

Prologue

Allison had always loved the beach. It was the ocean that had persuaded her to leave Atlanta when Michael was offered the position at McIntosh. She loved the ocean in all seasons, in all weathers. One of her fondest memories was of a Saturday afternoon in a beach house in January. A winter storm had settled in; black clouds hung low over the water, lightening flashed, and the waves pounded the sand. Alicia was a child. She had hidden behind her bed until Allison fished her out, carried her into the living room, and sang to her softly as they watched the surf and the clouds and the rain.

She crossed the bridge to Folly Island and turned south toward the point. The park, of course, would be closed, but she could walk out onto the beach, breathe the salt air, feel the cold water, and perhaps begin to get control again.

She could think of no way to make the situation right. This was unfamiliar territory for Allison, who, ordinarily, would identify a problem, analyze it, and implement a solution. She could identify the problem, but she could not understand it, and there appeared to be no solution. Her fate, her marriage, her happiness seemed to be outside of her control.

How did things come to this? she wondered. What happened to us? We were happy. I suppose we were happy. I was. When was it that things began to change?

Allison's mind drifted back. Stephanie came to town last summer. Is that when it started? She thought not. Michael had already begun to change by the time Stephanie actually moved to Charleston. It was before June. Yes, surely it was before our vacation, before he acted like a little boy, tossing me into the lake. Yes, before that.

She looked down at the ocean. The tide was rolling in. The reunion! Michael's high school reunion! That's when everything began to change.

Reunion

“What is that?”

Allison Bannister pointed to a letter that her husband, Michael, had thrown into the trash pile along with ads and credit card offers.

“What? Oh. High school reunion.” He glanced at the letter. “Thirty years.”

Michael scanned the telephone bill.

“These bills are impossible! Phone service, internet, data usage . . .” He shook his head. “They’re different every month and I never know why.”

“You’re not going to your high school reunion?”

“No.”

“But you would love it! See old friends.”

“See a bunch of fat, gray-haired people who I haven’t seen in, what was it, thirty years? A blast.”

“You should go. When is it? Where?”

“It’s in late April. In Atlanta. It runs for four days, believe it or not! A golf tournament, trip to Stone Mountain, a reception, dinner, church on Sunday. I think not.”

Allison picked up the letter. “You could go. Well, we could go – on Friday – have dinner at that cute restaurant in Buckhead, shop on Saturday morning, go to the reception and dinner, and drive home after early mass on Sunday. Reunions are fun!”

“You’ve been to one?”

“Of course. My twentieth. Remember?”

“Strange things happen at reunions.”

“What things? It’s simply an opportunity for old friends to get together, reminisce, and enjoy re-living old times. Remember what it was like to be a teenager?”

“Not really. It was a long time ago.”

“What bad could possibly come from seeing old friends, swapping stories, having a few laughs?”

“Well, I heard that after the last reunion, one of the women found she was pregnant. They say that the child looks just like her old boyfriend.”

“Michael!”

“Probably why they are going to church on Sunday rather than having an alumni-only breakfast. I heard that Carol and Stan were supposed to be at breakfast but never showed up.”

“Carol?”

“The woman who got pregnant,” Michael grinned.

Allison slapped his shoulder. “You really are impossible!”

“Mom! Dad! I got the job!” Alicia, their seventeen year old daughter, burst through the door. She attended a boarding school in Charlotte and was at home for Easter break.

“Tell me about it.” Michael said.

“I’ll be a lifeguard! Not working concessions at all! My schedule will be twelve to seven, five days each week. I won’t start until June 8, so it won’t interfere with our trip to the mountains. They have lifeguards until Labor Day, so I can work as late into August as I want.”

“Do you sit in the lifeguard chair for seven hours straight?” Allison sounded concerned.

“No more than three and a half hours a day in the chair, no longer than thirty minutes at a stretch. Other times, I’ll be walking on the beach, or in the water with a float, or in a kayak.”

“Now your swimming suit . . .”

“Here’s one of the suits.” Alicia pulled a red, one-piece bathing suit from her back pack. “He laughed at me when I told him my mother had to approve the suit!”

“I suppose it’s alright.”

“Mom, it covers more than yours does! Besides, most of the time I’ll have a tee shirt over it.” She pulled out a bright yellow tee shirt. “Or a long sleeve rash guard.” She held up a long-sleeved yellow shirt. “And a floppy hat. I’ll be so attractive! Every boy on the beach will lust for me!”

“Alicia!”

“Sorry. So is it alright? I can take the job?”

“It will be fine, Sweetheart,” Michael said. “You can take the job.”

“Yea!” Alicia jabbed her fist in the air and started upstairs. “I’ll call Mr. Richards and tell him it’s alright.” She stopped. “Oh, one other thing.” She walked back into the kitchen. “I met the cutest guy while I was at the Rec Office. His name is Mark, he’s just finishing high school, and he’s going to the College of Charleston in the fall. He asked me out on Friday night. Can I go? Please?”

“Does Mark have a last name?” Michael asked. “Where does he live?”

Alicia held up one hand. “Okay, Dad, I have all of the required data.” She grinned. “His name is Mark Wilson. He lives on Sullivan’s Island and goes to Wando High. His father sells insurance, and they go to church at Stella Maris. His mother paints.”

“Jon Wilson is his father?”

“I didn’t ask his father’s name. I don’t know.”

“Where are you going?”

“There’s a new Brad Pitt movie out on Friday. We’re going to see that and get something to eat.”

“His mother does what?” Allison asked. “Paints?”

“That’s what he said.”

“I don’t know . . .”

“What’s wrong with painting?” Alicia demanded.

“Michael?”

“Have him come in for a few minutes when he picks you up.”

“So I can go?”

“You’ll be back by midnight.” It was not a question.

“Daddy, that’s so early! I’m seventeen . . .”

