

The characters in this play will be portrayed at ages forty-four, forty-nine, fifty-four and seventy-seven.

PLACE

The living room of a beach cottage
on the Outer Banks of North Carolina.

TIME

One weekend in August.

ACT ONE

Scene 1: Twenty-two years after the characters' college graduation.

Scene 2: Five years later.

ACT TWO

Scene 1: Five years later.

Scene 2: Twenty-three years later.

THE SWEET DELILAH SWIM CLUB

ACT ONE

Scene 1

Lights come up on the living room of a simple and charming North Carolina beach cottage. It's late afternoon. Lively beach music plays on a radio. Upstage center is a table cluttered with grocery bags and a small ice chest. Down right is a screen door to the porch and parking area. Upstage center is the doorway to the hall that leads to bedrooms and the bathroom. Down left is a door to the kitchen. Liquor bottles, an ice bucket, a pitcher of iced tea and assorted glasses sit on a small table outside the kitchen that serves as a bar. On the wall above is an old, weathered sign that reads "Sweet Delilah Cottage." A couch, easy chairs, lamps and end tables are arranged center stage. There is a potted plant on the stage right end table. A suitcase sits nearby. Sheree Hollinger, mid-forties, dressed in khaki shorts, polo shirt and tennis shoes, dances to the music as she unpacks and organizes the room. She gets into the music and dances with abandon. Lexie Richards, mid-forties, in a sexy off-the-shoulder sundress and a large straw hat, enters unseen through the screen door with a suitcase and a bundle of roses. She watches Sheree's energetic gyrations, pulls a camera from her purse, then snaps a picture as Sheree shakes her fanny. Sheree whirls around, startled.

SHEREE. Lexie! (*Snaps off the music.*) You can't sneak up and take a picture of someone when they think nobody's watching.

LEXIE. Yeah, that's what my second ex-husband said, but it was the look of surprise on his assistant's face that got me the big divorce settlement, wasn't it?

SHEREE. *(Laughs.)* Oh, hush. *(Gives Lexie a hug.)* It's so good to see you.

LEXIE. You, too, Sheree. Lord, I just *live* for these weekends. *(Walks to the "picture window" that looks out onto the ocean, i.e., out toward the audience.)* Oh, look. Isn't that the most gorgeous thing you've ever seen?

SHEREE. *(Joins her.)* Yeah, there's nothing more beautiful than afternoon sun sparkling on the Atlantic Ocean.

LEXIE. Actually, I was talkin' about me. I just caught my reflection in the window and these highlights in my hair are divine.

SHEREE. What took you so long to get here? There wasn't any traffic coming in from Raleigh.

LEXIE. Well, there was this very attractive young man selling blueberries at the stoplight. So, I rolled down my window and told him, "If you can show me a cute tattoo, I'll buy a pint of blueberries."

SHEREE. Yeah. And...?

LEXIE. Well, I am here to tell you... *(Leans out the screen door and brings in two large bags filled with berries.)* It's surprising all the places you can put a tattoo. *(Hands Sheree the bags.)*

SHEREE. So, I guess we'll be having these on...everything.

LEXIE. Y'all can. I've never been a big fan of blueberries. *(Puts roses into a vase.)*

SHEREE. Lexie, those roses! You always bring such beautiful flowers.

LEXIE. I can't help myself. I thrive on the lovely things in life: flowers in sterling vases, hand-lettered place cards and flickering candlelight. Blame my refined and genteel Southern nature for the— *(Drops all pretension.)* Ooh, iced tea! I'm drier than a cow chip in a dust storm. *(Pours herself a glass of tea.)*

SHEREE. Did you bring the propane lighter for the grill?

LEXIE. Uh, sorry, I forgot it.

SHEREE. You forgot it last year, too. Not to worry. I've got it.

LEXIE. Well, if you were gonna bring it, why did you ask me to?

SHEREE. Same reason I buy every gadget that promises painless underarm hair removal: I keep hoping for a miracle. *(Picks up a note pad.)* I was just about to go over my list when you drove up: Turn in rental contract for cottage, check. Confirm Sweet Delilah for next year, check. Emergency kits...oh, shoot! I forgot the nori.

LEXIE. Nori? What do you need seaweed for?

SHEREE. My hors d'oeuvres.

LEXIE. For your—? *(Covering her alarm.)* Why, Sheree Hollinger, after you whipped up all those...delightful snacks last year, we agreed the rest of us would bring them this year. You shouldn't have to do everything.

SHEREE. Hey, once team captain, always team captain. Besides, y'all know I'm all about good nutrition. At least this way you girls eat healthy *once* a year. *(Pulls a Tupperware out of the ice chest.)* Let me just put these in the fridge. Ooh, this is fabulous: mung bean paste with goji berries and herring oil. Try it.

LEXIE. No, I don't think I— *(Sheree pops one into Lexie's mouth and exits into the kitchen with grocery bags. Disgusted, Lexie spits the snack into a potted plant.)*

SHEREE. *(Calls from offstage.)* What do you think?

