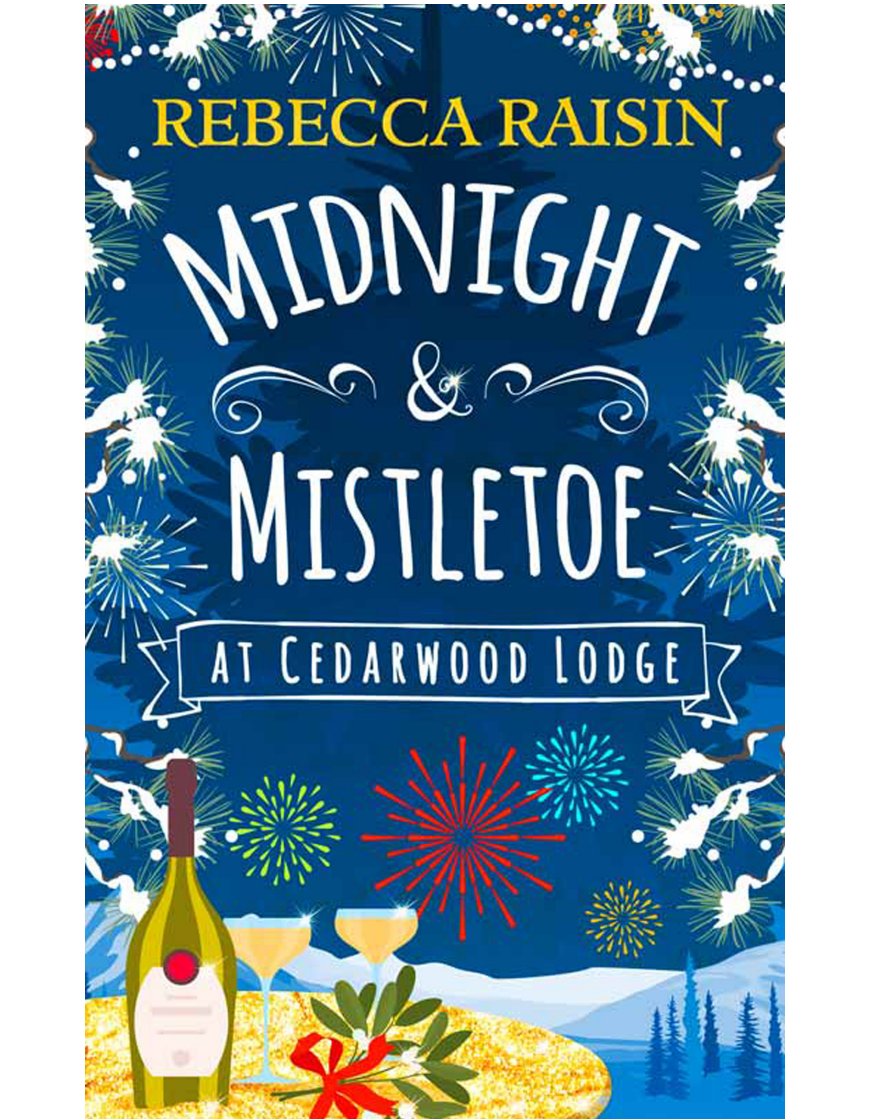




REBECCA RAISIN

MIDNIGHT

&

MISTLETOE

AT CEDARWOOD LODGE



Rebecca Raisin
Midnight and Mistletoe
at Cedarwood Lodge

Аннотация

Join Rebecca Raisin for the final part of the heart-warming Cedarwood Lodge serial and see who might be kissing at midnight... Planning a New Years Eve Party might be the kind of event Clio Winters used to dream about organising, but when everything is feeling a bit up in the air, she has to hope that this New Years her wish really will come true. Cedarwood Lodge is a delectable romance told in three parts – following Clio Winters journey back to her hometown of Evergreen. This is the final part in this feel-good romance serial.

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Join Rebecca Raisin for the final festive part of the Cedarwood Lodge serial and see who might be kissing under the mistletoe...

Planning a New Year's Eve party might be the kind of event Clio Winters used to dream about organising, but when everything is feeling a bit up in the air, she has to hope that this New Year's her wish really will come true.

Cedarwood Lodge is a delectable romance told in three parts – following Clio Winters' journey back to her home town of Evergreen. This is the final part in this feel-good romance serial.

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‘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*

‘Easy to read and devoured quickly, I literally could not get enough and I was so sad to finish it. It was a truly captivating, spellbinding tale of taking chances and living life to the full that I am sure will ring true with many readers.’ – Compelling Reads, *The Little Bookshop on the Seine*

‘...the perfect read to get you in the mood for Christmas and my mouth was watering after reading about all of the delicious-sounding baking.’ – Bookbabblers, *A Gingerbread Café*

Christmas

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Midnight and Mistletoe

Rebecca Raisin



ONE PLACE. MANY STORIES

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.

