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“**T**here you are.” Jake plopped down beside Kari, where she sprawled in a chair on the back patio. “What are you doing?”

She tapped her fingers against the chair arm. “It’s all so ... overwhelming.”

“The work we have to do?” Jake leaned back and crossed one leg over the other.

“That too.” She huffed a sigh, ruffling the hairs on her forehead. The movement was nice, considering how warm the day was, despite only being April.

Jake lifted a brow. “That *too*? I’ve been studying the list of things the property inspector left us. It’s almost never-ending.”

“Okay, okay. Yes, that part is overwhelming. But it’s not bothering me as much as the rest.”

“The rest?”

“I can’t remember any of this.” Kari motioned toward the pine trees surrounding them. “The salt-tinged air. The inn itself. None of this is familiar, but you tell me I lived here for almost seven years. And our uncles obviously remember me even though I can’t recall them.”

Jake ran a hand through his hair. “You did live here. We lived here until right before your seventh birthday.”

“Then why can’t I remember any of it?”

“My guess is you blocked it from your memory because of what happened afterward. We were happy here.”

“Then why did we leave?”

Jake sighed and rested his elbows on his knees. “How much do you remember about Mom’s sickness?”

Kari crossed her legs and tilted her head back. “Only that she was sick. A lot.”

Jake nodded. “She caught a lung disease when you were five. She had to stay away from all of us for several weeks because they were afraid we would catch it too. And even after she recovered, she was never the same.”

“What was it?”

“Even with all the testing, the doctors couldn’t give her a definitive diagnosis. Still don’t know as much about it as they want to, last I heard.” Jake rubbed a hand down his face. “It left her lungs weak, full of damaged tissue. Every time she caught the slightest cold, her health would deteriorate, develop into bronchitis, and then pneumonia. But that wasn’t the worst part.”

Kari swallowed, focusing only on what her brother was saying. Vague recollections of a never-ending cough, of her mom not having enough strength, filtered through her brain as his words wove the memories together. How could she not remember more?

“It also damaged her liver, but they didn’t know it for a long time. They kept diagnosing her with other issues, treating the wrong things. It only aggravated the real problem.”

Jake stared off into the distance, as if gazing into the past. “Dad thought if we moved up near his sister, a specialist there

who had treated other patients with the disease might be able to help her. But it was too late.”

A tear slipped down Kari’s cheek. She recalled hazy memories of her mom being sick and unable to interact much after Kari started school. But the details were lost in other memories of growing up.

“We were supposed to come back ... once Mom was better.” Jake’s gaze roamed the outside of the inn. “She loved it here. And our uncles basically raised her, since she was the youngest. She didn’t want to leave them.”

“But we never came back.” Kari studied her surroundings again. What would life have been like if they had? Growing up here instead of West Virginia? Seven uncles to influence and spoil instead of an aunt? It was hard to imagine.

Jake shook his head. “At first, after she passed away, Dad needed the help his sister offered. Then, the longer we stayed ...”

“The harder it was to leave.”

“I don’t think he wanted to live where there were so many memories of Mom.” Jake twisted his lips.

“Isn’t it strange that we never visited or anything, though?”

He shrugged. “Looking back, I guess so. But Dad had moved on. Worked with his family in Ohio and later, West Virginia. Both sides of our family are in the hospitality business, after all.”

Kari blinked away the moisture in her eyes. No time for lingering in the past right now. This place had waited too long already—and it showed. Reminiscing and remembering could come after the work was done. She stood and dusted off her pants.

“Uh-oh. I know that look.” Jake crossed his arms. “You’re about to put me to work, aren’t you?”

“We need a game plan.”

“So much for our bonding time.”

“We can bond while we figure out what to do first.” She grabbed his arm and yanked. “Come on.”

“I thought you didn’t want to have *anything* to do with this inn,” Jake grumbled but followed her.

“No. I said I didn’t understand why people thought I could. And I didn’t want to come. But we’re here now. And Mom would’ve wanted us to step up and help her brothers, right?”

Jake tugged her to a stop and wrapped her in a hug. “Right.”

“Okay, then. Let’s do this.”

Through the back door was the family den—the one they’d eaten in since arriving. Seven recliners sat in a semicircle around the edge with a couch and loveseat tucked across from them. The dining table stood behind the couch, closest to the family’s galley-style kitchen—as opposed to the bigger kitchen, left unused for years, for the inn’s occupants. Various items discarded around the den made it feel more like a home than hotel. She moved to the coffee table, where she’d left the report.

“This is going to need more than some paint and new fixtures.” She perched on the couch and tapped the papers. “He noticed some termite damage on the south side. Some leaky pipes added water damage. The roof needs repairs, if not completely replaced. New outlets and locks to bring things up to code.”

“Pshaw.” Jake bumped her over as he joined her on the sofa. “We got this.”

“When’s the last time you replaced a roof?”

“I’m all about learning new things.” He rubbed his hands together before flipping through the pages. “And some of this can wait a bit.”

