

A woman with her hair in a bun, wearing a red dress with white polka dots, stands on a sandy beach with her back to the camera. She is looking out at the ocean under a clear blue sky. The scene is brightly lit, suggesting a sunny day. The text of the book title is overlaid on the image in a white, serif font.

THE  
BRIGHTER  
THE  
LIGHT

AUTHOR OF *THE WORDS WE WHISPER*

MARY ELLEN  
TAYLOR

## PRAISE FOR MARY ELLEN TAYLOR

“Mary Ellen Taylor writes comfort reads packed with depth . . . If you’re looking for a fantastic vacation read, this is the book for you!”

—Steph and Chris’s Book Review, on *Spring House*

“A complex tale . . . grounded in fascinating history and emotional turmoil that is intense yet subtle. An intelligent, heartwarming exploration of the powers of forgiveness, compassion, and new beginnings.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*, on *The View from Prince Street*

“Absorbing characters, a hint of mystery, and touching self-discovery elevate this novel above many others in the genre.”

—RT Book Reviews, on *Sweet Expectations*

“Taylor serves up a great mix of vivid setting, history, drama, and everyday life.”

—*Herald Sun*, on *The Union Street Bakery*

“A charming and very engaging story about the nature of family and the meaning of love.”

—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*, on *Sweet Expectations*

## *THE WORDS WE WHISPER*

“Taylor expertly employs the parallel timelines to highlight the impact of the past on the present, exploring the complexities of familial relationships while peeling back the layers of her flawed, realistic characters. Readers are sure to be swept away.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A luscious interweaving of a spy thriller and a family saga.”

—*Historical Novels Review*

## *HONEYSUCKLE SEASON*

“This memorable story is sure to tug at readers’ heartstrings.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

## *WINTER COTTAGE*

“Offering a look into bygone days of the gentrified from the early 1900s up until the present time, this multifaceted tale of mystery and romance is sure to please.”

—*New York Journal of Books*

“There is mystery and intrigue as the author weaves a tale that pulls you in . . . this is a story of strong women, who persevere . . . it’s a love story, the truest, deepest kind . . . and it’s the story of a woman who years later was able to right a wrong and give a home to the people who really needed it. It’s layered brilliantly, and hints are revealed subtly, allowing the reader to form conclusions and fall in love.”

—Smexy Books

THE  
BRIGHTER  
THE  
LIGHT

## OTHER TITLES BY MARY ELLEN TAYLOR

*Winter Cottage*

*Spring House*

*Honeysuckle Season*

*The Words We Whisper*

### Union Street Bakery Novels

*The Union Street Bakery*

*Sweet Expectations*

### Alexandria Series

*At the Corner of King Street*

*The View from Prince Street*

THE  
BRIGHTER  
THE  
LIGHT

MARY ELLEN  
TAYLOR



This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Text copyright © 2022 by Mary Burton  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

Published by Montlake, Seattle  
[www.apub.com](http://www.apub.com)

Amazon, the Amazon logo, and Montlake are trademarks of [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com), Inc., or its affiliates.

ISBN-13: 9781542032599  
ISBN-10: 1542032598

Cover design by Shasti O'Leary Soudant

# CONTENTS

[PROLOGUE RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER ONE IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWO IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER THREE IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER FOUR RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER FIVE IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER SIX IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER SEVEN RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER EIGHT IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER NINE RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER TEN IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER ELEVEN IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWELVE ANN](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTEEN RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER FOURTEEN IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER FIFTEEN IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER SIXTEEN DANI](#)  
[CHAPTER SEVENTEEN CARLOTTA](#)  
[CHAPTER EIGHTEEN RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER NINETEEN RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX CARLOTTA](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT IVY](#)



[CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY EDNA](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO IVY](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE RUTH](#)  
[CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR IVY](#)  
[EPILOGUE IVY](#)  
[ABOUT THE AUTHOR](#)

THE  
BRIGHTER  
THE  
LIGHT

# PROLOGUE

## RUTH

*Nags Head, North Carolina*  
*Sunday, January 2, 2022, 8:00 a.m.*

Off these shores, the Atlantic Ocean is greedy. She swallows ships, goods, men, and hungrily guards her treasures and mysteries. Days, months, centuries can pass without a whisper of truth, and then smooth waters crackle, briny depths churn, and somewhere deep below the surface, a grip slackens, and a secret is revealed.