Follow her on Twitter [@jaxandwillsmum](https://twitter.com/jaxandwillsmum)

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As always a huge thank you to those who read, blog and chat about my books. There's far too many people to name them

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This one is for my cousin Tracy Farr. The coolest, funniest girl there is, and who supports my writing, always. Love you lots.

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Chapter One

The golden vocals of Frank Sinatra singing *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas* drifted upstairs to greet me. Feeling decidedly festive, I wrenched the bedcovers back and raced to the bay window. Outside, the frosty ground was blanketed by snow and the mountains in the distance slumbered under dense white. If you squinted you could make out tracks in the snow from Santa's reindeers. OK, maybe not, but a girl could dream...

From downstairs came the rattle of cups, the shrieking of the kettle – someone was up and about and, from the scents wafting my way, baking something Christmassy.

Not wanting to miss a thing, I pulled on my robe and went to investigate. Even at thirty-three the joy of Christmas had never left me. Taking the stairs two at a time, I practically bounced into the warmth of the kitchen. Cruz had brewed a pot of gingerbread coffee and handed me a cup. The spicy ginger scent was synonymous with Christmas and gave me the desire to eat my bodyweight in baked goods – from gingerbread families to reindeer cookies, and as many of Aunt Bessie's donuts as I could carry in two hands. After all, New Year's resolutions were made for a reason, right?

"Thanks, and Merry Christmas, Cruz!"

"Merry Christmas, Clio. Nice PJs." He raised a sardonic brow. Staring down at my ensemble I couldn't help but smirk. Isla

and Micah had gifted us all kitschy Christmas-themed gifts. My pajamas were festooned with grinning red-nosed reindeers and merry mistletoe; the material was so vividly red they were blink inducing. Let's just say you wouldn't have missed me even if you were in the next town over. My dressing gown covered most of the garishness but not quite enough apparently.

"Right?" I laughed.

A moment later I walked Amory, wearing *her* gift from Isla and Micah. Flashing candy cane earrings and a matching headband.

"Aww you look so... Christmassy." I grinned. I hadn't seen Amory embrace the holidays with quite so much flamboyance so early in the morning before.

"Coffee."

We laughed at Amory's usual one word dawn greeting, her Grinch-like tone a total opposite to her flashing festive accessories. Even on Christmas morning she was unable to communicate until caffeine was pumping through her veins. I poured her a gingerbread coffee and she gulped it down, then held the cup out for another, which she sipped a little more *gingerly*.

I gave her the prerequisite three minutes to let it work its magic before saying: "Did you hear the sleigh bells last night?"

She rolled her eyes dramatically. "Is that some kind of euphemism? Because if you want to know about my sex life all you need to do is ask."

A shocked giggle escaped me. “Amory!” Cruz turned away and did his best to appear busy, though I could see his shoulders shake with silent laughter.

“What? Isn’t that what you meant?” she grinned, the evil minx she was.

“No it isn’t! I meant *actual* sleigh bells! I think someone in town must have been marching around as Santa last night. Maybe we missed a Christmas parade or something.”

“Oh, my bad.” Her face was the picture of innocence but it was hard to concentrate when she had all manner of kitschy Christmas jewelry flashing from her head. “Of course something like that would be happening in a town like Evergreen, darling! There seems to be a festival for everything here.”

I smiled as I took a sip of coffee. Amory was right, Evergreen prided itself on having an event for every season. I’d missed the autumn food festival, but the switching on of the town lights and the ginormous Christmas tree had been truly spectacular. And before long, the spring flower festival would be here.

“And I see you’re wearing *your* gift,” Amory said, motioning to Cruz.

On top of Cruz’s head was a novelty chef’s hat announcing, *No soggy bottoms this Christmas!*

He grimaced. “Well, I figure I have three hundred and sixty-four days that I *don’t* have to wear it. And I only whipped it on when I heard footsteps and thought it might be Isla checking up on me.” With a grin, he pulled it off and threw it on the bench.

“Oh no, here comes Isla comes now!” Amory hissed. I darted a glance over my shoulder, sure Isla and Micah were elsewhere. They’d left in the early hours of this morning, after our Christmas Eve celebrations finally came to a close, in order to make it to Micah’s family Christmas.

Cruz’s eyes widened and he fumbled and cursed as he stuffed it back on.

“Just joking! Isla and Micah aren’t coming for breakfast today.”

He narrowed his eyes and clutched at his heart. “You’re evil. *Pure* evil.”

Amory laughed. “But you make it so easy!”

