



LYNNE MARSHALL

Soldier,

Handyman,
Family Man

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Lynne Marshall

Soldier, Handyman, Family Man

«HarperCollins»

Marshall L.

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He's all kinds of man. But is he a family man? Civilian life isn't easy for Mark Delaney. That's until B&B owner Laurel Prescott asks for his help. Suddenly Mark is in deep with kids, responsibility – and a love he never dreamed possible!

He's all kinds of man. But is he a family man?

It's good to be home! But civilian life isn't easy for Mark Delaney. The former surf champ copes by carving California waves and working solo as the handyman for his family's beachfront hotel. Until Laurel Prescott, pretty owner of the new B and B—and widowed mother of three—asks for his help. One small task leads to another and another, and suddenly Mark is knee-deep in kids, responsibility...and a love he never dreamed possible.

LYNNE MARSHALL used to worry she had a serious problem with daydreaming, and then she discovered she was supposed to write those stories down! A late bloomer, she came to fiction writing after her children were nearly grown. Now she battles the empty nest by writing romantic stories about life, love and happy endings. She's a proud mother and grandmother who loves babies, dogs, books, music and traveling.

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Soldier, Handyman, Family Man

Lynne Marshall

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SOLDIER, HANDYMAN, FAMILY MAN

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To our true heroes
who risk their lives for their country,
their cities, their neighborhoods,
their friends and their families,
and who often pay a personal price.
You have my deepest respect.

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The attractive brunette juggling a cardboard box and a plastic trash bag filled with who knew what needed help. Mark Delaney had first noticed her yesterday when her bobbing ponytail had proved to be very distracting. Now, seeing disaster about to happen, he sprang from the ladder, where he painted the underside of The Drumcliffe Hotel roof trim, nearly rolling an ankle. Then he jogged across the street attempting to hide the limp.

“Need help?”

“Oh.” She tossed him a flustered glance, the box precariously slipping from her grasp. “Yes, please.”

He rushed in and grabbed it, surprised how light it was.

“My favorite English tea set’s in there.” She used her head to signal the delicate nature of the contents. “Should’ve thought this through more.” She stopped, took a breath and made an obligatory smile. “I’m Laurel Prescott, by the way, and you are?”

“Mark Delaney.” With his free hand, he gestured across the street. “My family owns The Drumcliffe.”

Her honey-brown brows, a few shades lighter than her hair, lifted. “Ah, so we’re neighbors.”

He deposited the box on the porch as she came up beside him, then noticed the eyes that were light hazel and shaped like large almonds. He liked that. “Guess so. When are you planning to open the B&B?”

Another inhale, this one deeper. “Good question. My goal is next week, but there are so many last-minute things I need to do, and of course hadn’t even thought of.” She shook her head rapidly. “Don’t know what I was thinking doing this final move the week school started.” She hoisted the trash bag over her shoulder. Something clanked inside. “Oh, yes, I do—I’d finally have a few hours to myself!”

He couldn’t help but laugh with her even if it was over impending hysteria. “Anything else you need carried in?”

Her downright attractive eyes sparkled, signaling he may as well have been sent from heaven. Which felt good for a change.

“Are you sure you have the time? I mean it’s obvious you’re in the middle of painting.”

He glanced down at his black T-shirt and jeans, both splattered with the eggshell paint his mother had meticulously picked for the trim. “I was ready for a break anyway.” Then he looked across the road where he’d left the lid off the paint can. “Just give me a second, okay?”

“Of course!” She continued up the steps to the grand Queen Anne–styled Victorian house, which had been sitting empty, according to his mother, for ages. Some nice old couple used to live there when he was a kid, right up to the time he’d left home. He remembered once having the best apple pie he’d ever eaten in that kitchen.

He crossed the street heading back to the hotel. For the last several months, he’d seen crews inside and out bringing the gem back to its original beauty and then some. By the extensive upgrades, he knew his mother had been right about the old home being turned into a bed-and-breakfast. The workers had finished a few weeks back, making the steeply pitched roof with the dominant front gable and oddly shaped porch look picture-book perfect. Once a blah blue with ho-hum white trim, chipped and peeling from years of neglect, now the house was sage green with cream trim and forest green detailing between the cornices, and Mark had to admit it looked classy. Like her. That had been his first impression of his new neighbor last week when she’d stopped by to check on the finishing touches.

The lady was way out of his league, so today, when she was dressed in work clothes—faded straight-legged jeans with slip-in rubber-soled shoes, and a stretched-out polo shirt that’d seen better days—it made him smile. She fit right in with his style. And for the second day in a row she’d worn a ponytail. Not that he was keeping tabs or anything, but man, the ponytail was distracting.

Mark replaced the lid on the paint can.

“Little early for a break isn’t it?” Pdraig Delaney chided his middle grandson, while he had no doubt just finished a Monday morning round at the city course judging by his loud patterned golf slacks and a salmon-colored shirt. His daily routine at eighty-five kept his craggy face tanned and his blue eyes bright, not to mention the notorious toothy grin pasted in place. Which he was currently flashing since noticing where Mark had come from and the lady across the street waiting for him.

Mark smiled at his grandda with the Guinness-soaked voice and tendency toward magical thinking. They had an understanding since both had known how it felt to be young, far away from home, frightened and lonely—though one in peacetime and the other, well, in that hot mess known as the Middle East. Yet that was their unspoken bond, and nothing would break it.

Everyone knew Pdraig Delaney’s history. As a young Irish immigrant in the 1950s, he’d been brought over to work the new and lush golf courses along the central California coast. Cheap labor for sure, but he’d also had the foresight to scrimp and save money and buy the small patch of land in Sandpiper Beach. As his jobs and responsibility advanced, he saved more and worked like the devil to build the humble hotel back in the late sixties and early seventies. If it weren’t for that hardworking

dreamer's spirit, who knew what the Delaney clan would be up to now? So he'd cut him some slack over playing golf every morning. The man had earned it.

As Mark always did, he also tolerated the supernosy man's inclinations. "I'll get 'er done. All of it. By the end of the day. Have a good game?"

"Every game's a good game, Marky my boy, 'cuz I'm alive."

Mark had heard a similar statement from his grandfather at some point every single day since he'd returned from Afghanistan last year. He understood it was a less-than-subtle message, but most of the time he couldn't relate to it. Though today, glancing across the street to the lady with the ponytail, his personal outlook struck him as somewhat optimistic. "That it is, Grandda. That it is." He stood, ready to set off again for the B&B and the woman who needed some serious help.

"Fraternalizing with the competition are ye?" Ah, he wasn't going to let this slip by.

Mark laughed, knowing Grandda was making a joke. His mother was the one and only person in the family fretting about the B&B opening. Padraig Delaney understood different types stayed at a place like that than their modestly priced hotel. The B&B wasn't about competition, it was about revitalizing the town, which would be good for everyone. "Just helping out a neighbor."

"A mighty attractive neighbor I might add." The old man winked.

Mark returned a let's-not-go-there stare, though Grandda already had.

"Have you thought more about taking over the hotel?" So he'd gotten Mark's hint and changed the subject.

"You know I'm not ready to do that." He placed the paint can next to the hotel wall, then folded the ladder and put that next to it. "Besides, Mom and Dad really don't want to retire yet." At least he hoped so.

"Could fool me, the way they talk about it mornin' till night. Besides, you're the only one who loves this hotel the same way I do."

Mark couldn't deny that he was the logical person to pick up where his parents left off, if they retired like they kept threatening to. With Daniel being a doctor with his own practice and Conor a deputy sheriff for the county with plans for advancement, neither brother showed the slightest interest in running the place. But since being honorably discharged from the army last year, he'd wanted nothing to do with responsibility. For now, being a handyman every morning and surfing every afternoon was about all he thought he could handle. Still he did have a vision for The Drumcliffe, which he'd talked to his parents about under the condition that they would give him time, and postpone any immediate plans to retire. If Grandda caught on, he might insist Mark take on more responsibility right away. But he flat out wasn't ready. Yet.

