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CEDAR COVE SERIES

DEBBIE MACOMBER

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ROSE HARBOR
in BLOOM

A Novel

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in Bloom

A Novel



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Dear Friends,

Welcome to the second installment in the Rose Harbor Inn series. Jo Marie is eager to update you on what's been happening at the inn. The inn is booked solid this visit and you'll enjoy meeting Kent and Julie Shivers, who are celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary—the only problem is they can't seem to get along. Their granddaughter is refereeing the game and dealing with the boy next door, who was nothing but a pest ... except now he can't take his eyes off her. And then there's Mary Smith ...

But wait, I'm getting ahead of myself. This happens with novel writers. We fall in love with our stories and characters and have trouble not blurting out the entire plotline.

What I really want is for you to make yourself at home at the inn. Jo Marie is baking cookies for this big shindig she regrets ... oops, I'm getting ahead of myself again. And of course there's the handyman Mark, who ... okay, that's it. I'm not saying one more word. I'll leave it to you to turn the page and get started reading.

Now, please, sit back and relax. I promise I won't give anything else away. Everyone at Cedar Cove is eager to update you on what's been going on, and, as always, that seems to be quite a lot.

Something else writers like ... feedback. I'd love to hear what you think. You can reach me in a variety of ways. My website at DebbieMacomber.com is one, Facebook is another, and then of course you can always write me at P.O. Box 1458, Port Orchard, WA 98366. I'd love to hear from you.

Warmest regards,



Chapter 1

Rose Harbor was in bloom. Purple rhododendrons and red azaleas dotted the property. I stood on the porch, leaning against the thick white post, and looked over the property for my new bed-and-breakfast. *The Inn at Rose Harbor* was beautifully scripted on the wooden sign and was prominently displayed in the front of the yard along with my name, *Jo Marie Rose*, proprietor.

I never planned on owning or operating a bed-and-breakfast. But then I never expected to be a widow in my thirties, either. If I'd learned anything in this road called life it's that life often takes unexpected turns, rerouting us from the very path that had once seemed so right. My friends advised me against purchasing the inn. They felt the move was too drastic: it meant more than just moving and leaving my job; it would mean an entire life change. Mark thought I should wait at least a year after losing Paul. But my friends were wrong. I'd found peace at the inn, and somewhat to my surprise, a certain contentment.

Until I purchased the inn, I'd lived in a condo in the heart of downtown Seattle. Because of my job and other responsibilities, I hadn't had pets, well, other than as a youngster. But shortly after I moved to Cedar Cove I got Rover. In only a few short months, I'd grown especially fond of him; he'd become my shadow, my constant companion.

Rover was a rescue dog I'd gotten through Grace Harding, the Cedar Cove librarian. Grace volunteered at the local animal shelter, and she'd recommended I adopt a dog. I thought I wanted a German shepherd. Instead I'd come home with this indiscriminate mixed-breed short-haired mutt. The shelter had dubbed him Rover because it was clear he'd been on his own, roaming about for a good long time.

My musings were interrupted by mutterings from the area where I planned to plant a rose garden and eventually add a gazebo. The sound came from Mark Taylor, the handyman I'd hired to construct the sign that stood in the front yard.

Mark was an interesting character. I'd given him plenty of work, but I had yet to figure out if he considered me a friend. He acted like my friend most of the time, but then every so often he turned into a grumpy, unlikable, cantankerous, unreasonable ... the list went on.

"What's up?" I called out.

"Nothing," he barked back.

Apparently, the ill-tempered monster had returned.

Months ago I'd asked Mark to dig up a large portion of the yard for a rose garden. He'd told me this project would be low on his priority list. He seemed to work on it when the mood struck him, which unfortunately wasn't often, but still I thought a month or two would be adequate in between the other projects he'd done for me. To be fair to Mark, though, it

been a harsh winter. Still, my expectations hadn't been met. I'd wanted the rosebush planted by now. I'd so hoped to have the garden in full bloom in time for the open house planned to host for the Cedar Cove Chamber of Commerce. The problem, or at least one of them, was the fact that Mark was a perfectionist. He must have taken a week simply to measure the yard. String and chalk markings crisscrossed from one end of the freshly mowed lawn to the other. Yes, Mark had insisted on mowing it first before he measured.

Normally, I'm not this impatient, but enough was enough. Mark was a skilled handyman. I had yet to find anything he *couldn't* do. He was an all-purpose kind of guy, and most of the time I felt lucky to have him around. It seemed as time progressed I found more and more small jobs that required his attention.

New to this business and not so handy myself, I needed someone I could rely on to make minor repairs. As a result, the plans for the rose garden had basically been ignored until the very last minute. At the rate Mark worked, I'd resigned myself to the fact that it wasn't possible for it to be ready before Sunday afternoon.

I watched as he straightened and wiped his forearm across his brow. Looking up, he seemed to notice I was still watching him from the porch. "You going to complain again?" he demanded.

"I didn't say a word." Reading his mood, I forced myself to bite my tongue before I said something to set him off. All Mark needed was one derogatory word from me as an excuse to leave for the day.

"You didn't need to say anything," Mark grumbled. "I can read frowns, too."

Rover raised his head at Mark's less-than-happy tone and then looked back at me as though he expected me to return the verbal volley. I couldn't help being disappointed, and it would have been easy to follow through with a few well-chosen words. Instead, I smiled ever so sweetly, determined to hold my tongue. All I could say was that it was a good thing Mark was charged by the job and not by the hour.

"Just say what's on your mind," he insisted.

