wouldn't be surprised if the young man was a tennis pro. His game was excellent, despite his companion's ineptness.

Allison Jayton, who she'd seen coming out of Trey's house, walked over and sat near her to watch the players. She nodded at Mia, "You're Mia Spinel, one of the hotel owners, aren't you?" Mia nodded, and she leaned over to shake hands, "I'm Allison Jayton."

"Nice to meet you, Allison," Mia returned. "Are you enjoying your stay?"

"Oh yes, it's a lovely hotel," she said enthusiastically. "I'm having a wonderful time." Her gorgeous black hair swung in a sleek wave around her face.

With the woman closer and in bright sunlight, Mia could definitely see the faint signs of plastic surgery in her lightly tanned skin. She'd had not just her nose done, but pretty extensive work around her eyes and mouth. Her eye color had been changed with contacts to a very striking blue. Odd, she seemed young and pretty for such drastic changes. She much preferred changing her face with a nice spa day and relaxation.

With a start, she realized the other woman had been talking to her. She caught up the thread of conversation, "... always dreamed of coming here. It's so beautiful on the coast with all these little barrier islands. I'm even thinking of moving near here, maybe Charleston or Savannah."

"It's a lovely area," Mia agreed. "It gets very hot during the summer, but during the winter, you can continue with life instead of hiding inside." She herself liked skiing and hot chocolate too, but it was all good. "Where are you from?"

"Oh, a little town in the Midwest you've never heard of. I live in San Francisco currently, but now that I've sold my company I'd like to relocate. San Francisco's not what it used to be."

"Take time to find somewhere you really love," Mia encouraged. "Spend some time traveling and seeing the world."

"Yeah, I don't really have anywhere definite in mind, but this place is so beautiful I'm seriously thinking of it. I'm in no hurry to settle down right now." She sighed heavily, "I worked all the time the last few years, so all my friends were business friends. Then my partner and I were in this awful car wreck," she looked off into the distance, seeing the past instead of the live oaks. "I was driving. It was raining really hard. Just a stupid accident, but she died. The company just didn't seem worth doing any more without her."

"I'm so sorry," Mia said with great sympathy. "After a tragedy, sometimes it's better to make a change." No wonder Allison had had all the plastic surgery after a bad car wreck. That was what plastic surgery was for, to help people rebuild their bodies and lives. "You need to find who you want to be next."

"Yeah," Allison looked sorrowfully across the green tennis court. "Just time to make a change." She smiled a little. "I'd always dreamed of traveling around, seeing the world. So here I am. Going to all the places I read about." She bravely smiled.

"Good for you, Allison."

They were quiet a minute, then Mia commented after a particularly amazing shot, "That young man there is very good at tennis, isn't he?"

Allison laughed her high distinctive bray of laughter, "I think he's her tennis pro. She's got to keep up her practice, you know."

"How nice," Mia said with a smile. "I guess her game is coming along."

"It should be with all that practice," Allison commented. "I think he's usually there all night." She winked sardonically at Mia and stretched. "I think I'll have a bike ride, soak in the atmosphere."

"It's a perfect place for biking."

"Nice and flat," Allison enthused. "Quite a change from California hills. I'm looking for more relaxed activities, after my accident. I used to mountain bike, rock climb, do triathlons." She rubbed her legs reflectively, "I think some nice flat biking sounds perfect."

"Absolutely. Have fun," Mia said. She watched Allison head toward the bike stand. Trey wouldn't be her choice but she supposed he was just a vacation fling. Poor girl, having her friend die in a car wreck. She was glad Allison was restarting life with a nice vacation.

Mia watched the players, the handsome young man serving directly to Hannah Winley. Despite her phenomenal figure, she wasn't in very good shape. She huffed and puffed and her elaborate makeup ran with sweat. He lobbed balls to her and it was all she could do to return them.

Finally, Hannah held up her racquet, "That's enough, Phillip. I'm beat."

The tennis pro laughed, "You're doing great, Hannah," he encouraged. "Try a few more shots."

She whined, "I am so ready for a shower." She grabbed her matching pink bag. It had ruffles. "I'm headed back."

"Sure thing, beautiful," he said agreeably. He grabbed the bucket of balls and the basket fell over. The balls rolled across the court. "Well, damn." He stooped and grabbed. "I'll just pick these up."