LEXIE. *(Loudly.)* I think you've outdone yourself. Hey, are we going to Colonel Shad's Flounder Palace for supper tonight?

SHEREE. *(Reenters.)* You mean, the place they asked us to leave last year because every time the waiter leaned down, you licked his ear?

LEXIE. Sheree, he'd recently arrived from Honduras. I was merely showing him how hospitable we North Carolinians can be. *(Reacts to Sheree's look.)* Oh, don't worry, I no longer behave like that in public.

SHEREE. Today's tattooed blueberry boy notwithstanding.

LEXIE. Temporary lapse. Won't happen again.

SHEREE. Until you spot the first guy on the beach with tight abs.

LEXIE. Well, I am strong, but I'm not made of stone. *(Dinah Grayson, mid-forties, steps into the cottage dressed in executive chic.)*

or that someone with eyes as beautiful as yours could actually be single." *(The girls howl at her performance.)*

DINAH. Oh, God, I hope I'm never that desperate.

VERNADETTE. If I had used a come-on like that on Burl, he would've stroked out before I got him off the barstool. Speaking of which, I wanted to thank you for all the sympathy calls when Burl left me. And I really want to thank you for all the sympathy calls when he came back.

SHEREE. So, what was Burl's reason for leaving this time?

VERNADETTE. Same as every time. He says he can't handle my PMS. I told him to get over it, it's natural. It's even referenced in the Bible.

LEXIE. PMS is mentioned in the Bible?

VERNADETTE. KJV. Right there in black and white: "Mary rode Joseph's ass all the way to Bethlehem."

LEXIE. Jeri Neal said she was praying for you and Burl. Do you think that helped?

DINAH. Not as much as another martini will. Let me top you off, Vern.

VERNADETTE. I'm at your mercy, Counselor.

SHEREE. Maybe we should wait for Jeri Neal—

DINAH. *Sister Mary Esther.*

SHEREE. Come on, we don't have to use her convent name except at church functions.

LEXIE. Oh, it's probably good that we're getting the sex talk out of the way before she gets here. I mean, haven't any of you ever felt a little funny talking about your intimacies in front of a nun?

SHEREE. We've always been able to talk about anything with Jeri Neal. She's the most non-judgmental woman I know. Besides, I don't think of her as a nun. She's our friend, our teammate.

DINAH. And our own little ray of sunshine. I have always wondered how anyone can be that sweet and innocent.

VERNADETTE. Believe me, she is. I've seen the woman genuflect when she buys a jar of *Miracle Whip*.

SHEREE. What does it matter? We love Jeri Neal. But she has been hard to reach lately. When she called just now, that's the first time I've actually spoken to her in months.

LEXIE. I haven't talked to her in forever.

SHEREE. She says she has big news.

LEXIE. Well, she'd better get here and tell it if we're going to get our first group swim in before— *(A car horn is heard outside.)*

SHEREE. *(Runs to the screen door.)* She's here!

DINAH. So, Sister Mary Esther has big news. Five bucks says the boiler at the convent broke. We could be in for some titillating dinner conversation, girls.

VERNADETTE. I bet ten she's been fast-tracked to Mother Superior.

LEXIE. No, I bet she's going to Rome for an audience with the Pope. *(Jeri Neal McFeeley, mid-forties, enormously pregnant and dressed in beach-appropriate maternity wear, enters.)*

JERI NEAL. Hi, girls!

VERNADETTE. *(To Dinah.)* All bets are off.

LEXIE. *(Chatters non-stop.)* Why, Jeri Neal, it's so good to see you, we just never thought you'd get here and look at that cute little top you're wearing there's just a glow about you probably from driving all that way in the heat *(To the others, without stopping.)* she's pregnant, isn't she?!

JERI NEAL. Eight months and counting. *(Beat. Everyone stares at her open-mouthed.)* So...anybody going to say anything?

DINAH. Looks like they've relaxed at least *one* of the rules at the convent.

VERNADETTE. Oh, honey. Not even *Miracle Whip's* going to get you out of this one.

LEXIE. Jeri Neal, what have you done?

SHEREE. We know what she's done, what we want to know is who she did it *with*.

JERI NEAL. Okay, so now you know my big news, and I've left the convent.

DINAH. Naturally, we'd expect one to follow the other.

JERI NEAL. Good, that's out of the way. Now, I'm starving. Where are we going for dinner?

LEXIE. Oh, no, no, no, no. This isn't like you've just changed your hair color. Start explaining, Sister Mary Esther Hot Pants.

JERI NEAL. Can I get something to drink first?

SHEREE. Sure. But don't tell any of the good stuff 'til I get back. *(Races into the kitchen.)*

JERI NEAL. *(Calls.)* Oh, I never would. Granny McFeeley always said, "Don't strike the match 'til you got all your kindlin' in the stove." *(Then.)* Ooh, that looks good. *(Reaches for an hors d'oeuvre.)*

DINAH and LEXIE. *(Lexie grabs her hand.)* No!!!

