

*Eastover  
Treasures*

**DAWN BROTHERTON**



## Chapter 1

September 10, 1861

Mary's long skirts swished as she hurried into the dining area. *Where do I even begin?* she thought. James had already transported some belongings, but he left her to sort out household items. How could she decide what was worth saving and what wasn't?

If she cleared too many objects, they would suspect items were hidden and go searching. She must be selective. Opening the drawer of the buffet, she withdrew a handful of items, then opened the next drawer, slamming them shut as she moved on. She repeated this process until she had a small pile.

Brushing the loose hair off her forehead, she turned to the next room. *I don't know why he has to leave now. We are supposed to be plowing a new garden.*

Outside the window, the reins clinked as James hitched the horse to the wagon. Swiftly, she shifted her attention to the parlor and took the painting from over the mantle. A lighter rectangle was left on the wallpaper where it had been. Muttering words her mother wouldn't approve of, Mary replaced the painting. She spun to take in the rest of the space.

*Everything is a treasure to me! How can James not understand that?*

Mary's frustration was clouding her concentration. She needed to take a minute. She stopped in the library, admiring their collection of books. Her father was a generous man and often sent treasures he found on his trips to Philadelphia. With the fighting between the north and south, no packages had come recently. She picked up the leather-bound volume he had given her when she and James moved to Virginia.

*I need to get back to my writing. Father will expect to hear all the details about country life when we travel north next.*

*But when will that be?*

Looking around, she took a mental inventory. A drop of sweat threatened her eyes, but she wiped it away with the back of her hand. Then she heard the thunder of the boys' feet across the wood floor. They skittered into the room.

"Momma, can Frederick and I go to the river to catch frogs?" nine-year-old Thomas asked.

She put on a brave face. "What are you going to do with them once you catch them?"

"We can eat them," Frederick offered.

Thomas punched his arm. "That's foul."

"No, it's not. It's living off the land. You eat what you can catch. Isn't that right, Ma?" Frederick was only ten, but already starting to talk like his father.

She smiled at the towheaded boys. "Let's save the eating until it's necessary."

"But if those secesh take our house, we may have to live in the woods. Pa said so," Thomas insisted.

"Where did you learn that kind of language, young man?"

"Noah," both boys said together.

Mary rolled her eyes. "I'll have a talk with your brother. You may go down to the river but take a basket and bring some berries with you when you come back."

The boys were out the door before she had a chance to say anything else.

"Sarah?" Mary called.

The fourteen-year-old entered the library, carrying her

latest sampler. “Yes, Ma.”

“Will you get some of the quilts from the upstairs closet and bring them down?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Mary replaced the book on the shelf and plucked out another one, placing it on the side table. Then another.

“Momma?” Sarah’s voice cut through Mary’s wild purge. “We aren’t moving all those books, are we?”

“And why not? Books have value.” Mary turned away from the shelf and took in the overflowing stacks she had subconsciously built.

Sighing, she began replacing some volumes. “Why don’t you help me pick the best ten to save?”



## Chapter 2

### *Present Day*

The breeze picked up as Aury St. Clair sat on the back deck of the rustic motel checking the latest weather forecast on her phone. The hurricane had shifted again, this time moving up the east coast of Florida. There was a fifty-fifty chance the weather that accompanied a storm of that size would miss their slice of Virginia all together.

Aury held the cell phone loosely in her lap and prepared to say goodbye to the solitude she had with nature. The breeze rustled the bushes surrounding the pond, sending a ripple across the water. The frogs were especially loud. Maybe they sensed the impending storm.

The phone's buzz joined Mother Nature's song, and Aury picked it up again. The cell reception was so bad this far into the woods that she was usually bombarded with text messages that had been waiting to find her phone as soon as it could get a signal. From the porch, she at least had a bar or two.

She glanced through them, answering a few from the accounting firm she worked for. They seemed to disregard the fact that she was on vacation. She tucked it away again, rising from the picnic bench.

As Aury opened the door, she was immediately flooded with

the cacophony of sounds emanating from the women jammed into the open floor plan of the activities room. The concrete walls did little to absorb the sound, bouncing it around the hall until only emphasized syllables and harsh laughter could be discerned.

Aury slid into place behind her sewing machine, which rested on a table butted against three others. The ladies continued their banter.

“Finished with your phone sex?” Debbie asked.

“I was. Don’t know about him,” Aury answered, just as straight-faced.

Debbie cackled. “Guys have a harder time faking it,” she said, reloading her bobbin and snapping the door closed on the casing. Her soft, gray curls framed a round face that was always quick with a smile, but it was her brightly colored sweatshirts that Aury appreciated. They usually had a quick-witted line printed on them in bold colors. Today was no different: “I’m glad no one can hear what I’m thinking” was printed in neon pink.