Cruz was the epitome of politeness and it was almost impossible for us not to play practical jokes or tease him mercilessly. He took it in good humor, and it made the busy days a little more fun.

“And,” I said, “Isla has spies, she’ll know if you’re not wearing your hat.”

Shaking his head, he donned the offending item, and said with a smile, “It’s a lovely hat. *The best.*”

“You’re a lucky man.” Amory stood to kiss him, and I felt a moment of pure joy for my friends. A few weeks ago it didn’t look like their love would last, they’d both envisioned different futures; Cruz sought the American dream: a house in the ‘burbs, kids, a nine-to-five job... and Amory wanted the exact opposite, and had no desire to have children, ever. After lots of back and

forth they'd managed to compromise because they loved each other above all else, even if that meant sacrificing their own dreams. It gave me hope for my own love life... or lack thereof.

"You should see what Isla got for Micah's parents. Bright Kermit green *Christmas onesies*. With matching slippers. They'll certainly be warm, if nothing else." Amory giggled.

I blamed Henrietta from the gift shop in town for encouraging Isla; still, when we'd given out presents the night before our laughter had turned into a fully-fledged cackle-fest as the gifts got sillier by the moment. When she produced a talking elf you could teach to speak, the night disintegrated into chaos with everyone wanting to take a turn, teaching the innocent elf some not-so-innocent phrases.

It had been an endless evening of laughter until Micah had presented Isla with her very own real life constellation that he'd named after her; we'd let out a collective *aww*, and the night ended on a sweet note with everyone loved up, and me dreaming of being loved up...

Speaking of loved up. "Where's Kai?" I knew full well that man did not sleep in, rain, hail, shine or snow.

"Trudging up the mountain," Cruz said as he flipped pancakes. "He invited me and as tempting as it was, I couldn't let you girls wake up Christmas morning without a decent breakfast and gingerbread coffee now, could I?"

"Riiiiight," I said. "Sure, you couldn't."

He ducked his head and laughed. "I'm all for exercise but not

in a blizzard. Still, he should be back soon, he left ages ago.”

I tutted, glancing out the window at the snowflakes seesawing down, the scene was Christmas card perfect when you were warm beside a fire *inside*. Battling the elements outside was another thing entirely.

“I’ll stoke the pot belly stove so he can defrost when he gets back, crazy fool that he is.” I’d never known anyone like Kai. There was something in nature that pulled at him, like he needed time each day to be alone, somewhere he could hear himself think. The city didn’t suit him at all, nature lover that he was, and his time in San Francisco had drained him and snatched the light from his eyes. I couldn’t believe he’d soon be heading back to San Fran. Cedarwood didn’t feel quite right when he was gone.

Fairy lights blinked intermittently from window frames, brightening the somber skies. Cruz busied himself folding fresh berries into sheets of puff pastry and Amory drank gingerbread coffee like her life depended on it.

In the silence I thought of my mom, and how she’d react when she found out that Isla had discovered the maze last night. In my heart of hearts, I knew I couldn’t bring it up today, she’d shut down and it had the potential to ruin Christmas. Mom was a sensitive soul at the best of times and the idea of telling her today made my stomach somersault. How would she react? It was hard to know how to broach it with her.

“What are you making?” I asked as a pan sizzled, glad for the distraction. Cruz didn’t just cook for the sake of cooking, he went

all out, even though it was just the four of us eating Christmas breakfast. All good practice, he claimed, because he was rusty after having worked in finance for the last ten years, and wanted to get his skills sharpened before guests started arriving at the lodge in the new year and ahead of the events we had booked.

“It’s a *berry* nice Christmas tree. There’ll be a star at this end,” he said, indicating to the top of an intricately folded pastry shaped like a tree, “and I’ll serve it with lashings of Chantilly cream, and raspberry compote.”

“I *might* have to walk up the mountain after eating that, to make room for lunch at Aunt Bessie’s as well. I can see today is going to be mostly about gorging, and I am totally OK with that.”

“Me too,” Amory said, lifting her coffee mug in agreement. “After all, it’s Christmas and it would be rude not to. What time are we expected at Aunt Bessie’s?”

“Any time before lunch. I was going to leave after breakfast and help her out...” I ignored Amory’s snigger at the idea of me attempting to help cook, “... and you guys can make your way there whenever you’re ready. Micah and Isla are spending the day with his family, but they might pop over late afternoon if they get time.”

“And Kai?” she wagged her eyebrows.

“Are you having another eyelash malfunction?” I asked innocently.

She laughed. “Touché.”

“Kai can come with me, or hitch a ride with you guys. It’s up

to him.”

With a flick of her hair, like she was considering it, she said, “Oh we’re full up, sorry. He’ll have to go with you.”

