

A perfect  
festive romance!

Christmas  
at  
Cedarwood  
Lodge



REBECCA RAISIN

Rebecca Raisin

**Christmas At Cedarwood Lodge**

«HarperCollins»

## **Raisin R.**

Christmas At Cedarwood Lodge / R. Raisin — «HarperCollins»,

Includes bonus material! This winter it's time to fall in love at Cedarwood Lodge... After years of dreaming, Clio Winters is finally fulfilling her childhood dream of renovating the gorgeous old Cedarwood Lodge in Evergreen and turning it into the perfect destination for celebrations, weddings and extravagant birthday parties. The huge property used to be a bustling holiday camp, now Clio wants to bring it back to its halcyon days – which will be a lot of hard work! Returning back to the small town of her youth she's glad to have one of her best friends still around to lean on, Micah who is just as solid as he used to be. But with her own secrets pushing her to run from her glamorous life in New York, she'll have to tread carefully, especially when the far-too-handsome-for-his-own-good contractor, Kai, shows up on her doorstep... Sure she's here in Evergreen to change her life, but there is no way she's falling in love! Previously published as Celebrations & Confetti, Brides & Bouquets, Midnight & Mistletoe.

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*Christmas at Cedarwood Lodge* is a delectable romance following Clio Winters' journey back to her hometown of Evergreen.

Praise for REBECCA RAISIN

'This novel is a love letter to Paris, and even more so a love letter to books; it is absolutely a must-read book for book lovers.' Rather Too Fond of Books, *The Little Bookshop on the Seine*

'Drama and romance, but most of all it's got a more general sweetness and love and happiness that is often hard to find these days.' Love Reading Romance, *A Gingerbread Café Christmas*

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**Christmas at Cedarwood Lodge**

Rebecca Raisin



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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**REBECCA RAISIN**

is a true bibliophile. This love of books morphed into the desire to write them. She's been widely published in various short-story anthologies, and in fiction magazines, and is now focusing on writing romance. The only downfall about writing about gorgeous men who have brains as well as brawn is falling in love with them – just as well they're fictional. Rebecca aims to write characters you can see yourself being friends with. People with big hearts who care about relationships, and, most importantly, believe in true, once-in-a-lifetime love.

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Thank you to my bookish pals for your friendship.

Writing would be a lonely job without you.

*For Marie Webdale whose friendship spans the oceans that separate us*

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Christmas at Cedarwood Lodge: Five Years Later

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[Chapter One](#)

Staring up at the imposing structure with its weathered façade, I had a terrible premonition that I'd made a mistake. A huge one. But, I reasoned, clawing back rising panic, I had *always* wanted to

buy the hundred-year-old abandoned lodge. It had been put up for sale recently, and I'd jumped at the chance. The old place had good sturdy bones; it was solid, despite the desertion of its caretakers eons ago.

Even though I'd always dreamed about owning Cedarwood Lodge I hadn't expected for it to happen so soon. But it had, and I'd fallen madly in love with the place as it stood, shutters broken, doors in need of paint, ivy creeping through broken panes of glass, and cascading roses growing wild and free around the porch balustrades. Here was a place untouched for decades and I had a chance to bring it back to its former glory.

The September sky shifted from foggy wisps of gray to country blue as dawn arrived in the small New Hampshire town of Evergreen. A sputtering car swung into the long, winding driveway and I turned to watch my oldest friend, Micah, leap from his battered hatchback.

We'd been best friends since childhood and, though we'd drifted apart as adults, he was the first person I called when I bought Cedarwood Lodge – I offered him the job of maintenance manager, which he'd accepted with a *'Hell, yeah.'*

"You look exactly the same, Micah," I said, reaching up for a hug. "You haven't aged a bit." He'd filled out, no longer the lanky teenager I'd left behind, but aside from that he was the same old Micah with the same affable smile.

"It's the daily hikes up the bluff. That thin mountain air does wonders for my skin." He wagged his eyebrows. "We've got a lot of catching up to do. I almost fell over when you called. Lucky for you I was between jobs..."

"Lucky for me, all right."

I couldn't believe it'd been so long – when was the last time we had properly caught up? Five years ago, six? Time had ticked by so fast while I'd been away.

"You're different," he said, gesturing to my outfit and my usual flyaway curls restrained with a clip. "A little more polished."

I grinned. "Denim cut-offs and messy hair didn't quite cut it in Manhattan."

"What? Crazy city folk." He clucked his tongue.

"Right?" I joked. "How's Veronica?" I expected him to gush about his long-term girlfriend. Instead, his lips turned down for the briefest second, before he masked it with a smile.

"Veronica? There's a blast from the past. I haven't seen her for two and a bit years now. She was like you, Clio, left town and didn't look back."

Surprise knocked me sideways that she'd left town, left Micah.

"Sorry, Micah. I thought..." *Way to go, Clio!*

He touched my shoulder, giving me time to wrench the metaphorical foot from my mouth. "It's OK." He let out a half-laugh. "One day she just decided this place was too small for her big dreams. This town, it isn't for everyone."

An awkward silence hung between us. What kind of friend had I been to him? If I'd known I would have come home for a visit to comfort him, make sure he was OK, like he would have done for me. Shame colored my cheeks, because I realized if he had called me I probably would have played the *too busy* card.

I knew Micah inside out – or at least I had at one point in my life – and I sensed he was downplaying the split. But I could see by the set of his jaw that the conversation was over. A part of me deflated – if they couldn't make it, what hope did any of us have? They'd been *the* perfect couple.

I tried desperately to think of a subject that would get us back on an even keel. "Look at that view, Micah. Tell me I'm not imagining it – this place *is* magical, right?"

"Magic to its very core." He flashed a grin, reminding me of the playful guy he'd been in high school. The one who transcended cliques and was friends with everyone. "And soon you'll have the banging of hammers and the whine of drills to contend with, so soak up the serenity while you can."

Work was set to start today – with plumbers, electricians, glaziers and carpenters arriving. Once they'd completed their jobs, painters would come in to pretty the place up. A project manager called Kai would be here soon to oversee it all while I concentrated on building the business and event side of things. Micah would float between us all and make sure things ran smoothly.

“Who'd have thought I'd end up back here, the proud and slightly nervous owner of Cedarwood Lodge?” I scrunched up my nose, my earlier doubts creeping back in. What had I done? I planned parties, not renovations! I hired places for events, I didn't buy them! Sometimes my audacity at buying Cedarwood Lodge scared me silly. It was such a huge gamble.

With a smile Micah said softly, “Never in a million years would I have thought you'd come back from the bright lights of the big city. Seems once people get a taste for it, Evergreen pales into insignificance. But I'm so glad you did. Remember when we were kids and hung out here? Even back then you talked about the parties you'd host, colors you'd paint the place. Ten years old and you predicted Cedarwood would be yours, *and* you were right.”

The memories brought out a rash of goose bumps.

Cedarwood had been our own private playground. We had run breathless through the overgrown grounds, peeked into dusty windows and imagined the scenes that might have taken place there before it was abandoned.

The lodge had been closed ever since we could remember, and though stories had been whispered around town about the previous owners, we'd been too young to understand.

“It feels good to be home,” I said, meaning it. At that moment Manhattan seemed light years away. “I didn't realize how much I missed you until I saw your goofy face.”

“Oh, that hurt, that hurt a lot. *Goofy*? Don't think that just because *you've* come back all New York-ified that I've forgotten the girl with the uneven pigtails and mouth full of metal? The one who wore leg warmers as a fashion statement!” He raised a brow, challenging me.

I stifled a laugh. He was right. I had been a fashion *don't* when I was a teenager, but things quickly changed when I met Amory – my best friend in New York – who showed me how to dress to impress.

Would I regress, being back home? Go back to sweats and trainers? In my tailored suits and perilously high heels, I felt as though I had slipped on a different persona.

In the so-called ‘city that never sleeps’ it had been crucial to be assertive, ambitious, and one step ahead of the game. It had taken me years to build up my client list and I'd worked so damn hard for it. Maybe the old adage was true: you can take the girl out of Evergreen but you can't take Evergreen out of the girl, because here I was, home again.

I shielded my eyes from the rising sun. In the distance the mountain range was a riot of autumnal color: reds, ochres, dusty orange, and saffron yellow – the leaves on the hardwood trees clinging on for one more day.

“I hope I don't mess things up, Micah. This is my last chance. So many things could go wrong,” I said seriously. I could lose everything. The place could remain silent, might never be filled with the tapping of high-heel shoes, the popping of champagne corks and peals of laughter. I couldn't go back to Manhattan; that door was firmly closed. “What if, after all the work is done, no one hires the place?”

“Hey...” he said, gently rubbing my arm. “That's not the Clio I know. Where's the girl who left town screeching about setting the world ablaze?” He gave me a playful shove. “Where's she gone?”

Up until a few months ago I'd been brimming with confidence, sure of my place in the world. But then I'd messed up – been too honest with a bride, misunderstanding her nerves for something else entirely. It had shaken me up, and made me question myself and my ambitions. Maybe I'd just been lucky before, but that bride kicked my legs out from under me, and I hadn't quite managed to get back up yet.

“She's. Right. Here.” I rallied, pasting on a smile.

“Is that supposed to be a smile or a grimace?”

I flashed a sillier grin, reverting back to my teenage self and finding it refreshing. “God, it’s good to see you, Micah.” He was the one person I could be myself with. There was no point pretending because he knew the real me.

“Evergreen was never quite the same without you.”

During our teenage years we’d spent weekends dreaming of a life outside of here. I guess we’d always thought the grass was greener elsewhere and, for a small-town girl, it was. It was so damn green it glowed, and I wished things had turned out differently there. At least I had Cedarwood as a consolation prize.

Micah grinned. “Hey...” He checked his watch. “Where’s your mom? I thought she’d be here.”

I shrugged. “I have no idea. When I rang again she made some flimsy excuse. I honestly thought she’d be bursting to see the inside of the lodge after all these years. But I guess she’ll get here when she gets here.”

My first day back in Evergreen I had driven straight to Mom’s place to surprise her with the news about buying Cedarwood Lodge. It had been almost impossible to keep it secret but I’d wanted to tell her face to face and had guilelessly expected shrieks of joy. Instead she paled to a ghostly white, as if I had told her something shocking. We’d never been super-close, but still, I’d expected a smile, a word of encouragement, a hug that said *welcome home*.

Up until last winter Mom had owned an inn in the center of Evergreen, so I’d also been hoping for a bit of guidance. In my heart of hearts I hoped buying the lodge would bring us closer together, but I guessed hoping didn’t make it so.

Micah smiled but it didn’t reach his eyes. “She’s probably just tying things up so she can concentrate properly once she gets here.” He pulled me into one of his breath-stealing bear hugs to comfort me, because we both knew it was more than that.

“Yeah,” I said. Mom was retired now, so it wasn’t as if she had anything keeping her busy per se. Maybe she just needed to get used to the idea that her taking-the-world-by-storm daughter was back home... *without* actually having taken the world by storm. Was she disappointed in me? It was hard to tell.

“First things first,” Micah said, dragging me back to reality. “Let’s check out your bedroom and see if I can make it a little more comfortable like you asked.”

Stepping into the warmth of the lodge, I snuck a glance over my shoulder to watch Micah’s reaction, and sure enough he was wide-eyed, just like I’d been at seeing the place for the first time. Faded sunlight caught the crystals in the chandeliers and cast prisms of color around the room. I breathed in the scent of long-forgotten memories before leading Micah up the spiral stairs to the suite that was to be my home for the foreseeable future.

I swung open the heavy oak door. The suite needed a little TLC, though the stone fireplace and view to the mountains made up for it.

“Right,” he said, surveying the scene. “This shouldn’t take too long; just needs a few nips and tucks and a lick of paint here and there.”

I smiled at Micah’s assurances that it wasn’t a big job, as I was eager to make the suite my own, and snuggle in bed with the mountains a stunning backdrop to my dreams. In the basement I’d found an antique bed with an elaborate bedhead, which I’d repainted champagne-white. Dragging it upstairs had been a feat, but one I managed with only a few scrapes and bruises. Once the room had a facelift with paint, some luxurious bedding, and new décor, it would feel more like me, more like home.

He opened the creaky bathroom door, exposing the old claw-foot tub and a marble vanity – the perfect room to relax in with a book and a rose-scented bubble bath after a long day.

“I can fix the broken tiles, and redo the grout.”

I nodded eagerly. While the lodge was ancient, the bathrooms were still functional, and would only need some modern accoutrements to get them up to code. Some proper exhaust fans, and new lighting, maybe heat lights for winter... my list kept on growing. "Great!"

I grabbed Micah's arm, eager to show him the view from the landing at the top of the stairs and ask his advice on what to do with the space. The mountain range was visible from every window on the east side of the lodge and I wanted people to be able to soak it up in comfort. The reflection of the trees shimmered on the surface of the lake, and it was easy to lose an hour staring outside at such elemental beauty – it was spellbinding.

Our tour was interrupted by the rumble of engines roaring along the main road.

"Can you hear that?" I asked, dropping his arm and dashing closer to the window to get a glimpse of them arriving.

"That, my friend, is the sound of progress. Time to get your overalls on, Clio!" He gave my high heels a pointed look and was rewarded with an eye-roll. "Let's meet them out front!"

We flew down the stairs and on to the porch to watch the procession arrive. Cars and trucks turned into the driveway in convoy. Some were loaded with supplies, others were bare except for hard-hatted drivers with determined expressions.

Anticipation sizzled through me. It was really happening! This beautiful, timeworn lodge was about to be transformed back into its glorious self.

My old life was behind me. Here – in the town where I grew up, in the abandoned lodge I'd played by as a child – people would fall in love, they'd marry, they'd have families, and then they'd return to Cedarwood and celebrate once more...

## Chapter Two

A few weeks later, ignoring a head throb from the ever-present noise, I gave myself a silent pep talk. *You can do this! All you have to do is paint them a charming picture of what will be.* I buttoned up my navy-blue blazer, straightened the seam of my crisp linen trousers and slipped on red heels, the ones Micah teased me relentlessly over.

With the buzz of a drill nearby, I picked up my paperwork and iPad, which had a 3D presentation loaded and ready to play. Eventually I'd have an office in a suite off the lobby, but right now it was still too frenetic with workers for me to concentrate, so in the interim I'd set up a temporary office in the front parlor, a room once used for pre-dinner aperitifs.

The couple's car churned up the gravel and my heart rate increased. They'd called the night before and enquired about hiring the ballroom for their fiftieth wedding anniversary. It had taken all of my might to keep my voice level and act like I'd hired out the ballroom a hundred times already. But it boded well, having interest in Cedarwood at this early stage.

I peeked out of the newly replaced window and watched Edgar help his wife Imelda into a wheelchair. *Damn it!* There were no ramps in place. I made a mental note to check we had mobility aids on the list. Cedarwood had to be accessible to everyone.

With a broad smile in place, I hurried outside to greet them.

"Welcome to Cedarwood!" I said, too brightly, my nerves jangling to the surface. I was half-jogging toward them, mentally assessing the area for a plank of wood, or something to use as a ramp... when the heel of my stiletto got caught in a hole in the deck. With a calm smile that belied the drumming of my heart, I attempted to wrench my heel out, trying to appear casual, but it wouldn't budge. *Damn it!* With one last heave, the heel came free but momentum sent me flying forward with a screech. *Oh, God!* I flew precariously into the air, taking great leaps to avoid a tray of paint and a scattering of drill bits. *Please,* I silently willed the universe, *don't let me upend the paint all over her!* With a hop, skip, and a jump to avoid everything, I ended up on my knees by the woman's lap, my pulse thrumming in my ears.

Note to self: make sure walkways are cleared at all times.

Sweat broke out on my forehead despite the chilly autumn day. Red-faced and righting myself, I held out a hand and said breezily, “I’m Clio. And as you can see, I’ve been falling over myself to meet you.” *Kill me.* Thank God I hadn’t taken her out. I could already imagine the story getting Chinese-whispered around town: *Did you hear Clio Winters tried to murder her first client, and it was little old Imelda no less!*

Imelda chuckled and shook my hand. “Aren’t you as pretty as a picture? I hope you didn’t ruin those heels. Do you think they come in my size? My life flashed before my eyes but all I could think was, I need a pair of those dancing shoes for the party...” Her eyes twinkled mischievously.

Admonishing myself silently for being a klutz, I dared a quick peek at my trousers; they had somehow remained intact – however, from the pain radiating upwards, my knees hadn’t fared as well. “I’m sure they’d have your size and I think the leopard-print ones would suit you...”

