
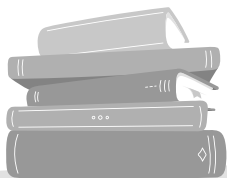


All 
Booked 
Up 



MELODY
CARLSON

All Booked Up



**MELODY
CARLSON**



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Just burn them if you have to.” Kenzie waved a hand toward one of the tall bookshelves filling all but one wall in the library room. The walnut shelves literally bulged with books collected over a lifetime. Several lifetimes, to be fair. “Just let them go, Mom. Be free of all these dusty, old books. Seriously, it’s probably unhealthy to breathe the stale, musty air in here.”

“I happen to like the smell of old books,” Riva protested.

“But these books are like an anchor around your neck. This whole house is too much for you. Using the books as your excuse to stay is ridiculous.”

“It’s not an excuse.” Riva looked up at the familiar shelves. The books were like friends. How do you get rid of friends? “What would I do with the books?” she asked, more to herself than to her impetuous daughter.

“Just imagine the huge bonfire you could have with them. You could invite the neighbors, roast hot dogs.” Kenzie laughed like this was funny.

But Riva stared in horror. “B-burn books?” she stammered. “You can’t be serious.”

“Okay, I’ll admit that’s pretty drastic. But there must be some

way to get rid of them.” Kenzie walked along one of the floor-to-ceiling bookshelves that had been added to the library about ten years ago—designed to match the fine craftsmanship of the original shelves that had been built more than a century ago. Kenzie shook her head with an expression a detective might wear when investigating a crime scene.

Riva watched her daughter trail an accusing finger along the spines of books, as if the innocent titles were somehow responsible for her dilemma. At one time the legions of books had been neatly arranged by genre. But over the years, especially after Riva and Paul had retired, the shelves grew so crowded they’d resorted to stacking more recently acquired titles horizontally in an effort to utilize every inch. And paperbacks were double stacked.

Kenzie turned abruptly toward her mom. “How on earth did you manage to amass so many in the first place? I don’t remember all the walls having shelves or being so packed in when I lived at home. Didn’t you used to regularly donate boxes of old books to the library? What became of all that?”

“I suppose that’s where it started. I donated your grandpa’s old law books, ones I knew I’d never read. And that got me interested in volunteering for the Friends of the Library and helping with the annual book sales.” She smiled sheepishly. “But I’d always come home with more books than I brought. Eventually I ran out of books I wanted to get rid of but kept bringing home books from the fundraiser.” Riva shrugged. “And then there were garage sales. We found some marvelous first editions.” She pulled out a Clancy hardback that Paul had been particularly proud of.

“And Dad probably didn’t help much.” Kenzie paused by the section that held her father’s collections of westerns, war stories, historicals, biographies, and such. “Surely, you can let some of these go now . . . you know, since Dad’s gone.” She sighed. “He wouldn’t want to see you trapped here by all these books. He’d want you to let go and move on.”

“Let go . . . move on . . .” Riva frowned. By burning books? By

liquidating his collection? Did Kenzie really think it was that simple? Like Paul's beloved Louis L'Amour titles, many he'd owned even before they met forty years ago. For some unexplainable reason it always brought her comfort to see the row of them up there. Like Paul was still in this room with her, leaned back in his worn leather chair, feet propped on the ottoman, reading glasses halfway down his handsome straight nose, happily lost in a new historical.

Riva removed a large book they'd purchased on a vacation in Mexico. She opened it, admiring the glossy photos of arts and crafts created in Oaxaca. "Oh my. I've never even looked inside this book before. It's beautiful." She held it up for Kenzie to see. "And you think I'd want to burn this?"

"Then give it away. Or have your own book sale. Just shake these things loose from you. Be free."

Riva set the book on top of her to-be-read stack, promising herself to look more closely at it later. "Oh, Kenzie, you are well aware of how most people don't want real books anymore. All my friends seem to have gotten rid of their collections. Either they don't have time to read or they only read electronic books or listen to audiobooks. Even the Friends of the Library have nearly given up on their yearly book sale. Maybe you should talk to them about book burning."

