

Leaving Home

by Leigh Michaels

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CHAPTER ONE

“THERE it is! Look, Jerry. You can just see it over the treetops!” Brodie was almost bouncing in her seat as the car made a sharp turn off the highway. “Isn’t it beautiful?”

Jerry laughed. “All this excitement over a house?” he teased. His voice was indulgent, and he didn’t take his eyes off the road.

“Safe Harbor is not just any house, Jerry.” But Brodie was too excited to be irritated at him. She leaned forward, propping her elbows on the instrument panel of his old car, to get the best view of the slate roof of Safe Harbor. It was all she could see from this angle of the tall old house on the hill, and it wasn’t enough to satisfy Brodie’s hunger for home. “Please hurry!”

“If we get stopped for speeding, you can explain it to the officer.”

“I haven’t been home in three months. Is it any wonder that I’m looking forward to a whole summer at Safe Harbor?”

“A whole summer?” Jerry looked at her quizzically. “You haven’t changed your mind about marrying me, have you?”

The house disappeared, hidden behind a block of commercial buildings, and Brodie leaned back in her seat and turned to look at him. “Of course not. But there’s no sense in renting an apartment for a few weeks when we’ll be going back to school in the fall. I’m sure Drew will want us to stay at Safe Harbor after the wedding.”

Jerry grunted. “Well, you may be certain, but I’m not. I can’t see that guardian of yours being agreeable about anything, much less you getting married right now. And I’m not the best catch in town.”

Brodie laughed gaily. “Jerry, when it comes down to it, it’s really none of Drew’s business. After all, I’m not a baby anymore.”

“But you’re only twenty.”

“In September, he won’t even be my guardian any more,” Brodie pointed out. “As of my next birthday, I will be officially responsible for myself. He won’t say no to me now. And if you want to talk about being a good catch...”

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“I’m not looking forward to discussing it with Drew Hammond, no. Attorneys scare me stiff.”

“Well, lots of people start off on the wrong side of the tracks. It doesn’t mean they have to stay there.”

“I don’t think even you will get him to agree to that, Brodie.”

She pulled one foot up under her on the upholstered seat. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, there is no caste system in Hammond’s Point.”

“Just try telling that to Drew Hammond. He thinks he still owns this town because his great-great-grandfather built it.”

“As long as you’re speaking of the wrong side of the tracks, that man was the black sheep of two families back East before he came to Iowa with the wagon trains.” She bit her lip and pleaded, “Look, Jerry, Drew has been like an uncle to me since I was five. Please don’t say awful things about him.”

“Face it, Brodie, your so-called Uncle Drew is a cold, supercilious, arrogant snob.”

“He is not! You don’t even know him, and of course you’re scared to meet him. But you shouldn’t feel inferior. You’ll like Drew, really.”

Jerry didn’t sound convinced. “Tell me once more how you got mixed up with the Hammonds.”

“My father and Andy Hammond—Drew’s father— were childhood friends,” Brodie recited. “So my dad named Andy as my guardian, and when Andy died a few years later, lucky Drew inherited me right along with Safe Harbor and Andy’s law practice.” The explanation had the ring of repetition, as though Brodie didn’t even have to think about it. And she promptly forgot the subject entirely as the car chugged noisily up the hill and she got her first good look at Safe Harbor.

The wrought iron gates in the high brick wall stood open in welcome, and the house seemed to smile down at her from the hilltop where it reigned over the little city of Hammond’s Point, nestled into a river valley.

Brodie drew a breath of sheer happiness. The house was so big and so warm and so incredibly solid, a three-story mass of brick, stone, stucco, and timber that seemed to reach out to her with welcoming arms.

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And it would keep her safe. That was how she had always felt about this house, since the day fifteen years ago when her father had first brought her here to visit the Hammonds. So long as she stayed at Safe Harbor, Brodie thought, nothing could ever hurt her.

