

Fish Perfume

A Romantic Comedy

by

Sammie Grace

CHAPTER ONE

Three days ago was the last day of school. I teach ninth-grade Social Studies at Girls Catholic High School, otherwise known as the Whore House on the Hill. As an alumna myself, I personally feel it is unfairly nicknamed. It's not that much of a hill.

Once again, I'd lined up a summer job at the local garden center and, on my days off, I planned to visit the Jersey shore as much as possible with my friends.

I wiggled out of my shorts, ready to jump in the shower, when the phone rang.

“Meggie, is that you?”

I recognized my grandmother’s New England accent at once.

“Of course it’s Meggie, Gram. How are you?”

“Good, honey, but I need a big favor.”

Hmmmm...Gram asking me for a favor.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“Well, I know you probably already have plans for the summer, but I was wondering if you would like to come up to Rhode Island and run the marina for me.”

I had to sit down on my bed as thoughts of Gram being sick swirled through my head. My heart leaped into my throat. I choked out, “Are you sick?”

“No, darling. I’m fine. I just want to take a nice long vacation out west.”

“Of course, I’ll come if you need me but can’t you find someone more qualified?”

“You’ll be fine,” Gram reassured me. “You’ve been up here enough over the years to know how I operate things. It’ll be a piece of cake for a smart girl like you.”

She went on to tell me about the marina and whom to ask for help if I needed it. I was half listening as my mind reeled with thoughts of all the things I could screw up. Then I heard her say, “I’m leaving tomorrow. When do you think you can be here?”

“I have to close up the house and pack. I could be there the day after tomorrow.”

“Great, honey. I’m sorry it’s short notice, but I just made up my mind today. I’m afraid if I don’t get out of Dodge soon, I’ll never go.”

“Gee, Gram, I wish I could be there tomorrow to see you before you leave.”

“I’m leaving you plenty of notes and I’ll be in touch. Bye, sweetie, and thanks.”

Before I could say another word, Gram hung up and panic took over.

Gram never left during the summer when her marina was in full swing. I knew why she asked me. I’m the only family member left in the country. My parents were in New Zealand visiting my brother Charlie, a travel writer. My other brother,

Jack, a merchant marine, was at sea. I knew I had to be her last choice since I'm not the most organized person in my family.

The marina is in the quaint seaside community of Cozy Harbor, Rhode Island. When I was a kid, my family would visit Gram every summer for several weeks. I can't believe I hadn't been up to Gram's in six years.

As soon as I got over the shock of Gram's phone call, I called my friends to inform them of my unexpected change in plans. They insisted we go out for a good-bye dinner the following evening. We met at one of our favorite hangouts, Maggie McFee's. Since I'd been packing all day and running late, I threw on a pair of beige capris and a white shirt, dusted my cheeks with some blush, put on a little mascara and some lipstick, and jumped in the car.

I walked in the door to find the bar packed. I looked at the large TV screen behind the bar and instantly knew why—the Phillies were playing. I looked around and spotted Laura and Helen sitting at a round table across from the bar. When I got to the table, Helen whined, "I can't believe you're leaving us for the summer."

I threw up my hands and said, "I don't really have a choice. I couldn't say no to Gram. I'm going to hit the highway early tomorrow morning."

Laura, always the positive one, said, "I think it will be good for you, Meggie. You've been in a rut since Jimmy the Rat Bastard did the unthinkable."

Yeah, a rut after the rat, I thought to myself. You'd think after three years of dating, he'd be ready to make a commitment, but instead he wanted a break. While I've spent the last six months wallowing in misery, I heard he's happily

dating a girl named Barbie he met at a bachelor party. She probably jumped out of the cake. Thanks to Helen and Laura, who ran into them at the mall, I learned Barbie had a big nose, big hair, a big mouth, and a really huge ass.

