**CHAPTER ONE**

**I wrapped Sam’s** ratty red-plaid shirt around me more securely as I sat on the couch and watched the snow pelt down from a leaden sky, indiscriminately covering both the immaculate lawn in front of my house and the mess my new neighbors had created while moving in. The mess didn’t surprise me. Debbie had always been surrounded by mess and half-completed projects back when I knew her as a kid growing up. Apparently, she hadn’t changed.

I still couldn’t believe that spunky little Debbie Doram, now McCorkmick, had moved back to Moffat’s Landing. The biggest shock came when she and Mickey bought the house next door to mine.

I’d always liked my former neighbours, the VanWoordens. They were friendly but discreet. We had coffee back and forth several times a year, but they never intruded into our lives, although Jerry and my Sam did collaborate on a few yard projects. I hated to see them leave, but Mrs. V was beginning to show signs of Alzheimers and her husband needed a low maintenance home where he’d be able to care for her.

I couldn’t have been more surprised when Debbie and Mickey bought the house. They were anything but discreet, as far as I had observed. As if to prove the fact, my doorbell rang—not once but three times—and, if my door hadn’t been locked, Debbie would have burst right in. As it was, she called to me through the door while I set aside my photo albums and carried my tea to the kitchen table. She was bouncing up and down by the time I unlocked the door.

“Jeannie!” she squealed as she wrapped me in a hug. “I can’t believe we’re next door neighbors.”

I extricated myself from her smothering hug and stepped back. “I go by Jeanne now,” I said, as she brushed past me.

“You got the coffee on, Jeannie?” she asked.

“It’s Jeanne,” I insisted, but I don’t think she heard me.

“So? Coffee?” Her brown eyes danced in her round face, surrounded by the bobbing auburn curls I remembered from high school, now streaked faintly with gray.

I took a steadying breath. “I don’t drink coffee.”

She shrugged. “Tea? Water?” She grinned widely, showing her beautiful teeth. “I bet you drink water.”

Her effervescent grin gave me a dull pain at the base of my neck. I glanced at the hall clock. Ten a.m. Time to dust and vacuum through the house. I doubted Debbie would understand. If I made her a cup of tea, maybe she’d go home and leave me to my work.

“What about this weather, eh?” she commented. “I haven’t seen a lot of snow these past thirty years. Texas doesn’t get much. I can hardly wait to go sledding and skating and make snowmen when the grandkids come. You have grandkids, Jeannie?”

I opened my mouth to answer but she was talking again. “We have eight now, mostly in Texas, a few in California. Have you been to California? Great place to visit but way too ‘out there’ for me.”

I couldn’t imagine. I led the way to the kitchen and plugged in the kettle.

“Whoa! Nice place you got here. Bet I could eat off the floor! My place is still in shambles, but I’m hoping to at least have the kitchen straightened up by Christmas.”

“Christmas!” I couldn’t help but comment. “That’s a whole month away.”

“Yeah.” She grinned and winked. “But I can do it.”

I was about to ask Debbie what kind of tea she wanted, but she beat me to it.

“Just don’t give me any of that herbal junk.” She pronounced the “h” in herbal. “Makes me gag. If I’ve gotta have tea, then give me the strongest you got.”

She reached past me into the tea cabinet and rummaged through it, knocking several boxes out of place.

“Hmm. Guess I’ll risk Earl Grey. Where’s the sugar?”

She pulled open the next cabinet, stepped back and shot me a look of disgust. “Has someone been filming a kitchen organization show from your home? Geez, Louise! You scare me.”

Frowning, I pulled out the seldom-used sugar bowl and handed it to her, then took the cream carton from the fridge and reached for the cream pitcher.

“Whoa, girl!” Debbie said. “Don’t fuss over me. If you make a big production of it every time I drop in for coffee—I mean tea—you’ll wear yourself out.”

My headache had crept forward to my temples.

“Don’t mind if I do,” said Debbie as she settled her rounded frame into Sam’s kitchen chair. I sat across from her, picking up my morning tea to finish it. She propped her elbows on the table, hands wrapped around her cup, and smiled at me with sadness in her eyes. Here goes, I thought.

“So how have you been doing these thirty years since I left you for life’s adventures?”

This time she waited for me to answer but I needed time to come up with something acceptable. I took a sip of my lukewarm peppermint tea, hoping it would calm the sudden sharp pain in my chest, and rubbed the rim of my cup with my thumb as I fumbled for words.

“Well, it’s…I’ve been…” I looked into her eyes, now soft with compassion. “It was a good life till Sam left me.”

