



The Quilt Before the Storm

A HARRIET TRUMAN/LOOSE THREADS MYSTERY

Arlene Sachitano



Harriet stood with her for a few minutes, neither of them speaking. She hoped it was helping in some small way. She was staring into her own coffee cup, lost in thought, when Aiden came striding up to them.

“I need to talk to you,” he said in a cold tone, his jaw so tense she could see the muscle jump. He grasped her arm in a rough grip and pulled her toward the door.

As soon as they were out in the hall, he whirled around to face her.

“Is it true?” he demanded. “Are you involved in not one but *two* murders? Again?”

“So what if I am? What business of yours is it? You’ve made it very clear—we’re through. I get it. I don’t like it, and it took me a few tries to hear the message, but I finally did. Aiden and Harriet are no more. So, again, what business is it of yours if I’m involved in two murders or twenty murders or anything else, even?”

“Just because I said I can’t be with you doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. I don’t want to see you get hurt, by me or anyone else. That’s the whole point of all this.”

“All what?” Harriet said in a louder voice than she’d intended.

“Don’t change the subject. What about the dead guys? Why are you involved?”

“I’m not involved, not that it’s any of your business.”

“You *are* involved. I came here to take care of a dog and a cat that got into a fight. The two owners were talking about the people who had arrived from the homeless camp. They mentioned you by name. They said you were there when they found both bodies.”

“That’s not exactly true, but again—not your business.” Harriet whipped around, pulling her arm from his grip, and went back inside the gymnasium.



ALSO BY ARLENE SACHITANO

The Harriet Truman/Loose Threads Mysteries

Quilt As Desired

Quilter's Knot

Quilt As You Go

Quilt by Association

The Harley Spring Mysteries

Chip and Die

The Widowmaker



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ARLENE SACHITANO



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THE QUILT BEFORE THE STORM

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Chapter 1

The wind threw rain laced with pine needles at the bow window, gusting and swirling before it moved on down her tree-lined driveway. Harriet Truman glanced out at the gathering storm.

“You know, I could just cook something for us to eat here so we don’t have to go out in the weather,” she said.

“About dinner.” Aiden Jalbert tipped his head downward and glanced up at her with his catlike white-blue eyes, a crooked half-smile on his lips. He was sitting in one of the two wing-backed chairs in the reception area of her long-arm quilting studio. Harriet sat opposite him in the other.

She hated the term “boyfriend”—it sounded so high school—but she had yet to find a better word to describe the relationship status of a woman twenty years *past* high school and a man not long out of veterinary school. If the truth were to be told, *boyfriend* is exactly how she thought of Aiden, and she was okay with that.

He reached out and took her hand, pulling her toward him. She stood and shifted over onto his lap.

“Please don’t tell me you have to work,” she said, studying his face. As the new guy at the clinic, he often got stuck with after-hour duties when problems arose.

“No, it’s not work.” He sighed.

“But you’re ditching me,” she prompted as she stroked a stray strand of silky black hair from his eyes.

“I’m not ditching you,” he protested. “Well, I am, I guess. But not because I want to. Believe me, I’d much rather be eating dinner with you than talking to my sister.” He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against him. She leaned her head on his shoulder.

“Your sister? You’re ditching me for your sister?” she moaned into his fleece-covered shoulder. “You don’t even like your sister. She tried to sell your house out from under you, for crying out loud.”

“I know.” He leaned his head back and stared at the ceiling. “She said it was important.”

“And you believed her?” Harriet sat up straight. “How can you believe anything that comes out of that woman’s mouth?”

“I can’t. I don’t. But she’s my sister. I have to at least hear what she has to say.”

“You can’t do that over a quick cup of coffee? She has to ruin our dinner plans?”

Harriet knew she sounded like a spoiled child, but Michelle had made a bad situation much worse for Aiden when their mother was murdered earlier in the year. She had tried to steal his inheritance, and standing up to her, while necessary, had been very hard on Aiden.

He pulled her back to his chest.

“I think this is one of those times when being an only child has limited your perspective. No matter what Michelle has done in the past, or what else she’ll try in the future, she’s still my sister. I won’t let her get close enough to do any harm, but I at least have to hear her out.”

“I might not know anything about siblings, but I know greed when I see it, and your sister has ‘what’s in it for me’ written all over her face.”

“She can’t touch my money or property. The lawyers have made sure of that.”

“It’s not your things I’m worried about. It’s you,” she said, and poked her finger into his chest.

He leaned his face down and kissed her gently on her mouth.

“If it makes you feel any better, I told her to meet me at Jorge’s place,” he said referring to Tico’s Tacos, a Mexican restaurant run by Jorge Perez. Jorge was the father of Aiden’s best friend Julio, and he had stepped in to fill the role when Aiden’s own father passed away while the boys were still in grade school. “That way, she can’t even start the discussion about what’s in the house and how Mom meant for her to have it.”

“She’s done that in the past, I take it?”

Aiden sighed. “Once or twice.”

“Did you give her stuff?” Harriet asked, her voice louder than she’d intended.

His pained silence answered her question.

“What did you give her?” she pressed.

“Not much. A necklace. A couple of teacups. Nothing I couldn’t spare. My mom had a lot of stuff, you know.”

“That’s not the point.”

“I know—you’re not the only one I’ve had this discussion with. Jorge told me the same thing. He says she’s toxic. And he said she’s probably selling whatever I give her online as soon as she gets home.”