Now, standing on the shore before dawn's untethered sky, Ruth could feel the looming change in her eighty-four-year-old bones. She huddled deeper into her coat, warming her arthritic fingers as sunlight burst above pale clouds ferried along the horizon by cold, salty winds.

"No one saw the storm coming but us, Mama," Ruth said to herself. "I felt it like you once could." None of the news stations had forecast that depressions off the African coast would head west, mingle with the warm waters of the Caribbean, and snap free as a Cat 4 storm. No one had expected evacuations so late in the hurricane season. And no one had predicted the damage.

Ruth had wanted to ride out the storm, but the sheriff had ordered her out. She'd argued but, in the end, let him drive her over the Wright Memorial Bridge to the mainland, where she'd spent a long night in the Currituck County High School gym with hundreds of others. Worries over the damage swirled in the crowd as winds howled and lights flickered.

Funny thing was, Ruth hadn't been worried. Annoyed, sure, but not anxious. She'd known before she'd left her cottage that her hotel, the

Seaside Resort, wasn't going to survive. Like her, it had run its course. Their time had passed.

Her family had owned and managed the Seaside Resort for over one hundred years. Her daddy liked to brag that he'd won it in a card game, but the place hadn't been much until Mama had seen fit to marry him and take charge of him and the resort's day-to-day operations. On this day in 1938, she was born in Bungalow 28, which once boasted the best ocean view in the entire place. As the story goes, her mama found Ruth wrapped in a pink blanket, with no sign of the woman who'd given birth to her.

Edna took her wailing discovery home to her husband, Jake, and the two decided after seventeen years of marriage that a baby would be just the thing for them. They folded the little girl into their lives and, together with the hotel, weathered all of Mother Nature's punches.

A wave crashed against the shore, pushing water right up to the tips of Ruth's worn athletic shoes.

She turned from the ocean and walked up the dune, past the sea oats that brushed her fingertips. Looking at the Seaside Resort's remains still pained her. One-hundred-and-fifty-mile-an-hour gusts had torn up the trees and shrubs and dumped them in the pool, rippled the asphalt parking lot, and ripped off the roofs of most of the bungalows and main building. Gallons of rain had poured inside the structures.

On the other side of the dune, she moved toward what had been the main building. The carpet in the lobby, which she'd just installed two years ago, was soaked with rain. The seashell wallpaper was peeling off the walls in large strips, and sunlight streamed in through the cracked roof. The Seaside Resort might have had more lives than a cat, but she'd used up her last.

"I've taken the offer on the property, Mama." The practicality of selling didn't soothe her guilt or anger. "Pained me good to sign the papers yesterday. But there was no way clear this time."

A breeze blew cold from the ocean, and she closed her eyes as she searched for signs her mother was listening. Of course, she didn't hear anything. Like Ruth, Mama never was a woman of many words. No bear hugs or sloppy kisses. But steady as she goes and always there. And Mama could guard secrets as close as old Neptune himself.

"I'm not crazy enough to think they'll save the hotel. Only a fool would try. Too expensive." She'd saved what she could from the damaged

buildings and stowed it in her cottage, packing each room nearly to the ceiling. Tossing away what she'd paid good money for seemed sinful. "What remains of the resort will be razed. But maybe that's for the best. Time for something new."

The money from the sale of five acres of prime beachfront property would clear out Ruth's debts and leave her with enough to get her to the grave. There'd be no extra money for her granddaughter, Ivy, but Ruth's cottage, built a century ago with timbers from a demolished church, would bring a tidy sum.

"Blessed by God," her daddy used to say about the cottage. Considering it was two hundred yards from the Seaside Resort and hadn't lost a shingle, she reckoned that was true.

Whatever the reason for the cottage's endurance, Ruth saw it as a blessing. Ivy had a chance for a fresh start, whether she chose to live here or sell. No better gift Ruth could give.

Ruth turned her back on the ruins and faced the ocean. The brisk salt air burned her lungs and fisted around her heart as she moved across the sand. Wind brushed her face.

When she raised her gaze, she saw her parents standing on the beach holding hands with her daughter. She was tired and ready to join them. She'd be leaving Ivy alone, but that girl was the strongest of the lot. If anyone could heal the sins of the past, it was Ivy.

