



Unforgettable Summer

So Inn Love +
Better Latte Than Never



CATHERINE CLARK

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Contents

So Inn Love

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

Better Latte Than Never

[Coffee Wench](#)

[How Am I Driving?](#)

[En français, s'il vous plaît](#)

[Rooty Tooty, What a Cutie](#)

[Weather on the Nines](#)

[Peggy, Peggy, Peggy](#)

[FEN](#)

[Your Love Is Like Roadkill](#)

[Maternity Moments](#)

[Everyone Looked Dead](#)

[Sunny-side Down](#)

[Triple Ew](#)

[Absolute Hams](#)

[Always Tweedledee](#)

[The Crispest Crisp](#)

[Steve, What's So Funny?](#)

[Call Me Cinder-Peggy](#)

[So Sorry, Fleming](#)

[It's Only Lindville](#)

[Protection](#)

[Free Ride](#)

[Aging Prematurely](#)

[I Am Sunshine](#)

[Thwarted](#)

[Wild Streak](#)

[No French Connection](#)

[Fireworks](#)

[She's Uncomfortable](#)

[Love among the Pancakes](#)

[Back When I Was Delusional](#)

[The Skating of the Lambs](#)

[What Boy?](#)

[Beaucoup Busted](#)

[You're Kidding, Right?](#)

[Web of Evil](#)

[Because I Really Like Pink](#)

[Back Ads](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Catherine Clark](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[So Inn Love](#)

CHAPTER 1

“And you are?”

You’ve got to be kidding me.

I was the last person to arrive. I hate walking into a room that’s already full of people—even if the room is the front lobby of a gorgeous seaside inn on the coast of Rhode Island, where I was lucky enough to be starting a great new summer job.

Being late wasn’t the impression I wanted to make on my first day, especially since I’d barely gotten this job to begin with, and had found out only a week before that it was mine.

“Hi. I’m Elizabeth McKenzie,” I said to the woman standing in front of me. She had short, reddish hair and a stocky, athletic build. She was wearing khaki pants and a white Tides Inn polo shirt that looked as if it had been ironed. The short sleeves had actual creases. “But please, call me Liza,” I said. “Sorry—am I late?”

“Just a minute or two. Miss Crossley.” She held out her hand to shake mine, and gave me a quick once-over glance, as if she was deciding whether to approve of me or not. I was relieved that I removed that pink streak from my hair *before* I got here—she didn’t seem the type to appreciate things like that. Her handshake was so strong, I nearly winced from her grip. “So you’re the last minute hire,” Miss Crossley said.

She didn’t sound all that happy with the decision, which was funny considering she was the Inn’s staff manager and she had to be *in* on hiring me, at some level. I wished she hadn’t announced that I was “last minute” like that to the room. Everyone kind of looked up and focused their gaze on me, as if there might be something wrong, or suspect, about me.

As if I’d only made the security clearance by the skin of my teeth. As if I were only good enough when there was no other option.

Or at least that’s what their faces told me. That I was being snobbed.

Yes, it’s a verb. Especially useful around exclusive communities like this one. I actually hadn’t known that much about it until three years ago when, because of my mother’s job as a professor, we moved to a new town, where Snobs ’R Us was the name of one of the after-school clubs.

Just kidding. But moving right before sophomore year had been a little traumatic for me. Just when I was working my way up from being a lowly freshman, I had to start all over again, and the cliques at my new school didn’t make it easy. It was like everyone had lived in the same town forever and I was the sole new person. That wasn’t true, but that’s how it felt until I made some friends. Now I was wondering if I’d just walked into the same situation here, at my perfect summer job.

One girl flashed me a sympathetic smile, so at least there was that. The room was filled with about forty people, taking up nearly every seat in the large, spacious lobby. It was starting to hit me that I was actually on the Tides Inn staff. I couldn’t believe it. Everything had happened so fast, since I got the summons a week ago. My dream job, coming through. I might be late and I might be a little uncomfortable, but at the same time I knew I was lucky to be here.

I finally spotted an empty white wicker chair by the window, so I nodded to Miss Crossley and scooted past her to take a seat.

“Now, we’ll do some introductions later on, once you’ve had a chance to get settled. But the Inn opens for summer season—the only season we have around here—in two days,” she said. “That gives us two days to get completely perfect at everything we do. We don’t accept less than perfection here

the Tides Inn. Our customers expect it, and we demand it. You've all been hired because of your extreme trustworthiness."

She made it sound as if we were about to go into battle, and we were the elite soldiers. The Green Berets—although I didn't think the Inn's color scheme was green. More like a blue-gray, the color of a whale you might see if you went out far enough in a sailboat. And instead of berets? We'd probably wear floppy bucket hats.

"Now," Miss Crossley went on, "some of you are new to me, some are old friends—" She stopped as the screen door creaked open and slammed shut with a bang.

A tall guy with brown hair, wearing long khaki shorts, flip-flops, and a navy T-shirt ripped at the neck, stepped into the lobby. He glanced behind him at the door, then turned back to Miss Crossley and smiled. He had the kind of smile that made you like him instantly.

"Someone's going to have to fix that before the guests get here," he said.

"Thanks for volunteering, Hayden. Nice you could make it," the manager said. She cleared her throat as she glanced at her watch.

So I wasn't the last one to arrive, after all. Victory! Or at least not total outright failure. I looked at him; his T-shirt said, "Mapleville Academy" on it, a place I'd only vaguely heard of but probably should know about. I thought it was one of those elite private schools in New England.

"Sorry, Peach. I got lost," he said.

"Peach?" several people repeated.

I'd only met Miss Crossley a minute ago, but I didn't get the impression that she was very "peachy" at all. Apple, maybe. Granny Smith Apple. Sour.

"In case the rest of you are wondering, Hayden's the only one allowed to call me that." Miss Crossley narrowed her gaze at Hayden. "And even then I'm not so sure, actually. And what do you mean, you got lost? You've been here the past two summers, plus I picked you up from the New York train yesterday. So where have you been?"

"I was trying to clean up the beach. I picked up some bottles and trash, then I was raking the sand—I lost track of time, I guess. Sorry."

"What, are you going for Employee of the Month already?" someone in the crowd called out.

"Hey, if the plaque fits . . . then put it on the wall," Hayden replied with a smile.

The guy sitting behind me groaned.

Miss Crossley didn't look impressed or amused, either. "Hayden, why don't you hurry up and take a seat so we can get started—or restarted, rather."

"Sure thing." He smiled at her.

"There's room here, Hayden." Two girls scooted over on a sofa to make a space for him.