She cocked her head as if contemplating. “I might just have to find some for the party. What do you say, Edgar?” She craned her neck and smiled benignly at her husband.

“They most certainly *look* like dancing shoes... Could be a new type of workboot, but what would I know?” He glanced at the hole in the deck and then my heels, and raised his eyes to the heavens. I tried to hide a smile and remain professional, but a giggle escaped. It couldn’t be helped – I liked them both instantly.

I stepped forward and shook Edgar’s hand. The speech I’d prepared had flown straight out of my head as I’d toppled into Imelda’s personal space, but I sensed my spiel would have been too formal, too stuffy for these people. Game face on, I cleared my throat and tried to regroup.

Right. *Explain yourself, and don’t fall over!* “As you can see, Cedarwood is getting a bit of a makeover. It’s a work site at the moment, but soon...”

“It’s just as gorgeous as ever,” Imelda said, her eyes shining. “Can we take a look through?”

“It’s a little noisy what with the...”

“Noise schmoise,” she said, waving me away. “We don’t mind that, do we Edgar?”

I gulped. What if something fell on them, or Edgar tripped and broke a leg? I’d planned on showing them the ballroom from the adjoining outdoor deck and showing my presentation. Not opening myself up for a health and safety lawsuit on the first day.

“We’re as tough as old boots, even if we look a little fragile. Don’t you worry about us,” Imelda said.

If we walked slowly, and carefully, surely it would be OK for a few minutes? Though I’d managed to fall over already...

“So sorry that we’re not fully equipped at the moment. Let me help you lift the chair,” I said, praying I didn’t get a finger caught in the wheel spokes and drop her, or something equally idiotic.

“Help with the chair would be mighty kind,” Edgar said, moving to one side while I took the other. We hefted the surprisingly light Imelda up.

With my back holding open the oak door, Edgar wheeled Imelda into the lobby, the scent of wet paint heavy in the air. Drop sheets were scattered across the floor to catch spills and the sounds of work echoed around the lodge.

“It might look like a big mess at the moment, but trust me, there’s a method to the madness. We have a strict schedule in place.” It was hard to envisage what the lodge *would* look like with groups of laborers in clusters, drilling, hammering, filing, and edging. Tools were scattered, buckets were littered here and there. Bags of rubbish sat awaiting removal. The couple followed my noisy tread, the wood underfoot making a weird kind of song depending on where we stepped. *Squeak, ping, pop, ahh.*

Imelda shook her head as if she was mesmerized. “I’m sure you’ve got a handle on it all.” We continued through the expanse of the lobby with its thick American oak pillars, and dusty chandeliers swaying in the breeze, their crystals clinking gently like a song, prisms of colored light dancing on the walls. The mantle of the stone fireplace was missing and it needed a little love, but a fire crackled in the grate, adding to the ambience.

Firelight flickered across the room. Even in its disorderly state the lodge radiated a type of warmth, a feeling of relaxation and expectation of what might be...

“As you can see, I’m trying to keep as much of it original as I can.” I wanted the lodge to keep its old-world charm. “The overall look will remain as it was all those years ago.”

“That’s music to my ears,” Imelda said, beaming. “We worried the lodge might’ve been purchased by a huge consortium and turned into some modern monolith. I’m so glad that’s not the case.”

We continued to a small salon where I narrowly avoided kicking over a bucketful of cleaning equipment. The room was musty, with old brocade curtains clinging to their rusty rails. “Edgar, don’t you remember, we used to play charades in here,” Imelda said, reaching up to grasp her husband’s hand.

“You’ve stayed here before?” I asked, a shiver of excitement running through me. They’d stayed at Cedarwood in its heyday? No one I’d known had actually been *inside* the lodge, as it had been closed for so long.

Edgar turned Imelda’s chair to face me. “We got married here,” she said dreamily.

I gasped. “You did? That’s incredible!” No wonder they’d been so eager to see the place as it was – warts and all – and could imagine what it would look like in the future.

Her face broke into a smile and I could see the bright-eyed young girl she’d been. “Coming up to fifty years ago I was a blushing bride of twenty-five years old. Edgar was twenty-six. We found each other late in life, or what was deemed late back then. All our friends were already married and had a bunch of babies. We fell in love but there were only a few weeks before Edgar was shipped off to the war.”

“I can’t believe this!” My pulse thrummed, knowing their story ended in Happy Ever After, because here they stood. “What a story, and to have you return to the lodge...” I wanted to hug them, but held myself in check. “How long were you away, Edgar?” I asked, thinking of the young man – as he had been then – being thrust into such a dangerous wartime situation.

He gave Imelda a meaningful glance and said, “Two years, four months, and one day.” He blushed. “Or thereabouts. Thankfully, or not so thankfully depending how you see it, I was shot in the foot and sent home. Never ended up making it back to my platoon, though...”

A ray of sunlight landed on Imelda like a soft spotlight. “Yes, I was lucky and got to keep him safe at home with me.”

They recollected the war, and how they’d missed each other fiercely for the two and a bit years he was away. They talked about the letters they wrote and all the promises they vowed to keep as soon as he returned home.

“Did you keep those promises?” I asked.

“We did,” he said. “You just don’t have an inkling when you’re young how fast those years flick by. Though I’m sure there’ve been plenty of days Imelda has wanted to walk off into the sunset with someone else,” he laughed.

Imelda considered it. “Once or twice I wanted to put your head in the oven, I can’t lie.”

He nodded. “See? Luckily our oven is electric. And we made it through fifty years with lots of talking, lots of *communicating* as you young folks call it.” He chortled. “When we heard this place had itself a new owner, we knew it was a chance to throw one hell of a party. We like the idea of coming back to where we began.”

They exchanged a glance, a private message in their rheumy eyes. Whatever happened in my life, I vowed right then to wait for the perfect man. I wouldn’t compromise. I wanted the fairy tale that I saw before me. Even if I ran into my old gang of friends in Evergreen and was the only one still single, still utterly without *The One* at thirty-three. Now was not the time to dwell on it. It didn’t matter. Love couldn’t be rushed. *Focus, Clio, this isn’t about you.*

“I promise if you have the party at Cedarwood there’ll be lots of celebrations, and confetti. It will be an ode to your life together, the love you share. I’ll make it as special as it so deserves to be.”

Imelda gestured for me to lean close and gave me a tight hug. “What do you mean *if*... We came here to tell you to get the ball rolling. We aren’t spring chickens any more. The only problem I envisage is time. You see, we want to celebrate on our wedding day. Makes sense of course, but that’s only six weeks away... Do you think you can do it?” She gazed around the lodge, like she was imagining the place as it once was.

Could we get the ballroom and entrance done in six short weeks? There was the garden to consider, guest bathrooms, safety measures... But their faces – they looked so awed by the lodge, how could I say no? “Sure,” I said, voice brimming with confidence for the first time since I’d arrived. “We can do it.”

She gave me a grateful smile. “I’d better find those high heels then. Maybe I’ll get the leopard-print *and* the red. You just never know when a gal might need a pair of fancy shoes.”

“It pays to be organized.” I winked. “And I’m truly honored you’re going to have the party here.” My mind spun with ideas, questions, solutions, and we hadn’t even started yet.

“It’s like the circle of life. We started here, and it will end here...” Imelda was a romantic, and I sensed a like-minded soul.

I said, “Would you like to continue to the ballroom?”

Edgar pushed the wheelchair slowly forward. “Sure, let’s see it.”

Imelda smiled, and fussed with a rug on her lap. “If I close my eyes I can still recall the excitement in that young girl’s heart, feel the butterflies floating in her belly at the thought of how that handsome young man was going to be her husband. I really didn’t believe you’d show up, Edgar. Isn’t that the silliest thing?”

Edgar went to reply but stopped as Imelda’s hand went to her throat, and her face paled. She let out a small groan, and scrunched her eyes closed.

I dropped to my knees and gazed into her face, but her eyes stayed tightly shut, screwed up in pain. “Imelda? Are you OK?” Panic seized me, but Edgar appeared resigned but calm.

Edgar rubbed her shoulder. “She’s OK. She’ll be right in a moment.” His voice was soft with acceptance at whatever it was causing her pain. He opened a bag hanging on the back of the wheelchair and rummaged around, taking out a pillbox and a bottle of water. “We fought a war, financial troubles, and everything in between, but we can’t fight time,” he said, sadly.

It was a full minute before Imelda returned to us, “Sorry,” she said, giving my hand a pat. “Another spell, I take it?”

Edgar stooped forward and handed her two pills and the bottle of water. She took them with trembling hands and drank, before saying, “The mind is willing, but the body just won’t listen sometimes. Don’t you worry, pet. It’s OK. Nothing is going to stop me from having a party at Cedarwood Lodge. Nothing.” She stuck her chin forward, resolute.

Once Imelda’s color returned to normal they peeked into the ballroom with cries of delight. “I’m so glad you’re not fussing with it,” she said. “It’s like something out of an F. Scott Fitzgerald novel.”

“Isn’t it?” I said, her description apt. “Have you thought about themes, colors? Cuisines? I can show you—”

She cut me off. “You’re the expert. All I ask is that the room is bright and cheerful; think colorful bunting, and streamers cascading down. I know it doesn’t sound like much, but I’d love for it to look just like we had it all those years ago.”

An hour later, after firming up more details, we said our goodbyes and I told them to visit any time so they could see the lodge being shaped back into the beauty of its halcyon days.

Hopefully it would return them to their wedding night and their hearts and souls would be young again, with their whole lives together ahead of them.

I couldn't wait to call my best friend, Amory, and tell her every little thing. And to see if my name was still making the gossip page...

### Chapter Three

"Clio, they sound amazing! So they've booked the party?" Amory shrieked as I sat down with a laugh at my desk, ignoring piles of invoices that needed to be paid and filed away.

"They did! And get this: they didn't want to see color swatches and menus, or a song list. They said I was the expert and just to make it bright and colorful. Only kicker is I have to get everything finished and organized in six weeks."

"You can do it, that's what you're good at. Deadlines." She let out a laugh. "You lucky thing not having to consult with them every five minutes – why can't they all be like that?"

Our clients in New York were pernickety to say the least. Bridezillas were plentiful, and the women weren't opposed to throwing tantrums a five-year-old would be proud of, but I always rolled with it. It came with the territory to receive phone calls at two a.m. from a blushing bride-to-be, sobbing about centerpieces or tiaras. That's what separated the good party planners from the bad. My job was to say *yes*, always.

I could fix anything, especially under pressure.

But then I had opened my big mouth.

Shaking myself out of reverie I said, "I'm sure the next clients won't be so easy." In the background phones buzzed and drawers banged. Office life. I felt a pang for it. We lapsed into silence as I debated whether to ask.

"Darling, about..." She hesitated and I steeled myself. Amory always knew what I was thinking without me having to say a word.

"Don't tell me. They're still talking about it? Still?" It had been months. Months since I'd packed up my desk and hidden in my shoebox-sized apartment until the sale of Cedarwood had settled. Surely they'd moved on to newer scandals by now? I'd been avoiding the online gossip sites for months in case I saw my own name trapped in a headline once more.

The previous headlines were still burned into my retinas: *Party planner to the A-listers tells reality-star bride to run from celebrity groom!*

Amory let out a nervous laugh. "Well..."

I groaned and cupped my face. "Tell me. I can handle it."

She took an audible intake of breath before launching into the whole sorry story. "It seems it's ramping up. She's saying you had a thing for the groom, and that's why you did what you did. Because you were after him and his... money."

I let out a squeal of protest. "*She didn't!*"

"She did."

"But that's not true!" I wailed. Outside the sun sank low, coloring the sky saffron.

Her voice came back a hissed whisper. "*I know it's not true. But you've really underestimated her. She's set on ruining your reputation to save hers.*"

"But my reputation is *already* ruined! Why does she have to continue with it?" The whole sordid thing was so unfair, and I kicked myself for believing in the blushing bride-to-be when she'd poured her heart out to me minutes before she was supposed to walk down the aisle. I'd been appalled by her confession – how could she marry someone she didn't love when her heart belonged to another? With the clock ticking, I'd advised her to run, get out of that church before she made a huge mistake, because I believed her tale of woe and didn't want to see her waste her life with the wrong man! And it had turned out to be the stupidest thing I'd ever done.

Really, I should have known. It was Dealing with Brides 101. Never, *ever* advise them. Wedding-day jitters and cold feet can make a person say the craziest things. It was my job to reassure them, not tell them to run! And these were not your average Manhattanites. He was a millionaire movie star, for God's sake.

“She’s vindictive.”

“I can understand why she’d try and save face. What she told me was pretty damning, but to turn it around like that...” I was bewildered by it. I had only met the groom twice and one of those times was on the aborted wedding day when I had to tell him she’d taken flight. *Because of my advice... stupid, stupid, stupid.*

Amory clucked her tongue. “It’s a simple case of *you know too much*. She’s got to make you the villain, so nothing rubs off on her. It wouldn’t take a genius to unearth her real story... but it’s juicier with you cast as the crazed, infatuated wedding planner.”

It was so damn ridiculous I could only sigh. Something like this would only happen in New York. “She’s so bloody cunning. I wish I’d shared my side of the story earlier. But it’s too late, no one would believe me now.”

“She’s called Flirty McFlirtison for a reason,” Amory said sadly.

I couldn’t help but giggle. Amory had disliked the reality-star bride Monica intensely and given her the nickname. It had been tricky to mask our true feelings around her because she’d been the client from hell, unless a man happened to walk by, and then she’d bat her lashes, leaving us shaking our heads.

I should have known never to trust her. The day after the wedding, Flirty started doing some major damage control and piling the blame on me. Once the news broke, no bride would go near me with a ten-foot pole.

“Jesus, Amory, I thought it would’ve all blown over now,” I said, slumping in my chair and gazing out at the beautiful explosion of color as the sun sank below the mountains.

“Here’s an interesting twist... it’s come out that he had her sign a watertight pre-nup the night *before* the wedding, so that’s why she did a runner. You were just the perfect scapegoat. She’s denying that, of course.”

I groaned. “Celebrities. I will never understand them.”

Still, even after all the A-list weddings I’d planned, I believed true love conquered all. Nothing would take away the pleasure I got out of organizing nuptials between two people who were *truly* smitten, even if they were on the never-heard-of-you list. Monica was driven by greed – she was just a reality-TV starlet whose show was cancelled after one season, but she still craved the limelight and would do anything she could to get tabloid attention. I’d been unlucky to get caught up in her schemes.

“Celebrities,” she agreed. “You don’t know how lucky you are, Clio. Granted, it wasn’t an ideal exit from the agency, but look where it’s taken you! I’m *wildly* envious. In time you’ll see it was the best decision you’ve ever made, and you’ll think of us scrabbling after every high-profile party with pity.”

This was Amory’s way, to line every cloud in silver. “I hope you’re right. Otherwise I’ve bought a lodge on a whim because of what happened. In Evergreen. A town with a population of five hundred and three people!”

“That’s the spirit!” she shouted, and I could just see her swinging in her office chair, tapping her pen, as if I was sitting across from her. “Now turn off Bonnie Tyler, please – I can almost hear your sobs from here. Leave Bonnie for the broken-hearted. And get back to work. You’re the boss now, darling, so square those shoulders and own it.”

She knew me so well, even what my choice of music meant.

Once I hung up, I turned the volume up and listened to Bonnie’s gravelly voice, not sobbing... not quite.

After all, what did *I* have to cry about? My reputation in New York was ruined. I’d invested every last dollar into a rundown lodge in a small town. There was nothing to worry about!

When I did something, like mess up my life, I did it right. And that included listening to music and crying like it was an Olympic sport. Who cared if everyone was saying I loved some random celebrity and had ruined his marriage? It would be yesterday’s news eventually, right? And being

blacklisted by every New York event-planning agency? Pffft. Big deal. I'd make my own success. In a town with five-oh-three people. Easy.

Oh, God, what had I done?

#### Chapter Four

"Is that Kai?" Micah asked, as we watched the new arrival jump down as deftly as a dancer from the cab of his truck. Even in the shadows, Kai stood out – with his wavy, sun-bleached hair and surfer's body. I hadn't expected... that. Builders were weathered, ruddy men who wore expressions of weariness from overwork, didn't they? Kai looked more like a pro surfer than someone who did manual labor. Golly, if Amory was here she'd be elbowing me forward by now.