Pat gave Aury a speculative look. “What’s the weather?”

“The hurricane is scheduled to hit the east side of Florida. They still don’t know if it will turn, but it’s moving fast.”

Debbie shook her head. “I could be a weatherman and do a better job than those bozos.”

Pat ignored her. “Do we need to consider packing up sooner than planned?” A tall woman with a dry sense of humor, Pat’s imposing nature hid her inner spunk. It had taken a while for Aury to figure her out. Thankfully, Pat saved her sharpest retorts for Debbie.

“No way,” Linda said from the next table. “I paid for six days, and I’m going to use all six.” The hum of her machine charged over the fabric in a practiced clip. “My husband would never let me get this much done at home. I’m taking advantage of the getaway.”

Aury turned her gaze to the sunlight streaming through the

windows. “Looks like another beautiful day.”

“You just never know with these storm patterns,” Suzanne commented from across the table. “Hurricanes are fickle.” She stood from her machine and limped toward the ironing board.

Aury tried to focus on one of the many projects she brought with her for this quilting retreat. She had been looking forward to it for so long, but now the projects were overwhelming, and she had trouble concentrating.

“Sam said he thinks we should head back early in case they shut the ferry down,” Carla added. “Taking the twenty-minute ferry will be a lot better than the extra hour it would take if we had to go up toward Richmond and back down the peninsula.”

She didn’t sound worried, though. At least twenty years older than Aury and six inches shorter, Carla was a sweet soul with a positive attitude. She’d find the bright spot in the toughest situation.

“If it comes down to it, we’ll close up shop. Anyone can leave whenever they want if they’re nervous.” Aury had spent months planning this retreat. She would hate for the weather to mess it up.

She looked around the room at the fifteen heads bent over their sewing machines and projects in various stages. Aury knew she needed to get some work done. When she got home, there would be many other projects that drew her attention away from her quilting. She wanted to get her entry for the Mid-Atlantic Quilt Festival completed before the week-long retreat ended.

At thirty-eight years old, Aury was one of the youngest in the room. Reconnecting with her grandmother through her quilting had proven a useful hobby to distract her from the what-might-have-beens that kept her awake at night. After her parents had died in a car crash four years ago, she had been wracked with guilt. They had been on their way to visit her because she was upset after yet-another argument with her husband. They drove through the night instead of waiting until the next day. A drunk driver crossed the centerline and ended their lives upon impact.

Even with her grandmother’s constant assurances that it

wasn't her fault, Aury still felt responsible. And her husband gave her no emotional support. She had followed him to Williamsburg when he was offered a job, more to be near her grandmother but also as a last chance to make their marriage work. It ended less than a year later.

Now her grandmother was her best friend, and she loved spending time with her. Liza St. Clair had taught her to sew when Aury was only eight years old. They had made clothes and quilts for dolls when Aury visited on vacations. It wasn't until visiting a quilt show that Aury began to value quilting as an art, not as a necessity.

Aury leaned down to search through her fabric bag as a pretense to hide her welled-up eyes from the ladies at her table. Thinking of her grandmother stuck in the rehab hospital broke her heart. Liza was spry for eighty-one and would take on most challenges. It would be unfair to be taken out by the flu. Aury had tried to find someone else to take over the retreat so she could stay and care for her, but the old lady insisted she go. She said Aury would do more good there than at her bedside.





## Chapter 3

The sun shone through the windows the next morning, lighting up the inside of her eyelids as Aury rolled over. She fought the urge to turn away from the light, but her mind started processing the next steps in her quilt. Rubbing her tired eyes, she relished in the quiet of the wooden motel that was her home for a few more days.

The layout of the Eastover Retreat Center was beautiful. The motel had sleeping quarters stretched out on either side, with a multipurpose space in the middle where they gathered to quilt. Although all the individual units had doors that opened to the outside rather than into a hallway, the path to the sewing area was under cover. It was a quick jaunt back and forth if something was forgotten.

Another upside was the parking directly outside the bedroom doors made unloading and loading a breeze. The quilters had a short walk past the lake to the dining hall where they were served lunch and dinner. Everyone commented how wonderful it was not to have to cook. They ate breakfast on their own whenever they drifted in.

Aury loved the idea of not waking to an alarm clock and took her time getting up. Eventually, the call of her sewing machine got her motivated. She slipped on a pair of flannel pajama pants, stuck her feet into old tennis shoes, and looked into the mirror.

Pulling her dark hair into a messy bun, she declared herself presentable—at least for this group.

“Morning, all,” she said to the earlier risers, already engrossed in their projects. Some raised their heads in greeting, but most simply called out a hello over the whirring of the machines.