"Now. As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted . . ." Miss Crossley looked at Hayden and smiled. "It's great to have you all back this year. I know there are other summer jobs that might pay more, might be more exciting, or might be closer to home. We at the Inn—the Talbot family and the rest of the adult employees—certainly appreciate the sacrifices you're making to be here. Living away from home—"

"That's a sacrifice?" the guy sitting behind me on the window seat joked. He was leaning forward onto the back of my chair, and he was sort of pulling my hair. I moved a little to tug it free from under his arm.

"More like a gift," a girl to my left added. I turned to her and smiled in agreement. It wasn't that living at home was so terrible, for any reason—just *old*.

"Well, it's not as if this is the Hilton," Miss Crossley said. "Actually the Inn is better than the Hilton, of course. But *your* living quarters—"

"More like Motel Six," a girl added.

“No, more like Motel Three,” Hayden said, and everyone laughed.

~~Is it really that bad?~~ I wondered. I mean, I figured that the dorm where all the employees stayed was nothing special, but I thought living on our own was cool enough. We didn’t need it to be all that nice, considering we wouldn’t be spending a whole lot of time in our rooms.

“Your accommodations are perfectly adequate,” Miss Crossley said, the only one who didn’t crack a smile. I wondered if she smiled much, period. Probably not. Too busy striving for perfection.

After an hour’s worth of rules and regulations, Miss Crossley told us to take a break from orientation and go check out our rooms.

The boy sitting behind me stood and stretched his arms over his head, looking sleepy. “Orientation. Like it’s college.” He smiled at me. He had curly, sandy hair that he brushed back out of his face. “How much is there to know?”

“A lot, I guess.” I didn’t want to say anything bad, seeing as how I was the last person to be hired.

“She thinks so, anyway.” He held out his hand. “Hey. I’m Josh.”

“Liza,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

“So you’re new here?” he asked, and I nodded. “Me too. Don’t worry, you didn’t miss anything by being late,” he said. Then he walked over to join and talk to some of the other guys.

I looked around the room at everyone gathered in small groups, talking and laughing and hugging. The way everyone was instantly talking to each other, it was obvious most of them knew each other already, from the summer before.

I glanced down at the information sheets Miss Crossley had handed us when the meeting broke up. “Room Assignments” was on top. I looked around the room at everyone, trying to guess who I might be rooming with, and who might become my good friends—with any luck they’d be the same people. The summer could either be great—which I was desperately hoping for and semicounting on—or terrible, depending.

I was skimming the list for my name when a petite girl with short dark-brown hair came up to me. She wore a red T-shirt and khaki capri pants. “Hi, I’m Claire. I think you’re my roommate,” she said.

“Hey!” I said with a smile. “I was just checking out the list and wondering how I’d figure out who you were. You’d think Miss Crossley would make a point of introducing us but . . . Are you psychic?”

“Well, since you came late, I got to hear your name, so I knew it was you,” she said. “It wasn’t my ESP—sorry.”

“I knew there was a reason I came late. Everyone probably thought I was just lazy, or disorganized, but it was all a plan so you’d know who I was. Really.”

“Sure. Obviously,” Claire said. “I’m the opposite—I always get everywhere early. I even *try* to be late, but it never works out. You think that kind of thing is genetic?”

“I hope so, because that would give me a good excuse for being late,” I said.

“Oh, come on. You weren’t even the last person to show up. And I think the only person who noticed or cared—”

“Just happens to be our new boss,” I put in.

Claire shrugged. “Yeah, so, she’ll get over it. It might take her a few weeks, and you might have to be perfect in every other way, but it’ll blow over.”

“Yeah. Thanks. *That* puts my mind at ease.” We both laughed. “Did you work here last summer, too?” I asked Claire. So far she seemed like a really nice person—we’d have no problem getting along. “Because it seems like everyone besides me has.”

Claire shook her head. “Oh, I’ve never worked here before, either.”

“Is it me? Or does it seem like kind of a club?” We stood off to the side, watching the other girls squealing and hugging. They were all standing in a circle, and the only two people not in the circle

were me and Claire. I felt totally frozen out, just like when I moved to my new school three years ago. ~~I hoped college wasn't going to be anything like this, because I wasn't sure how many times I could go through it.~~

"I hate cliques. I got enough of this in high school, you know?" Claire said.

As she was talking, I saw a girl over her shoulder who looked very familiar to me. "Me too. Except . . . wait a second. I *know* her," I said. I hadn't noticed her when I came in, but I suddenly realized—was Caroline Farlane! We both used to vacation in this town when we were kids. My grandparents rented a cottage just down the road, for two weeks every summer. This would be so cool! She kind of had an "in" already, and so could I, just because I knew her.

"Know who?" Claire asked.

Caroline used to be sort of a tomboy, but now she had shoulder-length straight blond hair, bleached and combed to perfection, and wore a flowered sun dress with high-heeled sandals. "Caroline?" I asked as I approached her. "Is that you?"

She turned toward me and gave me a confused look. "I'm sorry?" she said, fingering the strand of pearls around her neck.

"It's me," I said. "Elizabeth McKenzie."

"Oh, wow. Beth. I didn't even recognize you. Like, at all." She stared at my black tank, long khaki shorts, and black sandals.

"But didn't you hear me say my name when I came in?"

"I didn't see you come in. Zoe and I must have been talking," she said. "We had a ton to catch up on. That's Zoe, we're roommates." She pointed to a tall, pretty girl with similar features to her own.

You've heard of "the beautiful people," right? Well, that was Zoe. She was kind of stunning, actually, like she could model if she chose to.

"Anyway, you look . . . totally different." She implied that it was maybe not in a good way. "Is that a tattoo?" She pointed to a symbol on my arm.

"Not a permanent one. Just a last-night-at-home thing. My friends and I—we all did it."

"Hm. Interesting. Because they're banned, you know. If Miss Crossley sees that, you'll be in trouble."

"Noted," I said as I shifted to put my arm behind my back, in case our supervisor was approaching. "It's temporary. I can wash it off."

"Well, I'd suggest it," Caroline said in a snooty tone.

"Yeah, well, I've changed a little since we last saw each other, I guess." I was probably about half a foot taller, for one thing. She was about twice as preppy. Our outfits couldn't have been more different, which was funny, because we used to be so alike. "And I go by Liza now. This is Claire, my roommate. What room are you in?" I asked, wondering if we'd be neighbors.

"Beth, your hair," she said, ignoring my question—and my nickname change. "Didn't it used to be blond?"

"Sort of," I said. "Anyway, how have you been? Wow. It's so cool that we're both working here. Who would have thought?"

"Actually, this is my *second* summer here," she said. Her voice wasn't necessarily cold, but it wasn't warm either.

"Oh." I nodded. What was I supposed to say—congratulations? She was expecting something, so I said, "So you liked it enough to come back?"

