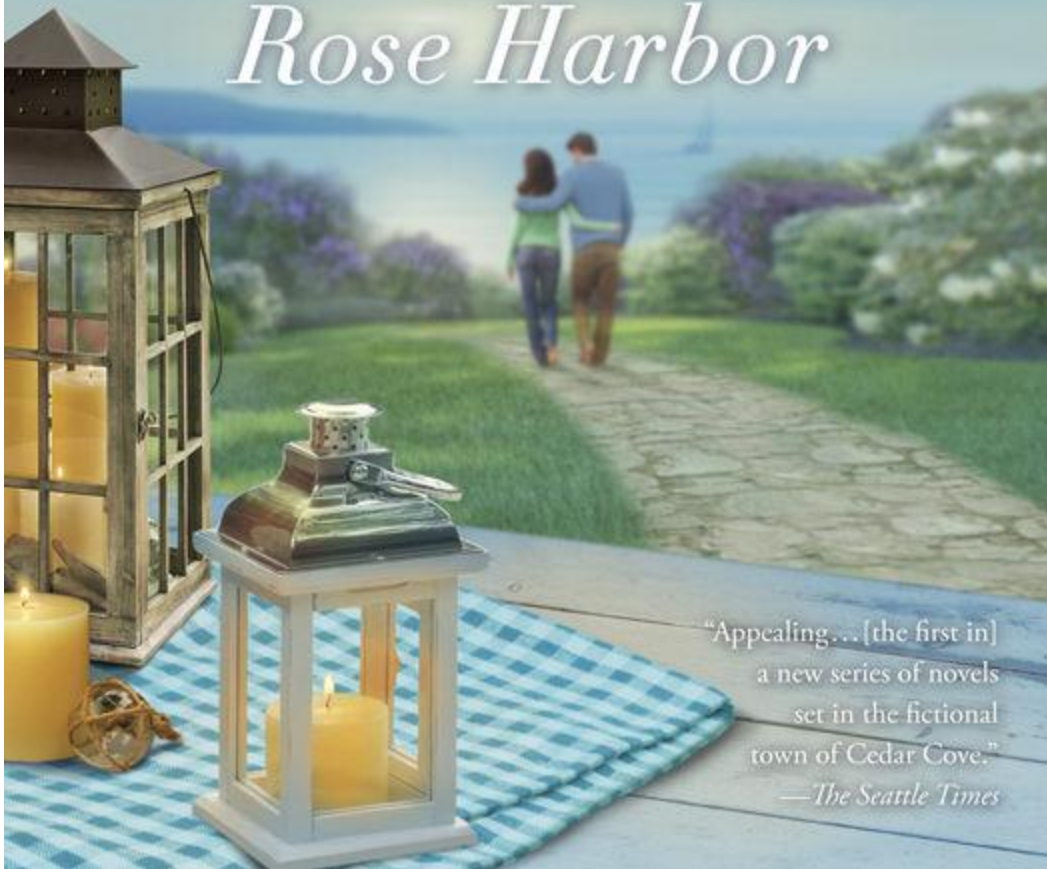


#1 *New York Times* bestselling author of the
CEDAR COVE SERIES

DEBBIE MACOMBER

The Inn at Rose Harbor



"Appealing... [the first in]
a new series of novels
set in the fictional
town of Cedar Cove."
—*The Seattle Times*

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March 2014

Dear Friends,

Welcome to Rose Harbor Inn *and* back to Cedar Cove. Think of this as Cedar Cove, Part II. This is a particularly exciting time to return because—drum roll, please—the Cedar Cove series is now a Hallmark TV series. The network has done such a wonderful job adapting my Christmas novels, and now Cedar Cove is their very first scripted television series ever. What an honor to be part of this history-making venture! What’s especially exciting is that the show has been renewed for a second season. Thank you all for your support and encouragement.

