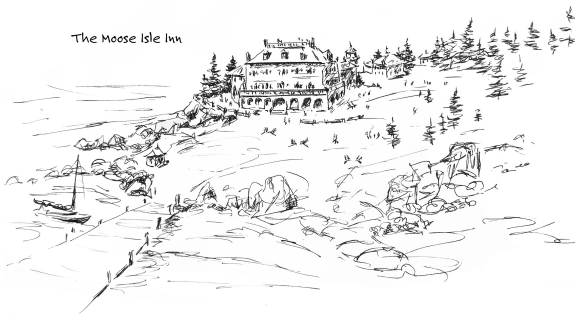


Ms Mia
and
Murder
on
Moose Isle

Jennifer Branch

Ms Mia
and
Murder
on
Moose Isle



Jennifer Branch

Ms. Mia and Murder on Moose Isle
Copyright © 2025 by Jennifer Branch Luallen
Registration Number: TXu002449834

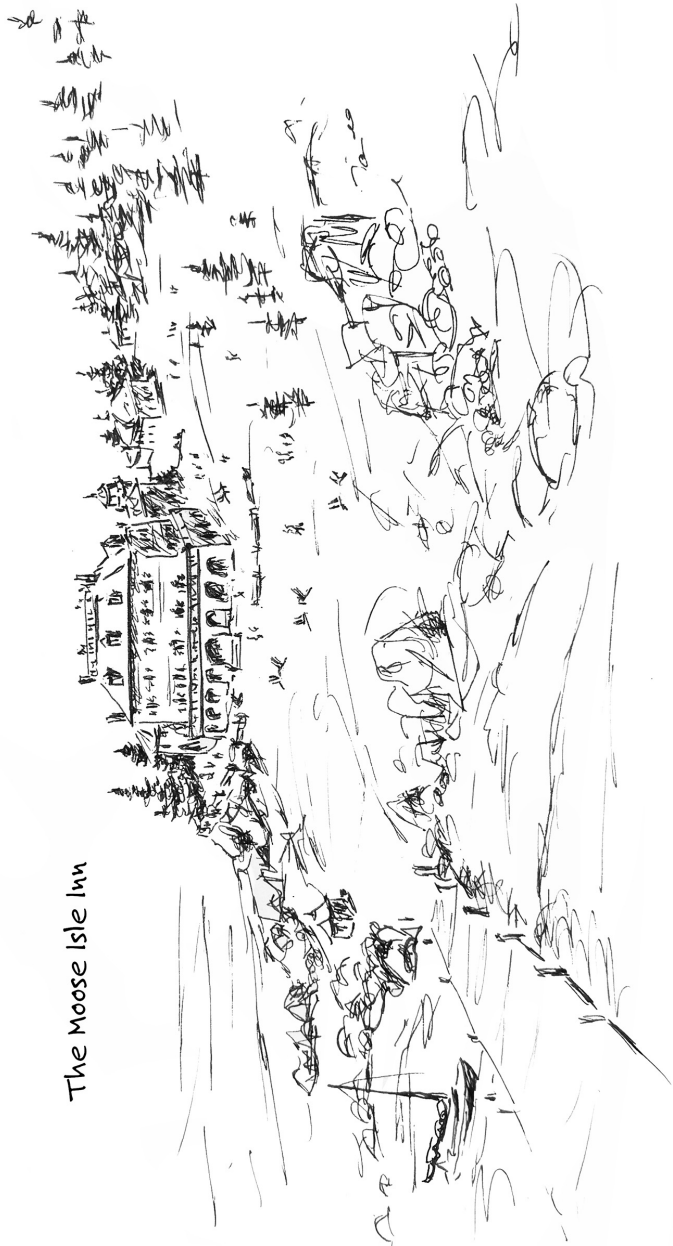
All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, scanned, or distributed in any printed or electronic form without permission. Please do not participate in or encourage piracy of copyrighted materials in violation of the author's rights. Purchase only authorized editions.