# CHAPTER ONE

## IVY

*Monday, January 17, 2022, 10:15 p.m.*

Four hundred and twenty-four. It was the number of miles between New York City and the Outer Banks of North Carolina. Seven and a half hours. That was the projected drive time. But it didn't account for the accident on the New Jersey Turnpike, the gridlock around the DC Beltway, or the new road construction miles before Norfolk. The calculation also didn't factor in a McDonald's stop in Delaware (hamburger and large Diet Coke) or the potty break in Fredericksburg, Virginia.

Eleven days. The time it had been since Ivy Neale had left home to attend her grandmother's funeral. It was the post-New Year's lull at the restaurant, so no one had minded when she'd taken off two days. There was a hurried flight to Charlotte and then back up to Norfolk, followed by a one-hundred-mile drive in a rental to the Outer Banks and then the thirty-minute funeral service. She'd seen friends and family, but the hugs had been quick and the conversations superficial. No time for the ex-boyfriend, the ex-friend who'd slept with him two months after she'd left for New York twelve years ago, their truly precious child, the hundreds of people who had loved Ruth, or a tour of Ruth's house.

She'd flown back to New York, the sea air still clinging to her sweatshirt, and inquired about an extended leave from her job.

Five seconds. How long it had taken her boss to reject her request for leave. One second for this last straw to break the camel's back and for her to quit. Three days to cut a deal with her landlord, sell her furniture, and pack up what remained. She had agreed to pay him the remaining two

months on her lease once she sold the cottage or was making money again. He'd accepted, knowing money later was better than none at all.

It wasn't that she didn't love her job or the city. God knew they'd endured a lot together. But it was time to return home and clean out Ruth's house. She owed this to Ruth.

One thousand five hundred dollars. That was how much the 2005 van had cost her from the used-car dealer. It was green and had worn tan seats and a radio that worked as long as you didn't hit a pothole, which was a neat trick on nearly eight hundred miles of I-95.

Thirty-one dollars and three cents. It was the cost of gas and a large packet of M&M'S from the gas station before she crossed the Wright Memorial Bridge and left the mainland behind for the Outer Banks, the two-hundred-mile-long chain of barrier islands stretching along the North Carolina coast. They'd been inhabited for a thousand years by native tribes drawn by the fertile waters and since 1587 had been settled by Europeans.

Ivy's grandmother, Ruth, had lived and died by numbers. She'd always been counting the days until opening season, the days until the season closed, the dollars and man-hours required to keep her hotel in the black, and the miles per hour of the winds when a hurricane loomed close to the shores. The last hurricane that hit in December was the "widow-maker," as Ruth had said on the phone. It ripped and soaked Ruth's hotel beyond the point of salvaging. Ivy had vowed to return home as soon as the Christmas rush was over.

The wind whipped across the long bridge, forcing her to tighten her grip on the steering wheel to keep the tires aligned. Thick gray clouds unspooled over the bright full moon.

Across the bridge, Ivy stopped at the Wendy's and ordered up two bacon cheeseburgers, fries, and a diet soda. There'd be no food at Ruth's cottage, so the extra burger could double as breakfast until she figured out what stores were open in the off-season.

Ivy glanced in the van's rearview mirror, which tossed back a reflection of smudged mascara and a riot of black curls. As she stared at her likeness, Ruth's voice echoed: *Your shift starts at seven. We've got three parties this weekend, so no time for friends. We made it through another season.*

She grabbed a handful of french fries and gobbled several as she pushed through the drive.

It was another eight miles down the main road until the left turn by the mattress store at Milepost 8 took her down a side street to the beach road. A half mile south, she expected to see the Seaside Resort, but the barren, leveled land threw her off, and without the landmark, she drove past Ruth's cottage.

She was a half mile gone when she realized her mistake and did a U-turn. After she'd retraced north, she slowed and pulled onto the naked lot. In the last two weeks, the demo team had erased all traces of the bright-aqua main building, the twenty-four bungalows, and the neon **SEASIDE RESORT** sign.

Ruth had said she was going to sell the valuable beachfront property a day after the storm.

"It would take a lifetime to pay off the debt, and I'm too old. I'm letting her go," she'd said.