My husband and I were able to visit the set early on. What fun it was to meet Andie MacDowell and Dylan Neal. Wayne instantly fell in love with Andie, who is as charming as she is talented. I was forced to remind him he’s a married man. While Wayne was agog over Andie, I was drawn into the magic of watching my words come to life before the camera. This was a remarkable moment for me. I had dreamed of being a writer since I was a small girl. And now a television series based on my novels! I feel incredibly blessed.

Season two of the Cedar Cove series will air this summer. You can get regular updates on my website at DebbieMacomber.com or on Facebook or at Hallmark.com.

Now comes the best part—reading *The Inn at Rose Harbor*, where you will be whisked back to Cedar Cove. I hope you enjoy meeting Jo Marie Rose and the first guests at her inn and getting updates on your favorite Cedar Cove characters. I know you’ll feel right at home. You can be assured of a warm welcome.

Nothing gives me as much pleasure as hearing from my readers. Please feel free to reach out to me either through my website or on Facebook. And, of course, through

the mail at P.O. Box 1458, Port Orchard, WA 98366. I so look forward to hearing from you all!

With affection,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rebekah Macomber".

Chapter 1

Last night I dreamed of Paul.

He's never far from my thoughts—not a day passes when he isn't with me—but he hasn't been in my dreams until now. It's ironic, I suppose, that he should leave me, because before I close my eyes I fantasize about what it would feel like to have his arms wrapped around me. As I drift off to sleep I pretend that my head is resting on his shoulder. Unfortunately, I will never have the chance to be with my husband again, at least not in this lifetime.

Until last night, if I did happen to dream of Paul, those dreams were long forgotten by the time I woke. This dream, however, stayed with me, lingering in my mind, filling me with equal parts sadness and joy.

When I first learned that Paul had been killed, the grief had been all-consuming, and I didn't think I would be able to go on. Yet life continues to move forward, and so have I, dragging from one day into the next until I found I could breathe normally.

I'm in my new home now, the bed-and-breakfast I bought less than a month ago on the Kitsap Peninsula in a cozy town on the water called Cedar Cove. I decided to name it Rose Harbor Inn. "Rose" for Paul Rose, my husband of less than a year; the man I will always love and for whom I will grieve for whatever remains of my own life. "Harbor" for the place I have set my anchor as the storms of loss batter me.

How melodramatic that sounds, and yet there's no other way to say it. Although I am alive, functioning normally, at times I feel half dead. How Paul would hate hearing me say that, but it's true. I died with Paul last April on some mountainside in a country half a world away as he fought for our nation's security.

Life as I knew it was over in the space of a single heartbeat. My future as I dreamed it would be was stolen from me.

All the advice given to those who grieve said I should wait a year before making any major decisions. My friends told me I would regret quitting my job, leaving my Seattle home, and moving to a strange town.

What they didn't understand was that I found no comfort in familiarity, no joy in routine. Because I valued their opinion, I gave it six months. In that time nothing helped, nothing changed. More and more I felt the urge to get away, to start life anew, certain that then and only then would I find peace, and this horrendous ache inside me ease.

I started my search for a new life on the Internet, looking in a number of areas, all across the United States. The surprise was finding exactly what I wanted in my own backyard.

The town of Cedar Cove sits on the other side of Puget Sound from Seattle. It's a navy town, situated directly across from the Bremerton shipyard. The minute I found a property listing for this charming bed-and-breakfast that was up for sale, my heart started to beat at an accelerated rate. Me own a bed-and-breakfast? I hadn't thought to take over a business, but instinctively I realized I would need something to fill my time. As a bonus, a confirmation, I'd always enjoyed having guests.

With its wraparound porch and incredible view of the cove, the house was breathtaking. In another life I could imagine Paul and me sitting on the porch after dinner, sipping hot coffee and discussing our day, our dreams. Surely the photograph posted on the Internet had been taken by a professional who'd cleverly masked its flaws. Nothing, it seemed, could be this perfect.

Not so. The moment I pulled into the driveway with the real estate agent, I was embraced by the inn's appeal. Oh yes, with its bright natural light and large windows that overlooked the cove, this B&B felt like home already. It was the perfect place for starting my new life.