Published by BranchStudio LLC
Branchstudio.com

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Cover Design by Jennifer Branch

The Moose Isle Inn





This Changes Everything

Lauren Tisserande Baker raised her voice over the shocked cries, "Quiet, please."

The room hushed. With one short sentence she'd changed their lives and their company completely. "Tisserande Linens is moving all production back to the United States." Every single person in the room waited anxiously to hear more.

"For a long time, I've watched our town of Megeso Point, Maine, slowly dying. I've seen the thriving town my great-grandparents and you built fade away. Buildings stand vacant, stores close. Young people leave as soon as they graduate from high school. There are no jobs to keep them here, even if they wanted to stay. I want the town I grew up—we grew up in—to be more than just an empty shell."

Lauren looked around the company cafeteria. She knew every expectant face, from summer interns to veterans of fifty years. Her hands clenched the old oak podium her grandfather had made from scrap wood, until her knuckles hurt. If she didn't make the right decisions this time, the town she loved would never recover. They trusted her. She'd never been more scared—or more determined—in her life.

Roughly clearing her throat, she dove in. "I've felt for a while the current success of Tisserande Linens, my family's company, was bought by this town's empty storefronts. I know grandparents who never see their grandchildren. Their children left here because there were no jobs. We sent those jobs offshore." Lauren choked back tears. "We sold out so we could compete with the big box stores, where price always triumphs over quality. That can't be the only way. That shouldn't be our future."

She shook her head vehemently and risked a look at the small line of management flanking her. Most of the people surrounding her frankly disapproved of her risking their well paid jobs to rehire people laid off a decade ago. They didn't understand that Lauren thought of every single person in the company, in the town, as her extended family. Most of them weren't from around here, but she'd grown up here. She'd baked cookies with their moms after school, ridden bikes on adventures, hauled lobster traps and picked apples with the people in this room. Megeso Point was her home.

Cynthia Clark, her VP of finance, tapped her pen sharply, punctuating her displeasure. Her strident

Chapter One

voice echoed in Lauren's mind, "You'll end up ruining what's left of Tisserande. Then no one at all will have a job here." Well, she was risking it all, then.

"All that is changing right now, on my watch." She spoke forcefully. "We're bringing back quality, made in the USA, made in Maine, made by us in our great town. We're rebuilding our town and our company like it should be. We're rebuilding with jobs first."

The room cheered and feet stomped wildly.

Lauren spoke over the thunderous approval. "It's not going to happen overnight, but we're doing this as fast as we can make it happen." She was gambling all Tisserande's profits, as well as most of her own capital, on the expansion. Working fast took money and lots of it.

The room stilled again. No one wanted to miss a word.

"I've devised a five year plan to bring all production back to the United States, starting with a new high end line. In two weeks, we break ground on a state of the art production facility that will provide work for an additional two hundred employees in Megeso Point by next year. That's just the start." Lauren nodded at the VP of Production, Max Davis, who gave her a quick, approving smile. "Max is already building the machines for the new line." She grinned suddenly. "That's the complicated mess in his workshop you've all been asking about. "

The room laughed a little, with relief more than mirth.

She continued, gripping the podium so hard her knuckles turned white, "The next phase will move the rest of our offshore production back home, creating more jobs for the community. With modern engineering capabilities, we can keep all of our production in-house, and improve the quality dramatically at the same time."

On her right, her husband, Paul Baker, the company president muttered sourly, "And lower the profit tremendously." He crossed his arms tightly, distancing himself from the announcement.

Ignoring him, she raised her voice. "We can make our community thrive again, and build Tisserande Linens into a better company."

"What about the old factory?" someone shouted from the back of the cafeteria.

"We have plans to refurbish it into a store," Lauren told them. "We can use it for a seconds outlet, like we used to have."

"People would drive all the way from Boston to shop," Cynthia commented grudgingly. "It brought a nice profit, from what I understand." Her pen tapping slowed slightly.

