



QUILT AS YOU GO

A Harriet Truman/Loose Threads Mystery

BY

ARLENE SACHITANO

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QUILT AS YOU GO

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Chapter 1

Could everyone who will have a quilt for sale in our sutler's booth please put your name and a brief description of your quilt or quilts on this form?"

Harriet Truman held up the aforementioned piece of paper before handing it to her friend Jenny Logan. Harriet was a member of the Foggy Point Business Association, organizers of an upcoming Civil War re-enactment. In Civil War days, the sutlers were the mobile merchants. The Loose Threads quilt group had been meeting every day for the past week in order to finish their quilts before the opening skirmish in the re-enactment.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but didn't the Civil War take place before Washington achieved statehood?" Lauren Sawyer asked. She gathered her straight blonde hair in both hands and raised it off her neck, letting the air from the open window cool her skin. "And why do we have to make quilts for people who relish violence so much they have to keep replaying it over and over again?" She loosened her grip and let her hair cascade onto her back again.

"Don't be so contrary," Marjory Swain scolded. She owned Pins and Needles, Foggy Point's only fabric store and the site of the Loose Threads' weekly meetings. Lauren couldn't afford to offend the older woman, so she held her tongue for once. "Here, tie your hair up and get back to your quilting." Marjory handed Lauren a lime-green fabric-covered elastic hair tie.

“I’m passing around another form,” Harriet continued and held up a yellow piece of paper. “This one is to sign up for times to work in the booth. I do appreciate everyone’s hard work. If we sell all the quilts we’ve collected so far, we’ll have enough money to repair all of last year’s storm damage in Foggy Park.

“I suppose you voted for that when I was in Angel Harbor last month,” Lauren said.

“I’m sure even you can’t have forgotten we were *all* in Angel Harbor, and no, we didn’t vote then, it was after we got home, and yes, you weren’t here for that meeting,” Harriet challenged.

By the time she’d graduated from high school, she’d dealt with bullying schoolmates on three continents, thanks to her parent’s international lifestyle and penchant for yo-yoing her in and out of boarding schools. At thirty-eight, she thought she’d learned to let go of the need to engage in schoolgirl trash talk, but when Lauren was involved, it all went out the window and she was back in the schoolyard.

“Ladies,” Mavis Willis said in a no-nonsense voice, “this isn’t getting us anywhere.” Mavis was not only the oldest member of the Loose Threads but had also raised five sons whose antics were legend in Foggy Point Public School District lore. When she spoke, everyone listened. “What matters today is that we get as many quilts finished as possible before people start arriving on Thursday.”

“If you have at least one quilt finished and ready to hang, raise your hand,” Harriet said.

Everyone raised their hand.

“Robin and DeAnn have volunteered to gather what we have ready, put price tags on them and hang them in the booth. Anything we finish between now and Thursday can go on shelves at the back of the booth. The whole sutler’s area will be covered with a canopy, so we don’t have to worry about sun damage from hanging quilts early.”

“I’ll have seven quilts finished by Thursday,” Sarah Ness announced.

“Here we go,” Mavis said, covering her mouth and coughing to conceal her comment.

Sarah held up a simple quilt made from one of the pre-cut five-inch-square fabric packages known as charm packs. The colors were pastel pinks and blues and yellows. The prints were reproductions from an earlier age—the nineteen thirties.

“Okay, who’s going to say it?” DeAnn Gault asked in a low voice, giving the rest of the assembled Loose Threads a sidelong glance.

Harriet shrugged, not up to that challenge. Mavis shook her head and smiled in anticipation of the coming argument. Lauren rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and went back to stitching the binding onto a quilt made with the Kansas Troubles block, done in shades of butternut and blue set alternately with unpieced blocks of the same size. She’d chosen small-print fabrics that were faithful reproductions of those used in the years leading up to the Civil War.

DeAnn gave the group one last pleading look before turning back to Sarah.

“While very lovely, your fabric is not a Civil War reproduction,” she stated.

“It’s a reproduction, that’s all people care about,” Sarah fired back. She folded the quilt and stuffed it in her large canvas carry bag, pulling another one out in the same motion.