Although I dutifully let Jody McNeal, the agent, show me around, not a single question remained in my mind. I was meant to own this bed-and-breakfast; it was as

if it'd sat on the market all these months waiting for me. It had eight guest rooms spread across the two upper floors, and on the bottom floor a large, modern kitchen was situated next to a spacious dining room. Originally built in the early 1900s, the house looked out on a stunning panorama of the water and marina. Cedar Cove was laid out below along Harbor Street, which wound through the town with small shops on both sides of the street. I felt the town's appeal even before I had the opportunity to explore its neighborhoods.

What attracted me most about the inn was the sense of peace I experienced the moment I walked inside. The heartache that had been my constant companion seemed to lift. The grief that I'd carried with me all these months eased. In its place came serenity, a peace that's difficult to describe.

Unfortunately, this contentment didn't last long, my eyes suddenly flooding with tears and embarrassing me as we finished the tour. Paul would have loved this inn, too. But I would be managing the inn alone. Thankfully the real estate agent pretended not to notice the emotions I was struggling to disguise.

"Well, what do you think?" Jody asked expectantly as we walked out the front door.

I hadn't said a word during the entire tour, nor had I asked a single question. "I'll take it."

Jody leaned closer as if she hadn't heard me correctly. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'd like to make an offer." I didn't hesitate—by that time I had no doubts. The asking price was more than fair and I was ready to move forward.

Jody almost dropped a folder full of detailed information regarding the property. "You might want to think about it," she suggested. "This is a major decision, Jo Marie. Don't get me wrong, I'm eager to make the sale; it's just that I've never had anyone make such an important decision so ... quickly."

"I'll think about it overnight, if you want, but there's no need. I knew right away that this is it."

The instant my family heard that I intended to quit my job at Columbia Bank and buy the B&B, they all tried to talk me out of it, especially my brother, Todd, the engineer. I'd worked my way up to assistant manager of the Denny Way branch, and he feared I was throwing away a promising career. Todd knew that I would eventually be named manager. I had given almost fifteen years to the bank, had been a good employee, and my future in banking was bright

What the people around me failed to understand was that my life as I'd known it, as I'd wanted it, as I'd dreamed it, was over. The only way I could achieve fulfillment was to find myself a new one.

I signed the offer for the inn the next day and not for an instant did my resolve waver. The Frelingers, who owned the B&B, gratefully accepted my offer, and within a matter of weeks—just before the holidays—we gathered together at the title company and signed all the tedious, necessary paperwork. I handed them the cashier's check, and accepted the keys to the inn. The Frelingers had taken no reservations for the last couple of weeks in December as they intended to spend time with their children.

Leaving the title company, I took a short detour to the courthouse and applied for a name change for the inn, christening it with its new name, the Rose Harbor Inn.

I returned to Seattle and the next day I gave Columbia Bank my notice. I spent the Christmas holiday packing up my Seattle condo and preparing for the move across Puget Sound. While I was only moving a few miles away, I might as well have been going halfway across the country. Cedar Cove was a whole other world—a quaint town on the Kitsap Peninsula away from the hectic world of the big city.

I knew my parents were disappointed that I didn't spend much of the holidays with them in Hawaii, a family tradition. But I had so much to do to get ready for the move, including sorting through my things and Paul's, packing, and selling my furniture. I needed to keep occupied—busywork helped keep my mind off this first Christmas without Paul.

I officially moved into the house on the Monday following New Year's Day. Thankfully the Frelingers had sold the inn as a turnkey business. So all I needed to bring with me were a couple of chairs, a lamp that had belonged to my grandmother,

and my personal items. Unpacking took only a few hours. I chose as my room the main floor bedroom suite the Frelingers had set aside as their own area; it had a fireplace and a small alcove that included a window seat overlooking the cove. The room was large enough for a bedroom set, as well as a small sofa that sat close to the fireplace. I particularly enjoyed the wallpaper, which was covered in white and lavender hydrangeas.