"I thought I'd told you I wanted the rose garden planted before I held the open house," I said, doing my level best not to show my frustration.

"You might have mentioned this earlier, then," he snapped.

"I did."

"Clearly it slipped my mind."

"Well, don't get your dander up." It wasn't worth fighting about at this late date. The invitations were mailed, and the event, ready or not, was scheduled for this very weekend. It would be nothing short of a miracle if Mark finished before then. No need to get upset about it now.

Actually, I was as much at fault for this delay as Mark. Often before he ever started working I'd invite him in for coffee. I'd discovered that he was as interesting as he was prickly. Perhaps most surprising of all was that he'd become one of my closest friends in Cedar Cove, so naturally I wanted to find out what I could about him. The problem was he wasn't much of a talker. I'd learned more about him while playing Scrabble than in conversation. He was smart and competitive, and he had a huge vocabulary.

Even now, after five months, he avoided questions and never talked about anything personal. I didn't know if he'd ever been married or if he had family in the area. Despite a

our conversations, most of what I knew about him I'd deduced on my own. He lived alone. He didn't like talking on the phone, and he had a sweet tooth. He tended to be a perfectionist, and he took his own sweet time on a project. That was the sum total of everything I'd learned about a man I saw on average four or five times a week. He seemed to enjoy our chats, but I wasn't fooled. It wasn't my wit and charm that interested him—it was the cookies that often accompanied our visits. If I hadn't been so curious about him, I probably would have gone straight to work. Well, from this point forward I would be too busy for what I called our coffee break.

Grumbling under his breath, Mark returned to digging up the grass and stacking squares of it around the edges of the cleared space. He cut away each section as if he was serving up precise portions of wedding cake.

Despite my frustration with the delay and his persnickety ways, I continued to lean against the porch column and watch him work. The day was bright and sunny. I wasn't about to let all that sunshine go to waste. Window washing, especially the outside ones, was one of my least favorite tasks, but it needed to be done. I figured there was no time like the present.

The hot water had turned lukewarm by the time I dipped the sponge into the plastic bucket. Glancing up at the taller windows, I exhaled and dragged the ladder closer to the side of the house. If Paul were alive, I realized, he'd be the one climbing the ladder. I shook my head and remind myself that if Paul were alive I wouldn't own this inn or be living in Cedar Cove in the first place.

Sometimes I wondered if Paul would even recognize the woman I'd become in the last year. I wore my thick, dark hair much longer these days. Most of the time I tied it at the base of my neck with a scrunchie. My hair, which had always been professionally groomed for the office, had grown to the point that when I let it hang free, the tendrils bounced against the top of my shoulders.

Mark, who rarely commented on anything, made a point of letting me know I looked like I was still a teenager. I took it as a compliment, although I was fairly certain that wasn't his intent. I doubt Mark has spent much time around women, because he could make the rudest comments and hardly seem aware of what he'd said.

My hairstyle wasn't the only change in my appearance. Gone were the crisp business suits and pencil skirts, and fitted jackets that were the customary uniform for my position at the bank. These days it was mostly jeans and a sweater beneath a bib apron. One of the surprises of owning the inn was how much I enjoyed cooking and baking. I often spent the mornings in my kitchen whipping up a batch of this or that. Until I purchased the inn there hadn't been much opportunity to create elaborate meals. These days I found I could read a recipe book with the same rapture as a *New York Times* bestseller. Baking distracts me and provides afternoon treats for my guests and wonderful muffins and breads I take such pride in serving for the breakfasts. I'd put on a few pounds, too, no thanks to all the baking I did, but I was working on losing weight. Thankfully, my favorite jeans still fit.

Some days I paused, wondering if Paul would know the new me—mainly because I didn't recognize myself any longer. I'd changed, which I suppose was only natural. My entire world had been set upside down.

After dipping the sponge in the soapy water, I headed up the first three steps of the ladder ready to wash off several months' accumulation of dirt and grime. I wrinkled my nose at the pungent scent of vinegar, which my mother had recommended for cleaning windows. Unfortunately, I failed to write down the proportions. Seeing that it was a big bucket, I emptied half a bottle into the hot water. At this point, my bucket smelled more like a pickled barrel.

"What are you doing?" Mark shouted from across the yard.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" I asked, refusing to let his bad mood rile me. Being Mark's friend required more than a fair share of patience.

He stabbed the pitchfork into the grass and marched across the lawn toward me like a soldier heading into battle. A thick dark frown marred his face. "Get down from there."

I remained frozen on the third step. "Excuse me?" This had to be some kind of joke.

"You heard me."

I stared at him in disbelief. No way was I going to let Mark dictate what I could and couldn't do on my own property.

"Ladders are dangerous," he said, his fists digging into his hip bones.

I simply ignored him, climbed up one additional step, and started to wash the window.

"Don't you know sixty percent of all home accidents involve someone falling off a ladder?"

"I hadn't heard that, but I do know sixty percent of all statistics are made up on the spot."

I thought my retort would amuse him. It didn't. If anything, his frown grew deeper and darker.

"You shouldn't be on that ladder. For the love of heaven, Jo Marie, be sensible."

"Me?" If anyone was being unreasonable, it was Mark.

"It's dangerous up there."

"Do you suggest a safety net?" He made it sound as if I was walking along a window ledge on the fifty-ninth floor of a sixty-story building instead of on a stepladder.

Mark didn't answer my question. He pinched his lips into a taut line. "I don't want to argue about this."

"Good, let's not. I'm washing windows, so you can go back to planting my rose garden."

"No," he insisted.

"No?"

"I'm staying right here until you give up this foolishness and come down from there."