Jerry stopped his car beside the back door, and Brodie jumped out. She stood on tiptoe to peek into the carriage house, but the spot where Drew left his Lincoln was empty. She heaved a big sigh, and then had to smile ruefully at her own impatience. Drew would be home soon, and there was plenty of time to tell him about Jerry and the wonderful love they had found in these last few weeks. After all, Drew's law practice was the busiest in town, and she could scarcely expect him to take the afternoon off to wait for her.

Besides, Brodie thought, just now she wanted to throw out her arms and embrace Safe Harbor.

The housekeeper was at the back door. Brodie swept her into a bear hug. "I'm home!" she caroled.

"I can see," the woman agreed calmly, but there was a gleam of joy in her eyes. "And who's this?"

"This is my friend, Jerry Whitcomb. Jerry, this is Mrs. Riley. She's the major-general who keeps us all in line around here."

"I know you, don't I?" Mrs. Riley asked, studying Jerry with narrowed eyes. "You're one of the Whitcomb kids from down on Cherry Street, aren't you?"

"That's right," Jerry said. His jaw tightened at the tone of Mrs. Riley's voice.

"Jerry's studying business and economics at the University, Mrs. Riley," Brodie put in quickly. "Since we were both coming back to Hammond's Point, he offered me a ride."

"I see. Well, bring in your luggage, Brodie. I made those sweet rolls you like so much, if you'd like to ask your friend to stay." She went back into the kitchen.

"I feel five years old," Jerry muttered under his breath as he tugged one of Brodie's monogrammed leather bags from the car. "Do I have to knock on the door and ask if you can come out and play, too?"

"Don't mind Mrs. Riley. She thinks I'm still a baby."

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Jerry grunted. “And since when am I only a friend, Brodie? Was I dreaming last week when you said you’d marry me?”

She gave him a brilliant smile. “Oh, darling, stop it. I just thought it was only polite to tell Drew first.”

“If I had my way, I’d be announcing it from the treetops without waiting for Mr. Wonderful’s permission.”

“Why don’t you stop worrying about him and come in for one of Mrs. Riley’s sweet rolls? They absolutely drip butter and nuts and cinnamon.”

“She seems to think I’m a charity case. No, thanks, Brodie. I’ll go back to the other side of the tracks where I belong.” His voice held a tinge of bitterness.

“Jerry, really!” Brodie was exasperated. “At least come for dinner tonight.”

“Must I?”

“You’re going to have to meet Drew sometime. It might as well be tonight, so we can get it over with.”

“All right. You win.”

“Seven o’clock. And wear a suit.”

“Too bad my white tie and tails are at the cleaners,” Jerry said sarcastically. He leaned over to kiss her.

Brodie dodged, and said, “Not here. Too many people can see, and...”

“Are you going to turn into a snob on me, Brodie?” The question was sharp. “Now that you’re back home with the country club set...”

“No! But let’s wait till we’ve told Drew, and .. .” Her voice trailed off unhappily.

“All right,” Jerry said gloomily. “See you at seven.”

He drove off without a backward look, and Brodie stood on the back step for several minutes, lost in thought. She was right; she knew she was. It was only good manners to let Drew announce her engagement, and it would be good politics besides. Drew wouldn’t take kindly to the idea of the neighbors knowing about Brodie’s young man before he did, and if anything would set his opposition into

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cement, it would be that.

He wasn't going to like the idea, anyway, she knew. Jerry was right about that much. Drew was a sweetheart, but he was fiercely proud of the Hammond heritage, and for his ward to marry one of the Whitcomb kids...

I can talk him around, Brodie thought. There has never been anything I couldn't talk Drew into if I tried hard enough. And I never wanted anything so badly as I want Jerry. When Drew sees how much I love Jerry, he can't say no.

And even if he got stubborn and refused his permission, she concluded, September wasn't far away, and then she can do as she liked.

She took a deep breath of the early summer air, heavily perfumed with the scent of lilacs from the bushes that surrounded the little lattice-work gazebo. *All summer, she thought, I'll read, and garden, and lie in the sun.* Safe Harbor—could there be anywhere in the world that was more beautiful than Safe Harbor in the summer?