Mark kept his head down, rather than pursue the pointed conversation about the future of the family hotel. Grandda cleared his throat in resignation, but Mark knew there would be future dialogue on the subject. The man would probably hound him until he gave in. It might even be for his own good.

"Well, I'm off, then." Padraig set out heading up Main Street for his daily visit with the other local business owners, using an ancient wood putter as a cane. "Remember the selkie, lad," he said, not bothering to look back for Mark's reaction, knowing it would be annoyed.

Would the old man ever let go of the notion Mark and his brothers had saved a selkie the day they'd gone deep-sea fishing together? First off, it wasn't a selkie, it was a seal that was being hunted by a pod of orca. Foolish or not, the brothers had used the fishing boat to interfere with the obvious training session for a young orca on how to catch a snack. Turns out they'd distracted the pod just long enough for the seal to escape. Their biggest mistake, after risking getting their boat flipped by ticked-off orcas, was repeating the story during the Sunday night family dinner in the pub. You'd have thought they'd saved the king of the little people judging by their grandfather's reaction. The seal was a selkie, he'd said. The selkie now owes each of you a favor. As if he knew the selkie rulebook backward and forward.

Ever since, Pdraig Delaney, a wise and intelligent man on many other levels, but obviously not this one, insisted each brother would find true love.

Right. And there's always a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Anyone ever find it?

His oldest brother, Daniel, hadn't helped Grandda's notion a bit when he'd hired Keela and, after a few months, started dating her. Now they were newly married with a baby on the way, and calling that proof, Grandda had doubled down on his woo-woo predictions. Especially after he'd had a Guinness or two. He'd gaze over his glass and give Mark, the middle brother, and Conor, the baby, meaningful glances meant to convey they'd be next. What a load of malarkey.

"Remember the selkie, my ass," Mark mumbled, watching the old man stride up the street without a care. What had made him bring that up again, anyway?

Because their new neighbor was a knockout, that's why. Mark smiled to himself. So Grandda had noticed, too.

And with that undeniable thought, he grinned and cleaned his hands with the rag hanging on the ladder and headed back across the way, even though she wasn't likely to give him the time of day after he'd finished helping her. He was still just a fix-it guy.

* * *

Laurel walked back to her car and secretly watched Mark reseal a paint can when an old gentleman approached him.

Here she was, thirty-five, a widow second-guessing her every move. Being the mother of a teenage boy dealing with grief and anger on top of the usual teen angst, and twin four-year-olds just beginning their journey with school, only added to the doubt. Buying the old house with one of Alan's generous insurance policies had been a risk, for sure, but it had also been her way of beginning again. Lord knew she needed a fresh start. They all did. The last five years had been hijacked by Alan's cancer, then remissions, praying the worst had been over, followed by the nightmare two years later of those demon cells' return. If anyone deserved a do-over it was the Prescott family. Though Alan never got the luxury of a second chance.

She swallowed a hard and familiar lump. Life had been difficult without him the past two years, and may have kicked the wind out of her, but now she wanted to move on. What choice did she have, really?

She retrieved a few small items from the trunk of the car and subtly watched on the periphery, the conversation going on across the street at the hotel between the old golfer and Mark, her disturbingly attractive neighbor. The fact she'd noticed him was progress, wasn't it? He was good-looking. There, she'd admitted it. But so what?

Before the move, she'd been walking around in a trance, dealing with the lowest rung on the Maslow hierarchy of needs—excluding sex, of course. That rarely entered her mind, except on those nights when she missed Alan's touch so badly she cried. All she wanted to do was build a new life for her family, to keep them safe and fed, healthy, while wondering if this B&B had been the best idea she'd ever had or the craziest.

Regardless, she owned the Queen Anne-styled house in Sandpiper Beach and planned to become a small businesswoman. A full-time job outside the home would provide a paycheck, but it would also keep her away from the ones she wanted to look after. This solution, buying and running a B&B, was the next best way she knew how to provide for her kids.

She glanced across the street. Why was that man so distracting? She had a world of other things to think about, didn't need a single distraction, yet there he was, tall, dark hair, intense blue eyes, totally Irish American. Younger than her.

She walked back to the house, trying not to look over her shoulder. What could be the harm in allowing a tiny, secret attraction for someone who lived across the street? Could she go so far as labeling it a crush, or merely an interest? Whichever, she'd felt something the very first time she'd

spotted him. Why now? Could it be a signal that, after two years of living in limbo, she was finally ready to move on with life?

Maybe.

A half hour later, after passing each other with arms loaded on trips back and forth to the house, with nothing more than glances and respectful smiles, Mark carried the last of Laurel's boxes up the porch steps.

The grand entrance and main sitting room were detailed and updated with fresh paint, crown molding, a traditional fireplace, ornate mantel and rich wood balustrades lining the otherwise modest staircase. But the impressive dining room with its long and grand oak table, antique print wallpaper and classic crystal chandelier was clearly the focal point. Visitors were going to love this old house.

"Looks great," was all he said.

"Thank you," she said with an earnest gaze. "I'm petrified. After all the money I've sunk into it, what if it's a big bomb?"

"Have you done this before?" He also wondered if she was married, which bothered him. Why should he care?

"Never." Something close to panic flashed in her eyes, but she recovered quickly. "Can I get you some lemonade? It's the least I can do for all your help." Maybe she's divorced.

He wasn't the type to stick around and chat. In fact, he'd kept mostly to himself in the year since he'd been back from Afghanistan, skipping socializing outside of his family, but something nudged him to accept her offer. "Sounds good. Thanks."

He followed her into the modest-sized kitchen for a house this big, and took in the view from the updated double-paned back window. The beach and ocean weren't far off, and he assumed most of the guest rooms would have views of the same. "I wouldn't worry too much about bombing out. Unless you overprice the rooms."

"I've done my homework on pricing," she said, opening the double-wide stainless steel refrigerator and grabbing a pitcher of lemonade. He also noticed she'd gone the modern route with the appliances and the long marble-covered island. Seemed like an efficiency decision, if she planned the usual serving of breakfast for her guests. "I'm right in the middle of the current going rate. Except for the honeymoon suite, of course." She gave a flirty wistful glance. "It's beautiful and well worth the price."

He didn't get what the deal was with rooms that were supposed to enhance romance—seemed to him you either had it or you didn't—but figured Laurel was depending on other people who did. Whereas The Drumcliffe appealed more to families and seniors on budgets. So he was content to leave the "lover's weekend packages" for her B&B. More power to her. Though Mom adamantly voiced the need for their hotel to have broader appeal, and she'd been on a quest to start wedding packages maximizing the gorgeous view and their large lawn area right along the ocean. An idea popped into his head: Why not turn the biggest room with the best view at the hotel into a honeymoon suite? Maybe he could get some ideas for decorating from Laurel. Of course, that would only mean more on his ever-growing to-do list. Which reminded him he was supposed to start building an arbor today, and a gazebo after that.

She handed him a dainty hand-painted glass of lemonade. So instead of gulping like he'd intended from thirst, he took only a sip of the fresh lemon and hint-of-mint liquid. "This tastes great."

"Thanks. I made it myself using the Meyer lemons from the side yard."

"Really good." The yard, he'd noticed, needed some serious trimming and weeding. But she'd probably already made plans with a gardener for that, so he didn't offer his services. Why would he? Besides, he had enough going on with the hotel.

He sensed she had all kinds of extra-special tricks up her sleeve where the B&B was concerned, like this homemade lemonade, and figured her guests would return because of those extra-special

touches. That was if they found the house in the first place. “You have plans for a grand opening or something?”

She took a drink, her lashes fluttering. “I plan to run some ads and have an open house.”

“That’s a good idea.”

She looked gratefully at him. “I grew up in Pismo Beach, so I know we have a long season. Does it ever get really dead around here?”

“I’ve only been back the past year, so I’m not a great resource. I’ll check with my parents, if you’d like.”