Harriet brushed at the errant lock of hair again. He took her hand in his when she’d finished and brought it to his lips before setting it back in her lap.

“It’s just complicated,” he said in a quiet voice.

“I know. Just be careful,” she said and pressed her lips gently to his. He tightened his arms around her and deepened the kiss.

A loud whoosh of wind rattled the bow window again, causing them to separate as tree debris pinged against the window.

“Hard to believe this isn’t the worst part of the storm yet,” Harriet said as rain fell in sheets outside.

“I’ve got go,” Aiden said with a glance at his watch. “Michelle’s supposed to be here in an hour, and I have to go by the clinic to check on a dog.”

“I have fabric to cut anyway. Mavis says we need six more charity quilts for the homeless camp, and she wants them done before the storm hits.”

She stood up and waited while Aiden stood and put on his outer jacket and a baseball cap with the Main Street Veterinary Clinic logo on the front.

“Call me?” she said and gave him one last kiss.

“If it’s not too late,” he said. “Michelle tends to drag our discussions out. She likes to bring up sentimental stories from when we were young to try to soften me up.”

“Do they work?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” he said. “No one knows your life like the people who’ve lived it with you. Plus, there’s a part of me that really doesn’t care if she has all the stuff. I know it’s not what my mother wanted, and I know it only encourages her when I give in, but still—it’s just stuff.”

“Okay, go.” She pushed him toward the door.

She watched out the window until his car disappeared into the rainy gloom then turned back to her cutting table. She had cut four different colors of flannel before Aiden’s arrival and stacked them in piles; her gray cat Fred was batting at the stacks, trying out a new design.

“I don’t think this is what Mavis has in mind,” she scolded him as she organized the squares by color again.

“What didn’t Mavis have in mind?” the woman herself asked as she swept into the studio, her coat flapping in the breeze.

“I was just talking to Fred—he decided to rearrange our fabric. I’ve got one more color to cut if you have time to wait. Aiden came by for a few minutes, so I’m a little behind schedule.”

“I’ve got a few minutes,” Mavis said as she shrugged out of her coat. “I’m not due at Connie’s for another hour, so take your time. Did your aunt call you? And I could use a cup of tea.”

“No, was she going to?”

“Well, after I give Connie her pieces, we’ll have three quilts left to go. Beth was thinking we could meet here, if it was okay with you.”

“Of course it’s okay—it’s her studio.”

“*Was* her studio,” Mavis corrected. “She gave it to you, and she’s trying to respect that.”

“It’s not like she gave it to me and I turned it into a beauty parlor or moved to Mars or something. I am part of the Loose Threads. At least, I was last time I checked.”

“Like I say, she’s trying to respect your autonomy.”

“Okay, whatever. The studio is free, and so am I. Aiden’s having dinner with his sister.”

“That sounds like a recipe for disaster.”

“Everyone’s told him that, but he can’t say no to her. He says I’d understand if I wasn’t an only child.”

“Well, sister or not, that girl’s poison, if you ask me.”

“You’re preaching to the choir,” Harriet said as she folded a piece of brown plaid flannel and spread it carefully on her cutting mat.

Mavis unplugged the electric kettle and carried it toward the kitchen.

“I’m going to get some fresh water, if you don’t mind,” she said as she went through the connecting door to Harriet’s kitchen. She returned a few minutes later and plugged in the now-full kettle. “Connie has another idea for us.” She pulled a stool to the opposite side of the cutting table and eased herself carefully onto it.

“You seem to be moving a little slow,” Harriet observed as she ran her rotary cutter along the long edge of her Plexiglas quilting ruler, slicing the edge off the piece of fabric.

“It’s nothing. I banged my hip on the square edge at the top of my bedpost yesterday. Curly was running around while I was making my bed, and I was afraid I was going to step on him. I was looking at my feet instead of where I was going, and now I’m sporting a big purple bruise.”

“You need to be careful. That little dog isn’t worth you breaking your hip.”

“Easy for you to say,” Mavis said with a laugh. “You don’t look at his sweet little face staring up at you every morning when you wake up. If he could talk, I know he’d be saying how happy he is that Aiden rescued him and brought him to live at my house.”

“Cute or not, he’s not worth breaking your hip, or worse, over.”

Mavis sighed and rolled her eyes skyward.

“You just wait until you get Scooter home,” she said, referring to the small, mostly hairless dog who was still living at the Main Street Veterinary Clinic, recovering from a series of skin grafts he’d needed after spending his short life living in squalor in the bottom cage of a tall stack in a dog-hoarding home.

The Loose Threads had all participated in a socialization program, holding the neglected dogs and getting them used to human contact so they could become eligible for adoption. So far, as each dog had graduated from the program, it had been adopted by the Loose Thread who had socialized it. They were now working on a second group of animals, hoping to release them to the public when they were ready.

“Who’s saying Scooter’s coming to live here?”

“Don’t even go there. We all see how you look at that little fellow.”

“Well, he’s still weeks away from being released medically. That urine burn on his back was so deep it has to heal more before they can get a permanent skin graft to take.”

“So, back to the quilts,” Mavis said. “Connie came up with an idea to solve our problem.”

“Our problem?” Harriet asked, looking up at her friend as she did.

