

EXCLUSIVE GUIDEPOSTS EDITION

DEBBIE MACOMBER

The Inn at Rose Harbor



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EXCERPT

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EXCERPT FROM
Debbie Macomber's
The Inn at Rose Harbor

Last night I dreamed of Paul.

He's never far from my thoughts—not a day passes when he isn't with me—but he hasn't been in my dreams until now. It's ironic, I suppose, that he should leave me, because before I close my eyes I fantasize about what it would feel like to have his arms wrapped around me. As I drift off to sleep I pretend that my head is resting on his shoulder. Unfortunately, I will never have the chance to be with my husband again, at least not in this lifetime.

Until last night, if I did happen to dream of Paul, those dreams were long forgotten by the time I woke. This dream, however, stayed with me, lingering in my mind, filling me with equal parts sadness and joy.

When I first learned that Paul had been killed, the grief had been all-consuming, and I didn't think I would be able to go on. Yet life continues to move forward, and so have I, dragging from one day into the next until I found I could breathe normally.

I'm in my new home now, the bed-and-breakfast I bought less than a month ago on the Kitsap Peninsula in a cozy town on the water called Cedar Cove. I decided to name it Rose Harbor Inn. "Rose" for Paul Rose, my husband of less than a year; the man I will always love and for whom I will grieve for whatever remains of my own life. "Harbor" for the place I have set my anchor as the storms of loss batter me.

How melodramatic that sounds, and yet there's no other way to say it. Although I am alive, functioning normally, at times I feel half dead. How Paul would hate hearing me say that, but it's true. I died with Paul last April on some mountainside in a country half a world away as he fought for our nation's security.

Life as I knew it was over in the space of a single heartbeat. My future as I dreamed it would be was stolen from me.

All the advice given to those who grieve said I should wait a year before making any major decisions. My friends told me I would regret quitting my job, leaving my Seattle home, and moving to a strange town.

What they didn't understand was that I found no comfort in familiarity, no joy in routine. Because I valued their opinion, I gave it six months. In that time nothing helped, nothing changed. More and more I felt the urge to get away, to start life anew, certain that then and only then would I find peace, and this horrendous ache inside me ease.

I started my search for a new life on the Internet, looking in a number of areas, all across the United States. The surprise was finding exactly what I wanted in my own backyard.

The town of Cedar Cove sits on the other side of Puget Sound from Seattle. It's a navy town, situated directly across from the Bremerton shipyard. The minute I found a property listing for this charming bed-and-breakfast that was up for sale, my heart started to beat at an accelerated rate. Me own a bed-and-breakfast? I hadn't thought to take over a business, but instinctively I realized I would need something to fill my time. As a bonus, a confirmation, I'd always enjoyed having guests.

With its wraparound porch and incredible view of the cove, the house was breathtaking. In another life I could imagine Paul and me sitting on the porch after dinner, sipping hot coffee and discussing our day, our dreams. Surely the photograph posted on the Internet had been taken by a professional who'd cleverly masked its flaws. Nothing, it seemed, could be this perfect.

Not so. The moment I pulled into the driveway with the real estate agent, I was embraced by the inn's appeal. Oh yes, with its bright natural light and large windows that overlooked the cove, this B and B felt like home already. It was the perfect place for starting my new life.

Although I dutifully let Jody McNeal, the agent, show me around, not a single question remained in my mind. I was meant to own this bed-and-breakfast; it was as if it'd sat on the market all these months waiting for me. It had eight guest rooms spread across the two upper

floors, and on the bottom floor a large, modern kitchen was situated next to a spacious dining room. Originally built in the early 1900s, the house looked out on a stunning panorama of the water and marina. Cedar Cove was laid out below along Harbor Street, which wound through the town with small shops on both sides of the street. I felt the town's appeal even before I had the opportunity to explore its neighborhoods.

What attracted me most about the inn was the sense of peace I experienced the moment I walked inside. The heartache that had been my constant companion seemed to lift. The grief that I'd carried with me all these months eased. In its place came serenity, a peace that's difficult to describe.