“Is that so?” I folded my arms and stared her down, knowing she was trying to push us together, and secretly glad about it, not that I’d let her know that! “Full up with what exactly? There’s only two of you!”

“Presents.” She waved her hand. “You know how it is.”

Cruz deftly ignored our conversation and put the tray of berry pastry in the oven, the jammy smell of warmed fruit scented the air.

“Well I’m sure you can squeeze him in if he doesn’t want to go so early. He might have other things to do first.”

Like call his parents. In Australia it would be dinnertime on Christmas Day, and I wondered if Kai had called them yet.

Were they sitting around their Christmas dinner table with long faces, trying to be jovial for guests but failing miserably, worried their son was elsewhere in the world and hadn’t made contact? I knew the whole situation was complex but Kai was too caring to let anyone suffer. Especially on such a family oriented day. Or so I hoped.

“Darling, here he is now. Let’s ask him, shall we?” Amory gestured to the window and I caught a glimpse of Kai as he jogged past, shoulders dusted white with snow.

A few minutes later, he walked into the kitchen. “Morning all,” he said, rubbing his hands together for warmth. His wavy

blond hair was mussed from the sheeting wind and snow, his cheeks stained pink from the crisp air. If you were into rugged, super hot guys with a toned physique he'd have been right up your alley.

Phwoar, he was certainly breathtaking to look at. *Smile, act normal!* The kiss from the night before replayed in my mind, and it was all I could do not to get starry-eyed and fall into a Kai daydream.

I nodded hello, not trusting myself to speak, lest I say something inane.

“Morning,” Amory said, flashing him a smile. “We were just discussing the logistics of Christmas lunch. Is it OK if you head to Aunt Bessie’s with Clio a little earlier than us? We’ve got some errands to run and don’t want to hold you up.”

Errands to run on Christmas Day? She was incorrigible.

Still, Kai swallowed the lie, “Sure, that’d be great.” When he smiled at me I pretended to be interested in a spot out the window, so I could let the blush creeping up my cheeks settle. But boy, it was hard to know how to act, or what to say, when we kept stealing kisses and then acting like nothing had happened. With Kai’s current family issues lurking in his heart, I didn’t want to be another complication and he would be leaving soon anyway. Maybe back to Australia, if they mended bridges, and did I really want to pine for someone who was that far away? It was better to protect my heart, and wait and see what happened before I plunged headfirst into anything.

When Kai grabbed a coffee and sat next to me I tried hard to look composed. The kitchen was a cozy nook, warm from the old belching pot belly stove, and full of delicious foodie scents as Cruz cooked a feast while we chatted about every little thing. The only problem was Amory kept throwing me secret looks that any fool could see. Each time, I frowned at her, gave an almost imperceptible shake of my head. She knew Kai was leaving soon, so I don't know what she expected me to do about it. Instead I waited patiently for the breakfast Cruz was preparing. He seemed to be whipping and baking what appeared to be enough food to feed a small country. Oh how I loved Christmas!

"Cruz, you know there's only four of us, right?" Amory called over as he placed another tray in the oven.

"You can't call it Christmas morning if there's no monkey bread," he said, as if we were crazy for even thinking such a thing.

"Monkey bread?" Amory asked.

"You haven't had monkey bread? Please tell me you've at least tried Christmas tamales?"

She gave a quick shake of her head, her candy cane earrings swinging and blinking merrily.

"You, my lucky lady, are about to be educated on what makes a perfect Christmas breakfast."

I wasn't sure what the hell monkey bread was either but it certainly looked pretty damn good. A man who could cook, and better yet was actually professionally trained in the culinary arts, was a keeper. Even *undomestic* goddess Amory could see it and

was coming around to our small town living ways. In Evergreen, if someone cooked you food, you damn well ate it. There was no *I'm on a diet* here. People would frown like you were insane if you so much as uttered the words, *put the dressing on the side...* or *hold the butter*.

Once upon a time there was zero chance Amory would have sat down and consumed so many varieties of carbs – neither would I, for that matter! In New York we'd been so accustomed to following fads. So much had changed in just a few months being back home and now she was much more lax about restrictions and would end up fighting me over the last gingerbread cookie. Another positive to living out here meant we got plenty of exercise – zooming around the grounds and inside the lodge all day every day, including trudging up the stairs a million times sure worked up an appetite, that and the abundance of fresh air, or that was my excuse anyway. Sure, it wasn't a gym on the Upper East Side, but it was a hell of a lot prettier and a lot more fun.

An hour later the table was laden with the biggest Christmas breakfast I'd ever seen. I touched my belly in apology, because there was no way I was going to be able to hold back from demolishing it all: from the monkey bread and caramel sauce to the crisp *berry nice* Christmas tree; the steaming cheese and chili tamales; and a helping of eggnog pancakes with lashings of butterscotch cream. And that's what I could see in front of me, Cruz was still stirring pots and flicking frying pans. We'd be

living on leftovers for a week at this rate.

