

NYT Bestselling author

Susan Mallery

*Barefoot
Season*



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Аннотация

New York Times bestselling author Susan Mallery returns with a poignant new story about finding love and freeing oneself from the past. Michelle Sanderson may appear to be a strong, independent woman, but on the inside she's still the wounded girl who fled home years ago. A young army vet, Michelle returns to the quaint Blackberry Island Inn to claim her inheritance, and recover from the perils of war. Instead, she finds the owner's suite occupied by the last person she wants to see. Carly Williams and Michelle were once inseparable, until a shocking betrayal destroyed their friendship. And now Carly is implicated in the financial disaster lurking behind the inn's cheerful veneer. Single mother Carly has weathered rumors, lies and secrets for a lifetime, and is finally starting to move forward with love and life. But if the Blackberry Island Inn goes under, Carly and her daughter will go with it. To save their livelihoods, Carly and Michelle will undertake a turbulent truce. It'll take more than a successful season to move beyond their devastating past, but with a little luck and a beautiful summer, they may just rediscover the friendship of a lifetime. "This poignant tale of family dynamics, the jarring impact of change, and eventual acceptance and healing is sure to please Mallery's many, devoted fans."

—Booklist on *Already Home*

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Barefoot Season

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To the women who serve, leaving behind home and hearth, friends and family.

This is for you, with gratitude, love and respect.

A special thank you to SGT Betty Thurman, who willingly offered personal stories about what it was like.

Any mistakes in this novel are mine.

And to SPC Jeanette Blanco who read the book for a “gut check.”

Many thanks for your comments and insights.

A Fool’s Gold cheerleader high five! You’re the best.

Contents

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

Eleven

Twelve

Thirteen

Fourteen

Fifteen

Sixteen

Seventeen

Eighteen

Nineteen

Twenty

Twenty-One

Twenty-Two

Twenty-Three

Twenty-Four

Twenty-Five

Twenty-Six

Twenty-Seven

Twenty-Eight

Twenty-Nine

Thirty

Thirty-One

Thirty-Two

Thirty-Three

Thirty-Four

Thirty-Five

Recipes

Discussion Guide

Extract

Copyright

One

“I’m going off to war tomorrow. I might not make it back.”

Michelle Sanderson slowly pulled her attention from the five-year-old truck she was thinking of buying and focused it on the guy standing next to her.

He was a kid—maybe eighteen or nineteen, with red hair and freckles. Cute enough but way too young. Still stuck with too-long arms and legs and a chest that had yet to fill out. More man than boy, she supposed, but not yet done with the transition.

“I’m sorry,” she said, sure she must have misunderstood. “What did you say?”

He gave her a wide grin and a wink. “I may not have long in this life. After you buy the truck, we could go get a drink or something. Celebrate me going into the army.”

“It’s two in the afternoon.”

“Then we could head back to my place.”

Michelle didn’t know whether she should start laughing or tell him he was an idiot in terms that would make him cry like a little girl. The latter would be easy enough. She’d served ten years in the army, nearly half of them in either Iraq or Afghanistan. She’d had to deal with more than her share of horny young guys who assumed they were irresistible. She’d gotten really good at showing them they were wrong.

Laughing would be a bit tougher. Mostly because every part of her hurt. Not just her hip, which had the excuse of a recent run-in with a couple of bullets from armed insurgents, followed by a partial joint replacement, but the rest of her. She'd spent more time than she even wanted to think about in the hospital. Healing happened in its own time, her physical therapist had told her. She'd tried to beat the odds, which had netted her nothing more than an extra three nights in the hospital before she'd finally been released.

"Aren't I a little old for you?" she asked.

He gave her a wink. "Experienced."

Despite the pain, she managed a chuckle. "Yeah, right. Looking to have your fantasies fulfilled?"

"You know it."

He was so eager, she thought, feeling more weary by the second. And obviously he hadn't passed the vision test yet. She knew she wasn't at her best. Her pale, too-thin body gave away the length of time she'd been in a hospital bed. Her eyes were hollow, her color too gray to be considered normal. She had a cane to help her walk. Which just went to show how powerful a young man's hormones could be.

Before she could figure out how to pass on his invitation, a yellow Lab came bounding around the side of the house. The animal raced up to her and jumped. Michelle took a quick step back to avoid being knocked over. The movement put pressure on her hip and fiery pain shot through her.

For a second, the world spun. She felt herself starting to black out. Nausea threatened. One or the other, she thought desperately, fighting to stay present. Not both. A surprisingly strong arm wrapped around her body, holding her in place.

“Buster, get down.”

She blinked and the cool, damp afternoon returned to focus. The fire in her hip banked enough to allow her to breathe. The kid stood so close she could see the freckles across his nose and a small scar on his right cheek.

“You okay?” he asked.

She nodded.

He stepped back and studied her. The dog stayed back, his eyes dark with worry, a low whine indicating his concern.

She held out her hand to the dog. “It’s okay, Buster. I’m fine.”

The dog stepped forward and sniffed her fingers before giving them a quick lick.

“Hey, I wanted to do that,” the kid said, managing a shaky laugh.

Michelle smiled. “Sorry. He’s more my type.”

“You’re hurt.”

She raised the cane slightly. “Did you think this was a fashion accessory?”

“I didn’t notice it, really.”

Which proved her theory about his poor vision. “Just a flesh wound.” Actually flesh, bone and a few tendons, but why get into the details?

He looked from her to the army-issue duffels on the sidewalk, to the cane and then back into her eyes. “Were you there?” he asked.

“There” could have been a hundred places, but she knew what he meant. She nodded.

“Sweet. What was it like? Were you scared? Do you think...?” He swallowed, then flushed. “Can I make it, you think?”

She wanted to tell him no. That staying home, being with his friends, going to college, would be so much easier. Safer. More comfortable. But the easy way often wasn’t the best way, and for some, being a part of something meaningful was worth any price.

Her reasons for joining had been far less altruistic, but over time she’d been molded into a soldier. The trick was going to be figuring out how to find her way back.

“You’ll be fine,” she said, hoping she was telling the truth.

“A hero?” he asked with a grin, then slapped his hand against the truck. “Okay, you’ve done your best to confuse me by being sexy and a war vet. But I’m not going to be distracted. I want ten thousand. Not a penny less.”

Sexy? That did make her laugh. At this stage in her life she would have trouble qualifying as a trophy girlfriend for a man pushing ninety. But hey, a compliment was always nice to hear.

She turned her attention to the truck. It was in decent shape, with relatively new tires and only a few dents. The mileage was low enough to allow her to get a few years out of the thing before she would have to start replacing parts.

“Ten’s crazy high,” she said. “I’m paying cash. I’m thinking closer to eight.”

“Eight?” He clutched his hands to his chest. “You’re killin’ me. You really going to do that to a future hero?”

She chuckled. “Come on, kid. We’ll take her for a drive and swing by a mechanic friend of mine. If he says the truck is good, I’ll give you nine-five and you can call it a win.”

“You’ve got a deal.”

* * *

Two hours later, Michelle let the guy—Brandon—off at his place. A mechanic she knew on the base had given her the thumbs-up on the truck and she’d handed over an ordered stack of crisp bills. In return she’d collected paperwork and keys.

Now, as she pulled away from Brandon’s house, she eyed the gray sky. She was back in western Washington state, where rain was so prevalent that a day of sunshine was the lead story on the local news. Leaving luggage in the open was taking a risk and she’d dropped her two duffels in the back. She decided the clouds looked more lazy than ominous. Her duffels should be safe enough on the drive home.

Home. It was a long way from where she’d spent the past ten years. Blackberry Island, an actual island in Puget Sound, connected to the mainland by a long bridge, might technically be within commuting distance of Seattle, but it was a world away. The single town on the island billed itself as the “New England of the West Coast.” A selling point she’d never understood.

Quiet, touristy, with quaint stores and a slower pace of life, the island celebrated all things blackberry. There were silly traditions and a rhythm to the seasons that had always seemed annoyingly out of step. At least before. But what she once hadn't appreciated now seemed appealing to her.

She shifted on her seat, the pain in her hip as constant as ever. The physical therapists had sworn it would get better, that she was healing quicker than they'd expected. She was already bored with the recovery process—it took too damn long. But there was no rushing her body along.

She found her way to the main road, then onto the freeway. She headed north, merging with the traffic. The number of cars surprised her. Their orderly progress. She was used to Hummers and assault vehicles, not SUVs and sports cars. The damp, cool air was also something she'd forgotten. She switched on the heater and wished she'd thought to pull out a jacket. It didn't matter that it was May. Seasons were for sissies. Summer came late to this part of the country. Fortunately, the tourists came early.

She knew what to expect over the next four months. Starting with Memorial Day and going through Labor Day, the island would be crawling with visitors. They came for the boating, the famous Puget Sound cranes and for the blackberries. Blackberry Island was the you-know-what capital of, well, the West Coast. Vacationers would crowd the restaurants, buying all sorts of knickknacks and handmade items. And they would eat

blackberries.

They would put fresh blackberries on their pancakes, in salads, on or in nearly every type of food known to man. They would purchase blackberry ice cream from vendors and blackberry cookies from kiosks. They would buy tea towels and mugs with blackberry motifs and taste the dubious results of the annual blackberry-chili cook-off. Best of all, they would fill every room in a fifty-mile radius. Including the rooms at the Blackberry Island Inn.

Michelle could practically hear the happy hum of the inn's bank balance filling. Like most businesses on the island, the inn made most of its annual income during those precious four months. The days would be long, the hours endless, the work backbreaking, but after being gone for so long, she was eager to dive back in. To return to the one place she could count on never to change.

* * *

“Is she here yet?”

Damaris asked the question from the doorway to Carly Williams's office.

Carly looked up from the welcome card she'd been making. Part of what the Blackberry Island Inn offered guests was personalized service. She found out about her guests before they arrived, then put a handmade welcome card in their room. The Banners, an older couple who had come to bird-watch and do some wine tasting, had mentioned how much they loved the

water. Carly had made sure they were in a west-facing room and was creating a card that featured a photo of Blackberry Bay at sunset.

Bits of ribbon and lace were spread across her blotter. A glue stick sat upright, next to her battered tweezers. She absently rubbed at a tiny square of glitter on the back of her hand.

“She’s not here,” she told Damaris, then gave her a smile. “I said I’d let you know when she arrived.”

Damaris sighed. Her glasses had drifted down her nose, giving her an absent air. More than one newly hired server had assumed her slightly scattered appearance meant that she wouldn’t notice if an employee was late or didn’t offer more coffee the second a sip was taken. All mistakes that were later regretted.

“I thought she’d be here by now,” Damaris admitted. “I’ve missed her so much. It’s been too long.”

“It has,” Carly murmured, not wanting to think about how her life would be altered when Michelle returned. Reminding herself that she’d been the injured party didn’t stop her stomach from churning.

Everything was different now, she told herself. She was capable, and for the past three months she’d been the one running the inn. She was a valued asset to the inn. If only Michelle would see it that way.

Damaris moved into her office and took the chair on the other side of the desk.

“I still remember when she hired me,” the fiftysomething cook

said with a sigh. “She was what? Sixteen? I had children older than her. She sat right where you are. So scared. I could see she was shaking.” Her lined mouth turned up in a smile. “She’d checked a book on interviewing out of the library. She’d tried to hide it under some papers, but I saw it.”

The smile faded as the dark eyes narrowed. “Her mother should have been the one taking care of things, but it was never like that. Michelle loved this place.”

Carly drew in a breath. She and Damaris had argued plenty of times about mother and daughter. Carly was willing to admit Brenda had her flaws, but she’d been the one who had rescued Carly. Given her a job and purpose. Carly owed her. As for Michelle...

“I hope she’s happy with the changes,” Carly said, by way of distraction. The band of tension around her chest was already tight enough that she had to consciously relax in order to draw in a full breath. She didn’t need more stress in her life right now. “You’ve told her what we’ve done, haven’t you?”

“I write her every month,” Damaris said with a sniff. “Not that her mother ever did.”

So much for diverting anyone, Carly thought. But she wasn’t going to give up. “Your blackberry scones are so popular with the guests. I’ve been wondering about offering packages of them for sale on Sunday morning. So our guests could take some home with them. What do you think? Would it be too much work?”

Damaris relaxed in her chair. “I could bake more. It wouldn’t

be difficult.”

“We could sell them in packages of four and eight. Use some of that decorative plastic wrap we bought.”

Damaris already knew the cost of each scone, so calculating a price was easy enough. Carly wanted to include a recipe card with the scones, but knew better than to ask. Damaris protected her recipes the way tiger moms protected their cubs—with teeth, claws and intimidation.

“I’m going to check to see if she’s here,” Damaris said as she rose.

Carly nodded, then reluctantly followed her out of the office. Little about the inn would stay the same now—there was no way to deny it, although she’d give it her best effort. Brenda was gone and Michelle was back. That was enough to shift the dynamics, but there were also complications. Ten years away would change anyone, so Carly knew Michelle would be different. The question was, how different? People didn’t always evolve in a positive way.