By the time night descended on the inn, I was exhausted. At eight, as rain pelted against the windows and the wind whistled through the tall evergreens that covered one side of the property, I made my way into the master bedroom on the main floor. The wild weather made it feel even cozier with a fire flickering in the fireplace. I experienced none of the strangeness of settling into a new place. I'd felt welcomed by this home from the moment I'd set foot in the front door.

The sheets were crisp and clean as I climbed into bed. I don't remember falling asleep, but what so readily comes to mind is that dream of Paul, so vivid and real.

In grief counseling, I'd learned that dreams are important to the healing process. The counselor described two distinct types of dreams. The first and probably the most common are dreams about our loved ones—memories that come alive again.

The second type are called visitation dreams, when the loved one actually crosses the chasm between life and death to visit those he or she has left behind. We were told these are generally dreams of reassurance: the one who has passed reassures the living that he or she is happy and at peace.

It'd been eight months since I'd received word that Paul had been killed in a helicopter crash in the Hindu Kush, the mountain range that stretches between the center of Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. The army helicopter had been brought down by al-Qaeda or one of their Taliban allies; Paul and five of his fellow Airborne Rangers had been killed instantly. Because of the location of the crash it was impossible to recover their bodies. The news of his death was difficult enough, but to be deprived of burying his remains was even more cruel.

For days after I got the news, hope crowded my heart that Paul might have actually survived. I was convinced that somehow my husband would find a way back to me. That was not to be. Aerial photographs of the crash site soon confirmed that

no one could have possibly survived. In the end, all that really mattered was that the man I loved and married was gone. He would never return to me, and as the weeks and months progressed I came to accept the news.

It'd taken me a long time to fall in love. Most of my friends had married in their twenties, and by the time they were in their mid-thirties, the majority had already started their families. I was a godmother six times over.

On the other hand, I had remained single well into my thirties. I had a busy, happy life and was involved in both my career and family. I'd never felt the need to rush into marriage or listen to my mother, who insisted I find a good man and quit being so picky. I dated plenty but there was never anyone I felt I could love for the rest of my life until I met Paul Rose.

Seeing that it'd taken me thirty-seven years to meet my match, I didn't expect love to come to me twice. Frankly, I wasn't even sure I wanted to fall in love again. Paul Rose was everything I'd ever hoped to find in a husband ... and so much more.

We'd met at a Seahawks football game. The bank had given me tickets and I had brought along one of our more prominent clients and his wife. As we took our seats, I'd noticed two men with military haircuts sitting next to me. As the game progressed, Paul introduced himself and his army buddy and struck up a conversation. Paul told me he was stationed at Fort Lewis. Like me, he enjoyed football. My parents were keen Seahawks fans, and I'd grown up in Spokane watching the games on television after church on Sundays with them and my younger brother, Todd.

Paul asked me to have a beer with him as we left the game that afternoon, and we saw each other nearly every day after. We learned we shared much more than a love of football: we shared the same political inclinations, read many of the same authors, and loved Italian food. We even had a Sudoku addiction in common. We could talk for hours and often did. Two months after we met, he shipped out to Germany, but being separated did little to slow our budding relationship. Not a day passed that we weren't in contact in one way or another—we emailed, texted, Skyped, tweeted, and used every other available means we could to stay in touch. Yes, we even wrote actual letters with pen and paper. I'd heard about people claiming to have

experienced “love at first sight” and I had scoffed. I can’t say it was like that for Paul and me, but it was darn close. I knew a week after we met that he was the man I would marry. Paul said he felt the same way about me, although he claimed all it took was one date.

I will admit this: love changed me. I was happier than I could ever remember being. And everyone noticed.

At Thanksgiving a year ago, Paul flew back to Seattle on leave and asked me to be his wife. He even talked to my parents first. We were crazy in love. I’d waited a long time and when I gave him my heart, it was for forever.

Right after our wedding in January, Paul got orders for Afghanistan. The helicopter went down on April 27, and my world imploded.

