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Present Day

What are we doing? Kari clenched her hands until her fingernails formed indentions in her palm. The flat southern-Georgia landscape outside the passenger window did nothing to settle her nerves. Gone were the Appalachian Mountains, the familiar places, her friends. All for uncles who needed their help.

She didn't even remember them.

"You're doing it again." Jake lazily tapped his fingers against the moving van's steering wheel.

"Doing what?" She forced her fingers straight again.

"Overthinking things." Her brother shot her a side glance, then returned his focus to the road. "It's too late now. I'm not driving back when we're almost there."

"So much for you loving me."

"Of course I love you, but your skills are exactly what our uncles need right now. You turned around Aunt Millie's hotel in West Virginia. You can turn around the Apple Inn down here in Brunswick."

"Apple Inn." Kari flopped her head back against the hard

seat. “Why did they name it such a thing? There aren’t any apple orchards near the Georgia coast. Shouldn’t it be a Peach Inn? Or the Peanut Inn?”

“Now be honest.” Jake snorted. “Would you stay at a place called the Peanut Inn?”

A laugh burst from Kari as she shook her head. “No. But why apples?”

“Maybe because it’s their last name?” There he went, being a voice of reason. She didn’t want reason right now.

“And why does it take seven men to run one inn? And why do we have seven uncles, anyway? What were our grandparents thinking?” Kari pressed her fingers between her eyebrows.

“Well”—Jake wagged his eyebrows, a mischievous sparkle in his blue eyes that matched her own—“I imagine they were thinking there wasn’t much else to do after dark, so they—”

Kari slapped her hand over her brother’s mouth. “No. Do not go there. Just ... eww. No. Can’t think of our grandparents that way.”

He nipped at her palm to make her jerk away. “Well, they weren’t grandparents when they—”

She walloped him again. “Stop already. Good gravy, Jake. Ugh.”

He snickered, so she punched his bicep one more time, trying not to wince at how hard his muscle was.

“Hey. Careful with the driver. Or I might have to pull over and unhook the pickup and make you drive the rest of the way.” He pointed his thumb toward the back of the moving van.

She wouldn’t complain too much about being out of this bumpy vehicle that smelled slightly of old feet. “If you did, I might turn around and go back.”

“Aww, come on. You can’t turn down old Uncle MacIntosh. He loved to take us fishing. Or Uncle Everard.”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t even know these men.”

“What? How can you not remember Uncle Pendragon? Or Uncle Jazz? He was always the one who could cheer you up after you scraped a knee or bumped your head.”

“Nope. No memories.” Kari shook her head.

“Well, I bet they remember you,” Jake muttered the cryptic words as he eased them off the interstate and onto a city road. “Almost home. Just got to get through town and over to the seaward side.”

Home? Home was four states back. How had she allowed Jake to talk her into this? Just because she’d turned one hotel around didn’t mean she could do it again.

Nothing about the town stood out to her, though they probably weren’t driving through the touristy parts. Houses—none bigger than modest—some stores and shopping centers, a park, and more houses. This was coastal Georgia? Before she was ready, he had turned again. Through the trees, small glimpses of water glimmered. A moment later, he pulled into a parking lot, and she leaned forward to take in ... the inn.

If you could call it that.

Two buildings made up the inn. A neon sign flashed “Vacancy” in a window off to the left. That part looked to be an old converted house, complete with a wraparound porch. A covered breezeway separated that section from the guest rooms.

The guest part was three stories. Weathered pale-green paint had flecked off to reveal some large spots of peachy tones. Missing trim. All the guest room doors opened to the outside, with little balconies facing the house and parking lot. Said lot had holes that might swallow her if she didn’t pay attention. *This* was her new project?

“Jake ...”

But he was already hopping out. “Uncle MacIntosh!”

An older gentleman pushed out of a rocker on the porch, wire-framed glasses resting on his nose. “Hunter.”