“And midnight gives you plenty of time to do anything you should be doing and a lot that you shouldn’t be.”

“Okay!” Alicia bounded up the stairs. Her father was so serious, and they were both so picky when it came to boys. One guy had come to pick her up and was so terrified after meeting her father that he barely talked the entire date.

On the other hand, her father could be swayed by logic. Her mother’s rules were set in stone and never changed, regardless of the circumstances. I’ll have to prepare Mark, she decided. Being home by midnight was no big deal; they would likely be back by eleven. However, if she could set a precedent for the summer . . .

Michael arrived home late on Friday afternoon. He changed into his running clothes and walked downstairs. Alicia, dressed for her date, was pacing around the house.

“Dad, remember that Mark is picking me up at 6:15. He’s coming early just to talk to you! Don’t go running off!”

“Alicia, it’s five-thirty. Why are you dressed so early?”

“I don’t know. Nervous. I guess. Seeing that I attend a girls’ school and most of the teachers live in a convent, I haven’t had many dates!”

“You chose the school. You could be at home, riding to Bradford each morning with your mother. Plenty of boys at Bradford.”

“I know. I picked the school and I love it, Dad. Really. But I don’t get to date except when I’m at home. So I’m nervous!”

“I’m just going for a short run. I’ll be back in plenty of time to talk with Mark.”

“Don’t be mean to him, Dad!”

Michael gave her a blank look. “What do you mean? I just want to meet him.”

Michael walked outside and began to stretch. Going off to school had been Alicia’s idea and Michael had not been thrilled with it. She had chosen the school because of its emphasis on science and mathematics. Alicia was, well, brilliant in math, so different from either of her parents. Of course, Bradford, the private school where Allison taught English, had an excellent science and math program, too. Allison suspected that Alicia had chosen a boarding school to get away from her, and Michael had to admit that the two of them had been at loggerheads since Alicia turned thirteen.

The Bannisters lived in a Charleston single house near the harbor. Like other single houses, it was a single room wide, several rooms deep, and three stories tall. A door opened out onto the street, but the primary entrance was from the side porch, which ran the length of the house. There was a small lawn, part of which had been paved as a parking area, a swimming pool off of the kitchen, and a garage off to one side. They had moved into the house about a year after Alicia’s birth.

Michael started to jog. Their house was near the tourist section, but he wouldn’t encounter many of them strolling the sidewalk until he had covered about two-thirds of his route. Michael ran about three days a week, just to stay in shape, a far cry from his schedule in high school and college, when he ran competitively. His last marathon had been what? Fifteen years ago? Maybe twenty.

Allison had never really liked it when he ran competitively, but she seemed to tolerate it when it was simply for exercise. He had never understood her feelings about running, but, in any case, his law practice had made training difficult. Michael was a partner in the McIntosh Law Firm, one of the oldest and largest firms in the city.

Michael’s route led him around the neighborhood, down to the water and along the Battery. As he reached the gardens, pedestrian traffic increased. He swerved around small groups, ran down the street, up the steps at the far end of the sea wall, and along the wall for about a block. Turning left, he headed toward home. It was just after six, and he did want to arrive ahead of Alicia’s date.

Alicia ran ahead of her parents as mass ended the next morning. When Michael and Allison reached the door, she was standing on the sidewalk, talking to Mark Wilson.

“Isn’t that the boy she went out with last night?” Allison asked.

“Yes, he is.”

“Well, what is he doing here? Alicia said he goes to church on the Island.”

“I would guess that he came to see Alicia before she goes back to school. Must have been a good date.”

“This is really inappropriate, Michael.”

“Allie, lighten up. Sometimes I think you look for reasons to fight with Alicia.”

“He just came to say good bye,” Alicia told them when they caught up with her. “We had to come in so early last night.” She glared at her father.

“Ow!” Cynthia jumped as the rubber band popped her arm. “Williams, stop it. Now! Mr. Bannister doesn’t like horseplay!” Williams was an intern who was working at McIntosh during the spring semester.

“But Mr. Bannister is not here!” He laughed. “He has gone to lunch.”

“He’s down the hall, and he’ll be back any second. He’s going out of town to his high school reunion this afternoon; he’s not in a good mood.”

“Ow! Williams . . .”

“It slipped,” he said, leaning back in his chair on the opposite side of the reception area.

“He will be furious if he finds you shooting rubber bands! Don’t you have work to do?”

“Does that man ever smile?”

Of course!” Cynthia replied. She had been Michael’s assistant for the past three years. “I saw him smile at the Christmas party last year.” She laughed. “It doesn’t happen often, though.”

“Well, he needs to lighten up. That will be my mission for the next month.”

“I think you have a death wish!” Cynthia picked up one of the rubber bands, put it around one finger, pulled it taut, and let it fly. As she released it, Michael walked through the door, and the band hit the side of his head.

“Oh! Oh! Mr. Bannister! I’m so sorry! I’m so sorry!” She glared at Williams, who was trying to stifle his laughter.

Michael turned to Cynthia. “This is an office, Ms. Harris, not a target range!”

“Yes, sir. Of course. I’m so sorry!”

“Is the McElroy Will ready?”

“Almost, sir.”

“Playing with Mr. Williams is more important than your work, Ms Harris?”

“No, sir. I was just . . .”

Michael raised his hand. “Save it! Both of you get back to work.” Michael walked into his office.

“I told you! I’m going to kill you!” Cynthia hissed.

Williams grinned.

“The Will, Cynthia!”

Last night’s dinner was delicious, Michael thought as he dressed for the reception. And Allie had a good time shopping. Actually, Michael had bought a couple of ties and a new shirt. He had almost purchased an iPad, too. “I’ll give it some thought,” he told the salesman, certain that Allison would be appalled at the purchase. She’s not exactly techno-phobic, Michael thought; she simply has no interest.