"To who?" She'd been in New York a dozen years, but the guilt over leaving always resurfaced when she talked to her grandmother.

"There's a developer."

"The land's worth a fortune."

"I know. And it's enough to pay off my loans and give me something to live on."

"If it's not enough . . ."

"It is," she said quickly. "Besides, I've been moaning for years that I'd like more time. Now I have it."

"I can be down there tomorrow."

"No rush, Ivy. I know how busy it gets in the restaurant at the holidays. Come when you can. Being here won't change much."

"I'll be there soon."

Ivy had grown up in that hotel. Stood behind the front desk when she could barely see over the counter. She'd swum in the long rectangular pool after hours more times than even she could count, eaten all her meals in the kitchen, and skateboarded on the parking lot in the off-season.

The kitchen was where she'd learned to cook. By age twelve, she was wearing an apron, standing on a step stool, and cutting, chopping, and sautéing meals for the guests. Never mind that her grandmother might have been breaking all the child labor laws. God only knew what OSHA would have said. But in truth, Ivy liked the work as much as Ruth did. She liked cooking, creating, and hearing feedback from the guests. By age sixteen,



she was in the kitchen before and after school and seven days a week during the summer.

And now it was all gone. Ivy and her grandmother were out of tomorrows.

Regrouping, Ivy pulled out onto the road and then took a quick right onto the concrete driveway bounded by tall shrubs, bent and twisted by the constant ocean winds. She parked and stared up at the dark house perched on eight-foot posts. The staggered cedar shakes were grayer than she remembered, and the battered blue hurricane shutters were closed. The stairs appeared to be in good shape and the wraparound porch intact. How fickle weather could be.

Her headlights swept the underside of the house toward the small utility shed. The breakers would need to be flipped and the water turned on. An hour before the heater warmed the cottage and the old water tank made hot water.

She dug into her bag of french fries, ate several more, and savored each bite of the salty, fatty potatoes. She could have calculated the calories but decided in times like these, they didn't count.

How many times had Ruth talked about the magic of food? It lifted moods, healed broken souls, and made any task less daunting. She polished off the fries and slurped diet soda before she crumpled up the wrapper and shoved it in the bag next to the uneaten burger. "Ready or not."

After fishing a flashlight from the glove compartment, she clicked it on, got out of the van, and dashed to the utility room. The cold wind cut through her thick down coat, a veteran of twelve New York winters. She fumbled with the keys, her fingers awkward in the cold. The lock, rusted by the salt air, finally gave way, and she stepped into the small room and swiped her light across the walls and fuse box. Praying the salt air had not corroded the box and that the water pipes hadn't frozen, she opened the door and searched for the master switch, which to her surprise had been turned on.

She wasn't sure who'd turned on the juice, but she was grateful there was hot water waiting in the tank, intact pipes, and maybe a warm house. Closing the box, she turned her attention to the master water valve and realized someone had also turned on the water. "Whoever you are, bless you."

She closed up the shed and grabbed her one overnight bag, burger, and soda. Tucking her head against the wind, she climbed the steps to the front porch spanning the house's entire exterior. The rusty front door lock had been freshly oiled and gave way easily. After opening the door, she stepped into the warm, dark house and switched on a light.

Greeting her were wall-to-wall items from the Seaside Resort, including stacks of red leather banquet chairs, boxes of hotel linens, folded tables, cutlery, and signs. **SEASIDE RESORT POOL. RECEPTION. NO PARKING.** Ruth had rescued and crammed all the Seaside Resort storm survivors into her house.

“Shit.”

Sixty-two days until spring; sixteen days until her thirtieth birthday, when she would inherit the cottage outright and could sell it.

She made her way to a couch by a dark stone fireplace climbing to the vaulted ceiling. Sitting, she dropped her overnight bag to the ground and dug her second burger out of the bag. Screw breakfast. She needed comfort now. She sat for several minutes focusing on the burger's flavor and sipping her too-sweet soda as she stared at the towers of clutter.

As the last of the soda gurgled up the straw, she rose and wove down a narrow path through the maze of items toward the back screened-in sleeping porch. The door's well-oiled hinges opened easily. Briny, cold air rushed toward her as she stared out over the crashing waves illuminated by the full moon dangling in the sky.