Beside me, Kai sent a look to the heavens as if he was also apologizing then helped himself to a huge serving of the pastry tree, the bright berries as fragrant as they were pretty. With a grin, he took up a slice of monkey bread and drowned it in caramel sauce.

“Your body is your temple, hey?” Amory teased him.

I grinned. I could hardly believe it, Kai – who ran up mountains for fun, practiced yoga at midnight and waxed lyrical on the pros of fermented vegetables – had a sweet tooth? It was good to see he was a mere mortal...

He blushed. “Well, I’ll be extra nice to my body tomorrow.”

“And what a body it is.” I said, and instantly wanted to slap my forehead. I coughed. “What I meant was...” *Yeah, Clio, what did you mean?* “... you can obviously see that you work out, and um... eat well, and that reflects in your... erm physique.” *Kill me.*

He winked, which of course provoked what I’d come to call *tremble leg* and I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Honestly, my brain was betraying me in the worst way. I didn’t dare look at Amory, even though I could feel her gaze on me like a laser beam.

Heat crept from my toes to my nose, and I concentrated really hard on staring into the coffee in my mug. I’d have buried my head in it if I could have. It was like being a teenager all over again... was it glaringly obvious to those around me?

It was kissing him again that did it. My lips tingled every time I

remembered, and he'd even stolen into my dreams. It was almost impossible to eat because my nerves were fluttering in my belly like the tips of butterfly wings, but I made an effort, since it was Christmas and Cruz had cooked such a feast. I couldn't possibly let any of it go to waste...

Chapter Two

After the gargantuan breakfast we'd put away, we were about to head off and somehow eat more. I already felt like napping, a surefire sign it was Christmas because I was floppy with relaxation and a very full belly.

Kai and I piled the backseat of my car with gifts and bottles of wine for Mom and Aunt Bessie. The sudden need to be organized and make sure we didn't forget anything calmed my nerves. It was only a fifteen minute drive to Aunt Bessie's, but with icy roads it would probably take twice as long to get there.

All set, we jumped in and turned the heat to high. We wove through the slushy streets, passing children bundled up in scarves, puffer jackets and mittens making snowmen in their front yards. Others tried out their new sleds, careering down long driveways and landing in a giggling heap amidst piles of snow. I smiled, remembering the excitement of Christmas as a child, waking up to find Santa had visited, discovering reindeer footprints in the snow, left by Aunt Bessie, who always made the magic real, despite whatever was going on at home.

"What are Australian Christmases like?" I asked, breaking the silence. "Do you spend them on the beach in the sunshine? Have a light seafood lunch instead of a traditional roast turkey or ham?" Did his parents fuss over him, wearing beaming smiles, proud that they'd raised him right? The thought of them missing him

today of all days hurt my heart.

“Pretty much,” he grinned and his eyes lit up as if with memories of merry Christmases. “We have a traditional lunch with turkey and all the trimmings, but we also do seafood on the barbecue, and eat outside to escape the heat in the kitchen. My parents live by the beach so we usually go for a swim at some point, and share a bottle of wine as the sun sets.”

“It must be so strange being here – all the snow and cold?”

He laughed, “It is, yes, but I like the change. Good to experience that American Christmas you see in the movies.”

We lapsed into another silence as we drove the snowy route. “I wanted to thank you, though, for inviting me to spend Christmas with your family. It means a lot, Clio.”

His gaze was intense, as if he wasn’t only thinking of *my* family. “They must be missing you this year,” I said, sensing he was thinking of his parents. His body stiffened slightly. Bingo. Part of me was relieved he cared; of course he cared, he was Kai after all. Maybe he just needed a push to reach out to his parents again. Someone to be the voice of reason? “Did you speak to your parents today?”

He took a full minute to answer. “No, I haven’t called yet.” He let out a sigh, “I don’t feel great about it, either. I dialed so many times, and then hung up before it connected. Like, what do I say, *‘Hey, merry Christmas! It’s your son who’s not actually your son.’*” There was a bitterness to his voice, and real pain shone in his eyes. I knew he didn’t want to hurt them, he just didn’t know

how to be this new Kai who'd found out he was adopted.

I gripped the steering wheel tighter as I turned a corner. What would I do in the same situation? Probably retreat too. Isn't that what I had done when things got too hard with my mom? Packed a suitcase and headed to New York, and didn't look back until I was forced to.

But I couldn't help think that whether Kai was related to them by blood or by love, did it really matter in the long run? Love was love, right?

"You should call them, Kai. They're probably heartsick over it all too, you know. I don't think it matters much what you say. Just call them, for their sake, if not your own."

