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LOW
WAYS



"Her most comic novel thus far... raises serious questions about the nature of love."

—THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW



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Love Always



A Novel by
Ann Beattie

Vintage Contemporaries

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Love Always

1



THE music was appropriate, although Hildon thought this particular version of the song was a downer: Barbra Streisand, singing "Happy Days." His wife, Maureen, was listening to it to rev herself up for the party. The magazine Hildon had started two summers ago, *Country Daze*, had become the hit of *tout* New York, and today was the day of the annual party. Maureen was the hostess, and as she moved around the backyard, placing conch shells on the tables, she smiled to herself. It was a perfect Vermont day—the last day of June—and she was about to stage another perfect party.

The only thing that galled her was that she had to invite Lucy Spenser. Not only was she sure that Lucy and Hildon were lovers, but she knew that Hildon had only married her when he despaired of Lucy's ever leaving Les Whitehall. Hildon, of course, denied the affair. "She's my oldest friend," he had said to her. "Why don't you try to understand the notion of friendship?"

Maureen liked to give parties with motifs, and although Hildon's staff did not deserve such pleasure, she decided on clever parties so that she, at least, would be amused. This time Maureen wore a sarong tied tightly above her hipbone. She served shrimp and lobster. Instead of a tablecloth, she draped an old tennis net over the long metal table. The paper napkins were patterned with little goldfish, swimming with happy smiles. She set out blue plastic bottles of sea salt and put on a record of the sounds of the ocean. The wine was *Entre-Deux-Mers*. Before everyone showed up, Maureen stretched out on the grass to survey the backyard. She smiled with content-

ment: Maureen the mermaid. Her hair was in a braid, clipped with a barrette in the shape of a blue starfish.

Matt Smith, the new publisher—the magazine had just been sold, and at a handsome profit—was the first to show up. He was a few minutes early. Hildon was still inside, showering. She poured Matt a glass of wine and paid a lot of attention to him. He was the new boss. As she poured, Maureen beamed her best summer smile.

“Take a sip. Do you like it?” she said.

“I tell you, Maureen, to me, wine is crushed grapes. What I like best is that you don’t have to spit out the seeds.”

She laughed, pretending that he meant this as an amusing remark.

“What’s so funny?” he said.

“Come on, Matt,” she said, running her finger around the edge of the wineglass. “You aren’t discriminating?”

“I discriminate enough to know who means most to me. *I* mean most to me. I always did say that a man has to know how to play his cards in this world, and sometimes he’d better realize that the best game is solitaire.”

Nigel, the photographer, had arrived, and Hildon was talking to him in front of the kitchen door. Hildon accentuated his handsomeness by appearing to be very casual. The shorts he wore were permanently yellowed from swimming in the crater lake. The cotton shirt was custom-made and cost \$75. As Maureen watched, Lucy pulled into the driveway and hopped out of the car. She had on turquoise shorts, white running shoes, and a white halter top. It was perfect. Everything Lucy wore and did was perfect. Even Lucy’s lover’s departure had been perfect: dramatic, unexpected, the quintessential abandonment. The column Lucy wrote was also perfect; it was exactly the right endeavor for the society girl who wanted to stay sour. Hildon and Lucy greeted each other by touching their hands to the other’s biceps. Lucy had a way of looking around, taking it all in very quickly, as if hidden cameras were photographing her, every firefly a potential flashbulb. She saw Maureen and lit up with a flawlessly false smile. If Maureen had been Lucy’s orthodontist, she would have been proud.

Lucy scampered across the grass, doing one of the many things that drove Maureen crazy. Two, actually, as soon as she spoke. Running like a faerie, on tiptoes, was bad enough, thirty years out of ballet class, but her polite dismissal of Maureen was even harder to take.

"Are you giving another one of your perfect parties?" Lucy called. Everyone but Lucy had the good sense not to ask rhetorical questions unless they were directed to dogs or babies.

"Of course I am," Maureen said.

Lucy shimmered. She acted a little like that woman, whatever her name was, whom the Great Gatsby had been in love with.

"Look at how beautiful everything is," Lucy said.

