

Second Time Around



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A Quilt for Christmas

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M E L O D Y
C A R L S O N



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Everyone moves on.

Everyone except for Mallory Farrell. At least that's how she felt as she drove home after her daughter's wedding. Mallory sighed. Dear Louisa had made such a beautiful bride and, thanks to all of Mallory's careful planning, it had been a gorgeous wedding. Picture-perfect down to the tiniest detail. Well, almost.

Mallory had suppressed the urge to growl when her ex-husband, dressed in a sleek black tux, escorted their youngest child down the aisle. Vince, who'd been mostly absent from their lives for nearly twenty years and now had a new wife with two young kids, had the gall to take center stage with the daughter Mallory had raised by herself. And when asked, "Who gives away the bride?" he proudly proclaimed, "I do." Oh, sure, he'd added "on behalf of the family" in a quieter tone, but Mallory had felt the sting.

Despite her pasted-on smile throughout the day's wedding festivities, Mallory was left with a bad taste in her mouth. She'd only learned Vince planned on coming during the wedding rehearsal. After she'd been so pleased to see her older son, Seth, practice-walk Louisa down the aisle, she'd imagined a repeat performance for today. But as they left the church, her younger son, Micah, had spilled the beans.

"Dad just texted me that his flight was delayed," he'd whispered,

“but he’ll be here in time tomorrow.” She could tell by Micah’s half smile that he’d felt conflicted too.

When her kids had questioned why her boyfriend wouldn’t be there to share in the nuptial celebrations, Mallory had feigned nonchalance, saying she and Marcus were taking a break. After all, she didn’t need her personal life to detract from Louisa’s limelight. She sure didn’t want them all to feel sorry for her when the truth was that Marcus, after almost four years, had suddenly decided he, too, wanted to move on. Just three days before the wedding where he was supposed to be her plus-one.

Despite Marcus’s usual bad timing, Mallory had told herself it was for the best. Sure, the relationship had been handy when it came to social functions. Marcus was charming and attractive and well-connected, but he’d always been more about Marcus than Mallory. Was it possible he’d viewed her as nothing more than the consummate escort? And maybe she deserved that. After all, everyone moved on eventually.

Mallory felt a weight fall upon her as she pulled up to the house she and Vince had purchased when Louisa was still in diapers. She’d loved this house then and loved it even more now. She’d been the one to urge Vince that it was a fantastic deal “for a fixer-upper.” But the once-neglected property had quickly evolved into a serious money pit. Still, they’d been young and strong and motivated . . . at first. But this house put their unrealistic DIY dreams, as well as their marriage, to a severe test. A test that first drained them—and their bank account—then thrust them into two different directions and two completely new career paths. Well, that was water under the bridge now. Mallory was beyond this. Wasn’t she?

Still, she felt an indescribable lostness as she unlocked the massive front door and walked into her big, lovely, *lonely* house. By now she’d fixed and renovated every square inch of the stately old Victorian. Her friends called it a showplace, which came in handy for her interior design business. In her effort to be a stay-at-home

mom, Mallory had converted the basement into a workspace years ago. But she'd always welcomed clients at her front door in order to show off the fruits of her efforts in her own home. Vain perhaps, but useful too.

She set her handbag on the cherry buffet in the foyer and picked up the small stack of mail she'd tossed there this morning. But before thumbing through it, she paused to admire the sunflowers, cosmos, and ferns she'd arranged in a bottle green vase. Sweet but simple perfection. Although this house had been built in the overly frilly Victorian era of gingerbread and fussy frills, Mallory had given it a more "grown-up" style—something all its own. People were usually surprised to discover her historical home wasn't filled with floral wallpaper and ornately carved antiques. Oh, there were a few well-selected old pieces, but the overall feel was more clean and sophisticated than fluffy and stuffy.

She'd offered to host the wedding reception in her home, especially since it had an early end time, but Marshall's parents had packed the guest list so full that everyone agreed a hotel reception was more practical. Still, Mallory had handled all the decorations, at both the church and the hotel, and she suspected some of the guests were still talking about it.

She kicked off her shoes and sighed. Life was good . . . *right?* She strolled through the living room where the last of the evening sunlight filtered through the massive maple tree outside. The yard looked so pretty in late May. But there was no one but her to enjoy it today. Mallory's sons and significant others had opted to stay over in the hotel. They hadn't said as much, but she imagined it was so they could whoop it up late into the night without bothering her. And that was fine. After all, everyone moves on.

