

Remember Me

By Deborah Bedford

Chapter One

Sam takes the steps to the house two at a time, stumbling over the soles of his size-13 tire-tread sandals. For one moment he stands there, breathing in the moldering smell of the porch, the glass door panels clouded with salt and grime, the doorknob scored with rust, the shingles paint-chipped, grey or green or white. He can't remember what color they used to be.

He takes one deep, satisfied breath and knocks. He knows exactly what he is going to say. He's been driving for more than two days to see her, across the broad nothingness of Wyoming, the width of lower Idaho, the high plains plateau of eastern Oregon and finally along a snaking, fast highway—terrifying because of the semis—before plummeting toward the sea. When he bangs on the door again, the rusty doorframe rattles and the curtain wavers in cadence with his fist. "Aubrey! I'm here! Hey!"

It seems odd that the dog hasn't started yipping inside. Mox, the McCart's black-and-white mutt, is always the first to greet him, nails clicking as he charges across the slippery, hardwood floor. Then, only seconds after the dog, Aubrey will come, too, shoving aside the curtain to see who is outside, yanking open the door and grinning at him. Her feet will be squeezed into pumps with pointed toes and her pale eyes, which he knows she wears heavily lined so she'll resemble Priscilla Presley, will narrow with pleasure.

Sam, she will say, did you know that a duck's quack doesn't echo and no one knows why?

He will box at her with his hands and say, I never fall for your silly stories anymore. You know that about me. You might as well quit trying.

When he tries the doorbell, he finds it's disconnected. He jiggles the doorknob, listens for sounds inside the house. He bangs again, harder this time, so hard that it hurts his knuckles.

The sound of his banging fades away and the outdoor sounds grow loud. Breeze rattles the myrtlewood leaves. Two flies dive bomb each other beside his ear. The Douglas fir beside the curb seems to watch him, limbs skirting its trunk like a Southern belle's gown.

Sam leans toward the glass, tries to peer through it, uses his sleeve to wipe off the murk. "Aubrey?"

When he straightens, someone is standing on the porch next door. A neighbor, he thinks her name is Mrs. Branton, examines him through pinched, suspicious eyes.

"What you want over there, boy? What's all the noise about?"

He's still so surprised to find no one at home at the McCart's, he just stares dumbly.

"You're disturbing people's peace. Do you know that? I'll bet they can hear that pounding for ten miles around."

"Didn't mean to bother anybody."

"Well, you are. You young people, wrapped up in your own vim and vigor. Always thinking about yourselves."

Sam feels his face flush with embarrassment.

"I've got a cake in the oven over here. You keep knocking like that, you're going to make it fall."

"I'm sorry," he says. Then, "Do you know where they are?"

"Who?"

"The McCarts."

"Oh, good heavens. You're not looking for them, are you?"

He nods.

"Nobody's coming to that door, young man. They aren't there anymore."

"Aubrey? Mr. McCart? Mox?"

"Oh, that Mox. Always digging in my garden. No, he's gone, too."

Sam doesn't know what to say.

"Didn't even take time to sell the house. They left too fast for that. Up and walked out, all in a day."

"Do you know where? Why?"

"Packed the car and locked the door. That's all anybody knows. Nobody's seen them since."

"But the boats—"

"Sold to another company. Some Portland people not interested in fishing. They painted the wharf, spiffed it up. Now they have box lunches, take people out looking for whales."

From where he stands, Sam sees driftwood overgrown with dunegrass and wild Oregon roses. He sees the long smudge of beach and the water shimmering at him, razors of silver almost burning his eyes. Somewhere near the rocks, farther out than he can see, he knows there are sea lions basking in the sun.

"I suppose you're like those other boys. Everybody around here was sweet on Aubrey."

Her words pelt him like stones, fall off, do not seem real. He turns from Mrs. Branton, aimlessly tries the doorknob again and thinks, I am not sweet on her, no. It's much more than that. Then he thinks, Lord, I thought you intended us to know each other a long time. How could you let it end this way?