"Yes, Kai, the project manager," I stage-whispered. "He had to finish up his last contract but he's here for good now... well, at least until the lodge is done." I adopted a disinterested expression and hoped Micah hadn't caught my moment of surprise when I clapped eyes on Kai.

Micah smiled, and waggled his brows, insinuating something untoward.

"And what does that eyebrow jiggle mean?" I asked, crossing my arms and staring him down. Even after all these years I could still interpret Micah's body language, though it wasn't hard when he was being so obvious about it.

"It *means* you hired some surfer god and..."

I poked him in the ribs to be quiet and hissed, "Oh, jeez, Micah, I didn't know he was..." What was he? "...He was... a surfer," I finished lamely, watching Kai, who was rummaging in his truck for something.

He did resemble the perfect leading man in a romantic comedy, a polar opposite to the heroine... wait, what was I even thinking? Did I picture myself as the leading lady? Ridiculous! My heart was a no-go zone for the foreseeable future. My one true love at this point had to be Cedarwood Lodge.

"We've only spoken on the phone. And, for the record, I wouldn't date anyone who worked here out of principle." There, that sounded believable.

Micah went to retort but was called over by one of the painters. "Saved by the bell," he joked before jogging off.

"Morning," I said to Kai, hoping I wasn't blushing after Micah practically accused me of hiring someone for their looks! It was absurd. But those eyes... mesmerizing.

"Hey," he responded with a bright smile. His blond hair was mussed, windblown.

I shaded my face as the fall sun climbed higher and warmth seeped into my bones. Kai's arrival meant I could knuckle down and focus on building marketing campaigns and our social media pages, spreading the word about the lodge while he instructed the team.

"You look familiar," he said, narrowing his eyes. "I know we've had a hundred conversations on the phone, but..." He surveyed me, and I blushed under his scrutiny. Damn it to hell and back. Had he read about me in the paper or on one of those dodgy online gossip sites?

I gritted my teeth so tight I almost gave myself lockjaw. Managing to prise my mouth open a notch I said, as casually as I could, "Where did you say your last job was?"

*Please, do not say New York or any of its boroughs!*

He cocked his head, scrutinizing me as if we were long-lost cousins or something. "Georgia."

I almost collapsed in relief. "Georgia. I hear it's pretty this time of year."

"It's pretty," he agreed. "But not as pretty as here." He stretched and his shirt rode up, exposing toned, tanned skin. I tried so hard not to eye the ripple of his muscles, or imagine how they'd feel under my hand. I wasn't used to seeing men *sans* suits, and it gave me a jolt. Surely, as a boss, I shouldn't even be thinking in such a way? But I was merely admiring the newcomer for his sporting prowess. Over the phone I'd got to know him – he was one of those keen athletic types. Surfing and hiking and all the exercise he did sculpted him, and we all knew a healthy body led to a healthy mind. I made a promise to myself to run some laps of the lodge later. It wouldn't hurt to get in shape, would it?

“So,” I said, businesslike, casting my gaze away from his exposed skin and back to his face. “I’ll show you where you can stash your things.”

“Perfect.” He bent to the cab and picked up a leather tool belt and satchel full of paperwork. The nuts and bolts of code and health and safety missives hurt my brain and I was glad I had someone professional to oversee it all. While Kai had been finishing up on another building site, he’d also been choreographing behind the scenes with the tradespeople at Cedarwood via phone and email and checking in with me at the end of each day. Having him here in the flesh would be even better.

Micah wandered outside with one of the painters, pointing and gesticulating to the eaves above the lodge, which had been painted the wrong color. I waved him over, and he excused himself and jogged the short distance so I could make the introductions.

They shook hands the way men do, hard fast pumps. “We’ve got Isla arriving today,” I said. “And she’ll...”

Before I could finish, a motorbike came careening around the corner and into the driveway. Isla? On the phone she’d sounded chirpy and enthusiastic. I’d hired her instantly because of her knowledge about garden design and her clear vision for Cedarwood, which matched my own. Her resume was impressive for her age, mid-twenties, and I liked the fact she had a flair for topiary.

A cloud of dust rose up as Isla stepped off the bike and handled her helmet. Strawberry-blonde hair fell around her shoulders in waves, and her light-blue eyes shone with eagerness. Freckles spotted the bridge of her nose like constellations. Holding out a hand, she said, “You must be Clio.”

“Yes. Nice bike,” I said, grinning. “Great timing, Isla. This is Micah and Kai. We’re going to go for a tour. Join us?”

Isla gave me a wide smile, shook hands with Kai and Micah, and turned in an arc to survey the grounds. There was an energy radiating off her that was impossible to miss, as though she couldn’t wait to grab her secateurs and start pruning.

I went to ask Micah about the painters and their roof folly only to see him staring at Isla slack-jawed. Lifting a finger to his chin, I shut his mouth so it wasn’t as obvious to Isla as it was to me.

He gazed at Isla, goggle-eyed, lost in a daydream before eventually coming back to reality.

Isla swiveled back to us. “This is like something out of a Grimms’ fairy tale,” she exclaimed, motioning to the overgrown gardens. “I can’t wait to get started!”

Shading my eyes once more, I flashed her a smile. I had this sudden sense that the trio in front of me would shape Cedarwood into something great again. Between us, we’d give it the kiss of life, and resurrect it from its somnambulant state. Along the way, maybe a love affair would blossom... On this estate where vibrant mountains watched over us, where the lake glistened in the distance, maybe Cupid sat on a branch, hidden by a leafy canopy, his bow stretched taut, before shooting his arrow, straight into the heart of the next perfect couple.

I grinned at Micah, who was fidgeting with his folder, his cheeks ablaze. Isla was watching him with a frown, trying to gauge his inability to make eye contact with her.

“Well,” I said, clapping my hands for their attention. “Let’s give you guys the tour, and then we can get to work!”

Ringling Amory later that night with my daily update, I pulled a blanket over my knees and munched on buttery microwave popcorn. I’d have to shop properly and stop eating like a college student, but time had a habit of running away from me, and at night, with the draught leeching in, all I wanted to do was rug up, eat junk food and drink cocoa.

“Hello, sunshine!” Amory’s tinny voice echoed around my bedroom, making it feel homelier – as if she was here with me.

I pushed the popcorn to one side. “So, today’s news... Kai the builder arrived and also the landscaper Isla, so it feels like we’re making real progress!” I stopped to wipe crumbs from the bed. “But no matter how much work we put in, I just can’t shake the feeling that it won’t be enough... What if no one comes?”

“OK, look, the lodge *will* happen because you’re a gun at what you do. I have absolute faith people will flock in droves to Cedarwood. You know that! No one can win against you when you wow them with your vision and paint the pictures you do just with words – I mean, that’s a gift that can’t be taught. What you *need* is romance to distract you.”

I groaned. “Romance? That’s the last thing I want. And which bit of me moving to a town of five hundred and three people did you not remember? There’s no one suitable. Besides, I wouldn’t have time. I have this overwhelming fear that if I take my eyes off of the project it’ll tumble down like a house of cards. I don’t have a plan B any more, this *is* plan B. I can’t afford to get starry-eyed and lose focus. There’s the—”

She interjected. “And that’s exactly why you need the distraction of a man! That worry will eat you up, just like it did here. You were on the path to burnout, and without me there to fishhook you out at night, what will you do? Worry, that’s what. Life is all about light and shade, work and play. You just have to find the right balance. Think of snuggling up at night with some bronzed, buff guy who will take your mind off your woes.”

I choked on a popcorn kernel, thinking of Kai. “Bronzed, buff guy in Evergreen?” I managed. “You’re dreaming. Men here don’t take weekends in Cabo to work on their tan, I’m sure of it.”

“OK, maybe they don’t go to Cabo, but you can renegotiate with yourself about what exactly you want in a man. Surely there’s someone there who’ll do for now. What about old flames? A boy-next-door type? Someone who’ll happily sweep you off your feet.”

Old flames... There *was* Timothy. I’d only thought about him in passing since I’d returned.

“What?” Amory said, breaking my reverie. “I’m right, aren’t I? There’s some unfinished business with a guy there? Tell me I’m right!”

Was there? I really didn’t think so. And what was I even having this conversation for? Amory was trying to distract me from the real issues in my life by wooing me with the idea of romance. “No, no... there isn’t unfinished business. Nothing of the sort. I see what you’re doing, you know.”

“But...?” she said, ignoring the fact I’d caught her out.

There was no hiding from Amory once she clued on to something. She was FBI grade when it came to interrogating someone and sensed any weakness. “*But nothing.*”

“Don’t tell me... He was your first love. Right? That guy who broke it off with you when you left Evergreen?”

“So? It’s not like I’ve been pining for him or anything. Timothy was a million years ago. I bet he’s married and has five kids and a house with a picket fence and a dog called Buster. A nice handicap at golf, and a wife with a blonde bob and bright-blue eyes who bakes cookies. *From scratch.*” I could see him having that kind of perfect American life, with his perfectly white teeth and perfect children with their perfect manners. *Perfect, perfect, perfect.*

Amory gave me one of her overly dramatic world-weary sighs. “Not that you’re into stereotyping or anything! Darling, I’m not asking you to marry him, I’m only saying that I think you need some balance. If I don’t lecture you, you’ll spend every waking hour crunching numbers and making those ridiculous pie charts before ending the night planning your dream wedding on Pinterest. And soon enough you’ll be a shriveled-up old maid in some windy, creaky lodge with a menagerie of animals who share your bed.”

I guffawed. “As if! I don’t even use Pinterest any more!”

“Liar. You forgot to make your dream-wedding board secret. I like the pearl wedding dress the best, the backless gown... stunning.”

I wanted to dissolve into the floorboards. How could I have forgotten to make it secret! I’d been planning my own wedding since I could talk, but what was wrong with that? I just really liked weddings. Was that a crime?

“Your romantic side is what makes you shine so brightly. Promise me you’ll find Timothy and go for coffee. And if he’s married, then don’t kiss him. Simple. But on the other hand, if he’s single... well, first love rekindled. God, I’d pay to see that.”

She was incorrigible. And if I didn’t nip this in the bud she’d get carried away, and start pinning her *own* suggestions to my dream-wedding board. “Amory, my life isn’t a romantic comedy. First love rekindled? That only happens in movies. Fiction!”

“And where do they get their inspiration from, huh? Real life, that’s where! Non-fiction!”

Amory was a bulldozer when it came to pushing me out of my comfort zone. But she really didn’t understand the complexities of finding love in a small town. Again, I realized she’d jabbed me into a corner with all this nonsense about love.

“I actually phoned you to talk about the new members of staff who arrived...”

“Don’t try and change the subject. Your mission is to have coffee with the Matt Damon lookalike, and report back.”

“Oh my God, Amory. Wait. How do you know what he looks like?” Timothy did bear an uncanny resemblance to the actor Matt Damon, and I knew he still looked just the same because I’d stalked his Facebook profile once. OK, maybe twice, but I’d had a few cocktails and didn’t everyone do that anyway? There wasn’t much to see because it was locked up tight, which left me with just his profile picture.

“I found your yearbook and saw all the scribbled love hearts around the photo of him. Seriously, you were the sweetest thing, weren’t you?”

I blushed, grateful she couldn’t see me. “Before you corrupted me.”

“Which was so much fun! I have to go into a dinner meeting, which fills me with joy, so call me and tell me everything, just as soon as you’ve done it, deal?”

I avoided the demand and said, “Don’t let them cold-shoulder you because of me.”

She let out an evil chuckle. “Don’t you worry, darling. They’ve tried that but, then I got the go-ahead from you-know-who’s squad, to organize her surprise birthday party – so I’m quite the flavor of the month. You know what these agency backstabbers are like. Fickle.”

Sadly I did know, all too well, how the tide could turn in an instant at the agency. “You’re a superstar. I wish I was there to see it.”

“One celeb party is the same as the next, no matter how we dress it up. You’re not missing out.”

“I guess. Wait, before you go, how are things with Cruz?” While Amory made a show of behaving like some kind of man-eater, I knew she had deep feelings for the mysterious Cruz, who hailed from Ecuador and was all intense with deep, smoldering eyes.

“The same,” she sighed. “You know men in Manhattan. Can’t really commit to anything except their gym routines. And I’m crazy busy myself, so we’ll have to wait and see. We’re meeting for cocktails tonight, and then a show on Friday, so two dates in one week... a miracle in these parts.”

Amory would never fully admit how she felt about a guy; it was like some protective instinct in her. And she’d been equally blasé about most guys up until now. Cruz was different, and I hoped she’d open up to him. “He really likes you, Amory, you can tell, so I hope you don’t act indifferent with him.”

“Darling, I don’t act indifferent, I *am* indifferent. Because most of the guys I’ve dated have been total bores. There’s no point hiding the fact they sent me into a slumber. Cruz is the first guy I haven’t had to fake it with... and I’m not talking only sex,” she laughed. “But I won’t pin my hopes on him, not just yet. There’s a definite sizzle of attraction, but what if it fades?”

“That first overwhelming *can’t eat, can’t sleep, can’t stop thinking of you* stage of love might fade away but it’ll be replaced with more enduring emotions like comfort and stability.” What the hell did I know? I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d been on a date... still, it seemed like sound advice.

“Boring! I want the sparks.”

I laughed, knowing Amory wouldn’t settle for mundane, ever.

“Oh, God, please tell me that’s *not* Bonnie Tyler warbling in the background again?”

I froze.

“Darling, when you play ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ I know things are grim. Please, turn it off and listen to something more upbeat?”

“It’s... the radio!” I lied.

After ending the call, I leaned back and smiled. Amory always knew just what to say to perk me up, even if it was to rekindle a pretty dull flame from my past... Turning up ‘Total Eclipse of the Heart’ I thought about my best friend’s advice. Believing that true love was out there was easy; I just couldn’t quite believe it was going to be found in the tiny town of Evergreen.

### Chapter Five

The evenings grew longer and winter crept closer, bringing moody gray skies and the promise of cooler months to come. Under such solemn light, I felt the space between me and Mom yawn wider. She still hadn’t appeared and I knew something was up. I dialed her number again and was rewarded with the robotic voice: *the number you have dialed...* I hung up. Enough was enough.

At the lodge, things were progressing hectically and only just behind schedule, and I supposed the world wouldn’t fall down around me if I took one night off from the endless paperwork and reconciling the figures. There was just so much to do, but I wasn’t concentrating properly with Mom’s absence on my mind.

The wind keened like a lost soul as I locked the front door of the lodge. Kai was wandering around the grounds so I set off and found him peering into the window of one of the chalets near the lake.

“I’m going out,” I said. “Are you OK to lock the front gate?” He always stayed behind, his work days longer than anyone else’s. As though he couldn’t fully relax until he’d checked every single job.

“Sure,” he said, trying to make out the chalet room configurations in the encroaching darkness.

I buttoned up my coat as the bracing winds took hold. Kai looked downright spellbound. Surely it wasn’t just the chalets prompting such a reaction? “What is it?” I asked. “You look like you’ve found Wonderland.”

“I have found Wonderland. I had no idea the chalets were so well appointed. I guess I expected them to be derelict. It won’t take much to get them ready for guests, just the usual safety checks, and a few modernizations.”

With twenty chalets on the property, it wasn’t viable for me right then, as much as I wanted them to be rejuvenated. There was new bedding to consider, mattresses, linen, and décor, as well as the TLC they needed. It would have to wait.

“I know,” I said with a sigh, wishing my funds could stretch that tiny bit further but knowing I couldn’t risk it yet. “There’s also the old stone chapel to do. It’s got the most glorious stained-glass windows that funnel in breathtaking kaleidoscopic colors. It would be perfect for weddings. But for now I have to focus on the lodge itself...”

“When word spreads you’ll be busy here, Clio. This place has a bygone-era feel to it. I’ve traveled a lot, and I haven’t seen anything like this.”

I crossed my fingers, hoping he was right. “I’ve bet my entire fortune that people will want holidays where they learn to tango, take up life drawing, sling on backpacks full of gourmet picnic food supplied by us and hike up into the foothills.”

It was as though I could visualize them: groups huddled by the fire playing cards, mahjongg, bridge, and charades.

“No shopping malls, no tearing around trying to see every single tourist attraction. I think you’re on to something here.”

“I hope guests see it that way. Without sounding like a disgruntled grandparent, I want to go back to a time where people made their own fun. Let’s pray I’m not the only one who thinks it’s a good idea.”

He ran a hand through his tangled, too-long hair. “I’d put money on it but I’m not a gambling type.”

