

# The Beach House

Sally John

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# One

September 24

*A Chicago suburb, Illinois*

When her teenage daughter created a scene in the master bedroom at 7:10 on Tuesday morning, Charlaine Wilcox stopped folding the turquoise silk blouse. It lay half in and half out of the suitcase while she glided her tongue along the backs of her teeth. *Slowly*, she commanded herself. Feel each individual tooth bump...the flatness of the front ones. Top row. Bottom row.

Any old body can count to ten, her mama—God rest her soul—had said on more than one occasion. Georgia-born-and-bred Ellen Cummins Stowe née Wentworth learned the gliding trick from her own mama, Edith Huntington Wentworth née Cummins. Women in the family controlled their tongues. They did not spout off in anger like common riffraff. They did not even raise their voices much above a soft whisper.

“Mom!”

Char sighed inwardly. The legacy hadn’t quite taken hold of fifteen-year-old Savannah Stowe Wilcox yet.

Char glanced at her daughter. “I said no.”

“You are such a flaming fossil!” Her voice screeched her pet phrase of the week. “Dad said this outfit looks great!”

"Savannah, sugar, your daddy can't see for beans at six-thirty in the morning." She resumed folding the blouse as she spoke. "I am a bit concerned about his early-bird patient today. That man might walk right out of the office with a perfectly good tooth whittled away to make room for a crown." She patted the blouse neatly into the suitcase, curved her lips upward into a tiny smile, and sat on the edge of the four-poster king-size bed to face her daughter.

"Ha-ha." Savannah crossed her arms and scrunched her pretty face into a tight mass of wrinkles.

"Your hair's lovely, all curled like that. It'll look extra nice in a ponytail for tonight's game." Her daughter's ash-blond hair and eyes the color of sliced almonds mirrored her own features. "But your makeup's going to make funny lines if you keep up that frowning."

"Mom! I need an answer!" Her voice rose again above the *Today* show on the television. "You're the one who let me go shopping! Everyone wears these skirts from Abercrombie! And that's what we decided to wear today! The whole entire volleyball team!"

"Skirt" was hardly an accurate term for the precious few inches of fabric hanging from her daughter's hips. "Sugar, let me put it this way: You look like a strumpet."

Savannah gave her a blank stare.

Char sighed inwardly. What were those schools teaching? Obviously not vocabulary. "A slut."

"A slut? Mom! Thanks a lot!"

"Well, you know, the boys are going to get all hot and bothered. They won't be able to focus on their geometry. And your teacher will ask why—in the name of all that is sane and holy—would a mother allow her daughter to step out of the house with the sole intention of disturbing every male who crosses her path?"

Char had already lost one battle over clothing the previous month. Hers had been the lone voice of reason against the girls' so-called uniform, which consisted of T-shirt and spankies. *Spankies!* The name was as loathsome as the purple bun-hugging shorts themselves. On a diapered toddler they would have looked cute. Not so on a gaggle of young ladies with the muscular thighs of serious athletes.

No, she was not about to lose a battle in her own house over what constituted decent school clothes. She finished the lecture. “Go put on that nice new sage green outfit I bought for you last week.”

“I hate you.” Savannah turned on her heel and stomped out the door.

Heart pounding, Char remained seated on the bed, breathed deeply, and finger-combed her short hair. She was not in a popularity contest. She absolutely was not.

A scuffling noise came from the hallway.

“Get out of my way, brat!” The barked command was a typical Savannah address to her thirteen-year-old brother.

Cole laughed heartily. “Yo, mama! Lookin’ good!”

Char smiled to herself. His insolent compliment would send Savannah racing to her closet to pull out the first outfit her hand touched.

A shriek was followed by the stomping of feet. Cole entered the bedroom then, his distinctive lopsided grin in place, and leaned against the doorjamb. The child was far too rakish for his age.

“Cole, honey, I owe you one.”

He held out his arms, palms up. “Consider it a freebie. Reverse psychology zings her every time. So where’s C.P.?”

Not up for another battle, Char let the disrespectful reference to his father, Camden Pierce, pass without reprimand. Like Savannah’s angst, it was simply another adolescent phase, here today, gone tomorrow. “He had an early appointment.”

“So how are you getting to the airport? Your car’s in the shop.” He paid close attention to anything with wheels attached.

She opened her mouth to say “Kendra,” but she caught herself before making a peep. Kendra, dearest of dear friends, who—unlike a husband—did not get her knickers all tied in a knot at the mere thought of making a round trip out to O’Hare. *Oh, puh-lease*. Kendra’s eyelashes had fluttered. What was one more stop for a master car pool driver? Unload the kids at their respective schools, breeze through Starbucks, enjoy an extra gab fest on the 294, and arrive with time to spare. Duck soup.

Char was tired of duck soup. She wanted chateaubriand. Complexity and effort, aromas that defined luscious, food that danced on the palate. She wanted out of Chicago without further ado, even if it meant sitting at the airport an extra two hours.

She flipped shut the suitcase lid. "Taxi, Cole. I'm taking a taxi."

*And hang the extra cost.*