VERNADETTE. We can't let you do that to the baby.

JERI NEAL. Oh. Sheree, right?

SHEREE. *(Hurries in with a martini glass of milk.)* Here we go. Now, start talking.

JERI NEAL. Well... Y'all remember how I'd gotten the calling right after graduation? Guess what? I got another one.

LEXIE. Darlin', we are not Catholic. You'll have to walk us through this.

JERI NEAL. Okay. One day I was working at the shelter and a mommy asked me to hold her baby while she fed her two-year-old. When I held that tiny, little thing, I had the most incredible sensation. I looked into that baby's eyes and it was like a jolt of electricity just shot right through me. I realized I wasn't supposed to be a sister anymore, I'm supposed to be a *mother*. So, I decided to leave the convent and had myself artificially inseminated.

LEXIE. *(To the others.)* Isn't that sweet? She doesn't even know the other way's more fun.

SHEREE. You know, you could've shared this with us before now.

JERI NEAL. I wanted to surprise you and there's been so much to do. Boy howdy, leaving the Sisters and moving home to Roanoke to live with Mama has been an awful lot to handle.

VERNADETTE. You're certainly bringing this baby in under the wire.

JERI NEAL. I know that's going to present its own set of challenges,

but it's like Granny McFeeley would say, "When you change horses mid-stream, you better count on gettin' your boots wet."

DINAH. Your grandma was a talkative old gal, wasn't she?

JERI NEAL. Oh, she sure was. After the chimney collapsed and that brick hit her in the head, no one could shut her up.

LEXIE. Look, Jeri Neal, if you're happy about this, we're happy.

JERI NEAL. I'm very happy. *(Holds out her arms.)* Group hug? *(They do so.)* Now, I don't want this to make the weekend weird for anyone, but honestly, we've made so many wonderful memories here, I knew this was the only place for me to share my news with you.

SHEREE. And to that end, we're fixin' to kick off our weekend right. Come on. Lift 'em up, girls.

EVERYONE. *(They rise, helping Jeri Neal to her feet, and lift their glasses.)* The faster we swim, the sooner we win! *(They take a drink.)*

VERNADETTE. That still gives me a tingle after all these years.

SHEREE. It helped us win a lot of swim meets.

JERI NEAL. *(Gets her purse.)* Ooh, that reminds me, look what I found when I was packing my things at the convent. *(Hands them a photo.)* This was taken right after we won the Conference Swim Meet.

DINAH. My God, look at the five of us: the Pemberton College Champion Swim Team. We were so young and beautiful!

VERNADETTE. Look at my fabulous thighs. I was gorgeous. How come I didn't know that?

SHEREE. I think we still look pretty good.

LEXIE. Yeah. But some of us a little more than others.

JERI NEAL. And I've still got the medal. That was the happiest moment in my life. *(Pats her stomach.)* Soon to be demoted to *second* happiest.

VERNADETTE. Did Coach take this picture?

SHEREE. No, I remember this distinctly. It was Richie Walker; Antioch's men's team captain. You know, the one who put the "ohhh" in Speed-o.

JERI NEAL. Whew, Richie Walker! Now *that's* a fella who could eat crackers in my bed any old time.

Scene 2

Five years have passed. The women are in their late forties. It's mid-morning and oppressively hot. Lights come up on the living room of the beach cottage. Different throw pillows on the couch, new lamps and other subtle changes suggest the passage of time. Jeri Neal is dressed in her robe and seated on the couch. Dinah, wearing tailored pajamas, paces behind the couch and sips what appears to be orange juice.

DINAH. You do realize if you get this position, you'll have to work overtime.

JERI NEAL. Well, I wasn't aware of that, but I guess I could.

DINAH. You "guess"? Ms. McFeeley, if you want this job, it's either "yes" or "no."

JERI NEAL. *(Fans herself.)* Do you really think they'll talk to me like that? I mean, it wasn't very friendly.

DINAH. Jeri Neal, you asked me to help you rehearse for job interviews. You've got to stay focused.

JERI NEAL. Oh, let's be honest, nobody's going to hire me. I don't have any skills. All I've done in the last twenty-five years is cook for a bunch of nuns, take care of a baby and read *Mr. Popper's Penguins* in silly voices.

DINAH. Look, there's bound to be a good job out there for you.

JERI NEAL. If there is, it can't be any harder than motherhood. I mean, chasing after a five-year-old boy is like trying to put socks on an octopus.

DINAH. I have wondered how you've been handling it.

JERI NEAL. Well, I try to take it one day at a time, but honestly, every now and then, several days sneak up and attack me all at once. *(Then.)* Did you ever want a kid?

DINAH. Not as much as I wanted a Mercedes. I never had the maternal instinct. Every time I got a doll for Christmas, I'd sell it to the highest bidder for cash.

