

THE INN *at* HOLIDAY BAY

Christmas in the Candlelight



USA Today Bestselling Author
KATHI DALEY

**The Inn at Holiday Bay:
Christmas in the
Candlelight**

by

Kathi Daley

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The Inn at Holiday Bay

Boxes in the Basement
Letters in the Library
Message in the Mantel
Answers in the Attic
Haunting in the Hallway
Pilgrim in the Parlor
Note in the Nutcracker
Blizzard in the Bay
Proof in the Photo
Gossip in the Garden
Ghost in the Gallery
Turkey in the Trap-Room
Cookies in the Cottage
Details in the Document
Clue in the Clam
Portent in the Pages
Poison in the Pudding
Lantern in the Lighthouse
Hint in the Hashtag
Pawn in the Pumpkin Patch
Secret in the Santa
Riddle in the Review
Clue in the Carriage House
Witness in the Wedding
Christmas in the Candlelight
Secret in the Storm

Bistro at Holiday Bay

Opera and Old Lace

Moonlight and Broomsticks

Cupid and Cool Jazz

Sunshine and Sweet Wine

Clues and Canines

Ravioli and Resolutions

Bookstore at Holiday Bay

Once upon a Mystery

Once Upon a Haunting

Once Upon a Christmas

Once Upon a Clue

Holiday Bay Cast

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The Inn at Holiday Bay

Abby Sullivan – owner of the inn (Rufus – cat, Molly – dog)

Georgia Carter – minority owner and inn manager (Ramos – dog)

Jeremy Slater – full-time inn employee

Mylie Slater – Jeremy’s wife and full-time inn employee

Annabelle Cole – Jeremy’s niece – lives with Jeremy and Mylie (Snow White – cat)

Haven Hanson – full-time inn employee (Baxter – dog)

Police Chief Colt Wilder – Police Chief and Abby’s boyfriend

Tanner Peyton – Georgia’s boyfriend (dog training academy)

Lonnie and Lacy Parker – Abby and Colt’s best friends

(Parker Children - Michael, Matthew, Mark, Mary, Meghan, Madison/Maddie)

Officer Alex Weston – Colt’s #2 – (Cooper/Coop – dog)

Gabby Gibson – police dispatcher

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The Bistro at Holiday Bay

Shelby Morris – owner of the Bistro (Hennessy – cat)

Amy Hogan – Shelby’s business partner and friend, head chef (Marley – cat)

Dawson Westwood – bar manager

Kennedy Swanson – dining room manager

Addie Swanson – Kennedy’s daughter

Nikki Peyton – waitress – Tanner’s sister

Lucy – waitress – lives with Eden Halliwell

Charmaine Kettleman – waitress

Cambria – sous chef

Beck Cage – PI with an office in Bistro

Leo Atwell – lives next to Shelby – sort of dating Alex
(Fisher – dog)

Brit Baxter – part-time resident – writer, mentoring Addie
Swanson

Sierra Danielson – Shelby’s half sister

Sage Wilson – Shelby’s half sister

.

The Bookstore at Holiday Bay

Lou Prescott – owner of Firehouse Books, along with
Velma (Toby – cat, Houdini – cat)

Velma Crawford – owner of Firehouse Books, along with
Lou

Eden Halliwell – full-time bookstore employee

Royce Crawford – Velma’s husband and member of
Murder on Tuesdays

Cricket Abernathy –owner of All About Bluebells, along
with Marnie – Thursday evening book club

Marnie Abernathy - owner of All About Bluebells, along
with Cricket – Thursday evening book club

Ethel Covington – owner of craft shop – Wednesday night
Senior Women’s Group

Astoria Walton – owns wine bar – Wednesday night Senior
Women’s Group

Andy Anderson – owner of Surfside Deli, along with Eli

Eli Anderson – owner of Surfside Deli, along with Andy

Savannah Garrison – all three book clubs – Joel’s friend

Joel Stafford – head of *Murder on Tuesdays*

George Baxter – part-time resident – *Murder on Tuesdays*

Hazel Hawthorn – longtime local – runs the local cat rescue – Thursday evening book club

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Chapter 1

“Is something on your mind?” My good friend, Velma Crawford, asked as she passed me a peppermint latte piled high with freshly whipped cream.