Lauren groaned and looked away as Sarah unfolded her second quilt.

“I can’t stand it,” she moaned.

The quilt was made with the same Kansas Troubles block pattern Lauren had used, only Sarah had used yellow fabrics against a black background with pale blue and acid green accents. Technically, she’d selected fabrics from Civil War reproduction collections, but Harriet was pretty sure this particular combination had never been assembled before—not in Civil War times and not since.

DeAnn started to speak, stopping before recognizable words formed. Finally, she gave up, shaking her head and laughing.

“What?” Sarah asked, truly bewildered.

“Nothing,” Harriet said, regaining her own composure, as long as she didn’t make eye contact with DeAnn. “Thank you for your

efforts. Give your quilts to DeAnn or Robin, and they'll record them and get them hung up at the booth."

She had been warned by the re-enactment consultant the Foggy Point Business Association had hired that some of their guests would be what were referred to as "thread counters"—people who obsessed over the authenticity of everything to the point of counting the threads per inch in all the fabrics used for uniforms, civilian clothing, bedding and supplies, checking to be sure they were true to the time period. The consultant recommended clearly labeling any items already known to be less-accurate copies from the period. He suggested phrases like "in the style of the Civil War period."

He had assured them that all types of history buffs showed up, and there would inevitably be family members of the hardcore re-enactors who would welcome the chance to shop for more contemporary items. As long as the majority of what was offered in the sutler's area were sincere reproductions, he was sure they would have a successful event.

"Does anyone have any questions?" Harriet asked before returning to her place at the big table the Loose Threads were clustered around. Normally, meetings were informal gatherings, with people drifting in and out as their schedule allowed or their project required. They met in the larger of two classrooms in Pins and Needles.

"Are we interrupting anything?" a stout, slightly balding man said from the doorway. He didn't wait to for an answer but came through the door and took the position Harriet had just vacated at the head of the table. A young, heavily made-up woman in a short pink skirt, silver tank top and pink alligator boots followed and stood by his side, a bored look on her face. Her long bleached hair was held up on her small head with a large silver plastic clam shell clip.

"We wanted to check and see how you gals were doing with the quilts for your booth. You know the quilt store is one of the most important booths in our whole vendor area." He made a grimace that was his version of smiling and directed his attention to Harriet, walking to her side of the table and sitting in the chair next to her. "Did you find vendors for the last three booths?"

He leaned eagerly toward her; the heavy gold chain he was wearing looped out through the open neck of his pink shirt. Harriet sat as far back in her chair as she could without being obvious.

As president of the Foggy Point Business Association, it was Carlton Brewster's job to organize the re-enactment. Since the association had agreed to hire a consultant, there weren't many jobs left for him to personally carry out, filling the sutler's area being his major one.

"Yes, they're filled. I got a candlemaker from Port Townsend who will do wax dipping demonstrations four times a day and will have candles for sale also. The knitting group that meets at the Lutheran church will sell handmade shawls as well as socks, hats and scarves. Luckily, they all had items they'd already made for a church sale that are historically acceptable, and they'll each turn out a few more items before the event. And for the last booth, the folk art school in Angel Harbor will set up a mini-bazaar like the women's aid societies ran to raise money for the war. They'll sell a variety of things—tobacco pouches, pin cushions, little sewing kits, children's toys, stuff like that."

"Well, good," he said. He clapped her on the back, causing the tea in the cup she'd just picked up to spill onto the table. "Seems like you have the sutler's area taken care of." He turned to his wife. "Bebe and I were just heading over to the country club. We figured people in Civil War times probably spent more time outdoors than we do. After spending all that money to make sure we have realistic costumes, we figured we better make sure our tans are up to snuff."

Harriet looked at Bebe, whose given name was actually Barbara. If she got any more tan her well-oiled skin was going to look like a piece of burnt toast.

"We wouldn't want that," she said.

His job for the day done, Carlton took Bebe by the arm and left.

Connie Escorcia got up and went to the bathroom, returning a moment later with a handful of paper towels. She glanced toward the door to make sure Carlton and Bebe were gone.