Mrs. Riley looked up when Brodie came in, dragging a heavy garment bag. "Need some help?"

"No. I shipped most of my things. Did I hear you say something about hot rolls?"

Mrs. Riley lifted an enormous, puffy pastry out of the pan and slid it on to a plate.

Brodie sank on to a stool at the breakfast bar and took a deep breath of the yeasty fragrance. "I've missed these," she said. "Drew is coming home for dinner, isn't he?" It was almost an afterthought.

"He wouldn't dream of missing your first evening at home," Mrs. Riley scolded.

"Good. I invited Jerry, by the way." Brodie cut into the bread and steam wafted out.

Mrs. Riley poured a cup of coffee and set it in front of Brodie. "The first night you're home? Mr. Hammond won't like that."

"Well, Jerry's kind of special." She closed her eyes so she could concentrate on the taste of plump raisins, tangy nuts, and sharp cinnamon, and she almost missed

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the suspicious look that Mrs. Riley gave her. “I would have killed for one of these rolls last week during final exams,” she said.

Mrs. Riley didn’t answer, and Brodie finished her snack in silence. “I’m going to take my coffee upstairs and unpack. And I think I’ll have a long, hot bubble bath,” she announced.

“They didn’t have bathtubs in the dorm?”

“Not like the ones here,” Brodie pointed out with a smile.

The back stairs were closer, but she walked instead down the long walnut-paneled hall and up the wide front staircase with its dark red carpet. *Safe Harbor even smells different from other houses*, she thought as she reached her own room at the top of the stairs.

It felt wonderful to be home. The big, airy bedroom with its southwest windows was the one she had moved into as a frightened child when her father died. Then it had been bright pink, with ruffles and eyelet lace— someone’s mistaken idea of the perfect room for a little girl. Now it was softly feminine in lemon and peach, without a single frill, the perfect background for Brodie’s sable-brown hair and dark eyes.

Perhaps we can be married here in the house, she thought as she pinned her hair up off her neck and filled the deep claw-footed tub with frothy bubbles. She would love to walk down the grand staircase on Drew’s arm, a long veil trailing over the plush carpet, and across the hall to the big drawing room where Jerry would be waiting...

She was thinking about her wedding, with a dreamy smile and her elbows propped on the glass top of her dressing table, when the grandfather clock down in the hall chimed six. It was long past time for Drew to be home, she thought. And then, with growing uneasiness, she wondered if he had come home already and Mrs. Riley had told him—what?

Don’t be silly, Brodie McKenzie, she told herself firmly as she tugged the skirt of her pale yellow dress into place. In the first place, Mrs. Riley didn’t know anything worth telling. And Drew would never take Mrs. Riley’s word as gospel truth; he’d at least ask Brodie first ... wouldn’t he?

Her foot was on the bottom step when he came out of the library, and Brodie

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seemed to freeze there for a moment.

In other homecomings she would have flung herself into his arms with a squeal of delight, and Drew would have laughed at her excitement and lifted her off her feet for a great warm bear hug. But this time Brodie hovered on the stairs and simply looked at him. Her eyes were nearly on a level with his, with the aid of the stair and her high-heeled sandals.

“So my little lady is growing up,” he said with a smile. “Are you too old for a hug, Brodie?”

She smiled at the teasing warmth of his voice and came down a step, her hand extended. “I’ll never get too old for that.”

Drew laughed and put a casual arm about her. “I’m going to have a drink before I change for dinner. Join me?”

She was thinking, as they walked together into the drawing room, about Drew and Safe Harbor. She couldn’t imagine him any other place; the big rooms and masculine wood of the house were made for him. To visualize him in a bungalow was ridiculous.

Brodie chose a blue-velvet chair that matched one of the jewel-like colors in the Oriental rug, and watched as he splashed Scotch into a glass and added ice and soda.