Life was much easier when Allie was happy, Michael had found, and she was happy when nothing happened to upset her ordered life. The idea that her husband might become absorbed with a handheld computer would be incomprehensible to her.

Anyway, he decided, I don’t need an iPad. It would simply be another toy.

“Michael! Can you help me with the necklace? I don’t know how anyone expects you to fasten it when it’s so small and you can’t see the clasp.” Allison was wearing a simple black dress and diamond earrings that matched the necklace.

“Is that not what husbands are for?” he asked.

“Among other things.” She kissed him. “How do I look?”

“Fantastic. Like the wife a well-to-do attorney.”

“That was my goal. You look good, too – like the well-to-do attorney to whom I’m married! Ready?”

“I suppose” He sighed. “Let’s go.”

“Relax, Michael. You’re going to enjoy it!”

A worn, yellowed banner hung across the mezzanine, “THE CLASS OF ’80 RULES!!!!!!”

Michael smiled, “The banner! I can’t believe that someone kept it!” He turned to Allison.

“Someone hung it across the front of the school on the first day of our senior year. I thought the janitor trashed it.”

Michael’s class had about four hundred students and, judging by the crowd, most of them had shown up tonight. Michael threaded his way through the crowd to the registration table and returned with two badges. His displayed his photograph from the yearbook and his name in large letters. Allison’s was smaller, bearing her name and the word “Spouse” underneath.

Allison looked at Michael’s photograph. “You were so cute! And so young! You look like a little boy!”

“That’s terrific. You see how large my name is? That’s so half-blind alumni have a fighting chance of not having to ask who I am.”

“Don’t start, Michael.”

“For yours, I had a choice of “Spouse” or “Significant Other.”

“Well, you chose correctly!”

“I don’t see anyone I know,” Michael said as he looked around. “And see, they’re all . . .”

“Fat, old, and gray, I know. Wait! I recognize someone! There’s Susan Lisse.” Susan was a friend from college. She was married to one of Michael’s classmates, Stan Worthy. Michael barely remembered Stan.

As Susan and Allison began to talk, Michael and Stan stood awkwardly at their sides. “What do you do, Michael?”

“I’m an attorney.”

“An ambulance chaser! Did you know that if all of the lawyers in the world were laid end-to-end then it would be a good thing!” Stan screamed with laughter.

Michael forced a smile at the old joke, wondering how much Stan had been drinking.

“I’m in paper, myself! Any kind. Any form. You name it! Tissue, napkins, newsprint, stationery. Get it in boxes, on rolls, whatever. Sales are booming, Michael! Southeast, the entire southeast, that’s my territory! I fly everywhere. Travel a lot, four to five, sometimes six days a week!”

Michael was thinking that Susan must appreciate her husband’s schedule when a voice boomed out.

“Michael Bannister! Michael! Where have you been?”

Michael turned to find Brad Wilks, one of his best friends in high school, striding across the room. He grabbed Michael in a bear hug. “I’ve been looking for you! I heard you were coming tonight!”

“Heard it from whom?”

“Michael!” a woman’s voice startled him. Linda Monroe Littlejohn ran toward him from across the room. She threw her arms around him, kissing him on the lips. “Michael! Michael! It’s so good to see you! It’s been so long!”

Michael hugged Linda, and glanced at Allison, her eyes like saucers. He mouthed “I warned you.” Linda’s husband ambled over. Tom Johnson, Ben Williams, and their wives joined the group.

“The gang’s all here!” Brad declared.

“How about Pamela and Becca?”

“They’re coming! They’re coming!” Linda shouted. “I can’t believe it! It’s been so long!” Stan and Susan drifted away.

“Michael, do you remember old Mr. Willoughby?”

Michael smiled. “Of course. Who could forget him?”

“Did you know he’s still alive?”

“No way! He was ancient!”

“Everyone is ancient when you’re eighteen. Turns out he was only forty-five when we were in school. Almost as ancient as we are, now! He lives in Lawrenceville. Didn’t stop teaching until five years ago. Do you remember when we burned his butt?”

“You did what?” Allison was aghast. “You burned your teacher?”

Michael laughed. “Well, yes, we burned our teacher.”

“Tell her, Brad,” Linda laughed. “Tell her what happened.”

Brad took a deep breath. Allison looked at the faces around her. The gang waited to hear a story that they remembered so very well. Their spouses glanced at each other as if to say, “What on earth?”

“Well. Mr. Willoughby was the chemistry teacher, you know. One day in chem lab, he was leaning across a desk, trying to help two dumb jocks.”

“Watch your language!” Tom had played football.

“Helping two INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGED FOOTBALL PLAYERS to balance an equation. Well,” he looked at Allison. “You know what a Bunsen burner is? Those little devices that look like a small pipe on a stand that were attached to a propane tank or something?”

Allison nodded.

“Well, you would turn on the gas, hold a match at the top, and the gas would light. You could change the size of the flame by changing the amount of gas.”

“You used these for what?”

“To heat chemicals. Anyway, Mr. Willoughby was leaning across the desk about three feet away. Michael held the burner, pointed it at Mr. Willoughby’s butt . . .”

“Michael!”

“I turned up the gas and struck a match. The flame shot across the aisle. Hit Mr. Willoughby, and he jumped, I swear, three feet! Landed across the desk and almost fell off on the other side!”

“I remember!” Linda was laughing hysterically. “I remember! You could hear the laughter in the next building!”

“Did you get into trouble?”

“Well, Mr. Willoughby turned around. His eyes were big, his face was purple. Michael was laughing so hard that he dropped the burner. It fell onto my back pack, and the pack caught fire. The flame shot up, about two feet, I guess!”