"Where's the new factory going?" a gawky kid yelled out, raising his hand, as if in school. He didn't look like he was old enough to be out of school.

"The old Malone estate, right behind the old factory. It went up for sale, zoned industrial. We're closing on it next week," Lauren said proudly. It had been the perfect location, just outside the town center. Not too far to drive during the brutal Maine winters. Not a potential eyesore in the middle of town.

Chapter One

"That old house was falling apart, even before the fire."

"Sure was."

Her husband grumbled, "It costs enough, even then." He looked down at the crowd with disgust.

"You hiring for construction?" a woman's voice rang out.

Lauren assured them, "Part of the construction agreement is they hire as much as they can locally. The factory is modular, so we can get started quickly and add to it as we go."

An excited chatter arose from everyone who had a cousin or uncle in the building industry.

Lauren said loudly, over the noise, "A whole new chapter is starting at Tisserande Linens and Megeso Point. Together, we're going to make our linens, our company and our town better than ever." She grinned, thinking of high school, and yelled, "Go Eagles!"

A huge cry went up, echoing her with their school cheer. Lauren felt tears in her eyes. Her husband looked at her, smirking at the effect the cheering had on her. She glared at him quickly, then glanced away. The factory build was out of his hands now. She knew she was doing the right thing, both for her and her hometown.

As the cheers died down, Lauren closed the meeting. "In the back of the room, besides doughnuts and coffee, we have a scale model and sketches of the new facility, so you can see where we'll be working next year."

Ms. Mia and Murder on Moose Isle

With a flourish, the sheet was pulled off the model and people crowded around. The room roared with the excitement of the crowd realizing their town could thrive again.



Hotel Arrivals

Mia Spinel relaxed in one of the Adirondack chairs dotting the smooth green grass and looked out across the rich blue of the Atlantic Ocean. It was a glorious day, with just enough chill in the air to give her a reason for a cozy pink cashmere sweater and her cup of mulled cider. She'd walked around Moose Isle Inn this afternoon, exploring the hotel grounds thoroughly. Now, with her pink tennis shoes propped on the footrest, Mia gazed out at the breathtaking view spread before her. Moose Isle, a granite island emerging from the bay, was just tall enough to give a good view from almost anywhere, but the inn stood proudly at the top.

The Spinel Moose Isle Inn was a grand Gilded Age relic, a huge white clapboard building stretching up three stories, topped by a slate roof and a glassed in widow's walk. You could almost see the core of the

house, even now, but large additions from ballrooms to guest rooms had sprouted from the main shell over the years. Lush green lawn, in defiance of the scanty Maine soil, carpeted the stretch between the main building and the shore, dotted with strategically placed balsam fir windbreaks.

On this side of the island, rocky cliffs stood high, guarding the island from the winter rage of the sea. The cliff tops were edged with pink beach roses, mixing their scent with salty iodine. The other side of the island sloped to a rocky beach full of pink granite balls. The hardy could swim in the chilly water in high summer, but the neighboring boat dock and fishing pier were more popular destinations. Most people preferred the glass enclosed heated pool off the hotel for actual swimming.

The hotel manager, Joesph Curry, casually strolled up, elegant as always in a Harris tweed jacket and wool trousers. "Enjoying your cider, Ms. Mia?"

Mia sipped the hot cider, inhaling the scent of rich apples and spices. "It's wonderful, Joesph. Everything looks great here."

"I'm glad. I never know what you'll tell me to fix on your first day here," he said sardonically. He sat in the neighboring chair and propped his feet up. Mia noticed his socks had tiny red lobsters decorating them, coordinating perfectly with a faint red line in his tweed jacket.