Maureen swept her eyes over the party. She had fallen into Lucy's trap—she had let Lucy point out to her what was beautiful, even though she had spent the day creating it.

A boy from the high school had come to videotape the party. Maureen had had her doubts about that, but Hildon had made her feel downright paranoid. "No one will even notice," he had said. "They'll just continue to party. The kid needs to practice taping a crowd. It's not going to interfere with anything." How did Hildon meet all these people who wanted something from him? She found it hard to believe that he spent as much time working as he said he did; he must have encouraged these people—suggested that he had a lot to give, that he was very loose. No one would think that Hildon, so casual he seemed not to have the power necessary to grasp his gin and tonic, had that very morning called the shirtmaker in New Haven to rant and rave about the imperfection of the collars.

Lucy moved off, to faerie skip to Nigel. He held his arms open to receive her. Nigel had the ability to turn any conversation into an interrogation. Like an analyst, Nigel, when asked what he thought about something, would either ask why you asked the question or what you yourself thought. It was possible that Nigel never thought anything. He was talking to some woman Maureen had not met. The woman seemed a little drunk. She was trying to remember the punch line of a joke about a nun who stole a jet plane and the penguin who waved

her in for a landing. When she couldn't remember how the joke ended, Nigel put his arm around Lucy and began to tell a joke about an Indian chief. He did a very extravagant imitation of the chief, puffing up his chest and changing his voice to an impossibly low register whenever he spoke in the chief's voice. "Oh, I've got it, I've got it," the woman said, clasping her hands. Nigel and Lucy smiled at her. "It's that . . . it isn't the nun who's in the jet plane, but the penguin, and . . ." Nigel exhaled. He waited a few beats, politely, then puffed up and continued his own joke, as if the woman had not spoken.

"You know," Noonan said, clapping his hand around Maureen's shoulder and taking her by surprise, so that she jumped, "the last party I came to, when you didn't offer me the leftovers the way you usually do, I stole half a wheel of cheddar that was on one of the tables. I put it under my jacket and took it home. Did you know that?"

"I had no idea," Maureen said.

"I grated it and made soup," he said. "You know—that excited me, taking that big piece of cheese. I could have bought it in a store and it wouldn't have meant anything to me, but all the time I was grating it, I felt so excited I couldn't stop grinning. If anybody'd seen me, they'd have thought I was a crazy person. And you know what? When I was a schoolboy, I used to steal things from the drugstore near my house, and it gave me the same lift."

Nigel was trying to write down the woman's telephone number, but she couldn't remember the last two digits. She put her shoulder bag on the ground and began to rummage through it. "I know I have it in here," she said. "Just give me a minute, and I'm sure I can find it." She dumped the contents onto the grass. Maureen saw three brushes and several wallets. There was also either a jump rope or a piece of clothesline. Nigel bent and began to examine the contents of the bag, fascinated: a flashlight, a notebook, a large-beaked blue plastic duck.

The record of the sounds of the sea had ended, and Maureen went onto the porch and turned it over. She lowered the needle back onto the edge of the record. She sat in one of the wicker rockers and stretched her legs: they were long and golden, re-

cently waxed. The Korean woman who waxed her legs, patting on the warm wax with a little wooden paddle, spoke no English, except to say, in unison with Maureen, "ouch." Noonan joined her on the back porch. "I also look through people's medicine cabinets," he said, "although I guess that's common. I like to know about people's secret pains."

The student with the videotape machine walked onto the back porch, camera grinding away. Maureen and Noonan both looked as if they had been caught at something. It infuriated Maureen: this was what Hildon thought was no intrusion? She put her hand up in front of her face. Carrying the camera on his shoulder, without comment, the boy crouched slightly and moved into the house. He was like a soldier in slow motion, creeping through enemy territory.

"Tomorrow I'm going to give Hildon the big news, but I'll give it to you first," Noonan said. "I got another job. I'm going to be working for a paper in San Francisco. It excites me," he said. "It excites me to talk about a lot of things, but I've always exercised restraint. I'm a very uptight person. I'm not going to be that way once I get to San Francisco. I want to be truthful from here on out. I told you about the cheese. I'll tell you what's in your medicine cabinet, too: Dalmane, patent medicine, Valium, and Tylenol with codeine."