She paused in the hallway. Evolve in a positive way? Maybe she should stop checking self-help books out of the library for a few weeks and relax with a nice romance instead.

She walked to the front room and stepped behind the dark, raised, hand-carved desk that served as a reception area. Touching the familiar, worn surface relaxed her. She knew every scar, every stain. She knew the bottom left drawer got stuck when it rained and that the knob on the top right drawer was loose. She knew where the cleaning staff hid extra towels and which

rooms were more likely to have plumbing problems. She could be blindfolded and walk into any room. Standing there in total darkness, she would be able to say where she was based on the scent, the feel of the light switch, the way the floor creaked when walked on.

For ten years, this inn had been her home and her refuge. The fact that Michelle could take it away from her with a flick of her wrist was beyond terrifying. That it would also be wrong didn't seem to matter. In the world of moral high ground, Carly feared she'd wandered into quicksand.

"There!" Damaris yelled, pointing out the window.

Carly glanced toward the freshly washed panes, seeing the sparkling glass and the white trim rather than the truck pulling up beyond. She focused on green grass and the explosion of daisies.

The flowers were her hobby, her passion. Where others noticed little beyond a variation on a theme, she saw Shasta daisies and gerberas. Broadway Lights, Gold Rush, daisy Golden Sundrops and, of course, the unique blackberry daisy. Daisies were a part of the very essence of the inn. They were featured in vases at the restaurant table. They danced across wallpaper, colored the murals and were embossed on the inn's notepaper. She'd kept the bright colors of her garden in mind when helping Brenda choose the new roof. Now the dark green composite shingles were the perfect backdrop, the color repeating in the shutters and the front door.

Damaris raced across the lawn, her white apron flapping

like butterfly wings. The older woman held open her arms and embraced a woman much taller and thinner than Carly remembered. She watched, even though she didn't want to, listened, even though she couldn't hear.

Michelle straightened, grinned, then hugged the other woman again. Her hair was longer now. A dark tangle of waves and almost-curls. Her face had more angles, her eyes more shadows. She looked as if she'd been sick. Carly knew that she had, in fact, been injured. Michelle looked fragile, although Carly knew better than to trust appearances. Michelle wasn't the type to give in to weakness. She was more like the scary alien from the movies—the one that would never give up.

She and Michelle were practically the same age—Michelle older by only a couple of months. Back before anything had changed, Carly had known Michelle's face better than her own. She could account for every scar, telling the story of how it came to be.

There were three defining moments in her life—the day Carly's mother had left, the night she found out her best friend had slept with her fiancé and the morning Brenda had discovered her crying in the grocery store, unable to afford the quart of milk her obstetrician insisted she drink each day.

Separately, each of those moments barely added up to a quarter hour. A minute here, two minutes there. Yet each of them had shifted her life, rotating it and tossing it on the floor, breaking that which was precious and leaving her gasping for

breath. Michelle had been a part of the fabric of her world—ripping it apart until there were only shreds left.

Carly drew in a breath and looked at the woman walking toward the inn. Once again she was dangling by a thread. Once again, Michelle would define her future and there wasn't a damn thing she could do about it. Unfairness caused her chest to tighten, but she consciously relaxed, telling herself she had survived worse. She would survive this.

The phone rang. Carly returned to the front desk to answer it. "Blackberry Island Inn," she said in a clear, confident voice. "Let me check that date," she continued, tapping on the computer keyboard. "Yes, we have rooms available."

As she took information, confirmed the arrival time and credit-card number, she was aware of Michelle moving closer. The hunter returned. Which left Carly wondering if she was going to be part of the celebration or simply her next prey.

Two

Knowing and seeing were not the same thing. Michelle stared at the front of the inn and knew the hits were going to keep on coming.

"It's so good to have you back," Damaris said, giving her another bone-crushing hug.

At least that was familiar, as was the other woman's scent of cinnamon and vanilla from the pastries she made each morning. But everything else was wrong. From the roof—a hideous green color—to the matching shutters. Even the shape of the structure

had changed. The lines of the building where she'd grown up had shifted, growing out in a way that made the inn look stubby. As if it had a muffin top and needed to lay off the blackberry scones and go find a Zumba class.

To the left, where the restaurant had been, an extra room jutted out, slicing through the side lawn and razing the slope she'd rolled down as a kid. To the right, a garish, wartlike growth was stuck on the side—all bright colors and windows displaying the usual island crap. Dolls and lighthouses, wind chimes and dangling stained glass.

“There’s a gift shop?” she asked, her voice more growl than question.

Damaris rolled her eyes. “Your mother’s idea. Or maybe Carly’s. I never listened when the two of them talked. They’re like the birds. Making noise and not saying much.”

Damaris’s small, strong hands gripped her arms. “Don’t worry about them. You’re home now and that’s all that matters.” Her mouth tightened in concern. “You’re too thin. Look at you. All bones.”

“From being in the hospital,” Michelle admitted. There was nothing like a painful rifle shot to kill the appetite.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught the flutter of wings. They were there—the ever-present Puget Sound cranes circling the gray water of the Sound. The birds brought visitors and scientists. For some reason people found them interesting. Michelle had never been a fan. When she’d been eight, she’d

spent a whole summer getting pooped on by the cranes. She wasn't sure if it was just bad luck or an avian conspiracy. Either way, she'd gone from a fairly neutral opinion to hating them. Time away hadn't lessened her desire to have them gone.

She returned her gaze to the inn and felt her gut lurch with disappointment. How could anyone have done this to the once-beautiful building? Even her mother should have known better.

She probably had, Michelle told herself. This was Carly's doing, she was sure of it.

"Come inside," Damaris said, moving toward the porch. "It's going to rain and I want to feed you."

The unrelated thoughts made Michelle slightly less uneasy. At least Damaris was the same—welcoming and loving, always needing to feed those around her. Michelle would hang on to that.

She walked haltingly next to the much shorter woman, knowing she should probably be using her cane but refusing to show weakness. Not when the situation felt so strange. And in her world, not knowing what came next meant she was in danger.

One of the thrilling results of multiple posts in Iraq and Afghanistan, she thought grimly. Along with nightmares, a hair-trigger temper and an attractive little tic that showed up under her left eye from time to time.

She'd foolishly allowed herself to believe that the second she saw the inn, she would be okay. That being home was enough. She'd known better, but still, the hope had lived. Now it shriveled up and died, leaving her with little more than the pain in her hip

and a desperate longing to be ten years old again. Back when crawling onto her dad's lap and feeling his strong arms holding her tight made everything all right.

"Michelle?" Damaris's voice held concern.

"I'm okay," she lied, then smiled at the other woman. "Or if you don't believe that, how about I plan to be okay eventually? Can you live with that?"

"Only if you promise to eat."

"Until I burst."

Damaris's hair had gone a little gray and there were more wrinkles around her eyes, but other than that, she was as she had been. At least that was something. Michelle was still searching for a piece of her home that was recognizable. Even the gardens were different, she thought as she stopped to look at the yards of happy daisies waving in the slight breeze.

Their color exploded in a cheerful pattern, edging the lawn, creeping up toward the main building, sliding around the side. They were all different, as if someone had sought out the obscure, the most bold. Their brightness seemed like a scream to her bruised senses and she wanted to shield both her ears and her eyes.

The front-porch stairs brought her attention back to the inn. She braced herself for the fire that would sear her and the subsequent nausea and sweat.

She put her right foot on the first stair, then lifted her left. Preparing for the flames didn't make them any less hot. Pain tore

through her, making her want to beg for mercy or, at the very least, stop. With all the changes they couldn't have put in a ramp?

By the time she made it to the top, she was coated in cold, clammy sweat and her legs trembled. If she'd eaten that morning, she would have vomited—an elegant homecoming. Damaris watched her surreptitiously, worry darkening her brown eyes.

“Is it your mother?” she asked, her voice quiet, as if she didn't want to hear the answer. “I know the two of you never got along, but still, she's dead. You can't blame yourself for not making it back to the funeral.”

“I don't,” Michelle managed, the words forced out through clenched teeth. Being shot was one of the best excuses around.

A few more breaths and the pain faded enough to be bearable. She was able to straighten without gasping. Which allowed her to notice that the furniture on the porch was new, as was the railing. Her mother had certainly been free with whatever profits the inn brought in.

“Hello, Michelle. Welcome home.”

She swung her gaze to the wide double doors and saw Carly standing on the threshold.

There were changes there, too. Short hair instead of long. The same color of blond, the same dark blue eyes, but now they were edged in subtle makeup. Less Goth, more ladies-who-lunch.

The simple black skirt and flats, the long-sleeved, pink shirt with a tiny ruffle on the cuffs, were perfectly professional for the inn. They made Michelle feel rough by comparison. She was

aware of her baggy cargo pants—still the easiest things to pull on that weren't sweats. Her long-sleeved T-shirt had been to war and back and looked like it. She couldn't remember the last time she'd used mascara or moisturizer. Or had her hair cut by someone who'd actually studied to be a stylist.

By contrast Carly was pretty. Prettier than she remembered. Feminine.

Growing up, Michelle had been the beauty—with her long dark hair and big green eyes. Carly had been cute. The sidekick in the “who has the best smile” contest. Resentful of yet another change, Michelle wanted to turn away. To go back to...

Which was the issue. The inn was all she had and leaving wasn't an option.

Carly continued to smile, looking calm and in control. “We're so excited you're back.” The smile faded. “I'm sorry about Brenda. She was a wonderful woman.”

Michelle raised her eyebrows. There were many words to describe her late mother. Wonderful wasn't one of them.

More worrying, however, was the other woman's attitude. As if it were her place to welcome anyone. As if she belonged here.

“It's been a long time,” Carly added. “I haven't seen you since...” She paused. “It's been a long time,” she repeated.

The words, possibly impulsive, possibly planned, reminded Michelle of her last hours in this place. She supposed she should be embarrassed or guilty, that Carly expected an apology. Yet despite what she had done, Michelle found herself wanting Carly

to apologize. As if Carly was the one who had done wrong.

They stared at each other for a long minute. Michelle fought memories. Good ones, she thought resentfully. She and Carly had spent thousands of hours together, had grown up together.

Screw that, she thought, pushing them away. She walked purposefully toward the door. As expected, Carly stepped aside to let her pass.

The inside was as changed as the outside. The cheerful curtains were new, as was the fireplace surround. The hardwood floor had been refinished, the walls painted, and there was a god-awful daisy mural in the hallway leading to the restaurant.

But the reception desk was the same, and that was what Michelle hung on to, mentally if not physically. As the room seemed to dip and swirl and shift, she understood that expecting nothing to change had been foolish. She had thought she would return to exactly what she'd left—minus her mother. That when she stepped into her home, it would be as if she'd never left. Never been to war.

“Are you all right?”

Carly reached for her as she spoke. As her arm moved, the light caught the gold charm bracelet on her wrist.

Michelle knew it intimately. As a child, she'd been mesmerized by the sparkly, moving bits of gold. As she grew, she'd learned the history behind each charm, had made up stories about the delicate starfish, the tiny high heel. The bracelet had been her mother's and it was one of the few good memories she

had about the woman.

Now Carly wore it.

Michelle didn't want it but she sure as hell didn't want Carly to have it.

Anger bubbled and boiled like water spilled into a hot skillet. She wanted to grab Carly's delicate arm and rip off the chains of gold. She wanted to smash and take and hurt.

She drew in a breath like she'd been taught. While she wasn't a big believer in PTSD, she'd been told she suffered from it. So she'd listened to the counselors when they'd talked about avoiding stress and staying rested and eating well. She'd listened, then she'd picked and chosen what she thought would work for her.

She did the breathing because she couldn't pick an action and every part of her hurt. Then she limped away, each step burning, the soft tissue weeping in protest.

She went down the shorter hall on the right, turned a corner and stopped in front of an unmarked door. At last something that hadn't changed, she thought, touching the frame where small cuts marked how she'd grown. The cuts ended abruptly, not so much because she'd stopped getting taller, but because the man who had cared so much, the father who had loved her, had left.

She turned the door handle, needing to be inside. Needing to be where she could retreat and lick her wounds.

The door was locked. She tried again, then pounded her fist against the wood—the thuds sharp and determined.

The door opened, exposing a wide-eyed teenage girl.

“Oh, hi,” the girl said, her freckled nose wrinkling slightly. “Sorry. The guest rooms are all upstairs. This is private.”

“I know what this is,” Michelle said, speaking for the first time since entering the inn.

“Who is it, Brittany?” a young girl called from the back of the apartment.

“I don’t know.” The teen turned back to the door, looking expectant, as if waiting for Michelle to leave.

Michelle wanted to make her way to her room, to fall on her bed and sleep. Because sleep, when she could find it, healed.

She pushed past the teen and stepped through the looking glass.