Riva forced an impish smile for her impetuous daughter. Naturally, it was easy to be impatient when you were thirty and just embarking on an exciting new career in an exciting new place. Everything was dispensable, and minimalism was the order of the day. And perhaps that made sense if you were on the move a lot. But it just didn't sit well with Riva. And now she wished she'd never complained about her oversized house and how difficult it would be to downsize, even blaming her resistance on the books of all things. She must sound like a foolish old woman to her hipster daughter. "Honey, I understand you wanting to encourage me to move on. I get it. I just don't think I'm ready yet."

“But the cost of keeping this big old house . . . it makes no sense, Mom. It’s like these books are holding you hostage. Like this library has become your jail.” Kenzie checked something on her phone as she continued her lecture. “I thought it would help with me coming here to clear out the last of my stuff. That having the upstairs bedrooms and attic cleared out would motivate you to get serious about moving. That’s why I put in all this effort.”

“And I appreciate that, honey. I never dreamed you would work so hard on it.”

“I just wanted to make this easier for you. You’re getting older, Mom. You need to take it easy.” She patted Riva’s shoulder in a way that suggested she was on her last leg.

“I’m only sixty-one. That’s not so old. And I take good care of myself.” Indignation rose up inside of her, making her stand up straighter . . . stronger. She could probably still beat her daughter at tennis.

“I know you’re doing great now. But you aren’t getting any younger. Why not get out of here while you have the strength and energy to move on your own. And, really, those new senior condos on the edge of town look pretty good. I heard they even transition into assisted living if you need it. Think about it—zero maintenance . . . all the free time you’d have. And the new friends you could make. We could get you into a nice two-bedroom, and I could still come visit you.”

Riva felt her nose turning up. “I’d never want to live there. Honestly, it seems like an end of the line kind of place, where people go to die.” She didn’t care to admit she’d noticed old folks wandering or just sitting on the grounds of that new development. Some with walkers, some with wheelchairs, all moving slowly and aimlessly. And maybe she was delusional, but she just didn’t feel that old. Not yet. “I do appreciate you clearing those upstairs rooms out so efficiently.” It was her turn to pat Kenzie on the shoulder. “Setting a fine example for me on how easily you got rid of those things.”

Kenzie laughed. “Well, what did we need any of that junk for?”
“Sentimental value?”

Kenzie held up her phone. “I took pics of anything that felt a little special. I’ll have them right here if I need them.”

“Right.” Riva wasn’t so sure, but it was too late to make a fuss.

Kenzie brightened. “You could do that with your books. Take pictures of all of them. Then let them go.”

“Yes, that’s an interesting idea.” Riva knew she wouldn’t do that as she looked up at the clock hanging above the library’s French doors. “Good grief—it’s nearly one! I should get you to the airport.”

“No need. Samantha’s picking me up. We’re gonna grab a bite at the airport and catch up on old times.” Kenzie’s phone chimed. “In fact, that’s her now. She’s probably in the driveway.” She hugged her mom goodbye, and just like that was gone.

Riva sank into Paul’s old chair, then ran her hands over the well-worn armrests. Was Kenzie right? Was she allowing all these dusty old books to hold her hostage? Was this room really her prison? She looked up at the shelves and instead of feeling trapped, like her daughter had insinuated, she felt completely comfortable and at home, as if sitting among friends. Kenzie meant well and had certainly been helpful, but Riva had no more intention of getting rid of any of these old books than she did getting rid of her old friends.

She leaned back and closed her eyes. But what Kenzie didn’t fully know was that Riva’s finances were stretched thinner than ever these days. Thanks to no life insurance policies, annuities that got swallowed up in a bad economy, and a mortgage that Paul had taken out to do some much-needed repairs on their old Victorian house, her situation was approaching dire. So much so, she was considering finding employment. Or filing for early social security.

She knew she had to do something to keep from going under. Sure, the sensible plan would probably be to sell the oversized

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house and move into something more affordable—something with less maintenance. But what on earth would she do with all these books? Maybe Kenzie was right. Maybe they truly were holding her hostage. But if they were, she probably had some version of Stockholm syndrome by now, because she loved her literary captors anyway!



Despite the gathering clouds, Riva decided to walk the six blocks to the public library. No, she was not going to get more books. That would be ridiculous. She had promised her good friend Laurel Wright that she would attend the grief support group that had started a few months ago. But seriously, Paul had been gone for more than a year. Did Riva really need a grief group now? Laurel seemed to think so.