She went straight to the kitchen that took up a corner of the multipurpose room. Thankfully, someone had already brewed a pot of coffee. Aury filled a cup and wandered to her table where she stopped to stare at the mobile quilt wall hanging by sticky hooks behind her workstation. The bedsheet-sized, felt cloth was invaluable for gripping the cut triangle and square pieces of cotton to envision how the quilt would appear once sewn together. The ease of removing and rearranging the pieces made it one of Aury’s best quilting investments.

“You finished a lot last night,” Debbie commented.

“I’m a night owl. I think I got most of this done between midnight and three in the morning.”

“That’s because you didn’t have Debbie yacking at you.” Pat tossed a crumpled-up napkin at her friend.

Debbie screwed up her face. “Bite me.”

“Seriously, see what I mean? How can we get anything done with that in the background?”

Carla came in through the door. “Looks like the rain is going to hit us today. The wind has really started blowing.” As if to emphasize her words, a gust caught the door and slammed it behind her. Everyone jumped.

“Sorry,” she said.

Quiet laughter rippled through the women as they shook off their nervousness.

“What time is lunch?” Aury asked.

Linda looked up from her work. “You just got here. I think you need to get some work done before you can eat.”

Suzanne raised an eyebrow. “Lunch is served at noon, just like every other day. You set up the retreat. Can’t you remember the schedule?”

Aury checked her watch. “Guess I still have time for breakfast.”

She wandered to the kitchen, stopping to check out the creativity of her fellow guild members along the way. The best part about this retreat was picking up pointers from all the ladies who had been doing this so much longer than she had.

After she finished her cereal, Aury poured herself another cup of coffee and returned to her table.

Sorting through her boxes of scrap fabric, she tried to decide what could be repurposed. From larger pieces of material, she cut five-inch squares. For smaller pieces, she selected templates to make different shapes for future quilts.

“Lunchtime!” Nancy called.

Aury looked up, surprised that three hours had slipped by. She had worked through a sizable pile and would be ready to start sewing when they returned.

She ensured her machine was off and unplugged her iron. Ladies grabbed sweaters off their chairs, readying to leave. As Aury stepped onto the porch, the wind cut through her pajama bottoms. Sheepishly, she realized she still hadn’t showered or changed yet that morning.

“I’ll meet you all over there,” she told Debbie and Pat as they started down the path that led to the dining hall.

Aury ran to her room, changed into jeans, and threw on a sweatshirt. She brushed her teeth and pulled her long hair into a sloppy ponytail. She decided boots would be a better choice for the walk alongside the lake, just in case the threatening rain started.

She hustled down the path, hoping to get in the food line before people returned for seconds. As she passed the pond, the bullfrogs yelled out their protest, seconded by the cicadas and other wildlife. Under normal circumstances, Aury would have enjoyed the solitary walk. Today, everyone was so worried about the storm that she had started to become worried, too.

This group of quilters had taken her in, encouraging her

to try new sewing techniques and expand her skills. She felt responsible for them, and she didn't want this storm to spoil their getaway.



## Chapter 4

**A**ury grabbed her tray and settled at a table with Penny, Nancy, and Carol. Nancy had already finished eating and stared impatiently at her phone.

“What’s up?” Aury asked, shoveling food in her mouth.

“This darn thing. There’s no service out here.”

“Haven’t they ever heard of WiFi?” Penny asked.

“This is a retreat,” Carol emphasized. “The idea is to leave behind electronics. No TVs, radios, or computers.”

Penny stacked her empty dishes on a tray. “That’s ridiculous. How are we supposed to know what’s happening with the storm?”

Aury pulled out her phone, checking the bars. “I get service here, but it’s weak. Guess it depends on your provider.”

“What a waste,” Nancy mumbled, shutting her phone off.

Just then, an old-fashioned ringtone sounded.

“Someone else has service.” Aury winced, realizing that was rubbing salt in the wound for Nancy.

A few minutes later Carla stood. “That was Sam. The hurricane hit Florida as a Category Four. It’s bad.”

“East or west side?” someone asked.

“East. It pushed through Georgia and is headed up the coast. Lots of flooding.”

“I thought it was supposed to turn out to sea,” Penny said.

“That’s one option. No one is sure at this point,” Carla answered.

Penny looked at Aury. “Do you think we should leave?”

“Carla, did Sam say what is expected to happen to Virginia?” Aury asked.

“It’ll probably turn into a tropical storm by the time it gets here. That means rain.”

Linda stood and picked up her tray. “What’s a little rain? We’re inside most of the time anyway. What would we be doing if we went home? I have too many projects to finish here.”