Nothing was as it was supposed to be. Not the walls or the rugs on the floor or the furniture. The tattered plaid sofa was gone and in its place was a tightly slipcovered couch in shades of blue. Daisies were everywhere—in vases, on pillows and pictures. Even the curtains were a testament to the mocking flowers. Where there weren’t daisies, there were blackberries.

She stared at the new chairs, the kitchen table she didn’t recognize and the toys. A dollhouse in the corner. Stuffed animals and a stack of games on the wide windowsill.

A girl, maybe ten, stepped in front of Michelle. Her eyes were big and dark blue, her expression fearful. She had an iPod in her hand.

“Who are you?” she asked, then those big eyes widened. “I

know,” she breathed, and took a step away, nearly flinching as she moved. “You need to leave. You need to leave now!”

“Gabby!” the teen said, sounding shocked.

Michelle moved quickly, backing out of the room, ignoring the protesting agony wrapping itself around her hips and making her stumble. Everything was wrong. There was too much pain and the room was tilting. She couldn’t breathe, didn’t know where she was. It was as if she’d stepped on what she thought was solid ground and instead found herself falling.

She went as fast as she could, feeling the damage, knowing she would pay later and not caring. Back the way she’d come. In the entryway, Carly waited. Still perfect in her girly clothes and Brenda’s bracelet. Michelle stopped in front of her.

“You’re fired,” she said, speaking clearly, despite the burning sensation in her hip.

Carly went pale. “What? You can’t do that.”

“I can. This inn is mine, remember? You’re fired. Pack up and get out. I never want to see you again.”

She passed Damaris, stumbled more than walked down the stairs and made her way to her truck. She nearly passed out from the pain of dragging her left leg inside, but made it, then started the engine and drove away.

Two sharp right turns later, she pulled to the side of the road and put the truck in Park. Harsh sobs squeezed out of her throat. Her hands shook and cold invaded down to her bones.

There were no tears—only the sounds and knowledge that just

because she'd come home didn't mean she had anywhere to go.

Three

"The special tonight is a variation on chicken Marsala," Carly said, smiling at the older couple sitting by the window. "Mushrooms, fresh herbs and a Marsala cream sauce with rigatoni. It's one of my favorites."

The woman, her white hair piled on her head, smiled. "I'm not sure my waistline can handle that, but it sounds delicious."

Her husband nodded. "We brought our own wine. That's okay, isn't it?"

Carly looked at the bottle. A blackberry sticker sat on the top left corner of the label, which meant the bottle had been purchased in town.

"Of course," she told them. "There's no corkage fee. Would you like me to open your wine now and let it breathe?"

The husband grinned. "I don't know. That sounds pretty fancy."

"You're the one who picked the great wine. Why don't you let me open it? While you're deciding on dinner, I'll get the wineglasses and you can have a taste."

"Thank you." The woman patted her husband's hand. "We're having a lovely time. This is our third visit here. We haven't been in a few years. You've made some wonderful changes."

"Thank you. I hope we won't have to wait so long for the pleasure of your company again."

She excused herself and retreated to the butler's pantry off to

the side. After collecting wineglasses and an opener, she returned to the table and took care of the guests. Next she checked on the other three tables before heading for the kitchen to pick up salads.

So far no one had noticed anything was wrong. Or if they had, they hadn't commented, which was nearly as good. If she kept busy, she couldn't think, couldn't worry, couldn't panic.

She stepped into the bright, hot kitchen and found her salads were ready. She grabbed them and returned to the dining room.

The motions were easy, for which she was grateful. Scattered didn't begin to describe how she felt. Terrified was probably closer.

Fired. She couldn't be fired. This was home. She'd lived here for nearly ten years. She'd put her heart and soul into this place. She loved it. That had to count, right? Possession was nine-tenths of the law. Would gathering clichés help? Something had to. Michelle couldn't simply walk back in and fire her.

Only she could.

Fighting tears, Carly ducked back into the butler's pantry. The marble countertop was cool against her fingers. Marble she'd chosen, along with the cabinets, even the tables and chairs in the expanded restaurant.

She'd promised, Carly thought, hanging her head as her eyes burned. Brenda had promised that she would give Carly a share of the inn. Two percent a year until she owned half and they were equal partners. By rights Carly should now own nearly twenty

percent of it. Only the inn hadn't been Brenda's to give.

All those years ago when Michelle had claimed her daddy had left the inn to her, Carly had assumed her friend was just saying what kids say. "This will be mine." Because Michelle lived there and worked there. But Michelle had been telling the truth and Brenda had lied and Carly had nowhere else to go.

She wiped her face and forced a smile before returning to her customers.

It was nearly seven-thirty by the time she escaped back to the owner's suite of the inn—the rooms where she and her daughter had lived since Gabby's birth. Rooms she'd made her own, rooms with memories.

Gabby was watching TV, but looked up and smiled when Carly entered. Brittany, her regular babysitter, quickly set down her iPhone. Gabby scrambled off the sofa and rushed to her.

"Mom."

She didn't say anything else, just hung on.

Carly hugged her back, knowing that like nearly every other mother on the planet, she would do anything for her child. Including protecting her from the truth—that they might be evicted from their home.

"How was your evening?" she asked, smoothing Gabby's blond hair off her face and staring into her blue eyes.

"Good. I beat Brittany on two puzzles on Wheel of Fortune."

The teenager grinned. "See. All that spelling homework is helping."

Gabby wrinkled her nose. "I'd rather do math."

"Dinner was great," Brittany said, coming to her feet.

"Thanks."

Carly had delivered the chicken Marsala pasta for them at five-thirty. She worked in the restaurant two nights a week, but at least was able to bring home dinner during her shift.

"I'm glad you enjoyed it."

"We did," Gabby said.

Brittany had already shrugged into her coat.

"Meeting Michael?" Carly asked, standing before walking the teen to the door.

The teenager smiled. "Yes. We're going bowling with friends."

"I should hear on the summer camp in the next couple of weeks," Carly said, catching her daughter's soft snort. Gabby wasn't a fan of summer camp, mostly because it involved getting outside and doing things like hiking and kayaking. Her daughter preferred to read or play on her computer.

"My summer classes are from eight to twelve." Brittany pulled her long, red braid out from her jacket. "So afternoons are good." She hesitated, then lowered her voice. "That was her? Michelle?"

Carly nodded.

"She's nothing like I expected. I didn't think she would be scary. Not that she did anything. It's just, I don't know..."

Carly's first instinct was to defend, which only went to prove one never outgrew being an idiot.

"She's not so bad," she said by way of compromise. Which

was pretty big of her, considering she'd been fired.

"Okay. Have a good night."

Brittany left and Carly settled on the sofa. Her daughter curled up next to her, her head on Carly's shoulder.

"I don't like her," Gabby whispered. "Does she have to stay?"

Carly wanted to say she didn't like Michelle, either, but knew that would be a mistake. Doing the right thing was a pain in the ass, she thought, stroking her daughter's hair.

"Let's see how it goes before we make any judgments," she said lightly, ignoring a sense of impending doom.

"You always do that, Mom," Gabby said with a sigh. "Look at both sides. Sometimes don't you want to just be mad?"

"More than you'd think."

The reality was Michelle needed her. At least in the short term. Someone had to run the inn and, with Brenda gone, that left Carly. Michelle would need time to recover, to remember what it was like to work here. The firing had been impulsive. Words, not intentions.

It was like whistling in the dark, she thought, pulling her daughter close. Or not believing in ghosts, evidence be damned.

* * *

An hour and a half later, Carly kissed her daughter's forehead. "Sleep well," she murmured. "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom."

The words were spoken in a sleepy tone. Gabby's eyes were already drifting closed. Even though her daughter had stopped

asking for a good-night story years ago, she still liked being tucked in. She was nine, would be ten in the fall. How much longer until she started thinking of her mother as more of an annoyance than a friend?

Carly couldn't remember the age when she'd found everything her parents did either foolish or embarrassing. At seventeen, she'd been desperate to be free of them. Funny how it had taken her mother running off for her to realize how much she needed her around. But it had been too late to say that, to find out the rest of what she needed to grow to be a woman.

She kissed Gabby again, silently promising never to abandon her child, no matter what, then stood. A night-light guided her along the familiar steps. For all Gabby's claims of growing independence, her daughter still preferred the soft glow while she slept.

At the doorway, Carly paused and looked back at the now-sleeping child, then at her room. She'd made the curtains herself and put up the shelves. Paint was cheap and she haunted the Blackberry Island Thrift Store for bargains, like the cheerful quilt still in its store plastic wrap. She kept a big jar at the bottom of her closet and put all her loose change into it. That was the fund for her daughter's birthday and Christmas. Despite the lack of money, they'd made it.

All that would change if she got fired. She wouldn't just lose her job; she would lose her home.

For a moment, she stood in the half darkness and remembered

when this room had belonged to Michelle. Most weekends they spent their nights together, usually here, because it was better. Safer. When they'd been Gabby's age, they'd made daisy chains to wear and offer to guests. They'd run down to the beach and thrown rocks into the Sound. Michelle would wade into the cold water, but Carly kept to the shore. She'd always been afraid of the water. She had no explanation, no early trauma. The phobia simply existed. Unfortunately, she'd passed it on to her daughter.

On her good days, she told herself she'd more than made up for that with love and caring and a stable home life. Their world was orderly and predictable. They were happy. No matter what it took, Carly had to make sure that didn't change.

* * *

The motel room could have been on any one of a thousand roadsides. The bed was small and hard, the sheets rough, the carpet stained. The dark drapes didn't quite meet in the middle. Car lights swept across the window, creating a pattern on the opposite wall. There was a steady drip from the faucet in the bathroom.

Michelle supposed she could have found a nicer place, but she hadn't had enough interest. This place would do for the night. It had the added advantage of being close to the main highway into town and a favorite stop for truckers. She was unlikely to run into anyone she knew. Right now being anonymous was a win.

She ran water in the shower until steam filled the small bathroom. After stripping down, she stepped into the spray and

let the hot water wash over her. She used the soap, rubbing the tiny bar into her hair, then rinsing.

Despite the heat, she shivered, eventually turning the taps off and drying with the small, thin towel provided. She couldn't see herself in the mirror, which was fine. It wasn't as if she was going to put on makeup. Her lone concession to her skin while deployed had been sunscreen. Now that she was back in the Northwest, she didn't even have to bother with that.

As she dressed, she avoided looking at the still-healing scars on her hip. She was sure the surgeon had done his best to tidy up the injury, to mitigate the blast marks from the gunshot, but he hadn't had much to work with.

In her head she knew she was lucky. She was all in one piece. A partial hip replacement was barely a footnote compared to what others had suffered. She'd survived, meeting every soldier's goal of not getting dead. The rest would take care of itself.

She left the small bathroom. A stack of take-out menus sat on the narrow desk in the corner. Food was probably a good idea. She was still on antibiotics and pain meds. Having something in her stomach would make them go down easier. Or she could avoid them completely, solving the problem in another way.

The paper bag stood on the nightstand. She crossed to it and removed the bottle of vodka.

"Hello, you," she murmured, undoing the top. "I'm not looking for anything long term. How about just spending the night together?"

The counselor at the hospital had warned her that using humor as a defense mechanism would get in the way of her healing fully. She'd told him she could live with the flaw.

The night was quiet. The steady rumble of cars was practically a lullaby compared to what she'd heard just a few months ago. There was no threat of explosions, no roar of heavy equipment, no jets overhead. The night was cool instead of warm, the sky cloudy instead of clear.

Decisions would have to be made. She couldn't avoid the inn. She belonged there, or she had. There was also the issue of Carly. Saying she was fired had felt good. Maybe she should keep her around so she could fire her over and over again. A little gift to herself.

"That's bad, even for you," she told herself, still staring at the vodka.

Exhaustion pulled at her, making her want to lie down, to close her eyes. She resisted, despite the need to heal. Because sleep came at a price. Sleep brought dreams and the dreams were a new level of hell.

"Not with you," she said, lifting the bottle. "With you, there's just a real good time."

She drank deeply, letting the liquor burn down her throat and swirl into her empty belly. She drank until she was sure there wouldn't be dreams, until she was sure that for one more night she got to forget.

The knock on the back door of the kitchen had Gabby scrambling out of her chair and racing toward the sound.

“I’ll get it! I’ll get it!” she yelled.

There was no point in telling her to be quiet, Carly thought. Gabby was a morning person. Most days Carly didn’t mind, but after a night of tossing and turning, her daughter’s high-pitched voice pierced her brain like glass.

Gabby fumbled with the lock, then threw open the door.

“Uncle Robert!”

She flung herself toward the man in the doorway, arms open, her entire being expectant. Robert caught her and swung her high in the air.

“How’s my best girl?” he asked before kissing her cheek.

“Good. We’re having blackberries on our pancakes.”

Robert chuckled. “And that’s news why?”

They laughed together, then he lowered her to the ground. Gabby returned to the table and Robert closed the door.

“How was it?” he asked, walking into the kitchen.

Carly knew what he meant and didn’t know how to answer. She shrugged, then busied herself getting him coffee. Robert took his usual seat—he was a regular at their breakfast table, joining them a couple of times a week.

