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DEBBIE MACOMBER

311 Pelican Court
Cedar Cove

Olivia Lockhart
Cedar Cove, Washington

Dear Reader,

One thing about Cedar Cove—people sure are interested in what other people are doing. Take Zach and Rosie Cox, for instance. Everybody in town knows that they recently got a divorce. Everybody also knows that I decreed a somewhat unusual custody arrangement. It won't be the kids moving between Rosie's place and Zach's. They'll continue to live in the family home at 311 Pelican Court. *Their parents* are the ones who'll be going back and forth.

I have to say I'm not immune to gossip myself. People are asking if I'll stay with Jack, who runs the *Cedar Cove Chronicle*, or will I get back with my ex?

But the *really* big gossip is about the dead man—the man who died at a local bed-and-breakfast. Who is he and why did he show up there in the middle of the night? Roy McAfee, a local private investigator, is determined to find out. I hope he does—and then I'll fill you in. Talk soon....

Oliv

DEBBIE
MACOMBER

“Debbie Macomber is a skilled storyteller.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *50 Harbor Street*

“As always, Macomber has scored a perfect ‘10.’”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *311 Pelican Court*

“In *311 Pelican Court*, the writing is sharp and the suspense taut. The pages turn quickly as the story heats up for the next installment. *311 Pelican Court* is a feel-good book, filled with plenty of small-

town coziness, romance, and a thread of mystery.”

—*Romance Reviews Today*

“Macomber never fails to expertly blend multiple stories and three-dimensional characters to create a world that her readers can enjoy revisiting early and often.”

—*The Romance Reader*

“Excellent characterization will keep readers anticipating the next visit to Cedar Cove.”

—*Booklist* on *311 Pelican Court*

“Those who enjoy good-spirited, gossipy writing will be hooked.”

—*Publishers Weekly* on *6 Rainier Drive*

“Macomber’s endearing characters offer hope and support to one another and find hope and love in the most unexpected places.”

—*Booklist* on *204 Rosewood Lane*

“Returning to Cedar Cove is always a pleasure, and this book is a particular pleasure.”

—*RT Book Reviews* on *74 Seaside Avenue*

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204 ROSEWOOD LANE
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DEBBIE
MACOMBER

311 Pelican Court

 HARLEQUIN[®] MIRA[®]

Dear Friends,

Welcome to Cedar Cove, Washington! *311 Pelican Court* is the next installment of this ongoing series. Cedar Cove is definitely a lively place, and everyone here is *thrilled* that you've decided to join us. As usual, there's a lot happening around town, so Olivia, Grace, Jack, Charlotte—and all your other friends—are eager to fill you in. (If this is your first visit, I think you'll enjoy getting to know them.) Rest assured that in Cedar Cove there's always a little mystery, a little romance and a lot of fun.

As you're probably aware, the series is inspired by my own hometown of Port Orchard, Washington, where there really is a library with a mural painted on the exterior wall, as well as a marina, a waterfront park and plenty of friendly folk. (All the grouches live in Olalla!) Of course, none of my characters—in the books or the Hallmark Channel television series—are based on anyone in town and any resemblance is purely coincidental.

Please join me now as our good friends in Cedar Cove continue to live their lives and tell their stories. And please get in touch. You can reach me at www.debbiemacomber.com or at P.O. Box 1458, Port Orchard, WA 98366.

Now I invite you to turn the page...and turn on your TV for the next episode of the Cedar Cove series.

Warmest regards,



Some of the Residents of Cedar Cove, Washington

Olivia Lockhart: Divorced, family court judge in Cedar Cove. Mother of Justine and James (of San Diego). Lives at 16 Lighthouse Road.

Charlotte Jefferson: Mother of Olivia, widow, lifelong resident of Cedar Cove.

Justine (Lockhart) Gunderson: Married to Seth, mother of Leif.

Seth Gunderson: Justine's husband. Co-owner, with Justine, of The Lighthouse Restaurant.

Stanley Lockhart: Olivia's ex-husband and father of James and Justine. Now lives in Seattle.

Will Jefferson: Olivia's brother, Charlotte's son. Married and lives in Atlanta.

Grace Sherman: Olivia's best friend. Widow. Librarian. Parent of Maryellen and Kelly. Lives at 20 Rosewood Lane.

Maryellen Sherman: Oldest daughter of Grace and Dan. Divorced. Manager of the Harbor Street Art Gallery. Mother of Katie.

Kelly Jordan: Maryellen's sister, married to Paul, mother of Tyler.

Jon Bowman: Local photographer and chef, father of Katie.

Jack Griffin: Newspaper reporter and editor of the *Cedar Cove Chronicle*.

Zachary Cox: Accountant. Divorced from Rosie. Father of Allison and Eddie Cox. The family home is 311 Pelican Court.

Rosie Cox: Zach's ex-wife. Works as a teacher. She and Zach share custody of their children.

Cliff Harding: Retired engineer and now horse breeder living near Cedar Cove. Divorced father of Lisa, who lives in Maryland. He has an on-again, off-again relationship with Grace Sherman.

Cecilia Randall: Navy wife, living in Cedar Cove. Accountant. Married to Ian Randall, submariner. Lost a baby, Allison.

Bob and Peggy Beldon: Retired. Own the Thyme and Tide Bed-and-Breakfast at 44 Cranberry Point. Have two adult children.

Roy McAfee: Private investigator, retired from Seattle police force. Married to Corrie McAfee, who is also his office manager. They have two adult children and live at 50 Harbor Street.