"Dios mio!" she exclaimed. "How dare he come in here with that...that..." She broke into rapid-fire Spanish even Harriet couldn't follow, but which apparently referred to Bebe, and not in a

good way, either. Connie was a retired teacher and, at five foot even, made up for her diminutive size with her larger-than-life Latina personality. “He dumped all his jobs on you so he can go sit at the pool with her?”

Harriet picked up her quilt, a scrappy design made up of eight-pointed stars and rail-fence blocks, which were squares made from three equal-sized fabric strips of different colors or patterns. Like Lauren, she was hand-stitching the binding onto the edge.

“Somehow, when I agreed to take over Aunt Beth’s quilting business, I didn’t realize I was also agreeing to this whole business association hoo-ha.”

“You’re really good at it, though,” Jenny offered. She was a slender, fiftyish woman whose sleek, shoulder-length hair was never out of place. Her taste in quilting normally ran to large pastel floral designs with a blended, low-contrast look. To her credit, for the re-enactment she was making a coverlet with roses and plumes cut from red, pink, yellow and green solids and appliquéd onto an off-white background. A ribbon of green stems with stylized rosebuds circled the rose blocks, forming a border. Jenny was still appliquing the rosebuds and had arranged with Harriet to machine-quilt it as soon as it was done.

“You’re definitely more competent than Carlton,” DeAnn said. “If he was actually doing the job, he’d be making a mess of it, so we’re better off with him sitting by the pool with the bimbo.”

“DeAnn’s right,” Robin added. “The extra work he would have created would have been much worse to deal with.” Robin taught yoga, and believed most problems could be solved with a few cleansing breaths and a stretch. If *she* condemned Carlton’s management skill, Harriet had to believe it was bad.

One by one, the women around the table pulled their finished quilts from bags, or fetched them from their cars and stacked them in front of Robin and DeAnn for pricing and labeling. For their part, the two women had made three quilts together, sharing cut strips in shades of blue to make several variations of the Irish Chain Pattern.

Harriet was pleased to see the growing stack of quilts. Going into this event, she’d been concerned about asking the group for such a large commitment of time and resources. She was once

again impressed by the willingness of the people in her new home town to pull together no matter what the cause. It didn't seem to matter that the current economy was tough—everyone in the group had donated at least one quilt, and most of them had contributed more than one.

"Honey, could you give me a ride home?" Mavis asked Harriet as she snapped her cell phone closed. "I dropped my car off for an oil change, but of course, Henry found a cracked hose and that worried him, so he wants to change all the hoses and he doesn't have time to finish it tonight."

"Sure, no problem," Harriet said. "I'll be done in a minute. I want to total up the asking prices DeAnn and Robin came up with for what we have here. We need to earn back five hundred dollars to pay for our share of the tent rentals for the sutler's area."

"That should be easy," Robin said. "All of the full-sized quilts are priced at least that high."

"You aren't serious, are you?" Lauren asked. "We'll have five hundred after the first hour."

"Of course, I'm not serious," Harriet said. She nervously tapped her pen on the page she was holding. "I just want to know what to expect profit-wise."

Robin put a garish purple-and-green quilt Sarah had made on the top of the stack.

"That's the last one for now," she said.

"Let me know if you two need anything," Harriet said. She finished adding up the figures on their list, wrote them in a small notebook and dropped the book into her bag. "You ready?" she asked Mavis, and when the older woman nodded, they left.

"Do you need to stop at the store or anything while we're in town?" Harriet asked.

Mavis declined, and Harriet pointed her car toward Mavis' cottage on the wooded shores of the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

Foggy Point is a peninsula on the northwest edge of Washington State. It resembles the head and small front claw of a tyrannosaurus, jutting into the inland waters that form the border between the United States and Canada. In earlier times, the jagged outline of the peninsula made a perfect hiding place for pirates and their

sailing ships between forays. Eventually, one of the more successful among them, Cornelius Fogg, had settled down and founded the town of Foggy Point.

The downtown area of Foggy Point was situated on what would be the back of the T-rex's neck and spanned an area of six square blocks, with most of the activity centered within two blocks on either side of Main Street.