“Thanks,” he said, taking the cup of coffee. He turned to Gabby. “Ready for school?”

She nodded eagerly, her blond hair bouncing with the movement. Gabby adored school, both the classes and her

friends. At least there she was happily social.

“So what are you studying this week?” he asked. “Calculus? You’re in college, right?”

Gabby giggled. “Uncle Robert, I’m nine.”

“Really? You look older. I would have thought you were twenty.”

The conversation was familiar. Gabby adored her uncle and the feelings between them ran deep. Family was good, Carly told herself. Although it had taken having Gabby to convince herself of that. Her daughter was a blessing she wasn’t sure she deserved, but the rest of the familial relationships were iffy at best.

Robert had been more than kind, more than giving with his time and attention. Some of his actions were fueled by guilt, she knew. Robert was a good man, someone who took commitments seriously. Someone who expected the same of others. His brother, Allen, hadn’t shared Robert’s sense of obligation, walking out on Carly long before Gabby was born.

The leaving had been shocking enough, but having him clean out her bank account, taking every penny she had, had been worse.

Robert had stepped in, offering to let Carly live with him. She’d refused and instead had come to work at the inn. Robert had tracked his brother down, but Allen had refused to return and he’d already blown all the money. Their divorce had followed. He’d never paid child support, but he’d signed away his rights to his daughter. While Carly could use the money, she figured

having him gone was a good exchange. He was one of those men who created trouble, then walked away without bothering to think about the shattered lives in his wake.

Gabby finished her breakfast and carried her bowl to the counter. She set it in place.

“I’m going to brush my teeth,” she announced before dashing from the room.

Robert’s gaze followed her. “I can’t believe how big she’s getting.”

“She’ll be ten soon.” Collecting her own coffee, Carly sat at the table.

“You saw her yesterday?” he asked.

There was no reason to ask who “she” was. Carly had confessed her concerns about Michelle’s return to Robert. He’d also been witness to the trouble between them ten years ago.

“Yes,” she admitted. “Briefly. She’s...different. Thinner. She walks with a limp, which isn’t a surprise.”

“She was shot in the hip, right? That’s what I heard.”

Carly nodded.

“Did you talk?” he asked.

“Not really. She was tired.”

Or so Carly had assumed. She wasn’t going to admit what Michelle had said. Wasn’t even going to think about it until she had to. Then she would make plans.

The panic returned, but she ignored it. Time enough to lose it later, she told herself. When she was alone. To give in to the

fear now, to worry in front of Robert, was to invite something she didn't want.

He looked enough like Allen to be both intriguing and to make her want to bolt. Medium height, dark hair and eyes, with broad shoulders. Allen, younger by nearly six years, had the allure and easy smile of a man who lived on charm. Him leaving was as inevitable as the tide that lapped against the rocky shore of the island.

Robert was nearly as good-looking, but without the destructive bent. He owned an auto shop on the far edge of town. He was a good man who wanted to take care of her and Gabby, and she'd let him. Because it was easy. Because he didn't demand a real relationship and she didn't want one.

But she was starting to wonder if easy had a higher price than she'd realized. If they were using each other to avoid having to find what they really wanted with someone else. Of course, if Michelle really did fire her, it would be less of an issue. She had a feeling that being homeless would make her less attractive on the dating scene.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"I knew she was coming, but it was still a shock to see her."

"I'm sorry. About all of this."

"Stop saying that. It was never your fault."

"He's my brother."

"I'm the one who married him. I knew what he was and I married him, anyway."

Married him after finding him with her best friend two days before the wedding. It didn't matter that Allen had blamed Michelle, had claimed she'd seduced him and it wasn't his fault.

Carly remembered everything about the moment. She'd finally bought a topper for the cake. She'd found it in an antiques store in Aberdeen. The porcelain was delicate, the couple a little old-fashioned. But there had been something about the way they'd faced each other, the tiny hands clasping, that had called out to her. She'd bought it and brought it to her small house and had cleaned it so carefully. Then she'd taken it over to show Michelle.

There were so many things she remembered about that afternoon. The cranes had been everywhere. They were loudest in spring, no doubt dealing with bird hormones and nest-building. She remembered it had been sunny—a rare event in the Pacific Northwest.

She'd walked into the inn, still feeling strange about being there. She and Michelle had only recently reconciled. Their friendship, solid for so many years, had been tentative. She'd walked into the owner's apartment, her eyes slow to adjust to the sudden shadows, and she'd stumbled as she'd made her way through the living room and into Michelle's bedroom. She'd entered without thinking, without knocking. They'd still been in bed, both naked, in a tangle of arms and legs.

At first she hadn't believed what she was seeing. She'd stood there, holding the cake topper in her hands, feeling as if

something was terribly wrong but unable to figure out what. Like a dream, where chairs were on the ceiling.

The out-of-focus blurring had sharpened as she'd realized what had happened. That the person she should have been able to trust more than anyone had betrayed her. With Michelle—the woman already responsible for destroying most of what she had.

Allen had jumped to his feet and run to her. He was still hard from the lovemaking, his penis damp, his hair mussed.

“Carly, please. It was an accident.”

She was sure he'd said more, pleaded, begged. Blamed Michelle, who had sat in the bed, her eyes as blank as her face. Carly had waited—not for Allen to convince her but for Michelle to say something. Eventually she had.

“You should go now.”

That was it. Four words. No explanation, no apology. Just “you should go now.”

Carly had run.

Two days later, she'd walked down the aisle and married Allen. Because it had been easier than facing the truth. Because she'd been afraid of being alone. Funny how she'd ended up alone, anyway.

“You'll figure it out,” Robert told her. “You and Michelle were friends. Once you talk, you'll be friends again.”

She nodded because it was easier than telling the truth. That while Carly was the injured party, Michelle seemed to be the one who had come home looking for revenge.

* * *

Michelle stepped into the kitchen at the inn and breathed deeply. The fragrance of cinnamon mingled with bacon and coffee. Her mouth watered and for the first time in months she was hungry.

The room was different—bigger, with longer counters and more windows, but the heart was the same. Damaris still ruled from her eight-burner stove, and servers and helpers jumped when she barked their names.

Michelle watched as the cook flavored eggs with her secret spices and flipped pancakes. Diced vegetables and cheese were added to omelets, blackberries added as a side to everything. Toast popped, the juicer whirred and the ever-present slap of plates was accompanied by the call of “order up.”

Her head hurt nearly as much as her hip. A testament to the aftereffects of too much vodka and too little food. But as she watched Damaris, the pain faded to the background. Here, in the chaos, she was finally home.

“Last order,” Damaris called, slapping down another plate.

Michelle glanced at the clock. It was nearly nine. This time of year the breakfast crowd faded early with most of the customers heading off to work. Midweek inn visitors were usually purposeful, with plans and itineraries to be followed.

“Morning,” she said as Damaris turned off burners.

The cook spun and pressed a hand to her heart. “When did you get here?”

“A few minutes ago.”

Damaris hurried toward her, wiping her hands on her white apron. “It’s so good to see you,” she said, pulling Michelle close and hugging her. “You’re hungry.” Damaris released her. “You must be. I’ll make your favorite.”

“You don’t have to.”

Dark eyebrows rose over the frame of her glasses. “You think I don’t know that? Sit.”

Michelle limped over to the stools by the counter and sat. Damaris poured her coffee and passed it over, then studied the ingredients on the counter.

“You didn’t stay here last night,” she said, slicing cinnamon bread. “I asked.”

“I didn’t want to.” An almost-truth. “It’s strange being back.”

“That’s because you waited too long. What were you thinking? Ten years? In all that time you couldn’t come back once to see me?”

Michelle didn’t answer. Her reasons for not visiting had nothing to do with Damaris and everything to do with Carly and Brenda.

“What do you think of the changes?” Damaris kept her attention on the eggs she whipped.

“That they’re more than you said. The whole inn is different.”

“I didn’t want to upset you. Carly suggested the remodel, but then your mother ran with it. The contractor was from Seattle. God forbid Brenda should hire local. I think she was sleeping

with him.”

“My mother?”

“He took advantage of her, if you ask me. The new roof and kitchen remodel became what you see. I almost felt sorry for her. He left when he was done and never came back. Such bad luck with men.” She looked over her glasses. “Like I said, I almost felt sorry for her.”

Michelle couldn’t summon even that much compassion. “She should have known better. The inn didn’t need to be different. It wasn’t hers. She didn’t have the right.”

“Did you think that would have stopped her?”

“No.”

The pounding was back in her head. The hip ache had never gone away. She supposed she could take one of the pain pills the doctors had given her but she didn’t like how they made her feel. Loopy.

Talk about irony. She had no problem washing away her life with vodka but resisted pain medication. Of course, in the scheme of things, that contradiction wasn’t even a footnote when compared with the rest of the jumble in her head. She had a feeling she was one step away from being a case study in some medical magazine. Or maybe she was giving herself too much credit.

Damaris set a plate in front of her. Cinnamon French toast with sausage. And blackberries on the side.

“Really?” she asked, nudging one of the berries until it

threatened to roll off her plate. “Even with me?”

Damaris grinned. “Habit.”

Because all food was served with blackberries here on Blackberry Island. When she was little, her dad had teased that they should be grateful they didn’t live on Broccoli Island or Spinach Inlet. She remembered laughing and laughing, then drew in a breath and tried to remember the last time she’d found anything remotely funny.

She sliced off a small piece of the French toast. The edges were crispy, the cinnamon visible through the layer of egg. Once on her tongue, the flavors mingled, sweetened by the maple syrup. The bread itself, light yet substantial, had what those in the business called “mouth feel.”

Most people believed that scent memory was the most powerful but for Michelle it was taste. She could remember this breakfast from what felt like a thousand years ago. Could remember where she’d been sitting, what the conversation had been about. Damaris had made this exact meal for her on her first morning working for the inn.

“God, you’re good.”

Damaris laughed. “At least that’s the same.”

She poured herself coffee and pulled up a stool, watching as Michelle devoured the food.

Michelle finished the French toast, then went to work on the sausage. It was exactly as she recalled, made locally by organic farmers at the north end of the island. She ended with the

blackberries.

“Are they from Chile?” she asked. It was way too early in the season for them to be local.

Damaris’s eyes widened. “Shhh. That’s practically blasphemy. Everything we serve is local.”

“You’re such a liar. Is that what we’re saying now?”

“No, but people assume.”

“It’s fifty degrees outside and the first week of May. No one thinks these are local.”

Damaris sniffed. “There’s a greenhouse on the far side of the island.”

“It’s the size of a toaster. They could plant maybe two bushes in there.”

“Still.” Damaris reached for her own cup of coffee. “What happens now?”

Michelle had a feeling the cook wasn’t asking if she planned to take her plate over to the sink or not. The question, and answer, was more complicated than that.

“I return to my regularly scheduled life. Run the inn, like I did before.”

“You can’t do it by yourself.”

Michelle glanced at her, wondering if she’d heard about what had happened with Carly the previous night.

“It’s bigger now,” the cook continued. “Thirty rooms. The summer’s coming. You know what that means.”

Crowds, tourists and a houseful of guests.

I fired Carly.

Michelle thought the words, testing them, enjoying the sense of satisfaction they produced.

Reality would be different, she thought, gripping her coffee. Reality was hard work and long hours. With her hip and the physical therapy that would require, not to mention the fact that stairs were going to be a nightmare, Damaris was right. She couldn't do it on her own.

This close to the summer season, finding a replacement for someone who knew the inn would be difficult. While the words had come from her heart, she knew letting Carly go would be stupid.

“You're saying I have to keep her.”

No need to say who “she” was.

Damaris shrugged. “For now. She won't want to go. She has her daughter. Gabby. A sweet girl, considering.”

Damaris had always been an ally. Impulsively, Michelle stretched her arm across the stainless counter and squeezed her friend's hand.

“I missed you.”

“I missed you, too.”

The door to the dining room swung open and a dark-haired woman a little younger than Michelle entered. She wore a pink blouse tucked into black trousers. Her hair had been pulled back into a ponytail.

“Isabella, come. This is Michelle. Michelle, my daughter-in-

law. Isabella is married to Eric.”

Michelle smiled. “I can’t believe he finally got married.”

“Four years ago,” Isabella said.

Michelle remembered Eric being the kind who didn’t see the point in having a girlfriend. Why limit yourself to just one? He’d hit on her a couple of times, once even flashing her his penis. It was the first one she’d ever seen and her unplanned “Really? Is that what all the fuss is about?” had not only deflated him but insured he didn’t bother her again.

“Congratulations,” she now told Isabella, hoping Eric was a better husband than his past behavior implied.

“Thank you.”

“They have a baby. A little girl.”

“That’s nice.”

An awkward silence filled the room.

“Okay. Well, it was lovely to meet you.” Isabella turned to her mother-in-law. “The last of the customers left. I’m closing up the dining room. I’ll be back at eleven-fifteen.”

“See you then.”