"Are you serious? This is the best place to work. Ever. How did you get in, anyway?" Caroline asked, as if this were the sort of nightclub where I'd be left standing outside, waiting in line forever.

I was going to tell her how hard it had been, and how I'd applied last year, too, and how my grandfather had pulled a few strings to get me in. But her attitude was bugging me, so I decided not to.

“Oh, you know,” I said. “It wasn’t any big deal.”

“Really.”

“Really,” I said. “So tell me what you’ve been up to. It’s been a long time. I can’t wait to catch up. You know what’s weird, I haven’t been inside here for a couple of years. Wow—I just thought of something. Remember when we got kicked off the tennis court here? Oh my God, that was funny.”

“We did not.”

“We did, too!” I said. “Remember those cute guys we met on the beach, and we were supposed to meet them here, and then—”

“Well, see you around, Beth,” she interrupted me. Then she turned back to the group she’d been talking to when I first walked up, to Zoe and her other friends.

She’s snobbing me, I thought. *Caroline, of all people, is snobbing me*. If she was part of the “crowd,” then maybe I didn’t want to be. “It’s Liza,” I said to her back.

“Hey, Liza. And don’t mind her, she’s not that nice to anyone.”

I turned and saw Hayden—the guy who’d arrived right after me—standing beside me. “Seriously?”

He nodded. “Caroline’s not exactly the person you send out on the welcome wagon.”

“Okay, but here’s the thing. Have you ever *seen* a welcome wagon? Like, what’s in it?”

“And who pulls it? Horses?” Claire added.

We all laughed, that kind of nervous laughter when you first meet someone.

“So you’re Liza. And you are?” Hayden asked.

“Claire. We’re new hires,” she explained. “You know, apparently the only two new people here?”

“Oh, come on, you’re not the *only* new ones,” Hayden said. “That guy, Josh, over there . . . and the other guy, what’s his name. There’re at least five or six of you.”

“Someone over there just called us newbies,” Claire said. “I hate that phrase, or term, or whatever it is.”

“I know,” I said. “We can’t help it if we didn’t work here before.”

“So, non-newbies,” Hayden said. “Don’t get a complex. Hayden Overton. Nice to meet you.”

“Same here,” I said. At least one person in the so-called in crowd was being nice to us. And as I learned from moving, that was really all it took. If one person accepted you or decided you were cool—then everyone would.

“You know what? You want to get out of here?” Hayden said.

“Aren’t we supposed to go to the dorm?” Claire asked.

“The dorm can wait. *Believe* me,” Hayden said. “Especially since—” He stopped and looked at me for a second.

“Since what?” I wanted to know.

He shook his head. “Never mind. We’ve got half an hour before we need to meet up with Peac again. Come on, let’s hit the water.”

I looked at Claire. “I’m all for it. You?”

“Sure,” Claire said. “Sounds good.”

“You know what—I see someone I’ve got to say hi to. But I’ll be right down, okay?” Hayden told us.

“He seems nice,” Claire said as we walked outside onto the Inn’s back porch, which stretched almost the entire length of the building. It had tables and chairs for guests, and standing on it, we looked straight out at the Atlantic Ocean.

“Very,” I agreed. I stood on the steps for a few seconds, admiring the view. Then I stepped off onto the boardwalk and turned to look back up at the Inn. It was as gorgeous as I remembered. It was four stories tall, with white shutters and weather-beaten-looking blue-gray paint. Every room had two

windows, and a few of them had small decks with big Adirondack chairs facing the ocean.

~~On the street side, there was a circular driveway, wide, welcoming steps, and a small open deck with wrought-iron tables and chairs under generous-size canvas umbrellas. The parking lot was set back a bit from the Inn, so small golf-cart shuttles were used to ferry guests and their belongings from their cars.~~

I loved the salty ocean smell that hit my nose as soon as I turned onto the road toward the beach. It was the same, every year, from the time I was a toddler until now.

The real reason I'd been late for the meeting was that on the way in, I'd stopped the car to get out and just breathe the salt air. It sounds dumb, I know, and I'd probably never admit it to anyone in the room—especially Miss Crossley, who was too no-nonsense for that sort of thing—but it's a ritual of mine.

It's not as if we lived so far from the ocean, but I still didn't get there very much, especially not during the school year. Every summer's first trip to Rhode Island made my nose so happy.

My boyfriend back home had been really upset—no, mad—when I told him I was going away for the summer. He didn't understand, but that was because he'd never been here, never seen how gorgeous it was. Anyway, we were only talking about ten weeks. That whole time he'd be busy working the graveyard shift at his uncle's boat factory, and we wouldn't have seen each other even if he was around, working at my dad's law office.

Anyway, it wasn't that kind of relationship. We went out when it was convenient, and we had a good time together—but I wouldn't die without him. I'd never had that kind of feeling for anyone. I didn't think I was the type of person to die for love, anyway. I wasn't into big drama.

"A private beach? This is incredible," Claire said as we stepped off the wooden boardwalk.

I slipped off my sandals before I jumped off into the warm sand. Since the Inn wasn't open for business yet, the beach was all ours. "I've never been on this part of the beach." I pointed to a public beach across the breakwater. "That's where we used to hang out. See how it's all crowded?"

Claire laughed. "You and Caroline hung out over there? Hard to believe."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. You don't seem like . . . the same kind of people. To be friends, I mean."

"No. Not anymore, I guess."

I heard voices behind us and turned to see that everyone else had the same idea. They were all either walking—or sprinting—down to the ocean's edge like us, ditching their shoes and sticking their toes into the ocean.

"So where are you from?" Claire asked.

"I was born in Iowa. But now we live in Connecticut," I said. "Outside Hartford. How about you?"

"Boston," Claire said.

"Cool," I said. "I've only been there once, but I thought it was great."

While we were talking, I was digging my toes into the sand, watching the water roll over my feet, which were sinking a little deeper with each wave and the undertow that followed. I loved that feeling. It was so relaxing.

Suddenly I felt someone's hands on my shoulders.

"Are you ready for your initiation, newbies?"

I turned around and saw Hayden standing behind me. He squeezed my shoulders. "Initiation?" I asked. What was he talking about? This didn't sound good. And here I'd thought he was being so nice to us. "What's that?"

"It's a rite of passage," a guy named Richard said as he swooped up Claire in his arms, with one quick motion.

"Hey! Miss Crossley never mentioned this," Claire said. "Put me down!" she protested.

“You’re not actually going to—” I started to say, as I struggled against Hayden. “You’re not serious. You think you can—”

“Yeah, I do.” He picked me up by the waist, sideways, as if I were a suitcase under his arm, and dragged me closer to the water.