I just can't picture Jimmy with someone like that. I'm not beauty queen material, but people have told me I'm pretty. I have blue eyes and straight, thick, copper-red hair that sits just below my shoulders. My parents said that when I was born, my hair stood straight up in spikes as if I came out scared to death. The doctor swore he never saw so much hair on an infant. My mother claims it was sticking up because she had read a couple of Stephen King novels when she was pregnant. I'm 5'4" tall, and a size 6 or 8, depending on how many potato chips I ate last week. I wish I could say I was tall and willowy with large voluptuous breasts, but I'm just an average height and weight, with small to medium boobs. I thank God every day for the Miracle Bra.

The waitress came to take our orders. When she left, I said, "I think getting away will be good for me, too. I've been feeling a little lost lately. Not just the Jimmy thing either. I'm not too crazy about my job anymore, and I'm disgusted with the dating scene."

Laura said, "It can't be that bad. There are plenty of good guys out there."

"Easy for you to say; you met your Mr. Wonderful in fifth grade," I said.

Laura was the homebody of the group. She and Danny dated for years, then got married right after college. She immediately spit out two adorable boys one after the other.

Helen chimed in. "The last date I was on, I was so bored I

felt like I was going to slip into a coma. He just never shut up. It took him forever to get to the point of what he was trying to say. I just wanted to scream at him and say, ‘SHUT UP AND GIVE ME THE CLIFF NOTES!’ I decided he was toast halfway through our date.”

Beautiful, super-smart, and more self-confident than most, Helen was a force to be reckoned with. She says she doesn’t have balls; she has something better—breasticles. At 28, she was one of the top engineers at her civil engineering firm. For the past two years, she’d been working on a new sports complex being built in Philly. Unfortunately, as smart as she is at work, her personal life, mainly her love life, was always high drama. She plowed through boyfriends like Sherman went through Georgia. Helen always says the world is full of old boyfriends. What she doesn’t say is most of them are hers. Men don’t know what to make of Helen because she intimidates the shit out of them. The guys at work call her Hell-n-Back, because by the time she’s done with them, they feel like they went to guess where and back.

Laura asked her, “Any new prospects on the horizon?”

Helen laughed and said, “No. I’ve been so busy with this project at work; I’ve barely had time to do my laundry. When it’s over, though, I’m going on a manhunt. I want a McDreamy or McSteamy like on that show ‘Grey’s Anatomy’. I want him just for a weekend of hot, sweaty, uninterrupted sex.”

We all laughed. I said, “If you find him, see if he has a McBrother or a McCousin for me. I’m taking a break from men, but I would make an exception for a McAnything. While in Rhode Island, I’m going to run the marina, take walks on the beach and do some soul-searching and figure out what I

really want to do with my life.”

Laura said to Helen, “You should fix her up with that Mr. McBoring you just dumped.”

The waitress delivered our meal and I was enjoying my delicious, messy buffalo chicken sandwich when I noticed Laura’s eyes grow wide. I turned around to see what caught her attention. I almost choked when I saw Jimmy the Rat Bastard walking through the bar with a beautiful strawberry blonde. I haven’t seen him since we broke up. My hand shook as I took a drink of beer to wash down the chicken that had stuck in my throat. I felt a presence beside me and looked up to find Jimmy standing next to me. He had a smug smile and I wanted to reach up and slap it right off his face. Of course, I would never do anything like that, but, boy, it was tempting. Sometimes being a nice girl is a bitch.

He glanced around the table and said, “Hi, girls.” He then looked back at me and said, “Meggie, you have some kind of sauce on your face.” Barbie started to giggle and he draped his arm around her and said, “See you around, ladies,” and strolled off toward the restaurant section.

Mortified, I picked up a napkin from the center of the table and wiped my face. I then turned my anger toward my friends. “Why didn’t you tell me I had sauce on my face?”

Laura said, “We didn’t get a chance. He made a beeline for our table the minute he saw you. What an asshole!”

I put my hands over my face, wishing the floor would open up and swallow me. “I knew I should’ve ordered a salad,” I moaned.

Helen said, “Yeah, but then with your luck, you would have had lettuce in your teeth.”