Harriet drove down the lane leading to the little house in the woods Mavis called home. Wild roses covered the fence that protected the yard of the fairytale-like cottage.

“Can you come in for a cup of tea?”

“Sure,” Harriet replied. “Here, let me carry your bag.” She got out of the car and grabbed Mavis’ canvas quilting bag from the back seat.

Mavis led the way to the arbored gate and held it for her.

“Did you leave your door open?”

“No, I haven’t left it unlocked since Bertie came calling.” Mavis referred to an incident earlier that year when Avanell Jalbert had been murdered by her own brother Bertie, who had then come after Harriet, who was staying with Mavis at the time.

“I don’t mean unlocked. It’s standing *open*.” Harriet started backing up, pulling her cell phone from her pocket as she went. “I don’t have a signal.”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions. My boys all have keys to the house and some of their kids do, too.”

“They *all* have keys? I don’t even know where my parents live, much less have a key.”

“You have weird parents,” Mavis replied, being all too familiar with Harriet’s history.

“Would your kids leave the door standing open?” Harriet asked.

“Not on purpose, but they might have forgotten you have to lift the knob when you shut the door or it doesn’t catch.”

Mavis brushed past her and went up to the porch. “We didn’t see any cars along the road or in my driveway. I’m telling you, it was one of my boys.” She pushed the door open. “Hello,” she called as she went inside.

Harriet grabbed at her to slow her down but Mavis wasn’t having it, so she followed her. The house was small; it only took a few

moments to check the two bedrooms, bathroom, living room and kitchen. No one was there.

“There’s no note, but that’s not unusual.” Mavis picked up her teakettle from the stove and added water before setting it back on its burner and turning on the power. “Sit down and put your feet up for a few minutes,” she said and pointed to the living room. “Your aunt Beth told me you’ve been working late trying to finish the Civil War quilts as quickly as you can. You know that’s why her shoulder went bad, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Harriet said, even though she was pretty sure her aunt had damaged her shoulder long before she’d taken up long-arm quilting. Granted, running the quilting machine for hours on end hadn’t helped.

“Have I shown you the new grandmother’s flower garden quilt I’m working on?” Mavis was an old-school quilter who sewed the pieces of her quilt top together by hand. She quilted most of her projects by hand, too, although in the interest of time she’d let Harriet machine-quilt one of her Civil War offerings.

“No, but I’d love to see it.”

“Katrina’s pregnant again, and they just found out it’s a girl.” Mavis went into the spare bedroom that doubled as her sewing room. “I’m using...”

“Mavis?” Harriet called when her friend remained silent. Receiving no response, she jumped up and hurried down the short hallway that led to the bedroom.

Mavis stood clutching a worn quilt Harriet had never seen before. Tears streamed down her face.

Chapter 2

avis, what's wrong," Harriet asked as she eased her normally unshakable friend into a seat on the bed. She grabbed several tissues from a box on the fabric cutting table and handed them to her.

After a few moments, Mavis regained her composure. She stood up and, with a final swipe of her tissue, went into the kitchen, turned the kettle off and started making their tea. She gave one cup to Harriet then picked up the old quilt from the chair back she'd set it on and headed into the living room.

"Come, sit. I owe you an explanation." She spread the worn lap-sized quilt on the sofa between them. "I haven't seen this quilt in almost twenty years," she began. "I made this for my husband Gerald. The predominant plaid fabric is from one of his flannel shirts. He wore a brand-new shirt out in the garage to sharpen the blade on the lawn mower, and he caught the sleeve on a nail and tore it from elbow to cuff. Instead of trying to repair such a big tear, I cut the whole shirt up and used it in this quilt."

Harriet studied the plaid pattern, giving her friend time. Green, brown and blue shirtings had been used, giving the quilt its scrappy look.

"Gerald traveled some with his job, but after I made this, he never went on a trip without it. He said it made him feel like he had a little bit of home with him. He died on a trip to Malaysia,

but when they returned his personal effects this wasn't with them. I thought it had been lost."

Harriet put her hand on Mavis's arm. "I'm so sorry."