“It’s not *our* problem, exactly, but Connie and I have been talking about how we’re making all these warm quilts for the people at the homeless camp, but we’re not addressing the wetness issue. We’re getting tons of rain, and the ground is so saturated that even if they’ve got a tarp or tent overhead, their quilt is going to get wet and we’ve accomplished nothing.”

“And the solution is?”

“Connie saw an article in the Seattle paper about a young University of Oregon college student who did a workshop project that involved making portable shelters from discarded materials. She won the competition with her tarp made from plastic grocery bags, which she then sent to Haiti after the earthquake there.

“They call them quilts because they look like patchwork when they’re finished. A group of quilters added some of that thin plastic drop cloth material, ironing it over the whole thing so they could

layer in flowers or letters or other decorations cut from dark-colored plastic bags.

“In both cases, you lay a piece of tracing paper or parchment over the layers and iron the whole thing. According to the people who’ve made them, it sticks together. The college students even slept outside using theirs to field test them, and they say they were quite comfortable.”

“That’s amazing.”

“Well, let’s not be too amazed until we try it. Connie’s been collecting grocery bags from everyone she knows since she read the article, so she’s got enough for a couple of tarps, and if it works, we can probably get more. She said it takes about four hundred bags after you cut off the handles and bottoms to make a ten-by-twelve tarp.”

“Why don’t you see if she wants to come here tonight? We can try the tarp idea, give her the flannel squares, and some of us can work on sewing quilt squares at the same time.”

“I’ll call,” Mavis started to get up, but was interrupted when the door blew open and a cluster of wet brown leaves sailed in on a cold blast of wind, landing in a soggy mess on the reception area rug. She went to the door and shut it, locking it this time.



An hour and a half later, Connie Escorcia, Mavis Willis, Harriet and Beth, Harriet’s aunt, were assembled in the quilt studio looking down at an array of plastic bags spread out on the large table and covered with thin clear plastic. Connie had cut three large daisy shapes from a green-and-yellow bag and now arranged them artfully between the bags and the plastic. She laid a large sheet of white tracing paper over the corner of the plastic sandwich and pressed a hot iron to the surface. The smell of melting plastic filled the air.

Harriet found a box fan and set it up on a stool so it was at table level, facing away from the project.

“I hate to open a window the way it’s storming out there, but I’m afraid it can’t be helped.” She went to one of the small win-

dows to one side of the bow window and opened it about an inch. The wind whistled, and cold air shot into the room.

Aunt Beth pulled her sweater closed across her ample midriff.

“I hope this is as bad as this storm is going to get,” she said and turned her back to the window.

“The weatherman says this is nothing compared to what it will be,” Connie said and, after receiving a nod from Harriet, pressed the iron down on the next section.

“What are you guys doing?” Lauren Sawyer said as she came in from the driveway, pushing the door closed with a bang. “I knocked, but nobody even looked up, so I let myself in with that key you gave me.”

“Come on in and make yourself some tea,” Aunt Beth invited. “It’s so noisy in here with the trees scratching on the windows, we didn’t hear you.”

“What are you doing with that iron? It smells horrible.”

“We’re making tarps out of plastic grocery bags,” Harriet told her. “Want to help?”

“Don’t you still have some quilts that need to be sewn?” she asked. “That’s why I came by. I turned in a design to a client, and I can’t do anything more until they test the first part, so I have a little free time.”

“How nice of you to think of the project,” Connie said.

“You say that like I don’t do my share,” Lauren shot back.

“Now, honey, I meant nothing of the kind. Harriet, don’t you have some fabric that still needs cutting?”

Harriet got Lauren set up at the cutting table with a ruler, rotary cutter and several yards of brown plaid flannel.

“Where did you get so much of the brown flannel?” Lauren asked. “Didn’t we put this in every quilt, front and back?”

“Marjory got a special deal from her distributor,” Mavis said. “There was a defect in the print. If you look at the plaid in the whole piece, there’s a swath through the center that doesn’t have its yellow stripes.”

Lauren leaned closer to the fabric, carefully examining the pattern.

“You’re right. I can see it now that you point it out. It hardly seems like a reason to reject the fabric.”

“Yeah, but if you were making a quilt for a show, you wouldn’t want fabric that wasn’t the same on part of it. In any case, it was all the better for us. Marjory got it for two dollars a yard and is giving it to us at the same price.”

“I guess you can’t argue with that,” Lauren said and set about cutting the squares of flannel that would be sewn into rag quilts.

Rag quilts are so named because of the ragged edges that result when you sew two or more squares of fabric wrong sides together then sew the resulting layered squares to each other with the seams on the top of the quilt. These seams are snipped to the stitching line every quarter inch or so, and when the fabric used is a flannel or other loosely woven material, these snipped margins fray when washed. This produces a thick fuzzy seam that adds to the warmth of the resulting quilt and eliminates the need for batting or additional quilting. This also makes them quick and easy to produce in mass quantities.

“What are these big squares for?” Lauren asked Harriet. “I don’t remember us using anything that big in the quilts we’ve already made.”

“Those aren’t going *in* the quilts,” Harriet said. “I thought we could sew two big squares, right sides together, then turn them and topstitch them down on three sides at one edge of the top of the quilt to make a pocket.”

“Why didn’t you just say we’re going to make quillow’s?” Lauren asked, cutting off anything else Harriet was going to say on the subject.