That's when I got mad. "You both lied to me. You said Barbie had a long nose, big hair, and a huge ass. The only thing big about her was her boobs."

Helen said defensively, "Her ass is too big." She turned to Laura. "Don't you think she has a big ass?"

Laura nodded and said, "*Huge* is the word I would use. No, humongous. I actually feel sorry for her. She has a JLo butt times three."

Helen nodded in agreement. "You need to get another look at her, Meggie."

I muttered, "No wonder he dumped me. He went to boob heaven."

Helen looked over her shoulder and said, "At least he and the Barbette are sitting in the other room. Also, did you notice he didn't even introduce her? If I were Barbie, I'd think that was really rude. Meggie, you're always selling yourself short. You are ten times hotter than her. You don't need a ton of makeup or flashy clothes. Barbie had about five pounds of makeup on and her clothes were two sizes too small. You're a natural beauty. You've got it all over her."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right."

Laura said, "Personally, I've always been really jealous of you, Meggie."

I tried not to laugh, but I couldn't help it. I may not have a boyfriend at the moment, but I sure had great friends who support me through thick and thin and rat bastards.

Helen flagged down the waitress and ordered another round.

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Connecticut has to be the road construction capital of the world. My old Volvo wagon valiantly battled the trucks for position on I-95, but the drive from Philly to Rhode Island is not for the squeamish. I'm glad I had a CD player installed in old Susie so my new favorite band, Three Legged Fox, could keep me company.

Between the traffic, all the coffee I drank, and a slight hangover, my nerves were shot. Not to mention the fact that I'm terrified I'll destroy Gram's marina within the first few minutes of my arrival. I just know some catastrophe will happen on my watch. A hurricane, an earthquake, or the fuel dock will blow up, and all the boats and docks will burn in a big ball of fire. I thought I was just a loser magnet, but my brothers say I'm a disaster magnet.

I guess I've given them some good-enough reasons to think that over the years. Like the time in high school when I volunteered to feed the neighbors' fish while they were on vacation. They had a large aquarium with all kinds of rare tropical fish. The neighbors had only been gone three days when I went over to feed the fish. I looked at the tank and couldn't see so much as one swimming around. Did someone break into the house and take the fish? Who the heck would steal fish? Then I noticed the top of the tank and saw the once-colorful, lively fish all floating belly up. I ran home crying, devastated that I'd done something wrong. My dad went over, scooped them all out of the tank, and flushed them down the toilet. He assured me repeatedly that it wasn't my fault. It was a problem with the air hose. The neighbors weren't too upset with me, although they did say they were glad they put their dogs in a kennel. To this day, I still feel terrible. At the young

age of fifteen, I was a murderer.

My second big disaster happened in college while I was house-sitting for a professor and his wife. I started a load of wash and went to class. The machine overflowed and caused about \$500 worth of water damage. Just my luck their appliances were on the second floor.

I don't even have to be around for disasters to occur. My poor car has been hit three times, always in parking lots. Every time it happened, I was nowhere near the car. I could go on and on but what's the point? I guess my brothers are right; I am a disaster magnet.

Nevertheless, I'm glad to get out of Philly. After last night's humiliation with Jimmy, I couldn't wait to see the City of Brotherly Love disappear in my rearview mirror. A change of scenery is just what I need. It'll help me keep my mind off the male species for a while. Who knows, I might learn some management skills and maybe start a new career.

I was nervous about running the marina but also excited to get back to Rhode Island. Some of my best childhood memories come from visits there with my family. It's a little-known vacationer's paradise.

Not long after seeing the WELCOME TO RHODE ISLAND sign, I got off I-95 and meandered my way east to Route 1, then headed north to Cozy Harbor. I could feel the tension in my body fading away as I soaked up the peaceful scenery of the ponds and the rural beauty of the South County area. A few more miles down the road, I took the exit for Cozy Harbor and came to the end of this Nightmare from Hell drive. Even though it'd been several years since I'd been there, I knew it would be just as I remembered it. I pulled into the

marina parking lot, which was pretty full for a Monday. Most of the vehicles were trucks or SUVs necessary for transporting boating and fishing supplies. The big building at the end of the parking lot was the marina office and store. On the left was Gram's cottage, and on the right, the big parts and repair shop. Beyond the buildings were the boat docks, the fuel dock, the Snack Shack, and the fish store.