Cedarwood *had* to offer something unique to draw people to such a small town, and I banked on old-school fun and frivolity. Dances, trekking, water sports on the lake, and games, canasta, bingo nights, pottery in the west wing, and still-life drawing in the east. Language lessons, cooking classes, and singing and theater for those who wanted to perform. Chalets with reinvigorated claw-foot baths and a wall of books for those who wanted peace and quiet. But I needed the numbers in order to hire the staff...

I wanted to recreate that time, that *feeling*, when holidays were about relaxation, or being awed by the natural beauty of the elements. Having a place where you could do as much or as little as you liked. The entire train of thought made me realize again just how much work I had to do on the marketing front. I took my phone from my pocket and snapped a picture of Kai standing by the front door of the chalet. Social media would eat him up. “Mind if I post this online?” I indicated to the photo.

“Sure, go ahead.”

With deft fingers I posted the pic with the description: Our project manager Kai at one of the #CedarwoodLodgeChalets before renovations.

“Why did the lodge close?” he asked, arms folded as he leaned against the balustrade.

I lifted a shoulder. “As far as I can tell, they struggled through wartime, and recessions, and I guess they never really recovered financially. The husband left first and then the wife, for reasons unknown, and not long after she closed the place down.”

“Why’d he leave her?”

I clucked my tongue. “That part is a little hazy. I was too young to understand.”

“It’s a shame when they had all of this.” I might have mistaken it, but I was sure I caught a glimpse of longing in his eyes. Like he had fallen under Cedarwood’s spell.

“The thing is, it’s not a broken heart. We can fix this,” I said, smiling up at him.

He faced me, and the full force of his gaze hit me. I envied the girl who’d lose her heart to Kai. Loving him would be like tumbling into an abyss – he had a depth, a magnetism, that was compelling.

“Cedarwood has a murky past, but it’s being reborn and I have this idea that it’ll be a place where people fall in love, and lives will be changed for the better.” Too whimsical? I had to remind myself I wasn’t in an office full of women who planned weddings for a living any more.

He took an age to reply, like he was absorbing my words, pondering his answer. “There *is* something special about this place. It’s not just you who feels it.” A blush crept up his skin.

While his words were innocent, my heart knocked a little harder. I fumbled with a response before sticking to the rudimentary. “So... don’t forget to lock the gate. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Kai stared at me so intently, I blinked and walked away, unsure of what exactly had happened, and why I felt a charge in the air.

Twenty minutes later I pulled into Mom’s driveway, my thoughts inexplicably fuzzy. I took a deep breath and focused my mind on Mom, reminding myself not to push too hard; not to say anything I’d regret. If I did, she’d shut down and I’d never get to the bottom of what was bothering her. My mom, despite having run an inn where she dealt with guests for most of her adult life, was insular. She didn’t socialize, her only real friend was my Aunt Bessie, my father’s sister. Aunt Bessie was so full of life that no one could avoid being swept into her world, so I’m sure my mom just gave in to it.

I killed the engine, and gazed up. The kitchen curtain shivered, alerting me to Mom’s presence.

Donning a friendly smile, I went to the door and knocked, waiting an age for her to open it, as if she was trying to decide whether to pretend to be out or not. How had we come to this?

Finally the door swung open and she feigned surprise. “Clio! I wasn’t expecting you.”

I held out a bag of groceries I'd stopped off to buy. "Thought we could rustle up some dinner, what do you say?" I held back the real words that threatened to pour from my lips: *Why haven't you come to see me?*

She darted a quick peep behind her.

"Is someone here?" I ventured. Mom hadn't dated after Dad died. Did she have someone special now, and that was what was distracting her? At least that would be progress.

"No, no. It's fine. Come in."

I held in a sigh. "I thought we could make lasagna and roast vegetables. Are you hungry?" Mom had lost weight, too much weight. She'd always been whisper-thin, but now she was almost invisible.

"My favorite," she said, attempting a smile.

The cottage was immaculate, not a cushion out of place. Mom had always been tidy but this was next level. The small living room sat solemnly; the kitchen was pristine and smelled of cleaning agents, not a place where food was made.

"Help me peel the vegetables?" I stood at the sink and washed my hands.

She did as instructed, and worry hit me anew, watching her tiny frame move around the kitchen. I should have come over sooner. I debated whether to ask her outright what was wrong, but she fixed me with her Mona Lisa smile, so I let it go, hoping she'd eventually soften and confide in me. *There's a first time for everything... right, Clio?*

"Where's Aunt Bessie? I thought she would have called in at the lodge. I've called her a few times but got the machine."

Mom washed potatoes and carrots and placed them on a tea towel. "You know Bessie – she's desperate to see you but she's on a cruise with her book club. When she phoned I told her all about your homecoming and how you turned up unannounced." There was a light rebuke to her voice, and I realized that no matter how I approached my mom it would never be the right way. "She gets home soon and, whirlwind that she is, will no doubt come straight to you."

As if visiting me first up was out of the ordinary. I was grateful for Aunt Bessie in my life. She'd always been there for me, and made up the shortfall my mother had left.

She owned a gourmet donut shop in town called Puft. My aunt took the basic donut and transformed it into a sweet-lover's delight. Big, custard-filled donuts balanced precariously on a cloud of Chantilly cream on top of thick chocolatey shakes. Donuts were stacked like the leaning tower of Pisa, each with different fillings – from passion-fruit curd to chocolate hazelnut custard, hand-spun candy floss on top. Or for those wanting simpler fare there were mini pistachio and honey rings, or lemon-flavored churros with orange sauce. My Aunt Bessie always emailed me the menu to proofread and it was torture not being able to taste the words.

Once she was back from her cruise I planned to go in and roll out, having my fill of her delectable treats.

She was a cuddly, bubbly person and had been a refuge in my formative years. Aunt Bessie was the type of person people confided in, and she welcomed them into her open arms. Along with confidentiality, she also provided advice, hugs and donuts. *So many donuts.*

"You should come by the lodge with her, Mom. We had a slight issue with the plumbing, but thankfully it didn't blow the budget." She turned away, but I kept on, hoping it would sway her. "The electrics have been fixed. The wainscoting has been replaced but still needs painting. The floors need to be sanded and polished, but we had a problem with a patch of rotted wood in the—"

"Do you want me to chop and fry garlic?"

Was I speaking too softly? "Sure. Did you hear me, Mom, about the lodge?"

Her hands fell to her sides and she stared out the window as if debating what to say. She'd gone so pale, I worried I'd pushed her over some invisible precipice. "I heard."

"Well?" I asked softly.

“Well, what?” When she turned to me her eyes were bright with tears. What could have provoked such a thing?

“What is it, Mom? Why are you so upset?” I moved to hug her but she stiffened at the sight of my outstretched arms.

She shrugged. “What do you want me to say? That I’m happy for you? OK, I’m happy for you. Is that enough?” Her voice was almost inaudible.

“Aren’t you glad I’m home?” I swallowed a lump in my throat. It hurt the way she froze me out. No wonder New York had been a haven for me; it was easier to ignore this *strangeness* when I was away.

“I’m glad you’re here.” She motioned to where I stood.

“Here? But not at Cedarwood?” I leaned casually against the counter, and tried to keep the conversation light despite the tense atmosphere.

She turned back to the chopping board. “Look, can we just make dinner and talk about other things?”

“Other than the lodge, you mean?” What was it about Cedarwood that upset her so? Outside, stars twinkled in the inky night, as if urging me on.

“Yes, other than the lodge. I’m tired of hearing about it.” Garlic skin coated her fingers as she peeled and chopped. “I know that sounds harsh, and I don’t mean it to be.”

“OK,” I said. “But I’m a little confused as to how you could be tired of hearing about it, when we haven’t really spoken.” God, sometimes I wanted to shake the woman. Why wouldn’t she want to hear about the biggest gamble of my life? The very place I’d always dreamed of owning. It didn’t make sense, but Mom’s moods had never been easy to translate.

“I hear about it in town. That’s enough. I want to talk to you, just not about that.”

I remained silent, and we prepped the dinner that way, both mired in our own thoughts. With the white noise of TV in the background, it was enough to pretend we were listening to that.

Sitting down at the table, I took the spatula and served Mom a generous slice, hoping she’d eat with gusto. “It’s good to have dinner together again. I’ve missed it.”

“Me too,” she said.

“We could make it a regular thing. Maybe Friday nights? And I can give you a rundown about what stage I’m at with the lodge?” I hadn’t meant to bring it up again, but really, it was all I had these days and it wasn’t like I was discussing something scandalous.

She sighed and placed her napkin on the table. “Clio, I’m just... confused. You were doing *so* well in New York. Why would you give it all up to come back here? That place...” She grimaced. “...It’s a money pit. What if you lose everything?”

With a deep breath I said, “It’s a risk, a big one. But to be honest, Mom...” I stalled. Would telling her the truth help or hinder? “I couldn’t stay there. I had an incident with a bride, and I got fired. It was a big misunderstanding, but the press got hold of the story and it gathered momentum, giving me no choice but to leave. I was basically blacklisted by every agency in and around New York. And then when Cedarwood came up for sale... it seemed like fate, a lifeline.”

Her face pinched. “I’m sorry to hear about your job. I know how much you loved it. It just seems like a step backwards coming home. There’s nothing here for you.”

I worked my jaw, fighting back tears. I felt so goddamn sorry for her, for myself. We were back to the same pattern of the past.

“Mom, *you’re* here.” When my dad died, part of her did too, but I’d always hoped it was just a phase, just part of the grieving process. Instead of pulling me close, she pushed me away. As the years passed she’d folded in on herself even more until all I had left was a shell of what she had been. Even Aunt Bessie hadn’t been able to pull her out of the funk she was in, though she never gave up trying.

She pushed her plate away. “What if you lose all that money, Clio? Your father’s money?”

Ah. “Is that what this... silence is about? You’re worried about my inheritance money?”

She had the grace to blush. “Well, it’s a lot of money.”

My shoulders drooped like I carried a lead weight. I’d never given much thought to her feelings about the legacy my father had left me. I presumed he’d left her a share too. It had been invested for me until I turned twenty-one and then I had reinvested it in a risky start-up and tripled the money. It was beginner’s luck and I knew it, but I’d done it out of spite – Mom had given me such a lecture about that money when I took charge of it so I did the exact opposite of what she advised. And luckily for me it had paid off; I took the money and ran, knowing it could have easily gone the other way. Much later I’d withdrawn the money to buy Cedarwood, and at the time it had felt right – like his legacy was always meant to bring me home.

“It *is* a lot of money. I’ve gambled, there’s no question about it. But if I host one large function a month, I can make it work. Then there’s the chalets, the chapel for weddings, and renting the rooms in the lodge. I want to market it as *the* holiday destination in New Hampshire. I can’t say for sure, but I think Dad would be proud.”

She sighed. “It’s too late now, Clio. It’s done, so you have to make the best of it. You could have gone anywhere in the world with that money, and you chose to come here. It’s mind-bending, that’s all.”

“I’ve always loved Cedarwood Lodge. You know that. And I guess I hoped we’d be closer, not just in terms of distance...” My voice trailed off.

I wished so much we could be the sitcom mother and daughter. The ones who knew each other inside out and didn’t have to guess at moods, or whims. The ones who met for coffee and cake and a shopping expedition; swapped novels we loved. But it would never happen. She was damaged somehow, and it was up to me to be there for her, no matter how hard it was. At the moment, though, it was hard to accept this was my lot.

“Eat,” she said. “It’s going cold.” But she didn’t lift her fork again.

### Chapter Six

“Micah!” I half-screamed, half-choked as I tried desperately to stop the water spurting from the kitchen faucet. “*Micah!*” He finally caught my eye, frowned, raced over and leap-frogged through the open window as I frantically threw my body in the way of the streaming water. “Shut the water off,” I shouted. He pulled a face and leaped back outside.

After a minute or two the water stopped and I sank to the floor with relief, soaked through and shivering, but not quite drowned – which I counted as a win. Micah’s quick footsteps sounded back through the hallway as he returned, towel in hand. “You’ll do anything for attention.”

“Right!” I said, swatting at him and reaching for the towel. “Give me that!”

As I began to wring myself out, he offered me a hand up and we slipped and slid over the wet floor like we were roller-skating, before sinking into the safety of the kitchen chairs and falling about laughing.

“It’s rusted through,” said Micah, who had managed to compose himself and was peering into the old spout. The kitchen was yet to be renovated, but must have last been replaced sometime in the fifties. It was lovely as it stood, with duck-egg-blue cabinetry and aubergine benchtops with chrome molding, but it was ratty around the edges, and needed to be updated with modern appliances. Still, it was like stepping back in time, and I half expected an apron-clad housewife from the fifties to appear brandishing a tray of prawn cocktails and devilled eggs.

Having to be budget-conscious, I hoped the rest of the plumbing was in better shape – already we’d had an issue with the main guest bathroom in the lobby and we’d be stretched for cash if we kept having nasty surprises like that. “Can you rig something up for now? When the new kitchen is installed we’ll have all new tapware so there’s no point getting anything fancy to replace it.”

“We’ve got a bunch of odds and ends in the storeroom. I’ll see what I can do.”

I surveyed him from the corner of my eye. Micah was always a ball of energy, the type of person who couldn’t sit still, but he was more jumpy than usual.

“You go clean yourself up, I’ll deal with this.” He motioned to the wet floor.

“Thanks, Micah, but I can do it. Before you go, anything you want to discuss?” *Smooth, Clio.*

He was practically itching to chat but, being male, tried to pretend otherwise. But he had forgotten how well I could read him. He made a show of scratching his chin, and thinking hard about what I could possibly mean. “Nope. Can’t think of a single thing.”

The cold air was taking my breath away, leaving a trail of goose bumps in its wake, but the damn man was going to confide in me, even if my lips went blue while I waited to go upstairs and change. I’d witnessed love at first sight and I wanted information!

“Nope, you say? Well, let me tell you what I observed and see if it rings any bells. *L.O.V.E.*” I sang the letters. It was in my nature to tease him. And we hadn’t had five minutes together alone for me to ask him outright.

He guffawed. “You’re such a child.”

“Shall I continue?” I sang a song about kissing.

He held his hands up. “OK, OK. For the love of God, don’t sing. So, Isla may have taken me by surprise, but it doesn’t mean anything.”

I huffed and puffed in disbelief. “It was love at first sight, that’s what it was.” I hugged myself tight, imagining Micah as the hero of the first love affair at Cedarwood, and Isla his stunning heroine. Would I plan their wedding? Their baby shower? I couldn’t help it, it was inbuilt in me to think of every stage as an event to celebrate.

“*Love is too hard,*” he said gruffly, wearing a dark expression, which I knew meant *leave it alone.*

But he should have known me better than that. “Micah, no! Love isn’t too hard. Is this because of Ronnie?”

He sighed and folded his arms. “It’s not because of Ronnie. Well... maybe in part,” he admitted with a shrug. “The split with Ronnie taught me love is totally unrealistic. Because you place all these expectations on one person – of course it’s destined to fail! Eventually that person won’t make you smile any more. They’ll be the cause of the tightness in your chest, the reason you can’t sleep at night.”

I frowned. It was unlike Micah to talk so pessimistically. “What expectations? Love can be as simple or as difficult as you want it to be.”

He ran a hand through his hair. “There’s always expectations. The expectation you’ll follow them anywhere, you’ll forgo your dreams for them, and then they just leave anyway, even though you sacrificed it all.”

“So, don’t have any expectations, and then you’ve got nothing to lose, right?”

The kettle I’d been waiting for when the tap exploded suddenly screeched and I poured water into two cups, motioning for him to sit at the trestle table. While he ruminated I added a log of wood to the cast-iron potbelly stove and stood with my back to it, warming myself.

His sighed and his mouth became a tight line. “I admit, it was nice to have that heady, heart-thumping feeling about someone again.”

My damp clothes shrank against the heat, biting against my legs as they warmed. “So, that’s a good thing, Micah! What happened with Ronnie was obviously devastating, but that doesn’t mean you can’t start over with someone new.”

The way his eyes filled with pain was enough to make me regret bringing Ronnie into the conversation again.

“I didn’t see it coming,” he rubbed at his face. “It blindsided me. And I want to avoid ever feeling that way again.”

“What exactly happened?” The hurt on his face was evident.

The whine of a chainsaw buzzed outside. Isla was trimming something back in a frenzy. “That’s the thing,” he said. “She just drifted away like it was nothing. Like what we had was nothing.”

“Really?”