Mavis just shook her head. She leaned back and stared into space as she silently sipped her tea.

Harriet wished Aunt Beth hadn't driven to Seattle for the day. She would know the right thing to say to her oldest friend.

"Do you want me to call the police?" she finally asked, knowing it probably wasn't the comfort Mavis needed, but she couldn't think of anything else.

"What for?" Mavis asked, a little more sharply than usual. "What am I supposed to say—'Oh, officer, a crime's been committed. Someone broke into my house to return a lost quilt to me?' I'm sure they'd rush right over to solve that one."

Harriet laughed softly, "I guess that's probably not a crime we need to dial nine-one-one over. But someone did come in here uninvited."

"We don't know that. Maybe Gerald left it with one of the boys, and they just now realized what they had. Things were pretty chaotic when Gerald died, him being overseas and all."

"It just seems like your sons would have left a note or called you or something."

"You'd think so, but the two unmarried ones are a little more scattered than the other three. Harry or Ben would have intended to leave a note, but I can easily imagine either one of them going out the door without doing it."

"Maybe we could call Darcy," Harriet suggested. Darcy Lewis was a quilter and sometimes Loose Thread, but she was also a criminalist based at the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office.

"You know better than anyone she can't do anything unless the sheriff's office or the Foggy Point Police Department sends her, and I'm not involving them."

Harriet heaved a weary sigh and finished her now cold tea in two large gulps.

"I better hit the road," she said. "I've got quilts waiting on me." She carried her cup to the kitchen sink, rinsing it before she set it on the counter. "Call me tomorrow if you want a ride back to the car dealer," she called before slipping out the front door.

Mavis didn't reply. Harriet could see through the front window that the older woman was sitting in her recliner, clutching Gerald's quilt to her chest.

She had almost reached her car when a strange-looking little dog with a too-round head and ears set at an odd angle ran up and started dancing around her feet. She bent down and patted her.

"Hi, Randy." She picked her up. "Where's your daddy?" she managed to ask as Randy licked her face.

"He's right behind you," a male voice said, in a falsetto, pretend-dog tone, from over her shoulder.

She turned to face Aiden Jalbert, Foggy Point's newest veterinarian, his arms already closing around her. She leaned into his solid chest—at six-foot-three, he was comfortably tall.

"I'll just stay here till after the re-enactment," she said.

She'd never thought of herself as one of those shallow women who judged men by their physical attributes, but Aiden's white-blue eyes, set at an angle like a cat's, and his blue-black hair, worn longer than was stylish unless you were a European model, made her heart flutter. The baggy running shorts that exposed his muscular legs only added to his physical appeal. Perhaps there were benefits to dating a man ten years her junior.

"Sounds good to me, as long as Mavis stays gone, that is."

"Mavis is inside in her chair. I brought her home—her car had to stay at the shop. It was good that I was here. Something weird happened." She told him about the open door, the quilt and Mavis's reaction to it.

Aiden thought for a moment. "I was pretty little when Gerald died." He looked up at the sky, thinking. "I don't remember anything other than Mom having to spend a lot of time with Mavis for a while."

"Maybe Mavis is right, and one of her sons dropped it off. It seems kind of insensitive to leave it in her house without a note or anything and then to leave the door open on top of that."

"Something's not right. I'll try to swing by here when I can."

"Speaking of that, what are you doing here, anyway? And dressed like that, too. You didn't get fired did you?"

Aiden lived on the other side of the large wooded area that ran along the shore of the strait. She had walked the trails through the woods with him and Randy on more than one occasion, but not during the workday.

“Your confidence in my abilities is underwhelming.” He tried to make a sad face but ended up laughing instead. “Dr. Johnson decided to keep the clinic open late an additional night, and yours truly gets to be the first guy on the new shift. I came home to take Randy for a run, since I have a few hours off now in exchange.”

“I guess that means dinner’s off,” Harriet said, trying for a smile but not making it.

“I could bring pizza by when I get off,” he said and tilted her chin up with his finger and then kissed her gently on the lips.

“As good as that sounds, in reality I’ve got a lot of work to do. Maybe we should just postpone.”