Troy Davis: Cedar Cove sheriff. Lives at 92 Pacific Boulevard.

Warren Saget: Local builder, formerly involved with Justine.

Dave Flemming: Local Methodist minister. Married to Emily. They have two sons and live at 8 Sandpiper Way.

To Jo and Hayley

Because you've given so much and inspired others

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One

From the moment Rosie Cox entered Cedar Cove's divorce court, she'd felt a renewed sense of failure—not to mention betrayal. Who *wouldn't* feel that way? After seventeen years of what she'd believed to be a reasonably good marriage, Zach's infidelity was the last thing she'd expected.

He'd never openly admitted to the affair. She hadn't found her husband in a compromising situation, hadn't found any concrete evidence—no matchbooks from expensive restaurants, no jewelry receipts or motel bills—but in her heart she knew. A wife always does.

Rosie owned up to the truth—she was angry and she'd expressed that anger by making this divorce as complicated and difficult as she possibly could. Why should she go easy on Zach or walk away from their marriage without one hell of a fight? And fight she had, with both fists raised.

As she turned away from the judge, the final decree in her hand, she realized she'd made another mistake.

Rosie had *assumed* that once the divorce was granted, the anger and bitterness of these dreadful months would be lifted. Wrong again. An even heavier burden had been added. When the joint custody agreement she and Zach had so carefully worked out, point by point, was presented to Judge Olivia Lockhart, the judge had rejected it.

Instead, Judge Lockhart had stated that it was emotionally detrimental to kids to shuffle them between residences every few days. Allison and Eddie needed stable lives, according to Judge Lockhart, and *they* hadn't asked for the divorce. Some people considered the judge innovative, Rosie thought, disgruntled. How about interfering? Or out of her mind? Because—of all the crazy settlements—she'd awarded the children their house. That meant Rosie and Zach would be the ones moving in and out.

Talk about ridiculous! Talk about impossible.

Now that the divorce was final, Rosie and Zach would have to figure out some kind of living arrangements. The ramifications of what they'd agreed to were starting to hit Rosie and she hadn't even left the courtroom.

"Rosie," Sharon Castor, her attorney, said as soon as they were in the silent hallway outside the courtroom. "We have to meet with your ex-husband."

One look told Rosie that Sharon was as flustered as she was herself.

Otto Benson, Zach's lawyer, joined them. Although he remained outwardly calm, his face was tense. She dared not glance in Zach's direction. In fact, she'd avoided looking at her ex-husband from the moment she'd walked into the courtroom.

"Let's get a conference room and discuss the details," Zach's attorney said.

Rosie peered at Zach, standing behind his lawyer. He didn't seem any happier than she was with the decision, but she'd keel over in a dead faint before she let him know how she felt.

"Rosie and I should be able to work this out ourselves," Zach said with an edge of irritation.

Given the way everything had gone so far, that suggestion wasn't promising. "If you remember, it took us weeks of haggling to come up with this joint custody agreement," she pointed out. She enjoyed reminding him what a jerk he'd been. Rosie supposed Zach was hoping to avoid more attorneys' fees. Too bad. If he ended up with less money to spend on his girlfriend, that wasn't her concern.

Fists clenched, Zach snarled something under his breath. Probably just as well she couldn't hear it.

Rosie decided, proud of her own display of self-control.

“What makes you think we’re capable of agreeing to anything without a mediator?” she asked sarcastically.

“Fine,” Zach muttered, with a pout reminiscent of their nine-year-old son. Staring at him now, Rosie had trouble believing she’d ever loved Zachary Cox. Not only was he smug and argumentative and self-righteous, he had no idea what it meant to be a husband and father. Granted, Zach was a handsome man; not only that, his appearance proclaimed his success as a businessman, a professional. Although, in her opinion, anyone with half a brain would instantly peg him for an accountant. He had that narrowed look about his dark eyes, as if he spent too many hours a day squinting at columns of tiny numbers. Despite that, he was appealing to the eye with his broad shoulders—which nicely set off his expensive suit—and thick, dark hair. At one time he’d been an athlete, and even now he routinely jogged and kept in shape.

Rosie had loved the firmness of his muscles as she stroked his back during lovemaking. Of course, it’d been months since they’d slept in the same bed, and much longer since they’d actually made love.

Rosie didn’t even remember the last time. Had she known, she might have appreciated it more, lingered a moment longer at her husband’s side, savored the feel of his arms around her. One thing was certain: Zach hadn’t been interested in her from the day he’d hired Janice Lamond as his personal assistant.

The thought of him entwined with Janice nearly suffocated Rosie and she forcefully shoved the image from her mind. Anger and revulsion at her husband’s—no, ex-husband’s—unfaithfulness rose like bile in the back of her throat.

Zach’s raised voice caught her attention; apparently he’d agreed to have their attorneys negotiate this added complication to their divorce decree. Otto was checking with the clerk for an empty conference room.

Once a private room in the law library was secured, Zach and his attorney sat at one side of the table, across from Rosie and hers.

Even the attorneys seemed perplexed by the situation. “I can’t say I’ve ever heard of such a decree before,” Sharon said, starting the conversation.

“Me, neither.” Otto frowned. “This is one for the books.”

“Fine,” Zach said in a curt voice, “it’s unusual, but we’re both adults. We can figure this out. I know I was sincere about putting the children first.” He glared at Rosie, as if to suggest she hadn’t been.

“If you were sincere, you would’ve had second thoughts about sleeping with that slut.” Rosie hadn’t intended to be argumentative, but if her ex-husband was so concerned about their children’s welfare, he would never have broken his wedding vows.