JERI NEAL. You know, I'm not so sure I'll need you to baby-sit for Kenny any time soon...or ever, really. Ooh, I'm parched. *(Takes Dinah's drink.)* I just need a little sip— *(Before Dinah can stop her, she swallows and gags.)* That's not orange juice!

DINAH. Well, technically there is *some* orange juice in it.

JERI NEAL. It's only nine-thirty. How can you drink in the morning?

DINAH. You're a forty-nine-year-old former nun who's the unemployed mother of a hyperactive preschooler. How can you *not*? *(Sheree, dressed in her usual outfit of khaki shorts, polo shirt and white tennis shoes, enters from the hall door, fanning herself.)*

SHEREE. This heat is unbelievable! I just got out of the shower and I'm already sweating.

DINAH. Well, it *is* August in the South. But better here than Hot-Lanta. And isn't it a little late for you to be getting up? I thought by this time you'd have run ten miles, done a thousand squats and boiled us up some free-range prunes for breakfast.

SHEREE. *(Clearly tired and on edge.)* I was afraid if I came out of my room Lexie would corner me again.

DINAH. We haven't seen her yet. Guess she's still asleep.

SHEREE. She's probably exhausted from keeping me up half the night. After you two abandoned me and went to bed, Lexie parked herself in my room and rehashed everything she'd already told us at dinner, which she'd already told me on the phone last week. It really put me in touch with my darker instincts.

JERI NEAL. Poor Lexie. She has such rotten luck with husbands. By the third time she'd told us how making love with Leonard had gotten so boring it made her want to jump off a cliff, I was kinda sorry she hadn't gone ahead and done it. And I only mean that in the nicest possible way.

DINAH. This one's name was "Leonard"? I always called him "Number Four"—makes it easier not to get attached.

JERI NEAL. Sheree, I don't think you ought to get into it with Lexie. She's always gonna do like she's always gonna do. It's like Granny McFeeley said, "Never wrestle a pig in the mud. You both get dirty and the pig enjoys it way too much."

DINAH. Something tells me Mawmaw liked her a nip of moonshine.
JERI NEAL. She sure did. That little old gal could knock it back like a Merchant Marine.
DINAH. So Sheree, how *did* you get rid of Lexie last night?
SHEREE. I asked if that was a moustache or just the way the light was hitting her upper lip. When she ran to the bathroom to look, I locked the door.
DINAH. Pure genius. Say, would you like a screwdriver?
SHEREE. It's a little early in the day for *some* of us.
DINAH. Yes, but it's already tomorrow night in Guam. (*Noticing Sheree's scowl.*) Don't give me that disapproving team captain look. We all have our hobbies: You garden, Jeri Neal paints, Lexie stares at herself in the mirror and I enjoy the occasional cocktail. And this would be one of those occasions.
SHEREE. Well, when it's *morning* in Guam, we're cuttin' you off. Now, have we heard from Vernadette?
JERI NEAL. No. And even with her lousy luck it's not like her to miss an entire day of our weekend.
SHEREE. Well, if she doesn't call in the next half hour, we're calling her. I've got activities mapped out for the entire day and I need to make sure she's going to be here to participate.
JERI NEAL. While we're waiting, I'll run go put on my interview suit for y'all to see.
DINAH. Jeri Neal, I bought you the perfect handbag. I got myself one just like it when I made partner. It's in there on my suitcase.
JERI NEAL. Oh, that's so sweet of you.
SHEREE. And... (*Holds up a pair of earrings.*) I brought these earrings for you to wear to your interviews. Coach gave them to me one year for my birthday.
JERI NEAL. (*Takes them.*) Oh, they're gorgeous. Thank you! I'll be very careful and make extra sure Kenny doesn't flush *this* pair down the toilet. (*She exits.*)
DINAH. I meant to tell you, I got the nicest thank you note from Eliza. Most brides take a full year to get them out, so I figured you'd threatened to hold the family china hostage if she didn't get on 'em.

SHEREE. She's an adult; she makes her own decisions. I'd be shocked if she consulted me on anything anymore.
DINAH. Okay, I'll play. What's wrong with you? And don't tell me it's nothing, because I've cross-examined too many hardened criminals who are far better liars than you.
SHEREE. I'm just tired from last night. Who knew we'd have to deal with another Lexie divorce-a-thon this weekend? As long as nobody else springs another surprise on us, I'll be fine. (*Vernadette enters on crutches, dressed in a clown costume without the makeup or wig. She quickly makes her way toward the bathroom.*)
VERNADETTE. Hi, everyone! Where's Jeri Neal and Lexie? Eeeekkkk! I don't know if I can make it! (*Exits.*)
SHEREE. (*Beat.*) Did you just see a clown on crutches hobbling toward the bathroom?
DINAH. Oh, thank God you saw it, too. I brought way too much vodka to stop drinking now.
SHEREE. What on earth could've happened? Nobody in her right mind would wear something that ridiculous.
JERI NEAL. (*Enters in an ugly, ill-fitting suit, carrying a gorgeous handbag, wearing Sheree's earrings.*) Ta-da!
SHEREE. I spoke too soon.
JERI NEAL. Mama made it for me. What do you think?
DINAH. You look like an upholstered footstool...with fabulous accessories.
JERI NEAL. It doesn't exactly scream "Hire Me!" does it?
SHEREE. Jeri Neal, you can't even wear that outfit for a *phone* interview.
JERI NEAL. The problem is Mama's eyesight. Ever since I caught her trying to stitch me up a pair of capri pants on the dehumidifier, I've been thinking her days at the Singer may be numbered.
DINAH. Do you have anything else you can wear?
JERI NEAL. Well, Lexie did bring me one of her outfits she thought might work.
SHEREE. Let's see that one. It couldn't be worse than this.