"Just leave them, I want my shower," she said, annoyed. "The hospitality team will take care of it."

He went on picking up the balls, "It'll just take a minute."

She watched him impatiently, tapping her foot, then kicked a ball toward him. "Here's one."

Phillip stepped on the unexpected rolling ball, almost caught his balance, then skated on another ball with the other foot. He fell with a thud and sat up yelling. "My ankle!"



Hannah said impatiently, "I'm sure you just twisted it. Try walking it out."

He lifted his foot. The ankle was visibly swelling. "I think it's broken."

"There's no way," Hannah told him. "You just turned it a little."

Mia grabbed her phone and called the front desk, requesting help.

She ran down the stairs to the grassy court, reassuring the young man. "I called for an ambulance and ice. They'll be here soon."

"Thank God," he said, grimacing in pain.

Hannah looked pouty. "I can't believe you did that," she laughed cruelly. "You almost did a flip."

The handsome young man just looked like he was in a lot of pain.

Mia checked out the ankle, loosened his laces and gently pulled his shoe off. "We'll have the ice soon, but let's get your shoe off before we have to cut it off."

He turned green as she pulled it off and his eyes rolled up a little. "Definitely broken," he muttered.

Misty, the spa receptionist, came running with ice and a first aid kit, her smooth dark ponytail bouncing. "I'm the first aid person on duty."

Mia always had several of the resort team at each hotel trained in emergency aid. When so many out of shape hotel guests decided to do their yearly exercise all at once, it saved lives.

Misty caught sight of the ballooned ankle and her round cheeks sagged in sympathy, "Oh, wow, that looks awful."

Her sleek ponytail swung as she turned to Mia, "The ambulance will be about thirty minutes, Ms. Mia. I'll just keep it elevated and iced until then."

She turned efficiently to Phillip, "Do you want Tylenol now or hold out for the good stuff with the EMTs?".

"I think Tylenol now," Phillip said through clenched teeth. "It's pretty bad."

Misty grabbed the medicine and elevated his foot. He winced as she gently placed an ice pack on the ankle already swollen to twice normal size.

"Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry," Hannah told him, finally seeming to realize he was actually hurt. She still seemed impatient with the fuss he was creating.

"Don't worry, the hospital here is very good," Mia reassured him.

The ambulance arrived shortly and the EMT's efficiently loaded Phillip in the ambulance, Hannah remaining behind. He didn't seem to care, relaxing into their professional care with relief. Before the ambulance was out of sight, Hannah had headed back to the hotel.

Misty commented, "Wow, she's cold." She waved the ice pack and ran, "Everyone's coming to the spa today. Gotta go!"

The boys from the pro shop had gathered up most of the scattered balls. She grabbed one more and threw it in the bucket. "No more accidents today."

"I sure hope not," they both agreed fervently.

She started walking to the hotel to dress for dinner. The warm air was cooling into evening.

Mia ran into Rebecca and Sam coming back from the dock. Their hands were entwined, and they were laughing. Mia was going to leave them to their fun, but they called in unison, "Hi, Mia!"

"Did you enjoy the boat?"

They grinned. Rebecca's face was alive with happiness. "What a great day! We took out one of the little sailboats and just played around."

"Just the right amount of wind," Sam enthused.

"That's right, you used to sail when you were a kid," Mia remembered. "Did it bring back memories?"

"Absolutely, but it made better ones," he smiled at Rebecca, his eyes sparkling and she blushed.

"I'm so glad you're having a good vacation."

"A great vacation," Sam said, swinging Rebecca around. She laughed in delight.

"Bye, Mia," Rebecca called as they ran off hand in hand.

Mia smiled. That couple had just needed a break. She loved the freedom hotels gave people to relax from the worries of regular life. Everyday worries melted away for a few days and became easier to deal with when they returned home. She walked slowly on, letting the young couple get far ahead of her.

As she passed Harold Stone on the path, he called out peremptorily, "Hey, you!"

Mia slowed, but didn't stop. She generally did not answer to "you." He yelled again, "You! Spinel. You own this shit hole, don't you?"

She stopped abruptly and turned, "Excuse me?"

"You own this place, right?" He backed slightly down at her icy glare.

"I do," she coolly stated.