Quillow was the term used to describe a quilt with a pillow pouch attached. The quilt could be folded up into the pocket to form a pillow or unfolded to use as a cover.

“I wasn’t sure—” Harriet started, but the look Lauren made her stop. “I’ll leave you to it.”

She turned back to the tarp makers.



“Is anyone getting hungry?” Aunt Beth asked when the group had been at work for more than an hour. “I was thinking I could call for pizza.”

“Sounds good to me,” Harriet said. “Anything to avoid going out in this weather.”

The rest of the group agreed, and after a brief debate about which toppings they all wanted, Aunt Beth placed the order.

“They said thirty minutes,” she reported when she’d hung up the phone. “I’m surprised they aren’t busier than that.”

“I’m glad,” Connie said. “I’m getting hungry. Rod and I spent the afternoon putting our patio furniture in the garage and securing the potted plants. We ate cheese and crackers instead of a proper lunch, to take advantage of the lull between storms. He’s off getting gas for our generator while I’m here.”

“Hopefully, it won’t come to that,” Lauren said and shuddered, pulling her zip-front sweatshirt closer around her. “My new apartment has that big front window overlooking the cove and no fireplace or wood stove.”

“I brought extra wood into the garage to dry,” Harriet said. “You can come here if things get really bad. I’ve got two fireplaces, and my stove top is gas, so I can still cook if the power goes off.”

“The downstairs water heater is gas, too,” Beth added. “When I had the propane tank installed for the stove, I figured it might be useful to have a gas water heater, too, just in case.”

“We may all be over here,” Mavis said. “I’ve got a wood stove, but hot water and a stove top would be real nice.”

“You’re all welcome to come,” Harriet said. “But I’m with Lauren—I’m hoping the weatherman is crying wolf.”

“I heard the Methodist church is setting up a shelter for the homeless people and anyone else who needs warming,” Mavis said. “They don’t usually go that far unless it’s pretty certain.”

Rain pelted the windows, and the wind howled as a prolonged gust forced its way up the driveway and through the trees surrounding Harriet’s house. The women went back to their stations, cutting bags and ironing sections of tarp together.

“Someone call for pizza?” Robin McLeod called as she came into the studio twenty minutes later, her arms laden with flat white boxes. The door slammed behind her.

“Did you get a new job we don’t know about?” Harriet asked, knowing that since Robin was a mother and part-time lawyer as well as a quilter, this was unlikely.

Robin laughed. “No, I called Connie’s house, and Rod said you were all over here, so I decided to join you. I stopped on my way to order pizza for *my* gang, and I heard them putting your order together. I told Theresa I was on my way here and could save them the trip, so here I am. I took the liberty of adding cheesy bread sticks and marinara sauce to the order.”

“Let’s go to the kitchen so we don’t have to move our projects to make table space,” Aunt Beth suggested.

“I’ve got diet and fully leaded soda in both light and dark varieties as well as fizzy water,” Harriet announced as she and the rest of the group followed Robin to the kitchen. She took drink orders then prepared the requests as the group settled around the table in the sunny yellow kitchen.

“Has anyone talked to DeAnn?” Mavis asked. “I called her last week, and she had a house full of sick kids.”

“Baby Kissa and one of the boys are better, but her younger son is still having ear problems,” Robin reported. “I talked to her this morning, and she said they’re thinking about packing up and heading south to her mother-in-law’s until the storm is over. They haven’t taken Kissa to meet that part of the family yet anyway, so now is as good a time as any. DeAnn hasn’t wanted to travel out of state until they had some sort of custody papers in hand, and given that Kissa had no history or documents, it’s been a slow process.”

DeAnn Gault and her husband had adopted the baby whose parentage had been a mystery the Loose Threads had unraveled several months earlier.

“Jenny’s out of town, too,” Beth said. “She left this morning to visit her son in Texas for two weeks.”

“The rats are all leaving the sinking ship,” Lauren said and took a bite of her pepperoni pizza slice.

“Jenny planned her trip months ago,” Beth said sharply. “And I don’t blame DeAnn for not wanting to deal with a house full of sick kids with the power possibly going out.”

“Who wants to come to the homeless camp and deliver quilts and tarps tomorrow?” Connie asked.

“I can’t commit until I hear from my client,” Lauren said.

“I can come,” Harriet said. “I’d like to see how muddy it is at the camp. Our tarps may not help if the ground is too mushy.”

“Beth and I are going to be at the church helping to put together hygiene kits,” Mavis said.

“I assume that’s soap and toothbrushes,” Harriet said.

“Yes, and deodorant, hand lotion, aspirin packs...” Mavis looked at Beth.

“Playing cards, and a hand towel and washcloth,” Aunt Beth added.

“Wow,” Lauren said and reached for another piece of pizza. “Who paid for all that?”

“Most of it was donations, and what they had to buy was covered by a grant of some sort,” Robin reached for a breadstick. “Mmm, these are so good,” she said through her bite of cheesy goodness. “I can come if it’s not too early. I have to get the kids to school.”

“How about ten?” Connie looked first to Harriet then Robin and Lauren for agreement. “Ten, it is,” she said when no one disagreed. “Let’s meet in the west parking lot at Fogg Park. We can walk in from there.”

“I talked to Marjory when I picked up the last batch of flannel,” Harriet said. “She’s worried about the river flooding downtown.”