He wasn’t exactly handsome, she thought as she studied him. But at thirty-three he had the kind of mature, striking attractiveness that makes women of all ages take a second look. For the first time in her life, Brodie felt a twinge of curiosity about the girl who had jilted him so many years ago. She had never heard the whole story. She had been just a child at the time, with only the vaguest recollection of the woman. But she knew that since Cynthia had rejected him, Drew had never been serious about another woman.

What a waste, Brodie thought. No matter who Cynthia was, she couldn’t have been worth that.

Drew turned from the cart and saw the thoughtful look on her face. “Why so serious?” he asked. “Mrs. Riley tells me we’re having a guest for dinner.”

“Do you mind, Drew? I know it’s my first night at home, and we always have a

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quiet evening and catch up on talking, but..."

Drew sipped his drink and sat down on the couch. "I gather that he's a special guest," he observed.

Brodie sat up straight and twisted her hands together in her lap. "A very special guest. My fiancé, in fact."

Drew's eyebrows shot up. "Aren't you a little young for this? You have two years of college left."

"I know what I want, Drew. I want to marry Jerry more than I've ever wanted anything before."

"Ross Whitcomb's boy." Drew's voice was dry. "I don't believe you've had the pleasure of meeting Ross yet."

"I don't care what Jerry's father has done. I know that he served time in prison—but that has nothing to do with Jerry."

"That's true," he admitted.

Brodie pressed her advantage. "Drew, it isn't like you to form an opinion before you meet him. Jerry is determined to make his own way. He isn't going to stay in that gutter, you'll see."

"Perhaps I shall." Drew set his half-full glass back on the cart. "I'd better go change clothes so I'm prepared to meet this paragon." He was whistling as he ran up the steps.

Brodie leaned back in her chair with a sigh. The worst hurdle was past; she had broken the news without provoking Drew to an explosion. She frankly wouldn't have been surprised if he had tried to forbid her to see Jerry again. That sort of reaction would have made it a challenge to talk him around.

Perhaps, she thought, Drew would be glad to be rid of her. He'd been responsible for Brodie for more than ten years. It would be no wonder if he was anxious to wash his hands of her.

She was glad that he was being so agreeable. He couldn't have changed her mind, anyway, and it would have been difficult for everyone if he had tried. So why, she asked herself irritably, did she feel disappointed— and more than a little apprehensive?

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The conversation at dinner was cool and civil. Drew wasn't making it easy for Jerry, but neither was he using the courtroom cross-examination techniques that had driven more than one of Brodie's past boyfriends out of Safe Harbor in a cold sweat.

And Jerry was doing very well indeed, Brodie thought proudly as she dipped a whole strawberry into the neat pyramid of confectioner's sugar. He looked like the banker he might someday be, in a dark-blue pinstriped suit and discreet tie. He was looking Drew straight in the eyes and answering his questions calmly.

Drew's face, of course, never betrayed his thoughts, but Brodie thought she could see a hint of surprise in his expression.

"I'll be working at Fanning Brothers this summer," Jerry was saying. "On the manufacturing line. Though of course I'd love to get my foot in the door at management level."

Drew nodded. "That kind of experience would be helpful when you graduate. Unfortunately, positions of that sort are rare."

"How well I know, sir. But the assembly-line job will help to pay the tuition next year. The Hammonds owned that plant originally, didn't they?"

"Yes. My grandfather sold it to the Fannings, because my father was more interested in law than in producing farm equipment."

"Safe Harbor," Jerry mused, and glanced around the dining room at the sparkle of crystal and silver. "The house that tractors built." There was a note of irony in his voice.

Brodie knew what he was thinking. Built by the sweat of men who were underpaid and overworked ... She and Jerry had argued that a dozen times. He was right, as a matter of fact, but that had nothing to do with Drew. She had to step in, to prevent Drew from questioning what Jerry meant.

She looked up at the massive chandelier where hundreds of crystal prisms surrounded a gold pineapple, the symbol of hospitality, and said thoughtfully, "Actually, it was land speculation to begin with. After that, it was farm equipment, and then..."