“Oh, sorry, I just assumed you—”

“—I was in the service for ten years. My parents run the hotel. I’m still getting used to being back.” Would that matter to her, that he wasn’t the guy in charge? Again, he chided, why should he care?

He’d left home at twenty-one an accomplished surfer, surf bum as Grandda often teased. Then he’d come back after a few tours in the Middle East, mostly Afghanistan, but also in Iraq, someone he didn’t recognize anymore. He’d dealt with his mood swings in his own way, spending the last year withdrawn, just trying to get his bearings in the real world again, while working on the hotel. And surfing. It had all been part of his healing journey, as the VA therapist had suggested. That was the reason he and his brothers had been fishing the day of the “selkie” incident. A bonding trip, they’d called it. But in truth, Daniel and Conor were worried about him and had wanted to help him over the slump he’d slipped into. Some trip that’d turned out to be. He still wasn’t 100 percent past PTSD. Still had occasional nightmares, hated being in big crowds, but he was on the road back to being a combination of the guy he used to be and the man he’d become. Less outgoing, more inclined to think things through before acting. Less lighthearted, grimmer. Someone he’d have to get used to. Maybe all thirty-one-year-olds went through the same thing?

Laurel studied him, those caramel eyes subtly moving around his face, her mind probably wondering what his story was. Well, she wasn’t the only one with questions. “What brought you here?”

“Oh.” Obviously unprepared for him to turn the tables. “I missed the beach. After college I got married and moved inland to Paso Robles to raise my family. Then I lost my husband a couple years ago.”

“I’m sorry.” And he meant it, even though he could only imagine how horrible it would be to lose someone you loved.

She quietly inhaled, then took another sip of lemonade. “Yeah. It’s been rough.”

That was something he could relate to, the rough part. He wasn’t good at this sort of thing, sympathy or empathy or whatever it was called, but he honestly felt bad for her. She had a lot going on, and a big project like opening a B&B all alone was probably as stressful as it got for a person. There went that nudging sensation again. “If you need any help, I’m around.” What happened to being too busy?

“Thank you.” She looked sincere and grateful. “I’ll definitely take you up on that offer.”

Good. A decisive and wise woman. But, out of character, he’d just opened a door he wasn’t sure that (a) he had time for or (b) he wanted to go through. Yet. She might be single, but she had a family, for crying out loud.

Her appreciative eyes suddenly widened. She frantically looked at her wrist. “Oh, no! It’s time to pick up the girls.” She grabbed her purse and rushed for the door. “It’s their first day at school. Kindergarten! I can’t be late.”

He followed, then noticed she had to work extra hard to get the front door locked. “I’ll come back later and have a look at that lock, if you want.”

She flashed another earnest gaze, this one accompanied with a pretty smile, which caught him off guard. “That’d be great!”

Then off she ran for her white minivan, where identical car seats were installed in the back—such a total mom.

Man, he must be completely out of his antisocial mind, because somehow, he found the whole entrepreneur—and multitasking-mother bit—sexy as hell. And that was way off course for his current game plan—keeping a low profile and figuring out where he fit in life...or even if he wanted to.

* * *

Laurel kept to the speed limit, but barely, trying desperately to get the image of Mark Delaney out of her head. Did he have any idea how gorgeous he was? Dark brown hair combed straight back from his forehead and just long enough to curl under his ears, clear blue eyes, a two-day growth of beard with the hint of red in the sideburn whiskers. His black T-shirt stretched across a broad chest and shoulders, with a peekaboo tear along his sleek abs, and arms that qualified for a construction worker calendar. His faded black jeans had matching tears at the knees from hard work, not superficial fashion, and fit his slim hips and long legs like he'd been born in them. Damn he was hot! Whether he realized it or not was the question. He certainly didn't act "all that." In fact, there was something dark and tender about him that put her at ease. And that ease put her on edge.

Laurel glanced at her face in the rearview mirror, horror soon overtaking her. She'd been looking like that? Her hair in a messy ponytail, not a stitch of makeup. Not even lip gloss. The man probably thought of her as a poor, struggling aunt.

She slammed on the brakes, nearly missing a red light. Woman, get a hold of yourself! You're thirty-five, obviously older than him, and not to mention the mother of three. It doesn't matter how you look, he's not interested. Still, there was much to appreciate about Mark Delaney, and she wasn't blind—or dead—in that department. Yet. Sometimes she thought she might be, so he was a pleasant surprise, after all she'd been through. She tugged the elastic out of her hair and let it fall to her shoulders.

Pulling into the parking lot, she prayed she hadn't cut it too close and that her kids wouldn't be the last ones there. They'd dealt with enough abandonment issues losing their father two years ago, and having to live as if the hospital was their second home for a year before that. Now was their time to get back to living a regular life, and nothing would get in Laurel's way of giving that to her kids. A quick thought of her fourteen-year-old son, Peter, made her chest pinch, but now wasn't the time to go there. She had to pick up her girls.

She parked and jogged into the kindergarten classroom. Gracie and Claire were happily playing puzzles with the little girl they'd met on Welcome to Kindergarten night, who wore a cast. Anna was it?

"Can Anna come home with us? Her mom's late, too." Claire, the oldest by twelve minutes, and clearly the bossiest, spoke first.

"I don't think the school lets kids go home with just anyone." Laurel used her diplomatic-mother voice.

"Stranger danger!" Gracie piped up.

"We're not strangers," Claire corrected, as she always did with Gracie. "Remember, we played together before." She used her middle finger to slide her pink glasses up her tiny nose.

"I pre-member. Do you, Annie?"

"It's Anna." Claire the clarifier simply couldn't help herself. "And re-member."

During Alan's long remission from the first bout of leukemia, and nearly a decade since Peter had been born, no one had been more shocked to discover she was pregnant with twins than Laurel. But life had always been crazy that way.

When Alan relapsed with a vengeance when the girls were a year old, everyone had been so distracted that Gracie's chronic ear problems had gotten way out of hand before Laurel had taken her to the pediatrician. She'd been walking around with fluid in her inner ears, which had affected her hearing. It was like listening to people speak underwater and had slowed her speech, while Claire seemed to have been born chatting, and now speaking for and chronically correcting her twin. Since

having tubes inserted, Gracie's hearing had improved, but she still often got words wrong. Claire never let her forget it, either.

"Oh, there you are, Anna." A breathless voice with a distinct accent spoke from behind. "Sorry I'm late, sweetness."

"That's okay, Mom, these are my friends."

The woman introduced herself to Laurel as Keela. "Thank you for staying with Anna. I don't want to be accused of running on Irish time, but we had a walk-in at the clinic and it threw things sideways."

Delighted by Keela's Irish accent, Laurel grinned. In the week she'd been in town, she'd already heard about the Delaney Physical Medicine Clinic from one of the women at the local farmers' market, who'd told her, after chatting and discovering Laurel's B&B was right across Main Street from The Drumcliffe, about Daniel's recent marriage to an "Irish girl." Small town. News traveled fast.

"I just got here myself. Honestly, I don't think the girls missed us a bit."

"Probably right."

"We should set up a playdate some afternoon," Laurel suggested, keeping in mind Keela worked full-time.

"T'would be grand. Maybe a Saturday would be best."

Ms. Juanita, the young teacher not much taller than her students, wandered over. "Are we all ready now?" she asked diplomatically, dropping the major hint it was past time to leave. So they did. But not before exchanging phone numbers.

* * *

As promised, later that afternoon after he'd finished painting the trim and had gotten a good start on the arbor, Mark headed back over to Laurel's B&B with his toolbox in hand. He planned to fix her lock. One of the benefits of being raised around a hotel was learning to be a jack-of-all-trades. Otherwise we'd go bankrupt, as his father used to say when he and his brothers griped about spending their Saturday afternoons working around the hotel. It'd always been extra torture when the surf was up and he'd been itching to hit those waves.