Others started to gather their things, feeling the pressure of the hurricane bearing down on them. Aury knew responsibilities at home would be calling to them.

Aury turned to answer Penny’s question. “I’m sticking it out. I don’t have anyone waiting for me, but no one will mind if you feel you need to go.” She glanced around at the die-hard quilters of the group. She couldn’t leave them alone. Although they were on high ground far above the river, Aury knew storms were unpredictable.

“I might take off a little early. I’m worried about what my dogs will do in the storm. They get all excited and might tear something up. My husband can’t calm them down when they get all riled up,” Penny said.

The ladies cleared their trays and bundled up for the walk back to the motel.

“I’m glad our rooms are close,” Carol commented.

The ladies chattered on the walk, and Aury took it all in, content to be absorbing their quilting knowledge any way she could. She was awed by the collective wisdom in their small group.

The women shed their sweaters and jackets and settled into their places. Some put on their headphones, while others continued to talk about various people they knew.

“There is no way Fred is able to fix that roof,” Debbie said. “He thinks he’s God’s gift to carpentry, but he doesn’t have it in him.”

“Let him try,” Pat said. “What’ll it cost you? He’ll be outside enjoying himself, and you can hide in your sewing cave. If it doesn’t work, I have the number of a handyman.”

“I’ll bet you do.” Debbie gave an exaggerated wink.

Pat gave her a sour look and spoke to Aury. “Are you going to get anything done today?”

“No, I think I’ll continue on my useless path of existence,” Aury replied, clicking on her sewing machine. Ignoring the snort of laughter from Pat, Aury started lining up the strips she had cut before lunch, organizing the colors into the range she would use to assemble her rose cathedral window. This was supposed to be a project for her and her grandmother together. She wasn’t sure she was up for the challenge alone.

“Stretch!” Aury called, standing from her seat an hour later.

Slowly the ladies put aside their work to humor their youngest member. Once everyone stood, Aury led the exercise. “Hands on your hips. Tilt your head and look at the ceiling. Push your hips forward.” The ladies complied. “Feel the stretch in your lower back.”

After a few seconds, she continued. “Slowly, come forward. All the way. Bend at the waist. Drop your hands and let them hang toward the floor.”

Aury heard some moans and creaks, but no one complained. She had started this stretching regimen after one of the other ladies had mentioned how she was getting stiff from sitting in place for so long. Aury tried to think up different ways to keep the ladies from returning home with memories of sore and tired muscles. A non-sewer doesn’t have an accurate perspective of what leaning over a machine all day does to a person.

“Slowly, stand. One vertebra at a time. Not too fast, you’ll get a head rush.”

“That’s what he said,” Debbie muttered under her breath, eliciting laughter from the few that stood nearby.

“Okay, now you can get to work.” Aury continued to stand, twisting at the waist, then rolling her shoulders. She was ready to cut again. She picked up her fabric and moved to the taller

cutting table.

A few hours later, Aury had made good progress on her quilt. She had a stack of four-patches made from the strips she had sewn together, cut, and then resewn. Her ex-husband had never understood the point of cutting something up to sew it back together.

When phrased that way, Aury could understand the confusion. He was never able to appreciate the beautiful patterns that emerged when things fell into place. Aury could lose herself in the colors of a well-made quilt.

She decided she needed to get some exercise before dinner. She shut down her machine and waved at her tablemates, letting them know she was setting out on her daily walk. She started down the path away from the road. Every day, she had tried to pick another route to explore. This time she headed toward the water.

The sky held a few dark clouds, but no rain had fallen yet. Aury didn't understand the fuss about the storm.

Shadows loomed on the path through the woods. After only a few steps under the canopy, the smell of decaying leaves and mushrooms overwhelmed Aury. Although it was late October in Virginia, all the leaves hadn't given up their hold yet.

Aury marched toward the glade a quarter mile ahead. The bright beacon of sunlight in the clearing blazed in contrast to the dappled light under the trees. The path through the woods was straight and well-maintained, and Aury found something unexplainably special about walking on a narrow strip of order between the natural spontaneity of the wilderness on either side of the path.

Ahead, she spotted a roughly hewn wooden arrow staked into the ground declaring that the path to the left led to the beach. Just the thought of water made Aury smile to herself. She wasn't much of a swimmer, but she enjoyed watching the current make its way past any obstacle in its path.

As she approached the fork in the road intent on heading to the beach, the vast, green lawn off the right fork caught her eye.



She hadn't been this way before and was surprised, once again, at how far the property stretched, with no one around for miles.

Only a few hundred feet down the path, she stopped, thrilled with the manor house that loomed in the distance. It was as if she had stepped back in time. The house was two stories, with white sideboards and four chimneys. The wooden shutters were closed, as if hiding its secrets from the world. Aury wasn't sure if that was a precaution against the storm or if the house was in a permanent state of hibernation.