“Not much.” Kari pointed to another spot that mentioned the foundation needed to be shored up. A lot of the air conditioners were in bad shape too. “But this is going to cost a ton of money. Think the uncles have it?”

Jake lifted a brow and glanced around the outdated room. “Considering we haven’t seen a guest since we’ve been here and no telling when the last one was here, probably not. With no income, it’s hard to raise money for repairs.”

Kari rubbed a spot on her forehead that was beginning to throb. “That sort of makes this impossible, doesn’t it?”

“That word’s not in my vocabulary.”

“Good for you.”

Kari and Jake both faced the door and saw several of their uncles looking as if they’d been listening for a while.

“We’ll help you figure out the money.” Uncle MacIntosh hobbled into the room and slid onto one of the leather chairs. “Maybe we can get a grant or something?”

The other three followed, standing nearby.

“You should just tell her about the—” Uncle Pendragon cut himself off when Jazz elbowed him in the ribs.

“About the what?” Kari studied the four uncles present.

Braeburn shuffled his feet and looked anywhere but at her. Jazz pinched his lips together, Pendragon glared and rubbed his side, and MacIntosh cleared his throat.

Kari crossed her arms over her chest. “Out with it. If it’s something that could help us revamp this inn, we need to know about it.”

“Yeah, you might as well give in now, guys.” Jake snickered. “When Snow gets on her sassy face, she doesn’t back down.”

“I’m not sassy,” she snapped at her brother. “And quit calling me Snow.”

He lifted a brow as if she’d just proven herself wrong. *Whatever.*

“Look.” MacIntosh ran his hands down his thighs and sat taller. “We haven’t mentioned it before now because we didn’t want you to spend it on us instead of you. But it’s supposed to be yours.”

Kari frowned. Had she missed something?

“What’s supposed to be ours?” She tapped her toe.

“The inheritance,” Pendragon growled and sank into his own recliner.

“Inheritance?” Kari and Jake asked at the same time. “What inheritance?”

“Your mama’s share in the inn.” Jazz lowered next to Kari and squeezed her shoulder. “When she passed, we all decided to pull out what would’ve been her share of the Apple Inn and invest it for y’all for when you were older. Figured it’s what your mama would’ve wanted. Well, MacIntosh here, he’s pretty good with numbers and such, and he did real well with it. But it’s your money. We don’t want you to just put it back in the inn and not have anything for yourselves. That wouldn’t be fair to you.”

“Wait.” Jake pointed between the uncles. “We have a big stash of money somewhere?”

“It’s not millions or anything, but it’s enough to be a nice surprise for you.” Braeburn shrugged.

“How much are we talking?” Kari narrowed her eyes. “Enough to cover a new roof?”

“I thought we told you not to use it on the inn.” Pendragon wagged a finger in her direction.

“If it’s our money, we can spend it any way we want, right?” The first bubble of hope welled inside Kari’s belly. “And besides, I think if Mama were still here today, she’d want us to use that money for the inn, which is where it came from in the first place.” Kari regarded the four older men, familiar and unfamiliar all at the same time. But words popped in her head

and out of her mouth without her conjuring them. “She’d be just as concerned about you all as she would about us.”

“I thought you didn’t remember anything.” Jake bumped her with his shoulder.

“Maybe things are starting to come back. Because as soon as the words left my mouth, I knew they were true.”

Jake nodded. “Yep. I’d say we’re in agreement on that.”

“Now, wait just a peanut-picking minute.” MacIntosh hefted himself out of the chair. “Don’t we get any say in this matter?”

“Do you or don’t you want us to help you save the inn?” Jake met their oldest uncle toe-to-toe.

“Course we do,” Braeburn grumbled. “But what about you?”

“What about us?” Kari asked her quietest uncle.

“Well, I mean, if you spend the money on the inn, you won’t have it if you need it for yourself.” He shrugged, his lips twisting to one side.

“What do we need the money for?” Jake motioned around the outdated room. “We have all we need right here. Except for maybe a newer sofa and a better coffee maker.”

Kari swatted him. “What Jake means is that we don’t need anything right now. We’ve talked about running our own inn one day, but nothing concrete. Plans can wait. The roof cannot. Thanks to what our aunt paid us for helping with her inn, we’ll be comfortable for a while. So, let us use the money where it’s needed.”

MacIntosh shook his head but moved toward the old computer in the corner. “Then let’s figure out how much money is actually in that account and what we need to do to access it, and go from there.”

“But it’s yours.” Pendragon shook his finger at them, his face slightly mottled. It hadn’t taken long in the last twenty-

four hours for Kari to figure out that he was more bluster than bite.

“So are you, even if we haven’t seen you in years.” Kari stopped on her way to join MacIntosh, put an arm around her cantankerous uncle, and squeezed. “And this inn is our mom’s heritage. Let’s see what we can do to save it.”

Hopefully her words sounded more optimistic than how she felt. As much as she’d like to think this money was exactly what they needed to solve the problem of a new roof—and possibly a few other things—she didn’t dare expect it. After all, from the looks of this place, how much money could they possibly have saved for them? Especially when the money had been split eight ways.