What I was picturing was my own mom, sitting at the table on Christmas Day for the last few years, missing her absent daughter. Guilt roiled inside me that I'd left her alone so long. I had left for good reason and stayed away for self-preservation, but that didn't change the fact that I should've reached out sooner. While our relationship hadn't been normal in any sense of the word, I knew she wouldn't ever ask for help even if she desperately needed it, and I'd simply packed up and left without so much as a backward glance. Maybe I could stop Kai doing the same thing; he shouldn't have to live with the regret, or wishing things had turned out differently.

As it stood I wasn't even sure if my mom would hug *me* and wish me a merry Christmas today. Her moods went up and down like a yoyo, and I was never certain how she would be. Sure,

things had been getting better, but would she even look me in the eye and *really* see me?

Kai had dream parents, ones who'd cheered him on at his surf comps and football games, then later supported him through university, all with one goal in mind – a successful future for him. He'd told me all about them and it was hard to think they'd want anything for him but the best. Yeah, they should have probably told him he was adopted earlier – but they kept silent out of fear they'd lose him, and now they had.

He rubbed at his face. "I know. And I don't want to hurt them. *Really*, I don't. My silence isn't some kind of revenge. It's more that I'm lost about how to be, what to say. They'll hear it in my voice. I just can't believe I had birth parents I won't ever get to meet. I won't be able to see if I have the same color eyes as my dad, the same smile as my mom... you know? I *am* angry, and I can't help it. I keep hoping that it'll subside and then we can move on. But it hasn't. What if it never does?" His voice was low and anguished and I wished I knew the right thing to say.

Houses crowded closer together the nearer we got to the town; twinkling Christmas lights flashed behind lace curtains, tinsel was strung across neat hedges, and wreaths blew sideways on front doors. Every house looked like a fully decorated gingerbread house, only on a real-life scale.

"I understand all of that, Kai, I think I'd feel the same. But I think the only way forward is to deal with it now, otherwise you're just sweeping it under the carpet, and you of all people

know how toxic that is.”

Using Kai’s philosophy on himself seemed fitting. He was a big believer in letting out negative emotions, and concentrating on the positive, through breathing exercises, yoga and meditation. While I teased him relentlessly about his surfer yogi guru prowess, it really had made a difference to me, no matter how crazy doing the lotus position at midnight might have looked to an outsider. And I think he probably needed to practice what he preached, for his own sanity.

“You make it sound so easy, Clio. But how do I articulate to them how I really feel without letting my anger creep in? I know they’re hurt too. What if I make it worse? Wouldn’t it be easier to just keep silent until I work it all out?”

I considered it. Who was I to advise him anyway? I still hadn’t mended things with Mom and I was walking into Christmas keeping a secret from her. But for some inexplicable reason, I felt calling them was the right thing for Kai to do. “I don’t know them Kai, but I’d hazard a guess they’d prefer you yelling down the phone line than silence. At least that would be progress.” I shrugged, hoping I wasn’t wrong. “The longer you leave it, the harder it will be to bridge that gap. It doesn’t have to be all sunshine and butterflies. Just be honest, say how you feel, and go from there.”

He nodded, his jaw tight. Kai wouldn’t yell at them, he wasn’t the yelling type, but his hesitation said a lot about the black cloud hovering over him. “Maybe,” he finally said.

I gave his arm a reassuring pat, feeling like a fraud – I could dole out advice easily, but when it came to my own life I kept bottled up tight too, not sure which way to go with my own mom.

Sensing a subject change was in order, I said, “I hope you’re hungry. Aunt Bessie has been talking up her festive donut tower, and says we’re not allowed to leave until it’s all been eaten, because...”

“*They’re artisan donuts,*” he finished, and we burst out laughing. Aunt Bessie took her donuts seriously and Christmas Day was no different. I expected it wouldn’t be long before we fell into some sort of sugar coma with the amount of eating that was expected at any soiree at Aunt Bessie’s. For a moment I almost regretted the second helping I’d had at breakfast, but who would ever wish away a single forkful of Cruz’s sinfully delicious berry nice Christmas pastry tree?

“If I eat any more I’ll explode,” Kai said with a grimace.

“Me too,” I laughed. “Damn Cruz for making such a huge delicious breakfast. Let’s just hope Aunt Bessie is running behind schedule.” I turned on the radio and as we drove down the last few streets Kai and I sang tunelessly along to *Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree*. When I surreptitiously glanced sideways at him I noticed he was grinning – our conversation hadn’t been forgotten, but at least he didn’t seem to be burdened by it.