“I refuse to dignify that remark by responding to it,” Zach said through gritted teeth. “Besides, if you were home more, instead of volunteering for every cause known to mankind, every cause *except* your children, you’d—”

“Well, I refuse to allow you to blame me for what *you’ve* done.” Her volunteer efforts were Zach’s big complaint. He had his wish; she’d had to resign from every position she held and seek paid employment. She hoped he was happy. For the first time since their children were born, Rosie wasn’t a stay-at-home mom.

“I thought we were here to discuss this divorce decree?” Zach asked with a bored look, an expression that was obviously for her benefit. “If we’re going to trade insults I’d rather not pay our attorneys to listen.”

That’s right, Rosie mused, deriving a small sense of satisfaction out of knowing that Zach was

responsible for both sets of attorneys' fees. He was the one with the high-paying job. She was currently taking summer classes to update her teaching certificate. Classes Zach was paying for. That was another notch in her belt—another concession granted in their divorce settlement.

Her application was in with the South Kitsap School District and, considering all her connections, she shouldn't have any difficulty getting hired as a substitute teacher in September.

"Let's make a list of what we can agree on," Sharon said briskly, ignoring the antagonism between Rosie and Zach. "Despite the breakdown of your marriage, you both claim you want to keep the needs of your children first and foremost."

Rosie nodded and so did Zach.

Sharon smiled. She was a no-nonsense woman who wasn't swayed by emotion. "Okay, that gives us a place to start."

"I want to compliment you both on your attitudes," Otto said, removing a legal pad from his briefcase as if to prove he was earning his pay. Zach had chosen the best and, for that matter, so had Rosie. Both attorneys came with high price tags.

"Yeah," Zach said sarcastically. "If we got along any better, we might've stayed married."

"You know who to blame for that," Rosie snapped.

"Yes, I do," he snapped right back. "How many nights were you actually home? How many dinners did you cook? If you don't remember, I do. Damn few."

Sharon sighed audibly. "Okay, the kids come first, and at this point, they have the house, which means Rosie will need to find somewhere else to live for the three days a week when Zach's staying with them."

Somewhere else to live? Rosie's head jerked up as the shock ran up and down her spine. The reality—the repercussions of the judge's edict—had just started to sink in.

"And pay half the mortgage on the house," Zach added, smiling at her benignly.

"But I can't—" Rosie hadn't realized, hadn't thought that far in advance. "I don't have a job yet—how am I supposed to afford an apartment on top of everything else?" This was grossly unfair. Surely Zach could see that such a demand was unreasonable. She had a life, too, and no way of building it if every penny she earned went into paying for two separate residences.

Rosie stared at Zach. He returned her look, unblinking.

"I have a suggestion," Sharon said.

"Let's hear it." Zach's lawyer sounded eager, if not desperate, for ideas.

"If Zach spends three days a week at the house with the children, then his apartment will sit empty—is that right?" She turned to Zach for verification.

Rosie studied him, too. In essence, Sharon was asking if Zach intended to move Janice into the apartment, Janice and her son, who was the same age as Eddie.

"The apartment will be empty," Zach said emphatically.

"What if—" Sharon glanced from one to the other—"Rosie moves into the apartment during the time you're at the house? You did say it was a two-bedroom apartment, didn't you?"

Objections shot up like weeds in Rosie's fertile mind. She didn't want anything to do with Zach. She certainly didn't want to be put in a situation where she had to deal with being around him or his things—or what had been *their* things. Nor did she want to be privy to any information regarding his relationship with his girlfriend.

"No way am I letting Rosie in my apartment." Apparently Zach shared her qualms. "We're divorced. It took months to get that way. Rosie wanted out and she got her wish."

"You were the one who moved out," she reminded him scornfully.

“Correction. You kicked me out.”

“If you’ll recall, *you* insisted I see an attorney.” She couldn’t believe how convenient his memory was.

Zach snorted and looked at Sharon. “More fool me.”

Rosie’s attorney raised both hands in a pleading gesture. “Listen, it’s just a suggestion—a way of saving money for you both.” She turned to Rosie. “You’ll be fortunate to find a place, even a studio apartment, for less than five, six hundred dollars a month.”

“Zach will have to pay—”

“The hell I will!”

“The divorce is final,” Otto Benson stated. “Zach isn’t responsible for anything more than what’s already been agreed to.”

Rosie’s gaze flew to her attorney, and Sharon reluctantly nodded. All at once, this was more than Rosie could bear. Not only had she lost her husband, but now she was being forced out of her home, too. Moisture welled in her eyes, and she managed to blink it away. Hell would freeze over before she let Zach know what he was doing to her.

A long moment passed before Zach finally spoke. “Okay, I’ll agree to let Rosie stay in the apartment on the days I’m at the house, as long as she’s willing to split the rent.”

Rosie was well aware that she had no choice, but she did have her pride and she was determined to hold on to that. “On one condition,” she insisted, lifting her head.

“Now what?” Zach asked with a long-suffering sigh.

“I don’t want you bringing that woman into the family home. I want our house to be a safe place for the children. In other words, I don’t want Allison and Eddie exposed to your women.”

“*What?*” Zach glared at her as though she’d spoken a foreign language.

“You heard me,” she said vehemently, meeting his angry eyes. “This divorce has been hard enough on the kids without you parading Janice or any other woman you decide to date through my home. I want the house off-limits to your...your floozies.”