Laurel was in the front yard, and two young girls in matching striped leggings and navy blue tops sat on the porch steps, though one wore glasses. Looking stressed, Laurel faced off with a scrawny kid by the yard gate who was somewhere in the early teen stage and who hadn't yet grown into his nose. He wore cargo shorts and an oversize, ancient-looking T-shirt with a picture of Bart Simpson on the front. Shaggy dark brown waves in an obvious growing-out stage consumed his ears and partially covered his eyes. He leaned forward, confronting her, his mouth tight and chin jutting out.

Mark thought about turning around, leaving them to their personal business, but their heated interchange, and the fact her hair was down and blowing with the breeze, prodded him to keep going. Maybe she could use some backup.

"Peter, I've got too much on my plate right now."

"I'm sick of having to drag those pests around." His voice warbled between boy and man, cracking over those pests.

"We're not pests!" The little one with glasses sounded indignant.

"Not pests!" the thinner of the two incorrectly echoed, garnering a confused glance from her twin.

"I need you to watch the girls while I do some errands. Is that too much to ask?"

"I'm sick of being their babysitter."

The fair-haired girls looked like twins. Identical twins, but with the help of one wearing glasses and one being slightly smaller, to tell them apart. The glasses girl took it upon herself to move in on the ongoing argument. "Sing with us, Peter. Please?" A future peace activist, no doubt.

"Pleee-sio?" Little Miss Echo being creative?

Without waiting, they started singing “Where Is Thumbkin” using their fingers and acting out the verses, oblivious, while Laurel and Peter continued to square off.

“You know it’ll take me twice as long if I bring them.”

“Don’t care.”

What should he do now? Just walk right up and pretend he didn’t have a clue they were fighting? He slowed down. That seemed lame.

“Okay, I’m not asking, I’m telling you to stay here.”

“I need time by myself!” Peter pounded his fist on his chest while his voice cracked again. “You’re the one who told me to get out and explore the neighborhood! Meet kids my age.”

Ten feet away from the picket fence and gate, Mark stopped. If anyone could understand the need to be by himself, Mark could. Hell, he’d been the king of withdrawal when he’d first come home. The girls continued singing and gesturing—“Where is pointer, where is pointer...?”

“I need your help.” Laurel wouldn’t back down.

“I’m leaving!”

Mark figured it must be damn hard to lose a father when a boy needed him most, but it still bothered him the kid was taking his anger out on his mother. He decided to step in, offer Laurel some support. “Is this a bad time?”

“Oh, Mark.” Laurel looked flustered and frustrated, her cheeks flushed. Those soft hazel-brown eyes from earlier now dark and tense. Edging toward the street side of the gate, Peter stepped backward, gearing up for his escape.

“How are you today, sir?” the twins sang louder.

Mark stepped closer, giving Peter a forced but friendly smile, hoping to keep him from taking off. “I’m Mark. Nice to meet you.”

In response, he received a death glare. It was clear the kid was furious, not just about Mark butting in, or his mother demanding he pull his share of responsibility, but about life in general. About how sucky it must be when a dad dies.

Unaware, the girls kept singing their nursery rhyme. “Run away. Run away.” Their way of coping with stress?

Still glowering, Peter spoke verse three. “Where is tall man?” He added the middle-finger gesture for the sake of his mother and Mark, made sure they both saw it clearly, then took off running, flip-flops flapping, down the street toward the beach.

“Peter!” Laurel yelled, anger flashing in those eyes.

He thought about running after Peter and straightening him out, but stopped the urge. It wasn’t his place.

It took guts, or total desperation, to flip off a complete stranger in front of his mother, he’d give Peter that. He didn’t envy Laurel’s having to deal with that on top of opening the B&B. Guests didn’t go to places like this to hear family arguments. Yet Laurel was a widow with three kids to take care of, and the proprietor of an about-to-open business. After he fixed her lock, he’d steer clear.

Laurel called after Peter again. When Peter didn’t stop or turn around, she dug fingers into her hair, obviously torn about whether to run after him or let him go. The girls had stopped singing, now zeroing in on their mother and gathering close to her. She put a hand on both of them, giving a motherly rub and pat, which immediately eased the tension in their sparrow-sized shoulders. Then she steered them back toward the porch.

Looking downcast, but not defeated, Laurel glanced back at Mark. “Welcome to my world.”

[Chapter Two](#)

Ten minutes later, Mark kept to himself as he tested the key that Laurel had given him in the stubborn front door lock. The scene with Peter had been unpleasant to say the least, and he’d had to bite his tongue to keep from butting in and telling the kid what he thought. Really thought—listen, punk, you don’t talk to your mother like that. Ever! But it wasn’t his place, and keeping it real, he’d

heard a similar warning—without the punk part—from his father a long time ago. Disrespecting parents must be some teen rite of passage. From the way Laurel had mostly kept her cool, she'd probably been down that road with Peter before.

While he fiddled with the lock, Laurel went about distracting the little ones with a snack and a promise to watch one afternoon kid's show. He was pretty sure “yay” meant they'd accepted her deal.

A minute later, he'd squirted powdered graphite into the keyhole, moved the key in and out a few times, then retested the sticky mechanism. The lock opened and closed just fine. For good measure, he repeated the process on the bolt lock, since her guests would most likely be using their keys after hours, and Laurel might appreciate their not waking her up to get in.

Before The Drumcliffe had switched to card keys, he and his brothers had become experts with fixing sticky locks. They'd learned the hard way that vegetable oil and WD-40 helped for the short term, but eventually made the problem worse. Then they'd discovered graphite, the non-gummy way to fix a lock.

On his knees with the door open, Mark surreptitiously watched Laurel wander his way, carrying a small plate of cookies. She sat on the nearest rocker in the row along the porch, stretching out her sleek legs, then offering him the plate.

“Do you barter?” she toyed, waiting for him to catch on.

“Work for chocolate chip cookies? You bet.” He took one and popped it whole into his mouth. Holy melting deliciousness, it was good. “Pretty sure I got the better deal, too.” He should've waited until he'd finished chewing and swallowing. He probably still had chocolate teeth.

She laughed gently. At least he'd done that for her. Made her smile. And a nice one it was, too, wide, straight and lighting up her eyes.

“You know he's grieving, right?” she said, growing serious, her eyes seeking his, needing him to understand why her kid had shot off his mouth earlier.

“I figured something was going on. I get the impression a lady like you wouldn't put up with that behavior otherwise.”

She put her head against the back of the rocker, nibbling on a cookie. “He blames me for everything. Sometimes I think he even blames me for his father getting cancer.”

“From what I recall, being a teenager is hard enough. Losing a parent on top of it, well, that's got to bite. Hard.”

“He was only twelve when Alan died, but for so many years before that, Alan's being ill was the focal point of our family. He missed out on a lot of things other kids his age took for granted. And the insecurity of it all, that I know firsthand. Must have been devastating for him, because it nearly killed me.”

Moved by her opening up so easily, Mark sat on his heels, wanting to give back, to make this an interchange somehow, but he was out of practice. “He's, what, fourteen now?”

She gave a thoughtful nod without looking at him, taking another small bite of cookie. “Who invented adolescent angst, anyway?”

Mark made one quick laugh. “He probably doesn't know how to move on. Maybe he's in a rut and needs a nudge or something.” This conversation had edged into familiar personal territory. He could say the same thing about himself—not sure how to move on, feeling in a rut—but for the sake of Laurel he focused on her problem and her son.

“We've tried therapy. He went to a teen grief group for a while. Then he stopped. I couldn't bring myself to force him to go.” She glanced at Mark for understanding. He assented. “I think he's afraid of his feelings. He's hurt so much for so long, he can't imagine going over everything again, examining the pain of losing his dad.” She sighed. “I don't know.” Now she looked at him, really looked at him, her eyes searching his, waking up some dark and forgotten place. Did she sense his pain? “And you probably never thought you'd get sucked into my family problems when you offered to help fix my locks today, did you?”