When Sam Tibbits was young, he'd found it impossible to think about anything else as long as the sea was breaking over the shore at his toes and the tide was running swiftly upriver. The ocean had the power to drown out the news of helicopters crashing in Vietnam, or thoughts of the *Ed Sullivan Show*—which he would be missing because the motor court where they were staying didn't have a television set—or even thoughts of the skateboard his father had promised him if he mowed Madelyn Vance's yard all summer.

He had wanted to pretend that he belonged here year-round, that he wasn't a city visitor always doomed to depart after a week's rental. He wanted to know the times of the tides and the diesel smells of boats and the sorts of bait that might coax things onto his hook and out of the water.

Something in him awakened every time he came to Piddock Beach. He wanted to be a boy of the sea.

From the moment seven years ago, when his father had first parked their new two-door Plymouth Fury at Sunset Vue Motor Court and Sam had launched himself forward, folding his mother halfway into her seat as he grappled for the door handle, he had been desperate to get to the water.

"Hold your horses, young man! The beach isn't going anywhere in the next five minutes." But his mother reached for the latch anyway to let him escape and his seven-year-old sister, Brenda, tumbled out behind him.

"Can I get the shovel out of the trunk?"

His father climbed out and headed toward the neon-lit registration office.

"I'm going to check us into the room first, son."

"But it'll be dark soon. I won't be able to dig anything if I can't see."

"This isn't going to take but a minute."

"Dad, we've been in the car for three *days*." They had been stuffed inside the Plymouth for what seemed like forever, listening to the radio cross-country and peeling Saran Wrap off of sandwiches that smelled of ripe, warm ham.

But Edward Tibbits kept walking.

"You never know!" Sam insisted to his father's squared shoulders. "I might be able to dig up some clams before supper, if you let me go now."

Edward turned. For five, ten seconds, Sam watched his father weighing a decision that Sam was too young to understand. Looking back, he recognized what it was—the first hint of his father relaxing in months as he breathed in sodden, salt-ridden air, his face losing its tight, hard edges. But he felt it at some deeper level, and it became another reason that the boy loved the sea.

With a slight, knowing smile, his father tossed the Fury keys toward him.

"Time's a'wasting, isn't it, boy? Get your shovel."

"Yeah." Sam snagged the keys in mid-air.

A long list of commands from his mother followed: "You watch your sister, Sam. Don't get too close to the water. Remember that you have to wear those pants all week; don't mess them up now." Her voice might as well have sailed off into the wind. Sam got his shovel and sprinted toward the sand, down a row of rickety steps, glancing back with irritation at his annoying little sister who was hurrying after him. Brenda clung to the railing, climbing down the weatherworn stairs. Her sandals slapped the wood. "You're going too *fast*," she complained. He could see her getting teary-eyed. "You're supposed to watch out for me. Mom said."

"You don't have to hold on, Brenda. Just *run*. Come *on*."

By the time she caught up, he was sitting in a clump of dunegrass tearing off his sneakers. He left his two socks in knots on the sand, brandished the shovel and raced toward the waves.

"I have to take my shoes off, Sam. Wait for me!"

The sun had begun to sink, silvering the water that skimmed the shore. A gathering of plovers strutted on toothpick legs, the birds' phantom strides pressing the sand dry in tiny spots. Ah! Sam grinned. Cold, wet beach beneath his bare feet! There was nothing in the world that could make him wait for this.

"There's splinters in my hand. See the splinters? Can't you get them out?" Brenda shoved her small grimy hand toward his face.

"Just *deal with it*, Brenda."

Another wave rushed toward them and, as it subsided, bubbles emerged from the earth around him. Once, Sam might have thought these marked the residences of clams. Now he knew better. He had made a friend at the school library, Mr. Crisp, who had shown him pictures in books and told him not to look for holes, but for churning indentations, signs of the clams burrowing in the shallow water along the seashore.

Sam set out in search of those kind of marks, completely ignoring his sister. He spied a promising place and began to dig. He speared the sand with his shovel and turned over a pile of it, sorting through it with his fingers, certain he'd found something for supper.

But, no. Nothing.