“Mr. Willoughby saw the flame, grabbed the water hose that he kept for such an emergency and sprayed down the book pack, soaked me, soaked Michael, even soaked Linda, since she was standing next to us. Then he started to laugh!”

“That’s all?”

“We had to clean up the mess. Michael had to give Linda his sweatshirt to wear. Mr. Willoughby’s pants were burned through. The next morning, he hung them on the board with a sign, “The Work of Bannister and Wilks, Arsonists.”

The group roared, except for Allison. “I’d have had you both expelled.”

“Do you remember the flag?” Tom asked.

The group howled.

“Michael tell you about the flag?” Tom asked Allison.

“No . . .”

“I have to tell you about the flag!” Brad gasped.

“It was November of our senior year. Drayer High, across town, was our big rival. Blue Devils, they were.” He turned to the group. “Remember our cheer?”

“Beat the devil out of Drayer! Beat the hell out of Drayer!” The group chanted.

“Anyway, Allison, that November, on the Sunday before the game, someone managed to climb the Drayer High flagpole, and tie one of our flags at the top. The school’s janitor was checking on something and found it at about eight o’clock that night.” He looked around. “What did the flag say?”

“Beat the devil out of Drayer! Falcons Rule!”

That’s right! Falcons rule! That’s us, of course, Creekside Falcons. Well whoever did this, took the chain off of the pole so that it would be hard to climb and spread lard on the pole so that it was impossible to climb! There was nothing the janitor could do, so he left it until the next morning.”

“In the morning, the Drayer students were all standing around the pole, shouting unprintable things! Three of them tried to climb the pole and got themselves covered with grease!”

“That’s awful!” Allison cried.

“The Drayer principal had to call the electric company with one of those trucks that they use to lift guys to the top of electric poles. They took down the flag, and the janitor had to wash the lard off of the pole.”

“What happened to the flag?”

“They burned it at their pep rally. Didn’t matter. They lost the game!”

Everyone cheered. “Beat the hell out of Drayer.”

“Who put the flag on the pole?” Allison demanded.

No one spoke, but all eyes turned to Michael.

“Michael!”

He held up his hands, declaring his innocence. “I deny it! Like I told the principal the next morning, I was in church with Linda.”

“At mass? On Sunday night?” Allison asked.

“I was with Linda. Training Union, they call it.”

“Yeah,” Brad laughed. “At the Baptist church across the street from Drayer High!”

“Linda was with me the entire evening.”

“With you – to break your fall if you slipped!”

“The preacher saw me! He told Linda’s father so.”

I’ve never seen Michael so relaxed, so talkative! Allison thought.

“Do you remember the key?”

Linda blushed. “We don’t need to hear about the key.”

“Go on, Linda. Tell her about the key!”

Linda sighed. “Michael and I were both on the debate team in the tenth grade. We were at a tournament in West Virginia, spending the night in a hotel, about thirty students and two coaches.”

“That’s not enough adults,” Allison said.

“Tell me! About two a.m. our telephone rang. Half asleep, I heard Michael reading something.”

“‘What are you reading,’ I asked.”

“The piece of plastic attached to your room key.”

“Michael!”

“How do you have my room key?”

“You gave it to me.”

“Well, give it back! Now!”

“I was so angry.”

“The phone clicked. About ten seconds later our room’s door flew open – Michael had the key, of course – Michael and Brad and Tom and Ben,” she pointed to each in turn, “ran into the room, throwing water balloons and shaving cream! They attacked us and then hit the room next to us through the connecting door!”

“Michael!”

“There were girls jumping up and down! Screaming, near hysterical!” Brad added. “I never imagined that girls wore so little to bed!”

“Michael’s first water balloon hit Linda on the chest. She was soaked completely!” Tom laughed.

“Everybody was soaked!” Linda said.

“Talk about a wet tee shirt!” Ben added. “You should see a wet nightgown – wow!”

“It certainly made the trip educational,” Michael added.

Linda was laughing as hard as any of the men. “They finally left. We all started laughing about it and began to plot how we would get even.”

Allison looked around the group.

“If you were my students, on one of my trips, you would be lucky if all I did was have you expelled.” Michael could tell from her expression that she was dead serious. “If I had been Linda, I would have never so much as spoken to you, again,” she said to Michael.

“Really?” Michael smiled. “That was when Linda and I started dating. I took her to a movie the next Saturday. Kissed her good night, as I recall.”

Allison shook her head. This is not the Michael Bannister I know! She thought.

“How did you get revenge?” Tom’s wife asked.

“I told you,” Michael said. “She started dating me!”

Linda hit him on the arm. “I’ll . . .”

She was interrupted by an announcement.

“Class of 1980! Dinner is served!”

They trooped into the dining room and found seats together. As they finished dessert, the class president announced that, of the four hundred ten members of the graduating class, three hundred eighty were still alive, and three hundred fifty were present that evening. The group fell silent as the names of the deceased were read; some had died from illness, some from drugs,

others in accidents, a few in Desert Storm. The lights dimmed, a screen unrolled, and a video began.

In the first slide, the banner that hung in the mezzanine appeared, hanging from the second story of the school. "Turn Back the Clock" was stamped across the image. There were cheers from around the room.

"I wonder who hung that banner." Tom whispered across the table. The others snickered, and Linda pointed at Michael. "The principal was furious!" She whispered to Allison.

The video was a collage of photographs of the class, many taken from the yearbook, others from collections hidden away for years in shoe boxes. Allison searched each image for Michael. She found him in the stands at a basketball game, and in the posed picture of the Physics Club (Michael was in the physics club?). Allison knew that Michael had painted when he was in high school. She saw him when he was awarded a blue ribbon in the art contest at the State Fair. In another photograph he stood in front of a painting that hung in the school's front hall. There he was, standing beside Linda in the Art Club photograph (Linda was an artist?). In another, he was crossing the finish line, winning first place in the State track meet. She spotted Linda in the background cheering him on.