I heaved an expressive sigh. Mark was treating me like I was in kindergarten instead of like a woman who was fully able of taking care of herself. "I suppose I should be grateful you're concerned."

"Don't be ridiculous," he said. "For all I care you could break your fool neck, but I just don't want to be around to see it happen."

"How kind of you," I muttered, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice. His attitude and as much as his words irritated me, so I ignored him and continued washing the windows. When I was satisfied the top two were clean, I carefully backed down the rungs just to prove I was capable of being cautious. Mark had his hands braced on the ladder, holding it steady.

"Are you still here?" I asked. I knew darn good and well he was.

Again he ignored the question.

"I'm not paying you to stand around and watch me work," I reminded him.

He narrowed his eyes into slits. "Fine, then. I quit."

I didn't believe him. "No, you don't."

Within seconds he was off the porch and stalking across the yard, every step punctuated with irritation.

I jumped down the last two rungs and followed him. I don't usually lose my temper, but he was pushing all the wrong buttons with me. I'm far too independent to have anyone, especially a man, dictate what I could and couldn't do.

"You can't quit," I told him. "And you certainly can't leave my yard torn up like this."

Mark acted as though he hadn't heard a word I'd said. Instead he gathered his pitchfork and other tools, most of which he'd left in the grass.

"We have a contract," I reminded him.

"So sue me."

"Fine, I will ... I'll have my attorney contact you first thing in the morning." I didn't have an attorney, but I hoped the threat of one would shake Mark up enough to realize how foolish he was behaving. I should have known better; Mark didn't so much as blink.

Rover followed me across the lawn and remained at my side. I couldn't believe Mark. After all these months he was ready to walk away over something completely asinine. It made no sense.

With his pitchfork and shovel in one hand and his toolbox in the other he started to leave, then seemed to change his mind, because he abruptly turned back.

I moved one step forward, grateful he'd come to his senses.

"Give your lawyer my cell phone number."

"Yeah, right. You forget to carry it half the time, and if you do, the battery is low."

"Whatever. Give your attorney the number to my business line, seeing that you're so hot to sue me."

"I'll do that." My back went rigid as Mark stalked off the property. I looked down at Rover, who'd cocked his head to one side as if he, too, found it difficult to understand what had just happened and why. He wasn't the only one.

"He isn't worth the angst," I advised my dog, and then, because I was half afraid Rover might be tempted to run after Mark, I squatted down and patted his head. "Everything takes ten times longer than he estimates, anyway." Raising my voice in the hopes that Mark would hear me, I added, "Good riddance."

I stood back up and remained in the middle of my yard until Mark was completely out of view. Then and only then did I allow my shoulders to sag with defeat.

This was nuts. Barely an hour earlier we'd been sipping coffee and tea on the porch, and now I was threatening Mark with a lawsuit. And the way I felt right then, he deserved it.

Returning to my window washing, I was so agitated that I scrubbed and washed the glass until the shine nearly blinded me. I finished in record time, the muscles in my upper arm aching from the vigorous scrubbing I'd done. For half a second I was tempted to contact Mark and let him know I'd survived this dangerous feat but then thought better of it. He would have to apologize to me because he'd been way off base, treating me like I was a child.

My apologizing to him simply wasn't going to happen. But I knew him well enough to realize how stubborn he could be. If he said he wasn't coming back, then I had to believe he meant it.

My anger carried me all the way into the evening. I didn't want to admit it, but the truth

was I would miss Mark. I'd sort of grown accustomed to having him stop by every so often, for no other reason than coffee. He offered great feedback on the cookies and other items baked. We'd grown comfortable with each other. He was a friend, nothing more, and appreciated that we could be simply that: friends.

In an effort to distract myself, I emptied the dirty wash water from the bucket in the laundry-room sink, rinsed out the sponge, and set it out to dry, and then went into my small office.

I had guests arriving this weekend, which was the good news and the bad news. The first name I saw on the list was for the mysterious Mary Smith. I took the reservation shortly after taking over the inn, and it had stayed in my mind. Mary had sounded unsure, hesitant, as she wasn't sure she was doing the right thing booking this room.

A party had booked the inn as well. The original call had come in from Kent Shivers, who hadn't sounded the least bit excited about all this hoopla his family had planned for him. Kent and his wife, Julie, were about to celebrate their fiftieth wedding anniversary by renewing their vows. Other room reservations had been added at later dates, all from family members. Seven of my eight rooms were booked for Saturday.

Only one of the guests would be here through Sunday evening, though, and that was Mary Smith. Remembering her hesitation, I'd half wondered if she'd cancel at the last minute, but to this point I hadn't heard otherwise. Her room was made up and ready.

I didn't have much of an appetite for dinner and ate chips and salsa, which wasn't anything I'd normally choose. Because I was restless and at loose ends I decided to bake peanut-butter cookies, one of my favorites. It wasn't until they were cooling on the countertop that I remembered they were Mark's favorite, too.

Rover curled up on the rug in front of the refrigerator, one of his favorite spots. He seemed content, but I was restless, pacing the kitchen, and then a short while later moving from one room to another. Once in my private quarters, I tried to knit, but I ended up making one mistake after another and finally stuffed the project back into the basket. Television didn't hold my interest, either. A book I'd found fascinating just the night before bored me now.

I might as well admit it. All this fidgeting was due to my argument with Mark. In retrospect I wished I'd handled the situation differently. But really, what could I have done? Mark seemed bound and determined to argue with me. He was the one who'd gone completely off his rocker. Oh, great, now I was thinking in clichés, but it was true—our clash of wills was all due to his being high-handed and completely unreasonable.