"Noonan," she said, "I'll tell you something. The people you work with wouldn't be surprised to hear you saying these things. 'Murky' is the word they often use. They think you're murky." Waves lapped at the shore.

"I was surprised that Hildon took Valium," Noonan said.

"He was having periodontal work done."

"You're protecting your husband. I like that. That's a good thing about heterosexuals—that they stick together. Fags move on like flies when they smell meat."

"That's pretty awful, Noonan. Do you feel that bad about yourself?"

"Yes," he said. "It excites me to talk about it. It excites me to be honest."

Another car pulled into the driveway. It was Cameron Petrus, one of Matt's reporters. Cameron had come here from

Boston, after having a heart attack at thirty. He had recently taken up javelin throwing. Ever since his wife left him, he had been giving Lucy Spenser the eye. Cameron had on gray jeans that made his legs look like tree trunks. The bright green fish-net shirt he wore made him look even more like a tree. She said hello to him when she went out to the backyard.

The food had been disappearing fast. The whole crowd really liked to eat and drink. They were laughing and bobbing in and out of groups; in their bright summer colors they reminded her of voracious, exotic birds. At the edge of the lawn, Lucy Spenser and the girl who had been too drunk to remember her phone number had linked arms and were doing a chorus line kick for the camera. Suddenly the boy began to turn, slowly, as if a pedestal rotated beneath him. He panned the crowd. Maureen found herself stiffening, trying to appear picture perfect. She would probably be the one who looked like a fool, not Lucy, who had kicked off her shoes and who was now talking to another couple, her mop of hair thrown forward, doubled up so that her forehead almost touched her legs. The girl she had been kicking her legs with was talking to Nigel again. Hildon went over and joined their group, pouring wine into Nigel's glass. The boy continued videotaping. He turned the camera on her, and Maureen raised her hand again.

"This is the best party I've been to all summer," Cameron Petrus said.

"Summer's hardly started, Cameron."

"Your party certainly is the official beginning of summer, to my mind," Cameron said. "What an evening. Look at those clouds off on the horizon. Simply wonderful."

Cameron was so boring that it almost drove her mad. Apparently he had only two modes: the violently aggressive way he acted when he interviewed people and the mindlessly polite way he was now, ready to sink in the quicksand of his own small talk.

"You're looking very lovely tonight," Cameron said.

"Thank you," she said.

"I had some of those spiced shrimp a minute ago. Did you make them yourself?"

"Yes," she said.

"You really do know how to give a party," he said.

"Thank you," she said.

"Say," he said, "I hear it's going to be good weather on the Fourth."

"I'm glad," she said.

"It's a relief," he said.

Noonan joined them. One large shrimp was curved over the edge of his wine glass. He dunked it in the wine and ate it.

"May I join the conversation?" he said.

"Cameron was just saying that it's supposed to be good weather on the Fourth," Maureen said.

Across the lawn, Matt Smith choked while he was laughing. A woman Maureen had never seen before patted him on the back.

"You know where he got all his money?" Cameron Petrus said. "His great-great-grandfather or some ancestor of the great-great-grandfather invented the jump rope."

"The jump rope?" Noonan said.

"Wooden handles," Cameron Petrus said, spreading his arms as if he were about to conduct an orchestra. He twirled his arms and jumped on his toes.

Hildon was walking the length of the large table, lighting citronella candles. Two of the writers were stretched out on the lawn, arm wrestling. The woman standing with Matt Smith dropped her glass and jumped back as the wine splashed. Maureen looked around. A year before, the party had been in a big canvas tent. She had worn a toga. She had served pita bread and hummus. It had rained on the Fourth of July. Two days later she had been on the phone, ordering a set of glasses from the Horchow collection, when she suddenly felt blood soaking her pants, and miscarried, without having known she was pregnant.