“I’ll come by with a treat to reward you for all your hard work,” he said with an impish smile.

She started to protest, but he pulled her into another kiss, silencing her. He brushed her short dark hair away from her face. “And I won’t stay long and keep you from your work.”

He let her go and called Randy, who ran up, her short tail wagging.

Harriet watched, her cheeks flushed and a smile on her face, until the pair had disappeared into the woods again.

Chapter 3

A long-arm quilting machine is really just a fancy sewing machine. It has a large frame that holds the quilt top, batting and backing under tension while the sewing head is guided over the taut surface, stitching as it goes. Completed sections are wound on a long roller as they are completed.

Harriet found the process relaxing—at least, she did when her thread didn’t break and the requested pattern flowed easily. The one she was working on had a reasonable pattern, but the thread had been provided by the quilt maker; and although it was a lovely tea-dyed cotton, it broke every few feet, which translated to every few minutes for this pattern.

“You look like you could use a break,” Aunt Beth said as she came into the studio through the outside door. Aunt Beth had given Harriet the long-arm quilt business as well as the Victorian house where she’d lived and worked back in April. Then, she’d retired to a cottage by the water.

Harriet still thought of both as Aunt Beth’s even though her aunt didn’t.

“I have a first-time customer who provided her own thread, and it’s giving me fits. I don’t have too much more to do, though.”

“You keep stitching, and I’ll make some tea,” Beth didn’t wait for an answer. She put her purse and coat on one of the wingback chairs in the reception area by the door and went through the door into the kitchen.

Aunt Beth backed through the connecting door again fifteen minutes later, a tray with a teapot, cups, sugar and spoons balanced in front of her.

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Perfect timing. I just finished. I’ll take it off the frame when we’re done with our tea.”

“How are the preparations going?”

“I’ve got the sutler’s area filled, no thanks to Carlton. And the Threads have our booth in good shape. As long as people actually buy our quilts we’ll be good.”

“Oh, honey, of course they’ll buy our quilts.”

“With this economy, I don’t want to count on anything. I’ve tried to keep the expenses conservative just in case.”

“That’s a good plan no matter. If people don’t spend much you’ll be fine, but if they do, you’ll have better profits.” Aunt Beth poured the tea and handed her a cup.

Harriet inhaled the fragrance of bergamot. “Hmmm, Earl Grey?”

“Good nose,” Aunt Beth replied. They both sipped for a few moments.

“I’m sorry you’re stuck with Carlton,” Aunt Beth finally said. “I’m so used to working around him I didn’t even think to warn you.”

“What I don’t understand is how people like him get good jobs and positions of authority when they’re completely incompetent.”

“In his case, it was easy—his daddy built a company and brought him up through the ranks. When Daddy died, his only son got the keys to the kingdom. As one of the bigger employers in the area, he gets his pick of the positions in the Business Association. Actually, until he got married to Bebe, he wasn’t that bad. I’m not sure he ever had an original thought, but at least he worked when you handed him a task. Now, all he can think of is her.”

“On a different topic,” Harriet said, changing the subject before she found herself ranting about Carlton for the hundredth time. “I took Mavis home from Loose Threads today and something really weird happened.” She proceeded to tell Aunt Beth about the incident at the cottage.

Aunt Beth took her time before replying.

“Gerald worked for Foggy Point Fire Protection Company back then. That was when it was called Industrial Fiber Products. He was some kind of chemist. He traveled all over the world visiting customers. He died in a car accident in Malaysia. What was weird was that for some reason they never got his body back. A few weeks later, his ashes arrived in an urn. No one ever went to Malaysia; none of the family was present for the cremation. I’m sure there was some good reason. Maybe they automatically cremate people within a certain time frame, or something like that. I don’t know.” She rubbed her hands over her weatherworn face. “I guess everyone has their own way of doing things.”

“Maybe that’s why she got so upset at the sight of the quilt,” Harriet said. “Did you ever ask her why she didn’t go there?”

“Honey, there are some things you don’t ask a person. Not when they’ve just lost the love of their life. I just trusted that she had a good reason. My job was to support her in whatever way she needed, not to challenge her decisions.” She smiled. “I know what you’re thinking, but you heed my words, some things are better left alone.”