Joesph still cultivated a faint English accent, even after many years in the United States. Mia always found it amusing that the sophisticated man had chosen one of their more rustic hotels. He'd turned it into the

Chapter Two

Gilded Age splendor it was, a refined haven marooned on a wild Maine island. He'd definitely borrowed from that bygone era's rusticators' mentality. The hotel offered glorious daytime nature excursions around the island (always with appetizing picnic baskets in tow) followed by dinners worth waiting for. The winning combination drew guests, and kept them returning year after year.

"I know we have close to a full house," Mia said. Joseph nodded serene agreement. "But what guests do we have this week?"

"Only one wedding this weekend. It's still early in the season, but the bride wants a spring wedding," Joseph told her, his long, narrow face thoughtfully considering weekend plans. "It's a small affair, just thirty guests. Mostly family."

"I shouldn't say it as a hotel owner, but I think the more intimate weddings are usually the most fun."

"They're certainly the easiest to manage and keep everyone happy. This hotel definitely encourages the smaller weddings, with only sixty rooms." He waved his long fingers to encompass the hotel. "Lots of interesting activities for different age groups too. Hiking for the kids and elderly grandmothers can sit and watch the ocean." He smiled meaningfully at Mia.

Mia grinned back in mock disdain. "I'm not a grandma yet, thank you." She patted her smooth blonde hair. Not a gray hair showed—they wouldn't dare.

"Just a matter of time," he teased her, bony shoulders shaking in silent laughter.

Mia ignored him, looking out at the water. A new group seemed to be arriving.

"It makes for an exciting adventure, arriving on the boat. There's just something about an island." She loved watching new guests arriving. The Moose Isle Inn used a gorgeous Hinckley Picnic Boat for one of their hotel ferries. Wood and brass glowed in the orange tinged afternoon sun. The design was an elegant refinement of a lobster boat, riding all seas with graceful ease.

A woman lounged in the stern, arm draped casually across the back of the navy blue striped cushion, large dark sunglasses turned toward the setting sun, an excited smile on her face. A dark haired man sat across from her, laughing at something she'd said. On her other side, another man perched stiffly, not letting his body relax into the roll of the waves. A young woman clutched his arm, her spun sugar blonde hair spilling onto his jacket. Mia could almost hear her squeal as she jumped and clung to the older man whenever the spray might possibly touch her.

"Ah, the weekend's company junket has arrived," Joesph Curry told her. "The management of Tisserande Linens. You know, they used to make the best towels and sheets in the Northeast."

"It looks like a good group," Mia said. She peered with interest at the new arrivals. She'd have to get some bird watching binoculars to tuck in her bag. They would be so handy for closer observation. Only of birds, of course.

"The management is having their annual get together to congratulate themselves on record profits again, I'm assuming. A very successful company." He

frowned, "It's rather odd they're coming here, you know. The factory, well, just the company headquarters now, is up the coast a little, in Megeso Point. It's only a few towns away. I think they usually head to the Caribbean or somewhere."

"May in the Caribbean is beginning to heat up," Mia said. "It's much more pleasant weather here now."

"Yes, but I think winter is their usual time for their company affair. Winter's a better time to get away, around here. Who wants to wade through snow instead of walk on a sunny beach?" His face turned sharp, like a terrier on the scent. "I wonder why they're here now."

Mia smiled at his interest, "I expect we'll know by the end of the weekend."

"I expect we will." Joesph watched the group disembarking with focused attention.

As the boat docked, three men ducked out from the open cabin, two with drinks in hand. Douglas, the hotel harbor master, scowled at them, firmly removing their cut crystal glasses after they'd gulped the dregs.

Arriving in the boat was a perfect start to their stay, Mia thought, as she saw the happy face of the young woman tenderly helped off the boat by the man next to her. He smiled down at her, while helping the next passenger disembark safely. The woman laughed in delight as she pointed to one of the little sailboats ready for guests' use. He nodded enthusiastically, the two clearly planning a weekend sail.