She saw him in a crowded hallway, between classes. There he was, pouring something into a test tube in the chemistry lab. In another, he was leading the Pledge of Allegiance at the Honor Society assembly.

There were photographs of the principal, several teachers – "That's Mr. Willoughby," Linda said, pointing to a middle-aged man with shaggy hair – the football team, the band making a capital 'C' during halftime, graduation. As the music slowed, the last image was one of Michael, a smile on his face, a pack over one shoulder, his other arm flung loosely around Linda's neck as they walked toward the parking lot.

They were certainly cute, Allison thought. She looked over at Linda, who sat next to Michael, her hand resting on his arm. She is still beautiful. I wonder what happened to them.

The video ended, and dinner concluded. Michael had a good time, tonight, Allison thought. I was right to make him come.

After dinner, Michael and Allison walked about the hotel's grounds.

"What happened to you and Linda?"

"We broke up."

"Why?"

"Oh, the July after graduation, we had an argument. Something silly. We stopped dating."

Michael was quiet for a few seconds.

"I saw her hug Tom, I think. It was really stupid. Linda hugged everybody. I think it was one of those arguments that people have when they know that they are going their separate ways. They are going to split up, and having an argument, having a fight, makes it all easier. It's simpler to leave someone when you are angry than when you are in love."

"I don't understand."

"We were going to college. I was going to UGA, Linda to Barnard, in New York. We weren't going to see each other again."

"Well, Christmas, Easter, summer ..."

"No, Linda was leaving. She wasn't coming back. Do you remember, a couple of weeks ago, we were talking about that poem, 'Richard Corey'?"

"Yes."

“I told you about the student in my high school, her father beat her, her mother was an alcoholic?”

“Yes.”

“That was Linda.”

“You’re joking.”

“Not at all. You asked why no one reported us for attacking the girls’ room. Her father would have blamed her, and given her a beating. That’s why it was important for the Baptist preacher to tell Mr. Monroe that Linda and I were in church. If he thought that I had put the pennant on the Drayer flag pole, then she would have been guilty by association. Linda wasn’t just going to college. She was escaping.”

“What does Linda do now?”

“She majored in art at Barnard, has a master’s in art history. She’s a curator at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.”

“Wow! I can’t believe you’re the same person who you were in high school! How many laws did you break when you put that flag on the pole? And attacking the girls’ room! And burning your teacher’s pants!”

“I never admitted to the flag pole. Remember, the preacher said I was in church!”

“Honestly, Michael, you certainly have changed!”

Michael hesitated. “I suppose I have.”

They rode the elevator in silence. As they reached their room, Michael stopped.

“I was thinking about the video. ‘Turn Back the Clock.’ Wouldn’t it be great if we could do that? Turn back time? Crawl through a worm hole and be back in high school?”

“You can go back to nineteen eighty if you want, but you’ll go without me!”

“Why?”

“If I were to return to high school, I would be returning to a convent! Being there for four years was more than enough!”

She took the key card from his hand, pushed it into the lock, and opened the door. Looking back at Michael, she smiled. “I’ll give you a sample of what you’ll miss if you use that worm hole.”

Michael smiled, too. They walked into the room, and the door closed behind them.

Literary Tour

“Six o’clock! Time to get up!”

Monday morning, Allison swept into the bedroom, toweling herself dry, flipping on the lights.

“Time to get up!” she popped Michael’s bottom with her hand.

Michael rolled over, squinting into the light. “It’s just six o’clock!”

“I let you sleep as long as I could. The buses will arrive in an hour, the kids fifteen minutes later, and we’re leaving at seven-thirty.” Allison pulled on a pair of khakis, and a blue tank top. Her blonde hair was in a pony tail.

Michael groaned. Allison was leaving for a week on her annual literary tour of New England. For the past decade, she had taken the American lit students to visit some of the places they had been reading about all year: Boston, Lexington and Concord, the Alcott’s home, Walden Pond. Michael didn’t see how she did it. He’d gone as a chaperone about eight years ago, and he had vowed “Never again!” Six days, forty kids, Allison’s sunrise to sunset schedule; they were more than he could handle.

“The buses won’t arrive until seven-thirty, the kids will be there by seven-forty-five, and you will leave about eight o’clock. We’ve plenty of time.”

“Some of the kids will be early, the buses have sworn they’ll be on time, and I need to be there before anyone else.”

“Allie, come lie down for five more minutes.”

Allison sat on the bed beside him and brushed his hair back from his forehead.

“I’d love to, but it won’t be five minutes, it will be thirty, and I’ll need another shower. So, up!” She pulled the sheets off the bed.

Pulling a shirt on over the tank top, she started down stairs. “I’ll start the coffee and pour the cereal!”

“Told you!” Allison smiled. They had arrived at school just before seven, and the buses were waiting in the parking lot. A few of the students had arrived, too, and were milling about. Michael took Allison’s luggage to the first bus and handed them to the driver. He recognized the man from previous trips.

“Good luck!”

The driver smiled. “Oh, we’ll do fine. Miss Allison runs a good trip! She does a fine job!”

“Better you than me!” Michael slapped him on the back and moved up the steps, out of the way. Ten minutes later, the other teachers had arrived. Allison and a tall man with black hair and blue eyes were checking students’ names on a list and directing each to the assigned bus. When almost everyone had boarded, Allison came over to talk to Michael.

“We’re almost loaded. Waiting for a couple of stragglers.”

“Who is the tall guy with the black hair?”

Allison turned to look. “That’s Bill McPherson. Teaches social studies. His wife is an attorney; lives in Charlotte, some big case that she can’t leave. He’s new this year.”

“So he didn’t know better?”

“That’s not fair. Betty is making her second trip. It’s Linda’s third.”