“Since when is there initiation around here?” Claire demanded.

“Since now!” And Richard lifted her in the air and tossed her into the surf.

Before I could laugh at her, I found myself being lifted over Hayden’s head—and the next thing I knew I was underwater. It was freezing cold and bubbling up all around me as a wave tumbled over my head. My feet were standing on sand and crushed shells. I surfaced and slicked back my hair, the salt water stinging my eyes. Around me I could hear a few other people complaining, and Claire was yelling at Richard. All the new people were in the water, including Josh. As he waded out, he looked at me and Claire and said, “So it’s us against them, huh?”

“I guess so.” I glanced back at shore and saw Hayden watching me.

What he didn’t know was that I didn’t really care if I got tossed in—I was dying for my first swim in the ocean, anyway. So it didn’t have to be in my clothes, but I didn’t care. What a great feeling.

I looked at my arm and saw my temporary tattoo dissolving in the choppy salt water, color streaming off my arm. I felt something tugging at me and found a long thick piece of seaweed—the kelp kind that reminds me of lasagna noodles—wrapped around my right leg.

Hayden was smiling at me as I strode out of the surf. “You actually *liked* that, didn’t you?”

I pulled the seaweed off my leg and threw it at him as I walked past. “Doesn’t everyone like swimming?” I asked him with a smile.

CHAPTER 2

“Why do I get the feeling this room is reserved for the new people?”

Claire and I stood in the doorway of Room 213.

“Thirteen equals unlucky,” she said.

“Also unfurnished,” I said.

Because our room was right next to the stairway, it had a strange, angled shape, like part of it had been chopped off.

“We get one dresser. Everyone else has two,” Claire complained. “Our closet is the size of an old telephone booth.”

I wandered around the room. It didn’t take long. “And look at this chair. There’s one arm missing and stuffing’s poking through.”

Our room was at the end of the second-floor hall, near the stairs, and had an L-shape, with our beds near the windows. There was a built-in wooden dresser, a tiny closet, one desk for us to share, and one semicomfortable chair with strange orange upholstery. The walls were bare and painted white, but at least there were pretty sage-green curtains on the windows.

I tried to open the windows, but they were jammed. I pounded on the sides to get them to budge. When I finally got them open, a fresh ocean breeze came into the room. I looked out the window. The dorm was set back behind the Inn, down a path, so the ocean view was blocked, but we did have a nice view of the Inn.

“Well, maybe it’s small, but I still don’t think it’s that bad,” I said, turning around.

I didn’t plan on spending much time in the room anyway, when there was so much to see and do being right on the ocean like we were. The room would be a place to crash at night, and that was about it.

“Wait until it gets hot in July,” Claire said. “No air conditioning, and we’re on the second floor. I bet this place gets as humid as anything.”

“Yeah, but we’ll always have that breeze off the water, right?” I pointed out.

Claire narrowed her eyes. “You like getting thrown into the ocean, you like the smell of salt and fish, you don’t care that we have the worst room, and you don’t mind humidity. . . . You’re one of those glass-half-full kind of people, aren’t you?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” I said. “It depends on my mood. I can be really dark when I want to.” I smiled at her.

“Good. If you were going to be optimistic about everything, I’d go crazy,” Claire said. “My mood is like that and it drives me nuts. She’s always saying that thing about how when one door closes another opens, or a window opens when a door gets slammed, or something.” She laughed.

“Well, in this place, if a door gets slammed? I think we’ll all hear it, whether or not the window opens,” I said. From downstairs you could hear guys shouting to each other, while someone on the first floor was blasting music.

The guys all lived on the first floor, and the girls on the second. I was still kind of surprised my parents finally let me go away to such an unsupervised place. Were they really aware of what I was getting into? A coed dorm? Did they not know, or did they know and not care? Were they just getting me prepared for what I’d encounter in college?

Maybe that was why they’d tried to talk me out of this plan at the beginning, even though my

grandparents had supported it. They'd also tried to persuade me to go to an all-women's college. That hadn't worked, either.

"How did you end up here?" I asked Claire as I pulled a suitcase onto the bed. It sagged under the weight, which was pathetic considering it wasn't that heavy a bag. The bed felt suspiciously like a cot—the kind that might be issued by the Red Cross during an emergency. Did everyone in the dorm have thin mattresses, I wondered, or just us?

"I needed to get away for the summer," Claire said. She lifted a stack of perfectly folded T-shirts from her suitcase into the dresser. "I'll take the two bottom drawers, if you'll take the top two, okay?"

"Sure," I agreed. "You were saying . . . you needed to get away?" That was sort of intriguing, as a conversation opening.

"Oh!" She laughed. "No big scandal—I didn't mean it to sound like that. I just couldn't stand another summer at home. Boredom. You know. Plus my older sister worked here a few summers ago and was always telling me how great it was," she said. "And *she* heard about it from her college roommate, who got her in. When I told her I wanted to apply, she said the most important advice she was going to give me was to beware of hookups."

"Beware of hookers? Really? Around *here*?" I tried to imagine a woman in a feather boa and short shorts, down by the boardwalk to the private beach.

"Hookups," Claire repeated with a laugh.

I laughed, too. "Oh! Well, that's okay, I wasn't really planning any."

"Neither am I," Claire said.

I didn't want to completely rule out seeing someone over the summer, though. I was only human and who knew what might happen between me and my probably ex, Mark? If we were really over, then I'd be free to date someone else. I didn't have a clue if I would, but I could. The beach would be the perfect romantic location, that was for sure.

"Anyway, my sister just said that this place can get really small, really fast, if you're not careful," Claire continued.

"Hm. Sort of like high school, then?" I asked with a smile.

"Yeah, exactly. God, I'm glad that's over," Claire said.

I nodded in agreement. I was glad to be moving on—and out—to college, too, but I didn't hate high school, not after I'd settled in and made new friends. The way I saw it, high school was a lot like a very trendy haircut. Fun while it lasted.

High school could get boring if you were complacent, if you did the same thing over and over. Same with hair. I preferred coloring mine, streaks of blue or sometimes pink, going platinum once or twice, and now, chestnut auburn brown, when I was naturally a blonde. (And no, I'm not going to beauty school. At least not until I flunk out of college.)

Claire unpacked several books, stacking them on the desk, making a bookshelf by using large stacks at each end of the desk.

"Wow," I said. "Are all those for fun, or . . . ?"

"Reading ahead for freshman year at Columbia. Plus a few for fun." She pulled out a couple paperback chick-lit novels and grinned. "Chaucer's okay, but . . ."

"Sometimes not so much," I added.

"Exactly."