This early in the evening, he was already too drunk to communicate clearly. "Well, I have a complaint to make!" He put his Scotch infused face way too close to hers, using his height and girth to intimidate her.

"Indeed." Mia stood her ground against his fetid breath.

"About your manager," he heeled to one side of the path, then recovered balance.

"Yes?"

"He's been stealing from me."

"My manager is a woman," Mia told him.

"No, that skinny runt with the slick hair. The thief. He stole my laptop," he accused blearily.

"Ah, your laptop," Mia tried to remember. "It was found in the lobby, correct?"

"He put it there," Harold Stone charged.

Mia had a policy to never argue with drunks. "I'll have to look into that," she pacified him.

He swayed up close to her again with his heavy breath. "I'll sue."

"I'm sure there's been some mistake."

He leaned in, blustering, "You can't steal from me."

Mia thankfully saw Billy hurrying up the path toward them. "I'm sure there's been some mistake, but I will look into the incident."

The small man gently but firmly took hold of Harold Stone's arm, "Can I help you back to the hotel, sir." It was not a question. His sinewy arm was pure muscle.

The heavier man struggled in Billy's seemingly light grip but couldn't get away. Billy smoothly said, "You don't seem to be feeling well, sir. I'll help you."

Harold gave one last attack on Mia, swaying all his weight out of Billy's grip, nearly crashing to the ground. "You won't get away with it. I'll sue!"

The wiry ex-Marine quickly recovered his charge, nodding to Mia, "This way, sir." There was no way Harold would escape that iron grip a second time.

By the time she got to her cottage, the light was softening into dusk. She walked in the newly painted green door and smiled at the living room inside. It was a lovely room, comfortable and intimate. She could imagine it being the perfect honeymoon suite with its private location at the edge of the main hotel grounds. The walls were a soft white, with hints of old world moulding around the edges. The sofa looked classically formal, with faint roses in the smooth floral patterned fabric, but was incredibly comfortable. The

room could have existed a hundred years ago, in the Sea Islands heyday, but had all the comforts of a modern, luxurious home.

A huge bouquet of roses almost covered the coffee table. So sweet of Maria to remember her. Always red roses for her - her husband had been a classic romantic. She sunk her nose into them and breathed in the smell. Lovely. She sat down and crossed her legs, checking the magazines laid out in an artistic fan. A perfect selection for a rainy afternoon. This was going to be a relaxing stay, Mia thought.

Tonight, she wore an elegantly cut silk floral dress and some coordinating blue spinel earrings. She added a large blue spinel ring with encircling diamonds to her ring finger and smiled at the sparkle.

Mia still wore her wedding ring, even two years after her husband's death, because it always made her think of their wedding. Leo had put the simple diamond eternity ring on her finger and winked at her. She'd almost burst out laughing in the middle of the ceremony, his comical grin was so infectious. She had a lovely engagement ring she wore frequently, of course, but she liked to mix up the jewelry she wore. It all had so many wonderful memories.

She walked through the damp night air to the hotel. It had turned a little cold tonight and she shivered in her silk dress. "Cat walking over my grave," she said to herself, smiling at the phrase.

Inside the hotel felt cozy and warm and she greeted the concierge with pleasure, "Sullivan! It's so good to see you."

The dark young man smiled back at her, "Ms. Mia! It's good to see you too. Have you had a nice day?"

"It's been a good day, up to that poor man breaking his ankle."

"Oh yes, you were the one who called it in, weren't you?" He winked wickedly at her, "Mrs. Winley already has a substitute." He grinned.

"Really? That's fast work."

"She came in and was complaining about having to dine all alone. Trey offered to prevent the catastrophe."

"Ah, Trey," Mia said thoughtfully and frowned.

"Yes, just like Trey," Sullivan smiled disdainfully. "If he doesn't marry rich, it won't be from lack of trying."

"Hannah Winley is still quite married, from what I understand."

"She won't be long if she keeps up what she's been up to," Sullivan rejoined. "I doubt she'll be rich either. There must be a prenup."

"I wish people would just come here and have fun," Mia said with sorrow.

"No worries there," the concierge rejoined, his narrow shoulders shaking with suppressed laughter. "She's having plenty of fun."

He looked around for onlookers and leaned toward her, "I'm glad I saw you today. I've a little problem I've been meaning to talk to Maria about, but I'd really prefer you handle it." He looked worried.

