

## Chapter One



*In the spring, mature loggerhead females steadfastly swim thousands of miles through the Atlantic to nest in the region of their birth. The females repeat this journey every two to three years.*

**A**LL ROADS LEAD home. That thought mingled with the soothing sound of Debussy as Cara descended from the majestic highlands of Tennessee toward the sultry lowcountry of South Carolina. Her brand-new red station wagon wound its way past racing rivers and creeks that flowed south to the ocean, past billboards advertising fireworks, fruit stands, deserted gas stations, and tumbledown antiques shops. Signs of spring—yellow jasmine blooms against lush greens—dotted the countryside. From time to time a flock of birds would fill the sky, and she would crane her neck to watch them migrating north. A short laugh escaped her lips. *We are all heading home to nest*, Cara thought.

She stretched her long legs as best she could while driving in

skinny jeans. The cuff of her white cotton shirt was stained with coffee from a quick swerve. Everything had been too fast in the past few weeks as she scrambled to pack up and move home—too many fast decisions and too much fast food. And here she was, journeying the same stretch of road again. Going home never seemed to get easier. She glanced into the rearview mirror as the passing years flashed in her mind. How many times had she made this journey back to the Isle of Palms?

At forty, she'd driven back from the chilly North to seek refuge at her mother's beach house in the sultry South, as listless as a rudderless ship. Primrose Cottage had been her sanctuary, as it had been her mother's before her. A special place by the sea to recharge one's batteries and find renewed purpose. At fifty, she'd buried the past and left again, looking for a fresh start. Now, three years later, like the loggerhead sea turtle she was named for, *Caretta* was returning to the only place she'd ever considered home.

She leaned slightly to the right to glance in the rearview mirror again. Her dark eyes were smudged with fatigue and had a few more lines around the corners. She wasn't a child any longer, or even a young woman. Each decision she made now had rippling consequences. Cara felt her resolve stir. She needed to be home now, more than ever.



LINNEA WAS SO done with the four-lane I-26. She'd sped along that endless stretch of highway from the University of South Carolina in Columbia to her home in Charleston so many times in the past

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four years that she could drive it in her sleep. And there were some trips that had come dangerously close to that. Red Bull could only do so much. This was her last one, however. She'd graduated at last, and after a final round of parties, she'd crammed everything she could into her blue convertible Mini Cooper and headed home.

At last she exited in Charleston. If she'd been a tourist, she would have followed the main road and got caught in the horrid logjams on East Bay, Meeting, and King Streets. Every time she came home, there was another hotel going up in the city. Traffic was a nightmare. She tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and swore the whole peninsula was going to sink in the next flood.

But, having been born and raised in Charleston, Linnea was no stranger to the city. She made a sharp right, then shot down Broad Street toward the water, ducking down narrow alleys only locals knew about—bumpy cobblestone roads lined with parked cars. After two more turns, she veered sharply into their driveway on Tradd Street, then slammed on the brakes. Panting and clutching the wheel, she stared at the imposing black iron gate and exhaled in relief that she hadn't hit it. Her father would have tanned her hide if she'd damaged that elaborately curved and exorbitantly expensive ironwork.

"Oh, Mama . . ." she muttered as she collected her wits. Her mother had complained for years about how the tourists brazenly peeked into their walled garden or even through the windows. While gardening one Sunday morning a few months ago, her mother had turned her head to see a strange man standing inside their enclosed garden taking pictures as free as he pleased—

including one of her bent over pulling weeds. She'd screamed at him, but he'd only laughed and strolled away. Her first call was to the police and the next to an ironsmith. Of course, being Tradd Street, it had to be a skilled craftsman who could create an elaborate, Charleston-worthy gate in the style of Philip Simmons. Daddy'd had a fit when he saw the bill.

"Hell, Julia," he'd argued, "that fella just took a picture of your best side."

Mama had won the argument, of course, as she had with each improvement of the grand house on Tradd.

Linnea had completely forgotten about this when she turned into the driveway. Staring at it now, she had to admit that it was imposing, if annoying.

She dug through her purse and pulled out the slip of paper with the combination her mother had e-mailed to her. She raised her sunglasses, then carefully punched in the numbers, and with a gratifying click, the great gate smoothly split open. Linnea felt pretentious driving through and wondered if that was exactly the effect her mother had hoped for. After all, she did love panache.