"Miss Crossley made it sound like we'll be working all the time. Do you think we'll have time to read? And if we do, can I borrow *that* one? Not the Chaucer."

Outside our window, a bullhorn sounded. "Come on, everyone, time to tour the Tides!" Miss Crossley's voice boomed through a megaphone.

"She's so high energy it's painful. I meant to wash my hair after the salt swim, but, oh well."

Claire sighed as she grabbed a ball cap from the desk and pulled it over her head.

“Good idea.” I grabbed my Tigers Volley-ball cap.

When Claire and I walked outside, Miss Crossley met us with a look of disapproval. She was good at doing that. “Dress code rule number seventeen. No ball caps,” she said.

There’s a dress code? I thought. *Why did no one tell me?* “Oh. Sorry—” I started to apologize.

“No ball caps, except these.” Miss Crossley opened a large plastic bag and handed us each an official Tides Inn cotton cap. They were different shades of sun-washed pastel, and the one I grabbed was a pale orange. I caught Hayden’s eye as I pulled it over my head. He was already wearing a white one.

“How do you guys like your room?” Caroline asked.

“Fine. Thanks.” I smiled at her. “It’s very scenic.”

“And spacious, don’t forget spacious,” Claire added.

“What’s wrong with your room?” Miss Crossley asked as we assembled into a group outside the dorm.

“Oh, uh, nothing,” I said. “It’s fine.”

“Good. So, moving on. Today we’ll get the big overall picture,” Miss Crossley went on. “You all need to understand the complete workings of the Inn. In case you’re required to fill in for anyone, you should know a little about each other’s jobs.”

“Miss Crossley, do we really need to do this again? I mean, some of us were here last year, we know the drill,” Zoe said. “How about if we split up and—”

“Zoe, you know as well as I do that a refresher course is never a bad idea,” Miss Crossley interrupted.

Zoe didn’t look as if she knew that at all. She turned to Caroline and rolled her eyes. The two of them definitely acted as if they were too good to be bothered.

“Now, you guys should know the rules. Day One, we stick together. That’s our philosophy. Teamwork. Day Two, you focus on your particular area of responsibility.”

“Day Three, we run away,” Josh muttered, beside me. Since he was new, I wondered if he had an equally crappy room on the first floor, beneath us.

“Day Three, we hit the beach, right?” another person added.

“Only if your job is lifeguarding,” Miss Crossley said sternly.

“No problem,” Hayden said.

So that was why he’d been cleaning up the beach. It was his turf.

It figured that he was a lifeguard, I thought. He had the body for it. He’d lifted me like I weighed nothing, plus he had broad shoulders, plus he had the kind of rock-hard abs people refer to as a six pack . . .

Hey. I’m just reporting what I saw when he picked me up to toss me into the surf, okay? Strictly journalistic effort.

“Listen up!” Miss Crossley said, interrupting my happy memory. “Here is the most important area of the entire Inn. The entrance. What guests see here influences their entire stay with us.”

“So in other words, no hanging out by the entrance, smoking?” Hayden joked.

“No smoking anywhere on hotel grounds,” Miss Crossley said. “Unless of course a guest requests that you step outside and offers you a cigar—”

“Then we *have* to smoke?” Claire interrupted.

“No, I was only joking. Though you should make sure he or she has a light!” Miss Crossley smiled.

“All right, Peach. Loosening up,” Hayden said.

“Don’t count on it,” she replied sternly.

“Lighting cigars for people? My sister didn’t mention the part about indentured servitude,” Claire said quietly to me as we all moved into the Inn.

“I’m guessing there’s a lot she left out,” I whispered back.

Once inside, I checked out the reception and lobby area—when I’d come through earlier, I’d been in such a rush that it had all been a blur. There were sofas, big, comfy dark-brown leather ones, wicker ones for those in wet swimsuits, tables with issues of current magazines, and bookshelves from which guests could borrow any book they wanted. The reception desk was made of a rich, dark wood. Behind it were mailboxes for the rooms. An old-fashioned silver bell sat on the desk, beside the fountain pen guests would use to sign the Inn’s register. It was like something out of an old movie.

We used to come to the Inn’s restaurant for lunch when my grandparents rented a small cottage down the road. Only once a summer, though, because it was too pricey, according to my grandmother, who, to be fair, could cook up a lobster and clam dinner herself that was equally good, if not better.

Still, I used to look at the teen servers and wish I could work here, especially a couple of years ago when I was desperate for a summer job. I always wanted to stay here, too, but my parents pointed out that not only was it too expensive, it would be silly considering my grandparents rented a cottage so close by.

Now I was going to be working here, at the front desk. Life was so weird sometimes. I was grateful to whoever had dropped out of the staff to make room for me. “Claire, did I tell you? This is where I’m going to be,” I started to tell her.

“Actually, Elizabeth, I need to talk to you about that,” Miss Crossley interrupted me.

Liza, I wanted to say, but didn’t. “You do?”

“Yes. There have been some reassignments.”

“There have?” I asked.

“Yes. Even though you were hired to help in the guest reception area, we’ve decided to go with someone with more experience,” Miss Crossley explained. “Caroline pointed out that she has been here longer, and that it is a job she’s wanted all along. So we reassigned you, based on seniority.”

Or lack thereof, I thought as I checked out the area where I wouldn’t be sitting, wouldn’t be answering the phone, and wouldn’t be greeting celebrities and other interesting people as they arrived.

Caroline looked at me and smiled. “It takes someone who knows the Inn inside and out. I’m really sorry, Beth,” she said, in a voice so obviously phony that I knew she wasn’t sorry at all. And if she knew the Inn so well, why hadn’t she been the one who got the job in the first place?

“It’s Liza,” I reminded her. “And that’s okay,” I said, smiling at her. “I’m sure any job here is great, no matter what it is. So, what do you have for me then?” I asked Miss Crossley cheerfully. Still upper lip, glass half full, and all.

“Housekeeping,” she said.

My heart sank. I was in trouble. They really hadn’t read my application, had they? “Housekeeping” was ranked last on my list of desired positions. I was really terrible about cleaning my room at home. They should have asked my parents for references, because when it came to keeping a place neat and tidy? I had zero skills.

“Housekeeping,” I repeated slowly. “Well, okay. I can keep house with the best of them,” I lied.

“Happy to hear that,” Miss Crossley said. “This is a team effort, and we need team players.”

Okay, I thought. *But do I have to be on the clean team?*

I glanced at Caroline, who was smiling happily at her friend Zoe. Caroline had just gotten upgraded from housekeeping to front desk; of course she was happy. But I had a feeling that any idea that Caroline and I might still be able to be friends was as dead in the water as my front-desk job.

It’s us against them, Josh had said. Was it really going to be that bad?