“Bye,” Isabella said, and left.

“She’s a hostess here. She works breakfast and lunch,” Damaris said. “The schedule is convenient for her. She can make some money and be home with the baby.”

“Good.”

Michelle knew she should ask more questions, get involved. She was back now. But dealing with people, the easiest part of

the job, suddenly seemed impossible. She wanted to retreat to a small space where she would feel safe. Somewhere familiar.

She rose and reached for her dishes.

“Leave those,” Damaris told her. “I’ll take care of them.”

Michelle walked around the table and embraced the woman who had always taken care of her.

“Thank you,” she whispered, kissing Damaris on the top of the head.

“Welcome home, Michelle. I’m glad you’re back.”

“Me, too.” Sort of.

She limped to the door leading to the dining room. From there she would enter the inn and figure out what was next.

“Michelle?”

She paused and glanced back.

Damaris smiled. “I’m proud of you.”

Michelle felt her throat tighten. “Thank you.”

Five

Her mother’s office, her office now, was one of the few places that wasn’t different. Michelle settled on the old wooden chair and grinned when she heard the familiar squeal of protest. The chair was older than her, dug up from some office furniture sale years and years ago. Like the desk, it was scarred and old-fashioned, but serviceable.

The computer had been replaced, probably more than once in the past ten years, she thought as she pushed the power button on the tower. Although it wasn’t as new as the one she’d used in

Afghanistan.

Behind her, built-in bookcases covered the wall from floor to ceiling. Old ledgers dating back decades gathered dust. The smell of aging leather and musty pages comforted her. Here, with a watercolor of the inn as it used to be, with the familiar fading braided rug underfoot, she at last felt at home.

In the 1950s her newly married grandparents had inherited an unexpected windfall and had impulsively purchased the inn. Michelle's father had been born and raised here, as had she. Three generations of Sandersons had left their mark on the halls and floors of the old building. Michelle had never imagined living anywhere else.

Ten years ago circumstances—okay, guilt—had caused her to join the army. Within eleven months she'd been sent overseas, eventually ending up in Iraq. Working in the supply office had kept her busy. Knowing that she was making a difference had caused her to request two more deployments.

She'd spent her leave time in Europe, had wandered through Australia for nearly three weeks, had seen the Great Wall. As far as she was concerned, she was ready for the Been There, Done That T-shirt. If she had her way, she would never leave the island again.

She turned her attention to the screen and clicked on the icon for the inn. A box came up, demanding a password. The computer might be new, but the software had obviously been transferred from the one before. She entered her old password

and screens flashed in front of her. She navigated easily through reservations, then to the computer version of a check register.

The dates there made her frown. All the entries abruptly ended three months ago. What had—?

Her mother's death, she realized. Brenda had taken care of the bookkeeping for the inn. She would have been the one using the computer. Carly hadn't, which meant what? That none of the bills had been paid? She remembered Carly having many flaws, but being irresponsible wasn't one of them.

She turned her attention to the paperwork stacked on the desk. She looked for a pile of bills but instead found a pad of paper with a neat, handwritten list.

“April 17. Blackberry Island Water. \$237.18.”

The entries went back the three months and included two mortgage payments each month for different amounts. Michelle studied the list, recognizing the writing as Carly's. So she had been paying bills, but by hand. She wasn't sure if the other woman hadn't used the computer because she didn't know how or didn't think she was supposed to.

Michelle dug in the drawers and found the checkbook. Her mother's writing jumped out at her, a rambling scrawl that contrasted with Carly's smaller, neater entries. Michelle stared at the numbers, seeing the actual form of them rather than the amounts. She drew in a breath and braced herself for the inevitable.

Inhale, exhale, and there it was.

The subtle slam of a car hitting the side of a mountain. Guilt. It hit her from every direction, making her writhe in her seat as her breakfast turned from comfort food to something heavy in her stomach.

Self-reproach mingled with shame, but the emotions were elusive. Because she and her mother hadn't gotten along, because the other woman had blamed her for things that a teenager could never be responsible for, Michelle knew deep down inside she'd been glad she hadn't been here at the end. And that being glad was wrong.

It wasn't that Brenda had been alone. Carly had been there, or as Brenda had referred to her in her infrequent emails, "the true daughter of my heart." But Carly wasn't family.

Knowing in her head that ambivalence was the cause of the guilt didn't make it any easier to endure.

"Focus," she told herself. The hangover had faded enough that the headache was nothing more than dull background noise. After ten years, who knew what kind of financial turmoil the inn had experienced. She would dig into the numbers and come up with a plan. The army had taught her to excel at logistics.

She reached for the mouse, only to have the phone ring. The sharp sound cutting through silence caused her to jump. Her heart raced and a cold sweat instantly coated her body. Fear joined the ache in her hip and made her want to duck under the desk. Instead, she picked up the receiver.

"Sanderson," she said from long habit, then unclenched her

teeth.

“There’s a call for you on line one. Ellen Snow from Island Savings and Loan.”

Carly’s voice was calm. Had Michelle only imagined the thrill of firing her the previous night?

“You’re still here?”

“So it seems. Did you want to take the call?”

By way of answering, Michelle pushed the flashing button, disconnecting Carly and connecting the other call.

“This is Michelle Sanderson. How can I help you?”

“Michelle, how great to talk to you. I’m Ellen Snow from the bank. I don’t know if you remember me.”

Michelle leaned back in her chair. “We went to school together.”

Ellen laughed. “That’s right. I was a year behind you and my brother, Miles, was a year ahead.”

The images were vague. Blond, she thought. Nordic. Miles had been popular, Ellen less so.

“I remember,” Michelle said, going for polite rather than accurate.

“I just want to say I think what you did is wonderful. Serving our country that way. This probably sounds strange, but thank you.”

Michelle opened her mouth, then closed it.

What was she supposed to say in return? Her reasons for joining had been far from altruistic, and now that she was back

she wanted to slip into normal, to pretend it had never happened. Hardly actions worthy of thanks.

“Ah, you’re welcome.”

“Now that you’re home, I’m assuming you’re going to be taking over the inn?”

“Yes.”

“Good. As you may know, the bank has two notes on the property. A first and a second mortgage.” Ellen’s tone had shifted from friendly to business. “We should talk about them as soon as possible. Is ten-thirty good for you?”

A second mortgage? When had that happened? At least it explained the second monthly payment, but why?

She closed her eyes and saw the new roof, the larger restaurant, then swore silently. Her mother had been in charge—it was the gift that kept on giving.

“Ten-thirty this morning?”

“Yes. I have some time then.”

It wasn’t as if Michelle had anything else to do. “I’ll be there.”

“I look forward to it.”

* * *

Island Savings and Loan stood in the center of town. The once-thriving business district had been taken over by stores and restaurants that catered to tourists rather than locals. Most of the companies that served locals had been eased toward the outskirts of town, but the Savings and Loan stood where it had for nearly a hundred years.

Michelle parked in front, then walked through the glass doors—one of the few concessions to modern times. The rest of the building was brick, with hardwood floors and a mural completed in the 1940s.

There was no security guard, and if she ignored the high-tech cameras mounted on the walls, she could almost pretend she was a kid again, going to the bank with her dad.

An older woman stood in front of a lone teller. Otherwise, there didn't seem to be any other customers. Michelle glanced around at the offices lining the walls, then walked toward the one with Ellen's name stenciled on a wood-and-glass door.

She knocked on the open door.

Ellen looked up, then smiled and stood. "Michelle, thanks so much for coming in. How are you?"

"Fine, thanks."

She did her best not to limp as she entered the small space. Her T-shirt and cargo pants had seemed fine back at the inn, but here, with Ellen, she felt underdressed and grubby.

The other woman was as thin as she'd been back in high school. Long blond hair hung past her shoulders. Hazel eyes were framed with discreet makeup. Pearls, probably real, sat on top of a light green twin set. Low heels and a black knee-length pencil skirt completely Ellen's "I'm a banker, trust me" look.

As Michelle took the offered seat, she tried to remember if she'd bothered to comb her hair that morning. She'd showered, so she was clean, but her lone concession to grooming had been

to brush her teeth.

“I was so sorry to hear about your mother,” Ellen said gently, waiting until Michelle sat before resuming her place behind her desk and leaning forward. “It must have been difficult for you. I heard you’d been injured around the same time. It’s not fair, is it?”

“No, it’s not.”

Ellen sighed. “The loss and being hurt. Now this.” She motioned to the slim file on her desk.

Michelle stared at the closed folder. “What do you mean?”

The other woman pressed her lips together, as if considering her words. “Have you had a chance to go through the finances of the inn?”

Michelle regretted leaving the vodka bottle in her motel room. Right now a drink seemed like a smart move. “No. I’d only been in a few minutes when you called.”

“Then let me bring you up to speed.” She opened the file. “I really hate to be the one to tell you about this. I wish it could wait.” She paused.

Michelle felt the familiar sensation of something crawling on her skin. “Just say whatever it is.”

“The inn is in trouble. If it were up to me, we wouldn’t be having this conversation. I know you just got home and need time to readjust, but we have a loan advisory board. The new regulations are so strict. Back in the day I’d have more control. I’m so sorry.”

Maybe it was a lack of sleep, but Michelle would swear the other woman had just given an explanation that hadn't made anything more clear.

"What are you talking about?"

"The loans on the inn. There are two mortgages, both delinquent. I'm afraid we're talking about foreclosure."

Michelle shot to her feet, ignored the stabbing agony in her hips. "What? That's not possible. How can you say that?"

"I'm afraid I can say it because it's the truth. The last three payments were made on time, but they were only for current amounts. There are months of back payments on both mortgages. With penalties and interest."

Michelle sank back into the chair. The pain in her hip radiated out like light from the sun. It burned through her, making it difficult to concentrate.

"We own the inn outright. Maybe my mom took out a loan to pay for the renovations, but how much can it be?"

Ellen handed her a single sheet of paper with two loan balances. They totaled nearly half a million dollars. The amount in arrears was nearly thirty thousand.

Michelle dropped the paper on the desk and sucked in air. This wasn't happening. It couldn't be. Not even her mother would be so irresponsible.

"I think most of the money went into renovations," Ellen said gently. "Not to speak ill of the dead, but Brenda spent money more easily than she should have. The first mortgage payments

were often late. When she approached me about a second mortgage, I wasn't sure I could get it through the committee. I really had to convince them to give her the loan." She sighed. "Which makes this mess partially my fault. From your reaction, I'm guessing you didn't know."

"No. She never said anything. The inn was held in trust until I was twenty-five. By then, I was gone and she continued to run things." Into the ground, she thought bitterly, wondering how much of the money she'd blown on things for herself. Clothes and jewelry. New cars.

She couldn't believe it, couldn't take it all in. Once she'd seen the renovations, she'd thought there might be a few bills to deal with, but nothing like this.

"What happens now?" she asked.

"That depends on you. This business has been in your family for a long time. Letting it go will be difficult."

"I'm not selling."

"You don't have a choice," Ellen said, her voice sympathetic. "The back payments are problematic. I know Brenda kept up the insurance, but there may also be back taxes. Even with the summer tourists coming, you won't make a dent in what's owed. If you funnel all the money into what's overdue, how will you survive the winter? It's prime property. I've been approached by several interested parties. You could walk away with a lot of money, Michelle. Start over somewhere else."

"No." The word came instinctively. "No, I won't sell. There

has to be another way. I have money.”

“Half a million dollars?”

“Of course not, but don’t I just have to get the loan current and then keep making payments? I have savings. I didn’t spend much of my salary and there are bonuses for overseas deployments.”

Her instinct was to offer all that she had, but she held back. After all, there might be other pressing bills. The income or property taxes Ellen had mentioned or vendors who couldn’t be put off.

She started to stand, but forced herself to stay seated. She knew that once she stood she would bolt, running until all this was behind her. And then what? She would have to come back. Better to just get it over with.

“I can pay at least half the back mortgages amounts by tomorrow. Maybe more. I have to figure things out.” She scooted to the front of her chair and stared at the other woman. “Come on. You said it yourself. I’ve been off protecting our country. That has to count for something.” Complete crap, she thought. But possibly useful crap.

Ellen sighed. “I would love to say yes. I’m on your side, Michelle. You have to believe me. These new rules are so frustrating. I know what you’re capable of. But it’s not just about the money.”

“What else is there?”

“Management of the inn.”

“I’ll be running things.”

“That’s what the committee is afraid of.”

“What? I know what I’m doing. I’ve worked there for years. In high school, I took care of everything. You know that. I never went out with my friends or played sports or anything. After high school I worked full-time at the inn.” Unfairness made her want to throw something. “Dammit, I got my degree in hotel management while I was gone. I know how to manage the inn.”

Ellen nodded. “I know. I agree completely. I remember how you’d always be working during school.” Her mouth twisted into a smile. “My mother used you as an example for Miles and me. How you were so responsible and we weren’t. It was a little annoying.”

“So why doesn’t that count?”