The woman strode easily up the gentle slope of the island, leaving the group to follow her. Her wide pants rippled in the breeze, and her green sweater clung

to her trim body. She moved like an athlete, long graceful strides making an easy journey up the hill. Laughing in pure joy, she pointed back to the mainland, Cadillac Mountain's pink granite glowing in the setting sun. "Isn't it beautiful?" she told Mia and anyone in earshot.

She paused to gather her group at the main entrance of the hotel. Only one other woman had kept up with her, the rest straggled behind.

The pale blonde woman's high heels caught on the rocks, making for awkward progress as she clung to the older man's arm. She apparently didn't think much of the rustic setting of the hotel, looking around her with disbelief. Her shocked, high pitched voice squeaked, "There's really nowhere to shop on the island? Why would anyone come here?"

The man informed her, "Oh, I think there are a few local shops in the village. Very arts and crafty."

The young woman made a face. "Not exactly my style, darling. Why couldn't we go to New York again this year? We live in Maine. Why do we have to vacation in this hell hole too?" Her perfectly fitted dressy pants suit, shiny silk blouse and expertly applied makeup agreed. The two continued their stilted progress up the rocky hill.

A woman with streaked spiky hair and orange framed glasses trudged by next. She was a little out of breath with a reddened face, even on the gentle slope. Her heron thin legs, clad in unfortunate orange pants, struggled to scale the hill, every joint clearly protesting her unusual spurt of activity.

Chapter Two

Two men, who thought they were younger than they were, raced up to the hotel. Neither came out of it with flying colors. They collapsed on the green lawn in laughter, still breathing hard, as if running to the hotel was the funniest thing in the world.

A gawky man with big glasses lagged behind them, not joining in the race. He gazed around him with happy wonder, smiling at the hotel and waving a cheerful goodbye to the boat captain, who completely ignored him. He walked leisurely up the hill, stopping to admire his surroundings every other step, completely unconcerned about catching up with the others.

Very last to emerge from deep in the boat's interior was a well padded blonde in shiny candy pink with bright heels to match and a bloated whale of a man. He heaved himself out of the cabin, balancing carefully on the deck, his flesh quivering as he caught his balance. Wobbling, he cautiously stepped onto the dock, the boat rebounding visibly as it was relieved of his weight. He began his measured tread down the center of the dock, not bothering to look back at his companion.

The woman in pink waited a minute, clearly expecting the boat captain to help her on to the dock. He completely ignored her, ducking below.

Mia smiled a little, wondering how long it would take the woman to realize Douglas was not coming back on deck while he was alone with a woman on his boat.

Finally realizing the only way off the boat was on her own, she eased herself to the edge and jumped off, hampered only slightly by her spike heels. She lumbered up the hill, trying to catch up to the rest of the party.

Mia saw Douglas pop his head out of belowdecks, like a groundhog checking for safety. When he confirmed the passengers were well and truly off his boat, he ventured out with an obvious look of relief, making Mia smile.

The hotel concierge, a petite blonde vibrating with energy, came out to greet the scattered group. She expertly herded them, holding the door to encourage them to come inside. A bellboy hurried down the hill with a cart to gather the luggage Douglas was grudgingly offloading.

Joseph laughed softly after the little group entered the hotel. "That looks like a fun little junket. I'm glad I'm not the one trying to make them work together."

"Me too," Mia said, laughing. "I doubt they ever agree on anything. And I can't believe those two overaged boys ever work."

"I also agree with that young woman. This island is not exactly her style. New York would suit her much better."

"She's certainly not here by choice," Mia observed. "So that's the Tisserande group. Who else is here?"

"Mostly couples having romantic getaways. A few foodies making their pilgrimage to the fabulous Chef Ava. One or two family groups. Nothing out of the ordinary."

"That sounds like a good mix," Mia got up and stretched her arms out. "This island is always so relaxing."

Chapter Two

She motioned to a happy older couple, a table between them heaped high with a glorious afternoon tea. The rotund man spread blueberry jam on a golden popover with gusto, his face avidly anticipating the treat. "Your teas always look as delicious as they taste. It makes me feel like being lazy."