Linnea parked in front of the stately cream stucco house and tapped the horn twice in announcement of her arrival. Manicured ivy climbed the walls of the garage along trellises—her mother wouldn't allow an untidy mess—and flowers exuberantly tumbled from classic Charleston window boxes. Linnea was always proud to bring her friends to her house near the famous Charleston Battery in the golden perimeter known as South of Broad. The handsome Greek revival never failed to impress with its gracious three-story piazza. But, in the end, it was just home.

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She ran her fingers through her blond hair, which fell smooth and straight to her shoulders, the same cut she'd worn some version of since high school. She swiped on a bit of rosy lip gloss and blush to cover up the effects of one too many graduation parties the previous week. God knew, her mother had binocular vision when it came to telltale red eyes.

Linnea climbed out of the car and smoothed out her floral swing skirt. One of her passions was vintage clothing, especially from the 1950s. No sooner had she closed her door than her younger brother trotted around the house from the garden.

"Cooper!" she called out. Her knight in shining armor was coming to carry her luggage.

Cooper Pringle Rutledge was wearing baggy beige shorts frayed at the hem and a stretched-out Porter-Gaud T-shirt. He was in that adorable stage she liked to call a man-child. At eighteen, he was tall and long-legged like his aunt Cara. Like her, he took after the Rutledge side of the family with his thick, dark hair and eyes and his strong jaw and proud nose. He looked like a young John Kennedy. In contrast, Linnea was a tintype of her grandmother Olivia. Petite, blond, and blue-eyed, she fit the stereotype of a southern belle, even if the expectations chafed her.

Cooper trotted toward her with his friendly, gangly gait. He was restless, like his father, always tossing a ball in the air, rushing from place to place, playing sports, and perfecting his game. Linnea was more solitary. She preferred to read, sew her own vintage-style clothes, or walk outdoors and observe nature. The Tortoise and the Hare, her mother had called them growing up. The fact that Linnea was mad for sea turtles made the description apropos.

“Hey, Sis,” Cooper called out. When he reached her side, he bent to kiss her cheek. “Nice to have you back.”

“Nice of you to *not* make it to my graduation.”

Cooper ducked his head with a wry grin. “Yeah, about that . . . sorry. It was the big Porter-Gaud-Bishop England basketball game.”

“Bigger than my college graduation?” she asked, her words ringing with doubt.

“Yeah, well, I’m on the team.” He looked up at her, eyes twinkling. “We can make it up when you come to my graduation next week.”

Linnea could never stay mad at him. She socked him in the arm. “Yeah, well,” she replied, teasing his phrasing, “I’ll see if I can make it. I’ve got a lot of parties and all. . . .”

They laughed, both knowing she wouldn’t miss it.

A shiny black pickup truck pulled up, dwarfing her car. She was blinded by the amount of chrome on the grille. The big engine rumbled loudly, and inside the cab she saw four boys she’d watched grow up since the first grade. She greeted them all warmly, congratulating them all on somehow managing to graduate high school.

“Gotta go,” Cooper called out as he climbed into the truck—probably the driver’s graduation gift.

Linnea was flabbergasted. “What? You’re leaving? I just got here!”

He shrugged with an endearing grin, and she couldn’t help but laugh. *That boy’s smile is going to get him into trouble someday*, she thought as she called out, “Thanks for helping me with my luggage!”

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The truck's engine roared with a show of testosterone and whipped out of the driveway. Before it squealed down the street, she heard Cooper bark out to a friend, "Shut up, that's my sister!"

Linnea shook her head and wondered what kind of trouble her brother was going to get into this time. Mama had called her just last week, worried to leave Cooper home alone for her graduation since Missy Bond's house had just been trashed by a graduation party.

She wiped away the perspiration forming along her brow. It was four o'clock on a steamy May afternoon. Summer had come early this year. The azaleas had bloomed in February, and it was already hitting the nineties. Early springs and late winters seemed to be the new normal.

She almost burned her fingers opening her trunk. "Thanks a lot, Cooper," she groaned upon seeing it packed to the gills. As she began tugging out the boxes, though, she heard the rumble of the garage door opening.

Rescue came in the form of her father.