From where she stood on the west side of the manor, Aury could see part of the circular driveway in the front, and the glassed-in porch on the back. The azalea bushes grew up close to the house, the pink flowers teasing the second-floor windows.

As she crept closer, Aury got another feeling. The original sense of grandeur was replaced with one of sadness and neglect. Paint was peeling from the wood siding, and the windows that weren't shuttered were so dirty they were hard to see into.

On the backside of the house facing the James River, the shutters had an extra board nailed across them to ensure compliance. Aury assumed that was more to ward off any intruders rather than the hurricane gusts coming off the river.

The grass had been mowed recently, so at a distance, the house still retained its dignity.

As Aury approached the porch, lightning flashed, and the first drops of rain splashed her face. Reluctantly, she took one last peek at the house and jogged down the path toward the motel, leaving the silent manor to face the elements alone.



## Chapter 5

**T**hat night at dinner, Aury stalled until she was last in the food line. “I saw the manor house today,” she commented to the gentleman behind the food counter.

“She’s a beauty, isn’t she?” Alan’s face brightened. “Needs some TLC but is certainly holding her own.”

“How old is it?”

“Built in the 1880s, is my understanding,” he replied, dishing up a large portion of fish and rice for Aury. “They used to rent it out, but the upkeep was too much.” He handed over her plate of food.

“Any chance we could take a peek inside?”

The older man shook his head sadly. “I’m sorry, miss. It’s been declared off limits. The insurance on this retreat center doesn’t allow for visitors in there anymore.”

“Who owns the retreat center?”

“It’s been in the Henry Bell family for years. He left it to his son, Scott, but unfortunately didn’t leave the money necessary to keep it running.” Alan looked both ways before leaning conspiratorially toward Aury. “Don’t be spreading rumors, but I don’t know how much longer he can hang on.”

“How sad. I assume this property would be quite profitable.” Aury’s curiosity grew, getting the best of her now.

The man gazed into the distance. “I’m not rightly sure. I

know Scott's mom wanted it left as a retreat center for people to get away from the city. She was the one who hired me, some forty years ago."

"What happened to her?"

"Died of cancer when Scott was a teenager." He waved his hand at her. "Go eat before that gets cold. You'll need your strength to battle the storm that's coming."

"How bad do you think it's going to get?"

"We haven't been hit up this ways in a while, but you can expect a solid drenching. Any of your ladies heading back to town tonight? If so, best git before dark."

"One or two might head out. They need to deal with things at home."

"Well, let me know soon if you need any help. We'll be off property until tomorrow night. Gotta rest on the Lord's day," Alan explained. "Don't worry. I'll bring crockpots of chili along with some cornbread over to the motel in a bit. All you'll have to do is plug them in tomorrow to heat it up, and you'll be set for a hot dinner."

"Sounds good. Thanks for looking out for us." Aury broke away to join the others.

As the ladies made their way back to the motel, the rain had slowed to a drizzle.

"This isn't so bad," Pat said. "Don't know what everyone's so worried about."

A flash of lightning followed closely by a rumble of thunder caught their attention. As if by instinct, they all picked up their pace, possibly the fastest many of them had moved in years.

By the time they reached the motel, they were drenched through. The women scattered back to their rooms to change into dry clothes.

Since she was wet anyway, Aury stripped down and climbed into a hot shower. As she stood under the water, she thought about what the man in the kitchen had told her.

The reader in her wondered if Scott's mother had died in

the manor house. It might make for a cool ghost story. And why was the family hanging on to the property if they were losing money? It was big enough; they could sell off a few parcels and still have hundreds of acres left. It was waterfront property. The Bell family could be rich.

The water turned cold quicker than it usually did. Aury supposed the other ladies had the same idea about a shower. She shut off the water and toweled off, her mind turning once again to her quilt project.



True to his word, Alan showed up in the activities room with a few crockpots full of chili they promptly put in the refrigerator for the night. He also left a pan of freshly made cornbread.

Aury smelled the melted butter drizzled over the yellow bread. “I don’t think it’ll make it until tomorrow.”

“I didn’t figure so.” He went back to his car, returning with another pan still warm from the oven.

“You gotta stretch it out, though. There’s fixins’ for salad in the fridge, and you should have plenty of lunch meat and cheese. That pretty much cleaned out my pantry. I’ll hit the store on my way in Monday morning.”

“We appreciate it. You all have been wonderful to us.”

“We enjoy having company out here. I know Scott loves to see this room busy like when his mom was alive.”

“What does Scott do for a living?”