“Floozies?” Zach smirked. “Fine, no *floozies*. And the same goes for you. I don’t want you bringing any men to the house, either. No studs, no hotties, no boy toys, no—”

“Oh, that’s rich,” Rosie broke in, putting an end to his ridicule. In seventeen years she’d never so much as looked at another man. Not since the day she’d met Zach.

“Do you or don’t you agree?” her ex-husband challenged.

“Of course I agree!”

“Good.”

“Perfect.”

With their attorneys present, they made decisions about a number of other issues, and Sharon quickly wrote up an agreement. Zach’s attorney reviewed it, and then both Zach and Rosie signed it.

By the time she left the courthouse, Rosie felt as if she’d been pummeled by wave after wave in a stormy sea. Strange as it seemed, her heart actually ached. For weeks she’d dreaded this day and at the same time longed for it, just so the divorce would finally be over. Now she wasn’t sure *what* she felt, other than this deep pain that threatened to overpower her.

Nine-year-old Eddie was shooting baskets when Rosie pulled into the driveway at 311 Pelican Court. In a little more than a month, school would start again. Perhaps then their lives would return to some semblance of routine.

Eddie caught the basketball and held it against his side as he waited for her to park the car in the garage. His sad dark eyes watched Rosie as he stepped aside so she could drive past.

Fifteen-year-old Allison was in the kitchen, microwaving a hot dog for lunch. She turned and stared at Rosie, eyes glittering defiantly. She resembled Zach so much just then.

“How’d it go?” Eddie asked, following Rosie into the kitchen. He continued to hold the basketball.

“All right, I guess.”

The microwave beeped and Allison removed the steaming wiener, devoid of a bun. As if it had suddenly lost its appeal, she set the plate on the countertop and studied Rosie.

“There’s been a...minor complication,” Rosie announced. She didn’t believe in hiding the truth from her children, especially when it involved something that would affect them.

“What kind of complication?” Eddie asked, pulling out a kitchen chair. He balanced the basketball on the table, one hand supporting it. Allison crossed her arms and leaned against the counter, pretending to be bored; still, she didn’t leave the room as she so often did.

With effort Rosie managed to show a bit of enthusiasm for Judge Lockhart’s decree. “Well...you guys won’t be moving in and out of the house every few days, after all.”

Allison and Eddie shared a look of surprise. Trying to sound positive, Rosie explained Judge Lockhart’s decision and briefly outlined how the switch would work.

“You mean Dad’s going to live *here*?” Eddie asked as if he didn’t quite understand. Rosie didn’t blame him for being confused. She was, too. Confused and irritated by this turn of events. Add miserable to the mix, and it pretty much described the way she felt about life in general.

“Your father will be at the house part-time,” Rosie said, so there wouldn’t be any misunderstanding. She’d agreed to turn what had been her sewing room into a spare bedroom for his use. The sewing machine could go in the master bedroom without a problem.

“Oh,” Eddie said. He seemed disappointed, but then his eyes lit up as he realized he’d have his father back, if only half the time. “I think it’s cool!”

“I don’t,” Allison shouted. “As far as I’m concerned, this entire divorce is bogus.” With that she stormed out of the kitchen.

Rosie watched her daughter go, wishing she knew how to reach her. She wanted to put her arms around Allison and hug her and assure her that everything would be all right, but the girl wouldn’t accept any kind of closeness. At least not from her...

“Don’t worry about Allison,” her nine-year-old said. “She’s really glad about Dad coming home, even if it’s only for a few days at a time, but she wouldn’t let you know that for anything.”

Two

Sweat dripped down Grace Sherman's face, and the intense heat of the mid-July afternoon plastered her T-shirt to her skin. She dipped her roller in the tray and smoothly spread light yellow paint across her bedroom wall. She was a librarian and, despite all the books she'd taken out on home maintenance, she wasn't much good at renovations and repairs. Dan had always insisted on looking after the house. Alone at age fifty-five, Grace found that life continued to thrust her into unfamiliar and challenging situations.

"I hope you appreciate what a good friend I am," Olivia Lockhart said from behind her. She, too, worked at covering the dingy white walls with yellow paint. Cautiously, Olivia—her lifelong friend—moved around the furniture pushed into the middle of the bedroom, protected by old sheets.

"You volunteered," Grace reminded her, using her forearm to wipe the perspiration from her brow. The room felt stifling and the air was still, even with the windows partially open.

After learning that her husband of thirty-four years, who'd been missing since the previous April, was dead, Grace had developed insomnia. She didn't understand it. Olivia had suggested she repaint the room, thinking a different color might signify a new phase in her life. Pale yellow was a calm, optimistic color. Maybe her subconscious would get the hint. At the time it had sounded like a good idea, especially when her friend had offered to help. It was just the kind of thing Olivia would do. Over the years, they'd supported each other through everything from minor domestic crises to life-shattering events.

"I can't believe I thought we could finish this in one day." Olivia groaned. Straightening, she planted her hands on the small of her back. "I didn't have any idea how much work this was going to be."

"How about a glass of iced tea?" Grace was more than ready for a break herself. The two of them had been painting for what seemed like forever but was probably only an hour or two. Still, they'd had to move the furniture and do the prep work first—laying a drop cloth on the floor and taping the windows.

Olivia set aside her roller. "You don't need to ask twice."

Grace wrapped both paint-coated rollers in a plastic bag, then headed into the kitchen. By the time Olivia finished washing her hands, Grace had poured the iced tea into tall glasses. Buttercup, her golden retriever, scratched at the screen door and Grace absently let her inside. Panting, the dog lumbered into the house and stretched out under the table, resting her chin on the cool tile floor.