“Not really,” I responded as I shifted my position slightly on the barstool at the end of the row that lined the coffee counter in Firehouse Books. “I guess it’s just that I’ve felt somewhat nostalgic the past couple of weeks.”

“I understand completely,” Velma said. “While I always look forward to the holidays and the insanity of the season, it does seem that it’s this time of the year when memories of things loved and lost tend to float to the surface.”

As I remembered the husband and son I’d lost just before Thanksgiving six years ago, I knew no truer words had ever been spoken.

“I love my little coffee counter,” she continued. “And I love working with Lou and Eden.” She referred to her business partner, Lou Prescott, and their full-time employee, Eden Halliwell. “Still, there are things I miss about the diner.”

“Such as?” I asked.

She shrugged. “I don’t know. It’s hard to define what exactly has been lost. I’m enjoying the reduction of hours this job affords me, and the new friendships I’ve developed are priceless, but sometimes I miss the ‘feels’ I associate with the diner.”

Ah, the “feels.” I knew what Velma was talking about. “I think that perfectly defines what I have been experiencing today. I came into town to do some shopping, and when I drove past the lot where the diner used to be located, I suddenly realized that I had an intense need to spend some time with you like I have every December since I’ve lived in

Holiday Bay. I guess there's just something about the arrival of carols on the radio and the fresh snow that reminds me of my first morning in my new home."

"I remember that morning well."

"I was so out of my depth. I had a huge house I had no idea what to do with, a stray cat I couldn't seem to get rid of, and a hole in my heart and in my life where Ben and Johnathan had once lived. Until that point, I'd given almost no thought to my decision to upend my life and move across the country and was actually thinking of slinking back to San Francisco with my tail between my legs when I happened to stop at Velma's Diner for a hot meal and a cup of coffee. The friendly woman I met that morning gave me some advice that would not only fill the void in my soul but, over time, would change everything."

Velma put her hand over mine and gave it a squeeze. "You have no idea how happy I am that sweet little Abby Sullivan decided to enter my diner that morning. I honestly can't imagine my life without you and Georgia. You're like the daughters I never had."

Georgia Carter was my roommate, best friend, and business partner.

"I guess Georgia wandering into my life was the third life-changing event that happened to me that December. The first was the determined cat who refused to leave me alone, the second was meeting you, and the third was the homeless waif who showed up on my doorstep with her giant dog."

Velma smiled. "From the moment Georgia walked into the diner, I instinctively knew you needed each other." Her smile faded just a bit. "I guess it's that sort of magic I miss the most. It's not that folks don't wander in here needing a guiding hand from time to time, but it did seem that my old diner had its own sort of magic."

"I agree. It was almost as if the diner sought out souls in need of a helping hand and invited them in."

“If you ever decide to dip a toe into the fantasy genre, that might make a good story for you to write.”

“I just might do that. I put my computer away for the entire month to ensure that I’d be free to enjoy all that the season has to offer.” I looked around the bookstore. “You and Lou have done a wonderful job with your décor. I love the train that circles the tree, and the little table and chairs you set up in the kiddie area are adorable. I would have loved having tea with my teddy bear friends at that table when I was a child.”

“Lou has really been into decorating this year. It seems that every morning when I come in, something new has been added for everyone to enjoy.”

“Georgia has had the same energy. The inn really does look magical. Of course, the television station is filming her cooking show on location at the inn next week, so hopefully, the new producer won’t undo everything she’s done.”

“Georgia has a new producer?” Velma asked.

I bobbed my head. “When Georgia re-upped her contract for another year of monthly specials, they assigned a new producer and a whole new crew to her show. I know the new producer’s name is Reno, but I’m not sure I ever caught his last name. I was away from the inn when they filmed the Thanksgiving special, which was the first monthly special with the new producer, but apparently, when they arrived to tape the show, they showed up with their own decorations.”