He pushed out a smile, just for her, because he figured she could use a friendly face right about now. Sticking to the superficial, rather than let himself feel something, he concentrated on how her hair looked resting on her shoulders. “It’s okay. Every family has issues.”

She lifted her brows, in a prove-it kind of way, but soon exchanged that for a quizzical expression. “I have no idea why I’m telling you my life story.” She leveled him with a stare. “Just strike that part, okay?”

“No worries. You feel like talking, go right ahead.” A long moment followed where they quietly assessed each other, and she must have decided she’d spilled her guts enough for the day. She took another bite of her cookie, which, for some crazy reason, looked sexier than it should. He couldn’t take the intimacy of watching her mouth, or sharing concerns and feelings, especially if she expected him to open up about himself or his family in return. So he deliberately changed the topic. “And if you give me another cookie, I’ll throw in checking all the guest room locks.”

As though relieved, she smiled, pushing the plate toward him. “It’s a deal.”

As he went through the rest of the house, he noticed all six of the guest rooms were on the second floor. Laurel and the kids must have taken up residence on the first floor, in the back part of the house.

Out of the blue he wondered what she’d look like with that top layer of stress erased from her pretty face. And then he stopped himself from going a single thought further. What was the point? She had her hands full, and the last thing he needed was to pursue a woman with kids.

He grabbed his small workbag, went downstairs and found Laurel in the kitchen slicing apples and carrots. He stopped for a second to enjoy the view.

“I’m all done here.” He set the small bottle of graphite on the long central island. “If you have any more problems with locks, just use this.”

She stopped slicing. “Thanks so much.”

In rushed the twins. “We’re hungry,” Claire, the spokesperson, said.

“Yeah, my tummy’s qweezin’,” said Gracie.

She tossed them both a piece of carrot and apple. Surprisingly, they accepted her offer and scuttled off for the backyard like contented bunnies. Intuition must be part of the job description for a mom. Another thing about her that impressed him.

“You may be wondering about Gracie’s speech.”

“She does have an interesting way of saying things.”

Laurel sighed as she leaned forward, elbows and forearms resting on the kitchen island countertop. The pose shouldn’t be appealing, but it was. “During Alan’s illness, I was so caught up in his needs, I didn’t realize that Gracie’s unusual speech was a sign she had fluid in her ears. I thought it was baby talk. It wasn’t until after Alan died I snapped out of my trance and took them both to the pediatrician. Gracie needed tubes in her ears, and Claire flunked her three-year-old vision test. I didn’t have a clue about either of them.”

She looked defeated, and it bothered him. “You had a lot on your plate. The main thing, nothing was life-threatening and you fixed the problem.” Listen to me, Mr. Logical. He stepped closer to her end of the island. “Maybe quit being so hard on yourself?”

She blinked and sighed. “I might have to hire you as a life coach.”

“Ha! First you’d have to find me one.”

“And what’s your story?” Her inquisitive stare nearly pushed him off balance.

“Ten years in the army. Tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. Need I say more?”

She looked horrified at first. That was the only way Mark could explain her expression, then it changed.

They gazed at each other, her manner seeming sympathetic, understanding. Mark was almost positive she thought the same thing—they were two people who’d come through tough times humbled and haggard. He’d worked out a drill to deal with his, but had she?

Mark's usual routine was to work all morning and through the early afternoon, then grab his board and head down to the beach to catch a few waves. What used to be his passion had now become his solace, better than a doctor's prescription or a cold beer. Funny how time changed things like that—passion to solace. He figured the PTSD had a lot to do with needing to be alone, at sea, man against nature, at least once a day. Plus, other than the noisy seagulls, it was amazingly quiet out there, and was the perfect place to shut down all the clatter in his life. Whatever it was, surfing was still a lifeline for him and he needed it. Especially today.

She wiped the counter with a sponge, and he was ready to leave, but something made him stop. It was like his body had quit listening to his brain. Don't get involved. "Just call if you need anything, okay?" Now his mouth had gone rogue. Seeing a notepad on the adjacent counter, he scribbled out his cell phone number, then left.

"You might be sorry!" she teasingly called after him.

He already was. Why walk in on someone else's life as a fix-it guy, when he'd yet to fix his own mess? He really didn't need the frustration.

But when he hit the street, he grinned. Like an idiot. Because he'd just given a woman his phone number for the first time since getting discharged from the service.

* * *

A half hour later, dressed in red board shorts and an old stretched-out, holey T-shirt, with surfboard under his arm, Mark strode toward the beach where the sun cast a golden orange tint on the ocean. Being the middle Delaney brother, he'd opted out of the role of peacekeeper by default early on. Instead, he'd elected to become an attention-getting surfer. It'd paid off in spades, too. Popularity. Girlfriends. Respect.

He'd intended to sign up for the army right after high school, but his father and mother had convinced him to try the local community college first. He did, without an inkling of what he wanted to major in, for two years, but didn't get a degree because the classes he took didn't add up to one major's requirements. Then that faraway Middle East war got personal. A good friend since grammar school had been killed in Iraq. It might not have been logical thinking, but after that he felt called to serve, so, without his parents' blessings, he'd enlisted. After voting in a presidential election for the first time, signing up for the army had been his next major life decision. And he was still re-adjusting to civilian life.

A predictable afternoon breeze had kicked up and the water was choppy, but he smiled at the swelling of sets forming in the distance. A few of the usual guys in wet suits were out there, most of them half his age. They'd probably been there all day. One with long sun-bleached hair caught the next wave, rode the crest, then wiped out.

Halfway down the beach, he passed a group of loud teenagers talking trash to someone. He turned his head to check things out. Five guys ranging from tall and buff to short and heavy, wearing board shorts and brand-name skateboarder T-shirts, were getting their jollies by bullying someone much smaller. He looked closer, saw the shaggy brown hair, the nose he was still growing into and that oversize T-shirt with Bart Simpson on the front. It was Peter with a frown cast in iron on his face, staring at his flip-flops. Obviously hating every second, he let the jerks taunt and tease him, but what choice did he have, one against five?

Mark dropped his board and headed their way. "Hey, Peter, I was lookin' for you, man! It's time for your surfing lesson."

Peter looked up, surprised. So did the other kids.

He walked right up to the group as if everything was A-OK, but making eye contact with the leader let him know he understood what was going on and it was ending right now.

One perk—or pain, depending on what kind of mood he was in—of being Sandpiper's very own surfing champion was the whole town knew him. His first-place regional championship trophy and a larger-than-life picture of him at eighteen with awful peroxidized hair, at the height of his competition

days, were on display at the local high school. He'd been the captain of the Sandpiper High surf team—hell, he'd been the guy to organize the team—and had led them to regional victories for two years. Then he'd moved on to statewide and a few national competitions where more was at risk, but with respectable success. From the reaction of these losers and tough-guy wannabes, even they knew who he was. Or used to be.

“We wus just horsin' around with the new kid.”

“Didn't know he knew you.” The tallest nudged Peter toward Mark.

“Yeah, I'm mentoring Peter. He's a natural. See you boys around,” he said, making sure the kids understood he'd be watching them, and escorted Peter toward his board. So much for not getting involved.

“Want to tell me what was going on?” he asked when they'd retrieved the board and, out of earshot, were heading toward the ocean.

“I was just sitting on the beach, reading a book on my phone and they came out of nowhere. Started giving me a hard time. Bully a-holes.”

“Punks are always gonna be punks.”

“Nah. They think I'm a nerd because I'm different. I'm skinny and I've got a big nose.” His anger radiated toward Mark, making the ocean air seem thicker. They walked on.

Mark also understood, since talking to Laurel, that Peter was still grieving and working through the stress of losing his father, which also made him an easy mark. For some reason, jerks had special radar for vulnerable kids. “Hey, first off, they should talk, if that's the reason. Did you look at them? Listen, it could be something as dumb as the fact you're the new kid and they know you don't have any friends yet to stick up for you, which will change soon enough.”