Maybe Laurel was the one in need of a support group. She wasn't technically a widow. But she was a retired divorcée who seemed to be grieving her failed marriage. Or to be more accurate, she was grieving the loss of her lovely home after the settlement. Now Laurel lived in a dismal downtown apartment with an aging cat named Fred, and she spent most of her time solving crosswords and watching network TV. Poor Laurel probably had need for some support.

Riva blew out a sigh as she wrapped her scarf more snugly around her neck. Sure, it was mid-May, but the fickle Oregon weather hadn't received notification it was spring. She probably should've driven the short distance to the library, but the gloomy weather seemed to fit her mood as she trudged down the hill toward downtown. And perhaps her mood was just perfect for attending her first grief group meeting.

She paused in front of the big brick building, one hand on the door. Really, it wasn't too late to turn back. She didn't belong in a group like this. She was beyond the five stages of grief. Or to be more specific, she was in stage five now—acceptance. It had been more than a year. She was ready to move on.

"Riva darling, you came!" Laurel came trotting up to stand alongside her and slapped her on the back. "Good girl."

"Do you attend these meetings?" Riva studied her friend, wondering if the group had more appeal to Laurel than herself.

Laurel firmly shook her head. "No. But I'm friends with Margaret, the moderator. I told my friend Windy Brewer about this group, and she's been faithfully coming since it started up in January." She held up a white bag. "And I promised Windy I'd drop off cookies. Apparently, it was her turn to bring treats and she totally forgot."

"You hate cooking."

Laurel looked skyward where raindrops were starting to splat down, then she propped open the door and waited for Riva to pass. "Yes, but I do live above a bakery." She winked. "Pretty convenient."

"Right."

"Here." She shoved the cookie bag toward Riva. "You can take these to Windy. I have to go."

"Why don't you come to the group too?" Riva asked hopefully.

"No thanks. Tell Windy and Margaret hi. Have a good meeting." She held up a forefinger. "And call me when you get home. I want to hear how it goes."

"If you went with me, you'd already *know* how it goes."

"I'd rather hear it from you." Laurel made a sly smile. "Have fun, darling." And then she whooshed off. Probably to do a new crossword puzzle in front of one of her soap operas. Did they still make soaps? Riva didn't know. Unless she was deathly ill, she'd always preferred books to TV. She unpeeled her scarf and proceeded into the warm library, gazing around with satisfaction.

At least the grief group was meeting in a respectable location. Perhaps she'd simply hand off the bag of treats, excuse herself to peruse the new books section, and then quietly slip out the door and make a beeline for home before those dark clouds really started to open.

She tentatively approached the meeting room. A couple of women lingered at a table by the door. Maybe, like her, they were planning a fast break. She stared intently at the new titles rack and considered bolting, but before she could get away, the women were greeting her, forcing her to fill out a name tag and sign in to a guest book. And suddenly the taller woman whose name tag read Helene practically shoved her into the meeting room.

"That's Windy over there." Helene pointed to a short redhead arranging things on a refreshment table. Dressed in a long bohemian skirt, red cowboy boots, and a purple fringed scarf, the woman appeared to be a unique individual.

Riva cautiously approached the refreshment table, keeping a wary eye on the small group now taking their seats in a circle of chairs. She noticed it was mostly women, but there were a couple of men, all in a wide range of ages. "Are you Wendy?" she asked the woman, then glanced at her name tag and saw that the name was spelled Windy, like the weather. Interesting. Despite her rather youthful ensemble, the woman's face bore the traces of years of living and perhaps too much sun. But her smile came easy and looked genuine.

"Yes, I'm Windy Brewer." She looked at Riva's name tag, then stuck out her hand. "Hello, Riva Owen. Pleased to meet you."

Instead of shaking the offered hand, Riva clumsily pushed the bakery bag into it. Realizing her faux pas and regretting her bad manners, she forced a nervous smile. "Laurel asked me to give you these, uh, cookies."

"Bless that dear woman. You know Laurel, then?"

"She's a good friend. In fact, it was her idea for me to come today. I tried to talk her into coming with me."

“You and me both. If you ask me, Laurel needs this group more than I do.” Windy opened the bag, then let out a happy squeal. “Lemon bars. My fave.”