"Daddy!"

"Hey, baby girl! Welcome home!"

She set a box down on the cement and hurried into his embrace. Her daddy, Palmer Rutledge, took after his mother's side. Like her, he was blond and blue-eyed. In bare feet he reached five feet eight inches, but most of his shoes boosted his height another inch. Being relatively short was a sore point between him and her aunt Cara. She was tall and dark; he was short and blond. Palmer claimed their mother got the genes mixed up.

He was a handsome man, dependably clean-shaven and well

presented in his usual uniform of polished shoes, a pale polo, and tan trousers. Looking at him in the full sun, Linnea could see his hair was thinning on top. His belly was fuller, too. But it was his ruddy cheeks so early in the day that concerned her. In his hand was a thick-cut crystal glass half-filled with ice and a brown liquid she'd bet good money was bourbon.

"It's a little early for a cocktail, isn't it?"

He squinted and shook the ice in his glass. "I got home early to see my little girl and now she's busting my chops?"

"Sorry, Daddy. I'm just teasing," she said quickly, though it wasn't true. When her parents had come up to Columbia the previous weekend for her graduation, Linnea had been shocked at how much her father drank. He downed bourbon like water, morning and night. When she'd mentioned it to her mother, Julia had simply tightened her lips and shaken her head, both in resignation and refusal to discuss it.

"Look at you," he said, holding her at arm's length. "I swear, you look more like my mama every day." He smiled wryly at her skirt. "Or maybe it's just 'cause you're wearing her clothes."

"Hey, Daddy," Linnea said with a teasing pout. "I made this skirt myself."

"It's right pretty," he said, and gently tapped her nose. "Just like you."

Palmer looked around as he walked toward her car trunk. "Where's Cooper? I sent him out here to fetch your luggage."

Linnea followed him. "He took off when a truck full of his friends pulled up. Lord, all those babies are becoming men already. Unleashed on an unsuspecting world."



"I swear, that boy's never around when you need him. He's perfected the art of the dodge."

"At least he made it through high school."

Her father made a face. "Thanks to a handshake and a hefty donation. Cooper never took to school like you did. He hasn't the sense God gave a mule."

"Oh, he's smart," Linnea countered, reaching into the trunk. Defending her little brother was second nature to her. "He's just lazy." She pulled out a box and handed it to her father. "And he sure is cute. The girls must be going crazy."

Palmer rubbed his jaw to hide his smile. It was obvious her father doted on the boy. "Can't shoo 'em away with a flyswatter." He narrowed his gaze on her. "What about you? You've got some fish on the hook I should meet?"

"Nope," Linnea said, turning back to the trunk.

"Why not?" he replied, hoisting the box. "You're as pretty as they come. I used to sleep with a shotgun by my bed when you were in high school for all the tomcats crying at your window."

She didn't reply because it was true. In high school she'd been an incorrigible flirt. With experience, however, she'd grown choosier.

Palmer started walking toward the house. Over his shoulder he called, "You're not getting any younger, you know."

Linnea felt the drag of the suitcase. "I'm only twenty-two! Hardly an old maid!"

"Your mama married me at your age." He set the box by the door with a thunk. "Graduation in May. A bride in June."

She wanted to say, *And look how well that turned out*, but she wasn't that stupid. Linnea just parked the luggage by the door,

turned on her heel, and walked back to the car to carry the last vestiges of her college life into her childhood home. With each step, she felt her family's expectations closing in around her.



THE SKY WAS as black as tar by the time Cara left the mainland to cross the Connector Bridge to the island. Few stars shone through the night, the moon was hidden by clouds, and the vast acres of salt marsh were as inky as the sky. Ahead, tiny red lights blinked on the island's water tower, and here and there golden light shone from a few houses. At last, she'd arrived.

"Isle of Palms."

The name slid from her mouth in a sigh. The gentle name of the small barrier island off the Charleston coast was synonymous with home to her. A sun-kissed place where visitors came to feel the caress of salt-tinged breezes, dip their toes into the warm waters of the Atlantic, and stare out over the expanse of sea and sky. Here they could escape from the sometimes overwhelming strains of a hectic life beyond the marshland. Her mama used to say that barrier islands protected the mainland from the storms. But in truth, the marshes protected the islands from the stress of the mainland.