I’d never experienced this kind of grief and I fear I handled it poorly. My parents and brother worried for me. It was my mother who suggested grief counseling. Because I was desperate to find a means to ease my pain, I agreed. In the end I was glad I attended the sessions. Doing so helped me understand my dreams, especially the one I had that first night at the inn.

Contrary to what I’d been told about visitation dreams, Paul did nothing to reassure me he was at peace. Instead, he stood before me in full military gear. He was surrounded by a light that was so bright it was hard to look at him. Even so, I found it impossible to turn away.

I wanted to run to him but was afraid that if I moved, he would disappear. I couldn’t bear to lose him again even if this was only an apparition.

At first he didn’t speak. I didn’t either, unsure of what I could or should say. I remember that emotion filled my eyes with tears and I covered my mouth for fear I would cry out.

He joined me then and took me in his arms, holding me close and running his hand down the back of my head, comforting me. I clung to him, unwilling to let him go. Over and over he whispered gentle words of love.

When the lump in my throat eased, I looked up at him and our eyes met. It felt as though he was alive and we needed to catch up after a long absence. There was so much I wanted to tell him, so much I wanted him to explain. The fact that he'd had such a large life insurance policy had come as a shock. At first I'd felt guilty about accepting such a large amount of cash. Shouldn't that money go to his family? But his mother was dead, and his father had remarried and lived in Australia. They had never been especially close. The lawyer told me Paul had been clear in his instructions.

In my dream I wanted to tell Paul that I'd used the money to buy this bed-and-breakfast and that I'd named it after him. One of the first improvements I wanted to make was to plant a rose garden with a bench and an arbor. But in the dream, I said none of that because it seemed like he already knew.

He brushed the hair from my forehead and kissed me there ever so gently.

"You've chosen well," he whispered, his eyes warm with love. "In time you'll know joy again."

Joy? I wanted to argue with him. It didn't seem likely or even possible. One doesn't heal from this kind of pain. I remembered how my family and friends had struggled to find the right words to comfort me. But there are no words ... there simply are no words.

And yet I didn't argue with him. I wanted the dream to last and I feared that if I questioned him he would leave, and I wanted him to stay with me. A peaceful feeling had come to me, and my heart, which had carried this heavy burden, felt just a little lighter.

"I don't know that I can live without you," I told him, and it was true.

"You can and you will. In fact, you'll have a long, full life," Paul insisted. He sounded like the officer he'd been, giving out orders that were not to be questioned.

"You will feel joy again," he repeated, "and much of it will come from owning Rose Harbor Inn."

I frowned. I knew I was dreaming, but the dream was so vivid I wanted to believe it was real.

“But ...” My mind filled with questions.

“This inn is my gift to you,” Paul continued. “Don’t doubt, my love. God will show you.” In the next instant he was gone.

I cried out, begging him to come back, and my own sharp cry woke me. My tears were real, and I could feel moisture on my cheeks and pillowcase.

For a long time afterward I sat upright in the dark wanting to hold on to the feeling of my husband’s presence. Eventually it faded and almost against my will I fell back asleep.

The next morning, I climbed out of bed and traipsed barefoot down the polished hardwood floor of the hallway to the small office off the kitchen. Turning on the desk lamp, I flipped through the pages of the reservation book the Frelingers had given me. I reviewed the names of the two guests due to arrive that week.

Joshua Weaver had made his reservation just the week before I took ownership. The former owners had mentioned it at the time we signed the final papers.

The second name on the list belonged to Abby Kincaid.

Two guests.

Paul had said this inn was his gift to me. I would do my best to make both guests comfortable; perhaps, in giving of myself, I would find the joy Paul had promised. And maybe, given time, it would be possible for me to find my way back to life.

Chapter 2

Josh Weaver never thought he’d return to Cedar Cove. In the twelve years since his high school graduation, he’d been back only once, and that was to attend the funeral of his stepbrother, Dylan. Even then he hadn’t spent the night in town. He’d caught a morning flight, rented a car, showed up at the funeral, and left directly afterward,

arriving back in California at the job site the same day. He'd barely spoken to his stepfather.