"Yes? What's wrong?"

"It's about Misty, the spa receptionist. You know Misty?"

"Of course. What's wrong?"

"Well, she's a sweet girl, and she's having a little trouble with Trey Sulley. He keeps showing up at her apartment at odd hours. She didn't want to go to Maria, because it would be her word against his, and she loves her job. She's going to school part time for physical therapy, and you know how we work with school hours."

"Yes, I know." Mia was concerned. "He's showing up at her apartment at night?"

"Yes, or very early, from your point of view. She lives on the island. It's just odd, and it's making her nervous." Sullivan was

obviously protective of the young girl. "I don't think she's the only one whose door he shows up at, either."

"I see," Mia said thoughtfully. "I'll speak with Maria about him."

Sullivan looked more worried. "She really likes her job."

"Don't worry, I'll make sure there's no backlash on her and she's protected." Mia smiled at him, "Trust me, Maria's dealt with this kind of thing before."

Sullivan looked unconvinced. "Trey is a very smooth talker."

Mia told him firmly, "I'll handle it." She changed the subject. "So what's new and good at the Hammock Dining Room?"

"I'd try the new she crab soup. It's absolutely marvelous."

"Sounds perfect," Mia headed for the dining room. She was ushered to a quiet corner table with a good view of the restaurant. Potted palms dotted the room, giving it a tropical feel.

Her waitress, Dorrie, poured her water. "What can I bring you tonight?"

"Hi, Dorrie. I was told to try the she crab soup," Mia said. "And I feel like something hearty," Mia said. "Maybe chef's famous seafood lasagna? With perhaps a crisp Soave wine to drink?"

The waitress whisked her menu away and chattily said, "I heard you rescued Hannah Winley's companion."

"I just called the ambulance," Mia explained. "And she's already found a new escort," she nodded toward Trey Sulley and Hannah having an intimate dinner in the corner next to the piano. He leaned toward her, whispering something. Hannah shook her head and instinctively leaned back, but didn't leave the table.

"She doesn't seem to like him that much," Dorrie commented. "I'll be right back with your order, Ms. Mia."

As she watched, Hannah smiled seductively at Trey, leaned forward and whispered something. She was dripping in diamonds and sparkling with sequins, like last night. Quite a lot of brilliance

for the more casual dining room. But Dorrie was right, she didn't look happy with her dinner date, despite her showgirl smile.

She looked around the long low room and saw Rebecca and Sam with eyes only for each other, a beautiful sight indeed. Trying not to catch their eyes, she left them alone in their world.

A few of the wedding guests were scattered around the room, old and new friends relaxing together now that the main event was over. Soft laughter and smiling voices mingled with the appetizing smells.

The writer, Harold Stone, sat over in a corner nursing a Scotch. He shoveled steak into his mouth, not pausing between bites. Mia didn't see how he could be tasting his food at all. After that confrontation earlier, she didn't see how he was vertical. Unfortunately, she couldn't lock unruly guests in their rooms. They were stuck with the drunk until he got unruly enough to kick out of the hotel, which was the last thing she wanted to do to such a well known writer.

His wispy assistant sat ramrod straight, as far away as she could get from him and still sit at the same table, clearly disgusted by his lack of table manners.

Mia noticed Billy and his wife, Jolie, over on the side of the dining room and gave them a friendly nod. He nodded back, keeping one eye on Harold Stone and one on his lovely wife. Jolie seemed happy to have a night off from cooking for her brood of grandchildren. Mia could hear her hearty laugh across the room, and it made her smile. She made a mental note to send them champagne when she ordered.

Sissy Collinsworth looked down at her menu, actively avoiding Mia's eye. She was still in her sandy long skirt she'd worn all day.

Mia had a lovely dinner, enjoying her seafood lasagna comfort food. She skipped dessert tonight and rose to go at the same time as several other people in the restaurant.



Mia let the others weave through the room before her. She noticed Trey stoop and hand a paper to Sam. Odd, Mia thought. She hadn't seen Sam drop anything. Sam glanced at it casually, then stiffened, seeming not to notice Rebecca for the first time tonight. Trey and Hannah brushed by her. Hannah, after a close knit whispering laugh with Trey, continued on to her cottage.