“Your name has an interesting spelling.” Riva tipped her head to one side.

“Well, my parents named me September Wind.” Windy grimaced, then smiled. “They were a bit . . . unconventional, to say the least.” She artfully arranged the yellow bars on a flowery paper plate. “I was actually raised on a hippie commune in Northern California.” She shrugged. “Used to embarrass me to admit that to anyone, but I’ve pretty much gotten over it since losing my husband. I’ve realized there are worse things.”

Windy paused as a woman called out, announcing it was time to get seated and start their meeting. Windy quietly thanked Riva for bringing the bars. “Go ahead and get your seat.” She fanned out some colorful napkins. “I’ll just finish up here.”

Feeling somewhat trapped, Riva made her way to the circle of folding chairs that were quickly filling. Was it too late to make a graceful escape? But the woman in front was smiling directly at her. “We’re happy to see a new face today. Welcome.” She squinted as if trying to read her name tag. “Can you share your name and what brings you here today?”

“Well, my name is Riva Owen, and I guess my feet brought me here.” To her relief this stirred some nervous laughter. “I guess that’s not what you meant,” she apologized and sat. “I’m here because, well, my husband . . . he died.” And suddenly the words began to pour out. “Paul was an attorney in town. Not really well known. But he was a good man who helped a lot of people. Anyway, Paul fought a brave two-year battle against lung cancer. Not that he was a smoker. He never smoked. But, well, he lost that battle more than a year ago, and I still really miss him. But I do believe I’ve moved past it. I’ve accepted that it is what it is. At least, I think I have. But a good friend kept urging me to try out your group here. Laurel’s a friend of Margaret and

Windy too.” She nodded as Windy took the last empty chair next to the woman in front. “But I don’t think I need group therapy at this point. Maybe a year ago. I mean, like I said, I sort of feel like I’ve moved beyond . . .” She felt embarrassed now. Why had she rambled on like that? These people probably thought she was loose-lipped.

“We’re glad you joined us anyway, Riva,” the woman said. “Perhaps someone in this group needs *your* help. Or perhaps you still have some hidden issues that you’re unaware of. That happens to a lot of us.” The gray-haired woman smiled a bit sadly. “I’m Margaret, and I do know your friend Laurel. And I moderate our group sessions. Now we’ll go around the circle like we usually do. This time I’ll ask members to share their names and give a little update as to where they all are on this interesting life journey.”

As they progressed around the room, Margaret didn’t intervene much, other than to ask an occasional follow-up question from their previous meeting. The sharing steadily grew more spontaneous and appeared to be sincerely heartfelt.

Riva was amazed at how quickly she got pulled into the various stories being relayed. A couple of members got emotional, and a Kleenex box was passed about. When it came to a nervous-looking younger member named Blair, he sat silently for a long moment.

“How has your week been going?” Margaret asked gently.

Scowling, Blair pounded a fist into his palm again and again. “I’m stuck,” he declared. “I can’t stop being angry. I know it’s a normal stage of grief. But I can’t get out of it. I just get angrier and angrier.”

For another long moment, no one spoke. Finally, the woman next to Riva asked a rather probing question about Blair’s deceased brother.

After pondering it a moment, the frustrated young man began to share more openly, admitting to feeling a total loss of control in all areas of his life.

“Loss of control can cause feelings of anger,” Margaret suggested. “And losing your brother like that probably feels like you lost control. You said he was your twin?”

Blair nodded, then pointed to an older man. “You mentioned survivor’s guilt,” he said. “That’s *exactly* how I feel. I was the black sheep of the family. My twin brother was the golden boy, good and kind and successful. I should’ve been the one to die. Not Byron.” Now he burst into loud sobs, which were followed with kind comments and motherly hugs and encouraging advice. More members were tearing up now, including Riva.

All in all, the intimacy of the meeting caught Riva off guard, but perhaps most surprising was the level of care and concern she witnessed among the odd mix of grievors. And when the meeting ended, she was almost sad to exit the library. Plus, it was raining cats and dogs outside. She decided to hang around a bit longer to peruse the new books section after all. Hopefully the rain would let up while she browsed.

Finally, not finding a title she cared to tote home, she decided it was time to face the weather. She was barely down the street when she heard someone honking and then hollering, “Hey, Riva!”