“I guess I’ll need to get out to the inn to take a look before the television crew shows up and undoes what Georgia has accomplished,” Velma commented.

“The entire inn has a festive look and feel, so I encourage you to find the time to come out. We have sleigh rides and a bonfire this Saturday if you want to tag along.”

“Lou is hosting a guest author on Saturday, so I should stay around and help. I’d really like to spend time at the inn, however. Is anything going on this Sunday? Lou has decided to be closed on Sundays and Mondays until the summer season hits.”

“Sunday tends to be a transition day with folks checking out and others checking in, and that is particularly true this week since the entire inn will turn over to make room for the television crew on Monday. Since we won’t have guests other than a handful of folks staying in the cottages, Mylie doesn’t have anything planned, but why don’t you and Royce come by anyway.” I referred to Velma’s husband, Royce Crawford. “You can hang out and visit and plan on staying for dinner. We’ll have the whole inn to ourselves since we’ve arranged for everyone to check out on Sunday so we’ll have time to clean the rooms before the television crew shows up on Monday. I’ll ask Mylie, Jeremy, and Annabelle to join us, and Georgia already said something about her and Tanner joining Colt and me.” I referred to my closest neighbor, Georgia’s boyfriend, Tanner Peyton, and my boyfriend, Police Chief Colt Wilder.

“I’ll ask Royce about it, but that sounds really nice. It’s been a while since I’ve been able to spend time with my family.”

I finished the last of my coffee and pushed my mug aside. “I guess I should get going. It’s still early, but I have a few stops to make before I meet Lacy at the Bistro.”

“Lacy is another one I haven’t seen for a while. She came in and ordered some books for her kids, but we didn’t have a chance to chat and catch up.”

“I’ll invite Lacy and Lonnie on Sunday if she can find a sitter for the kids. A nice dinner with just family in front of the fireplace sounds just about perfect.”

“It really does. And we may not have another chance. I guess you must be fully booked all month.”

“We are,” I confirmed. “Not only do we have all six suites booked solid this month, but all the cottages are booked as well. It’s good that Georgia reserved the suites for the television crew months and months in advance, or we wouldn’t have been able to accommodate them.”

Velma set my mug on the rack where mugs needing to be washed were stored. “How many are coming?”

“I’m not sure exactly, but I know that Georgia reserved the entire inn for the producer and the rest of the television crew.”

“I heard that Haven moved into the basement after Mylie, Jeremy, and Annabelle moved into the carriage house.” Velma referred to Mylie and Jeremy Slater, who exchanged their wedding vows in September, and Jeremy’s niece, Annabelle Cole, who lived with them.

“She did. It seemed to make the most sense. It wasn’t the sort of space visitors would have been seeking, and the cottage Haven had been using was always supposed to be reserved for paying guests.”

Velma smiled. “I guess it does make the most sense, and now that she’s eighteen, you don’t need to feel as if you need to keep her close.”

“Exactly.”

“I imagine all the cottages are available for short-term guests now that Brit and George have returned to South Carolina for the winter.” She referred to Brit and George Baxter, an uncle and niece who had rented a cottage for the summer season the past two years.

“All the cottages are available now, but I will say that I miss having Brit and George around.”

“As do I,” Velma agreed. “Our Tuesday night cold case group doesn’t seem the same without George. Joel does a great job leading the group, but he doesn’t have the experience George has.” She referred to Joel Stafford, a retired history professor who recently moved to Holiday Bay, and *Murder on Tuesdays*, one of the several groups who met in the evenings at the bookstore.

“Are you working on a case now?” I asked. I didn’t have the time required to participate in the group, but I found the concept of an amateur sleuthing group interesting.

“We just finished one. I guess you heard about the missing persons case we worked on last month.”

I nodded. “You ended up tracking the woman down to a small town in West Virginia where she had been living since

she ran away from her hardworking husband and adorable children.”