For that matter, Richard hadn't bothered to acknowledge him. It was exactly what Josh had expected. Although Dylan and Josh had been close, his stepfather hadn't seen fit to ask Josh to be one of his son's pallbearers. The slight had cut deep. He'd come anyway to pay his respects to his stepbrother.

Now Josh was back again and not out of any desire to spend time in Cedar Cove. This town meant nothing to him other than the fact that it contained his mother's grave site and Dylan's.

Born just a year apart, Josh and Dylan had been tight. Dylan had always been a daredevil. Josh had marveled at Dylan's complete lack of fear ever since they met. Still, it had come as a brutal shock when word reached him that Dylan had been killed in a motorcycle accident. That was five years ago now. Seven years after Richard Lambert had kicked him out of the house and forced Josh to find his own way in the world.

Now it seemed it was the old man's turn to meet his Maker. The sole reason Josh was back in town was because the Nelsons, who lived next door to Richard, had contacted him. Michelle Nelson and Dylan had been in the same grade in school, with Josh a year ahead of them. Following graduation, gentle-natured Michelle had gone on to become a social worker. Josh remembered that she'd had a big crush on Dylan, but she was overweight and Dylan hadn't returned the sentiment. In his mind, Josh linked her thoughtfulness in looking after Richard to her affection for Dylan.

"Richard is in a bad way," Michelle had told him during their brief telephone conversation. "If you want to see him alive you'd better come—and make it soon."

Josh had no desire to see the old man. None. They shared nothing other than a mutual dislike. Josh agreed to make the trip for two reasons. First, he was between job assignments as a construction manager. He had just finished one project and was waiting to hear about the next. Second, while he didn't consider it important, or really hope it was possible, it'd be nice to make peace with the old man. Then, too, there were certain things he hoped to collect from his stepfather's house. While he was in Cedar Cove, he wanted to retrieve a few personal possessions that his mother

had brought into the marriage. Nothing less than what should rightfully be his and certainly nothing more.

“I’ll be there as soon as I can get away,” Josh had replied.

“Hurry,” Michelle urged. “Richard needs you.”

Josh wagered his stepfather would keel over dead before he’d admit to needing anyone, particularly Josh. Apparently the neighbors had forgotten that Richard had taken delight in kicking Josh out of the house only a few months after his mother’s death. Josh had been just weeks away from his high school graduation. When he left he hadn’t been allowed to take anything more than some clothes and his schoolbooks.

Richard had claimed Josh was a thief. Two hundred dollars had been missing from his wallet and he was convinced Josh had stolen it. The fact was, Josh knew nothing about the missing money, which left only Dylan. Richard would never believe his own flesh and blood was guilty, though, so Josh had accepted the blame. What he hadn’t expected was for Richard to demand he leave so close to graduation.

In retrospect, Josh accepted that the missing money was just an excuse. Richard had wanted him out of the house and out of his life, and until now Josh had been more than willing to comply.

He was back in Cedar Cove, but he felt no sense of homecoming as he eased his truck into the driveway of the address scribbled down on a piece of paper. The B&B had surfaced in a hasty online search he’d conducted, looking for a location convenient to his stepfather’s house.

One thing was certain: he couldn’t stay with Richard. As far as Josh knew, Richard didn’t even know he was coming, which suited him just fine. If everything went well, he’d be in and out of town in a day or two. He didn’t want to stay any longer than was absolutely necessary. And when he left Cedar Cove this time, Josh had no intention of ever looking back.

Once he parked in the inn’s small lot, he climbed out of the truck, and reached for his overnight bag and laptop. The sky was overcast and it looked like rain, which was par for January in the Pacific Northwest. The charcoal-colored skies were an

adequate reflection of his mood. He'd give just about anything to be somewhere other than Cedar Cove—anyplace that didn't force him to confront the stepfather who had detested him.

No need putting off the inevitable, he decided. He lugged his carry-on and his computer case up the porch stairs and rang the doorbell. Hardly a minute passed before a woman answered the door.