“And I keep getting stuck watching my sisters. It's not exactly cool to hang out with four-year-olds.”

So that was why he'd put up such a fight earlier with Laurel. Mark figured it was worth mentioning to her. In the meantime, he'd practice treating the boy like a young friend.

“Yeah, but I bet girls love that, in an 'aw' kind of way.”

Peter screwed up his face, like Mark had said the dumbest thing in the world.

“What's with the Bart shirt, man? He back in style?”

“It was my dad's.” Peter looked at his chest as if reconsidering the meaning.

What was he supposed to say to that? The kid still missed his father. They continued on, quiet for another few moments, watching the waves as they strolled.

“Well, now that I've announced you're my student, I guess we better get started. Take Bart off. You got trunks under those cargos?”

Peter nodded.

“Wearin' sunscreen?”

He nodded again, but Mark suspected it was a fib, so he grabbed the small bottle from his back pocket. They both put it on.

“Let's hit the waves.”

Whether it was because Peter was shaken up from what had just transpired and was grateful, or the kid had always secretly wanted to learn to surf, Mark hadn't a clue, but highly out of character, from what Mark had witnessed of Peter so far, he did what he was told. And gladly!

After the initial “how to” lesson, and a discussion of strength and balance exercises Peter needed to do to get into shape for surfing, Mark used the time waiting for waves, both sitting on the board, to get to know a little about Peter. “Where'd you go to school last year?”

“Paso Robles Middle School.”

“What's your favorite subject?”

“Art, I guess.”

“Are you good at it?”

“Kind of.”

“Have a girlfriend?”

He got a killer “as if” glare for that.

“Who’s your best friend?”

Peter stared down at the board, silent.

“No friend?”

“My dad was sick all the time, okay?”

Mark didn’t react to the kid spitting the words at him. He could only imagine how hard it would be to maintain a friendship when his world was wrapped tight with worry and a fatally sick father. Or maybe parents were hesitant to let their sons sleep over at Peter’s house, like cancer was contagious or something. Who knew. “Must’ve been hard.”

“I hated it. I mean I loved him, but everything was so crappy all the time.”

Now they were getting somewhere. Peter’s guard was coming down. “I hear ya. Must have been a bitch.”

“They made me go to some stupid group. We were all a bunch of losers.”

“You mean you’d all lost someone you loved?” He needed to reframe it for Peter—something Mark himself had learned when he went into group therapy—because he couldn’t let Peter get away with the negative opinion of himself and other grievers, or anyone in therapy.

The kid’s mouth was tight, in a straight line, and he looked on the verge of crying.

“This anger you’re feeling all the time is real. It’s part of grieving. When we lose someone we love, we grieve for them. Sometimes it makes us angry as hell.”

“How do you know?” He spit out the words, challenging Mark.

“I lost more military buddies than I care to count in Iraq and Afghanistan. I know what I’m talking about.” His grief had been the single hardest part of coming back to Sandpiper Beach, because he no longer had the distraction of fighting a war. He was faced head-on with all the loss and horrifying memories. They’d crashed against him every single day and knocked him down. Made him want to either strike out or withdraw, so he chose to pull back, lie low, until he felt fit enough for society again. When it came to anger, he knew what he was talking about. Yet dealing with Peter, he already felt in over his head.

He saw a flicker of something in Peter’s gaze—maybe understanding, or firsthand experience grappling with fury. He’d also become more attentive.

“It’s hard, man,” Mark said. “Really hard. I get it.”

“I’m never gonna stop being mad. I hate death!”

The statement made him think about Laurel and all she’d had to face alone. They had that in common. Since they’d met that morning, she’d popped into his head a dozen times, which worried him. He remembered how she didn’t smile easily—but when she did, wow—and how cautious she seemed with him, insecure. Then the next thing he knew, she was spilling her life story over chocolate chip cookies.

Though she looked way too young to be a mother of a fourteen-year-old, she was still bound to be a bit older than Mark. Why was he even thinking this stuff? He wasn’t going to get involved.

He liked her hopeful attitude, trusted her instincts about the B&B and decided she was nothing short of an inspiration the way she refused to let loss and grief—being a widow, a single mother of three kids and overloaded with responsibility—drag her down. Not to mention how tough it must be dealing with a hurting and grieving teen like Peter.

Ah, hell, he already was involved. The kid was still staring at him.

“You have a right to your anger, but your mom isn’t the one who deserves it.” Mark glanced up to see a perfect-sized swell for a newcomer. He jumped off the board, leaving Peter on his own. “Okay, catch this one. Paddle. Paddle. Paddle!”

And Peter paddled as if his life depended on it. Mark bodysurfed alongside him, keeping up as best he could as Peter first attempted a time or two to stand, then finally got up on one knee, stood for the blink of an eye, then fell off. When he resurfaced, Mark met him with a smile and praise.

“Hey, that was the best you’ve done yet!”

Surprisingly, considering the topic they’d just been tossing around, Peter smiled, too. “I’m starting to get the hang of it.”

“Then you’ll just have to keep taking lessons until you’ve got it.”

“Can we catch one more?”

“That’s the spirit.”

An hour and a half later, the wind picked up and Peter was visibly chilled—his skin was pink-and-white blotchy to prove it—yet he didn’t complain, just kept trying to stand up on the surfboard. He’d come close a couple of times, but never quite pulled everything together. Still he never gave up. Mark discovered he liked something about Peter—he wasn’t a quitter.

“Lie down and I’ll push you in,” Mark said, treading water beside Peter and the surfboard.

For the second time that day, Peter didn’t argue.

As he swam closer to shore, with the help of a wave pushing them the rest of the way, Mark wanted to ask a favor of Peter while he still had him on his turf. “When we get back, tell your mom you’re sorry. She loves you, and it’s got to hurt when you treat her like that.”

Peter’s lips curled inward as he put on his flip-flops and covered up with his father’s Bart Simpson T-shirt. “Okay,” he mumbled, reluctantly.

At 5:55 p.m., they walked back to where Main Street curved into the cul-de-sac, the B&B on one side, The Drumcliffe hotel on the other. Like Grandda always said, they really did own a little piece of heaven. “Good first lesson. I’ll see you tomorrow at four for the next, okay?”

Peter nodded, seriously tired, but still interested.

“And start those exercises I showed you.”

“Okay. My legs are kind of sore, though.”

Mark grinned, leaving the kid at his front gate. “Get used to it. Later, man.”

Peter smiled. “Later.”

“I’ve been worried sick about you!” Laurel said from the porch.

“I was surfing with Mark.” He rushed by her and toward the house like he hung out with Mark all the time.

“Mark?” He turned, and there was a near-shocked expression on her face. “Thank you.”

“No problem.”

Maybe Peter was saving the apology for dinner.

* * *

Tuesday, when Mark delivered Peter back to the B&B after his second surf lesson, Laurel was waiting.

“Will you join us for dinner?”

Did he want to do that? After spending his morning finishing up painting the hotel trim, then working more on building the arbor, truth was, this was the most appealing offer he’d had all day. “Sure, what time?”

“Forty-five minutes?”

“Sounds good. Thanks.” His spirits lifted by the invitation, Mark was struck that Laurel was the first woman he’d been drawn to since coming home to Sandpiper Beach.

A widow with three kids. Seriously, Delaney?

* * *

“One time I was on a fwing an—an a pider came an—an—an, I queemed!” Gracie said an hour later, as the girls took Mark on a tour of their living quarters. She must have felt obligated to entertain him while Laurel put the finishing touches on their meal. The unusual speech pattern was

sweet, and knowing the history of her ear problems from Laurel yesterday—thinking she'd fallen down on the Mom-job—made him feel protective of both girls. And Laurel. He couldn't forget Peter, either. He wasn't sure what to make of that protective feeling, but he wouldn't deny it. Though it did make him uneasy.