Really, who else would go ballistic over something so ridiculous as washing windows because I chose to stand on a stepladder? He'd been rude, demanding, and utterly irrational. I wasn't putting up with that. Not from him; not from anyone.

Still, it saddened me that it had come to this.

Rover lifted his head from his spot in front of the fireplace and then rested his chin on his paws.

"Just think of all the money I'll save in flour and sugar," I said in a weak attempt at making a joke.

It felt flat even to my own ears.

Okay, I'd admit it. I was going to miss Mark.

Chapter 2

I didn't sleep well, which wasn't surprising after my tiff with Mark. I did feel bad about our disagreement, but I couldn't allow him, or anyone else, to dictate to me what I could and couldn't do in my own home.

If he was intent on breaking the contract, then so be it. The threat of a lawsuit hadn't fazed him in the least. I'd spoken in the heat of the moment and regretted that. I'd leave matters as they were for the time being until we'd both cooled down.

With no guests to prepare breakfast for, I took my time, luxuriating in not having any demands placed on me first thing in the morning, although Mary Smith would be arriving sometime before lunch. Rover followed me into the kitchen, where I brewed myself a cup of coffee. I walked out on the front porch, leaning against the round column, holding my mug while Rover did his business, watering the front lawn. When he finished, he leaped up the porch steps, bounding with such energy that I couldn't keep from smiling.

The sky was overcast and gray, threatening rain. My hope was the sun would burn off the clouds and eventually shine. Sipping my coffee, I looked over my torn-up yard where I hoped to have roses in bloom and slowly exhaled, feeling frustrated and irritated.

I had some baking I wanted to do that morning, muffins this time. I made a mental note to contact either Grace Harding at the library or Peggy and Bob Beldon, who owned another Cedar Cove B&B, about who I might hire to finish planting the roses and building the gazebo. One thing I could guarantee: whoever took on the job would complete it long before Mark ever would have, had he not quit.

I went inside and fed Rover, and as I was putting his food back in the pantry, I heard a closet door close. Checking my watch, I saw it was early yet, barely seven-thirty. The side door opened, and I heard Hailey call my name.

"I'm in here," I shouted back, and Rover hurried over to greet her.

Hailey Tremont was the high school senior I'd hired, recommended by Grace Harding. Hailey came in twice a week to help me with housekeeping chores and anything else I needed done.

She rounded the corner, leading into the kitchen. "Morning," she said, and bent over to pet Rover. She was a pretty girl, petite and sweet-natured. She was small for her age, and looking at her, I found it hard to believe she was eighteen years old.

A few weeks back Grace had asked if I could use help. Apparently, Hailey's family owned property next to Grace and her husband's ranch in the Olalla area. Grace told me Hailey hoped for a career in the hospitality business and needed a part-time job. It would give the teenager experience and a little nest egg before she headed off to college in the fall.

“I wanted to see if you needed me Saturday or Sunday,” she asked.

I knew the high school graduation ceremony was scheduled for this weekend. “What day is your graduation?”

“Sunday. I could work if you felt you needed me.” She looked down. “My grandparents will be in town and my aunt Melanie, too, but I could stop by.”

I could use the help on Sunday, but I wouldn’t ask her to come in on the day of her graduation. “Why don’t you come after school today and tomorrow?” I glanced up. “Does that upset your schedule?”

“No, that’s perfect.” Her eyes brightened when she realized she was free on Sunday.

I wished I had more hours to give her, but my business was just getting off the ground.

“I’ll be here this afternoon.”

“Perfect,” I told her.

Hailey glanced at her wrist. “I better get to school. It seems a little silly to attend class when all our assignments are in and we’ve already gotten our grades. I think most of us go simply because we know these are the last days we’ll be together.”

I remembered my own graduation. It seemed like a lifetime ago. I’d drifted away from most of my high school friends, but stayed in contact with my two best friends. Diane had moved to Texas, was married with two children, and Katie lived in north Seattle. Katie was married with three children. We kept in touch on Facebook and by email, although it’d been far too long since we’d last gotten together. I promised myself I’d make the effort to have Katie over to Cedar Cove soon. She’d seen the inn after I’d first bought it and loved it as much as I did.

“I better head off to class, or non-class,” Hailey said, and added a short laugh. “I’ll see you later this afternoon.”

“Great.” I got out the mixing bowl and the other ingredients I’d need for the muffins.

I had the cookbook open in front of me and brought out the necessary ingredients when I heard a noise outside. I paused, but I didn’t investigate right away. I had a sneaky suspicion it was Mark.

When I peeked out the foyer window, I saw that I was right. Mark stood looking down at the grass he’d dug up in order to plant the rose garden. My guess was he felt as bad about our disagreement as I did and wanted to set matters straight. Most likely he’d just begin working again and pretend yesterday had never happened.

I wouldn’t ask for an apology, although I felt he owed me one. For that matter, I probably owed him one, too. My shoulders relaxed, and I hesitated. I didn’t realize how tense our disagreement had made me, nor did I want to admit how glad I was to see him.

I decided to play it cool. I’d wait a few minutes, pour him a cup of coffee, and tell him I was intended on baking muffins and see how he reacted. I watched the clock, and after five very slow minutes I brought down a coffee mug, filled it, and carried it outside. I hesitated on the top step.

Mark was nowhere in sight.

I couldn’t imagine where he’d gone but then noticed the door to the large tool shed was cracked open. I walked down the steps to the shed, opened the door, and turned on the light. Mark wasn’t there. In that short amount of time, just minutes, Mark had come and gone taking with him the few items he’d stored at my place.