I was back in my room, tucking the sheets under my thin mattress, when Claire walked in carrying a couple of sodas. “You’re not practicing, are you?” she asked.

I sank onto the bed with a sigh. “I know you don’t want to hear this, as my roommate, but I’m not the neatest person. Having a job where I’m supposed to clean up after people is like . . . completely against type.” Miss Crossley had given me a ten-minute seminar on “Ways to Remove Sand from Carpet” that I’d already forgotten. Or blocked out. One of the two.

Claire handed me a soda. “You want to switch? I’ll clean, you take kids sailing?”

“I don’t know how to sail,” I said. “Not well enough to teach it, anyway. I mean, if I were stranded on a desert island and sailing was the only way to get off, I suppose I’d figure it out, but . . .”

“I’ll teach you,” she offered.

“You’re crazy. You’re going to trade being outside on the water all day with inhaling harmful cleaning products?”

“You can always open the windows to let the fresh air in. You know, your famous ocean breeze,” she reminded me.

I frowned at her. “Thanks.”

“Besides, didn’t she say they only use environmentally safe products that are organically made?” Claire asked.

“Okay, fine, whatever. Organic or not, it’s still strong-smelling stuff to cover other, less pleasant stuff, isn’t it?” I laid back on the bed and groaned.

Claire collapsed on her bed, laughing. “I’m not laughing *at* you. I’m laughing *with* you. Really.”

There was a loud, booming knock on our door. I sat up and was surprised to see several guys crowded into our doorway: Tyler, Hayden, Richard, Daunte, and a few others whose names I hadn’t yet memorized.

“So. You’re the ones with Room Two-thirteen.” Daunte nodded. “All right.”

“‘All right’ what?” Claire asked.

“You should keep it down,” Richard said. “There’s a noise limit.”

“There is?” I asked. Apparently there were lots of rules about this place I hadn’t been clued in on yet. Was I missing all the handouts, or what?

“Yeah. If you want to be really loud, you have to come down to the beach with us,” Tyler said. “We all go to Crandall’s to kick off the summer.”

“It’s tradition. You have to come,” Hayden said.

“Have to,” Claire repeated, not sounding convinced. “Or . . . ?”

“You know what happened earlier?” Richard asked her. “Cold seawater, up your nose? More of that.”

“Are you even supposed to be up here?” Claire asked. “I thought there were some fairly specific rules about ‘fraternizing.’ In other words, don’t.”

“Don’t tell me you guys are follow-the-rules types,” Hayden said.

“Not always,” I said. “But on our first night? Kind of. Especially since we’re new here, and people seem to love giving us a hard time about that.”

“We’d never do that,” Hayden said. “Us?”

“No, of course not,” I said. “And we’d never throw seaweed at you.”

He smiled at me.

Caroline pushed her way through the crowd. “If they don’t want to come, don’t make them,” she said. “Maybe they just want to hang out here.”

For some reason, that settled the matter for me. “Hang out here? In the dreaded Two-thirteen?” I don’t think so. Come on, Claire. Let’s go.”

“But—”

“It’ll be fun,” I said. “Grab a sweater.”

“So this is Crandall’s Point. Who or what is a Crandall?” Josh asked.

“It’s the huge place up there, the one you can see from here.” Caroline pointed to a gigantic secluded house that looked almost as big as the Inn. “It belongs to the Crandall family and has five generations of the family living there for over a hundred years. They made tons of money in the shipping business. You know, back when it was with actual sailing ships. The eighteen hundreds.”

She was acting like such a know-it-all that it really bothered me.

“Legend has it that Captain Crandall was out at sea, and he was several weeks late getting home. His wife used to pace back and forth on the widow’s walk up there, looking for him and waiting, and one day she actually fell off—or jumped, some people say. He came home safely, but she was dead,” I said.

“What? How did you know that?” Hayden looked at me, impressed.

“I used to come here with my grandparents. Way back when.” *When Caroline wasn’t so annoying.*

“I’ll never look at the house the same way again,” Richard said. “I had thought it was a bunch of old money, but now it’s a lot creepier.”

I thought of the time Caroline and I had met a Crandall cousin when we were taking a kayak class offered by the yacht club. Afterward we’d decided to go visit him, so we’d gone up to the Crandall house, rung the doorbell, and then ran away when we chickened out. I think a butler came to the door, but I’m not sure, because my view had been blocked by the hedge I’d hid behind.

I wondered if Caroline remembered that, too.

“But they don’t own this part, do they?” another new girl named Brooke asked.

“Own the sand and rocks?” Caroline scoffed. “No, I don’t think so. I mean, they’re not *that* rich.”

“So how does the Inn get away with having a private beach, then? They must own it, too, right?” Josh asked.

“Some ancient law preserves their right to it, I think,” Hayden said. “They don’t own it, exactly, but no one else can use it. Go figure.”

“So, can these Crandall people see us down here?” Claire asked.

“No. Well, if they can, they don’t care we’re here,” Zoe said. “At least they’ve never said anything before.”

“Having said that, I wouldn’t run around naked or anything,” Hayden suggested. “Just to play it safe.”

“Oh, good, I’m glad you warned me, I was just about to do that.” Claire rolled her eyes. “You know, you can take them out of high school, but can you take high school out of them?” she asked, and all of the girls laughed.

“Yes, but it’s a painful procedure,” Zoe said, and we laughed again.

Some of the other guys walked up carrying pieces of driftwood they’d collected. They dropped them into a fire ring made of stones and arranged them for lighting.

“Are we supposed to have fires here?” Claire asked as Richard struck a few matches and tried to get the fire going.

“We always do. It’s fine,” Hayden said.

“Fine, as in allowed? Or fine, as in you’ve never gotten caught?” Claire asked.

“We never got in trouble *last* summer,” Caroline said.

“Obviously people can see us out here, so if it was a big problem, they’d tell us.” Hayden shrugged. “We don’t cause any trouble around town, so it’s no problem.”

“You know what? I still think I’m going to take off,” Claire said to me in a soft tone.

“Are you seriously worried? They wouldn’t fire us. The Inn opens tomorrow, they need us,” I said.

“Who needs us?” Josh asked as he crouched in the sand beside me.

“Miss Crossley, the Talbot family, you know—everyone,” I said.

“~~They do need us, but you should know—they’re not afraid of canning employees,~~” Zoe said. “Last summer they fired a couple of people.”

“Oh yeah,” Caroline said. “What was her name, the one with the tattoo . . . ?” She looked meaningfully at me, and I held up my arm to show her it had washed off. She ignored me.

“Terri,” someone else added.

“Right. And what about that guy who partied with the guests after a wedding, and they found him sleeping on the front porch?” Caroline said. “Theo. Remember?”