Life was different on the islands. The pace was slower, the summer wind stronger. And that threat of losing all possessions during the hurricane season had taught Cara early that true joy came from loved ones, not loved things. Knowing that helped her feel free.

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Cara flashed back to one particular blustery night when a tidal surge from a hurricane had pushed past the dunes to race through the house. She and her mama had huddled in the attic crawl space, clinging to each other while the water rose higher and higher. On that terrible night, Lovie had held her hand, looked deeply into her eyes, and told her she was leaving the beach house to her, because Lovie knew Cara understood the power of the beach house as a sanctuary.

And it was true. Cara had always been happy at the beach house. Her best memories had been born on this island. She prayed that many more happy memories were yet to be forged. She felt buoyed by an air of expectancy.

Out in the ocean's swells, the female loggerheads were biding their time, poised to swim to the beaches and begin the summer saga of nesting. Cara hoped it would be a good year, with lots of nests and thousands of turtle hatchlings to scramble to the sea. In a few weeks, the tourists would also return, swelling the island population to more than double. The summer was a busy time along the southeastern coast, but Cara wouldn't rent her beach house this summer. Or ever again.

This time, she was home to stay.

She turned west onto Palm Boulevard, then slowed when she passed the small gray-brick house on the creek that sat tucked behind a giant live oak tree. She'd spent ten happy years in that house with Brett. A stab of bittersweet memories hitched her breath. Widowhood was a lonely state of being. She'd worked fiercely to create a new life in Chattanooga, but after three years, she still mourned. Now a strange car was parked in the driveway.

With a quick sniff, Cara gripped the steering wheel and drove on. *No looking back*, she told herself. She hadn't returned to this island to wallow in the past. She'd come to build a new future, one filled with hope. Turning seaward, she drove the final few blocks. Anticipation thrummed in her veins the closer she got to home. Then she saw it: Primrose Cottage.

The pale-yellow house sat perched on the dune in the shadows of the starless night, dwarfed by the imposing mansions on either side, as small and demure as the wildflower it was named after. A few of the postwar cottages still remained on the island, nostalgic reminders of a quieter time long gone. Back when a nearly impassable maritime forest dominated the northern end.

Cara drove up the short, pebbled drive and came, at long last, to a shuddering stop. She leaned back against the headrest and breathed deeply, letting the sensation of miles flowing beneath her subside. "I'm home," she whispered, feeling the impact of the words radiate through her body. Home at last.

The porch light shone bright over the ocean-blue door, a beacon of warm welcome.

"Thank you, Emmi," she said, as a small smile of gratitude eased across her face. Emmaline Baker Peterson had been her best friend since childhood. She'd lived next door during the summer months for as long as Cara could remember. Cara knew she'd find milk, bread, and eggs in the fridge; fresh linens on the bed; and windows open to the evening breeze.

A whimpering noise from the backseat immediately brought her to attention. Cara swiftly glanced again in the rearview mirror. She smiled when she saw the sweet face staring back at her. The

baby girl's large, dark eyes blinked sleepily under her dark brown curls as she yawned widely. Then her legs began to kick, and her plump hands moved in agitation as she started whimpering again. Cara jumped into action. The precious child had slept for hours with nary a peep.

"I'm coming," Cara said, and quickly released her seat belt. She swung open the car door and stepped out into the moist, balmy air. She paused a moment, breathing in the welcoming scents of wildflowers and sea after hours in the cramped, air-conditioned car. But another whimper sent her scrambling to the rear door.

"I'm here," she crooned as she lifted the year-old child into her arms, bringing her tight against her breast. The baby smelled of milk and soap and something intangible God put there in His wisdom to protect the innocents. She kissed the top of her head, feeling the delicate strands of hair graze her lips. Soft as a prayer.

"Welcome home, Hope!"



CARA BALANCED THE baby on her left hip as she struggled to find the right key to the front door. On the ground was a box with a chirping bird inside. The baby was slipping, and her arm strained to maintain her grip. At last a key slid in and the lock clicked. With a gusty sigh, she pushed open the front door and hoisted Hope higher on her hip.

"We're here," she said, and stepped inside.