It looked like he was serious about breaking the contract. He'd had all night to think matters over. If he felt the same in the light of a new day, that told me he didn't have any regrets. Well, so much for that.

I heard the phone ring in the distance and hurried back into the house. I dumped the coffee on the lawn, rather than risk spilling it in my rush to get to the phone.

"Rose Harbor Inn," I said, hoping I didn't sound as breathless as I felt.

"Good morning," a cheerful male voice greeted me.

"Morning," I replied.

"I'm calling to see if you have any more rooms available starting tomorrow and through the weekend."

I didn't need to check my reservation book to know that I did. "I only have one room left."

"Great; book it. I'll be driving Kent and Julie Shivers from Portland. My name is Sutton. Oliver Sutton, and I'm a longtime family friend. I'll be in town for their anniversary party."

"Yes, yes, I have their reservation right here," I said, glancing down at the book. The family would be gathering in Cedar Cove. I had to wonder why they would choose to come all the way from Oregon to our sleepy town, but I figured I'd find out soon enough.

"Would it be possible to give the Shivers a room on the bottom floor?" he asked. "I'm assuming there are stairs from the photo of the inn I viewed online?"

"Actually, the inn has guest rooms on three floors, but fortunately I do have a room on the main level." It was my favorite one, larger than the other rooms, with a love seat and fireplace. It had a beautiful view of the cove, and when the weather was clear the Olympic Mountains shone as a backdrop. Some days they were so breathtakingly beautiful it was all I could do not to simply stare at them.

"Is it available?" Oliver asked.

"Yes."

"Wonderful. I'm afraid stairs are a bit much for Kent these days, although he'd never admit it."

"I can switch rooms without a problem, but there's a slight price difference." It was only fair that I tell him that.

"No problem. Just add that to my bill, if you would."

"Okay. Do you have a preference when it comes to your room?" I asked.

He hesitated. "Annie Newton has also booked a room at the inn, is that right?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, she has." I'd met Annie a couple of times, although only briefly. She was the Shivers's granddaughter and the reason I knew that the Shivers were celebrating their fiftieth wedding anniversary. Annie lived in the Seattle area and had stopped by to check out the inn and make other arrangements for the family gathering. I'd learned she was a party planner by profession, and had taken on organizing the event.

"If possible, I'd like a room on the same floor as Annie's."

"I can do that." That meant shifting Mary Smith to another room, but that wouldn't be a problem.

"Perfect. I'll see you tomorrow, then, with the Shivers. I plan to arrive around noon."

I took his credit card information and paused as I looked down. I'd taken the reservation for Mary Smith the same day that Kent Shivers had phoned. Both conversations had stayed in my mind, which was unusual.

By mid-morning, the scent of the carrot-and-pineapple muffins filled my kitchen. The recipe was a new one, and I was anxious to try it out. The ingredient list called for walnuts, raisins, and flaxseed. Filled with fruit, nuts, and seeds, they were healthy, and if the heavenly scent coming from the oven was anything to go by, they would be delicious, too. I also planned to bake cookies, if time allowed.

Hailey arrived around two, when the kitchen countertops were lined with cookies and the muffins rested on top of the stove.

“Where would you like me to start?” she asked, after setting her backpack inside my office.

I gave her a detailed list that I’d made up earlier. She read it over, asked me a couple of questions, and then set about completing the tasks. While she was busy I worked in the kitchen. I finished loading the dishwasher, and after placing the cookies for the open house in an air-tight storage container, I wiped down the countertops.

I planned to serve the muffins with breakfast over the weekend. My baking for the open house was just getting started. I had several cookbooks spread out across the table when I heard the sound of a car approaching.

I looked out the window as the driver parked the car, climbed out, and then came around to the other side of the vehicle and opened the passenger door. A woman I could only assume was Mary Smith slid out and paused as she viewed the inn. She was an elegantly dressed businesswoman.

I removed my apron, and with Rover at my heels met her on the walkway leading to the front door.

“Hello and welcome,” I said. “I’m Jo Marie Rose. Welcome to Rose Harbor Inn.”

“Thank you,” she returned with a faint New York accent.

I recognized the high-end designer suit immediately and realized it was slightly too big for her. It wasn’t until then that I noticed the scarf on her head cleverly disguised the fact that she had lost her hair. Mary Smith appeared to have recently undergone chemotherapy. She had cancer, and I could only speculate what would bring her all the way from New York to Cedar Cove and Rose Harbor Inn.

Chapter 3

Exhausted from the long flight out of Newark, Mary Smith lay down on the bed and closed her eyes. The desire to visit Cedar Cove had come after she'd been diagnosed with breast cancer. It'd been an impulse motivated by fear, she realized. The truth was she never actually expected to make the trip. She wasn't an impulsive woman. She lived a purposeful life. Flying all the way across the country on a whim was completely unlike her, and yet ... yet here she was.

Mary had intentionally booked a nonstop flight into Seattle so she wouldn't have to change planes. She feared the necessity of rushing from one gate to another might have completely worn her out physically. As it was, the six-hour flight between the east and west coasts had utterly drained her. Yet tired as she was, she found it impossible to nap. Her mind raced, tumbling back through the years ... to the decisions she'd made and the man she'd once loved.

For all she knew George might still live in Seattle. The last she'd heard, nineteen years ago—oh, had it really been that long?—he'd married. Mary wanted him to be happy, which was one reason she didn't plan on contacting him. She'd stayed completely out of his life and that wasn't going to change.

