

WATCHING THE WATER

Book 1 in the Heart Tides series

Donna Gentry Morton



Virginia

Other Books by Donna Gentry Morton

Seeking the Shore, Book 2 in the Heart Tides series

Watching the Water

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To my big sister,
Rebecca Ann Williams

If you hadn't given me that lighthouse figurine to place on my desk
as inspiration, this story might not have ever been finished. You
cleaned my house so I would have time to write. You were the first
to read every page and told me to keep going.

Thank you, Becky.
Baby Sis loves you.

And

To the memory of my late husband, my soulmate, my It Guy, my
"Hon,"

John Ward Morton

When it came to reading, you were more of a Clancy guy, but you
read this manuscript and encouraged me to take it as far as I could.

I'm trying to do that now and wish you were here to share the
journey.

I know you know, though.
Someday we'll talk about it.
Time and tide, Hon.

I'll love you forever.

1934

The heart has reasons that reason cannot know.

Blaise Pascal



CHAPTER

ONE

The Downtown Panache was a fashionable lady among the traditional white-columned hotels gracing the South. Its sleek and streamlined beauty captured Art Deco, its bright colors and exotic woods making it a favorite among the young, most of whom flocked to the rooftop where jazz beckoned them to dance beneath the stars.

From near and far, people frequented the Downtown Panache, and from somewhere came the man with the dark eyes. Eyes like fine chocolates that, once sampled, were impossible to resist.

They were what Julianna Sheffield first noticed about the man when she caught his appreciative stare from across the dining room. Startled, she looked away. His boldness filled her with an unnerving intrigue, so she tried focusing on the dessert menu before her. *Baked Alaska*, *Lemon Meringue Pie*, and *Tapioca Pudding* swam before her eyes like quick-finned fish. She placed the menu on the table and ran a slightly trembling hand through her shoulder-length hair, a maple cascade of waves, thanks to eight hours in the permanent wave machine.

His attention didn't waver. Feeling its persistence, Julianna couldn't keep her eyes averted and began to take him in through glances. He was older, she guessed, having at least ten years on her twenty-two. His hair matched his eyes, and his tanned face was clean-shaven and perfectly chiseled. Though seated, he appeared tall with the lean and muscular, broad-shouldered build of a disciplined

athlete. He wore a navy, double-breasted suit with a whimsical tie depicting Popeye the Sailor, and he had a snap brim hat stylishly turned down in the front and up in the back, which rested on the table.

A playful smile formed on his lips, and it seemed to Julianna that he was amused by her glances. Perhaps he considered them a flirtatious catch-me-if-you-can dance of the eyes, an engaging game of cat and mouse.

Finally, he pounced, grabbing her eyes before she could look away and locking them into a gaze so intense, she was certain their souls had collided.

She was suddenly consumed. Her heart beat like a wild drum, and her thoughts roared like storm-driven waves hitting her in rapid succession. She couldn't grasp one thought for being struck by another. Amid the internal chaos, though, she heard it—a prophetic voice whispering from her core. This man could touch her life, like no other man would ever have the power to do.

She might have stayed immersed in his eyes had the waiter not intruded. "Dessert, Miss?"

When she didn't answer, he tapped her shoulder. "Miss?"

Julianna broke free of the man's gaze and turned to the waiter. "Oh, I'm sorry," she said, her voice shaking slightly. "No, no dessert, thank you."

He smiled and made a quick gesture about the table. "Your friends abandoned you?" He spoke of the four sorority sisters Julianna had dined with earlier, in town to be fitted for bridesmaid dresses for a friend's wedding.

Julianna sipped her sweet tea, wishing she could toss it on herself instead. She needed to snap from the surreal fog surrounding her, to regain her bearings. "They left me for Clark Gable," she answered, still flustered. The words sounding distant even to her ears. "His new movie, I mean."

"It's a shame you couldn't join them."

Out of habit, she glanced at her watch. "I'm expected home soon."

"Ah" was all he said before nodding politely and swooping toward the kitchen.

Julianna felt only slightly composed when she looked across the dining room to where the man had been seated. Would they be able to reclaim their connection or had the interruption broken the momentum?

Her heart sank when she saw that he had vanished, leaving nothing behind except a cloth napkin crumpled across a dinner plate.

It didn't mean a thing, Julianna told herself as she walked through the hotel lobby moments later. *It was just one of those strange moments in time. I'll forget about it in a week.*

But her heart lurched at the thought. Ha! It knew better and so did Julianna. She had been drawn to other men before, but this was so different. There was the fleeting schoolgirl crush she'd developed for a cute teenage boy who'd stole a kiss from her at a summer picnic. She thought of the attraction she had felt for a handsome young man she met once on a blind date. Compared to tonight's encounter, her heart had merely skipped like a butterfly at such times; this was more like the flight of a soaring eagle. Every other memory felt suddenly lighthearted and sure to fade. But she knew the moment shared with this man would be tucked away for safekeeping, tenderly retrieved on dreamy, rain-soaked nights. It would find its way into quiet thoughts when she watched the sun rise above the sea. And sometimes, while walking down the street, she would search the faces of strangers, hoping his would be among them. It had only been a moment, yes. But one to be forgotten? Never.

She paused before reaching the valet, dreading the idea of getting her car and going home. Another glance at her watch warned her that her parents would soon start to wonder of her whereabouts.