“Masochists.”

“You’re terrible. Oh, look, here are the last two.”

A car pulled up with two girls and a pile of luggage. Allison turned back to Michael.

“Okay. Here is a copy of our schedule: where we’ll be each night; when we should arrive; and each hotel’s telephone number. If we have a problem, I’ll call you; and here, these are the first parents on the call chain.”

Michael had heard the same departure instructions each year. While Allison talked, he was looking at a woman in a dark SUV parked on the other side of the lot. She looked familiar, although he couldn’t quite place her. Probably a parent, he thought.

“Now this is a reminder list, things I don’t want you to forget. I know you don’t like being told what to do, but sometimes, you get so involved in what you’re doing that you simply forget.”

Michael took the list. “Monday. Get the mail?”

“I usually bring it in.”

“Dinner in the freezer. Feed the cat.”

“I actually took your dinner for tonight down to thaw. That’s a reminder to thaw tomorrow’s.”

“Go to bed by ten? You’ve given me a curfew?”

“I was just being silly.”

Michael looked at Tuesday’s list. “Think about me?”

“Well, I won’t be here and, since it’s Tuesday and, generally we, well, I wanted you to at least think about me.”

Michael folded the list and put it in his coat pocket.

“I’ll think about you every night, Allie.”

“I know you will.” Allison paused. “And don’t go off chasing Linda Littlejohn!”

“What?”

“Last night, you had a dream, and you were running down a dark alley or hallway, shouting ‘Linda, come back! Come back!’ You know what they say about dreams.”

“The random firing of neurons?”

“No. They predict the future!”

“Well, I won’t chase Linda. Not this week, anyway.” Michael smiled. “Have a good trip, Allie.”

“I love you Michael.”

“I love you, Allie.”

Allison reached up and kissed him.

A student’s voice rang out. “PDA! PDA! Ms. Bannister’s doing PDA!”

Allison blushed and they both laughed.

“See you Saturday,” she called as she climbed onto one of the busses to give final instructions.

“Listen up! Everybody! Quiet! We’re about ready to leave. All of you received and signed copies of the rules for the trip. I want to emphasize three. First, stay with the group. Do not wander off by yourself. Second, do what the teachers tell you to do. Finally, do not become overly friendly with your girlfriend or boyfriend.”

“You mean no public display of affection, Ms. Bannister? No PDA?” The bus erupted in laughter. Allison waited for it to die down.

“I’m even more interested in having no private displays, Jeffrey.” Again, the students laughed.

“I don’t expect any problems from this group, but, in case someone has other plans, know that I have a school-issued cell phone with your parents’ numbers in the contact list. If there is a

problem, I am perfectly willing to call them, day or night. If I do, I will let you explain exactly why I found it necessary to call. My experience is that if I call a student's parent, that student does not have a happy homecoming! Any questions?"

As she started down the steps to go to the other bus, she turned. "Oh. I forgot. Contrary to rumor, I did not forget my hairbrush."

She delivered the same instructions on the second bus. Then, she turned to the driver. "Mr. Johnson, I believe we are ready to depart – right on time!"

As the buses pulled away, Stephanie Mueller turned the key in the ignition of the dark SUV. Bill McPherson was her husband. Stephanie lived four hours away, in Charlotte. She was in town for an interview, and she had driven Bill to school this morning.

Stephanie had noticed Allison as she took charge this morning, organizing the boarding process. Bill had been talking all year about this teacher named Allison, and Stephanie knew that she was in charge of the trip. It was good to put a face to a name.

She noticed Allison's blonde hair, and blue eyes, her flat stomach and her terrific figure. Just Bill's type, she thought. I wonder if he's sleeping with her yet. She considered the question and decided "probably not." Since he had talked about Allison so much over the course of the year, she had posed the question to Bill a couple of times. He had always denied it, and, even though Bill could be evasive when he did not want to answer a question, Stephanie could always tell when he lied. Besides, Allison certainly seemed fond of the man who had been standing on the steps. "No PDA!" Stephanie laughed. You could always depend on kids.

As Stephanie pulled out, the man who had been with Allison strode across the parking lot to a silver Lexus. "You know, he looks familiar!" she said aloud.

Stephanie glanced at her watch. I have plenty of time before my interview, she thought. I'll be able to get some coffee and collect my thoughts. We passed a little café on the way to school. I can stop there.

Michael paused to let the SUV pass. You have to admire Allison, he thought. She is organized, plans well, and leaves little to chance. Good traits in an administrator. Good traits when planning a field trip. But she reminded me to think of her on Tuesday night? He shook his head and laughed. "Only Allie!"

Michael climbed into his car. He had plenty of time before his first appointment. He could stop at Rita's for coffee.

He followed the SUV as he turned left out of the parking lot and, again, as he turned right a block later. The SUV took the single vacant space across from Rita's, and Michael pulled into the small lot on the side. Michael loved Rita's. The food was good and the staff were friendly. He and Allie ate breakfast there on Saturday morning.

Michael saw the blonde woman from the SUV sitting at a table as he walked through the door. "Hi, Joanne," he called to the waitress. "Just coffee this morning!"

"Morning, Mr. Bannister! Coffee will be right up!"

Stephanie almost jumped when she heard the familiar voice and the name.

"Michael Bannister!" She stood as she called his name.

Michael looked puzzled.

"I'm Stephanie! Stephanie Mueller!"

Michael's mouth dropped open. "Stephanie!" he hugged her as she rushed to him. "It's so good to see you! Sit down! Joanne, bring Ms. Mueller coffee, too, please. You do want coffee?"

"I haven't changed in that department!" Stephanie laughed.

“So, do you live here? Visiting?”

“My husband lives here. I live in Charlotte.”

“You were at Bradford this morning, weren’t you? The dark SUV. You pulled out just ahead of me. I almost rear-ended you at the light.”