Although there were a lot of cars in the parking lot, no one was around. Considering the beautiful day, I surmised that everyone must be out on the water. After my six-hour drive, I decided I really needed to unpack the car and get moved into Gram's cottage as quick as possible. A hot shower and a nap sounded good, too.

Out of the corner of my eye as I stepped out of the car, I saw a guy walking across the parking lot. He was tall and lean with broad shoulders. God, I love a guy with broad shoulders. He wore tan cargo shorts, a white T-shirt and a navy-blue baseball cap. My gaze followed him up the steps to the store. As he opened the door, he must have sensed my stare because he turned to look at me. The bill of his cap shadowed his face, but I saw his smile and my heart stopped. Just as fast, he proceeded into the store, leaving me gaping. I didn't even get a good look at him, yet I felt an instant attraction. I'll be in big trouble if all the guys around here were that good-looking. Here I said I was off men for the summer. I haven't been here two minutes and I'm hot for the first guy I see.

With a shake, I dragged myself back to business. I opened the door to the small cottage and looked around. It was the same as always, warm and welcoming with its shiny hardwood floors, chintz curtains, overstuffed chairs and sofa. The two

bedrooms, living room, and kitchen with a table and six chairs reflected Gram's simple lifestyle perfectly. In the kitchen was a hutch displaying Gram's collection of locally made pottery.

A lifelong over-packer, it took me a few trips before I hauled everything out of the car and into the guest room. I wasn't giving up hope that Gram would change her mind and come back early before I totally screwed up her livelihood.

When Gram had called, she was sketchy about her plans. She said she'd be out west and would call when she could. What had me worried was that this whole trip was so out of character for her. Mom was going to have a canary when she found out. I'd left a message on my brother, Charlie's cell to call me when he had a chance, figuring I'd let him deal with telling Mom. In the meantime, maybe some of the people around the marina could shed some light on Gram's recent state of mind.

At 72, my grandmother, Betty, was a beautiful lady and sharp as a tack. She was a strong, loving, fun person whom everyone couldn't help but love. She grew up at the marina and when her parents passed away, she kept it going. She raised her only child, my mother, Eileen, by herself. My grandfather died in a car crash before Mom was born and Gram never remarried. Come to think of it, I can't remember her ever having a boyfriend.

My stomach started to growl. No wonder, since I only stopped once on my drive up for some much-needed coffee and a potty break, I was famished. I took inventory of the kitchen and fridge and found them well stocked. I threw together a turkey and cheese sandwich with a healthy dose of chips. Gram knew her chip girl was coming and she had loaded up

the cupboard with potato chips, tortilla chips, barbecue chips, and sun chips. Chips are definitely my drug of choice. I was in chip heaven. After stuffing my face and unbuttoning my shorts, I laid down on the sofa for a quick twenty-minute nap. Twenty minutes turned into six hours. By the time I woke up, it was 9:00 P.M., so I decided to call it a night and start fresh early in the morning.

The alarm went off at 4:00 A.M., and it took me a few minutes to remember where I was. It all came back in a flash and I knew I had to get moving. Gram always said life at the marina started when the day was in diapers. I threw on some clothes and put my hair up in a ponytail. Dressed and nervous, I went over to the Main Building, which housed the marina store and Gram's office.

Gram said the two key people who would be helping me run the marina were Mo, who ran the Snack Shack, and Greg, who ran the parts and repair shop. Gram said hiring Greg was the best thing she ever did for the marina. Her parts and repair business had tripled since he arrived. He was the "go to guy" if you had boat or engine problems.

Since the store lights were on, I figured Greg had already opened up for the day. Gram said Greg would be filling in, doing his job *and* Gram's, until I got there. I heard a male voice say, "Hi, you must be Meggie." I looked around, and in the doorway to Gram's office stood a friendly-looking bald guy, about 45 years old, wearing jeans and a Harbor Marina T-shirt.