“It does, with me. Not with the committee. Brenda was required to come in for quarterly meetings. She talked about Carly. How Carly took care of things. How the inn wouldn’t survive without Carly. Unfortunately, they believed her. Since your mother passed, Carly’s been paying the bills.”

The hits kept on coming, Michelle thought bitterly. “You’re saying they would trust Carly over me? She can’t even use the computer. She’s—” Michelle swallowed the rest of what she wanted to say. Ranting wouldn’t help her case.

“I know you and Carly have a difficult past.”

Difficult didn’t begin to describe it. “So the committee, whoever they are, doesn’t trust me, but if Carly runs things, then I have a shot at keeping the inn?”

Ellen nodded. “Unfortunately, yes. I had a feeling you wouldn’t want to sell. They didn’t believe me, but then they’re not one of us. I consider you a friend. The last thing I want is another local business shut down. I’m tired of outsiders running things around here. I pleaded your case last week and they’ve agreed to the following concessions.”

She handed Michelle another piece of paper.

The list was short. The back payments had to be made within sixty days. All accounts with vendors had to be current by the end of the month. The inn had to maintain an eighty-five-percent occupancy rate through the summer, pass all inspections and stay current on the mortgage payments. The last item on the list was the one that made her hip ache the worst.

Carly Williams was to agree to stay on for at least two years.

“I’m sorry,” Ellen said. “It’s the best I could do. I know how you feel about her. I have to admit, I’m not her biggest fan, either. She took advantage of you being gone and she used your mom. She’s even wearing her jewelry. It’s awful.”

Ten years in the army had taught her to follow orders, whether or not they made sense or she wanted to. She could argue, she could scream, but unless there was a winning lottery ticket worth half a million dollars in a drawer in her desk back in her office at the inn, she was screwed.

“I’m not losing the inn,” she said. “My dad might have been a first-class bastard, but he left it to me and I’m going to keep it. I’ll do what I have to.”

“You can have a couple of days to think about it,” Ellen told her. “There’s still the interested buyer.”

“I don’t have to think about it. I’ll do it. I’ll do all of it.”

“Even work with Carly?”

“Sure.”

“It’ll be difficult.”

“You have no idea.”

Six

The Shop at Blackberry Island Inn was one of Carly’s favorite places. The space had been added nearly two years ago and was slowly building a loyal customer base. Big windows allowed in light, even on the gloomiest days, while the custom shelves and racks provided plenty of display space.

The store sold the usual kitschy island mementos—magnets, mugs and key chains done in both blackberry and daisy motifs. But there was also a section devoted to local artists and a display of unique china. Brenda had insisted on a doll collection, which Carly didn’t love. They’d both chosen the books of island history and pictures.

Mornings were often slow at the shop, but the lunch crowd at the restaurant brought in customers. Carly used the quiet time to dust, check inventory and organize invoices. After getting Gabby off to school, she manned the front desk of the inn, checking out guests and making sure the cleaning staff was ready to go. In the late morning, she would return to the front desk to check in those arriving, handle correspondence and talk to vendors. The couple

of hours she spent in the store a few times a week were as close to “me time” as she ever got.

Today she walked through the store, stopping to touch her favorite pieces, aware she was telling them she might be gone soon. As if the carving of an orca breaching and surrounded by spray would miss her.

The front door opened and the attached bell tinkled. She turned and saw Leonard Daniels walking toward her.

“Hi, Carly.”

“Morning, Leonard.”

Leonard was their resident ornithologist, specializing in the Puget Sound crane. He was here on a grant that paid for his room at the inn. They generally had two or three scientists at any one time.

Tall and thin, with dark-rimmed glasses and pale skin, despite his time outdoors, Leonard personified the phrase “geeky scientist.” He favored plaid and khakis, inevitably had binoculars around his neck and a small netbook computer under one arm.

He crossed to her, his gait more energetic than usual. “We have eggs.”

She knew enough to understand he didn’t mean the breakfast variety. “Already?”

He nodded. “Two in the first nest I found and one in the other. Within a week I’ll have enough data to determine a potential chick population.” His dark eyes brightened with excitement. “I’m hoping this is the third growth year. If it is, then we can

finally look at taking the cranes off the endangered list.”

He paused, as if expecting her to share his joy.

“That’s great, Leonard.”

“I know. We should celebrate.”

“It’s kind of early in the day.”

He pushed up his glasses, then looked at his watch. “Oh, right. Okay. I’m going back to work.”

He left the store.

She watched him go, hoping he wasn’t going to try to change the nature of their relationship. He was a paying guest and she’d always been friendly to him but the last thing she wanted in her life was a man. Men were trouble. It had taken her a while to figure that out but she wasn’t going to forget the lesson now.

There hadn’t been anyone in her life since Allen had abandoned her. Over ten years. Sure, it would be great to have hot sex with a guy, but aside from that, she didn’t need the aggravation.

She turned back to mental inventory, only to have Wendy, one of the servers, come in. Wendy worked the breakfast shift at the restaurant. She had three kids and a husband who worked nights. He got the kids off to school when he got home from his job and she took over until he got up in the late afternoon. They spent their evenings together, before he left and she went to bed.

Wendy was reliable and the guests liked her—which made her someone Carly didn’t want to lose.

“What’s up?” she asked.

Wendy wrinkled her nose. “Damaris got in my face this morning, which I can handle, but she came out and yelled at one of the customers, which I didn’t like. Jeez, what’s up with her? She gets in these moods. The guy wanted an egg-white omelet. She told him no special orders. When he said it was for his heart, she told him that his being fat wasn’t her fault.”

Carly felt her mouth drop open. “Please say you’re kidding.”

“I wish I were. Most of the time she’s fine, but every now and then she gets in a mood and takes it out on customers. You’ll talk to her?”

Carly wanted to say no. This was the sort of thing Brenda handled. The other woman had actually enjoyed taking Damaris on. If it had been up to Carly, Damaris would have been let go years ago. Firing the temperamental cook had been on her to-do list, just as soon as she got her shares of the inn. Now she wasn’t sure if she had a job, let alone the authority to fire anyone.

“I’ll talk to her,” she said, knowing she owed that to Wendy.

“Thanks. I’m heading home. Have a good one.”

“You, too.”

Carly had nearly an hour to fume and worry before Ann showed up to work in the gift shop. Not sure what she was going to say, she walked through the inn to the restaurant kitchen. Damaris sat on a stool, her cell phone to her ear. When she saw Carly, she frowned before saying she had to hang up.

“You know he was a big, fat guy. Do you think one egg-white omelet is going to make a difference?”

So much for idle chitchat, Carly thought. “He’s a customer.”

“The customer isn’t always right. Most of the time the customer doesn’t know what he’s talking about. I made the omelet. I didn’t want to, but I did.”

“Your job is to cook their food. Being rude and critical doesn’t help our business.”

“Our business?” Damaris raised her eyebrows. “It’s Michelle’s business, not yours.”

“I’m speaking as an employee. We have a responsibility to do our best. That’s what we’re paid to do.” Carly could feel her face heating. She’d never been very good at hiding when she was upset. “Do you think Michelle would have been proud of your actions? That she would be happy about what happened?”

Damaris stood and crossed to Carly. The cook was about five inches shorter, but much broader and more willing to be aggressive.

“Don’t you tell me my job, missy. I was cooking before you were born. She’s back now. How long do you think before she fires you?”

Less time than Damaris knew, Carly thought, knowing she had no power, no position of strength.

“You were wrong and you know you were wrong. Not just because it’s bad customer service, but because it was rude. Whatever you think of me, saying things like that won’t help the business. You claim to care about Michelle but your actions are hurting her.”

Damaris smiled. “Uh-huh? And who do you think is going to be here at the end of the day? Me or you?”

A question Carly didn’t want to answer. She turned and left the kitchen.

Frustration gnawed at her. Anger made her want to lash out. Maybe she should go ahead and leave. Start over somewhere else. Have a real life that wasn’t dependent on forces she couldn’t control and people who lied. People like Brenda.

She stopped in the hallway, needing a second to get control of herself and calm down.

“Why did you do this?” she asked out loud, knowing there wasn’t going to be an answer. Carly wasn’t a big believer in the dead coming back and having a conversation, and even if they could, she doubted Brenda would bother.

She’d been used by Brenda. At times the other woman had been sympathetic, even kind. But in the end, she’d only cared about herself. Now Carly had nothing. Her carefully hoarded emergency fund held all of sixteen hundred dollars. Barely enough to cover a deposit on a small apartment, let alone rent. Not to mention living expenses while she looked for work. She doubted Michelle would fire her and then give her a recommendation, which meant getting a decent job would be beyond difficult.

Which left what? Being homeless? Public assistance?

Her eyes burned. She sucked in a breath and told herself she wasn’t going to give in to tears. Not yet. Not when there could

be a bigger crisis brewing.

She squared her shoulders; she would get through this. She'd gotten through plenty. She was strong and a hard worker and she had Gabby. Besides, ice cream had been on sale so she'd bought a quart. If necessary, she could have a sugar-based pity party later.

She walked into the main room of the inn and found an older couple standing by the window. They weren't guests, so she wondered if they were hoping to get a room. She had three available, at least for tonight. The biggest of them had a balcony and a view.

"Hello," she said, smiling automatically. "Can I help you?"

The couple was casually but expensively dressed. More island chic than big-city vacationers. He was tall, she shorter, both fit with blond hair and tans.

They turned to her.

"Seth Farley," the man said. "This is my wife, Pauline. Do you have a moment? Could we talk somewhere private?"

They didn't look like salespeople or vendors. She'd been careful to pay all the inn's bills, so they weren't after money. Lawyers seemed unlikely.

"Sure. Let's go in here."

The "here" was a small conference room set aside for business guests.

When they were seated around the large table, she offered them coffee.

"No, thanks," Seth told her. "I'll get right to the point. My

wife and I are psychologists. We've been in practice together for nearly twenty-five years. We have a program for married couples interested in working on their relationships. I won't go into all the details, but we get together with two or three couples at a time for three days. We've been holding our retreats in Seattle, but we think that getting out of the city might help couples more fully immerse in their therapy. We've investigated several places and are interested in your inn."

"Oh." Carly brightened. Returning guests were always welcome. "This is our only meeting room, though. We don't have conference rooms like traditional hotels."

"We don't need a space for the seminars themselves," Pauline told her. "We have that taken care of. We're looking for housing for our clients. Three rooms Tuesday through Thursday from the middle of May through late September."

Summer was their busiest time, she thought. While the weekends were always full, there were usually rooms available midweek. Having guaranteed bookings for that many weeks would be great.

"I would have to check our availability," she said, then remembered there was more. "And talk to the owner."

Seth drew his eyebrows together. "I thought you were one of them."

So did I.

"No," she said brightly. "But I've worked here for ten years, so I'm confident your clients would enjoy their stay. Let me get the

dates from you along with your card. I'll check the reservations and speak with the owner, then get back to you by the end of the week. How's that?"

"Perfect."

Seven

Michelle sat with her fingers on the keyboard. It wasn't that she didn't know how to open the programs; it was that she didn't want to.

Reality was damned unpleasant. Sometimes she wondered what it would be like to be one of those people who could simply drift away. To be on another mental plane and not care about this world. Only not caring wouldn't fix the problem. This was her inn. The one thing that had kept her going while she'd been away. The thought of coming home. If home was fucked-up, she was going to have to fix it herself.

She typed purposefully, focusing only on gathering information. She was used to spreadsheets and charts and graphs. Her time in the army had been spent in and around supplies. Deciding what to order. Getting them where they needed to go. Getting the inn back on its financial feet was nothing compared with the logistics of housing, feeding and caring for thousands of soldiers on the other side of the world.

She quickly sorted through the previous year's tax returns, wincing when she saw the loss. Sure, avoiding taxes in every legal way possible was great fun, but seeing the amount of money the inn had lost made her heart sink. The only bright spot was that

losses meant there weren't overdue taxes.

She printed out the tax return, then started printing out other reports. The checkbook register. Accounts Receivable and Accounts Payable. She found that her mother had purchased not one, not two, but three new cars in the ten years Michelle had been gone. The last one, a BMW convertible with the price tag well over \$70,000, had been repossessed.

She sorted through desk drawers and found unpaid bills under boxes of paper clips and staples. Then she added Carly's neat list of deposits and bills paid.

After opening a new spreadsheet, she began to enter the information. What came in and what went out. She balanced the checkbook, then did it again because the number couldn't be right. She looked at reservations and saw there were many weeks when they weren't even close to the number required by the bank.

Two hours later, she stood and limped slowly around the room. Blood circulated, pouring into her hip and causing pain. She was stiff and sore. But the worst of it was on the inside.

Growing up, she'd always been her father's favorite. Even as a little kid, she'd known her dad preferred her to Brenda. She'd accepted his love, his devotion, and had known that he was the one who stood between her and her mother. Brenda had been indifferent at best, and critical and hurtful at worst.