"You were climbing up and down cliffs all morning," Joesph reminded her. "I'm not surprised you're hungry." He pursed his lips. "You know Mark will kill me if you break an ankle. It's not just your life you're risking."

Mark Spinel, one of Mia's two stepsons, would definitely know who to blame if Mia broke something climbing on rocks. He'd blame Mia and berate her unmercifully, as usual. Not that it made a bit of difference.

Her stepsons and daughter adored Mia, but they much preferred her spending her energy organizing the Spinel family's hotels around the world, rather than home in Atlanta, organizing their personal lives. They actively encouraged Mia to travel as much as possible—and send back interesting presents.

"I'm looking forward to visiting the town tomorrow." The town proper was on the opposite end of the island from the hotel, a short brisk walk away. "Right now, I'm going to dress for dinner, and enjoy the hotel for a few minutes."

"Wonderful. I will see you later, then." Joesph made no move to go, gazing out to sea at the passing sailboats with calm interest, his long legs neatly crossed,

polished leather brogues gently waving to his inner music.

Mia had never caught Joesph Curry doing any work whatsoever. He wandered around the hotel, gently gossiping, his elegantly lean body moving languidly, with all the time in the world at his disposal. She'd never actually spotted him in his wood paneled office. Sometimes there were recent signs he'd been there, an open laptop, papers on the ornate antique desk, a still warm coffee cup. Never the actual man sitting in his office, doing anything as mundane as working. Joesph was strolling through the hotel, leisurely chatting with everyone. Nothing happened on the island without him knowing about it.

He was also one of the most efficient managers Spinel Hotels had. Joesph had organized several of their hotels around the world, and finally settled down here, on Moose Isle, when they'd first bought the property.

The hotel had been a decrepit, once grand house that had housed everything from a wartime convalescent hospital to a cult headquarters in its day. The only thing going for the aged wreck of an obsolete house when they'd first seen it was its sublime location in the Cranberry Islands of Maine, just off Mount Desert Island, with breathtaking views of Acadia National Park.

Mia and her late husband, Leo Spinel, had helped organize the complete renovation of the Gilded Age summer vacation "cottage." The beautiful structure of the immense white house was rescued, while the necessary ingredients for a luxury destination resort, such as the spa, meeting rooms and excellent bathrooms in

Chapter Two

every room, were added. Luckily, the original extravagant owners had planned their summer home to hold all of their hundred nearest and dearest in spacious rooms, so sixty guest rooms had easily been carved out of the hulk, with a few discrete additions.

Joesph had taken charge of the renovation. A magnificent hotel, like stepping back into another era, rose from the ruins. He'd flatly refused to take on any new projects, preferring to stay with his grand creation in rustic Maine. He lived in a charming cottage, designed by himself, on the hotel grounds, and seldom left his beloved island.

Mia loved coming here for two weeks a year, before the true Maine summer season started. She might suggest a few things to improve the hotel during her visit, but most of her time was spent simply enjoying the wonderful island and the season. Joesph always had the hotel in perfect order. She was on vacation.

The wide front porch held old fashioned white wicker chairs adorned with bright floral cushions and a view of the surrounding islands. An elderly lady with a froth of snow white hair and smile of eager anticipation perched, eyeing the silver tea tray placed on a table in front of her. A plate of blueberry scones waited temptingly, just in reach. Visibly giving in to an internal struggle, she smiled up at Mia, placing one on her plate, "I think I'd better get mine before my grandchildren get here. They've been hiking all day, and I think these delicious looking scones will disappear quickly."

"Absolutely." Mia remembered how fast dinner disappeared as soon as hungry children sat down.

The dark wood paneled hall inside was designed for grand entrances, with a curved staircase on either side of the large hallway leading into the main lobby. A chandelier dripped sparkling crystals from the ceiling, but most of the lighting was discretely ambient. She nodded in greeting to Kayla, the concierge, who immediately jumped up to see if she could possibly help Mia with anything.