“Well, it wouldn’t be the first time,” Mavis observed. “It’s been probably forty years ago, but the Muckleshoot jumped its banks and ran three feet deep down Main Street.”

“I told her I’d help her put fabric up if things get to that point,” Harriet said.

“She better do it sooner rather than later if she wants your help,” Lauren warned. “The bridge between here and there will wash out long before the water reaches Main Street.”

“Let’s hope the city has done some work in the last forty years to prevent that eventuality,” Robin said.

“That was supposed to be a hundred-year flood when it happened, so we shouldn’t be due yet.” Mavis said.

“Every time there’s severe weather people claim it’s a ‘hundred-year event’ no matter what frequency it really happens with,” Lauren observed and reached for a bread stick. “You know, I never ate this sort of junk before I met you ladies.”

Harriet looked at Aunt Beth, who looked back and shook her head with a small smile.

Chapter 2

A fine mist was falling from a gray sky when Harriet pulled her car into the parking lot of Fogg Park the next morning. People always assumed the park was named for the prevailing weather but in fact, the park, along with a lot of other local features including the town itself, was named for Cornelius Fogg, a Victorian pirate who had retired and settled the area more than a hundred years ago.

Harriet had stopped by the veterinary clinic to socialize with Scooter and take him a new chew toy. He wasn't mobile enough to really play yet, but he loved a good chew toy. As much as she protested to the Loose Threads, in her heart she knew Scooter would be coming home to live with her and Fred when he was able to leave the hospital. Fred would probably find some way to make her pay, but she was pretty sure he would be a good "brother."

She had hoped to talk to Aiden and see how things had gone with his sister, but after a brief hello, he said he was needed in the back and disappeared. She waited as long as she could before leaving for the park, but he didn't return. She reminded herself he was at work, and undoubtedly, an animal had needed his care; but in her heart she knew this wasn't true.



Lauren was waiting in her car when Harriet arrived.

“My client wasn’t ready yet,” she said by way of greeting as she climbed into the passenger seat of Harriet’s car. “Hard to believe people live outside in this weather.” She shivered. “Can you turn up the heat?”

“It’s all the way up,” Harriet told her. “I’ve got a couple of flannel quilts I’m going to deliver with the tarps. You want one?”

“No, it’s okay,” Lauren looked out the window as the rain picked up in intensity. “I heard the next storm is supposed to come in this afternoon.”

“It’s hard to believe it’s going to get even worse by the weekend.”

“I’m just glad I’m not going to be the one with just a quilt and a tarp for shelter,” Lauren said. “Here’s Connie.”

“Looks like Robin’s with her.” Harriet turned her engine off.

The four women met at the now-open back door of Harriet’s car; each took an armload and followed Connie to the restroom building.

“The path to the camp starts behind the building,” she told them as she stepped onto a gravel path. The trail quickly changed from gravel to wood chips and then to mud.

“You weren’t kidding about it being muddy back here,” Harriet said.

“Joyce tries to cover the mud with leaves and tree debris from the forest, but I think this last group of storms has been too much to keep up with.”

The mud sucked at their boots as they made their way through the woods and finally came into a clearing.

“Did I hear you complaining about my trail?” a small white-haired woman said when they’d stopped. A hint of the British Isles was apparent in her speech. “You’re welcome to make any improvements you want to.” She added that with a smile.

“If I could think of anything that would help, I would,” Harriet said.

“Nothing works against this ol’ mud. Some volunteer group put down gravel two inches thick all the way from the restrooms to this clearing last spring, and you can’t even find a single rock now. I’m Joyce, by the way.” She held her hand out to Harriet, who took it

“I’m Harriet, and this is Lauren and...”

“We know Robin,” Joyce said. “She helped us work out the arrangement that allows us to have our camp in these woods.”

“We made those plastic bag tarps I was telling you about,” Connie said and held one out.

Joyce took the tarp and unfolded it.

“Well, aren’t you ladies clever? I’ll be the first to admit, I was skeptical when Connie told me about these.”

Harriet was surprised by Joyce’s clear soft voice. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but it hadn’t been the tidy woman in faded blue jeans and flannel who stood in front of her. She realized her image of homeless people was largely based on television and involved dirty people who were either drunks or mentally ill. Joyce didn’t seem to be either.

“I wasn’t sure how you were going to use these,” Harriet said, “so I brought some clothesline rope and heavy-duty clamps.”

“The boat shop I live over donated a bag of bungee cords, too,” Lauren added.

“Now, wasn’t that nice,” Joyce said as she refolded the tarp. “Let’s take this to my place and see how it works.”

She stopped in the middle of the clearing. A wooden table with mismatched legs stood to her right. A bench that consisted of a wide board resting on two tree stumps that were about six feet apart was on the opposite side of the area.

“This is our ‘living room,’ if you will. We have our group meetings here and our community meals as well. Each member of the camp has a private space separated by trees and brush. No one goes into anyone’s camp without an invitation.” She turned and led them down a less-defined trail to a smaller clearing. “Welcome to my home sweet home,” she said with a sweeping bow.

Again, it was not what Harriet had expected. She had never really thought about the day-to-day details of how the individuals in a homeless camp might create privacy, share spaces or secure their possessions. If she had, she wouldn’t have imagined what Joyce had created.