JERI NEAL. Golly, it was so much easier to dress when I was a nun.
(*Exits to the bedroom.*)

DINAH. (*Goes to the bar.*) Sure you wouldn't like a little eye-opener?

SHEREE. I give. It's probably best not to be sober for the next outfit.

VERNADETTE. (*Reenters.*) Girls, I apologize for being a day late and way more than a dollar short, but here I am. What's goin' on?

SHEREE. You first.

DINAH. And you can start with either the crutches or the clown suit, your choice.

VERNADETTE. Right. Uh...crutches: Last week, the phone rings and Eddie Mack's been arrested. Again. So, being the model parent-slash-door-mat that I am, I rush to the courthouse to post bail. Again. At the top of the steps, while I'm glancing up at the statue of "Blind Justice," I trip and bounce all the way back down to the sidewalk where I'm sideswiped by a court reporter on a Vespa. This ankle never stood a chance.

SHEREE. I guess it's too late for me to say I'm sorry I asked, right?

VERNADETTE. You bet. Moving on: As you know, Burl's never been a fan of the five of us getting together for our "special weekends." So, this year he refused to "allow" me to come to the beach. When I finished laughing at him, I got in the shower to get ready. But before I had time to towel off, Burl had ransacked my closet and driven off with every stitch of clothing I own.

DINAH. And yet, the mystery of the clown suit lingers.

VERNADETTE. Well, lately I've been moonlighting as Toodles the Clown at kids' parties, you know, to make extra money for little luxuries like food and electricity. And because you never know when someone's going to need a balloon giraffe, I always keep my costume under the seat of my truck. *That's* what my loving husband failed to remember.

SHEREE. You've put up with an awful lot from that man.

VERNADETTE. Yep, I never knew what real happiness was 'til I got married. But, by then, it was too late. Now, y'all catch me up.

DINAH. We're getting Jeri Neal ready for her job hunt with a

debatable amount of success and, here's a surprise, Lexie's getting another divorce.

SHEREE. And here's another surprise: She won't shut up about it.

DINAH. With each divorce she seems to get more and more bitter. I don't think I've ever seen her so blue. (*Lexie bursts through the screen door, wearing a sexy cover-up and sporting a new hair color.*)

LEXIE. (*Ecstatic.*) Hello, my darlings! Isn't it absolutely the most glorious morning you can remember?

VERNADETTE. Wow. I would kill to feel *that blue* just once in my life.

LEXIE. Oh, my. Clown outfit. Crutches. Do I want to know?

VERNADETTE. I doubt it. It's not about you.

LEXIE. 'Kay. (*She and Vernadette hug.*)

DINAH. Well, your mood has certainly improved. Did a wealthy investment banker just wash up onshore?

LEXIE. Almost as good. I just met the most divine creature on the beach. He's tall, has the most gorgeous black hair with beautiful silver touches at the temples and he has the most breathtaking physique! His arms are taut and hard, his calves fairly vibrate with power and his chest is like sculpted steel.

SHEREE. He sounds like the underside of my car.

LEXIE. Meeting him out there on the dunes just reminded me that I'm still young and sexy and beautiful and sexy and won't have any trouble at all finding another man... Admit it, I have the neck of a thirty-year-old.

VERNADETTE. And when they find the rest of her, you're gonna be in big trouble.

LEXIE. I paid a lot of money for this neck and I don't think it's very nice to poke fun at a person's appearance. (*Jeri Neal enters. She's wearing the outfit Lexie brought for her; the neckline is too, too low, the hem is too, too high. She carries Dinah's handbag.*)

DINAH. You mean, after we finish with *her*, right?

JERI NEAL. Okay, everyone. What do I look like?

VERNADETTE. A hooker who stole an expensive handbag.

JERI NEAL. (*Low, to Lexie.*) I need to ask you a few questions before I go home to Brice, okay?

LEXIE. (*Brushing herself off.*) Aw, shoot. I've got sand in my bosom.