I waved. "You're right. You must be Greg."

He gave me a big smile, shook my hand, and said, "It's nice to meet you, Meggie. Your grandmother has told me all

about you.”

I groaned. “Ugh, well, I hope she told you that I don’t know anything about running a marina. I’m more than a bit nervous.”

He gave me a big reassuring smile and said, “No need to worry. You’ll do just fine. If you have any questions, just ask me or Mo. Betty left you notes in the office. Everything is on the computer. Also, Betty hired a college student to help out in the store for the summer. Her name is Journey. She dresses a little funky, but she’s a nice girl and smart as a whip. She’s a nutrition major at the University of Rhode Island. She doesn’t come in until 9:00 and works until 6:00. That way, since you start early, you can take a break in the afternoon.”

“That sounds like a great plan.”

He said, “Hey, I hope you don’t mind but I hung a sign in the window. My daughters decided to go into the dog-walking business this summer so they made up a flyer to drum up some business. We live a few blocks up the road.”

“Oh, that’s fine. How old are they?”

He rolled his eyes. “Twelve and fourteen, going on thirty. They’re giving me and my wife a run for our money.”

I laughed and said, “I teach teenage girls; I can just imagine.”

Greg nodded, turned, and started walking toward the back door. Over his shoulder he said, “Well, I’m going over to the repair shop. Don’t forget; if you need anything or have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask. I’ll be back after Journey gets here and I’ll give you a tour around. I can introduce you to the fuel boys and anyone else we run into.”

“Thanks, Greg, I really appreciate that.”

I went into the office and read through Gram's notes. Thoughts of Gram kept popping up in my head as I looked around the office. I wondered where she went. I wished I could've seen her before she left.

The office looked out into the store, so I was able to keep an eye out if someone came in. After about half an hour, the door opened and in walked my old friend Mac. He had on a pair of old gray pants and a black sweatshirt that read "I don't give a clam." He sported a Red Sox baseball cap and a big smile on his weathered face.

"Mac, is that you?" I shouted as I ran over to give him a big hug. He hugged me back and then stepped back to take a good look at me.

"Meggie, you're so cute I could just put you in my pocket."

"Oh, Mac, you always say that," I beamed.

"Your grandmother said you'd be here for the summer. I hope you'll take a couple hours off sometime and go clamping with me."

I grabbed his hand, squeezed it, and said, "It's a date."

When I was little, my favorite thing to do was to go clamping with Mac. His full name is Alex MacTavish, but everyone calls him Mac. Mac and Gram have been friends for years. He's kept his twenty-foot Boston Whaler at the marina for as long as I can remember. The name of his boat is *My Marie* after his wife who passed away twelve years ago. Mac has got to be in his late eighties now. Gram told me he was doing great and still went clamping every day, weather permitting. As kids, my brothers and I would play on the docks until they hooked up with some of the local boys and ditched me. The joke was on them though. They'd fish off the

dock and just catch a couple of ugly green crabs. I, on the other hand, went clamming with Mac and came back with a bucket full of fresh clams.

Mac took off his cap, scratched his head, and said, “I was really surprised Betty took off. In all the years I’ve known her, I don’t remember her going away in the summer.”

This brought on that ill feeling I kept getting in my stomach whenever I worried about Gram.

“Do you think she’s okay?” I asked.

“She seemed fine. Maybe she just needed an adventure.”

“I hope so. This is turning out to be *my* adventure, since I don’t really know how to run this place.”

“You’ll do just fine, Meggie. Betty has this place so organized it practically runs itself.”

“I hope you’re right.”