Joyce had formed a bed from tree boughs stacked in layers at the back of her area. Closer examination showed a layer of tattered

plastic sheeting sticking out between the layers of greenery—a vapor barrier, of sorts. Wooden birdhouses adorned the tree branches at the head of the bed, and an empty wooden window frame dangled whimsically from a limb to the left side. There was a mirror on a tree trunk opposite the window. Two blue plastic storage bins were stacked under the mirror, a chipped china pitcher and bowl on top of the stack.

A large piece of torn plastic lay over a bush at the front of the area.

“I was just doing home repairs,” Joyce said with a smile and held her arm up. A roll of silver duct tape encircled her wrist.

“Maybe this will make that unnecessary,” Connie said.

“How many do you have?”

“Three so far.”

Joyce looked longingly at the brightly colored sheet folded over Connie’s arm.

“As much as I would love to replace my top cover, there are other people in camp who need them more,” she said with a sigh. “We had a new fellow move in this past summer, and this is his first winter outside. Let’s go get him set up first.”

She led the group out of her space and down the trail. She stopped after about fifty feet.

“Duane?” she called. “Are you in there?”

“Come on in,” a deep male voice answered.

Harriet had expected a much-larger man based on his voice, but Duane was of medium height and build. His balding head had a few long thin strands of light-brown hair mingled with gray. He was clearly letting his beard grow, but it didn’t cover his face and chin uniformly, leaving him with clumps sticking out in random patches.

“If I’d known I was going to have company, I’d have cleaned house,” he said with a chuckle. “I’m Duane, by the way.”

Connie, Harriet and Lauren introduced themselves and explained why they were there.

“I can use all the help I can get,” Duane said. “I’m sure Joyce told you I’m sort of new to the outdoor lifestyle.”

“Let’s see what we can do for you,” Connie said.

Duane's space wasn't as organized as Joyce's; he slept in a sleeping bag on the ground. Unlike Joyce, who had on a puffy down jacket and knitted wool fingerless gloves, Duane wore a purple-and-gold University of Washington sweatshirt. The edges of a light sweater and a plaid button-down cotton shirt showed at the neck and sleeve edges. The ensemble was topped with a Harris-tweed blazer—none of it was intended for outdoor living. It looked like it might be his whole wardrobe.

“Let's start with an overhead cover,” Connie said. She looked around the small clearing. “Over here.” She pointed, indicating an area between two tall Douglas firs.

“Isn't it sort of thorny?” Duane asked. A low berry bush filled the space.

“You're going to pile brush up over those bushes. They're going to keep you off the cold ground,” Joyce explained.

Lauren and Harriet strung a length of clothesline between the two trees, anchoring it around the trunks. When they had it pulled tight, Duane helped Connie fold the tarp over the line, securing it with large clamps at the top and tying the corners to smaller tree branches with smaller lengths of clothesline. Joyce directed Robin in the gathering and placement of large fir boughs under the tarp. She folded a second tarp on the boughs then reopened it, covering the bottom layer with more branches.

“Get your sleeping bag,” Joyce directed. When Duane complied, she laid the bag over the last layer of branches and flapped the tarp over it.

“This will be a lot more comfortable and dry,” she proclaimed when Duane's things had been arranged to her satisfaction.

“This is wonderful,” Duane said in his sonorous voice. “How can I ever thank you?”

“We're happy to help,” Connie said.

The mist that had continued to fall turned into a steady rain.

“Do you want a quilt?” Lauren asked without preamble.

“I feel as though I've already taken my share,” Duane said politely. “Let's see that the others' needs are met before I take anything else.”

“I think we have plenty,” Lauren protested.

“We’ll check with the others,” Harriet said and led her back to the trail.

“I’m just doing our job,” Lauren hissed. “Isn’t that why we’re here? To give out quilts?”

“Yes, that’s why we’re here, but let’s allow the man his dignity. When we’re finished with the rest of the camp, we can give him one, or if we run out, we can bring one back later.”

“Whatever.”

Connie and Joyce came out of Duane’s area, and Joyce took them to a fork in the trail then down the right-hand pathway.

“Brandy lives here,” she said as she held a branch aside, pointing them into the smallest clear area yet.

The brush was thicker here, letting in little light; it took a moment for Harriet’s eyes to adjust. She finally saw Brandy, asleep or unconscious on a muddy sleeping bag, a moth-eaten gray wool blanket draped over her shoulders. Her dark hair would probably have been shoulder-length if it hadn’t been so tangled and matted.

“Now, *she* looks like a homeless person,” Lauren whispered to Harriet as they stepped aside to let Connie and Robin in.

“I’m not sure how much help Brandy will accept,” Joyce said. “She’s one of the more troubled members of our community.”

“Maybe we could string up a tarp over her spot while she sleeps,” Connie suggested.

Lauren tapped Harriet’s foot with hers. When Harriet glanced her way, she was staring at the base of a small fir tree to Harriet’s left. Harriet casually looked where Lauren indicated and saw a pile of empty whiskey bottles.

“I don’t think she’s waking up anytime soon,” Lauren said in a stage whisper audible to all.

“We generally don’t let people stay here if they use drugs or alcohol,” Joyce said, “but Brandy has mental problems, and so far no one has been able to convince her to go to the clinic and get help. The rest of us agreed it was in our best interest to let her go on self-medicating for the near term. We’re hoping we can get through to her, but I’m not sure how that’s going to happen.”

“Is she from around here?” Robin asked.