“She breezily announced that she was off to LA for a job interview. *Los Angeles?* A job interview? It was the first I’d heard of it. She’d been working at the bank for ever, and I thought she loved it there.” He shook his head. “I offered to join her there after work on Friday and stay for the weekend but she wanted to go alone. Suffice to say she never came back. Wound up working in some cocktail bar. Was it always that bad here?” he asked, confusion lining his face.

“It wasn’t you, Micah. It was something in her.” In my heart of hearts, I wasn’t surprised Ronnie might’ve got itchy feet at some point; she was one of those people always looking for more. Still, I hadn’t thought she’d leave Micah. They’d been joined at the hip and I’d always hoped to find a love like theirs. How could she have been so callous to Micah, the person who loved her more than life itself?

“There was no malice in it. In her mind we’d come to the end of the road. And what could I do? I couldn’t force her to love me. So I let her go, and wished her well. Told her I was here if she needed me.”

A *pah* of surprise escaped me. “I don’t think many people would have been so understanding, Micah.”

With a half-smile he waved me away. “It hurt, no two ways about it. Without her I didn’t know who I was any more.”

Admittedly, I felt a wave of anger toward Ronnie, despite Micah’s assurances it wasn’t her fault. “I’m annoyed that you gave up your own dreams of studying medicine to stay here like she wanted and then in the end she left anyway. You could have lived near me in New York, like we’d always planned.”

“Doesn’t matter now. Truly, it doesn’t,” he said, seeing the concern on my face. “I made my choices; it’s not her fault. I enjoy what I do. So what, I fix things, instead of people?” Micah tried for that impish smile of his.

“There’s still time, you know.” I could picture Micah wearing a white coat and making rounds of the local hospital. He’d be the type that patients felt comfortable around, with an impeccable bedside manner.

He lifted a shoulder. “I’m OK, I’ve got Cedarwood now, right? But can you see my point, about trusting someone again? I don’t want to be swept away, because I know, when I fall in love, I fall hard, and where does that leave me? On a precipice, alone. Nope, I’ll never put myself in that position again.”

Surely if he felt that frisson he should follow his heart? “So you haven’t had a relationship since Ronnie left?”

“Nope. None. A casual date here and there, which was more for companionship. Then, when I’d resigned myself to being single for ever, someone walks into my world, and I get this *zap*. I honestly thought I’d never feel that ever again after Ronnie.”

“Micah, you can’t live like a hermit your whole life.”

“I’m just happy to know my heart isn’t frozen solid. And I’m not a hermit – I go out, I see friends. I’m happy, really.”

I frowned. “Ronnie isn’t coming back, Micah. You don’t have to follow anyone to the ends of the earth; you can set some boundaries...” I felt like an agony aunt doling out clichéd advice, but I didn’t know how else to make him see that love was *always* worth it.

“I know she isn’t...” The buzz of the chainsaw mercifully ceased and Micah adjusted his voice accordingly. “And even if she did, I’d never contemplate reconciling. She’s shackled up with some guy in LA, and they’ve had a baby.” He paused at the mention of the baby. For as long as I could remember Micah had talked of the family he’d have. “Anyway, I don’t want to make Isla uncomfortable. What if she doesn’t like me the same way? How awkward would that be? God, I sound like I’m back in high school.”

I laughed. “You do. Anyway, all you have to do is ask her to go for coffee! It’s not like you’re asking her to marry you.” Even though I was already mentally assessing color combinations for the wedding centerpieces...

He grinned and color flooded his cheeks. “You said yourself not to mix business with pleasure.”

I guffawed as the potbelly coughed and spluttered behind me. “Since when did you ever listen to me? What the hell would *I* know?”

Outside, the symphony of work started in earnest: chainsaw, hammers, and a lawn mower. Isla must have roped in some extra hands to help.

“Since always. You’ve steered me straight since we were kids.”

With one last attempt, I gave Micah a hard stare. “*I’ve* steered you straight, you say?” I didn’t wait for a response. “Then you have to listen to me – give the *idea* of love a chance. Just entertain the idea and ask Isla for coffee.”

“No, Clio. I’d hate to make her feel uncomfortable.”

“Jeez, Micah, so much for steering you straight.” I lifted a palm in surrender.

“Don’t you dare play matchmaker.”

I pretended to be outraged. “Me? As if I have time to meddle with your nonexistent love life,” I lied.

If Cupid needed a helping hand, who better to do that than me?

### Chapter Seven

With things somewhat under control at the lodge, I dressed warmly for town, and slipped into high-heeled boots. I needed to collect some supplies and wanted to drop in on Imelda and Edgar for an impromptu meeting to firm up numbers, and show them some pictures of the ballroom renovation. It dawned on me that, after their party, it wouldn’t be long until I could start preparing for Christmas, and the thought of decorating the lodge for the festivities had me in paroxysms of delight. A winter wonderland wedding would be perfect, but I needed to show off the venue to attract brides. A wedding expo would be ideal, and I made notes about what I’d need to do in order to achieve it, feeling a pang for Amory, wishing she was here to share the joy of winter and all it entailed.

Tying my scarf as I went, I found Kai in the ballroom, grinning up at the ceiling. “The electricians have just left. They’ve replaced the old insulation and fitted downlights so it’s not as gloomy with only the two chandeliers at each end of the room. What do you think?”

I surveyed the new lighting. “It makes the space appear even bigger. The downlights were a good choice, Kai.” They sent out little stars of radiance which helped brighten the room. I’d been wary when it came to adding such modern features in the traditional ballroom, but they fit seamlessly.

“Won’t be long until it’s finished and ready for the party. Mind if I hitch a ride to town with you? I need to meet with Walter at the hardware shop.”

“Sure,” I said. “Let’s tell Micah to keep an eye on things.”

We found Micah halfway up a ladder in the abandoned library. The room was the stuff of every bibliophile’s dream. Deep, dark mahogany shelves recessed into all four walls. Ladders were still attached, which slid across like something from the 1800s. It was bereft of novels and I couldn’t wait to go book shopping and fill the room with old tomes whose perfume would scent the air. With a fire crackling, and the teapot steaming, I was sure we could host book clubs here. Author events. Writing retreats.

“We’re going into town, Micah. Keep an ear out in case anyone needs a hand?”

A fine layer of wood dust coated him, as he sanded back one of the rippled and cracked water-damaged shelves. “Sure. But only if you bring me back a donut from Puft.”

“Deal,” I said, grinning.

When we parked in front of Puft, Kai jumped out, ear pressed against his phone. From what I could gather it was his boss, and there was a new job on the horizon once Cedarwood Lodge was finished. Soon he’d leave, and I wasn’t sure how I felt. Would I be lost without his easy-going guidance, his calming influence on me? Only time would tell, but I wasn’t looking forward to losing him.

It was warmer in town without the cold gust of wind drifting off the surface of the lake.

My aunt's donut store was doing a roaring trade with tables out front full of lunchtime patrons. I pushed my face up against the glass and searched for her, but saw only faces I didn't recognize behind the counter. As I turned I tripped over the foot of a chair, and landed smack-bang into the arms of someone walking the other way. We thumped foreheads, and tears stung my eyes. What was it about this place that made me so clumsy all of a sudden? High heels and Evergreen were a veritable deathtrap. An apology fell from my lips as I blinked hastily to correct my blurry vision. Just what I needed, a big black eye to greet potential clients.

"I'm sorry, I'm such an..." *Oh, God.* The words froze on my tongue.

"Clio?"

I nodded dumbly as I stared into the deep hazel eyes of Timothy. The first person to break my heart – a very handsome man with powerful shoulders that suggested time spent at the gym and a smile that would make many a woman melt.

"Hey." *Smooth, Clio.*

In the filmy light of midday his lips twitched as he rubbed the soft spot above his eyebrow where we'd bumped heads. "I heard you were back in town. I've been meaning to come out to Cedarwood and say hi."

"You should." I'd forgotten how modulated his voice was, every word measured and thoughtful. Maybe it was concussion, but his mouth, the way his lips twitched, held a whole host of memories for me; suddenly I was back in his parents' basement with him, listening to pop music and stealing kisses. My turncoat gaze darted to his ring finger and found it bare.

"How is it going at Cedarwood? From what I hear around town you're not far away from being able to open."

I swallowed hard and willed my voice box to engage. "Yeah, it's going well. No great disasters as yet. But there's still time." How could I say something so opposite to what I was thinking? *You're thirty-three, Clio, not thirteen.* Somehow the gangly, brace-face teen had returned uninvited. I coughed and recovered, summoning a voice I used on my most famous clients, one that hid how starstruck I was.

"How're things with you, Timothy? I thought you'd be married and have about a hundred babies by now." I left out the part about the picket fence, the cookie-baking wife, the fluffy dog called Buster...

Just then a squeal rang out as two children ran from the bakery holding chocolate-iced donuts. They laced their free hands around his legs. *I knew it!* I bet they had perfect manners too. And dabbed daintily at their mouths with napkins after they ate their bounty.

He wobbled as they took hold. "Clio, I'd like you to meet Scarlett and Zander. Haven't quite made it to a hundred kids yet, but these two have the energy of fifty at least." He held back laughter, and glanced down at them with such fondness in his eyes that my heart just about stopped.

I won't lie. A part of me, that teeny, tiny, hopeless romantic part of me, died. *He had made children!* Actual living, breathing little humans. And not just your standard cute ones; really gorgeous, impish ones.

"Nice to meet you, Scarlett and Zander. You chose well. I happen to know those donuts are the best in the world."

Scarlett narrowed her eyes, held the donut tighter, and shot a glance up to her father for... what? Reassurance? Even the... what... five-, six-year-old – she could have been two, three, for all I knew – could see straight through me, like I was wearing a flashing sign: FRAUD, beware! If I hadn't already felt like a member of the secret group *Being Left Behind*, I did now.

They could have been *my* children, if things had been different. And if they had been, surely they wouldn't clam up like that? Scarlett was so cold she was practically frosty, an icy wind radiating from her. And the little boy wasn't much better. Zander glared at me and tugged his dad's jean-clad

leg. Although maybe it was a stranger danger thing, and in that case, they were pretty perfect, just as expected. *Damn it.*

“Anyway,” I said, ignoring the death stares. “I must dash, I’ve got paint that needs... painting, and all sorts of very important jobs that need doing.” *Kill me.*

Timothy gave me a slow, saucy smile that provoked a jelly-legged reaction. What was happening to me? Had I made a mistake leaving town to follow my dreams? For the briefest moment in time I pictured myself as a wife, a mother. I shook the insanity away before I lapsed into an existential crisis about lost loves, and sliding-door scenarios. I pulled the strap of my bag tight, and went to step off the curb with an awkward backwards wave.

Timothy grabbed my arm. “Wait,” he said. “A few of the old gang are getting together next week. They’d love to see you. Micah will be there.”

“Umm, yeah...” I said distractedly as Scarlett, the girl with the most angelic cherubic face, stood behind her father dragging her index finger along her throat. Was she warning me to say no? What *was* that! I had zero clue about children, but it did intimidate me. She who could handle the worst Bridezillas was scared of a five-year-old!

Tim, oblivious to my hesitation, said, “So it’s a date! See you at Shakin’ Shack. Micah knows the details.” He bent to kiss my cheek as I mumbled about confirming closer to the day.

They walked away hand in hand as Scarlett turned once more to glare at me. What had I just agreed to?

Really, though, it would be good to see the gang again. Over time, we’d lost contact, but I often thought about them. Would I be the only one who was still trying to make sense of her life? Timothy radiated a cool, calm vibe like he was exactly where he was meant to be, and I was his polar opposite, fumbling with making basic conversation. The collected Manhattanite in me had vanished and was replaced with the former version of myself. Imagine if they knew I’d been fired and shunned in New York. Would they secretly think I deserved it for being ambitious when I left Evergreen? Only to return home, tail between my legs, buying the lodge on a whim, and claiming I’d make it something great?

With a deep, steadying breath I gave myself a pep talk, and tried to quash any crisis of confidence. Further ahead, Kai was leaning against the wall, his arms folded across his chest, like he was in contemplation.

“There you are.”

Kai had one leg against the wall, soft sunlight making him sleepy-eyed. “Sorry, I had to take that call. It was about another job. Looks like it’ll be Christmas in San Francisco for me.”

San Francisco... the other side of the country. My heart dropped at knowing Kai wouldn’t be around for the renovation of the chapel or the chalets. I felt a pang of sorrow that he’d be elsewhere, and for Christmas Day too. I always knew he’d be leaving, but a part of me wanted to host a Christmas Day party for the staff who were away from family and make it special. And Kai had become part of the Cedarwood family – that was why I particularly wanted him to be here.

“Who was that guy?” he asked.

“Oh...” I waved him away. “Just an old friend.”

Kai raised a sardonic brow. “Cute kids.”

I laughed. “Yeah, *cute*. Let’s go to the hardware store. I need to find Imelda.” Angst sat heavy in my belly and I had the overwhelming sensation I’d let life pass me by while trying to reach the unattainable in my career. Was I doing it again, setting myself up for failure? What would I have left this time if Cedarwood didn’t work out?

Kai put his hands on my shoulders. “Breathe. Your shoulders are up around your ears.”

I wriggled from his grasp, but he held me firm. “Take a *deep* breath, and count to five...” Kai was often mystical, like some kind of surfer yogi, and I just didn’t understand it. How would holding

my breath for five seconds achieve anything? Even being rewarded by staring into the ocean blue of his calming gaze wasn't enough to make me believe.

"I'm fine, Kai. Really. I'll count to ten later to make up for it. Let's go."

With one of his penetrating looks he said, "Clio, seriously, you hold so much stress in your body, it's toxic. Just chill for five seconds."

I willed my eyes not to roll, but he was so sure it would fix everything I didn't have the heart to ignore him again. "Fine. One, two, *threefourfive*. There. I'm cured." I grabbed his hand and dragged him across the road, surprised to feel a tingle racing up my arm from his touch. Kai had the sort of hands that were made for holding, I guess. Strong, warm hands.

Walter, Imelda's son, was standing by the cash register, spooling a ream of escaped receipt paper.

"Well, hello, Clio. Would have recognized you anywhere after Mom's description of you – Carrie Bradshaw hair indeed. Though don't tell anyone I know who Carrie Bradshaw is – I'd never live it down." Walter had a ruddy complexion and deep-set eyes, just like his father. He wore a checked shirt and suspenders, which somehow suited him, being holed up in a hardware store, which was ripe with the scent of old motor oil and dust.

I winked. "Your secret is safe with me. Is Imelda here?" Even though they claimed they'd retired years ago, Imelda was often found here according to Micah. He said she couldn't quite let go of her working life. Edgar tinkered around with tools as well, and swept up the workshop, their days too long without something to keep their heads and hands busy.

"Mom's out back in the office." He jerked his thumb in that direction. "Says she had to tidy up some paperwork, even though my wife does it these days." He shrugged. "What she means is, she's double-checking the figures because she can't grasp that anyone else could do it right. Who am I to argue?" There was no malice in his voice, just deep-seated admiration.

"They need to find a hobby, maybe?" I smiled and then dropped my voice. "While I've got you, can I ask a favor?"

He nodded.

"I want to do a slide show of photos that we can play before the speeches. Set to music, maybe songs they've loved over the years? A photo montage of their love through each decade."

Walter grinned. "Now you're talking! Mom and Dad would love that."

"But let's keep it between us?"

"Your secret is safe with me." He repeated my earlier sentiment.

I smiled. "Can you get hold of some photos without them knowing?"

Walter thumbed his chin. "It wasn't long ago that Dad had all his photos scanned and saved in the cloud – that was a fun day explaining what the cloud was. How about I copy the photos onto a USB and you can choose which suit?"

"That'd be perfect. And what about music? Any chance you can take a flick through their albums and let me know what stands out, what songs you remember hearing?"

At that he rolled his eyes dramatically. "I wouldn't even have to look. Dad serenaded Mom with Percy Sledge's *When a Man Loves a Woman* at their wedding, and then every year since, but Dad can't sing a jot, and he's so out of tune it's actually painful to hear. Mom seems to like it, though."

I let out a burble of laughter, imagining Edgar warbling to Imelda in spite of being tone deaf. "Gosh, they're adorable. OK, so that can be the first song, and can you email me the titles of any others that mean something to them?"

"Sure." His face broke into a huge grin, making the resemblance between him and Edgar more obvious. "They're really excited about the party, Clio. And what you're doing will thrill them, it really will. I can sneak over to their house this afternoon for a recon mission and send it all to you."

Kai wandered over, his basket full of pipes and tubes and God knows what.