“Miss Crossley went on a lecture for like a day and a half about how wrong *that* was,” Zoe told us.

“Okay. That’s all I need to hear,” Claire said, standing up and brushing the sand off the back of her shorts.

“Come on, relax. We’re not doing anything illegal,” Hayden said. “It’s a bonfire. People build them on the beach all the time.”

“Yeah, but . . . wasn’t there something in our handouts about no beach parties?”

“What are all these handouts everyone keeps talking about? Why didn’t I get them?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but I have them all back at the room,” Claire said.

“Miss Crossley would love to give you your own copies, too,” Tyler said. “She can probably quote them from memory.”

“Anyway, technically this isn’t a beach party. It’s a gathering,” Daunte said. “Stick around.”

Despite everyone’s protests, Claire took off to go back to the dorm along with a few others, while the rest of us sat around the bonfire.

“Okay, so you guys have to give us the dirt. The skinny. The four one one,” I said.

“What on earth are you talking about?” Caroline said. Why did everything she said to me end up sounding so disapproving? She sounded like a very uptight librarian at a very uptight library.

“You know, could you please give us the benefit of your venerable experience?” I turned to Caroline. “Is that better?”

A few of the guys laughed, including Hayden, and so did Zoe.

“Tell us what we need to know so we don’t screw up,” Josh said.

I nodded. “Nice translation. Thanks. Most of you guys have been here before, so tell us about it.” I took a handful of sand and let it run through my fingers.

“Okay, well, here’s what I would say.” Zoe lifted a chunk of her long, straight dark-brown hair and flipped it over her shoulder. “You want to get on Mr. Talbot’s good side, as soon as you can.”

“Oh yeah. If you can do that, you’re golden,” Hayden put in.

“Is it hard?” I asked.

“And which Mr. Talbot?”

“Yeah, aren’t there two of them? At least?”

“There’s the younger one, who’s not that young—he’s like forty-five—and then there’s the older one, who’s seventy,” Zoe said.

That was the one my grandfather knew. He called him “Bucko,” but his name was actually William.

“The younger one goes by William, the older by Bill,” another guy explained. “Not to us, though, of course.”

“Isn’t there a Mr. Talbot the third, too?” Josh asked.

“Yeah, Will, but he’s only five,” Hayden said. “So you don’t need to worry, unless of course you end up having him in your playgroup one day. Who’s got the little tykes group this summer?”

A couple of girls raised their hands.

“I hear he’s kind of a brat. Is that true?” one of the girls asked.

“He’s not bad. At least he wasn’t last year.”

“Anyway. How do we get the adult Talbots to like us?” I asked. I hoped I might have a head start since my grandfather knew Mr. Talbot Senior. Still, it had taken me two years to get hired, despite that. Hopefully Mr. Talbot Senior hadn’t soured on Grandpa, for some unknown reason. Hopefully Grandpa had been keeping up with his calls and Christmas cards and old-boy network stuff, like sharing jokes and cigars now and then. Virtually. Via e-mail.

“It’s easy,” Hayden said. “Just flatter them.”

“Yeah, but not in a phony way,” Zoe said. “They’re really nice guys, actually. Whatever happens they’re just trying to protect the Inn’s image, so every once in a while, they flip out over something small,” she explained.

“Like what?” I asked.

“You’ll just have to find out on your own,” Caroline said, in a somewhat ominous tone, as if I were bound to screw up. I got the impression that if I were drowning, she wouldn’t throw me a life preserver. I don’t even think she’d try. She’d probably turn and walk the other way.

What had I done? Was I forgetting some major slight on my part? Or was she remembering one that never happened?

I usually find a way to get along with almost everyone. The real person to worry about wasn’t going to be a Talbot. It was *her*.

“Okay, so you asked us what you need to know about the Inn,” Hayden said. “So tell us what you need to know about you.” He looked right at me.

“Me?” I asked. “Don’t start with me.”

He laughed. “Why not?”

“I don’t know. I’m not that interesting,” I said. That wasn’t it, but I just didn’t feel like talking about myself to a bunch of people I didn’t know. “I’d rather hear about stuff from you guys.”

“Not that interesting,” Josh repeated. “Hm. You know, the people who say stuff like that are always the *most* interesting.”

“You know, that’s true.” Hayden smiled at me across the bonfire.

Why were they ganging up on me? “What can I tell you? I’m from a suburb outside Hartford, I’m cocaptain of the volleyball team, my birthday’s March twelfth, which means I’m a Pisces. Oh and I also like piña coladas and walks in the rain,” I said. “That’s about it.”

“Righhhht,” Hayden said slowly.

“Okay, you’re right, you really *aren’t* interesting,” Caroline declared.

“Fine, then.” I turned to her. “Why don’t *you* talk about yourself?” She probably liked to do that.

“We could be here for hours,” Daunte joked.

“Stop it.” Caroline laughed and tossed a handful of sand in his direction.

“Not cool. Not cool. I have contacts, remember?” Daunte rubbed at his eyes.

“You know, we could sit here all night trading astrological signs. But I think I’d rather go swimming. Anyone else?” I asked.

“Race you,” Hayden said as he jumped to his feet.

“No fair—I don’t know the way—”

“The ocean? It’s right over there,” Tyler said.

“I know, but—”

“Last one in is a rotten quahog!” Hayden yelled.

“Ew. Smelly,” Caroline was commenting as I took off running for the water, stepping over rocks and stripping off my clothes as I did.

Don’t worry, it wasn’t *that* racy—I was wearing a bathing suit underneath.

I was tiptoeing into my room later that night when I knocked a book off the edge of the desk. It crashed to the floor and I saw Claire turn over in bed. “Sorry—I was trying not to wake you up so I didn’t want to turn on the light,” I said.

“It’s okay. I heard you guys coming a mile away.”

“Really?” I asked.

“Oh yeah. Remember not to say anything personal as you’re walking up the path—you can hear everything,” Claire said. “So how was it? Sounded like fun.”

“It was great. A bunch of us went swimming, which was so cool, but kind of scary, too—I’ve hardly ever gone swimming at night in the ocean.”

“It’s dangerous,” Claire mumbled into her pillow.

“Yeah, but Hayden was there, plus Lindsay, who lifeguards at the pool, plus Sara, who teaches swimming,” I told her. “So I figured I was safe, but you’re right, it is kind of weird only using the light of the moon to see by. The water was calm, though. Anyway, half of us were swimming, the other half were watching out for us. It took me forever to find my clothes afterward—never leave your clothes on the beach when it’s dark.”

I kept babbling for a few more minutes before I realized Claire had gone back to sleep.