“She doesn’t communicate well. We’re not even sure Brandy is her name. Another woman and I found her passed out in the park bathroom this summer. All she would say for the first few weeks was ‘brandy.’ We couldn’t tell if she was identifying herself or asking for her favorite drink, but she answers to it, so that’s what we call her.”

“That’s great,” Lauren said. “Can we get going with her shelter? It’s wet out here.”

“Please pardon our friend’s lack of sensitivity,” Connie said.

“She’s right.” Joyce gave a wry smile. “It *is* wet out here.”

Harriet uncoiled another package of clothesline and handed one end to Lauren. She pushed through the brush to the trunk of one of the taller trees, tying the other end securely. Lauren did the same and Robin and Connie quickly draped the last tarp over the line.

“Let’s tie the back closer to the ground,” Joyce directed. “I think a lean-to would serve her best.”

Harriet and Lauren did as instructed, and within a few minutes had fashioned a secure shelter that would go a long way toward keeping the rain off Brandy. Connie and Robin put two flannel quilts over the sleeping woman.

“I wish we could do more.” Connie sighed then turned and went back onto the main trail. “We have a few more quilts in the car,” she said when they were all together again.

“We have a new man who might like a quilt,” Joyce told them. “He has a small tent he brought with him. He said he managed to sneak it out of his house and hide it in the park the week before he was evicted.”

“Is he from here?” Connie asked. Harriet knew she was probably thinking about the programs the local churches had to provide transitional housing for people in that type of situation.

“We don’t ask those sorts of questions when people join our community. If a person wants to share they do. If not, then we leave it at that.”

“And did he?” Lauren asked.

Joyce gave her a long look before speaking.

“He didn’t, other than what I’ve just told you. He was evicted, and he was able to hide some stuff in the park. He didn’t say if the park was near his home or miles away.”

“So, let me get this straight,” Lauren said. “You just let any old person live here?”

“Well, we call the park ranger if someone camps here and is doing drugs or drinking to the point of being disruptive to others. Beyond that, it’s federal property that backs up to a city park. No one person has any more right to it than another.”

“Sounds dangerous, if you ask me.” Lauren said.

“Well, the world is a dangerous place,” Joyce replied.

“Let’s go get those last quilts, shall we?” Harriet said and steered Lauren back toward the parking lot.

“I can’t believe they don’t have any vetting process to check people out before they let them move in,” Lauren said when she and Harriet were out of earshot of the others.

“What, exactly, would you have them do? Plug their laptop into a currant bush?”

“Ha. Ha. You’re such a wit. But really, this new guy could be anybody. Haven’t you been reading the news about the serial killer who has been dumping bodies along the interstate?”

“I have seen an article or two,” Harriet said. “But the ones I read said they think the killer is a truck driver, not a newly evicted homeless man.”

“Well, the killer isn’t going to go around with a sign saying ‘I’m a truck-driving killer.’ He probably masquerades as something completely different—like maybe a homeless guy.”

“So, he has a truck parked somewhere nearby and goes on periodic road trips?”

“I don’t know. Do I have to think of everything? I’m just saying you can’t be too careful these days.”

“I suppose. I have to say, what we’ve seen of the homeless camp so far is nothing like what I was expecting.”

They reached Harriet’s car, and Lauren flipped the hood to her jacket down, shaking her long blonde hair.

“I hate hoods,” she muttered.

“You picked the wrong place to live if that’s your problem,” Harriet said and handed her two folded quilts.

“Who said I had a choice?” Lauren shot back.

A black Ford Explorer pulled up beside Harriet’s car and parked, ending the discussion before she could grill Lauren about what she meant. The passenger side window slid down.

“Hey,” called a male voice.

Harriet bent to look into the car.

“Tom!” she said as she recognized Tom Bainbridge, who she’d met the previous spring when she and the other Loose Threads had attended a folk art school in Angel Harbor owned by his mother. “What brings you to town?”

“And here, of all places,” Lauren added.

“I’m working,” he said with a smile. “What are you two doing out here in the rain? It’s not really picnic weather.”

“We’re being do-gooders,” Lauren said.

“What Lauren means is we’re delivering some quilts and water-proof tarps we made to the homeless people who live in the forest behind Fogg Park.”

“Well, what a coincidence,” Tom said and got out of his car. “I’m here to interview the homeless residents for my new project. If everything works out, some if not all of them will be living in new housing by this time next year.”

“Where?” Harriet asked and picked up an armload of quilts.

“Who’s paying for it?” Lauren asked at the same time.

“A redevelopment group wants to build some multi-use apartments a couple of blocks from the docks. They’re still looking at sites, but the city has stipulated that some of the apartments be set aside for qualifying homeless people.”

“Qualifying?” Harriet said.

“Believe it or not, there are people of means who live without a permanent residence. Sometimes it’s just a minimal pension, but it’s enough that they could rent a room in low-income housing if they wanted to. Turns out they’d rather live outside in the park than in a room with cardboard walls and gun-toting, drug-using neighbors.”

“I can’t say I blame them,” Harriet said.

“Me, either,” Tom agreed. “Towns like Foggy Point are trying to provide another alternative. This proposed project will have space for homeless vets, very-low-income homeless and then lower-income and so on, up to and including luxury penthouse suites.”

“Sounds like some kind of utopian sci-fi mumbo-jumbo,” Lauren said. “I suppose they’re solar powered and reuse gray water, too.”