“Left you?” Two deep ridges formed between Debbie’s eyebrows. “I thought he died.”

I didn’t look away. “Yes. He died and left me alone.”

She stared a moment longer, then smoothed out her features and reached across the table to lay a hand on my arm. There were tears in her eyes.

“I know, Honey. I always got *Moffat’s Musings*, even when we were in Texas. I read Sam’s obituary and my heart broke for you.”

Her words, meant to comfort, only pinched the nerve of grief that pulsed constantly within my chest. But Debbie, who had rarely been comfortable with silence when I knew her, carried on.

“What happened anyway? The paper said it was sudden.”

The pain in my chest spread to my gut and I set down my cup to hug myself. It was so difficult to put into words.

“He, ah, he was working in the driveway clearing snow. We had an early winter last year and he didn’t want it to pile up on the driveway and get icy, so he tried to keep it cleared.”

I could still see Sam attacking the heavy snow with his new yellow snow shovel from Canadian Tire, his green knit toque pulled down over his ears, breath coming out in white puffs. A former farmer, he dubbed the backyard and driveway his “back forty,” and claimed it as his own turf.

“Sam always whistled while he worked. It didn’t register with me right away, but suddenly I realized he had stopped whistling. I looked out and there he was, lying in a heap in the driveway.”

On edge with the telling, I stood and moved to the kitchen window where I’d been that terrible day almost a year ago. “I heard a shout and saw our neighbour, Mr. VanWoorden, running toward him.”

I grasped the countertop with both hands to still their shaking. “I ran out the door and Mr. V yelled at me to call 911, so I did. The ambulance only had to come from the hospital two blocks away, and it probably only took five minutes, but it seemed like hours.” I leaned against the counter, remembering.

“I held Sam, begged him to stay with me, begged God not to let him die, but somehow I knew he wouldn’t make it. The EMTs tried their best, but they couldn’t bring him back. Massive heart attack.”

I turned to look at Debbie and was surprised to see tears running down her face. I picked up the Kleenex box and took it to the table for her. My own eyes were dry. Maybe I’d cried out all my tears through the months of being without Sam. She grabbed a couple of tissues, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Then she jumped up.

“Oh Jeannie, I’m so sorry. You’ve lost the love of your life and I’m sitting here bawling my eyes out. I’ll get us some fresh tea.”

She plugged in the kettle again and fished around in my cabinet for whatever kind she thought I liked. “Here you go,” she said. “Chamomile. That’s relaxing, isn’t it? Oh girl, you’ve gotta learn to make coffee. This Earl Grey just isn’t cutting it.”

She refilled my cup with hot water, then added some to her own, along with two spoons of sugar and a generous splash of cream straight from the carton. Then she sat down across from me at the table again.

“So how have you been managing everything this past year? Did you have family here to help?”

“Emily—that’s our daughter—came out to stay with me for a couple of weeks, but she has a life out in Vancouver, and a job she apparently likes, so that was that. I had to pull up my socks and deal with reality.”

“What does that mean?”

Her question stumped me. Most people are content with stock answers because they really don’t want to delve into personal pain. But Debbie had never been most people. I rubbed my forehead to ease the ache. My fingers were cold. I was always cold.

“It means I’ve done what I had to do, asked for help when I needed it, hired a few people when I couldn’t do something myself. I’ve adjusted.”

Debbie frowned. “You’ve adjusted. Does that mean you’re coping or you’re content?”

I remembered Debbie being nosy and it irked me now.

“Yes.”

Her eyes narrowed and then she snorted. “You and your dry humour. At least you didn’t lose that.”

I couldn’t work up a smile for the life of me. Even when she was young she could move from caring to crass in very short order. I’d have to learn how to handle her if we were going to live in such close proximity. Set a few guidelines. Be upfront with her.

Suddenly she stood, carried her cup to the sink and set it down. “Well, Honey, I gotta go. Poor Mickey is up to his eyeballs moving furniture so I’d better tell him where to put it. He hates moving stuff too many times, poor guy, but I’m not sure myself where I want it all.”

She opened the door to leave, then turned back. “Too bad it snowed again. Makes everything wet and messy. Well girl, keep your chins up and I’ll see you later. Drop by for coffee if you can handle the mess. I’d love for you to meet Mickey. By the way, I love your shirt.”

I sensed sarcasm in her comment because the shirt, with its tattered tails, didn’t suit my image, not even at home, even though it was clean. Debbie came back over and hugged me, then walked out the door hollering “bye” as she went.

I sank into my chair, rested my head on my arms on the table and sighed deeply.