“I’ll leave you to it,” I said, grinning at the huge smile on his face. Men and hardware stores! Even the surfer yogi wasn’t immune. “I’m going to have a quick chat with Imelda and then I’ll meet you at Puft later?” Kai nodded as they fell into serious conversation about amps of drills and which battery had the longest life.

Imelda’s office was meticulously tidy, with stacks of yellowing paperwork in neat straight piles and a scented candle flickering on the table.

“Hello, pretty girl!” Her face crinkled into a smile. “What’s been happening at the lodge?”

I detailed the progress we’d made and where I was at in terms of the preparations. “What about a dance, Imelda? I know you’re wheelchair-bound, but you can still share a moment, right? Your favorite song, you two on the dance floor?”

Her face brightened. “Oh, that’s a great idea! With Edgar propping me up I can stand for a little while, at least... How about a love song, and me and Edgar standing in each other’s arms for as long as we can?”

“Yes! Let me find a special song.” I would dim the lights, and it would be so romantic. There wouldn’t be a dry eye in the house.

After discussing the party with Imelda, who exclaimed over every tidbit with glee, I headed to Puft and crossed my fingers my aunt was in. From the gaggle of customers still queuing, I doubted she’d had time to do anything except work since returning from her cruise, but I was eager to see her.

As I squinted through the glass the front door burst open, bells jangling noisily together. “Well, there you are! I’d recognize those curls at fifty paces!” Aunt Bessie’s husky voice boomed, startling me.

“Aunt Bessie, you look amazing!” With a full face of heavy makeup, and bleached-blond teased-up hair, Aunt Bessie hadn’t changed one iota. There was no evidence of a single laugh line and I expected she’d had some cosmetic help. She wore a tight-fitting sweater that accentuated her big bust, and tight jeans that exposed her curves – she was simply larger than life.

“Well, shucks. It’s the eight glasses of water I drink a day, you know.” She winked comically. “I expected to see you in overalls but I should’ve known the big city would change my girl!” She let out a cackle that drew the attention of her customers. “Tell me what’s been going on over at Cedarwood. I’ve spent the better part of the morning trying to escape this place to visit you but these people had other ideas.” She gestured at the patrons filling almost every table.

Aunt Bessie motioned to a table, and told the young girl behind the counter to bring us coffee and a serving of cookies-and-cream donuts with an extra helping of chocolate sauce.

I raised a brow.

“You’ll work it off running around that lodge of yours. Now tell me everything.” Aunt Bessie was a breath of fresh air, and I felt like I could do anything, *be* anything, with her on my side. I waxed lyrical about the renovations, Edgar and Imelda’s party, and my plans to meet with the old gang. I managed to gloss over the reasons for leaving New York and thankfully she was too eager to hear about the lodge and didn’t notice.

She raised her eyebrows. “The old gang? Does that include *Timothy*?” His name came out sing-songy, and I could see where I got the same urge to tease Micah.

I studied my nails to buy time. “It does, as well you know. Stop fishing.”

She feigned surprise, putting a hand on her bust. “*Me*? Fishing? I was merely asking about one of your oldest friends.” The gleam in her eye suggested otherwise.

Expertly, I changed the subject and focused on Micah’s reluctance regarding romance and how obvious it was he and Isla were perfect for each other. “Sounds like we need to meddle,” she said.

“I think you’re right.” I clasped my fingers, plotting. “How about I invite Isla here for coffee and I also invite Micah, but then, *dang*, I can’t make it...”

Her heavily made-up eyes widened. “And I’m here to pass on the message: *Look, kids, why don’t you sit together. Clio says everything is under control and you might as well take an hour to relax...* How does that sound?”

Only my aunt would understand my motivations and back me up. “Sounds like love is in the air...”

We gossiped about every little thing, and Aunt Bessie promised to visit once she was caught up at Puft. It wasn’t until I was back at the lodge that I realized she hadn’t mentioned my mom and her radio silence. Maybe Aunt Bessie wanted to see Mom in person first before making excuses for her?

Back at the lodge that afternoon I was sitting at the trestle table in the kitchen when Isla walked in. I made a show of shuffling paperwork and letting out loud sighs of frustration.

“You need a hand?” she asked.

I fumbled some more, and tried my best to look piqued. “What I need is some time away from all of this.” I gestured to my notebook, which was filled with loping red scribbles.

She gave me a sympathetic arm-squeeze. “Why don’t you take some time off tomorrow? I’m sure we can cover for you.”

*Dang it.* “Erm. Maybe. What about you, Isla? I’ve been so busy I haven’t even asked how *you’re* feeling. How are you settling in here?”

She flicked the kettle on. “I’m great. Beat, you know, but that’s part of the job. It’s a good kind of tired. The garden is really taking shape.” She flashed a smile and potted about making coffee, grabbing a tin of biscuits.

I leaned back, rocking on my chair. “And what about the other staff? No problems with anyone?” Gosh, I couldn’t work out how to bring the conversation around to Micah without making it blindingly obvious. Was I losing my touch as matchmaker?

“Everyone’s been great, really friendly and supportive.” She held up an empty cup toward me and I nodded yes for coffee.

“If you need an extra pair of hands, let me know. With the party deadline, I know I’ve put you under pressure and I’m sure Micah can help you.”

At the mention of his name she flushed scarlet. “Oh... yes. About that.” She chewed her lip while she pondered.

“What is it?” I urged her on.

Her gaze darted over my shoulder to the hallway, and as she turned back she dropped her voice to a whisper. “Can I ask you something... and I hope you won’t take it the wrong way?” She fidgeted with the handle of her cup.

“Sure.”

“Are you and Micah... like, together?” She looked downright mortified at her question.

I furrowed my brow. “A couple?”

She nodded. “Sorry if it’s too personal, I just wondered...you seem to be so in tune.”

I shook my head, and laughed. “No, no, he’s like the brother I never had. Just best friends. And we’re in tune because we’ve known each other for a million years. Why do you ask?” I tried not to grin, but my lips twitched in spite of it. *She liked him!*

Her face flushed a deeper shade of scarlet, bringing out her freckles. “Sorry, I just wondered. I’m not interested in him or anything like that.” A nervous, high-pitched giggle escaped.

*Sure.*

I kept my mouth shut and hoped she’d explain herself to break the silence.

“It’s only... I just thought, well, urgh...” She played with the length of her ponytail and tried to compose herself. “He just seems like a really amazing guy, and I thought there was no way he’d be single, and I was curious. *Just curious.*”

“He’s single. *Totally* single.” She wasn’t paying attention; her eyes were glazed as if she was stuck in a daydream. Time to move on to Operation Cupid. “Hey, do you want to meet in town for

lunch tomorrow? My aunt owns the Puft bakery and I've found the best way to recharge and re-energize is by stuffing my face full of sugary snacks. What do you say?"

With a few blinks she was back to me. "I'd love to. I've walked past it and been meaning to stop in."

"So, meet there at lunchtime?"

"Deal."

I picked up the paperwork, and my cup of coffee. "I'd better make some inroads then. See you tomorrow."

I went and found Micah and spun the same story. He eagerly accepted, though was concerned about the toll Cedarwood was taking on me. "I'm fine, Micah. Nothing an hour off with my best friend won't fix, right?" I gave him a dazzling smile, all the while wondering what kind of wedding dress would suit Isla. What flowers she'd choose for her bouquet...

"Right," he grinned, none the wiser. "So, lunchtime? We'll drive there together?"

*Shoot!* "If you don't mind, I'll meet you there. I've got some errands to run... erm... afterwards."

He was busy masking up the stairwell bannister for the painters, and nodded distractedly. "OK, sure, I'll drive myself there."

"Perfect. And my treat too."

He laughed. "Now you're talking."

### [Chapter Eight](#)

"So, canapés, my darling!" Georges, the caterer, brandished a plate of tiny morsels that had my mouth watering. He was a big, round, jovial sort, with a shiny, bald head and a whopping great laugh. I'd known him ever since I was a little girl when he worked for Aunt Bessie before starting his own catering company. Unfortunately, his business was flailing, according to word around town. I felt for Georges – it would've been darn near impossible to make a living here catering. He traveled far and wide for clients out of necessity, but the costs were exorbitant and ate into his profit. Today he'd arrived with tasting plates for the canapés for Imelda's party and I hoped we'd be able to work together going forward.

"Georges, *wow*. I wasn't expecting anything so inventive! These look amazing! What's this?" I pointed to a shot glass filled with yellow soup, and topped with some kind of mini bread.

"That's a saffron and prawn bisque with shrimp toast. Very popular. And this..." He pointed to a Chinese soup spoon filled with fragrant meat and fresh herbs. "...Is Peking duck-inspired. All of these are miniature versions of gourmet meals. There's not a prawn cocktail or chicken skewer in sight!"

I let out a volley of laughter. Poor Georges – how I'd underestimated him. "Sorry, Georges. It was unforgivable, what I said. I thought..."

"You thought because we live in a backwater my culinary skills were also stuck in the nineties. It's OK. I get it." His rotund body shimmied as he laughed. "Let's take a look at the kitchen," Georges said, bundling up our napkins.

I gathered up the tasting plates and followed behind.

"There's one problem, Georges. The kitchen is not exactly finished. Or..." I gulped. "...Even started yet. But it will be. Trust me, by party time you'll have yourself a shiny new spick and span space with all the modern gadgets you could ask for." I only hoped that was true. Our craftsman was dillydallying and time was running out. We wandered into the kitchen, Georges casting a keen eye over the old cooktop.

He folded his arms over his chef whites and his face paled to match. "When are they starting it?"

"Soon," I said. "Very soon."

Georges sighed good-naturedly and shook my hand, silently agreeing on a partnership I hoped would last us decades. "I can see this being the start of a beautiful friendship." He winked and laughed that deep, belly cackle of his. "Let's just hope I don't have to cook in this..."

The next day I bounced out of bed and went to my office, taking a pot of coffee big enough to drown in, planning to tick off my to-do list. I updated social media for the Lodge, sharing more photos, and checking the insights to see how the pages were growing. I had an enquiry about a baby shower, which I replied to, sending examples of menus and room styles and sizes. I tried not to worry about the salons being finished on time, and instead focused on responding enthusiastically about Cedarwood's charms. It was only an enquiry, not a booking, so I could panic later if they wanted to go ahead.

Next on the list was gathering interest for the wedding expo. I uploaded some stunning black and white shots of the chapel from a distance. Its rustic façade would make a great backdrop for professional wedding photos. I searched for bridal websites and took out some paid advertisements, describing Cedarwood Lodge and its amenities. Perhaps the start of December would give me enough time to organize the expo? Would that be enough to get the chapel fixed, and furnished? I wrote furiously about all the things I'd need to do in order for it to happen. I paused again, wishing Amory was here to help. We usually worked together on weddings and big events, and I missed brainstorming with her. Whenever I erred on the side of caution, she pushed me over that precipice into believing I could do it.

Once notes were made, I designed an e-newsletter and sent it to my contact list with a subscription link to sign up.

There was a knock at the door, and Kai stuck his head in. "You're early," I said, stating the obvious – he was always ahead of schedule.

"I've always been an early riser, can't help it. Usually I go surfing before work, but there's no surf here, and the lake is a little flat... so here I am." His tousled hair was windblown, and not quite as blond without weeks of sunlight to bleach it.

"The lake?" I laughed, picturing Kai trying to surf on the still water on this chilly autumn morning. In summer it would be great for kayaks, paddle boarders, kids with boogie boards... It wouldn't be long now before it froze. Perhaps we'd need to invest in ice skates?

"Well, up you get!" he said.

"Up for what?" I pulled my jacket tightly around me as the draught blew in from the open doorway.

He tutted, but his eyes twinkled mischievously. The look spoke volumes. "Time to head up the mountain before the workday starts in earnest."

I furrowed my brow. "It's not even seven in the morning, Kai. It's freezing out." Winter was creeping closer every day, the sky dark, somber. And I did not climb mountains, not for anything. I was made for high heels not hiking boots.

"Then we'll walk faster. Come on..." He took my hand, leaving me no choice but to follow; he snagged my scarf from the hook and passed it back to me. Still, I tried to extricate myself with excuses.

"Kai, it's very sweet of you to invite me, but I'm not really a fan of exercise. You go, and I'll have a nice hot coffee ready for you when you return. I've got so much work to do!"

"No dice. Get going." He stood behind me with his palms against my back, pushing me like a child, before grabbing my hand and starting out in a jog. The shock of cold air on my face, and *running*, was almost too much to bear.

It wasn't until we were at the foot of the mountains that I noticed he still held my hand. For warmth, I surmised. Hailing from a sunny climate, he probably felt the cold more than me – and it was brisk so early in the morning.

"Nothing like starting the day with some blood-pumping activity. You're lucky to live here, Clio. This is my idea of heaven. The mountains, the lake, the steep bluff in the distance. So many adventures to be had." His voice carried up the mountain but it was all I could do to keep up. He dashed ahead and dragged me along.

My lungs burned following his hectic pace. “You’re like a mountain goat!” My body was not made for running, had I mentioned that?

“Wait until you see the sun from up here. It’ll be worth it.”

“I much prefer the little glow of yellow from my office lamp.” Why on earth did people do this? My calf muscles froze in protest.

“Didn’t you ever head to the summit when you were younger?” He was annoyingly chipper. And wholly with breath. I pulled my hand from his grasp and doubled over, hands to hips. I was going to die, I was sure of it.

Once I’d caught some semblance of breath I said, “No, I didn’t climb up to the summit! But I’ve seen the postcards, that’s enough! Micah had his sporty friends for insane challenges like that, while I waited in the comfort of the living room with the heater on.”

The earth was soft and velvety from dew, and the smell of ozone was thick in the air.

Kai grinned. “This is what you need, Clio. To save you from sleepless nights, and carrying around that anxiety you try your best to hide.”

How did he know I couldn’t sleep? “I don’t know what you mean.” I couldn’t hide the haughtiness in my voice. “As if trudging up a wet and slippery mountain could ease any pain! It will cause more.” What was with this guy, with his breathing techniques, extreme sports, and mumbo jumbo? And still he was Zen – as if he was exactly where he was meant to be.

“You’ll see. Keep going, princess, we’re almost there.” Once again, he took my hand and hauled me the rest of the way. Once we reached the peak, he spun me around to check out the vista. I was dizzy with disorientation.

Arms crossed and disdain evident on my face, I was set to ridicule him, but the words froze on my tongue. Under the blanket of early-morning fog, the view was breathtaking, trees spanned for miles undulating on the landscape. Dark atmosphere and gray clouds sat heavily above, making the green of the ground more vivid. The sun splintered the sky, one lone ray landing on the earth like a spotlight.

I felt Kai’s gaze on me. Damn it. It was spectacular and I’d wanted so much to tell him he was insane for making me do this.

“It’s very... pretty,” I managed.

“It sure is,” he laughed, not taking his eyes from mine.

The air was heavy with words unspoken and for one lonely minute I pictured Kai kissing me. How had I gone from abject misery, climbing a steep range, to floaty desire? There was something so mystical about him, like he was at one with the earth, and soaked up the beauty of nature... and it was compelling. I shook the thoughts away and blamed it on lack of oxygen at this altitude.

“Next we’ll try yoga. *At midnight.* I’ll make you so relaxed you’re floppy.”

I went to argue, but couldn’t form words. Midnight yoga?

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Later that morning I was measuring up the ballroom for furniture placement, and also planning the table and chair combinations. In town, the local party store had furniture for hire; not the most modern or luxurious of options but it’d do for the interim. Eventually I’d buy my own to fill the ballroom, but that would depend on the budget and what was left after the renovations. My cellphone squawked, the alarm I’d set reminding me of my cunning plan. I shuffled my paperwork together and went to hide in my office until both Isla and Micah had left for Puft.

Safely ensconced with the door locked, I texted Aunt Bessie: *They’re on route. xxx*

Thirty minutes later Aunt Bessie texted back:

*Oh, they make the cutest couple! They were both a little bewildered when I said you’d been called back for an urgent meeting! So far they’ve spent a lot of time looking at the table. Will interfere if I need to xxx*

Micah would see straight through my cancellation but that was OK. I'd just deny it – hopefully he'd be all starry-eyed and ready to give love a chance, and then he'd forget about that tiny detail. It could happen!