She immediately felt the welcome of the beach house. All was in readiness. The floors had been washed, furniture dusted, flowers set in vases. She could smell the oil soap. A small table lamp shone

golden light across the living room. Not a chair or painting was out of place. All was just as she'd left it three years earlier.

Cara was humbled by her friend's thoughtfulness. After a long day's drive, she didn't have to open the door to a steamy, stagnant, and stuffy house. She always had so much on her mind, projects and endless to-do lists, so when a friend took the time to do something thoughtful to make her life easier—better—just because she cared, Cara had to stop and remember that life was so much more than a job's progress or a list of accomplishments. Life, if lived well, was enjoying random acts of kindness that elicited joy from giver and receiver alike. Each time she was reminded of this, she vowed to try to be a better giver than a receiver.

This was one of the reasons she'd returned to this beach house on Isle of Palms. Cara needed the help of her friends and family to learn how to be a good mother to Hope.

*And I need the security of this little house*, she thought as she surveyed the small rooms. The beach house was not grand, but it had loads of vintage charm. A row of windows overlooked the breadth of the Atlantic Ocean and gave the house an open, airy feeling. Even now when the ocean was cloaked in the evening's velvety blackness, she could hear the gentle roll of the waves through the open windows, as soothing as a cat's purr.

Even though the beach house was now hers, in her mind it would always be the cottage of Olivia Rutledge, Lovie to all who knew her. It had changed little over the years. The art on the walls had been painted by her mother's friends, local artists. The same ruby and blue Oriental rugs colored the wood floors. Even the plump upholstered furniture was Lovie's. When Cara took it over,

she didn't want to change a thing; she'd simply freshened it up. She'd painted the walls a soft ocean blue with crisp white trim, replaced the Palm Beach-y chintz with durable white fabric, and removed the countless knickknacks her mother had in every nook and cranny.

"What do you think?" she asked Hope with a gentle squeeze. "Shabby chic, but not too shabby, eh?"

The baby looked back at her with wide, uncomprehending eyes. Chuckling, Cara kissed her cheek. "Well, we look a bit shabby after that long drive. And," she added with a sniff, "you smell like you could use a change. Let's freshen you up. How does that sound?"

She went out the front door to pick up the bird box. Her canary, Moutarde, skittered about but didn't utter a sound. She set the box on the table, then made a beeline to her childhood bedroom down the hall. She paused at the door, stunned by the transformation. Her old black iron bed was gone, and in its place was a brand-new white crib dolled up with pink floral sheets and ribbon-trimmed blankets. Where her painted wooden desk had once sat was a cushy white upholstered rocking chair with pink piping and a small bookshelf filled with children's books. Cara laughed aloud at seeing the sweet green-and-pink-shaded lamp—it was a sea turtle. Emmi had raised two boys but had always wanted a girl.

"She must've had a field day fixing up your room," she told Hope as she laid her on the changing table. She chatted with the baby to distract her from getting her diaper changed. "You're going to love your aunt Emmi. I've known her since I was just a bit older than you. No one has a smile like Aunt Emmi." Cara envisioned

her friend's wide, Carly Simon smile. "She's going to make you laugh. Oh yes she will," she added, tickling Hope's belly and eliciting a giggle. "And smother you with kisses." She nuzzled Hope's cheeks. Cara had never known what joy a baby's laughter could bring.

"And your Aunt Flo," she continued, reaching into her baby bag and pulling out footie pajamas. Cara still felt clumsy in her newfound motherhood and secretly feared she was doing something wrong. For her, it was all trial and error. "Aunt Flo will tell you the best stories," she said as she lifted Hope into her arms. "Most of them about turtles. She used to take care of me when I was your age."

Cara set Hope inside the crib, noting the quick frown of disapproval that flashed across the baby's face. "It's okay," she crooned. "Just stay here and play with this turtle." She placed a stuffed toy in Hope's lap. "I'll be right back."

Hope immediately began to protest, lifting her arms and crying to be picked up. Cara's heart pinged. She couldn't bear to hear Hope cry. "I just have to get the suitcases," she explained with a hint of panic. "I'll only be a minute."

Hope was having none of it. Her cries followed Cara down the hall and out to the car. They spurred her on like stings from a whip. She dragged suitcases, bags of baby supplies, and personal belongings out of the rear of the car and up the gravel drive and front stairs, not pausing for a breath and working up a sweat. She dragged in the last bag and plopped it on the kitchen counter, winded.