"I fell off a swing once." Claire jumped in with a long and drawn-out story about exactly how her accident happened, the injuries she'd obtained, how her mother had cleaned her up, and on and on and on, while they walked down the hall toward their family room. Since he was the guest, for the sake of the little girls, he did his best to appear fascinated.

During the never-ending story, he also managed to assess the Prescott family living situation. The kitchen and in-dining breakfast area, downstairs bathroom and apparent three bedrooms with a medium-sized study, which they'd turned into their family room, was the section of the grand old home where they lived. About the size of a medium apartment. Unlike the foyer, the front sitting room and the dining room, or the six upstairs bedrooms, it was furnished with modern, wear-and-tear-styled furniture, which made sense with the kids. Laurel Prescott knew how to be practical.

"And this is my mommy's room," Claire said. "She has her own bathroom, but we all have to share that one." She first gestured to the largest of the three bedrooms, probably once meant for the staff when the house was built. Or an in-law suite? He glimpsed a humble room with a comfortable-looking bed with tall bedposts reminding him of her flair for antiques, and immediately felt like he'd invaded her privacy. Would she want him gawking at her room? Then Claire pointed across the hall to the main bathroom, and he was grateful for the distraction. The main bathroom was spacious and still had, what looked like, original tile in small white hexagon shapes. The pedestal sink and bear-claw tub also looked original, though the shower curtain encircling it was covered with colorful safari animals. Yeah, he bet Peter liked that, all right.

"We share, but Petie gwipes," Gracie added.

"That's Petie's room," Claire continued by pointing to a closed door toward the end of the hall.

Since he'd arrived ten minutes ago, he hadn't seen "Petie," but Mark had new understanding for why the kid shut himself off.

The girls saved what they felt was the best for last. Their room. Pink! White! Blindingly so. Frilly little girl stuff throughout. Putting him completely out of his comfort zone.

"Dinner's ready," Laurel called out. Thank God!

"Come on, awah-bubby! Dinner," Gracie said, taking off first.

"She means everybody," Claire quietly clarified, then made a beeline for their family dining room in the kitchen alcove.

Mark made a point to knock twice on Peter's closed door. "Dinner's ready." Just in case he hadn't heard his mother's announcement. Then he followed the girls.

Laurel looked great in tan capris and a pale blue tunic top, which brought out her hazel eyes. Maybe the touch of eye makeup she'd put on helped with that, too. Had she done that for him? He smiled, glad he'd combed his hair and dressed a little nicer than usual, wearing one of his best T-shirts, then waited for her to sit first. She looked a little nervous, so he didn't linger on her eyes, instead casting his gaze down to her sandals and noticing her tangerine-colored polish. Yeah, definitely in over his head. He never should have accepted her invitation.

Peter clumped down the hall, his feet seeming far too large for those skinny legs. Before he sat, he acknowledged Mark with a nod and partial smile. Then Claire insisted on saying a quick grace.

"I should say it. I'm Gwacie!"

"I said it first," and out went Claire's tongue.

"Now, girls."

Like so many family dinners at his own house, soon the plates were passed and the chaos began.

Mark wasn't used to being around kids, especially the chatty Claire and her little echo Gracie. He figured Laurel rarely got a quiet moment with them in the house. At least Peter's mood had

lightened some since yesterday. His second lesson had gone about the same as the first, but Mark made sure he understood that everything worth learning took time.

Peter let his mom know she'd made his favorite—turkey meat loaf. Mark could tell by Laurel's surprised and pleased expression a compliment from the kid wasn't routine. She'd rounded out the meal with small baked potatoes, with several choices for toppings, and fresh green beans that smelled great thanks to lemon slices and a large sprig of rosemary cooked with them.

Conversation around the table had more to do with bargaining over how much each twin had to eat in order to call it dinner, and whether or not Peter had homework and had he done it yet, than getting-to-know-the-neighbor gab.

It brought back a slew of memories for Mark, of him and his brothers when they were young kids, squirming and trying to behave. And later when they'd all become touchy teens, ready to pounce on each other at the drop of one wrong word, or unwanted glance.

Other than Mark occasionally catching Laurel's gaze, and a special zing that took him by surprise whenever he did, they weren't able to communicate much at all. He was okay with that, since his goal was to keep the distance.

“So tell us about your surfing lessons, Peter,” Laurel asked.

The kid said just enough words to qualify for an answer, then shoved more meat into his mouth. He seemed to have a healthy appetite, and Mark assumed it was from the beating he'd taken in the ocean that afternoon.

“Have you been doing those exercises I told you about?”

“Some.” More eating, this time potato. “I'm gonna do more later.”

“After your homework, right?” Laurel added between bites.

“Can we be excused?” the twins said in unison.

Laurel made a big deal out of checking their plates to make sure they'd eaten enough. “One more bite each.”

They both crammed another tiny bite into their mouths, washed it down with the last of their milk and rushed off for the family room.

Peter had to be asked to clear the table, but he didn't protest too loudly, which surprised Mark. Maybe he wasn't such a problem all the time after all. Or maybe that was Peter on good behavior because of Mark being there.

Mark wanted to help, too, but Laurel wouldn't let him. “I'll clean up later. While the girls watch their TV show and Peter finishes his homework, I thought we could have some coffee or whatever you'd like to drink in the front sitting room.”

An invitation for time alone? No matter how complicated the Prescott family's situation was, Mark couldn't resist the chance to get to know Laurel a little better. “Sure. Coffee's fine.”

“I'll meet you in there,” she said.

So he meandered into the front of the house. Rather than sit on the pillowed-out and overstuffed couch, or the matching ornate curved armchair beside it, he chose the classic paisley upholstered straight-backed chair across from the sofa, and waited for Laurel.

After looking around the room, he glanced out the front window toward the decidedly vintage-styled Drumcliffe and smiled, a few more ideas for perking up the place popping into his head. He also thought about Laurel and how having a brooding teen must stress her out, especially while juggling the twins and the hundreds of duties of the B&B. And the place wasn't even open yet. And once it was, would it even support them? He wouldn't suppose her situation, but figured there was probably life insurance meeting some of their needs.

He wondered what profession her deceased husband was in.

Then stopped himself. Enough already.

She brought coffee on a tray, like they did in old movies, and he got a kick out of all the effort she'd gone to for him. But this was a B&B, and she was the proprietor. Of course she'd do this for the guests. In fact, she was probably practicing on him. That was all.

He poured cream into his coffee and soon enjoyed the hint of vanilla and cinnamon. If this was only practice, he was happy to be her guinea pig, because it made their sitting alone together in a fancy room feel less intimate.

"I wanted to personally thank you for your help these last two days. Peter told me what happened at the beach yesterday."

"No big deal. Those kids were up to no good."

"It was a big deal. Who knows what would've happened if you hadn't shown up."

"Well, I did, and Peter got some surfing lessons out of it."

"I hope he keeps it up."

"He says he wants to."

She went quiet for a moment. "I never thought he'd get bullied simply for being the new kid in town."

"In a perfect world, it shouldn't make any difference, but..."

She primly sipped her coffee from a pink patterned cup that probably came from England. The one inside the box he'd first carried yesterday?

He didn't want to, but couldn't help noticing her mouth, how the top lip was slightly plumper than the bottom. Rather than get caught staring again, he took in how tonight her hair was tamed with a conservative hair band, and how she looked like a proper bed-and-breakfast owner. Then he glanced down at her bright tangerine toenails, enjoying the contradiction.

She caught him staring, too, and he didn't even try to look away. Why pretend when he liked what he saw? So he smiled, and judging by the twitch at one corner of her mouth, she didn't mind.

"So what are you going to call this place?"

"The Prescott Bed-and-Breakfast. I've got a sign, just haven't put it up yet."

"I can do it."

"Would you?"

On impulse, he decided he might just help out from time to time. She was a widow with three kids and needed all the help she could get. Not because he found her attractive, and she interested him, and he felt good around her. But as backup. Only to help her out, as a handyman, because she could use it. That was the main reason.

Right. And Grandda didn't believe in selkies.