"Oh, get over yourself," she said aloud as she opened a legal-size envelope. Talking to herself was a habit she'd acquired after Louisa had left home for college six years ago. "Be grateful your children have their own lives now and that they're not living under your roof, raiding your fridge, cluttering up your house—not like some

of your friends' kids." But even as the thought crossed her mind, she wondered which was worse.

She turned her attention to the letterhead she'd pulled from the envelope. It was from an attorney named Lloyd Henley, from a law firm in Portside, Oregon—the town Grandma Bess had resided in for most of her life, before passing away several months ago. Mallory had attended the funeral, which had been arranged by her mother's sister, Aunt Cindy. According to Aunt Cindy, all Grandma Bess left behind was a "'worthless' little tourist shop and a mountain of debt." Not that Mallory had cared about any of that. Mostly she'd regretted not having spent more time with Grandma Bess in recent years. Especially since there was no good excuse.

Portside had felt like a second home during her childhood. How many summers had Mallory spent with Grandma Bess after her mother had died? She'd even taken her own children to visit when they were young—before adolescent lives grew too busy. Prior to her grandma's funeral, Mallory hadn't been to Portside for nearly ten years. She tried to maintain contact with cards and notes and phone calls on Grandma's birthday, but she regretted not making it over there more often.

Mallory reread the letter more carefully. According to Mr. Henley, Grandma Bess left Mallory her small tourist shop, including the small apartment above it. Mallory, pacing, reread the letter a third time. Aunt Cindy must've been wrong about Grandma's assets. Mr. Henley's letter claimed he had the title and keys and some paperwork and would present them to Mallory when she came to pick them up in the near future.

How strangely intriguing. Mallory was now the owner of a beachy tourist trap. Oh, she'd loved that dusty cluttered shop as a child. She'd laughed over the silly gag items, played with the cheap plastic toys, and been completely charmed by the seashells and glass balls that Grandma had wisely displayed on a higher shelf. Mallory had even worked in the shop as she'd grown older. Dusting, stocking, and sweeping until she was old enough to run the

old cash register. What fun she'd had waiting on customers. She'd sometimes dreamed of having a shop just like Grandma's when she grew up. But then she grew up and things changed.

Still, the idea of taking a trip to the coast was surprisingly appealing. And if she hadn't invited her sons for Sunday brunch tomorrow, she'd take off right now. But all things in good time. She would spend the day with her boys and their girlfriends tomorrow. Then on Monday morning, she'd reschedule this week's appointments, make a hotel reservation, and leisurely venture on over for what she hoped would be an interesting trip down memory lane. It might even turn into a much-needed vacation. Perhaps she could pretend that, like everyone else, she was moving on too. At least for a week anyway.

Because she had no doubts that after her restful week in Portside, she'd come back here and get her nose to the grindstone again. That was what she did. And she had a long list of impatient clients with high expectations. Mrs. Denton wanted her entire house finished by early August for her family reunion. Sunshine Estate Realty wanted a bid to redo their lobby, and Alice Moore was still waiting for her high-end kitchen appliances to arrive. Perhaps Mallory would track those down from the coast.

Mallory was aware she'd inherited more than just her father's dark brown eyes, height, and prematurely gray hair. She ran her fingers through her thick, shoulder-length hair. It took her years to give up the dark brown dye she'd hidden behind since her late twenties, but ironically now that it was shiny and silver, people often assumed she had it done at the salon!

Besides Dad's physical looks, Mallory had been "blessed" with his workaholic ways. Early on she'd blamed her obsessive work ethic on being the only breadwinner, after Vince's disappearing act, but she suspected these habits went deeper than that, and although she'd always promised herself she'd slow down after the kids were launched, she was still going strong. And her clientele list was as demanding as ever. And growing. She'd get one client

satisfied and, like Whac-A-Mole, two more would pop up. More people than ever wanted their homes redone these days.

Sometimes, usually around three in the morning, Mallory grew worried. What if she continued this hectic path—would she work herself to death and follow her father into an early grave? Sometimes, again only at three in the morning, she'd even feel her heart fluttering frantically, imagining it was giving out on her. But her last doctor's visit had confirmed she was in generally good health for her age.

Although death was one surefire way to move on, it wasn't something she felt ready for. Despite knowing fifty wasn't too far in her distant future, she still felt fairly young and fit. And if Louisa and Marshall had children as soon as Louisa hoped, Mallory could become a grandmother. Perhaps it was time to slow down some and reevaluate her life plan. And perhaps Grandma Bess was offering her the opportunity. God willing and the creek don't rise, she planned to check it out!