*Let me know how it ends up. I'm not saying I expect a marriage proposal but a date would be nice. xxx*

While I waited for news I punched purchase orders into the laptop. The paperwork side of the lodge was never-ending and we hadn't even opened yet. To keep track of what we were spending I entered it every day, but I knew I wouldn't be able to keep it up myself once we were busy with guests. With staff wages, purchases and invoicing, I'd need a full-time bookkeeper to keep things on track. The costs were mounting up with the renovations, but I did some quick breathing exercises to pull me from panic, and then stopped and laughed. Damn Kai and his mumbo jumbo...

An hour later my email pinged. A bride-to-be had seen the chapel photos on Instagram and wanted to visit next month to survey it as a potential wedding venue. I could feel it in my bones that Cedarwood was going to be popular because of its unique appeal. Even with my amateur attempt at photography it was attracting enquiries. I emailed her back and told her about the bridal expo and held my breath as I sent it. There was no going back now. Well, why not! There'd be brides and bouquets as far as the eye could see at Cedarwood Lodge in December if I could pull it off. Who needed sleep anyway?

I jumped up to find Kai and see if he'd stay on and give the chapel the TLC it needed, but then the door swung open, catching me mid-flight.

"Kai, you won't believe..." My words dried up. "Micah, oh, hi. What is it?" He wore a look of mutiny and I knew damn well why. It was all I could do to stifle giggles and instead appear unruffled.

With folded arms he said, "The old set-them-up-and-don't-arrive trick? I really thought your matchmaking days were over, but I guess not." He stared me down and it was all I could do to keep a straight face. He couldn't actually prove I'd done it on purpose.

I put a hand to my chest. "Me? I did no such thing! As you can see..." I gestured to the multitude of paperwork scattered over the desk, notebooks filled with scrawls and laptop glinting with pictures of the lodge on a slideshow. "I've been *extremely* busy and an emergency cropped up. Anyway, how was it?"

He rolled his eyes dramatically. "When you use that chirpy voice it's even more obvious. It was a setup and Aunt Bessie was in on it. She was one step away from lighting candles and serenading us."

*Dang it!* Aunt Bessie, like me, was a hopeless romantic, but wasn't exactly subtle at times. "Did Isla catch on?"

"I'm sure Isla thinks Aunt Bessie is great, if not a little zealous with customer service."

I laughed. "Well, look, you survived a real date!"

Groaning, he fell into a chair and rubbed his face. "She's great: funny, beautiful, and totally eccentric when she talks about flowers, which she does *a lot*, but she's leaving, right? When Cedarwood is finished. So what would be the point? Don't you see, I'm setting myself up for failure if I even consider it? We both know long-distance love doesn't work out. You tried it and failed, right?"

"It didn't work for me, but Timothy and I were so young! That was completely different. This is just another damn excuse from you. It baffles me, Micah!"

"I wish you'd focus on your own love life and leave me be. You're being the world's biggest hypocrite, you know." He ran a hand through his hair, and dropped his gaze like he was confused. Isla had ignited something in him and he just had to work through those feelings and leap!

"Did Cupid strike me with his bow and arrow?" I retorted. "No, he struck you! So don't try and turn this around on me."

"Yeah?" His lip twitched as if he knew a secret. "And you and Kai aren't spending any time alone together?"

I let out a scoff. “That’s only by brute force. He’s got it in his adrenaline-junkie head that climbing up mountains will help me sleep. And it does because my entire body aches afterwards and all I want to do is snooze so I can’t feel the muscle pain.”

He grumbled under his breath and I knew I’d won the battle.

*Men.* Love wasn’t that complicated, surely? My mind drifted to Kai, and as I thought about him packing up his truck with all his tools, and driving off into the sunset, I understood Micah’s worry a little better.

“Yeah, well, dating Isla isn’t a good idea,” he said. “She’s great, but she’s a nomad, going from job to job.”

“Hmm,” I mused. Really, anything could happen, right? Isla could fall in love with Cedarwood and want to stay on...

Had I broached that possibility with her?

### Chapter Nine

“So, I’ll organize someone to fix the stained-glass windows?” Kai leaned against the stone wall of the chapel, pad and pen in hand. It felt cooler inside since the thick limestone walls absorbed the frosty air.

“Yes... ideally I want to keep these windows if they can be restored, rather than replace them.” Sun leached through the glass and colored the stone floor in prisms of light. The stained glass was circa 1920s and I didn’t want to lose any of the heritage. Even if it cost more to find an artist to repair what remained, it would be a worthy investment. The designs were eye-catching – flowers and cherubs, a landscape made from glass – but they were also a marker of another time, and part of the history of Cedarwood.

He continued: “Before we do that, though, the beams have to be raised and the rot at the base fixed. Also, the vestibule is full of rising damp and some of the stones need to be replaced. Aside from that, the main issue is refurnishing it.”

The pews still sat in solemn rows in front of the pulpit but the elements had ravaged them over the years, and sadly they weren’t restorable.

“Could you make new pews?” I asked. “It’s not as though they’re complex, are they?” Kai hadn’t signed on to renovate the chapel, and I wondered briefly if I was looking for an excuse for him to stay. Or was it that I relied on him, and knew he’d do the job properly, safely?

“I could knock some up. If we found some nice timber they’d last for ever. If the snow and rain hadn’t seeped inside these would have too. Once the windows are fixed and the damp sorted the chapel will stay dry and the furniture will be safe all through the winter.” His breath came out wispy with fog from the cold. “I’ll get them done before I leave so you can go ahead with your bridal expo. I’ll submit our plans to the council for approval, but you’ll have to follow up on them once I’m gone. They can get lost sometimes unless you badger them.”

I nodded, feeling a catch in my throat. Perhaps it was the chill of the room. “It’ll be so strange without you here.”

He gave me a weak smile. “No one will force you up the mountain.”

“True. Small mercies and all that.”

We lapsed into silence, as I fumbled for something to say. A knock at the door saved us, so Kai made his excuses and left.

“Have you got a minute?” Isla’s forehead furrowed.

“Sure, what’s up?”

“The grounds beyond the lake are a little unruly, and I wondered if you wanted me to work that far along. Or are we leaving it wilder?”

Beyond the lake was the entrance to one of the walking trails, and the land was overgrown and full of brambles. “We will need to tidy that area if guests wander that far, but it probably won’t be

an issue until spring. I think Kai and Micah are the only ones crazy enough to walk in lashing wind and rain at the moment.”

“OK, well, I’ll add it to the list and see how we go for time.” She shuffled around like there was more she wanted to say.

“Anything else?” I asked, giving her a wide smile.

She chewed on her bottom lip before replying. “Clio, thanks for offering me the contract for Cedarwood. I know you would’ve had applicants with more experience.” It struck me that the bubble we had was bursting. Everyone was thinking of their next job, of leaving Cedarwood for good. I’d miss them all, and what we shared here, and it was hard to believe I’d continue without them. Still, I wouldn’t pine just yet. We had a few more weeks together.

“Your resume was best suited to us. There was no question about your being the right landscaper,” I said, meaning it.

There were times Isla had a kind of solemnity, a heaviness, as though she carried a burden. When that passed she was energetic and lively, but when her guard fell, like now, it was obvious there was something wrong, always hovering just below the surface. I sensed she needed a confidante.

“That’s nice of you to say.” She fiddled with her gardening gloves and wouldn’t meet my eye.

Rays of saffron sun shone through the stained-glass window. “Isla, what is it? You know you can talk to me as a friend.”

“Do you have sisters?” she eventually asked.

I shook my head. “No, I’m an only child. What about you?”

“Same,” she smiled. “With my job, I don’t tend to have many friendships. They’re a little hard to maintain when I pack up and leave all the time. Sometimes I wish I was more grounded, settled, you know?”

Outside, the rumble of a truck started, coughing and spluttering like it was on its last legs – I wouldn’t miss the noise once the renovations were done. “It must be hard moving on all the time.”

She dropped her gaze. “Yes.”

“Well, how about you sit down for five and tell me what’s really bothering you? Whatever you say stays here, in this chapel.”

She gave me such a grateful look my heart nearly tore in two. Maybe that sadness she carried was pure loneliness and I understood that. I’d felt it often enough myself since returning home to Evergreen, but thankfully I had old friends to fall back on.

She moved from foot to foot, the room humming from the noise outside. “I feel like I’ll drown in these feelings if I don’t confide in someone.”

I gestured for her to continue.

She blushed, bringing out the freckles on her nose. “He makes me forget there’s anything in the world except him and we’ve barely even talked. I can’t think straight when he looks at me. It’s the strangest thing. I’ve never felt like that before, and I don’t know what to do.”

“With Micah?”

She nodded.

I hid a smile but inside I was jumping for joy. “Why not meet for a date and see what happens?” Micah had valid reasons for being wary about plunging into love again, but I couldn’t see what was holding Isla back. Shyness, and what else?

“I doubt Micah even knows I’m alive! When we talk it’s like this halting, awkward mess.”

“Nerves, perhaps? On *both* your parts...” It wasn’t my place to tell her how Micah felt but I was sorely tempted, and had to allude to it. Surely she could read the signs?

“Do you think he feels the same?”

I nodded. *Whoops*. What else could I do? Time was running out. Isla would leave soon unless something was done. “I think you’re both struggling with the same feelings and how to act on them.”

Her blush deepened. “Well, that throws up a whole new set of problems. Unrequited love was torment enough, but that is infinitely worse.”

“Why?” I asked, confused.

“I worry...” Her face pinched. “...That Micah will see the *real* me, and it’ll all be over and I’ll have to leave Cedarwood early because it’ll hurt too much to stay.”

“What do you mean, the real you? Unless you’re some kind of knife-wielding maniac in secret...?” I gave her a half-smile.

She laughed. “I can wield the secateurs fairly well, so unless you’re a hedge you’re safe. But it’s more than that.”

“OK... like I said, whatever you tell me stays in this room.”

When she gazed up at me, my heart seized. She wore a look of abject grief, like she was one step away from dissolving into tears. What could make her so unhappy? I moved to embrace her. “Seriously, Isla, talk to me. It can’t be that bad...”

After a deep, shuddery breath she said, “A few years ago I was visiting my parents’ farm for the weekend. It’d been almost a year since I’d seen them. That night their house caught fire. We still don’t know how it started, maybe faulty wiring, something shorted out. It spread so quickly, and it destroyed the house, and all of their farming equipment.”

“Oh, Isla, that must have been terrifying. Were they OK?”

She nodded. “They got out just in time. But I went back in for the dog, Roxie. I couldn’t let her suffer like that, knowing she was trapped and inhaling all that toxic smoke. I raced around the back and into the kitchen where she usually slept, and found her whimpering. As I went to pick her up a beam fell, blocking my path. Roxie scampered over it and out the door, but I got stuck, the smoke distorting my vision. The kitchen collapsed all at once, and I knew I had to clamber through the flames or I’d perish in there. It was the most terrifying thing ever, and I could hear my mom screaming my name. So I just reacted, and ran through the fire. I was burned down my body.”

I let the story float, absorbing it all. “Isla, what a shocking thing to go through. I can only imagine how frightening it was for you and your family, but why would sharing that with Micah matter?”

“The burns.” She swallowed hard. “I’ve never given the scarring much thought because I was so damn grateful to be alive. But now I wonder, how they’ll feel under his touch, how they’ll look... and I just want to retreat. What if it repulses him? Or the thought of it puts him off?”

I hadn’t even thought of the scars. I’d only thought of her near-miss and how terrifying it must’ve been for her. “Oh, Isla. What a thing to worry about. Micah’s...” I groped for something that wouldn’t sound like platitudes, something that would convince her to take a chance. “If you knew him as well as I do, you’d know it would be a non-issue for him.” I paused. “Unless it’s upsetting for you, and then he’d be concerned. Out of all the men in the world, Micah would be the one to make you feel beautiful, because you are beautiful, and those scars, no matter how much you dislike them, are part of your story. They’re part of who you are, and how you got to this point, and I’m sure Micah would say the same. It’s a big ask, me telling you to trust in him, but I think you should.”

Her eyes were glassy with tears. “You really think so, Clio?”

“I really do. You can hide away for ever, but what good would that do you? Why not risk it and see, and I bet you’ll be surprised.” I could only guess Micah would run his fingertips along them, and ask Isla about that night, and make her feel like the most beautiful woman on earth. When he fell in love he was lost to it, and scars or not, their romance would blossom if only they could move on from their pasts. They were utterly perfect for one another and I sent a prayer up to the universe to make it happen for my two friends.

“I guess I’ve built it up into this huge issue and I can’t see past it. It’s like I don’t know who I am any more. I always have this instinct to run, so I never get close to anyone. I don’t know, it’s just easier that way.”

“I can understand that, Isla. What you’ve been through is pretty huge. Have you thought about putting roots down? See what happens when you stay for a while? We’d love to have you full-time at Cedarwood. No pressure, but you’ll always have a place here if you need it. What’s the worst that can happen?”

Hope danced in her eyes. “Really? You want me to stay?”

“Of course! But there’s plenty of time for you to decide. You do what’s right for you.”

“Thanks, Clio. Gosh, it’s good to have another girl to talk to. I miss that.”

“I do too. So let’s make it a regular thing.” I gave her arm a squeeze. Isla needed a friend – it was as obvious as the freckles dotting her nose – and I was more than happy to be that person. And I was glad she’d shared her secret with me. I’d tread gently with my two lovesick friends.

### Chapter Ten

With two short weeks until the party, the lodge facelift was at full speed ahead. Kai and I had spent the better part of the day setting up the sound system in the ballroom, before working around the electricians who were fiddling with wires after the downlights had shorted, then blinked before going dead. In the end I gave up. “Kai, we’re in their way, let’s leave them to it?”

He nodded, and gave the guys a wave, before following me outside. “Let’s head up the mountain,” he said.

My eyebrows shot up. “We’ve lugged boxes all morning, and untangled five million cables, and you want to trudge up a huge mountain? You’re crazy.”

“I won’t have much longer to do it. Come on, humor me,” Kai said.

“OK,” I said reluctantly. Despite my protests, a bit of space from the lodge was just what we both needed. We’d been working since sun up and hadn’t stopped for lunch or an afternoon coffee break. “Where do you come from, Kai? Which part of Australia?” It struck me I could now walk and talk simultaneously up the mountain without my lungs burning.

He jogged up ahead, then spun to face me. “I’m from Bondi, a beachside city, which is always full of tourists. The faces always change with the seasons, but I’m betting that doesn’t happen here.”

“Why’d you leave?” My calf muscles began to protest as the climb steepened.

With hands on hips, he considered the question. “The coastline is beautiful, and Australian beaches are the best. Bright white sand, and the whole surf culture... But it wasn’t enough. I figured I’d pack up and see a bit of the world. Maybe I’d stumble on something that made sense to me. I’ve always felt like there was something more for me than surfing all morning and fixing up other people’s homes in the afternoon.”

“Have you found that mysterious something?”

He laughed. “I’m still searching.”

“And what do you think it is? Money? Waves? Lifestyle?”

He took an age to answer but finally said, “I think it’s a feeling.”

“A feeling?” I mused about what he could mean, ready to tease him, but then I realized we were both similar really...

I went to prod for details when something stopped me. Something was amiss, and it took me a good minute to comprehend it was the smell of smoke in the air. My heart stopped as I turned to face Cedarwood. Plumes of thick black smoke rose from the roof into the lilac sky. “Oh my God, Kai! It’s on fire!”

I skidded forward to get a better look, but from our vantage point we couldn’t see the front of the lodge, or whether everyone was out of harm’s way. My heart raced and my breath grew short as fear seized me. This was my place. My life. Everything I had, all of my dreams were tied to the lodge and... I froze. Micah. Isla. The team.

“Quick...” Kai grabbed my clammy hand to steady me as my body turned liquid, seemingly unable to hold me up. “We have to get down there. We have to make sure everyone is OK.”

“Yes!” I had to calm myself and get down there fast.

Running and skidding down the mountain, brambles ripped at my jacket and scratched my skin. But I couldn't stop. I couldn't stop until I knew Micah was OK. I couldn't lose him. He was like my brother. He knew me inside and out. I couldn't face this world without him and for some reason I had this overwhelming sense he was the person in danger. He'd protect Isla, I knew he would.

The descent was interminable, as my heart thundered in my chest. Cedarwood seemed to glow bright in the sky and, watching the dancing flames, my mind went to Isla and my blood ran cold. She'd be reliving her worst nightmare. I had to get to her. We tumbled to the bottom, muddy and red-faced, the acrid stench of the fire growing stronger as we neared the lodge. Kai was just ahead of me and I motioned for him to go on. The closer I got to the lodge the more my fear choked me.