Hunter? That wasn’t Jake’s name. Not even his middle name. Had her uncle lost his memory? But Jake answered to the misnomer. Kari pressed a finger to the spot between her brows, wishing more of this made sense. MacIntosh was the oldest uncle, right? Jake had quizzed her on them before coming.

MacIntosh greeted her brother warmly, despite having to reach up to wrap him in a hug. The breeze ruffled the silver hair poking out from under his hat, and suspenders supported the pants nestled under his slightly pudgy belly. Nothing about this uncle was familiar.

Sighing, Kari woodenly jumped out of her side of the moving van, testing her legs to see if they’d support her after the long ride.

“Is that my Snow?” MacIntosh moved from hugging her brother to face her. “Man alive. You sure did grow up pretty.”

“Snow?” She barely got the question out before all the air was squeezed from her lungs in a hug that might have cracked a rib or two.

“Come on, Kari, you remember.” Jake smacked her shoulder. “They called me Hunter and you Snow. Because our last name was White. And you looked so much like the fairy tale character. We played the story all the time in the trees out back.”

Kari shook her head, frowning. She tried to be discreet as she whispered, “Jake, I’ve never met these uncles. Never been here.”

“Of course you have.” He scoffed. “We lived here until you were six.”

A creak sounded from the porch, pulling her attention that way. A swing bobbed back and forth and, for a split second, Kari pictured Mom holding her and singing as they swung there in the evenings. Where had that memory come from? And why couldn't she remember more?

"Come on in." MacIntosh motioned toward the door. "The boys are all anxious to see you. We'll help unload your things in a bit, after we've had supper."

Kari followed in a haze, though she noticed a familiar smell she couldn't quite place. And a patterned sofa that reminded her of something. A fancy glass lampshade. Past the reception area and dining room, she trailed MacIntosh, feeling caught between two different worlds.

An old photograph in a hallway stopped her. Her gaze traced the faces in the frame: Jake, as a boy of about seven or eight. Her, not quite four. Mom and Dad, much younger. And seven other men, their arms wrapped around each other's shoulders. In the background, this inn, in much better shape. She really had been here.

"See, Snow?" Jake nudged her with his shoulder as he tapped the glass.

"This is all surreal."

"Maybe you were too young to recall much." He looped his arm around her shoulder and steered her through the swinging door into a homey-though-outdated den, divided into living and dining spaces.

MacIntosh dropped into a chair at the head of the table and motioned for them to take the seats on either side. Six other men with smiles on their faces sat, their eyes all turned to take in the newcomers. Kari sank onto the wooden chair. MacIntosh pointed to each man, reminding Jake and her of their names. Every one of them wore a plaid shirt and suspenders.

The uncle to her left—Everard, he said—blinked a few

times and extended his hand to hold hers during the prayer. His white hair tufted high on top, making him look soft and comfortable. MacIntosh's hand was wrinkled and had sunspots, but still appeared strong and steady. She slid her fingers into theirs and bowed her head. This was crazy.

They passed the food, and she took something from each dish, not paying attention to what she ate. The men chatted freely with Jake, as if they'd known him all his life. Which, evidently, they had. How did she not remember any of this? Surely, she'd remember growing up with seven uncles—each of them named after an apple.

"I guess you're overwhelmed by the amount of work." MacIntosh patted her hand, shifting her attention to him.

"Now, most of it is just cosmetic." Jazz, the uncle three down from her, leaned forward. He looked a lot like MacIntosh but with more hair and a bigger smile, as if he always saw the bright side of things. "Paint and whatnot."

"That's ridiculous, and you know it." Pendragon, with permanent frown lines etched into his face, slammed down his fork next to Jake. "We got plumbing issues, drafty windows, creaky stairs, some electrical problems—"

"All that to say"—Spencer stifled a yawn, stretching his beard wide—"we all need to pull together and contribute some elbow grease to help Snow with whatever vision she suggests, and Hunter, here, with his handyman skills."

Kari blinked. The various personalities around this table didn't mesh quite as well as she'd first imagined—from having only minor repairs assumed to a full overhaul. What was the truth? "Have you had anyone do an inspection to determine what needs to be fixed first?"