At that point, three guys came walking into the store and Mac introduced them as Big Howard, Medium Howard, and Just Howard. Howard must be a popular New England name. Big Howard towered over everyone in the store. Medium Howard was next in height, and Just Howard was the smallest. I guessed he was Just Howard because he didn’t want to be called Little Howard. Men don’t like that word *little* associated with them in any way. After studying them a moment, I’d say they were all in their late forties or fifties. Mac said they were recreational fishermen who do the occasional charter. Big Howard bought some fishing line, and Just Howard bought some hooks. I wrote up their purchase slips, since they all had accounts, and they left to go fluke fishing. Fluke is summer flounder and they said the fishing had been pretty good. Gram always kept up with these reports because people were always

calling the marina asking how the fishing is. I guess I'd better stay on top of what our clients are catching.

Mac said goodbye, too, and went clamming. Over the next several hours, I met a few more marina patrons. Journey walked in around 9:00. I knew at once who she was from Greg's description. She had multi-colored hair with shades of burgundy, blond, and red all spiked out in different directions. She was very thin with a pixie face and wore an orange shirt, red pants, and black high-top sneakers. She had five piercings on her left ear, three on her right, and a piercing on her left nostril with a small diamond inserted. Greg was right when he said she dressed a little funky. Some people can pull off funky, and Journey was one of them. Despite the outfit, she was a pretty girl.

"Are you Meggie?" she asked.

"Yes, it's nice to meet you, Journey," I said, holding out my hand with a smile.

We shook hands and she said, "I don't know if Betty told you, but this is my second summer working here, so if I can be of any help, let me know."

"I'm sure I'll be taking you up on the offer."

Journey put her backpack behind the counter and said, "Betty is really cool. I hope she has a good time on her trip."

I couldn't help myself; I had to ask. "Did my grandmother seem okay to you before she left?"

"Yeah, she seemed fine. She was kind of mysterious about the trip though. I tried to pin her down about where she was going, but she just said out west."

"That's what she told me too. I'm a little worried about her."

“Betty is a tough lady. She has all these fishermen wrapped around her little finger. I’m sure she’ll be fine.”

Not wanting my concern to freak people out, I changed the subject and said, “Journey is a pretty name. Unusual.”

“Yeah, well, my parents were hippies. I guess they still are in a lot of ways. My brother’s name is Quest.”

“Wow.”

“At least we never had to worry about someone else in school having the same name as us. There were five Heathers and six Tiffanys in my grade alone.”

I laughed thinking, how true, as I had four Emmas in one of my classes last semester. I said, “I bet that was confusing.”

“It was. Well, I’ll take over out here if you want.”

“That sounds good. Greg is coming over in a little while to introduce me around. I do know a couple of people who have been around a long time, but I haven’t been here in years, so I’m sure there are a lot of new faces.”

“Oh, yeah! Lots of characters, but they’re all nice people,” she said.

Coming from Journey, I thought that was pretty funny.

I went back in the office and skimmed through some paperwork. When Greg showed up a little while later, we proceeded out to the docks. Greg refreshed my memory, pointing out the different sizes and types of boats moored to each dock. There were four docks at Harbor Marina, labeled A, B, C, and D.

A dock had twelve cabin cruisers, thirty- to forty-five-footers. Half of them never leave the dock but are used as summer homes. I met Kathy and Mike who were sitting on the deck of their cabin cruiser, the *Dancing Queen*.

B Dock had 12 sport-fishing boats, ranging in sizes from thirty-two to forty-five feet. Greg pointed to the right side of the dock and said, “This section is called Divorce Row. All the guys are divorced and half of them live on their boats. Things can get pretty entertaining down here.”

I giggled and said, “I can imagine. Do they live on their boats in the winter, too?”

“Just a few. Betty keeps the electricity running for them and they help her out during the winter shoveling and taking care of other small maintenance jobs that need attention.”

Greg introduced me to a fisherman named Randy on the *Blood, Sweat and Beers*, tied up on the left side of the dock.

C dock, the smallest, had four small sailboats and four small motor boats such as Mac’s Boston Whaler.

D dock, on the end, was the largest. In front of it was the Snack Shack with some tables outside, and next to that the Fish and Bait store, which sold bait, fresh fish, lobsters, and clams. Beyond that was where the big lobster boats dock. There are four sixty-foot and two forty-foot boats. The lobster boats were usually out every day, today being no exception.