“Yes, they’ll be green buildings, if that’s what you’re trying to say.” Tom smiled at Harriet.

“Let’s get these back to the camp,” she said and turned back toward the park with her armload of quilts.

“Can I carry anything?” Tom asked.

Lauren paused as if she were going to hand off her quilts but then looked at Harriet and changed her mind.

“No, we’re good,” she said.



Robin and Connie were standing in the main clearing beside Joyce and a man who had to be the new resident she’d told them about. He was older, maybe mid-sixties, and was dressed in foul-weather hiking clothes, Danner boots, brand-name Gore-Tex jacket, and moleskin cargo pants. His tan was more Club Med than Fogg Park.

“Hi,” Joyce said when the trio reached them. “This is Ronald, the gentleman I was telling you about—the one with a tent. I think he could use one of your blankets.”

Lauren glared and clutched her quilts a little tighter. Harriet handed one to him.

“Nice to meet you,” Harriet said. “Enjoy your quilt.”

“I’m Tom Bainbridge,” Tom said and held his hand out to Joyce then Ronald. “I’m the architect hired to design a proposed housing project designed to provide alternatives to living in the park.”

“I like the sound of that,” Ronald said. “How can we help you?”

“I’d like to talk about space requirements. For instance, would people prefer studio-style apartments or small but separate rooms? And how about kitchen size? Is an under-counter refrigerator adequate, or do people need full-size? I guess I’m asking how much

cooking do you envision doing? Will people live alone or with roommates?"

"Being indoors with a roof over our heads will be such a big step up I'm not sure the rest matters," Joyce said.

"I'm sure that's true initially," Tom said, "but I'd like to build apartments people will stay in. I'd like people to be comfortable once they get beyond being warm and dry."

Joyce looked him up and down without saying anything.

Duane came into the clearing from the trail and introduced himself.

"I heard you say you wanted to talk to people about the housing you're going to design."

"That's right," Tom said.

"A number of our group are at the Methodist church warming room waiting for lunch, and a couple more are at Annie's, the coffee shop downtown. You can probably still catch them there if you hurry," Duane said.

"You might be a bit more comfortable, too," Joyce added. Rain dripped off her nose, chin and eyelashes.

Tom looked around.

"Okay, maybe you're right," he said. He looked at Harriet. "Want to meet for coffee later?"

"Sure, when?"

They agreed to give him an hour to talk to the people at the church and another half-hour to talk to the coffee shop crowd. Harriet suggested they meet at The Steaming Cup, Foggy Point's other popular coffee shop, and he agreed.

"Well, aren't you two just cozy," Lauren said when Tom was out of earshot.

"We're friends, Lauren. Don't you have any male friends?"

"Yes, and they don't look at me the way he looks at you." She held her hands up in front of her. "Okay, fine. None of my business."

"Can we leave quilts here for the people who are in town?" Connie asked.

"That would be nice, and we'd take an extra one, if you can spare it," Joyce said, looking at the full armloads of quilts. "We like

to keep a few extra supplies on hand for new people. There is no typical situation when someone becomes homeless, but not many are able to bring as much from their old life as Ronald here did.”

“I’ve always been a planner,” Ronald said. Harriet couldn’t tell if he was blushing, his face was so red from the cold, wet rain, but he looked embarrassed. “This was my fallback to the fallback plan.” He shook his head. “I just never imagined my family would turn me away when I lost my house.”

“I’ll bet you didn’t tell them you’d be homeless, did you?” Joyce said. She turned to the Loose Threads. “People who end up here often are turned away by family who don’t realize how dire the circumstances are, and people like Ronald here are too proud to tell them the real situation.”

“I won’t beg,” Ronald said. “My daughter was right—they have a full house with two kids and another on the way, and her husband’s mother is already staying with them. She said I was always too busy with work to spend the time with her and her brother when they needed me, so how can I expect to come crying to them now that I’m the one who needs help.

“You know what? She’s right. I wasn’t father of the year. I can’t go back and change that, but I can avoid causing them any more pain.”

“Hopefully, that bed will be a bit more comfortable now that you have one of our nice warm quilts,” Connie said.

“And I do thank you for that,” Ronald said with a theatrical bow. “I see this as a temporary setback. I just need to find a job and start over.” His eyes filled with tears.

“We all appreciate the quilts and tarps,” Joyce said. “Let’s get the rest of them in something waterproof before they’re soaked through.”

Lauren and Harriet handed off the quilts after showing Joyce the quillow feature. Connie helped her load them into two wrinkled black plastic garbage bags she’d pulled from under the large table.

The wind lashed the Loose Threads as they walked back to the parking lot.

“Anyone want to join Tom and me for coffee in an hour?” Harriet asked.

“Connie and I were going to swing by the church and see how Mavis and your aunt are doing. If we have time after that, maybe,” Robin said and looked at Connie for agreement.

“We’ll see after we check in at the church,” Connie said.

“As much as I’d love to ruin your date with Tom, I’ve got to go see if anything’s up with my client,” Lauren said with a wicked smile.

Harriet could feel her face redden.

“Ciao,” Lauren said and headed for her car before Harriet could think of an appropriate comeback.

Inside her car, Harriet looked at the clock then drove out of Fogg Park. She could go home and start sewing another rag quilt, but she drove past her turn and headed into downtown instead.

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