“Yeah, I was at Bradford, dropping my husband off for a field trip. You were there, too, giving that pretty woman some PDA.” Stephanie laughed.

“My wife, Allison. She plans the tour each year. What is your husband’s name? I don’t recall a Mueller on the faculty.” He thought for a couple of seconds. “Oh, that’s your maiden name. Who is your husband?”

Allison. Allison Bannister, Stephanie thought. She’s the witch who stole Michael from me.

“Bill McPherson. He teaches history at Bradford.”

“His first year. Right. I met him this morning. Brave man.”

“Why brave?”

“Volunteering to spend a week with forty wild teen-agers. I made the trip a few years back. The noise. No sleep. Allison packs more into two days than I would in a week.”

“Well, Bill loves the kids, and they seem to like him, too. He listens to them when they talk, and they’ll tell him anything. Adults will, too, actually. He’ll be fine. I hear that the kids are all afraid of Allison.”

“That’s what I hear. She does have rules, and she insists that they behave. If you’re Bill’s wife, then you’re an attorney, I hear. I would never have suspected.”

Stephanie laughed. “Totally unexpected, but, yes. UGA Law, class of ’88.”

“Weren’t you majoring in anthropology or ancient history or something?”

“Yeah, something like that. Things change, though.”

“Allison tells me that you are still in Charlotte because of some big law suit, or something.”

“Well, that has been the public story. Actually we’ve had sort of a trial separation.”

She paused.

“Bill had to leave his last job. A student walked into the teacher’s lounge one morning and found Bill and the assistant principal, well, going at it on the sofa. And they’d gone pretty far. Everyone knew by the next morning.”

She paused again.

“It was humiliating. I mean, Bill has had other flings, but never in public. I told him to leave.”

Stephanie looked up.

“We decided to try it again. I’ve been in town on weekends for a couple of months. I love the city. I have a job interview this morning at the McIntosh Law Firm. Heard of it?”

“Actually, I’m a partner at McIntosh.”

“You’re joking! I was thinking art professor!”

“Emory Law, Class of ’87! I joined McIntosh as a junior partner after graduation. I’ve been here since.”

“I would never have guessed.”

They were quiet for a moment.

“You and Bill have children?”

“No, just never happened. How about you?”

“One child, a daughter. She goes to school in Charlotte.”

Another pause.

“Do you still run, Michael?”

“I jog around the neighborhood a couple of time a week. How about you?”

“Marathons.”

“No joke?”

“Oh, yeah. I love running,”

“You were really good in college. You had to slow down to avoid losing me.”

“We did enjoy running together.”

Another pause.

“Who is your interview with?”

“William McMahan.”

“Bill’s the senior partner.”

“Right. Let’s see. I had a telephone interview, and then someone came to my office for a talk. I was here two weeks ago.”

“Been in court, lately?”

“Earlier in the month. Why?”

“Someone from McIntosh was probably watching then. It sounds like our typical interview process.”

Stephanie put her hand on Michael’s arm.

“I’m really nervous about this interview. It would be really good if I could land this position. I could move to town, and Bill and I could really have a fresh start. Any words of advice?”

“You’ve interviewed with Tom Mixon in real estate? It’s the only opening I know of.”

Stephanie nodded.

“Well, if you are interviewing with Bill, it means that Tom has made his decision. Bill simply needs to give his approval. He can veto Tom’s recommendation, but I’ve known a senior partner to do that once in twenty-five years.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“You could flirt with him.”

“What?”

“Flirt with him. Like you’re doing with me.”

Stephanie moved her hand and sat back. They both smiled.

“Bill is sixty-five, and he believes that anyone under fifty is young. He likes for young women to flirt with him. He would never do anything, mind you; he simply likes the illusion that he has a choice.”

Stephanie laughed. She checked her watch.

“I’d better go. My appointment is at eight forty-five. It’s been really good, seeing you again! You know, if you would like to run a little more seriously, there is a club, the Low Country Striders. They meet once a month on Saturday morning, run for a couple of hours. Drink a little bit, socialize. I joined last month.”

“I don’t think I’m in that league . . .”

“Doesn’t matter. Only a few of them run anything more than the River Run in October. They just enjoy running.” She rummaged in her purse. “Anyway, here’s the president’s card, if you’re interested. The May run is Saturday.”

She hugged him.

“Bye. Michael. Maybe we’ll be working together!”

Michael watched as she crossed the street, climbed into the SUV, and drove away.

JoAnne brought more coffee, and Michael sipped it as he thought about Stephanie. Talk about turning back the clock! He had met Stephanie during freshman orientation before he

started college. He called her in the fall, took her to a football game, and they had dated more or less continuously for the next year and a half – until he met Allison. That is how he remembered it, anyway. He knew that in Stephanie’s mind they had been “going together.” He heard later that she had begun talking to her friends about the possibility – the probability – that they would marry.

He recalled the last time he saw Stephanie. She had pounded on the door of his dorm room late one Thursday night, demanding that he come out. He opened the door and she began to pummel him, slapping his face, hitting him in the stomach. Three of the guys from next door pulled her away. She cursed him in three different languages as they dragged her down the hall and pushed her onto an elevator. He didn’t see her for the remainder of the quarter, and he assumed that she transferred to another school in the spring.

As he thought about college, his mind skipped back to high school and to the past weekend’s reunion. He’d had such a good time seeing his old friends. He began to wonder what it was from his high school years that he missed. If he could turn back time, for what part of his life would he be searching? He had enjoyed seeing his friends, but realistically the group could never be re-assembled. They lived all across the southeast, and Linda lived in New York. He had been in love with Linda, of course, but now he loved Allie, and Linda was married to an attorney who worked on Wall Street. What was it that he really missed; what was it that he wanted to have again?