The app on her phone displayed the weather forecast for the next five days, including the weekend. What she remembered, having lived in the Seattle area for almost a year, was that it had rained almost continually. As if to contradict her, the app showed nearly five days of sunshine, which came as an unexpected bonus. What she was surprised to learn, once she left Seattle for a position on the East Coast, was that New York City received a higher annual rainfall than Seattle. But then Seattle had the drizzle factor and more days in which the skies were gray and overcast.

The song that said the bluest skies they'd ever seen were in Seattle had it right, though. Despite the weather, whatever it might be, Seattle would always hold a special place in her heart. It was here that she'd fallen in love, truly, deeply in love, for the one and only time in her life.

It seemed ridiculous to stay indoors and attempt to sleep when the sun was out. She had packed light, and it didn't take her long to place the few items in the dresser drawer.

Once she'd finished, she left the room and slowly climbed down the stairs. The proprietor stepped out of the kitchen when she reached the bottom step.

"I hope everything in your room is satisfactory?" Jo Marie asked, and then with a look of concern added, "Are you going to be all right with the stairs?"

"It's fine."

“There is one room on the main level, but unfortunately I’ve already promised that to an older couple. Had I known ...” She hesitated.

Mary held up her hand, stopping her. “It’s fine. I’m getting stronger every day.”

“Is there anything more I can do to make you more comfortable?”

“Nothing, thank you,” Mary assured her.

The proprietor didn’t look convinced. “Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“That would be lovely.” Mary didn’t much feel like chatting. “Would it be all right if I drank it on the porch?”

“Of course. I’ll bring it out to you. Would you like sugar or milk?”

“Just plain.”

The Adirondack chair offered her a view of the Olympic mountain range as a backdrop to the smooth waters of the cove in the forefront. The shipyard was across the way, with an aircraft carrier and a number of other vessels docked there. The waters of the cove were a deep green, with a lighthouse at a point in the distance. This was a lovely area. Ideal, really.

The door leading off the porch opened, and a teenage girl stepped out carrying a tray with a teapot and china cup and a couple of cookies on a matching plate. She set it down on the table next to Mary’s chair.

“Hello,” Mary said, smiling up at the girl.

“Hello. Jo Marie asked me to bring this out to you.”

“Thank you.”

“Would you like me to pour?”

Mary hesitated. She was perfectly capable of pouring her own tea, but she welcomed the girl’s company. “Please.”

The girl lifted the teapot and, holding onto the lid, tipped it ever so carefully as she filled the delicate cup. Steam rose, and the scent of chamomile wafted toward Mary.

“What’s your name?” Mary asked.

“Hailey.”

“Do you live in the area?”

“I do.” Hailey straightened and stepped back. “It can get a bit chilly out here, especially when the sun goes behind a cloud. Would you like me to get you an afghan?”

“Please; how thoughtful.”

The teenager left and returned a couple of minutes later with a hand-knit afghan in warm pastel colors. She laid it across Mary’s lap and then added a pillow.

“Do you attend school here?” Mary asked.

“I do,” Hailey said. “I’m graduating on Sunday.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“Any plans for the future?”

Hailey nodded with enthusiasm. “I want to go into hospitality and work in the hotel industry.”

“Wonderful.”

“It’s going to be hard to leave Cedar Cove, my family, and all my friends, but this is what growing up is all about, right? It’s time I tested my wings. That’s what my grandmother said.”

“She’s right.”

“Mom would like it better if I attended community college for a couple of years, but I got a scholarship for Washington State University.”

“Congratulations. How big is your graduating class?”

“Big. Six hundred.”

“That’s huge.”

Hailey agreed.

“My own graduating class was around that size. I was fortunate enough to be the valedictorian.”

“Really? One of my best friends, Mandy Palmer, is our class valedictorian. She’s so smart. Were you like that?”

Mary smiled. “I’d like to think so, but the ability to get good grades doesn’t necessarily translate into living a successful life.”

“Mandy will. She’s got it all together.”

“I’m sure you do, too,” Mary said.

“I wish,” she said, and folded her hands in front of her. “Is there anything more I can do for you?”

“It’s all good. It’s been a long day, and I’m feeling tired.”

“Then I’ll leave you. If you need anything, please don’t hesitate to ask. I’ll be heading out soon, but Jo Marie is here. It was a pleasure meeting you, Ms. Smith.”

“You, too, Hailey.”

The teenager left, and, feeling better than she had since she’d stepped off the plane, Mary closed her eyes. It’d been a foolish decision to travel all the way across the country. Her oncologist had advised her against the trip. She needed time to rest, to give her body a chance to heal.

To her surprise, Mary felt her body relax and surrender to the warm bath of sunshine. Almost before she realized it she felt herself drifting into a light sleep. It was only natural, she supposed, that thoughts of George would fill her head.

No man had ever loved her the way George had. There’d been men before and since her affair with him, but no one had ever cared as deeply as the young attorney in Seattle almost twenty years ago.

She remembered the first time they’d met. It’d been a Saturday afternoon, summertime. June, wasn’t it? Yes, June. Her friend Louise had suggested lunch at the Seattle Center and made reservations at the Space Needle. They were to meet at the base of the Needle. Mary waited outside, but her friend hadn’t shown up.

Growing restless, Mary had paced the area, checking her watch every few minutes. She’d been so intent on looking at her wrist that she’d inadvertently bumped into a man on the sidewalk. That man had been George.