Breathless, I finally came to the front of the lodge, where a few men stood, eyes wide with shock watching orange flames lick the roof. "Where's Micah? And Isla?" I asked, my voice sharp and shrill with panic as I looked around, desperate for any sign of them. Kai ran around the side of the lodge calling up to see if anyone was inside.

Then, through the smoke, I saw them sitting on the grass out of harm's way. I scrambled over, my eyes stinging.

Micah was wrapped in a blanket, his face black with soot. Isla had a protective arm around him, her features lined with worry. Breathless, fearful, and about to sob, I fell at their feet. "Micah! Micah, oh my God, are you OK?" All I wanted to do was hug him, know he was safe, sure that no matter what happened to Cedarwood I would still have Micah. And beautiful Isla with her scared eyes, and ravaged heart.

He nodded and clutched my hands, giving me a reassuring smile. "I'm fine." Despite his assurance his hands shook and I held on tighter.

"Isla..." I turned to her, aware of how much this fire would have affected her.

She shook her head, as if to say *don't mention it*, so I stayed mute, while I tried to discreetly check Micah for any injuries. Was he burned? His hair was now cropped close to his head in messy tufts, but aside from that and black soot coating his skin, I couldn't see anything else.

A wail of sirens rang out. Fire engines careened into the driveway, followed closely by an ambulance. "Did you inhale much smoke, Micah?" While I was concerned about the lodge, seeing Micah's charred hair and blackened face scared me silly and all I could think of was his safety and that of everyone here.

"A little, but I got out quick. I'm really OK, Clio, but I've got some bad news."

"Shush, Micah. Let's worry about all of that later." I knew he meant the lodge, and the fact we'd have to start over, but right then all I cared about was them.

I turned to Isla again, unable to shake the feeling she was reliving a past nightmare all over again. "Are you really OK?"

She nodded, biting her lip against the tears that threatened to flow. "I'm fine. Everyone is. I couldn't find him, and I wanted to go in, but I... something stopped me, and it was like my feet were made of lead."

I wrapped my arms around her and whispered. "He got out. He's OK."

She swatted at her face with the back of her hand and nodded.

"Can you help him to the ambulance?" She needed to feel like she was helping, that she was there for him, or so I figured. I silently thanked the universe she hadn't raced into the lodge after him. Who knew what might have happened?

Her face pale with worry, she led him to the paramedic who was busy pulling supplies from the ambulance.

The paramedic sat Micah down and asked quick-fire questions, assessing him and dabbing on ointment, fixing on an oxygen mask. Firefighters lined up before running into Cedarwood, hoses clasped tight.

“Don’t worry.” Kai appeared, slightly breathless, at my side. “We’ll fix it.” I didn’t know if he meant the lodge, my stuttering heart, or what.

I shivered, chilled to the bone despite the crackle and heat of the fire the firemen were frantically hosing down, bringing it slowly under control. Would it all go up? My dreams, gone in one big puff of smoke? Kai inched over and wrapped an arm around me. “You’re shaking.”

“Do they know where it started? How?”

“The ballroom,” Kai said.

The ballroom! I sniffled, trying desperately to hide the shock clawing at me. “Is everyone else accounted for?”

Kai nodded. “Everyone’s fine. Joe the carpenter was the only other person inside when it happened. We think it was the same downlights that shorted out before; they were set too close to the insulation. And when the electrician fixed the wiring, the heat from the lights set fire to the padding. We’ll have to check once it’s out. But Micah saved the room, pretty much, Clio. He got up there fast with a fire extinguisher and managed to put most of it out. Without his quick actions the whole place would have gone up. Joe got out, but when Micah didn’t follow he went back in, and found him. He’d been overcome with smoke by then.”

“He could have died in there.” I shuddered at the thought. Micah would have been thinking only of me and Cedarwood, of the hopes I’d pinned on the place, and not his own life.

How close to disaster we’d come.

A fireman walked over and removed his mask. “It looks worse than it is,” he said. “The room has sustained a lot of damage, and the floor above it, but it’s mostly cosmetic. Close call, but your friend managed to keep it at bay.”

I tried to respond but my voice caught. I tried to compose myself to speak. “Thank...” I swallowed hard as the actualization hit me anew. In the end I gave up and let the tears flow.

The fireman patted my shoulder and said to Kai, “It’s shock. Better if you get Clio out of here for the night. Tell everyone to stay away. We’ll keep a few guys here just in case. The paramedic is taking Micah and Joe to hospital for observation.”

“Sure,” he said. “I’ll tell everyone to pack up and head home. Thanks for all of your help.” The fireman nodded and went back to his team. Kai pulled me close, and I rested my head against his chest. The steady thrum of his heart was a comfort as I tried to think rationally.

Kai lifted a finger to my chin. “Are you going to be OK if I go chat with everyone? I’ll only be a second.”

I wiped at my face. “I should speak to them. I can...”

“Hey,” he said. “You’re upset. And rightly so. It’s a big shock and no one is going to hold it against you if you sit for a while. I’ll be right back.”

Isla darted a glance to the firefighters before jogging to me. “I’m going to go with Micah. Just so he’s got someone with him. OK? I’ll report back as soon as we know anything. Will you be all right?”

“I’m totally fine. He’d love that. And please, call me as soon as they check him over.” Micah was in good hands; he didn’t need me hovering over him, wringing my hands and pacing. Still, it was hard to switch the worry off.

Isla gave me a quick hug and ran back to the ambulance, hoisting herself inside before they shut the double doors.

The tradespeople gathered their tools and gave me somber waves as they headed for their vehicles. I sucked in a breath of air, trying to steady my heartbeat. We’d been lucky, so very lucky. Thankfully Micah had installed fire extinguishers into every single room before anyone so much as picked up a hammer. And he was OK, wasn’t he? He’d be OK. Sobs started anew as I imagined a very different scenario, a world without my friend. And I vowed we’d do another safety check before any work recommenced at Cedarwood.

Kai was staying in a motel the next town over, in a basic room with a tiny kitchenette and small bathroom. There was a double bed, a sofa, and an old box TV on a buffet. I was tucked up on his sofa, phone resting on the arm, waiting for any news about Micah.

“Thanks for the coffee,” I said. “I should probably go. I don’t want to intrude any more than I have.”

Just then my phone buzzed, and I answered without looking at the display. “Isla?”

“Clio! Oh, thank God, are you OK?” My mom’s desperate voice screeched down the line.

“I’m good, Mom. You heard about the fire I take it?” My voice came out limp. I couldn’t fake it with her today.

“Yes, why didn’t you call? Are you sure you’re OK?”

Kai motioned to the door, as if he understood the need to speak privately. I nodded thanks. “I was going to head over to you. I’m with Kai... I’m fine, Mom. I wasn’t close when it broke out. But Micah was. He’s in hospital under observation and so is one of the carpenters. We’re worried about the amount of smoke inhalation at this stage.”

“Poor Micah. I bet he was the hero, wasn’t he?” Her voice was soft with pride. Mom had always liked him. The Micah effect – everyone did.

“If it wasn’t for him there’d be no more Cedarwood. I owe him everything. But still, I wish he hadn’t put himself in harm’s way. I’d choose him over property any day of the week.”

“That place, Clio...”

“What?”

“I think you should sell it. Get out, get away before something truly terrible happens.”

I sighed. “It was an accident, Mom. There’s bound to be accidents, no matter how much we try and prevent them. This was a one-off, an electrical issue that will be investigated to make sure it doesn’t happen again. To advise me to sell seems a bit dramatic. Why do you hate the lodge so much, anyway?” Again, I had that overwhelming feeling it was about more than the bricks and mortar of the place, and right then I was tired of pussyfooting around her.

“I just don’t like the idea of you in that big, old lodge alone.”

“I won’t be alone. Eventually I’ll have guests staying in the rooms. You could always sell your cottage and live with me. There’s plenty of room, you know.”

She gasped as if that idea was preposterous. “That place is hexed, I’m telling you right now.”

“What, Mom? What do you mean it’s hexed?”

“Nothing. I didn’t mean to say... that.”

She was speaking Mom riddles again. “Can we stop sidestepping the real reason for once? Do you have some connection with the lodge I don’t know about?” My mind reeled through possible reasons. The previous owners? “Did you know the woman who lived there? The one whose husband abandoned her and the business?”

There was a pause. My pulse sped up. Was Mom connected to the former owners? If so, why hadn’t anyone breathed a word of it to me? Evergreen was a small town. Surely something would have got back to me after all these years, unless... it was something they all wanted to forget.

“No,” she said, her voice tight. “If you’re coming to stay here for the night, I’ll leave the key out. I have to go to bed...”

“Actually, I think I’d better stay where I am and wait for news. I don’t want to disturb you.” In actual fact, I couldn’t be bothered with Mom and her delicate moods. And I knew she was hiding something and I’d probably push her to breaking point trying to find out what it was.

“Pass on my love to Micah.”

Did I imagine it, or was she rushing me off the phone, grateful for the reprieve?

“Bye, Mom.”

I turned to Kai, who’d reappeared, frowning.

“Problem?” he asked.

I shrugged. “Nothing serious.” It was too soon to confide my suspicions to anyone. Besides, I couldn’t exactly explain it when I had no real information. “I think we should go visit Micah at the hospital. Isla hasn’t called and I’m worried.”

“Let’s go.” Nothing ruffled Kai. Maybe it was the Australian side of his nature – he was a laid-back, roll-with-the-punches kind of guy. I liked that he was still in control, but moved through life in a fluid, easy-going way.

At the hospital we found the nursing station and asked about Micah and Joe. With a smile, the young nurse pointed us to a room further along the corridor with assurances that Joe had been discharged and was totally fine, and that Micah was being observed overnight and would likely be discharged first thing in the morning. Relief flooded me, and I pulled Kai forward, counting room numbers.

We came to a single room, with the sound of a TV blaring some cops and robbers show. I was about to knock when I saw them and wrenched my hand back. Isla was on the small bed next to Micah, running the pad of her finger along his jawline, before kissing him softly on the lips and then murmuring quietly to him as he closed his eyes.

I nudged Kai, who stood behind me, and moved out of sight. Kai grinned, lacing his hand through mine to pull me away. Once we were out of earshot Kai said, “I think Micah is *totally* fine. And in good hands.” He wagged his eyebrows just like Micah would do. My heart just about exploded with so many feelings – relief, awe, happiness... and hope that my two friends had opened their hearts to one another.

“Let’s get out of here,” I whispered, wanting to dance down the hushed, antiseptic-scented corridor. Micah deserved to tumble into love with someone gorgeous, bubbly and free-spirited like Isla.

“The night is young. Should we get a bottle of wine and head to the lake at Cedarwood?”

I gasped. “The lake? Are you crazy? It’ll be freezing!”

He shrugged. “We’ll take a couple of blankets. When’s the last time you switched off your phone, lay on your back and counted stars?”

“Counted stars?”

“Yeah,” he laughed. “Soak up some of the moonlight – it’s good for the soul, like midnight yoga... but I’ll let you off that activity for tonight.”

The autumnal sky was pitch-black, and there was a bite to the air. “OK, why not? But it’ll be even colder by the lake, just so you know, you with your sensitive Australian skin.”

“I can handle it,” he laughed. “The view will be worth it.”

I shook my head, bemused to be getting myself into such a situation. Even though we’d been told to stay away from Cedarwood, I felt like a worried parent, and I’d be glad to see the lodge for myself from a distance and make sure it was OK. I’m sure, deep down, Kai sensed that and had made up the counting stars idea to make me feel like I wasn’t some needy parent, returning to the nest, when in fact I was.

We gathered wine and glasses from Kai’s motel, pulled blankets from the bed, and drove back to Cedarwood, winding down the driveway past the lodge. It looked gloomy in its abandoned state, with the smell of smoke and sadness still heavy in the air. A part of me wanted to go inside and investigate, but we weren’t cleared as yet to enter. The thought of the lodge sitting empty for a night hurt right down to my soul. Sentimental or not, it was part of me now.

“We were lucky today,” Kai said, as if guessing my mood as he drove past the lodge and toward the lake.

“Damn lucky.” No matter what happened once we investigated tomorrow, if our plans ground to a halt, I’d for ever be grateful that Micah, Isla and Joe were safe.

“Once we have the report from the firefighters, we’ll gear up to get the ballroom back into shape as quickly as we can. We can do it,” Kai said, his voice resolute. “We’ll just have to get everyone to help.”

I searched his face. “You think so?”

He nodded, parked the truck under a copse of white cedar trees, and killed the engine. “I *know* so. It’s important not only for your future but for morale. Everyone has worked so hard, and they want to see it finished. I didn’t tell you before, but I’ve had calls from the previous laborers, and they’ve offered to come back if we need them.”

Those weary tradespeople who’d left Cedarwood with tired faces after such long, hard days? “They’d come back and start over?”

“You treated everyone like they were part of the family, and they want to see this place done. Of course they will.”

Something fluttered inside me, hope maybe. “Wow, OK.” I shook away the worry and angst from the day, their compassion giving me a boost. “We can do it! No matter what we find tomorrow, there will be a solution so Imelda and Edgar can still have their party here.” I was used to solving crises, right? That’s what I was paid to do. Make it work, no matter what!

“That’s the spirit!” He grinned, and my heart beat staccato. Kai was one of the good ones.

We laid our rug by the lake, the wind icy as it blew toward us. “We’re going to catch our death here.” I laughed and fell back, gazing up at the star-filled sky. The moon was a fuzzy yellow orb, illuminating the ripples on the water like diamonds.

“Do you think they’ll end up together?” he asked.

“Isla and Micah... I don’t know. He was with Veronica – Ronnie, we called her – for most of our teens, right up until a couple of years ago. I thought I’d come back to Evergreen and they’d be living the American dream. But she left, and it tore him up pretty bad. When I think of love, I always picture those two, the way they finished each other’s sentences, cast these long looks that conveyed some private meaning, and sensed each other’s needs on some deep level. He’s adamant he doesn’t want anything serious, but Isla is pretty damn amazing, and I think, despite being younger than him, she’s mature and sensitive in a way that suits him.” It still hurt the edge of my heart thinking that Ronnie had waltzed out of Micah’s life in such a blasé fashion, so coldly, leaving such damage in her wake. Though I was one to talk. I’d left my best friend too and hadn’t made a quarter as much effort at keeping in touch as I should have. Life had just got so busy...

“Some relationships are a warm-up for the real thing. Maybe the first one was just practice.”

I turned to face him. “Do you really believe that?”

With his hands clasped across his belly, he said, “It makes sense, right? Do you think you’re only allowed or allotted one love your entire life?”

“If I say yes does that make me seem naïve?” I plowed on. “I guess I thought you’d recognize true love when you saw it. Like the world would flip over, colors would brighten, it would be like having your favorite song on repeat.” Oh God, had I really just said that to him?

But deep and meaningful Kai didn’t laugh. Instead, he contemplated it before saying, “Maybe. Have you been in love before?”

I sighed. “You know that guy we saw in town? Timothy?” He nodded. “We were high-school sweethearts, I suppose a much more subdued version of Micah and Ronnie. But looking back I think it was puppy love. In New York I had lots of *first* dates, but work was hectic and I couldn’t or wouldn’t commit to men who counted three months as a long-term relationship. What about you?”

He pushed his hands under his head. “There was a girl back home. But when it came down to it, there wasn’t enough between us for it to go anywhere. I felt a little like a cardboard cutout, going through the motions as if it was expected of me. Meet a girl, move in together, and eventually propose. But it never felt quite right. I left Australia, with no hard feelings between us, searching for something else. I don’t know whether it’s love or a different life, or something spiritual I want. All I

know is that, if I'd stayed, suddenly I'd be sixty and looking back wondering why I felt so empty. I want more, as selfish as it sounds. Or if not more, something truer.”

“Do you think the tiny town of Evergreen is the answer?”

He faced me, moonlight reflected in his eyes. “Could be. I have an affinity for this place. Like I belong. Maybe it's being so close to nature. I've always been happier in the wild than out with a bunch of people. Weird, huh?” He took a sip of wine and cupped his glass by his side.

“Not weird. Evergreen is the kind of place you can get lost in if you want. You've climbed the mountains, you know how easy it is to find solitude here.”

“Until Cedarwood Lodge is alive and kicking.”

“From your mouth to the universe's ears.” I laughed.

A shooting star flashed across the sky leaving a phosphorous trail.

I made a wish. That Kai would find what he was searching for, and that he'd find it close to Evergreen.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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