Grace slumped into the chair and released the kerchief tied at the base of her neck, shaking her damp hair free. She wore it shorter these days, since she no longer needed to worry about her husband's likes and dislikes.

After witnessing Olivia's pain years before, Grace had never wanted to go through a divorce, but when Dan disappeared she wasn't left with any options. For financial reasons, it was the only practical choice.

That had been months ago now. Afterward, even learning Dan's fate was anticlimactic. She was relieved that his body had been discovered, but she'd already endured the worst of the grief and guilt—the not knowing, the doubts, the recriminations—all of which had befallen her after Dan's disappearance. So this sudden bout of insomnia didn't make sense to her.

“This was the best idea you’ve had all day,” Olivia said, sinking down on the chair. “Besides putting on a Credence Clearwater Revival CD,” she added. They’d both gotten caught up in the music of their youth and hadn’t realized how hot and uncomfortable they were until the last song on the CD ended.

“We may not have the moves we did thirty years ago, but we aren’t ready for walkers just yet,” Grace said, and Olivia agreed with an easy smile.

“I heard about your latest decree,” Grace said, smiling across the table at her friend. They’d been working together all afternoon, but with the music playing they’d barely had a chance to talk.

“You mean the joint custody case?” Olivia asked.

Grace nodded. “It’s all over town.” This wasn’t the first time Olivia had made a controversial decision in the courtroom.

Olivia rolled her eyes. “At least Jack didn’t write about it in his column.”

So Olivia was going to bring Jack Griffin into the conversation. Good. Grace had been looking for a way to introduce the subject. He and Olivia had been seeing each other for more than a year, and Grace loved Jack for the simple reason that he’d made her friend happy. Once Olivia had started dating Jack, the local newspaper editor, she’d been...more relaxed. More lighthearted. Then, a few weeks ago, Jack and Olivia had a falling out, a difference of opinion, really—and they hadn’t spoken since. Olivia was miserable, although she wasn’t willing to admit it.

“Speaking of Jack,” Grace asked brightly, “what’s new with the two of you?” In her opinion Jack was exactly right for her friend. He was witty and funny and just outrageous enough to be interesting.

Olivia looked up. “I don’t want to talk about Jack.”

“Then don’t. Tell me about Stan.”

Stan was Olivia’s ex-husband, who now lived in Seattle with his second wife, but he’d been making regular appearances in Cedar Cove lately. Something must be up; however, Olivia had kept suspiciously quiet about it.

“You heard about Stan and Marge?” Olivia asked, her eyes rounding with surprise. “Who told you? Mom or Justine?”

“Neither one told me anything. I’m waiting for you to enlighten me.”

Olivia took a deep swallow of her iced tea, then glanced up, an uncertain expression on her face.

“Something’s bothering you,” Grace pressed.

“Stan and Marge are getting a divorce.”

Shock waves went through Grace. This was news. Big news. No wonder Stan had been coming to Cedar Cove more frequently. His visits were often under the guise of seeing his daughter, Justine, and his grandson, who’d been born a little more than two weeks ago. Grace found his sudden interest in family somewhat suspect. Especially since Stan had deserted his wife and children back in the summer of 1986. Jordan, a bright, lively thirteen-year-old, had gone swimming with friends one hot August afternoon and drowned. Justine, his twin sister, had held his lifeless body in her arms until the paramedics arrived. Everything in Olivia’s life was marked by that day; it was the dividing point, the boundary between believing the world was a safe place and knowing it could be a treacherous one.

Olivia and Stan’s marriage fell apart after Jordan drowned, but Grace had always wondered if Stan had been involved with Marge before Jordan’s death. She’d never said this to Olivia’s face, but she had her suspicions.

“You haven’t got anything to say?” Olivia asked.

Grace was almost surprised that Stan and Marge’s marriage had lasted this many years. The ink on the divorce papers was hardly dry when Stan had married the other woman. “I’m sorry it didn’t work out,” she mumbled, which was slightly stretching the truth.

“I am, too,” Olivia said, looking melancholy and tired.

Then it came to her. Grace should've connected the dots much sooner. She felt like slapping her palm against her forehead in cartoon fashion. “Stan wants you back, doesn't he?”

For a moment it seemed as if Olivia wasn't going to answer, then she did with a nod of her head.

Outrage filled Grace. How dare he! How dare Stan walk back into Olivia's life after all these years and expect her to welcome him with open arms. Of all the nerve! His timing was impeccable, too, she thought wryly. Naturally Stan would reappear just when Olivia had met Jack. He must hate the idea of his ex-wife seeing anyone else.

“I didn't tell you about Stan for exactly this reason,” Olivia muttered. “You're so angry your eyes are about to pop out.”

“I can't *help* it,” Grace cried.

It occurred to her that Olivia might actually be considering a reconciliation with Stan. That was the worst thing she could do—and if Olivia didn't know it, Grace wasn't too shy to tell her. Stan had never appreciated his wife. He'd never seemed too concerned about what his leaving would do to her or to their remaining children. All Stan had ever cared about was himself and *his* needs, *his* wants.

“I know how you feel about Stan,” Olivia murmured.

“You're not going back to him, are you? You wouldn't really consider it, would you?” The thought was so repugnant Grace had difficulty getting the words out.

The perplexed uncertainty that came over Olivia was so unlike her that Grace had to make a conscious effort not to get up and hug her.