"Can you make a reservation for tonight in the Acadia Dining Room?"

"I'll tell Chef Ava," Kayla said, bouncing with enthusiasm. "You have to try her clam chowdah. It's better than my mom's."

"I wouldn't tell your mom that. She might not make it for you any more," Mia told her with a smile, looking around the hall. "There aren't many people in the lobby right now?"

"Oh, everyone goes to the library, Ms. Mia. That's where we set out the nibbles." She consulted the huge grandfather clock ensconced in the corner. "People will start gathering there in about an hour."

"Thanks, Kayla. I'll just go and change for dinner, then." Mia headed for the elevators, surreptitiously tucked behind the grand stairway.

Her room was in the main building, one of the large older rooms surviving with its beautiful proportions intact. Her bathroom was carved off from the neighboring room. There were only two true suites at the Moose Isle Inn, with most of the large rooms arranged, like Mia's, into distinct bedroom and living room spaces.

Chapter Two

The room felt airy and bright, with creamy white paneled walls catching the warm sunlight. Tall French doors led to a balcony just big enough for two chairs and a tiny table, but with a magnificent view of the coast. A massive antique bed sat majestically on one side of the room, pale blue curtained drapes framing the tall four poster. Across the large room, a blue and gold Persian rug framed a sofa and two comfortable chairs pulled up to a tall fireplace. An exquisite watercolor of Cadillac Mountain held pride of place above the fireplace. A little sign hung next to it, "Pull for Fire Service," with an old fashioned twisted pull rope beside it. Mia immediately planned at least one evening with a cheerful fire and a good book.

A bottle of champagne and a small cheese board waited for her on the coffee table. She smiled at Joesph's thoughtfulness and poured a glass of perfectly chilled champagne. Sipping, she nibbled cheese and a cracker and walked to the balcony, leaning on the railing.

From the balcony, she saw the whole of Southwest Harbor in the distance. A lobster boat piled high with traps was headed out to sea. A beautiful wooden yawl, sails folded in the calm evening air, returned to the harbor after a day spent sailing the Maine summer sea. Tiny lights showed along Mount Desert Island's coast, with just an occasional house light up higher on the mountains. She tried to remember what the town in the near distance was—maybe Northeast Harbor?

She remembered going to this house long ago with her husband, Leo, wondering if they could possibly

make it into a hotel. The short boat ride here had been miserable, gray and choppy. They hadn't been able to climb the stairs to the third floor, so many of the boards had been missing. They'd explored the property, planning together, deciding whether the tattered remnant was worth making into a hotel.

Leo hadn't been bald then. She smiled in fond remembrance of his windblown hair standing straight up. He'd looked like a mischievous round faced elf. She still missed him every day, even after two years. They'd had a wonderful life together. After the children were grown, they'd explored the world, living at all the Spinel Hotels in turn. They'd spend a few weeks or a few months perfecting each hotel, then move on to the next.

Mia tried to keep that spirit of adventure they'd enjoyed together. Even now she traveled on her own, she saw each new day as a precious gift to open. After all, you never knew what wonderful things the next day might bring.

The Moose Isle Inn had turned out even better than they'd expected, on that long ago windswept morning. Joesph deserved the credit for its transformation into a premier destination. And Chef Ava—her dinners were fabulous. Looking forward to tonight, Mia thought Moose Isle Inn was truly a hotel to savor. She sighed in pleasure, then suddenly sniffed sharply.

She definitely smelled smoke. Leaning out, she didn't see any bonfires on the grounds, but she did see smoke coming from a balcony at the other end of the wing. Mia quickly called Kayla, then hurried down the

Chapter Two

hall. One door had smoke oozing out from under the door frame. She knocked hard. "Is anyone in there? Is everything okay?"

To read more, please order

Ms Mia

and

Murder

on

Moose Isle