"Sure. The sooner you start to advertise the better."

"Tomorrow, then?"

He refilled his coffee. "Absolutely."

For now, he'd buy the little white lie about helping her out because she needed it. Otherwise he might get uptight about making another excuse to see her tomorrow, and he didn't want to be tense when having her all to himself in the sitting room right now felt so right.

* * *

Laurel sipped coffee and watched Mark's big hands as he grappled with the teapot made for ladies. She hid her smile behind the antique china cup. He'd obviously ogled her pedicure, and she wondered if there was anything else he might like about her. It had been a long time since she'd seen appreciative gazes from a man, and, being honest, she'd missed it.

Was that why she kept asking him to come back?

Or was it because, beyond his all-man appearance, he was nice? He'd intervened on her son's behalf. He was a man and her boy needed male mentoring? Lord only knew she was out of her depth on that one. She hadn't a clue that Peter, gangly and new in town, would be the subject of teasing.

From what Peter had said, the teasing had been heading in a much more serious direction when Mark showed up.

What kind of mother was she? One who seriously needed to make time to read some books on parenting teens. Maybe if he was more confident, hadn't been devastated by losing his father...

Her mind drifted back to the present. Instead of required reading, she was sitting in the parlor with a man who emitted more sex appeal than the last three seasons of bachelors combined. Did he have a clue?

Yesterday he'd hinted at needing a life coach as much as she did, so that was something they had in common. With his time in the Middle East, and her husband's losing battle with cancer, they'd both been through hell. There was one other, more positive thing they had in common, too: they'd both been raised in a small beach town.

She could hear him swallow. Deep in thought, it'd grown too quiet. "So tell me about the history of The Drumcliffe."

An easy subject to tackle, he did so with ease, giving her the story from all the way back when his grandfather came from Ireland. As he spoke, she enjoyed the sparkle in his blue eyes, darkened by the parlor lighting, and how tiny the teacup looked in his hands. His lower lip curled out the tiniest bit, and she wondered how it would feel to kiss him.

What? She took another sip of her coffee. Maybe she was ready to...

Oh, the mere thought made her stomach knot and a hope chest of guilt crash over her shoulders. But there he was, sharing his family's story, natural as could be, smiling with pride. What could be wrong with a little longing?

She took another sip, admiring every aspect of Mark Delaney. She'd caught him checking her out earlier, and knew how that felt. Good, by the way. Now the tables were turned, but she didn't want to give the wrong impression, and the last thing she needed was to get caught. Taking yet another sip of her cooling coffee, she wondered how long she could hide behind her teacup before being obvious.

Chapter Three

"Hey, Peter, give me a hand," Mark said that Wednesday afternoon, as he prepared to sink the white posts for the brand-spanking-new Prescott Bed-and-Breakfast sign.

The teen sat on the front porch playing a handheld video game and didn't bother to look up.

So he made his loud tooth whistle. "Dude!"

Finally, Peter's head bobbed up.

"Come help." It wasn't a question.

"I don't know how."

"So you'll learn."

Reluctantly, Peter put down his device and padded in his flip-flops across the grass toward Mark. "Like I said, I don't know how to do this stuff, and we're supposed to have another surf lesson."

"We'll make up for that tomorrow." He watched the kid hide his disappointment. "I promise."

That got a better response.

"Okay, here's what we're going to do."

Over the next hour Mark showed Peter how to dig a hole, set an anchor, use an electric drill—which he especially liked—place washers and install a nut. Peter had obviously never so much as hammered a nail, but the how-to approach seemed to capture his interest enough. At least he tried.

"See that pile of wood over there?" Mark pointed to the grassy yard across the road, between the hotel and the beach.

"Yeah?"

"That's going to be a gazebo, and I want you to help me build it this weekend."

"Me!" The kid's voice cracked and his eyes nearly bugged out.

"Yeah, you need experience hammering nails, and I can teach you how to use more power tools, a crosscut saw, table and band saw, you name it. What do you say?"

“Why?”

“Because knowing how to do a few useful things will build your confidence.” Which he needed. And will come in handy for your mother, too. “Like learning how to surf.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Surf?”

“No. Help.”

Not an option. Think fast. “Think of it this way. Our hotel is right on Main Street, the biggest road that leads straight to the beach.” He glanced up the road lined with palm and fruitless olive trees, small local businesses, storefronts and, in the distance on a hill, the local high school. “All the girls come this way to the beach, and they’ll see you building stuff. They’ll notice you. Might open some doors.”

Peter stood staring across the street at the pile of wood, then glanced up toward what passed as the town center, small as it was.

“It’s better than babysitting your sisters, isn’t it?” Mark noticed the click in his expression from on-the-fence to makes-perfect-sense. Whether it was the girls or not dealing with his sisters, Mark had sold him on the proposition, and though the last thing he needed was a novice assistant, he wanted to help the kid. Maybe he’d find out something new about himself, feel better and, like he’d said, be more confident. Or, he could smash his finger with a hammer, get the mother of all splinters and never want to go near wood again. It was a gamble, but worth the risk.

A half hour later, after a few finishing touches on the posts, and with plans to meet Saturday morning to begin building, they’d hung the B&B sign.

“It’s beautiful!” Laurel called from the porch, her eyes bright with excitement. It was obvious she’d made a conscious effort not to hover over her son while he helped Mark, but from a safe distance she’d followed the whole process. “I’ve got to take a picture.” She whipped out her phone and rushed down the yard toward them.

“You get in it, and I’ll take the picture,” Mark offered.

“Oh.” Her hand flew to her hair. “I wasn’t planning on—”

“You look fine. I’ll get a few shots and you can choose the best one, then put it on Facebook.”

“I’m not crazy about social media.”

“But you’ve got to create a buzz.”

“You’ve got a point.” She glanced at her son. “Peter, you worked so hard on this, come be in the picture with me?” she said with pride.

“Ah, Mom.” He obviously didn’t want anything to do with smiling for a camera, but he hadn’t wanted to help sink the posts, either, and there they were.

“We want to!” Claire came rushing through the screen door and down the porch steps wearing plastic play heels, clicking all the way, Gracie hot on her tail clack, clack, clacking. Laurel split them up, putting one on each side of the sign.

After some arm-twisting, Mark managed to get a picture of the entire family, with a good portion of the beautiful house behind them. He had to admit, Laurel’s smile was captivating, and he thought about secretly sending a copy of one shot in particular to his email. It was of her alone, of course, looking proud, maybe a little nervous but alluring, as she often did. Her understated confidence was just one of the things he liked about her.

“This is the best picture. Agree?”

She shrugged, but he could tell she liked it, too. Yeah, that one, definitely that one. “Should I post it?”

“Sure.”

It was time to face the fact. His grandfather had a word for it—smitten. Mark would never use that term, but he needed to admit he dug her. Yup. There. He’d finally allowed himself to think it.

He liked her, and not just in a pure neighborly sort of way. Ready or not. Maybe he'd blame it on the tangerine pedicure.

“There you go.” He handed her the phone. “Anything you want to say with the picture?”

“Oh, sure.” Her thumbs flew over the phone, and Mark took the opportunity to watch her up close. Yeah, as bad of an idea as it was, he liked her all right.

* * *

Laurel finally realized, with Mark's hinting, she was behind in the social media game. Instead of going all ditzy over an appealing man like she'd been doing since he'd helped her that first day, she needed to hunker down and finalize her plan for opening the B&B. Sure, she'd given it a lot of thought before she'd bought the place, but making the move and starting the kids in new schools all at the same time had taken her eye off the prize.

She had catching up to do and plans to firm up. Ads to run in the tricounty local papers, visits to make to the chamber of commerce.

What about a mock run? She could invite three local travel agents to spend the night as a sort of rehearsal, maybe get some good endorsements in the process. Her head spun with new ideas, thanks to Mark's gentle nudging, and she needed to get back on her game, instead of ogling her sexy neighbor. Pronto.

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