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“Brodie,” Drew said firmly, “let’s not dissect the family fortune tonight, all right? What are you going to do with yourself this summer, my girl?”

“I thought I’d ask the boss for my old job back.”

“What if the position has been filled?” he teased.

“Come on, Drew. You know I’m the best office girl you ever hired.”

“That’s probably true,” he mused. “Very well, Bro, you have a job, whenever you want to start.”

“Next week, all right? I’ll take a few days off first. And of course I’ll have wedding plans to make,” Brodie added. “I’ll stay busy.”

Drew’s forehead wrinkled, and she held her breath for a moment. “Have you set a date?” he asked finally.

Brodie sent a triumphant look at Jerry. *See?* it said. *I told you he’d let me have whatever I wanted!*

“Soon,” Brodie said. “I can’t wait to be Mrs. Jerry Whitcomb.”

“I should think it will take a while to get ready,” Drew observed. “Perhaps the end of August?”

“I don’t want to wait that long,” Brodie wailed.

“Oliver Fanning won’t be pleased if Jerry asks for time off in the middle of the summer for a honeymoon.”

“That’s right,” Jerry agreed. “We’ll have to make do with a weekend. In any case I can’t afford much of a trip, but...”

“Maybe Drew will make that his gift to us,” Brodie suggested, and flashed her most charming smile at him.

It bounced off Drew, who said, “I’ll give it some thought.”

But Brodie wasn’t upset. “Let’s go pick out my ring tomorrow, Jerry. Now that it’s official...”

“It isn’t,” Drew said sharply. “Not till it’s been announced.”

“But, Drew!” she protested.

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He picked up her hand. “There will be no ring on this lovely finger until after the announcement is made.”

Jerry must have seen the angry color rise in Brodie’s cheeks, for he intervened. “We’ll do as Drew likes, Brodie.”

“Then at least let’s do it right away. Can we have a big party, Drew?” Suddenly Brodie’s irritation was gone. “Invite all my friends. So many of them have never met Jerry. What about Saturday night? Please, Drew? We can be ready by then, I know we can.”

“Very well. Now I’d like to talk to Jerry alone for a while—the proverbial man-to-man chat. So run along, Brodie.”

“I’ll be waiting,” she promised blithely. She dropped a kiss on Jerry’s cheek and danced out to the kitchen.

“What hit you?” Mrs. Riley asked. She was loading plates into the dishwasher.

Brodie almost told her, before she remembered her own warning. It was Drew’s job to announce it. “We’re having a party Saturday night,” she said.

The housekeeper warmed a bit. “It’ll be nice to see Safe Harbor sparkle again.”

“It always sparkles,” Brodie countered.

“Not like it does with a party. It gets kind of lonely with just Mr. Hammond here. He eats out a lot, and works all the time. The house just seems kind of bored with it all.”

Brodie was startled. She had never suspected the housekeeper of having an imagination.

“I’ll have to start polishing silver tomorrow,” Mrs. Riley said, half to herself.

“I’ll begin on the guest list right now.” Brodie reached for a notepad and sat down at the breakfast bar. She was still hard at work when Jerry came down the hall.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, darling,” he said, bending over her to put a possessive kiss on her lips. “We’ll go pick out your ring, even if you can’t wear it just yet.”

Brodie walked out to his car with him, and she was still bubbling when she came back to the kitchen a few minutes later. Mrs. Riley was standing in the

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middle of the kitchen, hands on her hips. “This is an engagement party?” she asked sharply. “You’re going to marry that young punk?”

“Jerry isn’t some kind of delinquent, Mrs. Riley,” Brodie began hotly.

Mrs. Riley cut her off in mid-sentence, shaking her head sadly. “I never thought I’d see such goings-on at Safe Harbor,” she mourned. “To think that the young lady of this house has so little opinion of herself as to get mixed up with—”

“The young lady of this house knows quite well what she wants, Mrs. Riley! And to begin with, I want silence from you—it’s none of your business whom I choose to marry!” Brodie stalked out of the room and up the stairs, her temper at white heat.