When she was a child, Ivy and her best friend, Dani, had slept on this porch more nights than she could remember. Dani and Ivy would giggle until midnight, when Ruth would finally shout from her first-floor bedroom for them to sleep. There was something freeing and exciting about sleeping out here with the ocean breeze cutting through the humid air dripping with moisture, the squawk of the gulls, and the gusts carrying the laughter of hotel guests still lingering by the hotel's pool.

When Ivy had first moved to New York, she had a terrible time sleeping. The honks and shouts of street noise were a poor substitute for the crashing waves that had lulled her to sleep ever since she was a small child. And lying on a cot in the YWCA, listening to two residents fighting, she'd wondered how she could have been such a shitty friend to Dani and a bad girlfriend to her ex, Matthew.

The three had run together since middle school. She'd started dating Matthew junior year of high school, and their dreams for the future had quickly tangled together. He didn't want college, like Ivy and Dani, and he believed the three of them should open their own business. She agreed, because she had no better idea. Dani was thrilled, admitting that she'd been accepted to art school, but the housing-market crash had made finances really tight for her dad. A year of making money would solve all her problems for the much-needed school tuition.

When Matthew announced he'd found a work-to-own arrangement for a small restaurant, Ivy freaked. Dani would leave in a year for school, and then she'd be here with Matthew in a *life* she wasn't ready for. And still it took a few weeks and four beers at a graduation party for her to screw up the courage to tell him she was backing out of the deal and moving to New York.

"What, you're just going to New York?" Matthew's wide grin faded, but he still seemed to be expecting a punch line.

"I'm leaving tomorrow." Her heart lodged in her throat, making it hard to draw in a full breath. She'd hoped spitting out the words would be a relief, but she felt sick with guilt.

"We're scheduled to sign papers in two days on the café!"

"I know."

"Is this payback because I forgot to pick you up for this party?"

"It's not payback. I'm leaving."

"Do you know how stupid this sounds?" Anger cut through his beer-glazed eyes. "You've only been to New York once, on the high school field trip last year."

The vastness of New York City had overwhelmed her on that trip. But she'd been so excited by the newness and energy, which had both followed her home. "Maybe it does, but I've got to try."

"Do you have a job?"

"No." But she had a list of places where she wanted to work and a seven-night reservation at the YWCA. If she got too mired in the details of this move, she would acknowledge how pie in the sky it was.

His laugh held no humor. "You really aren't kidding?"

"No." The more she spoke, the stronger her intentions grew.

"This is bullshit," he said. "We were supposed to open our own place."

"It was your place," she said.

“I thought we were a team.” He gestured between them, sloshing his beer on her white dress.

“Sorry.” They could go around and around, but she was not going to change her mind. She was not. And when Dani came up to them with three beers balanced between her long fingers, she must have immediately seen their tight expressions.

“What’s going on?” Dani asked.

“Ivy is ditching us,” Matthew said. “She’s not signing the papers, and she’s moving to New York.”

Ivy drew in a breath, wishing she were drunker. “I’m not ditching you. I’ve decided to move to New York.”

“No, you haven’t,” Dani said.

“I have.” Telling Dani was harder for some reason. “I’ve talked to Ruth, and she understands.”

“When did you talk to Ruth?” Matthew demanded.

“A few weeks ago.” Her grandmother had needed time to find a new fry cook and overall kitchen manager. Ruth had taken her announcement with a shrug, hugged her, and whispered, “It’s what we all got to do at some point.”

“Weeks?” Matthew shouted. “Don’t you think I deserved the same goddamned consideration? My deal depends on having you both working the business. Ivy, you were trained by one of the best cooks on the Outer Banks, and that means something to my backers.”

Dani took a step back as if she’d been slapped. “You never said a word to me. We were going to enjoy this next year, working together.”

“And next year, when you had your money for school, you were leaving,” Ivy said. “Matthew would have his business up and running, and I’d still be in a kitchen working less than a mile from the place where I grew up.”

“I didn’t just pull my plans out of thin air,” Dani shouted. “You knew I was leaving. You promised us both that the three of us would stick together for at least another year.”

“I’m sorry. I can’t keep that promise.” Tears welled in Ivy’s eyes. “It’s now or never for me.”

Dani set the red plastic drink cups down hard, splashing more beer. “I forbid you to leave. Not until we’ve hashed this out.”

“No,” Ivy said.