I breathed deeply, taking in the beautiful day and the smell of the fresh salt air. As we walked around the marina, I couldn’t help but laugh at some of the boat names: *Breaking Wind*, *Cod Father*, *Costa Lotta*, and *Atsa My Boat* were some of my favorites. Boat names usually say a lot about the owners. I can’t wait to meet them.

Greg introduced me to Matt and Brian, who work the fuel dock and tend the fish and bait store. Matt’s a cute kid, tall with blond hair and big blue eyes. He’s Mo’s nephew and, from what Greg said, a good worker. Brian is really tall with

long, brown, shaggy, surfer-type hair. Greg said the kid always has his head in the clouds and his iPod in his ears.

When we reached the Snack Shack, Greg and I parted ways, since I told him I already knew Mo, and he had things to do in the repair shop.

Mo was running the Shack the last time I visited, and I remembered her as a warm, funny person. I'd been looking forward to seeing her again. Mo was in her late fifties, a retired Marine Corps cook born and raised in the South. She not only cooks up good food, but juicy marina gossip. If Mo didn't know, no one knew. She'd dated a few guys around town over the years, but when nothing jelled, she moved on to cyberspace. Gram told me she was dating up a storm on the Internet and having a ball. Some of the guys say she reminds them of a tugboat—strong, powerful, and broad in the beam.

I walked into the Snack Shack and wasn't surprised that it looked the same, except for the new white curtains and the robin's-egg blue walls. Mo manned the grill with her back to me. I took a seat at one of the six counter stools and glanced over at a guy a few stools over. He was looking me up and down as if I were on the menu, so I decided to take a little inventory myself. He had very dark, brown-black hair and big, chocolate-brown eyes with eyelashes that most women would die for. A little scar just below the outer edge of his left eye added to his subtle sex appeal. His skin was that great tan-olive color that Latin men have. His tight, black T-shirt accentuated his toned arms and broad shoulders. I didn't get a chance to check out his bottom half, but if it was anything like the top, WHOA. Good thing I was off men right now because he looked like trouble.

Mo turned around and when she spotted me, her friendly blue eyes went wide and she said, “Hey, girl, welcome back.” Mo looked great. Her blond hair was cut in a short bob that complimented the shape of her round face. She looked like a chubby Doris Day.

I smiled and said, “I’m glad to be here, Mo. How are you?”

She put her hands on her hips, wiggled, and said, “Fit as a fiddle and ready for love.”

The hunk at the counter piped up and asked, “Mo, aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“Sorry,” she said. “Tony Maroni, meet Meggie Quinn, Betty’s granddaughter.”

He gave me a slow, sexy smile that showed off his perfect white teeth. “Meggie, it’s nice to meet you.”

I could feel the blood rushing to my face as I said, “Nice to meet you, too.”

Tony put his coffee cup down, gave us a dazzling smile and said, “Well, ladies, I’ve got to get back to work.” He stood and I got a look at six feet of hunk-o-rama. From head to toe, the view just got better and better. As he walked out the door, he turned around, winked at me, and said, “Meggie, I have visions.”

Mo and I laughed together.

Mo warned, “Watch out for that one. The name of his boat is *The Stallion*. What’s that tell yah?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not. It would be tough keepin’ that horse in the barn, if you know what I mean. Tony always has a girl on his boat and you never see the same girl twice. He’s a real Casanova. He should put a big sign on his boat, IF THE

BOAT IS SWAYIN', THE CAPTAIN'S PLAYIN.

"Well, he sure is gorgeous. I could see him on a billboard somewhere, possibly modeling Calvin Klein underwear. He's six feet of solid muscle."

Mo sighed and said, "Yeah. He could wear one of those things. You know. One of those banana hammocks."

I laughed and said, "You mean a thong?"

"Yeah, but I like to call them banana hammocks."

I couldn't help my curiosity. "Is he a fisherman?"