Sometimes she wondered if her father's favoritism had hurt Brenda. If, in return, Brenda had taken that out on her daughter. There was no way to know how much of her mother's actions

were the result of circumstance and how many came from a sucky personality.

Michelle couldn't remember when she first learned that her parents had "had" to get married. She'd been born seven months after the wedding. While Michelle and her father had loved the inn, loved the island, Brenda had resented being trapped here. There were no trips to Europe—the inn couldn't be left for that long. No summer vacations—that was the busiest time. No weekends anywhere. The inn came first.

Michelle remembered her mother screaming that she and her father were so selfish. At seven, Michelle had been a small but determined opponent. "If we're so selfish, why do you always get your way?"

A question for which her mother never had an answer.

Brenda had resented her husband's abandonment more than she had mourned his absence. He'd left them both—devastating Michelle. The desertion had not only proved he didn't love her best, it had left her at the mercy of her mother.

At the time, Michelle had wondered if she would leave, too, but Brenda didn't. Instead, Michelle had been the one to go away. Looking now at the financial math that was her family's legacy, she thought that Brenda had won in subtle ways. A bad decision here, a foolish purchase there. Individually they were inconsequential. Taken in total, they were a disaster.

She studied the payroll reports. Boeing didn't need this many people working for them. The inn only had thirty rooms, but

seven maids. And what the hell was a reception greeter? Just as confusing, some people seemed overpaid while others didn't make enough. Damaris hadn't had a raise in six years. That was bad enough, but Carly's financial situation was worse.

Michelle stared at the biweekly paycheck amount. Even taking into consideration the fact that she got free living quarters and a couple of meals a day, she wasn't making close to minimum wage. She had a kid. The medical insurance sucked. There had to be out-of-pocket expenses for that, not to mention clothes and shoes and whatever else children needed.

While she was aware she should probably be happy that the other woman was practically living in poverty, she mostly felt embarrassed and maybe a little guilty.

Michelle wanted to put all the blame on her mother. The inn had been left to her in trust. She was supposed to take care of it. But Michelle knew she was the one responsible. She'd been the one to leave, the one who hadn't come back, the one who had never asked. Now she had two mortgages, a pending foreclosure and a list of rules and demands that made her skin crawl.

Someone knocked on the door.

"Come in," she barked without looking up.

"You sound like you're still in the army."

She saw Damaris step into the office. The cook had a tray in one hand.

"I brought you lunch. I didn't think you'd eat on your own."

Michelle glanced at the clock and was surprised to see it was

nearly three. “Do you always work this late?”

“Sometimes yes. Sometimes no.” The cook put the tray on the desk, then sat in the empty chair. “I had to order my meat and produce.”

“What time do you usually get out of here?”

Damaris shrugged. “Two. Two-thirty.”

Michelle did the math in her head. She knew Damaris got to the restaurant sometime around six. They opened at seven and she worked through lunch.

“You haven’t had a raise since I left.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.”

Michelle wanted to ask if her mother had been doing this on purpose. If her goal had been to destroy the inn. She doubted her friend would have an answer.

“I’m giving you a raise now. Retroactive three months.” She named an hourly salary. “Better?”

Damaris nodded. “You’ve always been a good girl. None of this is your fault.”

“What have you figured out? About the inn?”

“I hear things. People don’t get paid. Checks bounce. No one blames you.”

Michelle glanced at the tray. Damaris had made her a roast-beef sandwich. Her favorite. There were chips and a small salad and a chocolate milk shake.

She reached for the glass and scooped out a spoonful of whipped cream. “Thanks.”

“Someone has to take care of you. You’re too skinny. How will you ever get a man?”

For the first time since arriving home, Michelle laughed. “I don’t think getting a man is my biggest problem right now.”

“A man would help.”

Michelle thought getting through the night without having nightmares and waking up in a cold sweat was probably a better first step, but she didn’t say that. The information would only frighten Damaris.

The other woman poked at the papers on the desk. “Is it bad?”

“I haven’t figured that out yet.” She stuck a straw in the milk shake. “Do you think my mother screwed up on purpose?”

“I don’t know. She wasn’t the type to have a plan. I think maybe it just happened.”

“What about Carly? Did she help or hurt the inn?”

Damaris shrugged. “I don’t like her very much, but I don’t think she did anything wrong.”

Not exactly what Michelle wanted to hear. Carly’s low salary made her suspicious and their past made her want to show her the door. The deal with the bank was a problem, but more than that was the fact that Carly didn’t even know how to work the computer system. Her carefully handwritten notes proved that.

If Carly wasn’t stealing, then it was all Brenda.

“How long has Carly worked here?” Michelle asked.

“Practically since you left. One day she was here. Pregnant. Brenda gave her one of the rooms. After Gabby was born, she

moved into the owner's suite and Brenda took the two bedrooms on the second floor."

Michelle wanted to ask what had happened to Allen. If Carly had been alone and pregnant, he'd obviously left. But why?

"The customers like her," Damaris said grudgingly. "She's good with them, but she's not the boss of me."

That made Michelle grin. "What are you? Five?"

Damaris chuckled. Then her humor faded. "Are you going to fire her?"

If wishes were horses, Michelle thought. "Not today."

"Soon?"

"That eager for her to be gone?"

"It goes back to the 'boss of me' thing."

"I'm the boss of you now."

"Good. I like that." Damaris stood and walked around the desk. "Give me a hug. I'm going home."

Michelle stood, then winced as the fire surged through her and she nearly lost her balance.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. My hip."

"Don't you have something you can take?"

"I'd rather not." She'd rather drink.

Damaris put her hands on her hips. "You were always stubborn. You must get that from your dad. Take something. I'll wait."

Determination gleamed from behind her glasses, telling

Michelle this wasn't a battle of wills she was going to win. Besides, by the time she got back to her motel room, the pill would have worn off and she would be able to drink as much as she wanted.

"Fine," she grumbled, then reached for her backpack. She fished out the prescription bottle and swallowed a pill. "Happy?"

"Always."

* * *

Michelle kept Carly waiting for two days. Despite the fact that they were spending their workdays in the same building, they seemed to be skilled at avoiding each other.

Carly spent her time alternating between wondering if she should start packing up and praying she didn't have to go. She was able to fake it enough with Gabby that her daughter didn't seem to notice anything was wrong.

Ann had asked to come in late, so Carly was in the gift shop at lunch on Thursday. Several customers were browsing the book section while a teenage girl and her mother sighed over the dolls. Carly rang up a teapot, then wrapped it.

"I hope your friend loves it," she said as she handed over the package. "It's beautiful."

"I think so, too," the middle-aged tourist said. "Have a nice day."

Carly gave her a friendly wave, then turned and nearly ran into Michelle, who had apparently crept silently into the store. Carly had to jump back and steady herself on the counter.

“You have a minute?” Michelle asked.

Carly glanced toward the customers. “I shouldn’t leave them.”

Michelle eyed the few people looking around. She pointed to the alcove by the rear storage room. “What about there?”

Carly nodded. She could see the cash register and know if anyone was ready to check out.

She crossed to the doorway. Michelle followed more slowly, her gait uneven, her hip obviously troubling her. Carly wanted to ask how she was, but held the words inside. For all she knew, she was about to be fired. Again. Showing compassion in the face of that seemed to be giving away the grain of power she had left.

She hadn’t decided if she was going to plead her case or accept her fate with dignity. Two nights of sweating her bank balance had done nothing to improve her lack of a bottom line and going through the Seattle paper hadn’t given her much in the way of job options.

As Carly leaned against the door frame, she saw that Michelle looked more tired than she had when she’d first arrived. Lines of weariness and pain pulled at her mouth. Dark smudges shadowed her eyes and there was a gray cast to her skin. Her long hair hung limp, and if she lost any more weight, her cargo pants were going to slip off her skinny hips.

Michelle braced herself against the wall.

“Do you need to sit?” Carly asked, then wanted to smack herself for asking.

Michelle shook her head. “I’m fine.”

She was a lot of things, but fine wasn't one of them. Carly told herself this wasn't the time to remember that, years ago, Michelle had been her best friend in the world. That they'd grown up together until ugliness had ripped them apart. Still, she wanted to connect with her former friend, to talk about all that had happened, to find a common middle ground. To heal, she thought wistfully. Closure and something positive out of this mess would be nice.

“You're not stealing.”

Michelle made the pronouncement with the ease of someone sharing facts about the weather. Carly's head jerked, as if she'd been slapped. All the warm, gooey feelings evaporated until she was left with anger and the knowledge that she was a down-to-the-bone idiot for expecting anything close to friendship from the woman in front of her.

“I thought maybe you were, but you're not,” Michelle continued. “I've been over the bank statements and books for the past three years and I can't find where you've done anything wrong.”

If Carly thought she had a hope of surviving without her job, she would have walked away. Simply turned and disappeared into the afternoon, maybe after giving Michelle a well-deserved kick in the teeth.

“How disappointing,” Carly snapped. “I'm sure finding out I'm the bad guy in this would be a highlight in your day.”

“I'm due a few highlights, and you're right. I'm disappointed.”

I would love to fire you.”

“You did fire me.”

“You didn’t leave.”

“I wasn’t sure you meant it.” Carly hated to admit the truth.

“I did,” Michelle told her flatly. “But it’s not a luxury I can afford.”

“What does that mean?”

Michelle studied her. “You have to keep this to yourself.”

“All right.”

“I don’t know why I’m about to trust you.”

“If it’s about the inn, then you can trust me. I’ve worked here nearly ten years. I care about this place. If that’s not enough, then hey, I don’t steal. That has to be worth something.”

Michelle’s left eyebrow rose. “Attitude?”

“I’ve earned it.”

Michelle closed her eyes for a second, then opened them. Emotions swirled through her green irises. Whatever she was thinking, the thoughts weren’t happy.

“The inn is in trouble. Financially, we’re sinking. I was at the bank a couple of days ago and it’s bad.”

Carly considered the information. “I don’t understand. We had a pretty decent winter. Lots of guests, considering the season. When I paid the bills, there was money in the bank.”

“Not enough. Two mortgages were taken out on the property. Ten years ago, there wasn’t one.” Accusation sharpened the words until they were a knife.

“The renovations,” Carly breathed, knowing they had to have cost a fortune.

“Something you pushed my mother to do.”

“What? No. They were her idea. We had to get the roof repaired and things sort of spiraled from there.” Mostly because Brenda had gotten involved with the contractor. Getting him to do more work had kept him around.

“Sure. Blame the dead woman.”

Carly straightened. “You can rewrite history all you want, but that won’t change the facts,” she said, crossing her arms over her chest. “The renovations were your mother’s idea. She’s the one who wanted to build this gift shop and expand the restaurant. If you need proof, I can show you the files. She did the drawings, made notes. This was her vision. I wanted to spend the money on remodeling the bathrooms.”

Aware of the customers close by, she consciously lowered her voice. “If you’d bothered to come back even once, you’d know that.”

“Don’t make this about me,” Michelle told her. “Trust me, you don’t want to fight with me. I’m not who you remember. I can take you down.”

Despite the tension between them and the seriousness of the moment, Carly laughed. “Seriously? You’re threatening me physically? You were in the army, not the CIA. You can’t kill me with a matchbook cover, so get over yourself. You’re moving about as fast as a woman in her late nineties and you’re obviously

in pain. But this is so like you. Reacting without thinking. You're still impulsive."

"You're still annoying."

"Bitch."

"Double bitch." One corner of Michelle's mouth twitched as if she were about to smile.

In that nanosecond, Carly felt the connection that had always been there. Then Michelle's expression turned hard again.

"I still blame you and as far as I'm concerned you're the enemy."

"If that's what it takes for you to sleep at night, go for it. I'm a single mother with a nine-year-old and sixteen hundred dollars in the bank. Making my life more difficult isn't going to be much of a stretch, but sure. If you need to do that to feel important, I can't stop you."

Michelle's jaw tightened. "Then it's in your best interest to keep what I'm about to tell you to yourself."

"All right."

Michelle looked away. For a second it seemed that her shoulders slumped, that she was giving in to defeat. Carly waited, not sure if the weakness was real or a way to trick her. Before she could decide, the moment passed and she drew in a breath.

"The inn's financial state is desperate," Michelle began, then explained about the overdue mortgages and threat of foreclosure.

Because she needed one more thing to keep her up at night, Carly thought grimly, horrified and yet not even surprised by the

news.

“She never said a word. Never hinted. Four months ago we were looking at catalogs of French linens.”

“Tell me you didn’t order any,” Michelle said.

“We didn’t. But we could have.” Carly looked around at the gift shop. “How could she have done this? Don’t bother answering. I’m just talking out loud. This is so her. So her.”

Anger joined disbelief and resignation. Anger that Brenda, who had seemed to care about Gabby, would have put the child in harm’s way.

Carly and Brenda had talked about the future so many times. How Carly would become a partner and then have financial security. The inn would never make her rich, but having money in the bank, a college fund for Gabby, the comfort of knowing she could afford a decent used car every six or seven years, would have been enough.