Unfortunately, this contentment didn't last long, my eyes suddenly flooding with tears and embarrassing me as we finished the tour. Paul would have loved this inn, too. But I would be managing the inn alone. Thankfully the real estate agent pretended not to notice the emotions I was struggling to disguise.

"Well, what do you think?" Jody asked expectantly as we walked out the front door.

I hadn't said a word during the entire tour, nor had I asked a single question. "I'll take it."

Jody leaned closer as if she hadn't heard me correctly. "I beg your pardon?"

"I'd like to make an offer." I didn't hesitate—by that time I had no doubts. The asking price was more than fair and I was ready to move forward.

Jody almost dropped a folder full of detailed information regarding the property. "You might want to think about it," she suggested. "This is a major decision, Jo Marie. Don't get me wrong, I'm eager to make the sale; it's just that I've never had anyone make such an important decision so...quickly."

"I'll think about it overnight, if you want, but there's no need. I knew right away that this is it."

The instant my family heard that I intended to quit my job at Columbia Bank and buy the B and B, they all tried to talk me out of it, es-

pecially my brother, Todd, the engineer. I'd worked my way up to assistant manager of the Denny Way branch, and he feared I was throwing away a promising career. Todd knew that I would eventually be named manager. I had given almost fifteen years to the bank, had been a good employee, and my future in banking was bright.

What the people around me failed to understand was that my life as I'd known it, as I'd wanted it, as I'd dreamed it, was over. The only way I could achieve fulfillment was to find myself a new one.

I signed the offer for the inn the next day and not for an instant did my resolve waver. The Frelingers, who owned the B and B, gratefully accepted my offer, and within a matter of weeks—just before the holidays—we gathered together at the title company and signed all the tedious, necessary paperwork. I handed them the cashier's check, and accepted the keys to the inn. The Frelingers had taken no reservations for the last couple of weeks in December as they intended to spend time with their children.

Leaving the title company, I took a short detour to the courthouse and applied for a name change for the inn, christening it with its new name, the Rose Harbor Inn.

I returned to Seattle and the next day I gave Columbia Bank my notice. I spent the Christmas holiday packing up my Seattle condo and preparing for the move across Puget Sound. While I was only moving a few miles away, I might as well have been going halfway across the country. Cedar Cove was a whole other world—a quaint town on the Kitsap Peninsula away from the hectic world of the big city.

I knew my parents were disappointed that I didn't spend much of the holidays with them in Hawaii, a family tradition. But I had so much to do to get ready for the move, including sorting through my things and Paul's, packing, and selling my furniture. I needed to keep occupied—busywork helped keep my mind off this first Christmas without Paul.

I officially moved into the house on the Monday following New Year's Day. Thankfully the Frelingers had sold the inn as a turnkey business. So all I needed to bring with me were a couple of chairs, a lamp that had belonged to my grandmother, and my personal items. Unpacking took

only a few hours. I chose as my room the main floor bedroom suite the Frelingers had set aside as their own area; it had a fire place and a small alcove that included a window seat overlooking the cove. The room was large enough for a bedroom set, as well as a small sofa that sat close to the fireplace. I particularly enjoyed the wallpaper, which was covered in white and lavender hydrangeas.

By the time night descended on the inn, I was exhausted. At eight, as rain pelted against the windows and the wind whistled through the tall evergreens that covered one side of the property, I made my way into the master bedroom on the main floor. The wild weather made it feel even cozier with a fire flickering in the fireplace. I experienced none of the strangeness of settling into a new place. I'd felt welcomed by this home from the moment I'd set foot in the front door.

The sheets were crisp and clean as I climbed into bed. I don't remember falling asleep, but what so readily comes to mind is that dream of Paul, so vivid and real.

In grief counseling, I'd learned that dreams are important to the healing process. The counselor described two distinct types of dreams. The first and probably the most common are dreams about our loved ones—memories that come alive again.