In Aunt Bessie’s driveway, I shut off the engine. A gasp escaped when I caught sight of her house. “Golly,” I said. “It’s got to be the most decorated on the block!” Aunt Bessie never did

do anything by halves! It was the most fabulously festive cottage – which said a lot as competition in Evergreen was fierce. There was a sleigh complete with reindeer on her roof, and even Santa’s legs visible – as if he was heading down the chimney to deliver presents. The look was completed with thousands of twinkling fairy lights, and I’d bet money that the enormous wreath on her door was a musical one. I peeked at Kai, who wore an expression of surprise – maybe they didn’t decorate quite as fantastically where Kai came from?

“Aunt Bessie *really* likes Christmas...” I said as I climbed out the car.

He winked at me across the back seat as he started to gather presents. “Ah, I had been wondering where you got your love of excess from.”

“So I like buying gifts?” I said with a flick of my hair, and laughed as he pretended to teeter under the weight of his pile.

I loved Christmas, and gift buying even more so ... I couldn’t help but put things away all year round when I found perfect presents for those I loved. Which would have been fine, except I kept forgetting what I’d bought, and ended up with more than I had intended. Though it was fun to exclaim over them, and remember what store I’d found them in, and what I’d been doing at the time.

When we reached the porch I leaned over to press the doorbell and tamped down giggles as *Jingle Bells* rang out.

“Come in, come in,” Aunt Bessie trilled from inside the

house, before throwing the door open. She wore a bright green Christmas sweater, her hair curled and make-up immaculately applied... if not a touch heavily, as was her way.

“Don’t you look fabulously festive?” I said, hugging her with one arm as I grasped the wine.

She waved me away. “This old thing? Shucks.”

I grinned and moved aside so she could hug Kai, managing to maneuver her arms around the presents he clutched. She held on for a moment or two longer than strictly necessary and then stage-whispered over his shoulder: “At your age, I wouldn’t waste any more time getting to know the man, *if you know what I mean.*” She then gave me a salacious wink and I almost died right there.

Scandalized, I hissed, “Aunt Bessie!” As any other words failed me. What was she playing at? Kai did his best not to laugh as he squeezed past her into the house. Had Amory sent out a memo or something: *Let’s not rest until Clio admits she has feelings for Kai!* He was leaving soon, and once again, that would be that. Besides, he had other issues far more important than the erratic beating of my heart when he was in my presence. And what did she mean *at my age!*

Was I left-on-the-shelf age already?

“What?” she said, wide-eyed, playing the innocent. “Just saying it like it is.”

“Well you may as well have told him I’m old and desperate! *At my age*, jeez, Aunt Bessie!” I hissed at her.

Aunt Bessie just smirked at me and turned to follow Kai in,

“Oh let me help you, Kai.”

I shook my head and laughed. Seriously, she was the limit.

Aunt Bessie’s cottage was just as I remembered it from Christmases as a child. There was a fire crackling in the grate, and Christmas carols playing chirpily from unseen speakers. The living room was decorated from the ceiling, where shiny silver lanterns hung, right down to the floorboards where a Nativity scene played out, including hay in the manger for baby Jesus.

“Now come through, I’ve made some candy cane milkshakes, but you can’t have a milkshake without a donut and you can’t have a donut without candy floss, so I hope it won’t spoil your lunch.”

I groaned. “We’ve only just had breakfast, Aunt Bessie.”

She tutted. “It’s only a drink, Clio!”

There was no denying her. We’d be marshmallow shaped when we left.

“See what’s for dessert?” Kai said in awe as he unloaded presents under the tree, a tree that seemed to be more lights than branches.

On the kitchen bench sat Aunt Bessie’s donut tower, and I gasped. I’d been expecting something extravagant, but not this. It was truly a marvel, iced donuts in festive red and green stacked atop each other in the shape of a Christmas tree. Edible diamonds twinkled on each layer. A golden star gleamed from the top. “What on earth...” In the window of Puft she’d had something similar but on a much simpler scale, this was another level!

“Your mom helped,” she said, her eyes shining with pride.

“She sure has a steady hand for it. It took us just over four hours to assemble, and that doesn’t include making the donuts.”

“Mom helped?”

Aunt Bessie grinned. “She sure did. She’s becoming quite the baker, you know. Her visits to Puft are more frequent. Sure, to start with she just helped out the kitchen hand, cleaning and sorting the fridges, but now she’s learning to bake too. And decorate. She’s got the patience for the finicky work.”

My eyebrows shot up. I knew Mom went to Puft and ‘helped’ but I thought it was just a reason to catch up with Aunt Bessie, and have some time outside the house with someone she felt safe and comfortable around. I never for one second thought she would be learning to bake. Also, I’d inherited my terrible cooking skills from my mother... or so I’d thought! I stared at the tower again, fresh pride coursing through me.