“I cared about her,” Carly murmured, more to herself. “I was there for her when she got sick.” She looked at Michelle. “I was there when she died.”

As expected, Michelle’s expression didn’t change.

“She screwed us both. Do you want to keep your job?”

“Yes.”

“I want to keep the inn. The bank has conditions. The loans have to be brought up-to-date. We have to maintain better than an eighty-five percent occupancy through the summer. That’s twenty-six rooms at any given time.”

Michelle hesitated. “There’s one more thing. They want you to commit to stay on.”

The words sank in slowly. “You can’t fire me?”

“You sound smug.”

“I’ve earned it.”

“How the hell do you figure that? I’m gone thirty seconds and you weasel your way in here, taking advantage of my mother, sucking this place dry.”

Carly glared at her. “That’s crap and you know it. I didn’t weasel my way into anything. I’ve worked my ass off here for practically no money. I work ten- or twelve-hour days, I take care of all the guests. Since I’ve been here, our repeat business is up sixty percent. Do you think they come back because your mother made them feel welcome? It was me.”

“Aren’t you a saint.”

Carly angled toward her. “I’m someone who was here, which is more than I can say for you.”

Color stained Michelle’s cheeks. “I was away defending your country. Getting shot at.”

“You were hiding. You didn’t have the courage to come back. You stayed away because it was easier.”

“What’s your excuse?” Michelle asked, not denying the words. “If everything was so difficult, if you had to work so hard, why didn’t you leave?”

“Because she told me I would get a piece of the inn. That I was earning my way into owning part of it.”

Michelle stared at her for several seconds. "It wasn't hers to give," she said quietly.

"I found that out recently." That lie had been the hardest to handle.

"I told you the inn was mine. Before. When we were kids."

"I thought you were bragging."

"Maybe if you'd believed me, none of this would have happened."

"What does that mean?" Carly demanded. "That the inn being in trouble was my fault? You're not listening."

In the background a bell tinkled. She turned and saw that all the customers had fled the store. So much for selling anything else this morning.

"I want you to stay on," Michelle told her. "I'll draw up a contract. It will give you job security."

Something Carly could appreciate. "I want to stay in the owner's suite. It's the only home Gabby's ever known."

Michelle's mouth twisted. "Fine."

Carly desperately wanted to demand a raise, as well, but if the inn was in enough trouble that Michelle was willing to promise employment for a period of time, then there wasn't going to be any extra cash for her. Still, she would work harder at saving. She would come up with a plan, and when her contract ended, she would be prepared.

"Thank you for taking care of Brenda. At the end."

The words were as shocking as the news about the inn. Carly

blinked. “You’re welcome.”

“I’m sure it was more meaningful for her than having me here. After all, you were the daughter of her heart, something she mentioned frequently in her emails.”

Serve and point, Carly thought grimly. Michelle had learned to go for the throat.

“I’m not going to apologize for taking care of someone who was dying,” she snapped. “Twist it however you want. I know what happened. But if it bugs you so much, maybe you should have come home. Or not left in the first place. Of course, you wouldn’t have had to run off and join the army if you hadn’t slept with my fiancé two days before the wedding. Considering you were my maid of honor, it was a bit of a shock for all of us.”

“For you, most of all,” Michelle said. “You knew what he was, what he’d done. Why did you marry him?”

“I was pregnant. I didn’t think I had much of a choice. I wanted to avoid being a single mother.” She gave a hollow laugh. “Not that it made a difference.”

She walked to the counter, then turned back. The distance seemed necessary. “Here’s the part I don’t get. You’re not even sorry you slept with him. You never once apologized. You were supposed to be my friend.”

“So were you.”

“What did I do?”

Michelle studied her for a long time. “Aside from having a convenient memory, nothing, I guess.”

She was obviously bitter about something, but Carly couldn't figure what. She'd been the one betrayed by the two people she should have been able to trust. Talk about a convenient memory.

"I'm sorry my mother lied to you about the inn."

Carly opened her mouth, then closed it. "All right," she said cautiously, not sure she wasn't being set up.

"I mean it. It was never hers and she used that to keep you around. Neither of us is surprised by that, but it's still wrong."

"Thank you."

Michelle nodded.

"He left it to you in a trust?" Carly asked.

"Until I was twenty-five. Brenda kept running it after that. I would rather have had him than this," she said, raising her glance to the ceiling. "He didn't give me the option."

Carly thought about pointing out she'd lost her mother at the same time, with equally devastating consequences, but didn't want to spoil their very tenuous détente.

"I'll stay," Carly told her. "I'm happy to sign an employment agreement."

"For two years?"

Which was a whole lot longer than she'd expected. She wasn't sure they could work together for two years. But she was willing to try.

She nodded.

"I'm giving you a raise," Michelle told her. "It won't be much at first, but as soon as we're on better financial footing, it will

be more.”

Like Carly believed that. “Okay.”

“You don’t sound convinced.”

“I’ve heard it before.”

“I’m not Brenda.”

“I’m not a lot of things but that doesn’t stop you from not trusting me.”

Michelle surprised her by smiling. “Point taken. I’ll put it in writing.” The smile faded. “You’re going to bite my head off, but I have to ask. Why don’t you have your dad’s house? Shouldn’t you be living there rather than here?”

“I sold the house. It was Allen’s idea.” Her shiny new husband had convinced her they needed something bigger for their growing family. She’d foolishly agreed, accepting his plan for them to sell it first and then go looking for something else.

“He took off with all the money two days after we closed escrow. Every penny. It was in a joint account, making it community property. The cops patted me on the head and told me I was pretty enough to find another husband, but to be a little smarter next time.”

She raised her chin slightly, waiting for the blow.

“I’m sorry.”

“That’s it? No emotional punch? No low blows?”

“I’m having an off day.” Michelle pushed off the wall and limped toward her. The grayness was back, along with an air of weariness. “We have to talk about the inn. Who’s going to work

where. I'd like to do that tomorrow.”

“Sure. Oh, I spoke with some people a couple of days ago. Psychologists. They have some kind of seminar in the area. A marriage retreat. They want to rent three rooms a week, Tuesday to Thursday, through the summer. I've checked the reservations and we have openings. I wanted to talk to you before I agreed.”

“Tell them no problem. We need the money.”

“I'll call this afternoon.” She hesitated. “Do you need to take a pill or something?”

“I look that bad, huh? I'll be fine. Everything hurts. It's going to hurt for a long time.”

“Do you want to talk about it?”

“Talk about what?”

“Anything.”

“With you?” She laughed. “No.”

“If you change your mind...”

“I won't. Even if you mean it, you couldn't handle it.” The laughter faded. “I'm not a project, Carly. I'm your boss. If you remember that, we'll get along fine.”

She turned and limped out.

Carly watched her go, torn between bitter anger and really annoying empathy. While she resented Michelle and the inherent unfairness of the situation, she could see her point. Michelle was her boss. The fact that they'd once been friends didn't seem to matter.

As for what Michelle had been through—she had a feeling

it was worse than anything Carly could imagine. Maybe understanding wasn't possible, but a little compassion couldn't hurt.

She sighed. Who was she kidding—it would hurt a lot. But that didn't mean she wasn't going to try.

Eight

“Why'd your mother name you Mango?” Michelle asked in a gasp, her breath coming in pants. “Was it a fruit thing? Do you have a sister named Nectarine?”

Jolts of agony ripped through her hip, up her side and down her leg. Mango, a tall, dangerous-looking, dark-haired guy with the heart and soul of the devil, grinned.

“It's a family name,” he said easily, adding tension to the machine. “Five more.”

Her sweat-slicked hands slipped on the grips.

“I can't,” she said, knowing she'd reached the end—that place where she was close to begging for mercy.

“You can. You don't want to. There's a difference.”

“I'm going to kill you.”

Mango patted her shoulder. “If I had a nickel for every time someone threatened me, I'd be a rich man. Five more, Michelle. Don't make me use my physical-therapist voice. You won't like it.”

If she could muster the strength, she would hit him. She knew how to punch in a way that left a bruise. One of the advantages of her military training. Not the official kind, but still helpful. Of

course, Mango was big enough to snap her like a twig in return.

She wondered why a guy like him was working as a physical therapist instead of—what was it Carly had said?—working for some spy agency and killing people with a matchbook cover.

“Quit stalling.”

She swore at him, then moved her leg three more times before her head went fuzzy and the edges began to darken.

Faster than she would have thought possible, he had her out of the machine, bent over, his hand forcing her head down.

“Breathe,” he instructed, his massive fingers gripping her in such a way that she knew she wasn’t going to be allowed to sit upright until he released her. “I don’t care if you vomit, but you’re not passing out.”

“Is that information or are you giving me an order?” she asked between breaths.

“Both.”

She breathed deep and the room cleared. “I’m good.”

He released her. “I’m better.”

She leaned back against the equipment and tried to smile. “I’m sure you are. Right now I don’t give a rat.”

“You will.”

“Maybe.”

“Cheerful. Guys like that in a woman. You’re not doing your exercises at home.”

“Does anyone?”

“The ones who want to get better manage to find the time.”

Who do I have to threaten to call to get you to cooperate?”

“No one.” She stood and turned her back, mostly to avoid any pity he might accidentally show.

“There has to be someone. A friend. An enemy. I’m not picky.”

“Okay, yeah. A friend.” Damaris counted. If she included her nightly dance with the vodka bottle, she could say two friends. Practically a posse.

“Do the stretching, do the exercises. The more you listen to me, the faster you get to stop coming here.”

“There’s motivation.”

She reached for her cane. Normally she ignored it but there was no way to walk out of here without help after a therapy session.

Mango patted her on the arm. “You’re doing good. It’ll get easier.”

“You say that to all the girls.”

He grinned. “You’re a patient, not a girl. You don’t get to hear what I say to them. Come on, I’ll walk you out.”

She trailed after him, stepping around equipment and other vets, mostly guys, working the program. Compared with a lot of the patients, she was lucky—barely injured. She still had her arms and legs, and any lingering trauma was carefully hidden on the inside where only she could see it.

Not wanting to go there, she allowed her gaze to drift to Mango’s butt. It was impressive—high and tight. An athlete’s

butt. She would bet he looked good naked. Not that she could imagine caring about naked guys ever again.

“Next week,” Mango told her. “Don’t be late.”

“Was I late today?”

“No, but I don’t want to get my hopes up.”

His easy grin was infectious. She found herself smiling right back, despite the steady throbbing in her hip.

She hobbled toward the exit, pausing to check out the bulletin board by the door. There were all kinds of postings. The usual assortment of items for sales, requests for car pooling and free kittens. She scanned them all, looking for a room to rent.

With the inn’s financial trouble, she couldn’t stay there and use one of the rooms they could be renting out every night. Plus, she didn’t want to be that close to Carly. An apartment was more than she needed right now. She planned on working long hours for the next few months. A room was plenty. The trick would be getting one that wasn’t too far away. She was willing to drive, but anything farther than forty minutes would be too much.

She’d nearly given up when she saw a small index card listing a room for rent on Blackberry Island. The address was only a couple of miles from the inn. The dirt-cheap price made her wonder if she would be sharing the space with anything that crawled, but she made the call, anyway, punching in the number on her cell phone.

“Tenly.”

“Hi. I’m calling about the room for rent. I saw the card at the

VA hospital.”

The man on the other end paused. “Is the room for you?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a mother-in-law suite. No private entrance, but it’s off the kitchen, at the other end of the house. You familiar with the island?”

“I grew up there. Michelle Sanderson.”

“From the inn.”

She wasn’t surprised he knew. The island was small enough that most people knew one another. There was only one school—a K through 8—where all the kids went. After that, they were bused off island to the nearest high school.

“Jared Tenly.”

She recognized the name but couldn’t put a face to it. If she had to guess, she would say he was a few years older than her.

“When’d you get back?” he asked.

“A few months ago. I got to the island last week.”

“You’re at the VA hospital, so you were injured.” He paused. “Okay, you can see the room when you want.”

“How about now?”

“Now works.”

“Give me half an hour to get there.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

* * *

Michelle slung her backpack over her shoulder, then slid down from her truck, doing her best to take the brunt of her weight with

her good leg. Even so, the jolt made her gasp and gag. Thinking about throwing up reminded her of Mango, which made her want to laugh. The combination had her choking and coughing, as if she'd swallowed wrong.

When she got control of herself, she eyed the walkway to the house. It was only about fifteen or twenty feet. She shook her head and reached for her cane. Dancing wasn't in her future anytime soon, she thought. At this point she would be thrilled to walk around without causing people to point and stare. At least the house was a single story. She couldn't imagine having to deal with stairs at the end of the day. Bad enough she would have to go up and down them at the inn.

Leaning heavily on the cane, she walked around the truck and went up the driveway rather than stepping on the curb. The house looked to have been built in the late forties, with a wide porch and decorative dormers. The paint—a soft blue—had faded with time to something closer to gray. The windows were clean enough not to be scary but not so bright that she had to worry that Jared Tenly was one of those weird men obsessed with washing everything in sight.

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