A tap on the studio door interrupted the silence that enveloped the room. Harriet got up and opened the door for Aiden, who carried a pizza box in one hand and a drink carrier in the other.

“I thought I might find you here,” he said to Aunt Beth as she took the drinks from him. Harriet closed the door then held the connecting door to the kitchen open for them.

“How’s Carla doing?” Aunt Beth asked when they were all settled on stools around the kitchen island, the pizza within easy reach. Aiden had chosen a nontraditional pie that included artichoke hearts, Kalamata olives and goat cheese. He’d also gotten a large Caesar salad for them to share.

“Getting better.” He took a big bite of pizza.

Carla Salter was the youngest member of the Loose Threads. She’d joined after participating in a quilting group for unwed mothers that Marjory held at Pins and Needles. In addition to making a quilt for their own baby, each of the young women made a quilt to be donated to charity for other young mothers. Marjory

gathered donated fabrics for the group to use, and when Harriet took over Quilt As Desired she'd also assumed Aunt Beth's donation of free machine quilting for all the quilts the group made.

Carla had caught the quilting bug and gotten a second job working at the quilt store to fund her new hobby. Unfortunately, she had lost her job at the vitamin factory Aiden's family owned and was living with her baby in a borrowed van until Harriet convinced Aiden to hire her to be his housekeeper.

"I stayed in my apartment over the clinic until a week ago," Aiden explained. "I thought it would be better for her to get settled at the house before I moved back in." He took another bite of pizza, and Aunt Beth waited patiently for him to finish chewing. "The first week I went to check up on her, and at seven o'clock at night she had the baby strapped to her back and was on the third floor scrubbing windows."

"Poor little thing," Aunt Beth said.

"So, I told her to restrict her activities to the first floor until we could figure things out. Then she didn't go upstairs at all, and one of the plants in the sitting room up there died and she was in tears over that." He sighed. "I had no idea how hard this was going to be when I agreed to hire her as a housekeeper."

"You must have had some idea—your mother had a housekeeper, didn't she?" Harriet asked.

"Of course, no one could take care of that huge house without help. I just didn't pay attention to who did what. And I was in school. I only know who took the garbage out—that would be me. And my sister was supposed to walk the dog, but she never did, so I did that, too."

"I've got a little time," Aunt Beth offered. "How about I go over and spend some time with Carla, and we can make a list of what she should do and a list of what things you should hire out. I know who your mama had do her windows and a few things like that."

"That would be great," he said with relief. "And could you ask her to stop calling me Mr. Jalbert? And also, when you make the list, you can give me some stuff to do, too. I never expected to have someone wait on me hand and foot. I know my mother still did

some stuff around the house even though we had Rose. And like you said, she had other people who did stuff.”

“We’ll get things straightened out in no time.”

“One more thing,” Aiden said. “See if you can find out who her new friend is.”

“Does she have a boyfriend?” Harriet smiled.

“Yeah, and he’s not from around here.”

“Did you check him out?” Harriet asked.

“No, I didn’t check him out. She’s a big girl. Besides, I just moved back, and she was already seeing him. If Beth can find something out, that’s different.”

Talk turned to Aiden’s work and then the upcoming re-enactment. When they had eaten as much pizza and salad as they could, Aunt Beth got up and started clearing the remains.

“I’d better get out of here so you can get that quilt off the machine,” she said.

“I better go, too,” Aiden said. “Carla’s friend was supposed to be dropping by tonight while I was at work.”

“Okay,” Harriet said. “I’ve got to go finish the quilt.”

Aiden brushed his lips over her cheek in a quick kiss and left. She stood at the door looking down the driveway long after his car had rounded the turn and gone out of sight.

How pathetic am I? she wondered.

Aiden had spent months assuring her their ten-year age gap was meaningless, yet here she was wondering what it meant when he rushed off to check on Carla, of all people. In her heart, she knew he wasn’t interested in Carla in that way, but an irrational part of her was hurt that he couldn’t spare just one minute to kiss her goodbye properly.

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