After apologizing profusely, she’d been pleasantly surprised when he said he’d been stood up for lunch himself and wondered if she’d be willing to join him. Seeing that she already had a reservation and it was a shame to let it go to waste, they’d taken the elevator to the restaurant. Rarely had she clicked with anyone the way she did with George. Their attraction was strong and immediate. They enjoyed a three-hour lunch. Later, he confessed that he’d told her a fib. He hadn’t been meeting anyone, but had instantly felt drawn to her.

Later, Mary learned that her friend had gotten an emergency phone call. Her father had

suffered a heart attack. These were the days before personal cell phones, and Louise didn't have any way of letting her know what had happened.

Seeing how well her afternoon had turned out, Mary wasn't complaining. George asked to see her again, and they met the next day and then the day after that. Inside of a month they were lovers. They were wild for each other, crazy in love, feverish. It had never been like that for Mary. Not before George, and not after him, either.

Mary worked for a brokerage firm, struggling in a man's world, and was making a name for herself. She hadn't wanted to move to Seattle, although it'd proved to be beneficial on a number of different levels. Her work often led her to travel to New York, and she had her eye on a key position with the firm there.

When they first met, George had just made partner in an up-and-coming law firm. They both worked long hours, and the week-long separations were hard. Yet they found ways to be together as much as possible. Three months after their first date, George proposed.

Even now, all these years later, Mary still remembered the disappointed look that came over him when she turned him down. Every instinct told her she was going to be offered the position in New York. George was a law partner, and she wouldn't ask him to give that up. Her gentle refusal hadn't discouraged him, though. If George was anything, it was persistent. Mary lost count of the number of times he'd argued his point. He loved her. She loved him. Even if it meant traveling back and forth between coasts, they could make it work. Their love would carry them, and everything else was small stuff. They'd find a way.

Mary wanted to believe that was true, but after six months flying from one coast to the other, she could see what it was doing to them both. This was no way to live and certainly no way to raise a family. George wanted children; he loved kids, and he deserved to be a father. Frankly, she wasn't good mother material. She didn't have a maternal bone in her body. Motherhood simply didn't interest her. And so Mary had done the only thing she could, and that was to end their relationship. Once she was offered the position in the New York office, she accepted, sold her Seattle condo, and kissed George good-bye one last time. It'd broken her heart and his, but it was necessary.

He'd been stunned, shocked into silence, and unbelievably hurt. She'd hated to do that to him, but really there was no other way.

The cut was clean. Painful, terribly painful for them both, but quick. Two years later George mailed Mary an invitation to his wedding. It was the one way he had of getting back at her, she supposed, of letting her know he had found someone else to love. Someone who was willing to give him all the things in life he wanted that she wouldn't. Mary had wed twice in her adult life. She cried the day she got his wedding invitation, addressed personally to her in his own hand, and the other ... well, that was the reason she was in Cedar Cove.

George had moved on, and for that she would always be grateful. Mary had loved George, she supposed she always would. She'd never considered marriage, but if she had, there could be only one man, and that was George. Wonderful, sweet, caring George.

Raising her hand to her forehead, she felt the stubble from her hair, which was just now starting to grow back, following radiation and chemotherapy. Mary sighed and reached for her tea.

Cancer.

The diagnosis had turned her life upside down. One minute she was at the pinnacle of her

career. The next moment, following a suspicious mammogram report, she was looking stag four breast cancer in the face and it had metastasized. Overnight her world changed. Instead of heading board meetings, making decisions, commanding attention, she was sitting in chair at an oncology center and having medical professionals tell her how best to beat the disease. Instead of giving advice, she was on the listening end.

All her life, Mary had been a woman in charge. Nothing had stood in her way. She was smart, savvy, and sophisticated. She'd stood up to financial institutions, the federal government, and attorneys without batting an eyelash.

She'd risen higher than any woman in the firm to take over as vice president of one of the country's largest New York brokerage firms. She was wealthy beyond her expectations. But money meant little when it came to cancer. She couldn't intimidate cancer, couldn't overwhelm it with the strength of her personality, couldn't pay it off or hand it over to one of her personal assistants.

Nor could she ignore it.

Cancer was there, front and center, staring her in the face, leaving her with no options.

She was sick, and she could get much sicker. Everything that was possible had already been done. What was left was a period of waiting, of resting. In twenty years, Mary hadn't sat still. Her life had revolved around her career. Forced now to analyze her past, she was troubled by a series of decisions she'd made ... decisions that involved George.

It was time to be honest. She'd been a straight shooter with others and was amazed she hadn't dealt with herself the same way. The excuses for traveling across the country slid off her tongue with ease.

Lies. All lies.

The time had come to own up to the truth. She was in Cedar Cove because of George.

"Mary?"

Mary's eyes flew open and she saw Jo Marie standing in front of her. Gone were the apron and the comfortable jeans and sweater. Now she wore black slacks and a white silk blouse with a pink rose pin secured at the top button. "I need to run a couple of errands."

Mary blinked, unsure why Jo Marie found it necessary to tell her this.

"Don't worry about answering the phone."

For the love of heaven, why would she do that?

"I'm having an open house on Sunday, and ...?"

"Okay," she mumbled, but she still couldn't figure out why any of this was her business.

"I won't be gone long, but Hailey is here if you need anything."

"You don't need to report to me, Ms. Rose. This is your home, and you can do what you like."

"I realize that, but I felt you should know in case anyone arrives."

"Are you expecting anyone?"

"Not really. But I was hoping ..." She let the rest fade. "If you need anything—"

"I won't," she said, cutting her off. She regretted having chosen a bed-and-breakfast now. She'd heard they could be warm and welcoming. An online search had led Mary to the website for the Inn at Rose Harbor. She'd been wooed by the simple elegance and beauty of the inn. Looking at the online photo of the view had convinced Mary this was where she wanted to be, and she'd booked it.