“That one wasn’t as satisfying as some of the cases we’ve focused on. I mean, this woman had a beautiful and loving family, and then one day, she decides she no longer wants to deal with the responsibility of a family and leaves without telling anyone what she was doing. Until we found her, she was considered to be a victim of foul play.” Velma shook her head. “Such a shame.”

“That does sound like a frustrating case, but at least her husband and children have closure.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“And the ghost case you worked on in October sounded fun.”

Velma smiled. “It was.”

“If your group decides to work on a case this month, you can tell me all about it the next time we chat.” I slipped off the stool and stood up. “Right now, I really do need to get going. Hopefully, I’ll see you on Sunday.”

“I’ll talk to Royce and then call you, but I’m sure he’ll want to come.”

I reached out and hugged the woman who was a good friend and a mother figure to me. “I really am happy that the subject of getting together for dinner came up. It really has been a long time since we all got together.”

“It really has.”

After I left the bookstore, I completed a few errands before I headed toward the Bistro to meet Lacy for lunch. We’d both been so busy as of late, me with my holiday guests and her with six children, all of whom seemed to be involved with different holiday activities, that we hadn’t had many opportunities to visit.

“I guess it’s a good thing we got here early,” Lacy said after I joined her at the table she’d already been seated at. “It’s crowded today.”

“I think there are a lot of folks who are out taking care of their Christmas shopping this week. The stores are packed. Heading out to lunch makes sense when you have a full day of crowds and shopping ahead of you. Speaking of shopping, how much do you need to do today?” I asked.

“I already took care of all the practical items my children will receive. Books, school supplies, clothing, and Christmas pj’s. My boys all wanted hockey equipment this year, which seems ridiculous to me since I just bought a bunch of new equipment, but the boys were really insistent, so I just went with it.”

“Do you already have the hockey stuff?” I asked as the hostess brought us water and menus and assured us our waitress would be right with us.

Lacy answered. “I preordered everything, and the sporting goods store is holding it for me, so I just need to pick it up. Maddie’s gifts are taken care of, but the twins are being difficult this year.”

“Difficult, how?” I asked.

“They can’t seem to stick with anything. They’ll ask for one thing, and then, a few days later, they change their mind and ask for something else. I told them they had until the end of the day tomorrow to give me their absolute final list. I guess I’ll wait to buy anything until I get their lists, but I have a feeling Mary will settle on a sewing machine, so if I find the one I want, I may have the store hold it for me.”

“Mary likes to sew?” Personally, I found sewing to be something akin to torture.

“She does. I helped her make a bunch of custom pieces over the summer, and she seemed to be hooked. Meghan doesn’t seem to have inherited my love of all things domestic, but she does seem to enjoy working in the garage with her dad. Lonnie suggested a woodworking kit if she doesn’t come up with something on her own, and I’m inclined to go with it.”

I looked up when our waitress, Charmaine, headed toward our table with her notepad in hand.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “Kennedy had a conference with one of Addy’s advanced placement teachers, and she hasn’t made it back yet, so we’re shorthanded.” She referred to the Bistro at Holiday Bay’s dining room manager and single mother, Kennedy Swanson.

“It does seem as if half the town decided to come in for lunch.”

“Shelby decided to be closed on Sundays and Mondays, which, personally, I appreciate since I can count on my days off, but I feel as if the five days we are open are twice as busy as they used to be at this time of the year.” Charmaine referred to the Bistro’s owner, Shelby Morris.

“I guess serving the same number of meals that would be served over seven days in five days is more efficient,” Lacy said.

Charmaine smiled. “I guess it is. And having regular days off has allowed me to take on a part-time job at the Reindeer Roundup. The tips at both jobs have been good, so I’m not complaining.”

Once Lacy and I had ordered, I brought up the idea of having dinner on Sunday. Lacy was thrilled with the idea and promised to get a sitter lined up right away. I knew that both sets of grandparents could be counted on to babysit, but it also seemed that all the kids were old enough for Lacy to feel comfortable with a few teenage sitters she knew from the church as well.