She gazed in the direction I looked. “Oh, the star? It’s made from tempered dark chocolate and covered in golf leaf, cost a pretty penny, but it’s worth it, don’t you think?”

“Aunt Bessie it’s totally amazing. It’s so grand!” The stack of donuts had been truly transformed. It was a piece of art. “You’ve got such an incredible talent, sometimes I think you’re wasted here in Evergreen,” I said.

“Well funny you should say. About that,” Aunt Bessie said, dipping her head as if shy, which was out of character for her. “I’m not technically minded, I’m more a ‘get your hands dirty in the kitchen’ type, as you can clearly see, but I’ve had a lot of *the*

emails recently...”

“*The* emails? Go on.” I bit down on a smile.

“Yeah, so the emails are all basically asking the same thing. Where can they see pictures of what I make, what’s my handle on Instagram,” her face went blank, “I replied I don’t have a handle on it, I don’t have a handle on technology at all.”

Laughter sputtered out of me. “Oh Aunt Bessie! They mean what’s your *name* on Instagram, so they can follow you! Not whether you have a handle on using it! Handle means name – for example, it could be something like: @PuftArtisanDonuts.”

“OK, OK, I understand, but what exactly is Instagram?” Her eyebrows pulled together as she poured out enormous candy cane milkshakes, decorating both with white and red sprinkled donuts and a spiral of whipped cream.

I laughed in spite of her bewildered expression and took my milkshake before I pulled out my phone to teach her the intricacies of Instagram. “So, social media looks scary, but really it could take Puft to the next level. Introducing it to more customers, from, well, pretty much anywhere in the world.”

“So,” her nose wrinkled. “You’re telling me I’ll post pictures of my artisan donuts and strangers are going to *like* them? With a click of the button? And this will sell more donuts?”

I nodded and took a gulp of my milkshake, relishing in the minty freshness. Puft definitely deserved more fans, even if demand in Evergreen was pretty high. I just knew New Yorkers would love to ‘discover’ those artisan creations.

Still confused she asked, “But how will they find me?”

“Hashtags.” And I tried to hold back the laughter as I caught Kai’s gaze. Explaining social media seemed completely mad – hashtags, handles, likes?! “Okay, so let’s not worry about all the terms or anything, let’s just get you an account set up. It’s easier to show you that way.”

With a big smile, and a lot of dramatic sighing and exclaiming over remembering passwords and how her nails were too long to click-clack at a phone, we set up an Instagram account and I promised to help her with Facebook and Twitter once she got a handle (!) on using Instagram first.

“So these strangers will *like* my posts and send orders through my website? Seems pretty crazy to me...”

“It’s the way of the world, Aunt Bessie,” I said, smiling. “Amory will design you a stunning webpage that will suit Puft and she can link your social media accounts to that. Then when you get an order you simply ship it. Easy peasy. We better sort out some nice packaging for shipping too, because I bet it won’t take long for the word to spread.”

“You’re a sweet girl, Clio, believing in me like that. This all came about after Cedarwood was written up in the newspaper, you know. It’s more to do with you than me.”

I kissed the top of her head. “It came about because you’re exceptional at what you do. It has nothing to do with me.”

Looking up at the clock Aunt Bessie suddenly exclaimed, “Look at the time! We best get a wiggle on now or this Christmas

lunch is going to be a real *turkey!*” she cackled at her bad joke and I followed her back to the kitchen.

I sat at the counter and watched Aunt Bessie work as she pulled out vegetables and instructed me to stay well away from any pot or pan. But she called Kai over to be her helper and I watched as he confidently chopped and prepared the carrots. I was almost jealous – seeing as Aunt Bessie had been able to teach Mom how to bake, I wondered if she could teach me how to boil water without burning the pot...

“Where’s Mom?” I asked

Aunt Bessie stopped stirring and checked her watch. “Should be on her way.” She paused, turning towards me and catching my eye. “Clio, you know it’s a big thing for her, coming here today when there’s going to be people she doesn’t know.” She motioned to Kai, who seemed to be in his own world meticulously julienning carrots to the same length.

I nodded, my mom could hide out in the kitchen at Puft, stick her head into the bakery and say hi to a friendly face, but real socializing – sitting down, eating, drinking and making conversation for hours on end – was another thing entirely. I couldn’t remember ever seeing my mom handle a social situation well – I guess she just used the avoidance tactic, or made excuses and we left it at that.

“I know Aunt Bessie, they’re all really sweet people. No one is going to make her uncomfortable.” She nodded and turned back to her stirring.

It was nice to be spending Christmas with family this year. Of course last year – spending it with Amory in a Chinese restaurant in Brooklyn – had been amazing in its own right, but I sensed things were changing for all of us. Family should've come first, and I vowed it would from now on.

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