“Don’t fuss over me,” she said, perhaps a bit too bluntly. Mary didn’t want allowance made for her. Not because she had cancer. Not for any reason.

Jo Marie nodded and left. Her shoes made clicking sounds against the wooden steps.

Mary closed her eyes once again, intent on returning to her thoughts. For years she’d felt bad for the way she’d treated George, especially toward the end of their relationship. She’d been cruel, thinking she’d been doing them both a kindness. And now, sitting in the warm sunshine, with him possibly just across Puget Sound in Seattle, she felt an incredibly strong desire to see him again for what possibly would be the very last time.

She couldn’t. Wouldn’t, though. George was married. To disrupt his life now would be doubly wrong. She’d made her choice, and now she had no option but to live with it.

Chapter 4

I was on my way out the door when the phone rang. For a moment I was tempted to simply let it go and be about my business. I couldn't, though; I was in business, and this inn was my livelihood.

"Rose Harbor Inn," I said automatically.

"Jo Marie."

I recognized the voice immediately, and my back went rigid.

"This is Lieutenant Colonel Milford."

My hand tightened around the telephone receiver. The last time I'd seen Lieutenant Colonel Milford was at the memorial service held for Paul at Fort Lewis. From the moment I learned Paul had gone down on a mountainside in Afghanistan the lieutenant colonel had been wonderful. He'd patiently answered my questions; he'd offered me words of comfort. He'd promised he would do everything within his power to retrieve my husband's remains. He'd been Paul's commanding officer. Paul had thought highly of him, and the respect had been mutual.

"I'm calling because of a promise I made to you and the other families who lost loved ones last April."

"Yes." I was barely able to get the word out from the constriction that tightened my throat.

"I told you at the memorial service that we would make every effort to retrieve Paul's remains so you could give him a proper burial."

"I remember," I whispered. I was sure he was about to tell me Paul's remains had been retrieved. Part of me wanted to hear it, needed to hear it, and at the same time I wanted to place my hands over my ears and shout for him to stop. If they'd located the crash site, that would be the final confirmation that my husband was dead. Despite everything I'd been told and all the assurances that Paul couldn't have survived the crash, I couldn't help holding on to the belief that he had somehow found his way out and he was alive.

"Jo Marie?"

Apparently, the lieutenant colonel had said something and I hadn't picked up on it.

"Sorry."

"The terrain where the helicopter went down was deep in the mountains and inaccessible, but with recent changes we are now able to operate within the area."

He didn't mention what those changes were, but it didn't take much for me to speculate what had happened. Paul and his team had been sent deep into al-Qaeda-held territory. The mountain landscape had made it even more difficult to retrieve the bodies.

"Recent changes?" I repeated. I swallowed hard and bit into my lower lip. "Are you telling

me I can bury my husband?" I asked, and my voice trembled as I spoke.

"Yes and no. As I explained, we now have access to the crash site. A team has been assigned to go in and investigate. Once they do and the bodies have been retrieved, we will, of course, need to test for DNA."

"Of course."

"I promised to keep all the families updated."

"Yes, thank you."

"Can I do anything more for you, Jo Marie?"

I wanted to shout at him to bring my husband back to me alive. I wanted him to return to me all that I'd lost on that mountain half a world away. But I knew that request was both impossible and unreasonable. Sooner or later I would need to give up this crazy notion that Paul was still alive. As long as Paul's remains stayed up on that mountainside, I could pretend. I'd clung to that slender thread of hope because that was all I had left to hold on to.

"Paul Rose was a good soldier and a fine officer."

Lieutenant Colonel Milford didn't need to tell me what I already knew.

"Please let me know if there's anything more I can do for you." He hesitated and added, "Are you still there, Jo Marie?"

"Not just yet ... Thank you for the call."

"I'll be in touch as soon as I have more information."

"Yes, please," I managed to squeak out, struggling to hide the tears in my voice. "It was a good of you to call."

"Remember, I'm here if you have any questions."

"I'll remember." My hand shook as I hung up the phone. When it came to anything having to do with Paul, I couldn't hide my emotions. My life, my dreams were all tied up around my husband, and he'd been taken away from me. I didn't know if I'd ever grow accustomed to this unexpected and tragic turn my life had taken. Meeting him, falling in love, and creating our future together had been some of the happiest days of my life. I'd given up on ever finding the right man. And then there he was when I'd least expected it.

I couldn't understand why God would bring Paul and me together only to snatch him away. But then I'd done plenty of crying out to the Lord since I got the news of the helicopter crash.

Drawing in a deep breath, I was determined to hold myself together. I had one guest, and more would be arriving soon. Because my knees felt weak, I slumped down into a chair and braced my elbows against the table.

Rover came to me, as though sensing I was in need of consolation. He braced his front paws against the side of my thigh and rested his chin there. I placed my hand on his head and sat, drawing in deep breaths until the trembling had stopped.

I'd barely had time to compose myself when Hailey came down the stairs.

"I'm going out for a few minutes," I told her. "Mary Smith is on the porch and seems to want her privacy, but if she needs anything, will you see that she's made comfortable?"

Hailey's eyes brightened. To this point I'd never left her to look after the inn or guests while I was away. I could see that being given this new responsibility pleased her.

"I'll be happy to," she said with real enthusiasm.

"I doubt I'll be gone long." Rover strained at his leash, eager to be on our way.

"I'll look after the inn," Hailey promised as I headed toward the door with the plate of

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