“I don't know,” Olivia whispered.

Grace merely nodded, arranging her features in as neutral an expression as possible.

“The day Leif was born,” Olivia said, studying the inside of her glass as if it held the answers she needed, “Stan and I had the most wonderful time reminiscing.”

“You had three children with him,” Grace said, trying to suppress her own negative view of the situation.

“We were happy for a lot of years.”

Grace couldn't deny that, but Stan had nearly crippled her friend emotionally. She above all others knew how long it had taken Olivia to recover her equilibrium following Jordan's death and the demise of her marriage.

“What about Jack?” It was probably a mistake to introduce his name just then, but she was genuinely curious. “Does he know?” Her guess was he did, and that was the key to their current troubles.

As Olivia nodded, her hand tightened around her glass. “Do you want to know what he did?” Her brown eyes sparked with irritation. “I swear every time I think about it, I get mad.”

This sounded promising.

Olivia didn't wait for an answer. “Jack gave me an ultimatum. He claimed Stan's been after me for months and that I had to choose—either him or Stan.”

“Ye-es?” Grace said, dragging out the word. “And your point is?”

“My point,” Olivia said with exaggerated patience, “is that I'm not some trophy to be won. Furthermore, I'm not willing to play Jack's silly games.”

“Games,” Grace countered. “It seems to me you're the one playing games.”

“Me?” Olivia cried.

“Yes, you,” Grace said. “Do you expect Jack to hang around and twiddle his thumbs while Stan waltzes back into your life?”

“No, but I expect him to...to show some gumption. If I’m as important to him as he says, then the least he can do is let me know how he feels.”

Grace frowned. “You mean he *hasn’t* told you?”

“Told me?” Olivia repeated. “Oh, hardly. He stopped by the house at an inopportune moment about a month ago. Stan had spent the night—”

Grace couldn’t disguise her shock. “Stan...”

“Not you, too,” Olivia said, sounding utterly exasperated. “If you *must* know, he slept in James’s old room upstairs. It was completely innocent. I can’t believe you’d think I’d let him back in my bed...”

“I don’t know what to think,” Grace said, eager to learn what had taken place. “Go on, tell me what happened.”

“Jack and I were supposed to meet the next morning, but he showed up early with coffee and doughnuts, and there was Stan in Justine’s old housecoat and fuzzy slippers. He looked ridiculous, but that’s beside the point.”

“And naturally Jack assumed the worst.” He’d jumped to conclusions, just as Grace almost had.

“Naturally,” Olivia echoed. “I went after him and tried to explain, but he wouldn’t listen. He said I wanted to get back together with Stan, that was fine with him.”

Grace frowned again. “Are you *sure* that’s what he said?”

Olivia paused. “Maybe not in so many words, but that was his message. I have to tell you it upset me that he actually thought I’d sleep with Stan when the two of us had been seriously dating.”

A picture was beginning to take shape in Grace’s mind. “You haven’t heard from him since, have you?”

“No. Mom thinks I should phone him.” Slowly Olivia raised her eyes to meet Grace’s. “Is that what you think, too?”

Grace shrugged. If she was the one in this situation, she might, but then...

“The thing is,” Olivia said, biting her lower lip, “I want Jack to show some commitment here. Prove that he cares. If he honestly loves me, I think he should fight for me.”

“Fight for you?” The image that came to Grace’s mind, of Jack and Stan standing in the driveway, duking raised, was comical. “You mean you want him to challenge Stan to a fistfight? Or—” she grinned, imagining them in Regency-era costumes, brandishing pistols “—a duel?”

“No, of course not,” Olivia said impatiently. “I want him to give me some indication, a sign that I’m worth more to him than his stupid male pride. That’s all.” She lowered her eyes. “He’s acting like a hurt little boy.”

“I imagine he *is* hurt.”

“Well, so am I. He instantly decided I’d spent the night with Stan, although we’d been seeing each other exclusively. If he really believes I’m that kind of woman, I’m better off without him.”

“Don’t give up on him so quickly.”

“It’s been almost a month, Grace.” Slowly, sadly, she shook her head. “What else am I supposed to think? He’s apparently content just to drop the relationship.”

“What about you?” Grace asked. “Are you willing to walk away from Jack?”

She didn’t answer immediately. “I don’t think so,” she finally said.

This was encouraging. “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know,” she readily admitted. “Give it time, I guess.”

Grace nodded. She drained her tea, stood and set her glass in the sink. “Let’s get back to painting.”

“Just a minute,” Olivia said, stopping her. She was still seated. “While we’re on the subject of men

tell me what's happening between you and that good-looking rancher.”

Grace wanted to groan out loud. She'd really prefer not to discuss Cliff Harding. They'd been seeing each other for nearly a year; they'd met shortly after Grace had filed for divorce. She hadn't officially gone out with him until her divorce was final, but he'd let her know he was interested. Grace was interested in him, too; however, for some reason, their mutual attraction made her uncomfortable.

“What's wrong?” Olivia asked.

“I'm not really sure,” she murmured. “That's part of the problem.”

“You mean a decent, wonderful man comes into your life and you can't figure it out?”

Grace ignored the light sarcasm. “Dan and I got married so young,” she said, and because it was apparent that Olivia wasn't going to let her escape, she reclaimed her seat. “We were just teenagers, and then Dan went off to Vietnam. But despite all that, despite the difficulties we had, I never looked at another man.”

“I know,” Olivia said, her voice low and soothing.

“Given the least bit of encouragement, Cliff would ask me to marry him.”