She turned to see an orange VW Bug with Windy’s head poking out the window, her purple scarf flapping in the wind. “Need a ride?”

“I’d love one,” Riva called back. She jogged over to the passenger’s side. “Thank you so much.”

“I just remembered you saying that your feet brought you to the library.” Windy grinned as she put the car in gear. “So I figure you must live nearby. I’m guessing you’d be soaked before you got there.”

“I’m nearly soaked now.” Riva told her to turn left at the stop sign. “I live on Periwinkle Avenue.”

“Swanky side of town, eh?”

“Swanky?” Riva chuckled. “It’s the old section, that’s for sure.”

“The *expensive* old section. There are a lot of historical homes over there. Is yours on the register?”

“We didn’t think it was a good idea at the time.”

“Yeah, it can be a bit restrictive. But it’s got some benefits too. If the fit is right.”

“You seem to know a lot about it.”

“My husband had a real estate business and I helped him in the office. Learned a lot from him . . . before he passed.”

“I’m sorry for your loss.” Riva remembered now that Windy had described her husband’s death as traumatic and she’d admitted to still getting over some PTSD. “How long has it been?”

“Bill’s been gone about seven years now, but I still miss him. Don’t get me wrong, the man had his faults, especially when it came to business, but underneath it all, he was a good guy.”

“Do you mind if I ask how he died?”

“No, that’s okay. It was a car wreck. He got T-boned going through an intersection. A drunk driver ran a red light going about eighty miles an hour.”

“Oh my.” Riva sighed. “That does sound traumatic.”

“Yes. I had nightmares for a year. Still do sometimes. But mostly I’m better. I just feel like I should participate with the grief group in support of Margaret.”

“Is Margaret a good friend?”

“She counseled me the first couple of years after losing Bill.” Windy put her car in a lower gear to climb the hill, revving her engine as she went up.

“Margaret seems like she’d be a good counselor.”

“She was. And now she’s a good friend.” Windy stopped at the Periwinkle Avenue intersection.

“Go right,” Riva said. “And you’re a friend of Laurel’s too?”

“Yes. We’re not very close, but we live in the same building downtown. Although it won’t be for long from what I hear.”

“Is Laurel moving?”

“Not that I know of. But they raised the rent again and now I’m

looking for something else.” As Windy kept driving her little car up the hill, Riva hoped they wouldn’t have to get out and push it.

“I thought Laurel said they just raised the rent last year.”

“They did. They claim it’s to cover increasing costs of maintenance, but then they never fix a thing. Have you ever seen the place? It’s a real dump.”

“Laurel says the same thing. I know she wants to move too.”

“There’s a deplorable shortage of affordable housing in Greenwood.”

Riva pointed to her tall Victorian house. “That’s mine there. Go ahead and pull into the driveway.”

“Oh, I adore this house! This is really yours? I’ve always admired it. I used to drive by here, wishing it would go on the market and dreaming I could talk Bill into buying it.” She laughed as she parked. “Not that we could’ve afforded it. Bill kept sinking all our funds into his business and a few other shaky investments, ones that eventually landed us in bankruptcy. Eventually, after he was gone, I lost the house I thought we owned free and clear.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. I keep hoping I’ll get a great big insurance settlement for Bill’s accident, but thanks to the courts and a zillion appeals from the insurance company, that probably won’t happen until I’m a very old lady.” Windy gazed up at Riva’s house. “It’s such a beautiful home. What a blessing for you to have it, Riva.”

“Would you like to come in and see it?”

“Seriously?” Windy was already opening her car door. “You don’t have to ask me twice.”

Riva laughed then, running through the rain. She hurried ahead to unlock the front door and let Windy inside the foyer.

“Oh, it’s perfect.” Windy looked around as Riva removed her dripping coat. “I love these center cut oak floorboards. And this original molding and your beautifully carved staircase newel posts. It’s even better than I imagined.”

“Let me take your coat and I’ll show you more.”

Riva gave Windy the full tour, explaining her own dilemma. “Paul was a self-employed attorney, and our health insurance coverage was very minimal. The cost of his treatments and care and everything else really wiped out our savings. Even though this house was in my family, we put a mortgage on it years ago to afford all the improvements we needed. Electric, plumbing, and upgrades. But after Paul got sick, we were forced to get a second mortgage just to cover the medical bills. Now I can’t really afford to stay on here.” Riva paused in the library, and Windy literally gasped at the walls of books.