“I guess it’s nice that you have an entire half-day free of guests this year,” Lacy said. “Once Thanksgiving hits, you usually don’t have any vacancies until after the first of the year.”

“With the television crew all coming in at the same time on Monday, it created a situation where we needed to have all the other guests staying at the inn check out on Sunday. We will have guests in all four cottages, but we can simply tell them that we’re having a special event in the inn and offer them room service for their evening meal.”

“I’m kind of surprised you still have the cottages open. Wasn’t the plan to winterize them before the first heavy snow?”

“It was, but Georgia and I talked it over and decided to try to keep them open until after the first of the year. I guess we’re gambling with the weather a bit. If we get a big snow before we close everything up, I suspect that we’ll regret our decision.”

“It will be a real hassle if you end up having to shovel all those extra walkways, but if the weather holds, it will be a nice boost to your annual income.”

Charmaine came by with our meals, which caused the conversation to pause. When we started up again. I asked Lacy about the community play one of her twins and two of her triplets were in.

“The rehearsals have gone really well so far. I wasn’t sure if trying to perform *The Christmas Carol* with a kid-only cast was the best way to go, but Louisa found some older kids to play the key parts where there are a lot of lines to memorize, so I think it’s going to work out just fine.”

“I can’t wait to see it. It’s too bad all your children didn’t want to do it.”

“I think Meghan and Matthew are sorry that they didn’t accept the offer when they were asked. Mary, Mark, and Michael have scored invitations to parties, caroling, and other events from their fellow cast members. I think Meghan and Matthew feel left out.”

“It is too bad they are being excluded.”

“I don’t think it’s intentional. Since Meghan and Matthew chose not to participate in the play, I suppose it’s a matter of not being around when the invitations are being handed out. I even considered calling the moms organizing the parties and other events, but as Lonnie pointed out, Meghan and Matthew decided not to participate, so learning to live with the consequences of their decisions wasn’t the worst thing in the world to happen.”

“I guess I can understand that. Still, I would imagine that as a mother, it’s hard to stand by and see your child be left out.”

“It is. It’s hard to know where to draw the line between protecting my children and letting them deal with the natural consequences their actions create.”

There were many things I’d missed by never having had the opportunity to raise a child of my own, but dealing with childhood heartbreak wasn’t one of them. Sometimes, I wondered how Lacy and all the other mothers managed to get through the worst of it.

“Oh look, there’s Shelby,” I said, waving at the red-headed owner of the Bistro.

“I didn’t know the two of you were here,” she offered. “I was upstairs doing the books and didn’t see you come in, or I would have been over to say hi sooner.”

“It’s not a problem,” I said. “Lacy and I were in town to shop and decided to stop by for lunch.”

She pulled up a chair. “I’m glad you did. It’s been forever since I’ve had a chance to visit with the two of you.”

“I’m having a dinner party at the inn on Sunday if you and Amy want to come,” I referred to Shelby’s roommate and the Bistro’s head chef, Amy Hogan. “Charmaine mentioned that the Bistro would be closed.”

“I’d love to come. I’ll mention it to Amy and have her call you. Will the inn be closed to paying guests?”

I explained about the television crew and the fact that all our guests for the week were required to check out on Sunday.

“It sounds like a great opportunity to catch up with everyone,” she said.

“The idea first took hold when Velma and I were chatting this morning, and it grew from there. I haven’t even asked Georgia about it yet, but I know she won’t mind whipping something up.”

“Georgia has been busy, and she deserves a chance to relax. Let’s do a potluck dinner where everyone can bring a dish to share, so no one will need to spend the entire day in the kitchen.”

“Actually, that sounds like a good idea,” I said. “It’ll be easier to do a buffet. If folks can eat when they want and sit where they want, we won’t have to worry about setting the table. I have a feeling the number of guests is going to fluctuate, which will be less of a problem if we keep it simple.”