“He was so kind the day of Dan's funeral.”

Grace could only agree. Cliff had shown up at the house following the wake and tenderly looked after her. She'd been exhausted, mentally, physically, emotionally. That afternoon, Cliff had comforted her, tucked her into bed and made her dinner. Grace had never met anyone as thoughtful as Cliff Harding, and, frankly, the way that made her feel frightened her.

“I know Cliff wants us to be serious,” she said, her voice trembling, “but I haven't dated anyone except him since Dan disappeared.”

“You think seeing a man exclusively—any man—is the same trap you fell into during high school?” Olivia asked. “Is that it?”

“I didn't want to be divorced or a widow, but I'm both. I guess I don't want to limit myself to one person at this stage. I don't think I'm ready to be in a relationship.” There, she'd said it, and as soon as the words were out she understood what had been happening and why.

“Grace?” Olivia was studying her closely.

“That's it,” she breathed. The insomnia, the anxiety, it all made sense to her now. She didn't need her bedroom repainted to help release her from the memories of her dead husband. Yes, she had concerns about some information Dan had given her in the letter he'd written just before his death, information to think about, but Dan had very little to do with what had been churning inside her these last few weeks. All this angst was tied to her relationship with Cliff. What she needed was time and space and freedom to discover who she was—who she'd become—and what she wanted out of life. She needed a chance to be herself, by herself.

“Grace?”

“I adore Cliff,” she whispered. “I truly do, but I'm not ready to be as serious as he is. Not yet... I just can't.” Although she was almost in tears, Grace experienced an incredible feeling of relief, and for the first time since Dan's funeral, she knew she'd sleep through the night.

“You have to tell Cliff,” Olivia said urgently.

“I know.” She had to find a way to explain without offending him or losing his friendship. “I'd like to continue seeing him, but I want the freedom to see other men, too.” Said out loud, it seemed so unfair and selfish, but it was the truth and that was something Grace often had a difficult time admitting, especially to herself.

Three

As the morning light cascaded into her bedroom, Maryellen Sherman rolled carefully onto her back, astounded at the determined effort it took to shift her “nine-months-and-counting” pregnant body.

Her sister had warned her there’d be days she’d feel as big as the Goodyear blimp, and there were, but Maryellen couldn’t remember a time she’d been happier.

“Any day now,” she said, rubbing her hand over her tight, round abdomen. Catherine “Katie” Grace kicked and stretched, and Maryellen marveled as she watched her stomach extend and move. Glancing at the clock, she saw it was eight-thirty, time to get up. She struggled to sit, and with her palms braced against one side of the bed, Maryellen stared down at her feet and realized they were no longer visible. In fact, it’d been weeks since she’d last seen her toes.

She stood awkwardly and supported her back with both hands. It’d begun to ache, which was no surprise. That was what she got for sleeping on a worn-out old mattress. Once she started moving around, she’d feel better. On bare feet, she padded into the kitchen and put on water to make herself a pot of herbal tea; while she waited for it to boil, she sorted through the four maternity tops that were still decent enough to wear outside the house.

This pregnancy hadn’t been planned, and she’d tried to hide the fact that she was pregnant from the father—not a smart move on her part but a desperate one. Jon Bowman, an artist whose work had been displayed at the gallery she managed, had learned about the baby on his own. He’d been adamant about having a role in his daughter’s life. Maryellen didn’t like it, but she didn’t have any choice. It was either grant Jon visitation rights or fight him in court, something she’d rather avoid.

Maryellen was fond of him and respected his considerable talent. What she disliked most about Jon wasn’t his fault at all. With barely any effort, he’d managed to awaken her sensual nature. Until that November night last year, she’d assumed the sexual part of herself had been buried for good, along with her failed marriage. Jon had deftly proved otherwise.

The biggest regret in her life had come when she was a college student. Maryellen had experienced another unplanned pregnancy. She’d allowed her boyfriend, soon-to-be-husband, to manipulate her, and at his insistence had aborted her baby. She hadn’t wanted to, and she’d never been able to forgive herself for doing it.

This time around, she was determined to protect her unborn child. This time she refused to listen to anyone or anything other than her own heart. She *wanted* this child, loved this child. What had begun as a terrifying mistake had become a valued second chance.

It had been a shock to find out that Jon intended to be part of Katie’s life. So much so, he’d threatened to take Maryellen to court if she excluded him from seeing his daughter. Maryellen had no grounds on which to keep him away, so she’d reluctantly agreed to his terms.

The kettle whistled as she finished laying out her clothes. Massaging her back with one hand, Maryellen poured the boiling water into the waiting teapot. “You don’t have any idea how happy I’m going to be to drink coffee again,” she muttered to her unborn daughter.

Maryellen showered and dressed, and because she was only working half days, she had a leisurely breakfast of toast and yogurt and tea. She didn’t need to be at the Harbor Street Art Gallery until shortly before noon. She loved her job, and enjoyed the friendships she had with many of the local artists. Jon was a photographer, and his work, mostly nature photography, was both breathtaking and

insightful. After she'd rejected him, he'd decided to take his photographs elsewhere. At the time, his decision had seemed for the best, but the truth of it was, she missed seeing him and the gallery—certainly missed the revenue his work had provided.