"No wonder only young women have babies," she muttered.



She cast a weary glance at the pile of brown bags littering the kitchen, but a boisterous cry from Hope focused her anew. “A bottle,” she muttered, and rushed to the kitchen sink to fill the tea-kettle. “Mama’s coming!” she called out as she set it on the stove.

As the water heated, Cara put her fingertips to her temples to calm herself. She had adopted Hope in February, and with that single decision she’d once again changed her life. The past four months had been a steep learning curve for a woman in her fifties who had never had much to do with children. A single woman at that. Cara was never one to let the moss grow under her feet, however. Once a decision was made, action followed.

She’d given notice to the Tennessee Aquarium that she was resigning her position as the PR director—a job she’d loved—and made plans to move home to Isle of Palms to raise her child. Despite her seeming confidence, there were times, such as now, when the professional businesswoman was a complete and utter klutz.

The baby began howling. From the box on the dining room table she heard the worried peeps from her bird. With mounting hysteria Cara ripped through her carefully packed bags in search of bottles and formula. She tossed bottles, nipples, and tops onto the counter and finally found a matched set. But her success was short-lived. Opening the formula tin was like breaking into Fort Knox. Especially with her shaky fingers. Just as she pried off the stubborn lid at last, the kettle whistled, and jolting forward to grab it, she bumped the open jar of formula powder. She watched in horror as it plummeted in slow motion to the floor, exploding white, powdery milk all over the clean hardwood.

Cara gasped and stared disbelievingly at the mess. “No, no, no,”

she cried, dropping to all fours and scooping what she could back into the container. As soft and fine as talcum powder, the disrupted formula created milky clouds in the air.

In that ignominious moment, all the stress of the baby's incessant crying mixed with the strain of quitting her job in Tennessee, packing up their things to move to South Carolina, and the long, exhausting drive came crashing down on her. She slid her long legs across the floor, leaned against the counter, and brought her powdery hands to her face as her cries blended with the baby's.

Who did she think she was fooling? She was hopeless when it came to mothering. An utter and complete failure. She was a fifty-three-year-old career woman. Her résumé was great for a PR executive, but she'd never bag a job as a mother. She couldn't even make a bottle without screwing up.

At moments like this, her greatest fear would surface. *Was it a mistake to adopt Hope?*

*Help me, Mama,* she cried into her hands.

The baby's cries pierced through her desolation. Cara was never one to wallow in doubt and self-pity. Her nature was to get things done. And that bottle wasn't going to make itself. She finished scooping up as much formula as she could and dragged herself to her feet. She washed the powder from her hands and face, and with a determined swipe of her nose on her sleeve, she started anew to prepare the bottle. She worked quickly, with steady hands, but as she shook the bottle, she suddenly noticed the house had gone quiet. She froze. Hope had stopped crying.

Cara turned on her heel and rushed to the bedroom. She screeched to a halt at the door and sucked in her breath. Fear flut-

tered in her heart. But as she slowly exhaled, the fear dissipated and wonder took its place. It was as if time were standing still. A hazy white light shimmered near the crib. Hope was standing, clutching the railing. No longer crying, her face bore the sweetest grin of pleasure as she cooed and babbled at the glowing light beside her.

And in that shimmering light Cara saw her mother, or rather, a ghost of Lovie. Transparent yet real. There was no mistaking her. Lovie's hair was pulled back in her usual chignon, her profile serene as she gazed at the child. Then, in a breath, her mother turned her head and looked up.

Cara felt the unspeakable power of a mother's gaze. The light seemed to enter her soul, permeate her being, and warm her. Reassure her. Comfort her. Lovie smiled, and Cara felt the weight of her hopelessness lift from her shoulders. In that miraculous instant, she knew she was going to be all right.

Then, in a blink, the light disappeared, and Lovie was gone.

"Mama?" she called out. Cara suddenly wondered if she'd imagined it all. She shook her head and looked down at Hope. The child gazed back at her with innocent eyes.

Cara hugged the little girl and crooned softly as she rocked her in her arms. The room was filled with the scent of jasmine. Her mother's scent.

"Thank you, Mama."