Trey paused to talk with the concierge in the lobby, laughing hard at something Sullivan apparently didn't find funny at all. He noticed Mia, "Ah, Mia. I'm so glad to see you. I wanted to apologize to you for your terrible experience at breakfast. I took care of the problem, and he won't be working here anymore," he smiled an insincere grin at her.

Mia gaped at him. "Excuse me?"

"I've fired that chef Francisco González. He served you a terrible breakfast and wasn't up to the job of running a kitchen," he shook his head in mock despair. "He just wasn't up to the job."

"I see," Mia said icily. Personal dislike had not been a reason enough for her to fire Trey Sulley, but this might be. Of course, it was Maria's job to supervise her team. "You didn't think Maria, as the manager, should make that decision?"

"Word is she won't be manager much longer," Trey said smoothly. "She's a bit past it, isn't she? Time for some new ideas and new blood here. Get some more exciting guests than old fogies, liven this place up." he laughed heartily, not bothering to hide his disdain of several elderly guests passing him slowly. From their expressions, they weren't all that hard of hearing.

"I see," Mia repeated expressionlessly. She needed to get this scene away from the guests quickly, but she didn't want to be alone with Trey Sulley. "Sullivan, can you and Trey come to the office for a minute?"

She saw Billy kiss his wife, then wander casually in their direction as they headed for the office. Sullivan efficiently motioned one of his underlings to take charge of his desk and

followed them back to Maria's office. Maria looked up as they entered, still working this late at night.

"Mia?" She looked at the little group. "What's going on? Is something wrong?" Maria purposely avoided Trey's gaze, ignoring him.

"Did you fire Francisco González?" Mia asked. She'd get her facts straight first.

"No, of course not," Maria said with confusion, smoothing her styled brown hair distractedly. "He's one of our best young chefs, training up well. I see him being head chef in a few years."

"Head chef," Trey sneered. "He can't even cook breakfast. I fired him."

"What? He hasn't been on breakfast yet," Maria said, bewildered. "He's not scheduled to train for that for another month."

Mia clarified, "I believe Mr. Sulley put him in charge of breakfast this morning."

"You what?" Maria stood up, face horrified.

"He's a chef, isn't he? Chef called in sick so I put González on," Trey said confidently. "He couldn't do the job so I fired him," he looked at Mia for the expected vote of approval.

Mia avoided his gaze and sat down with composure in a side chair. Sullivan stood behind her, his elegant lean frame ready for action.

Billy appeared in the doorway, his relaxed body standing on the balls of his feet. He turned his wrinkled face cheerfully from one speaker to the next, clearly enjoying the show. Mia glanced at him and he winked cheekily.

"You put him on breakfast with no training?" Maria was aghast. "Then fired him? May I ask why?" she said with clipped syllables.

"He had the gall to serve Mia here a lousy omelette. I heard she had to go and show him how to make one. So I fired him." Trey was proud of his prompt action.

Mia added in her own icy tones, "He had not been trained in our method. I stayed in the kitchen afterwards, and he was doing an excellent job, under the circumstances."

Maria looked at her for guidance and Mia nodded. She'd stand by Maria's decision.

"You threw him in the deep end and fired him when he wasn't perfect," Maria summed up with a frown, tapping her pencil on the desk.

She looked up with decision. "I'm afraid you're not what I'm looking for in my assistant managers, Mr. Sulley. You're fired."

"Wait a minute," Trey backpedaled briskly. "You can't fire me."

Maria repeated, "You're fired."

Trey cut in, "You can't fire me. I'll tell everything I know about you. I mean everything," he threatened vindictively.

Mia felt Billy and Sullivan shift position slightly, ready for action.

Maria continued inexorably, "You're fired, effective immediately. You have two weeks to vacate your house on the island, according to your contract. During this time, you do not have use of the facilities." She held out her hand, "Please hand me your master key card."

Trey looked to Mia for help. "Mia, don't let her do this. I thought we were getting to be friends. I was just trying to help you out. I could tell you all kinds of things about Maria here," he offered with a sly smile.

Mia stiffened, back straight as a board. "This is far from the only issue I have with you, Mr. Sulley. I had several I planned to discuss with Mrs. Sotos tomorrow. We have ample cause for your dismissal."

He protested with a sneer, "You don't run this hotel. You're not the manager here anymore. You're just a rich man's leftovers. Like you care as long as the money rolls in, and you get your fancy vacations."