Drew was in the sitting room next to his bedroom. The room was dim, and the stereo was playing Rachmaninoff. Drew was stretched out in a chair, a magazine on his lap.

“For heaven’s sake, Drew, you’re going to blind yourself, reading in the dark this way,” Brodie said sharply and snapped a light on.

Drew sat up abruptly, running a hand absently along his jaw as if to reassure himself that he’d shaved.

“I just came in to tell you that Mrs. Riley is getting awfully impudent. She seems to think that I’m crazy to marry Jerry.”

“She may have community support.”

“You of all people should understand, Drew. All men are created equal, you know.” Brodie’s tone was sarcastic.

“But sometimes they don’t stay that way. You’ve been raised in luxury, Brodie. Just how do you think you and Jerry are going to live for two years till he’s self-supporting?”

“We’ll manage. I was meaning to ask you about something, Drew.” She curled up in the chair opposite his. “We’ve talked before about my college education, and you know that I think it’s a waste of time for me. The things I want to do I can’t learn in school. I’ve had all the singing lessons I can absorb. It’s time for me to get out and perform and see what I can do.”

“Absolutely not true. Some of the best singers in the world take lessons every

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day. But something tells me that isn't the bottom line."

"You're right. I know what these two years of college have cost you, Drew. And I know that you want me to go on." She took a deep breath. "So if you're going to spend the money, anyway, why not spend it on someone who's worth it? Instead of paying my tuition next year, will you pay Jerry's?"

"No." There was not an instant of hesitation.

It took Brodie by surprise. "But Drew..."

"I'm willing to invest in your future, Brodie. Jerry hasn't shown me anything yet that convinces me to place my bets on him."

"But Jerry *is* my future, Drew! His education will mean security for me."

He shrugged. "So will yours. And if your marriage breaks up..."

"It won't break up, Drew. I won't let it."

"Marriage licenses don't come with guarantees, Bro. Every divorce I handle is a couple that intended to make it till death us do part." He looked her over unemotionally. "Did Jerry ask you to do this?"

"No! He wouldn't ask for anything for himself. He doesn't even know I was thinking about it." There was a long silence, then she asked hesitantly, "Will you do it?"

"In words of one syllable, Brodie—no, I won't. I will give you an engagement party and a wedding and a gift of some sort. It will not be the honeymoon, by the way." He broke off suddenly, shook his head, and ran a hand through his hair to the nape of his neck, as if it was suddenly hurting. "I have a moral obligation to your father and mine. But more than that I will not do. Once you're married, you aren't my responsibility any more, Brodie."

She was stunned. This wasn't the uncle who had always indulged her whims, the big brother who had petted and spoiled her. "I thought—after we were married..." She stopped and tried again. "There isn't any sense in us renting an apartment for a few weeks. I thought perhaps we could..."

"Live here at Safe Harbor?" His smile was twisted. "No, Brodie. Once you leave this house as Mrs. Whitcomb, you will come back only by invitation."

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Anger swept over her, then. “You’re trying to make me back down!” she cried. “You’re trying to break us apart!”

“Not I. I know how foolish that would be. I’m just presenting the facts, Brodie, so that your decision is made with full knowledge of the consequences.”

She stormed across the room and turned at the door. “Well, it isn’t going to work, Drew. I’ll marry whom I please, when I please. It’s none of your damn business!”

“That’s right,” he said calmly. “You’re legally an adult now. You have every right to make your own mistakes. But tell me, Brodie, how are you going to eat next year?”

“I’ll find a job,” she said. “We can do it. Hamburger tastes just fine when you eat it with someone you love.”

Drew’s eyes went back to his magazine, and Rachmaninoff blasted forth in a wild Slavic dance. “How very young you are,” he said. “How very, very innocent.” Somehow, in that vibrant voice that could make a courtroom echo when he chose, it sounded like a curse.