He tried another spot while Brenda traipsed behind him, her shoes squishing because she'd never had the time to take them off, her splintery hand still upraised, her fingers curling out like a starfish. "Sammy Tibbits. If you don't take care of me, Mom is going to *bust your bottom*."

Sam rolled his eyes and continued to explore and dig in the shallows for at least another quarter mile before he finally stuck the shovel into the ground and stared at the ruddy Oregon sunset in disappointment. He'd been so certain he would find clams. At that moment Sam noticed the girl standing out where the waves crashed and rolled over the end of the jetty.

Her silhouette against the darkening sky made the girl's knobby-kneed legs look as stilt-like as a sandpiper's. He couldn't help but stare. She stared back as if she were examining Sam for some purpose, as if she knew already that her presence in his life would be a certain thing.

"Sammy," Brenda whined. "I'm gonna tell!"

"Okay," Sam said, turning to his sister. "Dad has tweezers in the car box. We'll go back and have Dad take care of your hand."

The girl began bounding toward them, leaping with no effort from rock to rock, her yellow culottes flapping in the wind. As she jumped forward, he saw that she was shouting at him. Spray pounded the jetty. She approached him without hesitating, hopping down off the rocks, so confident that you'd have thought she owned the whole of Tillamook County.

"You won't get anything if you keep digging like that."

"Oh, no?"

"Nope. Not at all." The gap between her front teeth made her smile interesting. Her eyes reflected the waves, a clear, coke-bottle green.

"This is how everybody says I should do it."

"Everybody *says*." He could see where she had swiped her cheek and left sand there. Salt air matted her brown hair. Even her bangs were sticky, poking from her forehead in the same shape as a crab's claw. "But nobody must have ever *shown* you."

"There aren't any clams on this beach anyway."

"You don't think so?"

"No."

She dragged a piece of hair out of her eyes. "Look," she said, taking his shovel from him. "I'll show you clams."

He followed after the girl with Brenda in tow, as the girl sifted through the shallows with dirty, bare feet. Just when Sam least expected it, she speared the ground and began to scoop three times as fast as he could have ever done it, siphoning off shovelfuls of liquid sand with easy, economic tosses of the spade.

"No clams on this beach, huh?" she asked as she pulled one out and handed it to him. Then she found another. And another. And although Sam could have been perturbed because he hadn't been the one to actually haul these out of the ground, his enthusiasm overshadowed his pique. He had now *seen* seafood come out of the ground! These were the biggest, fattest, roundest clams! Sam had

expected small ones, the kind he had seen in Howard's Surf and Turf Restaurant, bite-sized morsels steamed and served with melted butter.

"Do you want to take these? Hold out your shirt." The girl offered them to Brenda. "Do you want more than that? Those aren't enough to feed anybody."

Brenda gazed up at her with undisguised awe. "We need a whole bunch."

The jetty girl stayed with them until dusk, digging and pitching clams into the sling of Brenda's shirt. "You ought to take some of these, too," Sam said, trying to be polite.

"I can't," she said, brushing her windblown hair from her face. "I bring home too many. My father told me that I couldn't do it anymore." She pointed to a light that had just appeared on the western horizon, maybe still a half-mile out at sea. "You see that?"

"Yeah."

"I'd better go. That's my father's boat. He's coming home."

Sam retrieved his shovel.

"How long you going to be here?"

"A week."

"Longer than some."

Only after she headed off did he realize that he had never asked her name. The girl's footprints pressed deep in the sand until they grew shallow and faint where she had started running.

When Sam and Brenda appeared on the stoop of room 3 at the Sunset Vue Motor Court, his mother opened the door and gasped. Edward shook his head with pride. "Well, I guess we did the right thing, letting you run off the way we did, boy. Look what he's done, Terrie! He's gone out and brought back supper just the way he said he would."

"Edward, bring them a towel or something, would you? Don't you two come in here without wiping off. Oh, Brenda, just look at you! You've ruined your shirt."

"I'll go to the front office right now and borrow a pot," their father blustered. "We don't have anything big enough to cook this huge catch."

Beneath his breath, Sam whispered to his sister, "Don't tell."

"I won't," she whispered back.