Well, he missed drawing. Drawing and painting had been part of his life since his mother gave him a children’s “art set” when he was ten years old. He loved to make sketches of things he saw and, even in elementary school, would occasionally spend recess with his sketch pad. The pad was always in his back pack in high school, and his art teacher had praised his work and his effort.

He recalled one of the images in the collage at the reunion, him standing in front of a large painting that hung in the school’s central hall. It was a painting of the football team in practice. It had taken him two months to perfect likenesses of each of the players and to sketch a scene with the entire team on the field. The painting won an award in the state art contest, and the high school had purchased the painting – his first sale – to hang in the hallway when the team won the State championship.

He had considered majoring in art in college. He recalled a conversation with Allison when it was time to declare his major, and he was vacillating between art and pre-law. She was aghast that he might choose art and, once, declared that she would never marry an artist.

“Why would you not marry an artist?” Michael asked.

“My father was an artist, you know.”

“I thought he was a teacher.”

“He was an art teacher. But he had not planned to be a teacher. He trained to be a painter, and graduated from the New England Institute of Art. He was good, too. In nineteen-sixty, the Art Institute named him “an artist to watch in the coming decade.” For a while he actually made a living at it. He earned enough for two square meals a day and a third-floor walk up. Then he and my mother married. A year later, she was pregnant. He couldn’t support a wife on what he made, much less a child, so he became a teacher. Did you know that only one painter in a hundred, maybe in five hundred, actually supports himself with his painting? Most of them become teachers, just to survive.”

“Can you imagine what it is like for an artist to teach an elective art course to thirteen-year-old boys who are interested in nothing more than football and girls? Do you know what it is like

to deal with a parent who thinks her son, who can't draw a straight line with a ruler, is the next Monet? It sucks the life out of you. I watched it happen to my father; I won't watch it again."

It was tempting to blame Allison for his decision, but she was not the real reason for his pre-law major. To begin with, they weren't even thinking of marriage at the time. Although he remembered the conversation, her unwillingness to marry an artist was no threat. Of more importance was the fact that his father was an attorney, and Michael had always thought that he would be one, too. In addition, he lacked confidence in his talent, and was not willing to commit himself to a career at which he could not succeed. Finally, it was not until he was in college that he encountered anyone other than a teacher who actually made a living as an artist. Art was important to him, but it was not really a live candidate for a career.

He did not stop drawing once he declared his major; he just did it less and less frequently. Law school demanded so much of his time. Law practice did, too. Junior members of a law firm worked sixteen hour days to complete their work and to attract new clients, leaving little time for anything else. When Alicia was born, Allison suffered from depression, and Michael spent most of his free time caring for the baby.

The last real drawing that he had done, as opposed to a simple, hurried sketch, was when Alicia was six years old.

"Draw my picture, Daddy! Draw me!" Alicia had been rummaging through a drawer and had discovered an old sketch pad and some drawing pencils. Michael had made a quick sketch, and Alicia had squealed when she saw her image on the page. "Can I have it, Daddy? Can I please have it to keep?" Michael had persuaded her to let him keep the sketch for a while, and he used it as the basis for a formal portrait. As he drew, Allison would walk past, glance at the drawing and sigh. He gave it to Alicia on Sunday afternoon, and she was ecstatic. "Look, Mommy, Look! See my picture?"

"It's very nice, Alicia."

"Can I have a frame? Will you get a frame?"

"Maybe later."

It lay on a shelf for a couple of weeks; then Michael had it professionally framed. Alicia insisted that they hang it in her bedroom. "So I'll know what I looked like, when I get older."

"No one at work saw the picture, did they?" Allison had asked.

"I guess not. Maybe my secretary when I took it in. I picked up the framing on my way home."

"Don't let them know that you draw. Michael."

Michael laughed. "Why not?"

"People won't take you seriously. They'll think you are a dilettante."

"Well, there's no need to worry. I don't draw. That's my first real drawing in three years."

Another thing he missed was running. He still enjoyed running, but he had not run competitively in years. Allison never liked for him to run, except for exercise. He did not know why. She didn't oppose the activity; she just never showed any interest.

He recalled his last competitive race. He was in law school, in Atlanta. It was the Peachtree Road Race. He finished in the top ten. Allison was waiting at the finish line; it was one of the few races that she had attended. She handed him a bottle of water, held out at arm's length since he was so hot and sweaty. Later that night – they had just married – he lay on the sofa in the tiny apartment, reminiscing.

"I was behind as we started down the hill, and some of the guys, they really move on the hills. They were flying away from me."

“Really.” Allison did not look up from her book.

“We hit the bottom, hit the straightaway and, suddenly, I had my second wind. I’ve never done that before, not like that. Heard of it. Never done it. All of a sudden, I wasn’t tired, wasn’t out of breath, not puffing at all.”

“That’s great.”

“I started to pass the others, one by one. I pulled up into the leader group and just held on. I focused on the guy just in front. I knew that I wasn’t going to pass him, but I hung on, kept up! Terrific race! Runners live for things like that!”

He looked over at Allison. “You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

She put her book down and smiled. “Not really.”

Michael laughed. “I’m going to bed.”

“Be there in a minute.”

Finally, he missed having fun! At the reunion, Allison said, over and over, “This is not the Michael I know!” And “Michael, you certainly have changed.” And she was right. Michael in high school had been fun-loving, he told jokes, and he teased. That Michael felt free to attack the girls with the water balloons and to shoot a Bunsen burner at his teacher. Today’s Michael might think of such things, but he would never do them.

Part of the difference, he knew, was simply growing up. But that was an incomplete explanation. On the Friday that he left for the reunion, he overheard part of the conversation between Cynthia and Williams. “Does he ever smile?” “Yes. He smiled at the Christmas party last year.” His friends in high school would have been appalled to hear him described in that way.