JERI NEAL. *That's what they're using now? Well, I guess it does make sense, it's cheaper and there's plenty of it. But I bet you have to be really careful when you take a shower. Sand gets pretty clumpy when it's wet.*

LEXIE. What are you talkin' about? I do not have sand *in* my breasts.

DINAH. Of course she doesn't. To get breasts that size, they have to use lots of high-grade silicone, which also certifies her as a flotation device.

LEXIE. Okay, three years of listening to catty remarks about my breast enhancement is sufficient.

VERNADETTE. (*Reenters, removing her neck brace and massaging her neck.*) Which is why we're thrilled you've just had a fanny lift. We can get at least two years of ridicule out of that. Unless it bothers you, then we can all just *butt* out. (*Vernadette, Dinah and Jeri Neal laugh. Sheree reenters.*)

SHEREE. Well, I'm glad y'all are able to stand around and enjoy a good laugh while I'm in there frantically getting things organized in case we have to make a run for it.

DINAH. You're absolutely right. We should all be doing more to get ready. So, who wants a martini?

VERNADETTE. Ooh, good idea. It's just what we need to wash down the biscuits.

SHEREE. What biscuits?

VERNADETTE. The ones I'm fixin' to pull out of the oven. There's a storm nipping at our heels and that says only one thing to me: Biscuits.

SHEREE. Vernadette Simms, there is a Category Two hurricane sitting off the coast threatening to blow us all the way to the Piedmont. This is no time to eat.

JERI NEAL. Sheree, honey, try to relax about the weather. Brice will call if anything changes. Now, let's just enjoy our time in case the weekend gets cut short.

SHEREE. Relax?! I'm in there making sure everyone's got an emergency kit and Vernadette's rolling out biscuit dough?

VERNADETTE. Well, excuse me, but that's how I respond to danger. Some animals spit venom. Some roll themselves into balls and play dead. *I consume large quantities of freshly baked fluffy mounds of fat.*

SHEREE. But, Vernadette, *biscuits*? I just read in *The New York Times* that biscuits are one of the worst foods you can put into your system. Do you have any idea how many grams of fat are in a two point seven ounce biscuit? And the article said the number of carbs is unbelievable. At our age, biscuits have no place in our diets, much less our lives.

VERNADETTE. Alright, that's it. That is it!! I'm gonna have to clarify something the tofu has obviously leached from your good sense. Biscuits are the ultimate comfort food, so fat and carbs do not count. They're what I ate when I was sick or lonely and when company came to dinner and after we opened our presents on Christmas morning. My mama made them, and her mama before her and my great grandmama before her and I bet the same can be said for every one of us in this room. *The New York Times* is not going to take away this Southern girl's biscuits!

SHEREE. Vernadette, just calm down—

VERNADETTE. Oh, we are waaay past the time for calm. You and your *Times*-readin', sprout-eatin' kind need to wake up. People who don't give a damn about our traditions or our way of life are paving over our farms and building suburbs and coffee bars and super centers that suck the life out of every main street in every small town. And they won't stop until they've made this country one big, homogenous, soulless blur. Well, I'm not going to be quiet about it anymore. They can take away our beauty pageants, they can laugh at us for using the word "y'all," they can even bulldoze our magnolias. But as long as there is music in Memphis, as long as a peanut grows in Georgia, as long as I am alive and can remember the South of my childhood, there will be biscuits on my table! And the day I stop eatin' 'em will be the day they pry 'em out of my cold, dead Southern hands! (*She exits into the kitchen. Beat.*)

DINAH. Sheree, just eat the damn biscuits.

LEXIE. *(She puts her arm around Dinah.)* That guy sure had good taste in women, huh?

DINAH. He sure did.

JERI NEAL. And then we lost Coach.

SHEREE. You know, one of the last things Coach told me before he died was how proud he was that we've kept our team together all these years.

LEXIE. Wouldn't he have gotten a kick out of it when the kids who were carrying his casket out of old Pemberton Gym slipped and almost dumped the thing into the pool?

VERNADETTE. That *was* a hoot. And it's a funny thing to say about a funeral, but I think everyone who came had a real good time.

DINAH. It was the perfect send off. We really did Coach proud.

SHEREE. *(Lifts her coffee mug.)* Raise your glasses, girls. Absent friends.

DINAH, LEXIE, VERNADETTE and JERI NEAL. Absent friends.

EVERYONE. The faster we swim, the sooner we win! *(Jeri Neal's phone rings.)*

JERI NEAL. *(She answers.)* Brice?... Really?... *(To the girls.)* The hurricane's turned toward us and it's moving and they're going to evacuate the Outer Banks. *(Into the phone.)* We're all packed and ready to go...

SHEREE. Vernadette, you and Lex get these dishes back into the kitchen. *(They get started.)* If we get out now before the warning siren is activated, we'll beat the bottleneck at the bridge. *(Exits into the hall and drags out three suitcases into the living room.)*

JERI NEAL. *(Into phone.)* We're leaving right now. Tell Kenny I'll call y'all once I'm in the car. Bye, punkin'. I love you both.