“Wow, this is amazing. I think you have more books here than the public library.”

Riva smiled sadly. “Yes, books are my passion. And my problem.”

Windy turned back to face her. “Problem?”

“If I were to sell my house, what in the world do I do with all these books? My daughter suggested a bonfire, and if I didn’t love her so much, I might’ve thrown her out.”

Windy laughed. “So you keep the house in order to keep the books? That’s a new one.”

“Pathetic, I know. But it’s the truth. I guess I’ll need to get a job. I’ve only worked in the law office. And despite my experience doing legal research, I don’t really have the credentials. I’m hoping someone will be willing to give me a try.” She frowned. “Although I realize my age could be disadvantageous.”

“Your age? Well, that’s just plain discrimination.”

“Yet a fact of life all the same.” Riva shrugged as she led Windy out of the library. “Want to see the second floor? My daughter cleared a lot out last week—mostly her stuff. I still have basic furnishings up there since Kenzie thinks I need to do some staging before listing.”

“She’s right. Staged houses bring higher prices and sell faster.”

“Right . . .” Riva cringed at the thought of what she’d do if her home sold quickly.

“Anyway, I’d love to see upstairs.”

Riva hadn't actually been up there since Kenzie had cleared it out. Mostly because she knew it would make her sad to see part of her life and her home vanishing right before her eyes. But when they got up there, Windy didn't seem to notice the bare walls or how they were in need of paint. She simply continued to gush over the spacious bedrooms, especially the ensuite in the back of the house, noting the quality of the roomy shared bathroom that had been remodeled in the 1990s, when Kenzie was born. "And the view of your yard from the ensuite is charming. Such a beautiful outdoor space. You must love being out there."

"I suppose I used to. But it was my late husband's domain. Paul loved being out there and keeping it all perfect. I've sort of let it go." How sad Paul would be to see how neglected it had become.

"I adore gardening. Whether it's produce or flowers, I love growing things. I used to have a wonderful yard. I think that was the hardest thing to say goodbye to when I lost my house. I keep potted plants now, but it's just not the same."

They were back in one of the front bedrooms now. Windy was looking out the window and gushing about the view from this side of the house. "I love how these rooms look out over the town. I'll bet it's pretty at night with lights on down there. Such fun." She turned, a wide smile on her face. "Your house is a treasure, Riva. Even better than I envisioned."

"Thanks, I've loved it all my life."

"All your life?"

"It was my grandparents' home. My dad inherited it when I was an infant, so I grew up here." She felt a lump in her throat. "It'll be very hard to leave."

"I can imagine." Windy looked at Riva with arched brows. "What if you could keep it?"

"I don't see how. Short of buying a lottery ticket and getting lucky." She turned to leave the room that she'd occupied as a child.

"You could take in boarders."

“Boarders? Like a B and B?” Riva paused in the hallway, then shook her head glumly. “That sounds like a whole lot of work. Changing sheets and towels and cleaning rooms and preparing breakfasts . . . not to mention booking and promoting and everything else that goes with it. I actually looked into all that last year but, after some research, I realized it wasn’t for me.” She headed for the stairs.

“No, I don’t mean a B and B. I mean you could rent rooms by the month. Thanks to the lack of affordable housing, a lot of homeowners in Greenwood are doing it. You’d be surprised how quickly they get snapped up. Do you have any idea of how much a room goes for in this town?” Windy followed her down the stairs, describing some listings she’d recently viewed and how much landlords expected. “A lot of them are real dumps too. I can hardly believe they get that much. Makes me wish I’d hung onto my home and rented rooms there. But that ship has sailed.”

Riva paused on the landing. “I wonder how much I could get?”

Windy tossed out a number she said was fair for a single room. “Multiply that by three for these rooms, although I’m sure you could get more for the ensuite.”

“Really? That much?” Riva considered it. “That would cover my mortgage payment.” She sighed. “But not my property taxes.”

“You have that lovely spare room downstairs.” Windy pointed up the stairs behind them. “And I’ll bet there’s a roomy attic up there. I noticed third-floor windows from my drive-by dreaming days.”