Braeburn rubbed the back of his neck and ducked his head, leaving only the shiny bald top visible. "Well, now, we talked about it. But just never got around to it, I reckon."

“I can’t even go into half the rooms.” Uncle Crispin wiped his nose. He could pass for Jazz’s twin, except for the red nostrils and watery eyes. “So much mildew and dust.”

“It’s a lot.” Everard sighed. “But I can help.”

“Course you can.” MacIntosh nodded. “We all will. But that’s something we can talk about tomorrow. Tonight, we’ll get you young’uns settled into your old rooms here in the family wing. We kept them for you all these years. Everything else can wait.”

The way he said that put Kari on high alert. “Uncle MacIntosh, there’s more, isn’t there?”

Everyone at the table stilled from gathering dishes and preparing to leave. Jake lifted a brow. MacIntosh cleared his throat.

“It’s that Evil Queen,” Pendragon barked.

“Evil ... Queen?” Jake coughed as though trying to cover a laugh. “I think you guys have been referring to us as storybook characters for too long. This is America. We don’t have queens.”

“Tell that to the company trying to buy us out,” Crispin said right before he sneezed. “Run by Queenie Ville. She’s already bought up three other inns down the road. Trying to acquire enough land to expand her resort.”

“Okay, but I don’t see what the problem is.” Jake reclined back in his chair, arms crossed. How could he always be so nonchalant?

“Because she’s persistent and stubborn. Determined.” Pendragon narrowed his eyes. “And she’s decided she needs this property as her last one.”

“So? That doesn’t mean you have to sell to her.” Jake shook his head.

Braeburn ducked his head and mumbled almost indiscernibly, “We might.”

“What do you mean?” Kari reached over to place a hand on his, and his cheeks turned bright red. “She can’t force you to sell your property.”

“But she can and already has called in people who can condemn us.” MacIntosh cleared his throat.

“Condemn?” Despite not remembering these men, they were family. Her mother’s brothers. And several of them had already started working their way into her heart with their eccentric personalities and suspenders. Besides, after seeing pieces of her own history here, she wanted to learn more. If this inn was condemned, the work ahead would be much harder—not to mention the extra hoops they’d have to jump through.

“We need to get things shipshape again so she can’t have us shut down and evicted.” Jazz wasn’t looking much like his name. His smile lines warred with the frown wrinkling his forehead.

“How long?” Kari braced herself, tension coiling in her belly.

All the men exchanged long glances, guilt crossing their faces. Not good. She met Jake’s eyes, and he seemed to be thinking the same thing. This might be more than they could handle after all. But they had to try.

The little snatches of her own history woven with her endearing uncles had her bracing herself to do whatever it took.

* * *

Last one of the day.

Royal Barrett pulled into the potholed parking lot and let his gaze travel across the old inn. It had seen better days. Was it even worth giving them a flyer?

As his attention spanned back down, it caught on a woman standing a few feet from the porch, seemingly doing the same thing he was. Staring at the building. The owner? He didn't remember the owner being listed as female.

The slam of his door surprised her, and she glanced over, her brown hair cascading over her shoulder. His heart skipped a beat seeing her icy blue eyes full of something he couldn't quite define. Mourning? Defeat? Fear?

"Can I help you?" Her voice startled him back into action.

"Hi. I'm passing out flyers for the Chamber of Commerce. They're starting a new contest. The Fairest Inn All."

Her pale forehead wrinkled as she frowned. "A contest?"

"It's meant to encourage older establishments to revamp and revitalize so we can maintain some of our past charm for tourism instead of succumbing to the newer, fancier resorts and hotels going up." He handed her a flyer, not needing to read it. He'd given this spiel six times already this afternoon. "The inns, hotels, and bed and breakfasts have to be at least fifty years old and in good condition, as well as functioning."

They both surveyed the dilapidated structure before them. Hmm. Maybe this inn wouldn't be a good fit after all.

Her fist tightened around the paper. "Sounds like more motivation."