Jon's talent was what had first attracted her, but she found the man himself intriguing. He was unpretentious and straightforward—and reticent about the details of his own life. Although she'd worked with him for more than three years, she knew nothing about his artistic training and next to nothing about his personal background. The one bit of information he'd given her was that he'd inherited a stunning piece of property from his grandfather, the property on which he'd built his house. When she asked him questions, he either walked away or changed the subject. For the most part, he declined invitations to social gatherings. She'd been surprised when he'd agreed to attend a Halloween party last year. She'd made up an excuse to invite him, never believing he'd actually show up. That night they'd shared their first kiss, which was the beginning of it all. In the days that followed, Maryellen had come to know him as well as anyone in Cedar Cove, and probably better. The baby kicked and she smiled to herself. Obviously she *did* know him better than most.

Still, she was impressed by the man who'd fathered her child. Jon had constructed his own home and worked as a chef for The Lighthouse restaurant, all while his reputation as a photographer grew in the Pacific Northwest and beyond.

"I didn't expect you until noon," Lois Habbersmith said when Maryellen walked into the gallery at eleven-thirty, a little ahead of schedule.

Until recently, Lois had been Maryellen's assistant, but had been temporarily promoted to gallery manager during Maryellen's maternity leave. She was confident Lois would do a more-than-adequate job.

"When's your next doctor's appointment?" Lois asked.

"Tomorrow morning." The ache in her back seemed to be getting worse. Maryellen pulled out a chair and sat down.

Lois looked concerned. "Are you feeling all right?"

"No," Maryellen admitted. "The truth is, I'm having this weird backache." She realized the ache seemed to diminish and then increase fairly regularly. It suddenly occurred to her that perhaps this *wasn't* a backache, but the onset of labor.

As if she, too, had reached the same conclusion, Lois walked all the way around her. "My labor pains always started in my back." Then holding one finger to her lips, Lois said, "Maryellen, you think you could be going into labor?"

"I...I should probably time these...pains, shouldn't I?"

Lois clapped her hands excitedly. "This is so wonderful!"

"Lois, Lois, I don't know if I'm in labor. I just have this...strange feeling."

Maryellen glanced at her watch and tried to remember when she'd last felt this odd pain that seemed to radiate from her spine.

"Your mom's your birth partner, right?"

Maryellen nodded. She vaguely remembered that her mother had mentioned she'd be attending a librarians' meeting in Seattle on Wednesday. Today was Wednesday. Grace had a cell phone, Maryellen knew, but she was constantly forgetting to turn it on, or off, in which case the battery would run low. No need to contact her mother just yet, she decided. There was plenty of time, and she wasn't convinced she was officially in labor, anyway. She wondered if maybe this was false labor, which several people had warned her about.

A few hours later, at home by herself, Maryellen was no longer wondering. She knew. There was

nothing false about this. What had started out as a dull ache in her back had ultimately worked its way around, and she was having contractions at five-minute intervals. She reached for the phone and dialed her mother.

Just as she'd suspected, her mother's cell phone was off or not working or the battery was dead. Or whatever! Drawing in a deep breath, Maryellen closed her eyes. There was always her sister. Kelly had been wonderful ever since she'd learned Maryellen was pregnant. They'd grown closer than at any time since they were teenagers.

After five rings, Kelly and Paul's answering machine came on. Hoping she sounded collected and in control, Maryellen left a message. "Kelly, hi. Listen, it looks like I'm going into labor. I haven't called Dr. Abner yet and I'm sure there's loads of time, but I thought you should know." Then, not wanting her sister to guess how panicky she was beginning to feel, Maryellen added, "Mom won't be back from that librarians' meeting until later, so when you're available maybe you could give me a call. I...I don't have anyone to drive me to the hospital." Any pretense of composure vanished by the time she replaced the receiver in its cradle.

As Maryellen turned away from the phone, she felt a pain so sharp it nearly doubled her over. Almost immediately water gushed from between her legs. Amniotic fluid.

Maryellen stood in a puddle of water and tried to think clearly. Fearing any movement might endanger her child, she stretched out one hand for the phone, then hesitated, not knowing whom to call.

Suddenly it became obvious. She had to get the number from directory assistance. As she punched out, she prayed Jon was home and close to a phone.

When there was no answer at his house, she nearly wept with frustration. Panic started to set in; warding it off, she forced herself to remain calm. On the off chance that he was working, she dialed The Lighthouse restaurant.

The woman who answered was polite and friendly. Maryellen was put on hold. After an eternity, Jon came on the line, and his clipped greeting said he wasn't happy to be called away from whatever he was doing.

Frightened, near desperate, Maryellen whispered hoarsely, "Jon...I need help—"

She wasn't allowed to finish. "Where are you?"

"Home. My water broke."

"I'll be there in five minutes."

Her relief was overwhelming. She blinked rapidly to keep from breaking into grateful tears. "Thank you," she began, but the line had already gone dead.

Only a few minutes later she heard a car door slam outside her small rental house. By then, she'd called Dr. Abner and learned that her instincts had been right; he wanted her to go directly to the hospital's birthing center.

Jon didn't bother to knock but came barreling in the front door. He had on his white chef's shirt and pants, both of which were stained. Obviously she'd caught him in the middle of the midday rush. She hadn't seen him in weeks. The last time had been early in the summer when they'd agreed to visitation, and despite the frantic way his gaze darted to her now, he looked wonderful. By conventional standards Jon wasn't a handsome man. His features were too sharp, his face long and narrow, his nose almost hawklike, but Maryellen had learned a harsh lesson when it came to attractive men. At first glance, Jon wasn't going to cause hearts to flutter; it was only on closer examination that she'd recognized the strength of character she found so compelling.

"Hi," she said weakly, staring down at the floor and the watery mess she was standing in.

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