“You’re right. The third floor is large. Paul had it insulated and had drywall installed for a playroom when the kids were little. After they left, we talked about getting a pool table up there, but eventually we just used it for storage.”

“Can I have a look at it?”

“Of course.” Riva changed directions, heading back upstairs. She opened the door at the end of the second-floor hallway.

“These stairs are a little steep,” she warned. But Windy was already scrambling up like a mountain goat.

“Oh, Riva, this is a glorious space. I would rent it from you in a heartbeat if you’d let me.”

“Seriously? You *want* to live in my attic?” She pointed to the high windows in the gables. “Not a lot of light up here.” She frowned at the teal paint on the walls. “And this dark wall color doesn’t help. My daughter picked it out when she was a preteen.” Riva looked down. “This old carpeting is pretty atrocious too.”

“Those are easy changes. Fresh paint. Rip up the carpet. Add some cheery furnishings and additional lighting, and it’d be perfect.”

Riva wrinkled her nose. She sure wouldn’t want to live up here. “I don’t even know what a spot like this would rent for.”

Windy spat out a number slightly higher than what she quoted for the bedrooms below. “Anyway, that’s what I’d pay for it. And I’d give you first and last, plus a cleaning deposit if you like, or you could let me invest that into improvements. You know, like paint and flooring.”

“Really? You’d want to rent this for that much?”

“That’s what I have set aside for my next move. It’s what I was originally paying for where I am now, before the rate increase. And believe me, my apartment is pathetic. Of course, I’d want kitchen privileges since I don’t think cooking up here would be such a great idea. I might like a hot pot for tea, though, and a tiny fridge for drinks . . . but I do love to cook. Not so much in my apartment though. My stove has just two burners that sometimes work, and the oven is useless so I don’t really bother anymore. But I miss it.” Windy turned her attention back on the attic room, strolling about, guessing on wall measurements and scrutinizing the whole space as if she planned to move in today.

“You really love to cook?” Riva studied the colorful woman she’d only met a few hours ago. “I don’t mind making soup or something simple occasionally, but I don’t particularly love it.”

Windy's brows arched. "I'm surprised. I figured with that well-equipped kitchen and all that counter space, you'd be into cooking. It would be such a fun place to whip things up. And if I lived here, I'd love to cook for you as well."

Riva didn't know what to say. Windy seemed to be jumping to conclusions here. "Well, I used to enjoy cooking back when my kids were home. We remodeled the kitchen about twenty years ago, and putting meals together was fun for a spell. But then Kenzie headed off to college and Brent—that's my son—joined the Air Force, and I had to adjust to cooking for two instead of four."

"I know what you mean. I had to do the same thing. But after I got used to it and quit overbuying at the grocery store, I really enjoyed it."

"I sort of did too. Then Paul got sick and his appetite changed." Riva stood by the door, ready to call this house tour done. "I mostly made smoothies for him the last couple years . . . It wasn't much fun." To be honest, life wasn't much fun, but she didn't want to be a complete killjoy since Windy seemed so hopeful and optimistic, still obsessed with the horrible attic space.

Riva sighed and, overwhelmed by Windy's enthusiasm and tired of the stuffy attic smell, headed back to the second floor. "Look around as long as you like," she called over her shoulder, eager to get back downstairs and to her sanity.

All this talk about renting rooms to strangers and the possibility of letting this eccentric woman move into her attic, share her kitchen, and work in her backyard was discombobulating. What was Riva getting into? How could she put on the brakes? Good grief, she didn't even know this Windy person! What if she turned out to be a hoarder with twelve cats? Or what if she had a bunch of wild friends that she planned to invite over for noisy parties? Or worse, what if she were a criminal looking for a hideout to hole up in? Or what if she was involved in drugs? That'd be disastrous.

As Riva went into her kitchen, which really was pretty swanky

All Booked Up

with the stainless appliances and sleek countertops, she replayed how Windy had admitted to admiring and even “loving” this house for years. What if she was on a mission to get rid of Riva and attain the property for herself? Riva had recently watched a creepy Lifetime movie about that very thing. And it had been based on a true story! No, Riva decided, before this craziness went too far with Windy—if that was her real name—she would nip it in the bud!