“He’s an engineer in northern Virginia, but his dream is to be out here full time. I think he keeps the other job to make ends meet.”

“Can’t he just sell off some of the property to make it more manageable? Maybe get a little boost to fix up the rest of the buildings?” Aury asked.

Alan was shaking his head before Aury finished speaking. “Don’t understand it myself. He won’t consider breaking it up,

and no way he'll walk away from it. Land's been in his family for years. His mother was researching the history before she got real sick. It's a shame. I thought she was rallying there for a while." An audible sigh escaped as his shoulders slumped and his eyes dropped.

"Well, I'm glad we still have Eastover to come to. It works perfect for our quilting retreats." Aury gestured at the room full of machines and focused ladies. "Some of these women wait for this all year."

Alan perked up. "Yes, ma'am. My own momma was a quilter. Nothing better than a blanket full of love to warm your bones. Speaking of which, I better get home before my wife makes me sleep outside for being late. You all have a wonderful night."



## Chapter 6

**A**ury quilted late into the night. She enjoyed the energy of a room full of quilters, but she also looked forward to the solitude of watching movies on her eReader while she sewed. At this hour, everyone had turned in for the night.

Some of the women had packed up and headed home already. The vacant spaces looked strange in the midst of tables overflowing with material and various sewing paraphernalia. They were down from fifteen to ten women, and Aury wondered how many would leave in the morning.

As Aury freed her project from the sewing machine and prepared to move to the ironing board, she thought she heard a noise at the front of the hall. She held her breath in concentration.

There it was again! A scraping outside the front door. She stole toward the sound, keeping out of sight behind the kitchen wall. She couldn't imagine any of the ladies would be up, and even if they were, they would come straight into the hall, not loiter outside.

She peeked around the corner, but the lights inside were bright, making it impossible to see outside. As she struggled with what to do, she searched the closest table for a weapon. A giant pair of shears sat beside Linda's machine. Aury reached for them.

The crash against the door was followed by a stream of

incoherent words. Aury's head whipped around, catching sight of a man trying to right the toppled stack of chairs.

Her fear vanished, but her heart continued to pound in her chest. Aury approached the door expecting to see Alan and was ready to quiz him about why his wife let him come to work in the wee hours. Instead, she saw a man in his mid-thirties with dark, close-cropped hair. His tie was askew, and the sleeves of his white button-down shirt were rolled to the elbows.

She stopped short, but by then it was too late. He locked eyes with her, and for a moment, Aury was sure he looked frightened. Then he smiled and ran a hand through his hair.

He pushed the chairs aside and opened the glass door. "I'm sorry if I scared you. I didn't realize anyone was still awake. Of course, with all the racket I made, I probably woke everyone up."

Aury simply stared back, unsure what to say.

"I'm Scott." He extended his hand.

She took in the tan, muscular forearm before the name registered. She returned his handshake. "Are you the owner here?"

"I am." His grin was friendly. "I'm sorry I haven't come out to greet you all before now, but I was trying to set matters straight at home, so I could be here before the storm and batten things down."

He gestured toward the chairs. "I was going to put some things inside, so they wouldn't blow around if the wind catches them. Guess I should have waited until morning. I was still keyed up from the drive and couldn't sleep, so I thought I'd work a bit. I never have enough time to do everything I want."

Aury smiled. "I know what you mean. Obviously, or I wouldn't be sewing at," she looked at her watch, "two o'clock in the morning."

"I don't know how you can create such beautiful works of art from cloth. My mom was a quilter. She could spend hours behind her machine." A fleeting sign of sadness washed across

his face.

“I totally lose myself in it. There are so many new patterns I want to try. Just looking at fabric makes me happy.”

“Well, I should let you get back to it,” Scott said. “I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“It was a nice break, aside for the part where you scared me half to death. Are you staying for the weekend?”

“Yes, there are a lot of things to be done before the storm. You ladies may not want to be here. I can refund some of your money if you need to close up shop early.”

Aury recognized the generous offer, especially in light of what Alan had told her about how hard it was to make ends meet. “I doubt that will be necessary. We’re tough for a group of quilters.”

He smiled at that. “Have a good night then.” He tipped an imaginary hat.

Aury returned to her ironing board, lost in thought about Scott and his dilemma with the camp. She wondered if there was any way she could help.





## Chapter 7

**B**y the time Aury dragged herself into the hall the next morning, a few more tables had been vacated. “So it’s down to us seven?” she asked the room.

“It’s going to be six. Sorry, I need to help my daughter prepare for the hurricane. She’s seven months pregnant and trying to put boards up over her sliding glass window,” one of the ladies said.

“More food for us!” Debbie cheered. “Chili is my favorite.” The hum of her machine sounded like an agreement.