2



THE day after the party, the heat came on so suddenly that the Green Mountains almost disappeared in the haze. Lucy Spenser sat in the grass, on her side lawn, feeling a little sorry for herself. This had been the time, five years ago, that Les Whitehall had gotten a job teaching in Vermont once they had moved here. He had been gone for a year, though the mailbox on the road across from the house was still marked Spenser/Whitehall. It had caught her eye as she returned from her morning walk, and suddenly she had felt the heat, the flies seemed to buzz louder and to be more persistent, and the air seemed as dense as icing.

Since Les had taken off, she hadn't figured out how to get her life going again. It was not that the two of them had had specific plans that had been interrupted, but that when he left she realized that she had lived so long without thinking of the future that now it was difficult to imagine what she should do. There was really no routine to her life except that once a week Hildon drove to her house to pick up the column. It still amazed her that her oldest friend had started a magazine on the \$50,000 profit he had made selling land, and that it had become so successful that it had just been bought by a corporation.

Hildon was quite up front about telling his friends that the magazine's success was proof positive that the entire country was coked-out. Hundreds of readers wrote in every month—readers who had caught the slightest, trendiest in-jokes. Unsolicited manuscripts rolled in that were either works of such quality that Swift must have rolled over in his grave or suitable evidence of mass psychosis. Thousands of people had filled out

a request form, in the last issue, to have the psychmobile come to their houses. This was one of Hildon's new concepts; it was modeled on the idea of the bookmobile, but instead of books to check out, there was a staff of psychologists to evaluate people's mental condition and see whether they should be checked in.

But Lucy's column was the biggest success, and it had been from the first. She was, as Cindi Coeur, a Latter-Day Miss Lonelyhearts, and the picture that accompanied her column showed her with hair romantically disheveled, eyes wide (presumably with wisdom), and a smile that, coupled with hair and eyes, might have suggested *après l'amour, tristesse*. The beatific smile was actually *après \$125 a gram*.

These days, Lucy did the column straight—if you could call making up the questions and writing the answers on pieces of pink stationery she had her mother send her from John Wanamaker in Philadelphia and using a fountain pen with lavender ink doing it straight. Lately, Lucy had been thinking that maybe it was time to stop. Just because Jagger was still popping up like a jack-in-the-box, did she really want to be Cindi Coeur at forty? Still, Lucy herself admitted to a morbid fascination with being facile.

Dear Cindi Coeur,

When my husband makes love to me he always has a lot of money under the pillow. I mean, before we get into bed he empties out his wallet, and in the middle of lovemaking, he plunges his hands into the money. His money is always all wrinkled. I think that clerks in stores will see the money and maybe know what is going on. What can I say to my husband to make him stop? Do you think that he likes money more than he likes me?

Sad in the Sack

Dear Sad,

Your husband is sexually excited by money. This is called a "fetish." You have not given me enough information. First, I need to know the ages and educational backgrounds of some of the clerks in order to tell you whether they will know what your husband is up to. You do suggest that your husband has quite a bit of money if there is so much that he can plunge his hands into it. What denomination is this currency? If your husband has as much money as it seems, I want to suggest two things: (1) that you put

up with whatever he does and (2) that you not consult your clergyman, as he will expect increased donations.

The phone rang in the kitchen and Lucy got up to answer it. It was her sister, Jane, calling from California. Jane's calls were always a sidestep from whatever she was doing. She would call someone, clamp the phone between shoulder and ear, then become so involved in painting her nails or doing leg stretches that when the phone was answered, it caught her off-guard.

"Oh. Hello," Jane said.

"Hi," Lucy said.

"I set my alarm," Jane said. "I wanted to be sure to catch you. It's seven o'clock here." She sounded offended, as if Lucy had arranged for it to be early morning on the West Coast.

"What's up?" Lucy said.

What was usually up was something involving Jane's daughter, Nicole.

"Nicole's blue," Jane said. "Piggy was trying to set up a spot for her on *Saturday Night Live*, and it fell through. Then you know that gorilla that she liked so much—the one they put in a sailor suit, that she stood next to on the deck of the QE2 for *Vogue*? He just died of pneumonia. I sent a contribution to the San Diego Zoo."