"Mrs. Frelinger?" he asked. She was of medium height and much younger than he'd expected when he booked the reservation. Her thick brown hair was shoulder length with a part down the middle. Her eyes were a piercing shade of blue not unlike a summer sky. When he'd booked the reservation the woman on the other end of the line had sounded older, as if she were in her sixties. The woman standing before him was young, mid-thirties at most. She wore a colorful red bib apron over casual pants and a long-sleeve sweater.

"Sorry, no, I'm Jo Marie Rose. I recently took over the inn from the Frelingers. Please, come in." She stepped aside, making way in order for him to enter the large home.

Josh entered the foyer and was instantly warmed. A small fire crackled in the fireplace and the scent of freshly baked bread set his mouth to watering. Josh couldn't remember the last time he'd smelled bread direct from the oven. His mother had baked bread but that was years ago. "Something smells wonderful."

"I've always enjoyed baking," Jo Marie said as if she needed to explain. "I hope you have a good appetite."

"I do," Josh said.

"You're my first guest," Jo Marie told him, welcoming him with a bright smile. "Welcome." She rubbed her palms together as if she wasn't sure what to do next.

"Would you like my credit card information?" Josh asked, as he removed his wallet from his hip pocket.

"Oh yes, that's probably a good idea."

She led the way through the kitchen and into a small office. Josh suspected the area might have been a pantry at one time. He withdrew a credit card.

Jo Marie stared at the card. "I'll need to jot down your number for now—I have an appointment at the bank later." Looking uncertain she raised questioning eyes to him. "If that's all right?"

"Not a problem," he said and she wrote down his credit card information and handed the card back to him.

"Would it be all right if I got the key to my room now?" he asked.

"Oh sure ... sorry! Like I said, you're my first guest."

Josh wondered just how long she'd owned the business. Jo Marie must have read his mind because she added, "I signed the final papers just before Christmas."

"Where did the Frelingers go?" Josh didn't remember ever meeting them when he'd lived in town, but he wondered why they would sell.

Jo Marie returned to the kitchen and lifted the coffeepot, silently asking if he wanted a cup. Josh nodded.

"Apparently the Frelingers have decided to travel across the country in their motor home," Jo Marie explained. "It was loaded and ready to go the day I took over the inn. They handed me the house keys and were off to join their two daughters in California for Christmas as their first stop."

"They certainly weren't letting any grass grow under their feet," Josh said as she handed him a steaming mug of coffee.

"Do you take sugar or cream?" she asked.

"No, black is perfect." He'd gotten accustomed to drinking it that way when he lived with Richard.

"You have your choice of rooms," Jo Marie told him.

Josh shrugged. "Any one is fine. This isn't exactly a pleasure trip."

“Oh?” She seemed openly curious now.

“No, I’m here to set my stepfather up with hospice.”

“I’m so sorry.”

Josh raised his hand to stop her from expressing sympathy. “We were never close and frankly we didn’t have the best of relationships. This is more out of duty than anything else.”

“If there’s anything I can do?” she offered.

Josh shook his head. At this point there wasn’t anything to be done. If he could have, he would gladly have avoided this altogether, but unfortunately there was no one else to take responsibility for Richard.

Jo Marie showed him a room on the second floor. It had a large picture window that overlooked the cove, and the Puget Sound Naval Shipyard was directly across the way. There were several ships and a mothballed aircraft carrier visible, and the sky reflected the battleship gray of the navy vessels.

Richard had worked at the shipyard for most of his working career, Josh remembered. He’d served in the navy during the Vietnam war, and after being honorably discharged he had found work as a welder in Bremerton. Dylan had worked at the shipyard, too, until the accident that had claimed his life.

Stepping away from the window, Josh didn’t bother to unpack his bag. He took out his cell phone and logged on to his email account to collect his messages, hoping for word on the next job. He hadn’t even seen Richard yet and already he was planning his escape.