Aury poured a cup of coffee and wandered out to the deck. The sky was overcast but it was still bright. It was hard to envision how a hurricane could affect them out here.

“Good morning.” Scott approached from the direction of the dining hall. “Did you quilt much last night?”

“A fair bit. Looks like you started early.” In the daylight, Aury was able to see a few streaks of gray in Scott’s hair and the faded blue of his eyes. He was wearing an old t-shirt and a pair of cargo shorts that showed off his tan features.

“Couldn’t sleep. I came by earlier and met some of the ladies. They were kind enough to show me the quilts they’re working on. Talented bunch you got there.”

“Amazing, aren’t they? Why couldn’t you sleep?”

“My mind is constantly racing with what might go wrong in

this weather.”

“Do you think it’ll flood this high?” Aury remembered the steep drop off the cliff she had seen on her walks.

“No danger of flooding. I’m more worried about trees falling, to be honest. With all the rain, the ground becomes saturated, and heavy winds can knock them over easier.”

“Is there anything you can do about it?” she asked.

“Not really. I was hoping to cut some of those big ones away from this building, but time got away from me. There’s always something.” He shook his head.

“I haven’t checked the news this morning. What’s the status of the hurricane?”

“It’s supposed to swing up the coast of North Carolina, slowing down when it’s over land. That should be another day or so.”

“Good to know. We’re down to only six of us, so please tell Alan he doesn’t need to worry about any fancy food for us tomorrow. We’re happy with soup and salad if that’s easy for you.”

“That would help us out. There’s nothing left in the dining hall now except some canned food. Alan is going to do some shopping tomorrow on his way in.”

They fell into a comfortable silence, watching the wind blow the treetops.

“Did you grow up here?”

Scott looked across the pond lovingly. “In a way. We didn’t live here, but we spent every summer and most weekends here. Halloween was especially entertaining because of the haunted woods.” His lips quirked into a grin.

“Haunted?”

“That’s what my grandparents told us. Ethereal mists guarded part of the property, and we would dare each other to walk into it when it was especially thick.” This time he laughed aloud.

“Once, my cousin Julie went in and ran out without her shoes. She was sure a ghost had latched onto her and her only

escape was to ditch her runners. In the light of the day, we found her shoes stuck in the mud. After that, our grandparents weren't allowed to tell us scary stories anymore."

Aury watched the laugh lines crinkle around his eyes while he thought about happier times.

He shook himself as if coming out of a trance. "When my grandparents were alive, they lived in the manor house. We ran around like we owned the place."

"Do you have brothers and sisters?" Aury asked. She could picture a gaggle of kids playing hide and seek in the trees.

"Cousins, actually. On my mom's side. Dad didn't have any brothers or sisters. It would have been easier if he did."

She gave him a puzzled look. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, I don't mean to go on about myself."

"I'm interested. Really," she assured him.

Scott ran his hand across his face. "Well, when my grandparents died, they left this property to my dad. Mom wanted to turn it into a Christian retreat center and have youth groups out here. They sunk a bunch of their retirement money into the renovations, then Mom got sick." His voice hitched, and Aury looked away to give him a sense of privacy.

"The medical bills added up quickly with cancer. Mom passed, and then Dad lost all interest in this place. They say that happens a lot when two people are close. He died a year later."

"Sorry to hear about your family." Her stomach twisted with the shared pain of losing parents, but she wasn't ready to talk about the accident that claimed her parents.

"Thank you. I hope to keep going with the plans my parents had for this place, but I'm not sure I can swing it. It takes more money and energy than I have right now."

"I understand." Aury thought about the energy she had expended on keeping her marriage afloat, only to see it fall apart in the end.

"My mom was especially excited to see Eastover full of kids and families. And quilters, of course," he added with a grin.

“I’d love to see the plans someday. This is a awesome piece of property.”

“Hopefully I’ll have a chance to show you. For now, I better hustle back to my chores. And you need to get some sewing done. Those quilts won’t make themselves.”

Aury gave a little wave and headed indoors. The room was almost eerily quiet with only the few ladies that were left.

“Can we at least put on some music now?” Debbie asked. “We should be able to agree on something with six people.”

“Seven,” Carla corrected her.

“Ah, she don’t count.” Debbie indicated the lady who was packing her things. “She’s deserting us.”



## Chapter 8

**A**s Aury took her usual walk before dinner, she wandered toward the manor house again. This time, she admired it from a distance, preferring to think of it as it must have been in its heyday.

Aury pictured kids of various ages running through the halls and almost heard the cry of the house matron as the kids let the screen door slam shut as they ran out to play. She smiled at her musings as she took the left fork in the path through the woods that led toward the beach.