For the last two years, Nicole Nelson had appeared on *Pasionate Intensity* as Stephanie Sykes, an abused child from a broken family, a teenage alcoholic who was being rehabilitated by a woman internist and her husband, Gerald, a wimpy would-be novelist who felt misunderstood not only by his wife but by the world. The woman internist, who secretly subjected herself to experimental surgery to correct sterility, then found out that she could conceive. She faced the dilemma of whether to divorce her husband, who was at last working on his novel, to have a child with her true love, another doctor at the hospital, thereby disrupting the family routine she had established that had put young Stephanie on the road to recovery, or to settle for what she now realized was probably the correct thing: a childless marriage. This was also complicated

by the fact that her husband's sister, a volunteer worker at the hospital who had always envied her sister-in-law and who had had a brief affair with the same doctor, was now considering blackmail, wanting to force her sister-in-law into the dull routine of motherhood with the wrong man, so that she could make the handsome doctor who would be left behind fall in love with her again. The further complication was that when his wife's wealthy benefactor died, the wimpy husband had buckled down long enough to put his wife through the last two years of medical school. The day of her graduation, he had had a mental breakdown and, when he was recovering, a brief affair with a woman who worked in the lab. Then he had at last gotten an advance for his book, *Barren*, a fictionalized account of his and his wife's failure to have children. What no one but the doctor/lover knew was that Stephanie Sykes was pregnant and begging the doctor to abort her. What even the doctor did not realize was that his lover's husband's ex-lover, the woman who worked in the lab, had found out that Stephanie was pregnant. She was anti-abortion, and if the doctor performed the surgery, she was going to go to the wimpy novelist and let him know what a farce his happy family life was, in hopes of getting him herself.

"Nicole needs a vacation. I want to send her to you," Jane said.

"She'd be bored to death," Lucy said. "You know what happens here? In the late afternoon the cows walk into the field."

"Boredom might be good for her," Jane said. "Don't people develop their imaginations if they're bored?"

Why argue? Lucy thought. If Jane had made up her mind, the visit from Nicole was a *fait accompli*. Only seconds elapsed before Jane's ideas materialized. Their mother likened Jane's mind to a dollop of pancake batter dropped on a hot griddle.

"Both of you come, and we'll go to Philadelphia and visit Mother," Lucy said.

"I'm going to tell you something that you can never tell another soul," Jane said. "I've gained eight pounds since you last

saw me. I'm on a macrobiotic regime. I have to stay close to the seaweed store. I'll come visit when I've finished ingesting half of the ocean."

"Does Nicole want to come?" Lucy said.

"She loves you," Jane said. "She had such a good time the last time she visited. She still talks about Heath Bar Crunch ice cream and Hildon's motorcycle."

"He sold it," Lucy said.

He had sold his motorcycle because he wanted a pickup instead, but so far he hadn't found one with the right ambience.

"Come on," Jane said. "Martyr yourself."

Lucy laughed. She spent no more time than other people thinking about being a do-gooder. Like the rest of the world, she was preoccupied and imperfect: she had had an abortion, crushed a few rabbits under tires as she rolled down country roads, turned the page of the magazine when her eye met the eyes of the orphan she could save if she made out a check and sent it before the winds of fate blew the urchin's last grain of rice away.

Take Nicole for the summer? To Lucy, she was still a baby—the poor baby whose father had died before he ever saw her, two months after he and Jane married, off the southernmost point of the United States, in Key West, after drinking ten piña coladas with friends. After Nicole had been born, Jane had gotten engaged again, to an actor. They broke it off when Jane had a miscarriage, but before they did, he arranged for Nicole to meet his agent. Just after her first birthday, Nicole had done a toy ad, hugging a Baby Do-Right doll against her cheek, and the rest was history. From the first, she had not just been personable in front of the camera. Other children had rashes and insect bites, but Nicole's skin was unblemished; she always looked windswept rather than rumped. She was the perfect California girl long before her mother took her there. Her bedtime lullaby, suitably enough, was harmonized by the Beach Boys, who also played at her kindergarten graduation. She tap danced on the *Tonight* show, sharing the limelight with Charles Bronson and a macaw. The first time Nicole vis-