The second type are called visitation dreams, when the loved one actually crosses the chasm between life and death to visit those he or she has left behind. We were told these are generally dreams of reassurance: the one who has passed reassures the living that he or she is happy and at peace.

It'd been eight months since I'd received word that Paul had been killed in a helicopter crash in the Hindu Kush, the mountain range that stretches between the center of Afghanistan and northern Pakistan. The army helicopter had been brought down by al-Qaeda or one of their Taliban allies; Paul and five of his fellow Airborne Rangers had been killed instantly. Because of the location of the crash it was impossible to recover their bodies. The news of his death was difficult enough, but to be deprived of burying his remains was even more cruel.

For days after I got the news, hope crowded my heart that Paul might have actually survived. I was convinced that somehow my husband would find a way back to me. That was not to be. Aerial photographs of the crash site soon confirmed that no one could have possibly survived. In the end, all that really mattered was that the man I loved and married was gone. He would never return to me, and as the weeks and months progressed I came to accept the news.

It'd taken me a long time to fall in love. Most of my friends had married in their twenties, and by the time they were in their mid-thirties, the majority had already started their families. I was a godmother six times over.

On the other hand, I had remained single well into my thirties. I had a busy, happy life and was involved in both my career and family. I'd never felt the need to rush into marriage or listen to my mother, who insisted I find a good man and quit being so picky. I dated plenty but there was never anyone I felt I could love for the rest of my life until I met Paul Rose.

Seeing that it'd taken me thirty-seven years to meet my match, I didn't expect love to come to me twice. Frankly, I wasn't even sure I wanted to fall in love again. Paul Rose was everything I'd ever hoped to find in a husband ... and so much more.

We'd met at a Seahawks football game. The bank had given me tickets and I had brought along one of our more prominent clients and his wife. As we took our seats, I'd noticed two men with military haircuts sitting next to me. As the game progressed, Paul introduced himself and his army buddy and struck up a conversation. Paul told me he was stationed at Fort Lewis. Like me, he enjoyed football. My parents were keen Seahawks fans, and I'd grown up in Spokane watching the games on television after church on Sundays with them and my younger brother, Todd.

Paul asked me to have a beer with him as we left the game that afternoon, and we saw each other nearly every day after. We learned we shared much more than a love of football: we shared the same political inclinations, read many of the same authors, and loved Italian food. We

even had a Sudoku addiction in common. We could talk for hours and often did. Two months after we met, he shipped out to Germany, but being separated did little to slow our budding relationship. Not a day passed that we weren't in contact in one way or another—we emailed, texted, Skyped, tweeted, and used every other available means we could to stay in touch. Yes, we even wrote actual letters with pen and paper. I'd heard about people claiming to have experienced "love at first sight" and I had scoffed. I can't say it was like that for Paul and me, but it was darn close. I knew a week after we met that he was the man I would marry. Paul said he felt the same way about me, although he claimed all it took was one date.

I will admit this: love changed me. I was happier than I could ever remember being. And everyone noticed.

At Thanksgiving a year ago, Paul flew back to Seattle on leave and asked me to be his wife. He even talked to my parents first. We were crazy in love. I'd waited a long time and when I gave him my heart, it was for forever.

Right after our wedding in January, Paul got orders for Afghanistan. The helicopter went down on April 27, and my world imploded.

I'd never experienced this kind of grief and I fear I handled it poorly. My parents and brother worried for me. It was my mother who suggested grief counseling. Because I was desperate to find a means to ease my pain, I agreed. In the end I was glad I attended the sessions. Doing so helped me understand my dreams, especially the one I had that first night at the inn.

Contrary to what I'd been told about visitation dreams, Paul did nothing to reassure me he was at peace. Instead, he stood before me in full military gear. He was surrounded by a light that was so bright it was hard to look at him. Even so, I found it impossible to turn away...

Find out what happens next in *The Inn at Rose Harbor!*