The first one that popped up was an email from Michelle Nelson, Richard’s next-door neighbor. She’d sent it only a couple of hours earlier.

Josh read the message.

From: Michelle Nelson (NelsonM@wavecable.net)

Sent: January 12

To: JoshWeaver@sandiegonet.com

Subject: Welcome Home

Dear Josh,

I'm expecting you to arrive in Cedar Cove anytime now and I wanted to make sure we connected first thing. My parents are visiting my brother in Arizona—he's a new father—and I'm staying at their home to feed the dog and keep close tabs on Richard. I'm off work the next couple of days so give me a call once you're settled in at the B&B and I'll go with you to see Richard if you'd like.

Michelle

360-555-8756

Josh settled against the back of the chair and folded his arms over his chest. He remembered how Michelle's obvious infatuation with Dylan had been an embarrassment to his stepbrother. Still, Dylan had never been cruel to Michelle like some of the other boys in school had been, taunting her with names and off-color remarks and jokes.

He appreciated her offer to accompany him when he went to visit Richard for the first time. It would be great to have another person there to act as a buffer. Josh punched out the phone number Michelle had listed, and she picked up almost right away.

"Michelle, it's Josh."

"Oh Josh, my goodness, it's so good to hear your voice. How are you?"

"Good." Michelle's enthusiasm felt like a balm. He hadn't expected anyone to be pleased that he was in town. While Josh had had plenty of friends in high school, he hadn't kept in touch with any of them. Following his high school graduation he'd joined the army and headed almost immediately for basic training. Then he'd linked up with a construction company and worked his way up to project manager. He didn't mind the travel, so he bounced from town to town and from job to job, never staying longer than a few months in any one place. He'd seen a good part of the country and hadn't put down roots anywhere. In time, he'd settle down, he supposed, but he didn't feel the burning need for that to happen anytime soon.

"You sound wonderful," Michelle continued, her voice soft with what seemed to be remembered affection.

“So do you,” he murmured. Josh had always liked Michelle, even though he’d felt sorry for her because of the extra weight she carried. “I suppose you’re married by now with a passel of kids,” he joked, confident that she’d found someone who would appreciate her. He remembered her as being generous and kind. It didn’t come as any surprise that she’d become a social worker, looking after others.

“No, unfortunately.” Her voice echoed with regret and a tinge of sadness.

Josh was sorry he’d asked.

“What about you? Did you bring your wife and children with you to see your old stomping grounds?”

“No, I’m not married either.”

“Oh.” She sounded surprised. “I asked Richard about your family and he didn’t know.”

No reason he would—they hadn’t spoken in years. “How’s the old man faring these days?” he asked in order to change the subject.

“Not so good. He’s both stubborn and foolish. He insists he doesn’t need any help from anyone, although he’s willing to let me take him meals and check in on him every now and again.”

Same old Richard: unreasonable, cantankerous, and constantly in a bad mood. “Does he know I’m coming?” Josh asked.

“I didn’t tell him,” Michelle said.

“Would your parents have mentioned it before they left for your brother’s?”

“I doubt it. None of us were sure whether you’d show or not.”

Apparently the Nelsons knew him better than he realized. “I wasn’t sure I would either,” he admitted.

“Stop by my parent’s house first,” Michelle offered. “I’ll meet you there and we can go over to Richard’s together.”

“I appreciate the offer,” he said.

Michelle hesitated and when she spoke her voice went soft, almost wistful. “I’ve thought about you often through the years, Josh. I wish ... I wish we’d had more of a chance to talk at Dylan’s funeral.”

Josh couldn’t remember seeing Michelle there although she would have surely attended. His own participation had been so brief there hadn’t been time to really talk to anyone. It’d stung that Richard had discounted the strong relationship Josh and Dylan had shared. It was just another slight to add to all the rest, but as it stood now, Josh was Richard’s only living relative.

“When would you like to stop by?” Michelle asked.

“I’ll get settled in and be there in about an hour. Does that suit you?” The sooner he confronted the old man the better. Putting it off wouldn’t make seeing him again any easier.

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