I quickly changed into my pajamas and climbed into bed. I guess I should have showered, because my skin was sticky with salt, but I didn’t care. It would get old after a few weeks, but for now it was perfect, unlike the rock-hard cot I was lying on top of. Maybe I’d be more comfortable sleeping on the sandy beach, under the stars, I thought as I snuggled under the covers.

I thought of the way Hayden had looked at me as we both sprinted into the ocean, racing each other to be first to dive in. Afterward we’d all sat around the bonfire to warm up and dry off, and I’d caught him looking at me a few times across the fire.

So what? So you’re kind of—or more than kind of—attracted to him, I thought as I tried to fall asleep. You’re not here to fall in love over the summer. That would only make everything really complicated.

You’re here to save money for college, and just have fun, I reminded myself.

But . . . wouldn’t being in love be fun?

CHAPTER 3

Vacuuming. I hate vacuuming.

I ran the heavy industrial vacuum around the room, starting near the window and working my way backward to the bed. This was my fifth guest room so far, and I was cruising, nearly done with my block of rooms. I'd been lucky and nothing too challenging (or disgusting) had come up yet.

Although there was one challenge: The vacuum had superstrong sucking power and would sort of take off on its own if you didn't keep a tight grip on the handle. I could totally picture it taking off down the hall, cleaning everything in its path—and knocking down a few people, too. It seemed sort of possessed, like something you'd encounter in a horror novel. The fact that Mr. Knight, the “Clean Team” supervisor, had *named* all the vacuums, and this one was the “Hulk,” worried me.

Mr. Knight had spent a few hours with us the day before, going over procedures, like how we could use special sticky tape to lift sand out of hard-to-clean places. He'd tested us by making rooms dirty and then having us clean them. He literally had white gloves he used to test our “surfaces,” as he called them.

My test went something like this:

Mr. Knight: “And would you say that this is clean?”

Me: “Ye-es.”

Him: “You call this clean.”

Me: “Yes.”

Him: “Really.”

And then he showed me the white glove, which was not so white.

“So this is what they mean by commercial strength,” I mumbled now as I kept vacuuming. I was being extra thorough, as instructed, so I pushed the vacuum underneath the bed and moved it around searching for “Inn bunnies,” as Mr. Knight called them. Suddenly I heard a loud whirring sound. *Uh-oh*, I thought, quickly shutting off the vacuum. Had it eaten the bedspread?

I pulled the Hulk toward me, but the wheels wouldn't roll—they were jammed. And then I smelled something burning.

I quickly unplugged the vacuum and laid it on the floor. A black belt was wrapped around the roller on the bottom—and I didn't think it was part of the vacuum. I got down on my hands and knees and started to tug on the belt. Suddenly I saw a pair of feet in shiny black loafers standing beside the vacuum.

I looked up with a feeling of dread.

“What is going on here?” Mr. Knight demanded. “Have you broken the Hulk?”

“What? Come on, no one can bring down the Hulk,” I joked.

“What have you done, Liza? It smells like you slipped a belt,” he said.

“Something like that.” Slipped one, devoured another. No steps forward, two steps back. I tugged at the belt that had gotten sucked into the vacuum, but no matter how hard I pulled, I couldn't get it free.

“Let me see that.” Mr. Knight crouched beside me and examined the vacuum's rollers. “You've ruined it,” he said sadly. “I think you've ruined it.”

“Wait,” I said. “Maybe if we both pull really hard—”

“No, this requires a professional. Leave it.” He stood up and brushed the dust off his knees.

reluctantly got to my feet, too. "I'll need to fix up the vacuum before we can get anything else done here. You're excused, for now."

"Excused?" I asked. That didn't sound good, at all.

"Free to go. Take a walk. I'll contact you later about making up the lost time," Mr. Knight said. "You can work a double shift tomorrow."

"Great. Sounds great," I said, faking a smile. *And after that, I'll do a triple shift, and then a quadruple shift . . .* But as much as I hated cleaning, I'd do anything he asked in order to stick around and make up for my mistake. "And I'm *really* sorry about the Hulk. And the belt."

"What belt?"

I turned around and saw a man in tennis whites, holding a couple of racquets, in the doorway.

Time to make my escape, I thought as I edged toward the doorway. "I'm sorry, sir. I didn't realize your belt was under the bed, and the vacuum didn't either until it was too late—"

"You ruined my *belt*? My Etienne Lavager belt? Do you know how much those cost?" the guest demanded.

"It may not be ruined," Mr. Knight said. "Just one moment." Finally he managed to unhook the belt from the vacuum roller, and it whipped through the air as it came free, snapping against the bedpost. When he held it up, there was a big crease in the middle and the edges were frayed.

Mr. Knight cleared his throat. "Of course, the Inn will reimburse you for the belt."

"You don't understand. That's the only belt I have *with* me."

Great. Now I was responsible for this guy's pants falling down, too.

"I'll need a replacement. Or twice the replacement value," the guest demanded.

"Certainly, sir, certainly." While Mr. Knight scrambled to make things right, I hurriedly ducked out into the hallway. I walked down the hall to the stairway at the end as quickly as I could. If this guy ever got his belt back, he'd probably try to strangle me with it.

So, Day One on the job had been a bit problematic. But in my defense? I'd told them not to put me in housekeeping! This sort of thing wouldn't happen at the front desk, I thought as I walked through the lobby, where Caroline was busy chatting with a couple of guests. I would be great at her job—and I wouldn't be at risk of getting fired. Though I couldn't exactly say this was all Caroline's fault, I wanted to, anyway.

I was almost out the door when I heard sandals skittering on the floor behind me. "Beth, where are you going?"

I turned around. Caroline was hurrying up to me. "Is everything *okay*? You look upset. Aren't you supposed to still be working?"

I looked at her for a second. I could tell her everything that had just happened. That was clear what she wanted me to do, for some reason. We could laugh about it, or maybe I'd end up crying. But she was the last person I wanted to tell about my rocky start at the Inn. I had a feeling she'd enjoy it too much. "Everything's just fine," I said. "I finished early." Then I smiled, because that wasn't a lie—just a different take on things. "See you later!"

I grabbed my iPod and headed out for a walk along the winding oceanfront road. I took my time, admiring the beautiful large homes that faced the sea. I just tried to enjoy breathing in the salt air while I calmed down by listening to loud music.

I could give up, go home, get back together with Mark. . . . I could do the same old thing I did last summer. But that wasn't me. I didn't quit things. Definitely not after one day. When I was second team on the volleyball team, I worked my way up to captain. When I bombed my SATs on the first take, I took them again and again.

After walking for a while, I came around a curve and saw fellow newbie Josh, walking from the other direction. He had a small brown bag from the candy shop in one hand and a can of energy drink

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