"No. The only thing he fishes for is bootie. He has an auto body shop in town. The rumor around the marina is that he's connected. Probably because he grew up on Federal Hill, a.k.a., the Rhode Island residence of the Mafia. I guess that, and the fact that his uncle is Carmine "the Cannoli" Maroni, doesn't hurt the rumor either. Don't get me wrong; Tony is a good guy, but nobody you'd want to play hide the salami with."

"Don't worry, Mo, Tony really isn't my type. He's too beautiful for me. I like guys with a bit more character to their looks. I guess a bit more rugged-looking. I don't like to date anyone prettier than I am. Besides, I've sworn off men right now."

She reached over and patted my hand sympathetically. "Oh yeah, Betty told me all about that devil dog boyfriend of yours dumpin' you. He must be some kind of idiot."

I told her, "I was really upset at first. Now, I think it was all for the best. He probably wasn't Mr. Right. He was just Mr. Okay for Now."

I smiled and thought to myself, Wow, I can talk about Jimmy now without that hurt feeling washing over me.

Mo said, "You'll have a good summer up here, and if you

want to get back on the datin' circuit, I can teach you how to meet guys online. I've met a couple of nice men. No big love connections yet, but I've had some fun times and I just know my right man is out there lookin' for some huggin' and lovin'. I've decided I'm gettin' married this year. I think it's time I settle down with one guy. I'm an ex-marine on a mission for love."

"Well, Mo, I wish you all the luck. Keep me posted and I can live vicariously through you."

"You got it, girl."

"Hey, Mo, do you know anything about my Gram and her trip?"

Mo leaned closer to the counter. "I wish I did, Meggie. She was pretty close-mouthed about it. She said she was going out west to visit some friends. I never heard her talk about any friends out west. Maybe she's just havin' a late midlife crisis."

Her half-smile told me she was worried, too.

I said, "I hope so. If you hear anything, let me know."

"I'll keep my ear to the counter as always. Now how about me makin' you a nice sandwich or wrap for lunch? Or, I've got some great chowder I just made."

"A bowl of chowder would be great, thanks."

It was better than great—it was out of this world. My taste buds were singing.

The rest of the afternoon went by with Journey stocking shelves and taking care of customers. I spent some time getting familiar with Gram's computer, taking extra time studying the inventory and payroll programs.

After Journey went home at 6:00 and I closed up the store, I decided to e-mail Helen and Laura:

Hey, Girls:

I survived my first day on the job and no disasters yet. I met a lot of new marina customers and saw a few old friends. I think I'm going to enjoy being here, but miss you guys. Keep me posted on everything.

Meggie

P.S.: I've given it some thought and I think you're both right—BARBIE DOES HAVE A HUGE ASS!

I made myself a salad for dinner, then took a glass of wine out to Gram's deck. There's nothing better than watching a sunset over the water. This was always my favorite time of day at the marina. Seeing all the beautiful colors of the sky would steal my breath away while I waited for the great big ball of orange to descend. I love watching sunrises and sunsets on vacation, and though I'm not on vacation now, I'll certainly be up at sunrise.

The bugs by the water are ferocious. When I felt a mosquito take a huge bite out of my right arm, I retreated to the cottage. I'm allergic to mosquitoes so, of course, they love me. When I do get bit, I get a big welt. I'll have to remember to put bug cream on. I bought this great bug cream when I was on vacation in Mexico. They told me it worked a lot better than spray. I've used it for a couple of years, and when I put it on, I never get bitten. I was a little afraid of it at first, expecting my arm to fall off or something, but I've never had a bad reaction. Whenever anyone I know goes to Mexico, I get them to bring some back for me.

Leaving Philly on short notice, I forgot to bring some books to read, so I decided to see what Gram had. Her three

favorite authors were Elizabeth Adler, Maeve Binchy, and Rosamunde Pilcher. I decided to work my way through them all and start with Elizabeth Adler's *Hotel Riviera*. Since my evenings will probably be spent alone, I'd have plenty of time to make it through the whole collection.