SHEREE. Everyone get your keys and don't forget your suitcases. Now, listen to me: The evacuation route is easy. Just head North on Twelve, then West on Sixty-Four or North on One Fifty-Eight at Whalebone Junction. I've put a copy of this in each of your emergency kits, in case you forget. Now, everyone go! I'll close up the house.

LEXIE. Sheree, I take back every hateful thing I've ever said behind your back about your obsession with organization.

JERI NEAL. I don't know if I can see these directions in the dark.
VERNADETTE. *(Gets into her neck brace.)* Me, either, and in this thing, I can't be bending over trying to read.

DINAH. Sheree, you're going to have to lead Jeri Neal and Vernadette out. I'm riding with Lexie and we'll be fine. *(She exits into the bedroom.)*

SHEREE. We're not leaving you two here—

LEXIE. It's okay, I'm dropping Dinah off at RDU anyway. Maybe she can catch an earlier flight to Atlanta. Now, we'll just close the windows, lock the doors and we're out. Y'all are wasting time, now go! Go!

SHEREE. Uh...okay. But everyone calls each other when we get home, okay? *(Rummages in her purse.)* Where are my distance glasses?

JERI NEAL. Oh, shoot! We only got in one group swim.

SHEREE. Well, if the bridge washes out before we make it across, we might get in another one.

VERNADETTE. And if we do go into the drink, everyone just grab hold of Lexie and hang on 'til the Coast Guard finds us. *(Dinah reenters with the last two suitcases. Everyone exchanges a quick hug and Sheree, Vernadette and Jeri Neal exit. Dinah picks up her martini glass and casually sits on the couch.)*

LEXIE. *(Turns to Dinah.)* What are you doing?

DINAH. There's never an emergency so dire that it can't wait 'til I get to the bottom of my glass. Besides, we're already packed. Even if we wait to leave until the siren sounds, we're way ahead of everyone else.

LEXIE. *(Sighs deeply.)* So, how'd I do?

DINAH. I think you did great, considering the circumstances.

LEXIE. I appreciate you keeping my secret. I just needed this weekend to be as normal as possible, and if they knew what's really going on with me, that's all we would've talked about.

DINAH. *(Teasing.)* Why, you don't know how this touches my heart. This is the first time in memory you haven't wanted to be the center of attention. I do believe our own little Lexie Richards is growing up.

LEXIE. You know, I never dreamed I'd have to face something like this alone. Of course, it would happen when I'm between husbands. And I guess this is what I get for not having kids.

DINAH. I didn't know you regretted not having children.

LEXIE. I don't. Lord, Dinah, I'm way too selfish to have even considered diverting my attention to a child. But, you know, facing this, I kinda wish I had given birth to a thirty-one-year-old, fully-educated and gainfully-employed offspring.

DINAH. Yeah, if *that* had been one of the options, even I might've checked the box. (*Then.*) Is the surgery still scheduled for Friday?

LEXIE. Yes, and I'm dealing with that part okay. After all the nips and tucks I've had in my life, I'm certainly not afraid of hospitals. Isn't it unbelievable I've spent so much money and time trying to get the outside of me perfect only to have it come down to what's inside me that's really the problem?

DINAH. It is fairly ironic.

LEXIE. The heck with irony. What steams me is that I've spent a fortune keeping myself looking this good. And if it's all been just so I could die looking firm and gorgeous, then somebody up there's gonna have a lot of explaining to do.

DINAH. Now, here's something I'd like *you* to explain. When you got the diagnosis, why did you choose to call *me*?

LEXIE. Because you're the least sentimental friend I have. And in this situation I need a rock. Any one of the other three girls would hover over me like a mother hen. (*Beat.*) Although, if you were to find yourself between cases, I certainly wouldn't be adverse to your dropping by and visiting me in the hospital if you really want to.

DINAH. At the risk of jeopardizing my title of "least sentimental friend," I should tell you I'd already planned to be there in the hospital with you. Every day.

LEXIE. But how can you arrange that with your schedule?

DINAH. Well, you're not the only one with a secret this weekend. I have one, too. I left the firm a couple of weeks ago.

LEXIE. What?! But your career is everything to you. This doesn't sound like you at all.

DINAH. No, this is more like me than I've been in a long time. See, when Randall died, I put in hundreds of hours of overtime, took cases I had no interest in just so I wouldn't have to think about my life. Then two weeks ago, I was cross-examining a witness and raised my hand to make a point, and somehow my watchband got tangled in my pearls.

LEXIE. Not your grandmother's pearls.

DINAH. No, the ones I bought when I was in Bora Bora. Anyhow, the strand broke and all I remember is watching the pearls drop to the floor one by one. I couldn't speak or think, I just watched. It was like everything was happening in slow motion.

LEXIE. Now, were these pearls freshwater or cultured, black or white?