Mia smiled like a crocodile, "I have the right to fire anyone I want. You're a disgrace to the hotel, and you are fired."

He made a quick move toward her and Sullivan stepped a little forward, balancing on his toes.

"Fine," he backed down and fumbled for his key card. "It's a lousy job anyway."

"I'm glad you feel that way, Mr. Sulley."

Sullivan followed him out the door, herding him like a sheepdog. Billy nodded to Mia, walking alongside their charge. He winked at them as he gently closed the door.

"Whew," Maria said.

"Yes, he's a nasty bit of work," Mia said. "I was going to recommend you let him go when we chatted tomorrow. We just needed to make sure we had documented cause. He's the type that would sue unless we have ammunition. Did you know he's been showing up at the girls' apartments at night?"

Maria said stiffly, "No, I did not know that or his ass would have been out of here long ago." She sighed, collapsing into her chair. "I clearly need to have a team meeting. I should have spotted this."

"Yes, they need to come to you with small problems before they become big ones," Mia said emphatically.

Maria toyed with a pencil. "I thought they did. Everything seemed to be going smoothly."

"It always does, until you hit a bump," Mia told her. She paused, then went on, "Are you going to tell me what he was threatening you with?"

Maria looked uncomfortably away. "Oh, Mia, it's just so embarrassing, I don't want to talk about it. Things I thought were buried so long ago." She looked down at her paperwork. "I maybe gave him one more chance than I should have to avoid the gossip but that's all. There's no way I wouldn't have fired him after he

fired Francisco for no cause." She fiddled with her paperwork, "Can we talk about it tomorrow?"

"It's okay," Mia trusted her old friend and didn't want to add to her discomfort right now. "Just clean up the mess and move on." She'd find out what was going on whether Maria told her or not.

"Right," Maria said with decision. "First thing is a call to Francisco." She picked up the phone, tapping a pencil and Mia left her to it.



Rebecca stood on the balcony in her silk robe, shivering. She looked out at the dark, the lights blurring with her tears. They'd had a wonderful day. It really had been like a second honeymoon, Sam sailing and acting like when they'd met again. They'd had a wonderful dinner and then suddenly, Sam had been distant again.

He'd barely spoken when they came up, seeming angry. He hadn't even noticed the new glamorous nightgown she'd bought for a special night on their trip. He hadn't even looked at her. He'd simply put on his ratty old pajamas and pretended to go to sleep. She knew he wasn't really asleep since he wasn't snoring. He was just laying there, pretending, so he didn't have to talk to her.

There was no point in a fight. Rebecca had left for the living room of their suite, which had a sofa bed. She'd pulled it out and laid down, but she just couldn't sleep.

She heard Sam's door to the hallway close softly, muffled by the wall but still audible. He had gone out somewhere by himself, without her.

She drew the dark red robe tightly around her and swallowed the sleeping pill her doctor had given her for nights she couldn't sleep. It would take effect in a few minutes, and she wouldn't lay awake all night worrying.

She sat looking down the hotel terrace, mind starting to calm, knowing she would sleep soon. People came and went, happy voices chattering and calling. She knew what Mia meant about hotels being fun places. She loved the joy people had on vacations.

They had had so much fun today, sailing in the bay. Life had seemed simple and perfect. And now it was back to this, Sam hiding from her, and her hiding from him. Where had he gone in the middle of the night?

No, she wouldn't think about that tonight. She'd let the medicine lull her to sleep. Any decisions she made tomorrow would be made with a clear head.

The air was heavy and still with hardly any wind. Oppressive. She looked at the scattering of people walking through the palm tree shadows. The palmetto fronds made a clackety noise, percussion to the soft splash of waves. Glasses clinked and guests talked in cheerful voices. She spotted Mia leaving by the back way and strolling down the beach a little, then returning to her cottage.

That sweet young chef who made the wonderful pastries came out carrying a bag, walking very fast down the beach toward the apartments. Late for him to be at work, she thought vaguely.

Maria, the manager, came past, also walking down the beach, her flashlight disappearing in the distance. She looked upset, her steps rapid and clipped. Rebecca thought she wasn't the only one having a bad night.

That assistant manager, Trey, hurried after Maria. He walked angrily down the beach in great strides. She saw his flashlight disappear through the palmetto palms.