"Motivation?"

She focused her baby blues back his way. "My uncles brought my brother and me here to help fix up this place. Get it back in running order. Bring it up-to-date."

Royal took in more of her details—just a bit shorter than his five foot eleven, but slim. What exactly were her uncles expecting her to do? He cleared his throat. "I know how much work these old inns take. I followed my grandfather around his inn when I was little, and he let me be his assistant. Then, as a

young man, I helped my Uncle Kurt when he took over. It can feel never-ending.”

“No kidding.” Her mouth spread into a tiny grin, showing a dimple in one cheek.

Enchanting.

“So, when is the deadline for this?” She ran a finger down the fine print on the page.

“September.” He tapped the area she needed to read. “That will give the judges time to view all the properties and make a decision before the end of the year. Winner gets bragging rights, a big banner to hang out front, and a feature in the Chamber magazine that goes out once a quarter as well as an advertisement on the Chamber of Commerce website for the next year.”

She nodded. “We already have a deadline for the end of the year.” Her gaze flitted to his before dodging away again. “This ups the ante.”

“I hope you can fix it up.” He should leave, but this enigma of a girl intrigued him. She appeared dainty but somehow laced with steel. “I used to love all the old inns down on this side of town. Seeing them disappear one at a time ...” He shook his head. “It’s been hard. One of the reasons I talked my dad into doing something like this.”

“Your dad?”

“He’s the one who’s actually on the Chamber, but his leg is broken right now, so I’m running errands for him.” He stuck out his hand. “Sorry. I didn’t even introduce myself. I’m Royal Barrett, by the way.”

“Kari White.” Her cool fingers slid over his, too small for such a large task.

“It’s nice to meet you.” He didn’t want to let go but couldn’t find a legitimate reason to keep holding her hand.

“Hey, Snow.” Another man burst through the front door.

Royal jerked back a step. Snow?

“Quit calling me that, Jake.” Kari huffed. “Check this out.”

Jake stopped beside Kari, his stance wide and eyes narrowed. Who was this man? Kari’s husband? But would her husband call her something she didn’t like? Jake stared at Royal for what felt like a full minute before turning his attention to the flyer. “Hey. This is great. We should totally enter.”

“Deadline is September. That’s even earlier than the deadline we decided on last night.”

“So?” He shrugged, then looked at Royal again. “Who’s the guy?”

“Oh, this is Royal Barrett. His dad’s on the Chamber of Commerce and is running this contest. Royal is letting people know about it.”

Royal stuck his hand out once more, but Jake’s fingers were much larger and unforgiving in his handshake. Like a vice grip.

Jake sized him up and then slapped his shoulder. “Nice to meet you. I’m Kari’s brother.”

So, not competition—just overprotective. Wait. Competition? Royal glanced at the beautiful brunette again. Where had that thought come from? She’d said they were here to help out their uncles. Nothing else.

Royal stepped back toward his Bronco. “Glad to meet you both. I hope you do enter the contest. I’d love to see this inn come back to life.”

“That makes three of us. Ten, if you count all our uncles.” Jake grinned.

Royal blinked and calculated the math twice to make sure it was accurate. “Seven uncles?”

Jake opened his mouth to say something, but Kari socked him in the stomach before he could. Royal chuckled. Not so meek and gentle as she first appeared.

She gave Royal a tight-lipped grin. “Big family.”

Oh, to have a sibling relationship like that. Royal grinned, scanned the space again, and nodded to the sister and brother. “Hope to see you both around.”

“Thanks again.” Kari held up the flyer.

He waved and returned to his vehicle, maneuvering around a deep hole to back out of the parking lot. Kari and Jake had a lot of work ahead of them. But if the contest encouraged a few more of these old inns to stick around, it would be worth it.

Every time another property was swept up and transformed into something modern and sleek, his granddad and his beautiful, beloved town disappeared a little more. So Royal would pass out the rest of these flyers, despite the fact it would likely stir up Aunt Queenie’s wrath.