DINAH. (*Annoyed.*) White, cultured, sixteen-inch strand. Just try to follow me here, okay? The next thing I knew, I was in the judge's chambers with paramedics standing over me. My assistant told me I'd crawled around the courtroom sobbing, picking up each pearl. The judge called a recess and had the bailiff carry me out.

LEXIE. You know, I'll bet it was a weak clasp. That's happened to me before. Was it silver or gold?

DINAH. Would you just forget about the damn necklace?! You missed the whole point of my story.

LEXIE. No I didn't. You've had a life-changing experience. The pearls cascading to the floor clearly symbolized your release of the material and all the trappings of your career-driven life that are irrelevant to who and what you really are. Of course your response was to quit the firm. What else could you have done?

DINAH. (*Stunned.*) Wow, Lex. That was really...perceptive. That's exactly what I felt. Geez, everytime I think I know who you are, you throw me a curve.

LEXIE. Oh, come on, Dinah, just because I'm vain and frivolous doesn't mean I'm shallow. Beneath this gorgeous veneer runs a deep river of intelligence and understanding. I frequently mask that because it tends to scare away the more attractive men. (*Then.*) So, what are you gonna do now?

DINAH. I haven't thought it through completely. Randall used to say when you turn fifty you're closer to the final curtain than the

VERNADETTE. Well, whoever it is, I hope she brought ice cream. *(Just then, Sheree enters. Her hair is silver, her clothing sporty for a seventy-seven-year-old woman and she walks with a quad-cane. She carries a canvas bag and a purse.)*

SHEREE. Hey, girls. I'm glad we all made it.

LEXIE. We were startin' to wonder about you. *(She and Jeri Neal go to Sheree and hug her.)*

JERI NEAL. Didn't lose your way after all these years, did you, Sheree?

SHEREE. No. I've been here for a half hour. I was sitting in my car up on the rise studying the cottage, trying to make sure I never forget how this place looks.

VERNADETTE. You could've saved a lot of time if you'd brought a camera, you know.

SHEREE. Shoot, we've all got trunks full of photographs. I was making memory pictures, that's all. *(Walks to Vernadette.)* Here, give me a hug.

VERNADETTE. You got any ice cream in that bag?

SHEREE. No, I don't.

VERNADETTE. Oh. Well then let's hug and get it over with.

SHEREE. *(She hugs her, then looks around the room. Beat.)* It's a strange feeling knowing we won't be coming back here.

JERI NEAL. Yeah, it's just not right without Dinah.

SHEREE. Lord, whoever thought she'd be the first to go?

LEXIE. I certainly didn't. I figured it would be you.

SHEREE. What?!

LEXIE. Oh, sure. The way you were always shoveling down that nasty health food. I just knew it would backfire on you and get you in the end.

SHEREE. Well, I hope you're not too disappointed, Lex.

LEXIE. Of course I'm not disappointed. *Surprised* is more like it.

JERI NEAL. Lexie, I have to tell you again how beautiful your eulogy was at Dinah's service.

SHEREE. Yes, it was terrific. And enlarging those photographs from Dinah's travels around the world was the perfect touch. Only

Dinah could manage to look elegant standing next to a yak in front of a yurt in Outer Mongolia. You made that memorial the celebration it was meant to be.

LEXIE. Thanks. It was the least I could do after all she'd done for me.

JERI NEAL. Dinah did a lot for all of us. It still floors me she established the swimming scholarship at Pemberton.

LEXIE. She wanted to make sure our team's legacy lives on.

SHEREE. Actually, there was something she did for us we never knew about. When I went through her papers, I found out why this cottage was always available to us. Forty years ago, Dinah took a lifetime lease on this place.

LEXIE. Why, I'm surprised she kept that from us.

SHEREE. *You're* surprised? All these years I prided myself on being so organized, making sure I had the reservation in early to get the same weekend every August. The whole time Dinah already had it locked in.

JERI NEAL. She sure did love Sweet Delilah.

VERNADETTE. The bathroom works. Why don't we just stay here?

JERI NEAL. Because erosion's so bad they have to tear it down. Guess the ocean wants our beach back. And maybe it is time to let it go. It wouldn't be the same without all five of us here together, anyway.

SHEREE. But it's okay, Vernadette. I've rented us a very nice condo just a few miles away.

VERNADETTE. So we can keep coming to the beach?

LEXIE. As long as there are any of us left.

VERNADETTE. Good. 'Cause I'm really starting to like you people.

SHEREE. You're going to love the townhouse. We each get our own bedroom and the kitchen is huge, with a big double sink.

JERI NEAL. Oh, remember the summer the kitchen sink overflowed the minute we got here and didn't stop for an hour? We used all the towels in the cottage and half our clean clothes to mop up.

LEXIE. Lord, we have had some times.

SHEREE. And don't forget the weekend you had Kenny, Jeri Neal. We took a wrong turn on the way to the hospital and by the time we got there, his head had already crowned.