She saw Sam appear on the beach, dressed in the same clothes he'd worn today and walking down to the sand. Her heart cried out. She didn't understand what was happening to them. He disappeared past the palmettos, walking through the wave washed sand.

A wedding party went down to the beach, chattering with great bursts of laughter. The men seemed happily tipsy and their wives not much different. They walked through the splashing waves, pants rolled up and sand between their toes. It was good to see people having fun.

Beyond the warm lights, the inky black of the ocean reached out forever under the domed dark sky. Palm trees clattered in the ocean breeze, and the sounds of revelers gradually faded as the night claimed them.

She tried to stay awake to hear Sam come in, but the medicine lulled her to sleep. Eventually, she found her way back to her solitary bed. She hadn't seen Sam again.







## The Morning After

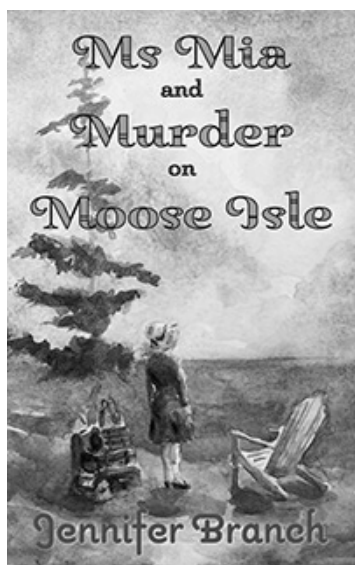
**D**orrie found the body in the morning, walking to work from her apartment. Trey Sulley lay at the edge of the surf, face up with his legs moving in the water. His brown hair was slicked back from his face and covered in wet sand. His eyes stared into nothing, and blood covered his chest.

Dorrie stood there a moment, frozen and staring. The ocean washed the shore, back and forth, and Trey's legs moved with the water, back and forth, like some dance of the dead. Nothing else moved. A seagull shrieked, releasing her from her trance.

She screamed, running to the hotel, the seagulls came with her, screeching, and the sand held her feet as she ran. She made it inside the hospitality team quarters, still screaming.

**To read more of *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Grand Island Hotel*, please purchase this book through Jennifer Branch's website, Amazon or leading retailers.**

## Ms. Mia Murder Mysteries



A Gilded Age mansion on a secluded Maine island, perched on rocky cliffs overlooking the ocean, sets the scene for a classic cozy whodunit. Ms Mia, a vibrant woman of a certain age, savors all life's experiences, cheerfully rearranging hotels and lives to her satisfaction. Glamorous settings hide sinister secrets at Spinel Resorts, a luxurious chain of boutique hotels founded by her late husband.

At the exclusive Moose Isle Inn, Ms. Mia uncovers trouble at a corporate retreat, with a bitter battle over Tisserande Linens' future. Lauren Tisserande fights to revive her Maine hometown with a new factory, but her controlling CEO husband, obsessive CFO, and suspiciously wealthy trustees conspire to stop her. Her dysfunctional sales team flatly refuses to sell the new factory's products, distracted by their own pursuits. When murder threatens Lauren's plans, Ms. Mia unleashes her talent as an amateur sleuth, diving into the investigation with charm, wit—and a glass of champagne. No one gets away with murder at her hotels!

Check in to *Ms. Mia and Murder at Moose Isle Inn*, available August 1, 2025!

## About the Author



Jennifer Branch weaves cozy mysteries with the vibrant flair of her watercolor paintings, inspired by her renown for capturing the Georgia coast. From her Northwest Georgia studio, she pens the Ms. Mia Murder Mysteries series, starring the charming champagne-sipping sleuth Ms. Mia, who solves murders in glamorous resorts. Her debut mystery, *Ms. Mia and Murder at the Grand Island Hotel*, sweeps readers to a Georgia Sea Islands paradise, followed by *Ms. Mia and Murder at Moose Isle Inn*, set on a Maine island.

As a modern impressionist painter, Jennifer infuses her stories with vivid settings, inspired by her artist's eye. When not writing or painting, she roams Georgia's salt marshes, coastal shores, and beyond with her husband, Roger, sons, Edwin and Owen, and dogs, Scout and Sam, finding inspiration in her travels. Visit [Branchstudio.com](http://Branchstudio.com) to join her for more Ms. Mia adventures, books, and art!