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The bells jangled above the door at Barrett’s Family Furniture. Royal started toward the front but paused when he caught sight of who had entered. Queenie Ville, her posture fit for the monarchy she acted like she hailed from. She held her head high as if the best way to look at the world was down her nose. She was the one person he least wanted to see today—or any day. The property thief.

Beth, one of their newer employees, made her way over from the recliner section. As the clerk approached her, Queenie leered, as if ready to devour the innocent girl. As tempting as it was to have someone else handle his aunt, he could guarantee she wasn’t here to buy furniture. Royal waved Beth back. No need for one of their best salespeople to suffer through a meeting with Queenie.

“What can I do for you today?” Royal stepped from behind a sectional and offered what he hoped was a friendly smile.

“Where’s your father?” Queenie’s wrists jangled from the

multiple bracelets wrapped around her arms as she swept her long black hair over her shoulder.

“I’m afraid he’s not in the store right now. But he’s taught me everything about this business, so I’m sure I can—”

“I’m not here for a sofa.” Queenie narrowed her eyes. “This is Chamber business. And something tells me you know exactly what I’m talking about.”

Royal kept his arms loose at his sides instead of crossing them over his chest. No need to aggravate the woman further. “Oh?”

“Don’t act all innocent with me, boy.” Queenie wiggled a finger, complete with sharpened red nail, under his nose. “I saw you out passing around those flyers. Something tells me you’re as much to blame for this stupid contest as your daddy. But I’m going to show you all. Because I’m here for an entry form.”

Royal barely kept his mouth from hanging open. “An entry form?”

She must be jesting. From the moment Queenie had married Uncle Kurt and moved to Brunswick, she’d been a fish out of water. As if she couldn’t figure out how to live in a town smaller than Atlanta. A few months after Kurt passed away, Queenie took all his insurance money and sank it into building her resort. And she hadn’t slowed down since. But what did that have to do with the contest?

“Sure. I own an inn or two, don’t I?” One side of her mouth tilted up as if she knew something he didn’t. “I have just as much right to enter an inn in this contest of y’all’s as anyone.”

“This contest is for inns fifty years old or more that are maintaining the heritage and charm of their original structure. It isn’t for resorts or inns that have been remodeled within an inch of their life or are identifiable as built within the last few

years. Do you have an establishment that meets those criteria?"

Queenie pursed her lips. "Are you judging my inn because I updated it? I believe that's discrimination."

"I'm only stating the rules." Royal tucked his fingertips into his pockets so his hands wouldn't fist.

"More likely, you're still sour about me buying that inn right out from under you with my better offer. You thought it was going to be yours, didn't ya?" Queenie cackled. "It's hard playing with the big dogs."

Royal swallowed the acidity rising within him at her nonchalant attitude toward squashing his dream. "It has nothing to do with the fact that I was outbid on the inn I planned to buy. It has to do with the aesthetic of the inn. The structure's history is indiscernible despite having been there for twice my lifetime."

"It's called keeping up with the times." Queenie pulled a flyer from her huge handbag and thrust it against his chest. He stumbled back a step. "This little contest of yours isn't going to work."

"What do you mean?" Royal took the familiar paper and smoothed it out. "What is it you think we're trying to do, exactly, besides help preserve the historic aspect of the tourism industry in our town?"

"Save the tourism industry?" Queenie tilted her head back to laugh this time. "Puh-lease. People don't want to stay in old places. They want modern features and updated fixtures. They can't live without all the electronics and doodads that come with my resort and inns. No one wants to stay in an old building that leaks and creaks. *I'm* saving the industry—giving people places to stay in this town—so they won't all run over and sleep on the islands."

"We'll have to agree to disagree." Royal straightened.

“Besides, your resort isn’t saving the town. It’s only bringing money to you. Definitely not spreading it around. The people who stay with you spend all their money on your inns, your bus services, and your restaurants. Not a penny is going to local families or small businesses.”

“I still pay local taxes, don’t I?” Queenie shook her head. “All those dollars go to the roads and schools and whatnot. Seems like I’m doing my part.”

Royal pinched his lips. How many other dreams had she crushed? Who cared about taxes when she smothered people’s aspirations one at a time? Saying more wouldn’t change her mind or any future decisions she would make to buy more inns.

“Guess I need to go find another inn so I can enter this fancy contest of yours, since you don’t like the ones I already own. If memory serves, there’s one right down the street from me that’s struggling and could use a bit of aid from my oh-so-capable hands.” She rubbed her palms together. “I’ll be back.”

It was the one thing she’d said he knew was true. And, as the bells chimed to mark her exit, he braced himself for the battle ahead. His mind ran through the various inns still intact around her huge resort. He stilled.

The Apple Inn. The sad one that held so much hope, where Kari White and her brother lived. They wouldn’t sell it to Queenie, would they? Despite how overwhelming the needed repairs were.

Maybe it was time he offered to help.