At one time, this path was obviously tended but not in the recent past. Oyster shells littered the walkway and crunched under her feet. The leaves still hanging on to the trees overhead muffled most of the sounds except in Aury's immediate area.

Climbing over fallen tree trunks that must have been there for years, she was glad she was wearing jeans and not shorts for this adventure.

She stopped to examine how the roots of a fallen tree had dislodged what appeared to be a marker stone. Now covered with moss, the two-foot cube rested askew with one corner pointed up as if it had stopped in mid-spin. The rough-hewn edges must have been chiseled, not cut with any modern equipment.

Aury brushed at it with her hand, but the moss and dirt didn't loosen their hold easily. Wiping her hands on her pants,

she continued along the trail. The downward slope made for an easy enough walk, although the roots pushing up through the groundcover were a tripping hazard.

At the edge of the woods, she stopped to take in the broad expanse of the James River. Even on this overcast day, the sight was impressive. Off on the distant shore, lights shimmered from houses tucked into the woods. With another deep breath to fill her full of happy thoughts, Aury turned to her right to continue along the riverside.

As she prepared to turn back, Aury spotted what appeared to be an opening in the foliage. A tapestry of vines hung like a curtain across what used to be a path. Finding a long piece of driftwood, Aury swung at the vines, trying to loosen them from their sticky grip. They were thick and tangled, and Aury soon gave up on her adventure.

She glanced at her watch, deciding it was time to head back the way she came. The wind picked up, and the promise of spicy chili and cornbread made her stomach rumble.

The chatter of the women and the hum of machines was a welcome home as she stepped into the room, but the rhythmic pulse coming from Debbie's phone made Aury laugh. Debbie sang along with Taylor Swift, and her head bopped with the beat.

"I see you found music you all agree on."

"Agree? Who said anything about agreeing? Debbie turned on this crap, and we're stuck with it," Pat said.

"Bite me," Debbie replied without missing a beat.

Aury laughed as she stepped to the sink to wash the dirt from her hands.

Carla followed her into the kitchen, filling up a plate of snacks from the leftover assortment. "Have a nice walk?"

"It's beautiful out here. I wish we could stay longer."

"Be careful what you wish for. I hear the storm is moving faster than they thought."

“Glad I brought a lot of projects.”



Most of the ladies retired early that night, leaving Aury and Carla alone at opposite ends of the hall working. Aury had her earplugs in, half-listening to the movie she had downloaded to her tablet. Carla was absorbed in her ironing.

The lights flickered, causing both women to glance up in surprise. They had just turned back to their work when the lights flickered again, then went out.

The darkness fell on them. Aury pulled at the wires in her ears. “Carla?”

“I’m still here.”

“I wonder if they have a generator.”

“I doubt they would for this building,” Carla said.

Aury waited for her eyes to adjust to the dark but nothing happened.

“Watch out for the hot iron,” Aury cautioned Carla as she got up from behind her machine. Without the sound of the sewing machine, the howling of the wind instantly became more evident.

“I guess we may as well go to sleep,” Carla suggested. “Doubt we’ll get anything else done tonight.”

“Do you need help finding your way?” Aury held up her tablet, which was still playing on battery. The faint glow lit a few feet in front of her.

Carla moved cautiously around the table, avoiding the tripping hazards. She reached down and unplugged the iron. “Let’s not take any chances.” She grabbed her keys and cell phone. Her phone flashlight illuminated in her hand. “I can make it from here. Hopefully they’ll have things under control in the morning.”

She went out the back door as Aury moved to the front of

the hall. Her room was on the side of the building closest to the parking spots. Stopping at her table, she picked up her cell phone and turned off the tablet. Her phone was at fifty-three percent. She cursed herself for not charging it earlier in the night.

Using her phone as a flashlight, she stepped into the night. The rain came down in sheets. Large puddles had formed around the cars, indicating it had been raining for a while.

After changing into her pajamas, she slipped into bed and pulled the blankets over her shoulders, listening as the rain attacked the roof.



## *Other Books by Dawn Brotherton*

### **Jackie Austin Mysteries**

*The Obsession* (also available on audio)

*Wind the Clock*

### **Romance**

*Untimely Love*

### **Lady Tigers Series**

*Trish's Team* (book 1)

*Margie Makes a Difference* (book 2)

*Nicole's New Friend* (book 3)

*Avery Appreciates True Friendship* (book 4, written by  
Paige Ashley Brotherton)

*Tammy Tries Baseball* (book 5)

### **Nonfiction**

*Baseball/Softball Scorebook*

*The Road to Publishing*

### **Contributing Author to**

*A-10s Over Kosovo*

*Water from Wellspring*