After Shelby left to return to her office, I decided I’d better call Georgia and give her a heads-up. I knew how fast these things could grow. An invitation to one close friend seemed to result in an invitation to all your close friends. I was relieved when Georgia responded to my heads-up by saying she loved the idea. She reminded me that Nikki, our good friend who had previously worked at the inn, and Eden had both volunteered to help with the cleaning that day and should be invited to the dinner, which meant that Lou from the bookstore should also be invited since Velma and Eden would both be there. As Georgia and I tossed around a few other names, it occurred to me that my simple invite to Velma might have created a monster. A monster made up of friends I loved dearly, but a monster all the same.

Chapter 2

“Something sure smells good,” I said to Georgia after I walked into the kitchen at the inn through the back door the following day.

“Gingerbread for dessert tonight,” she informed me.

I set the first two grocery bags of the six filled with items I’d picked up at the market on the little kitchen table. “I hope there will be plenty of leftovers for the staff since gingerbread with fresh whipped topping is one of my favorites.”

“I made a bunch. Do you need help?”

“No, I can get it. I only have four more bags to grab, but thanks for offering.”

By the time I brought the other four bags inside, Georgia had poured me a cup of coffee, set out a plate with cookies, and had begun to put away the grocery items I’d picked up. She hadn’t said anything to indicate something was wrong, but she didn’t seem like her usual cheery self. I supposed she might just be having a bad day. We all had them, so I decided not to mention it.

“Did the Klondike family arrive?” I asked after dipping one end of my candy cane sugar cookie into my coffee.

“They did,” she answered matter-of-factly. “I put them in cottage four since the Brunswick family hasn’t checked out of cottage three yet.”

I glanced at the clock. “It’s four hours after check-out time.”

“It is, and I did go and knock on their door. I guess Mr. and Mrs. Brunswick had a late night and slept in. They said they needed a little more time to get going but would be out of there by four. The other family with a two-bedroom cottage

reservation isn't checking in until tomorrow, so it should be fine. I'll clean the room once the Brunswick family leaves since Mylie and Jeremy have plans in town with friends, and Haven mentioned hanging out with Nikki, Eden, and Lucy."

"If Jeremy is going to be in town, I guess that means you'll be handling dinner."

She nodded. "I will. We're having a hearty baked potato chowder, which is already made and only needs to be heated, an easy-to-assemble pear and pecan salad, and chicken pot pies that I made this morning and only need to be heated. It's an easy meal, and I figured I'd prep the meal early and clean the cottage while the chowder and pot pies are heating and then hurry back and serve everything."

"I'll take care of the cottage, and you take care of the meal," I said.

"Are you sure?" She looked uncertain. "I think I can make it work."

"I'm sure. Colt won't be by until around six, so as long as the family vacates the cottage by four as promised, I'll have time to clean the place and wash up before Colt arrives." I knew I should resist the urge but helped myself to a second cookie. "Did your producer come by to look at the place ahead of next week?"

Even though there had been multiple episodes of *Cooking with Georgia* filmed here at the inn, Georgia had told me that her producer still wanted to bring his new set designer in to take a look.

"He did," she said, her tone hardening.

"And?" Based on the tone in her voice, it seemed clear that the meeting had not gone as well as I'd assumed it would.

"And Brody Litman was with him."

Given the way Georgia spat it out, I wondered if the name should mean something to me, but it didn't. "Brody Litman? Should I know who this man is?"

Georgia huffed out a breath. “No, you shouldn’t know who Brody Litman is. I’ve never mentioned his name before, but I may have told you the story of the snake in a man’s clothing who totally ruined my first big catering job after I started my own business.”

“The man who stole your client was here today?”

Georgia nodded. I could see she was angry, and I didn’t blame her.

“If I remember the story correctly, you were just starting out as a caterer and were still trying to establish yourself when you landed a huge client after months of courting the woman. You hoped catering this woman’s wedding would lead to your big break, but then Litman came along and stole your client right out from under you.”

“That’s all correct, but I suppose when I told you the story before, I didn’t tell you the entire story.”

“There’s more to it?”

Again, she nodded. She sat down at the counter next to me. “I first met Brody when I was in culinary school. He was a handsome young chef with an established career who had somehow been talked into teaching one of my classes, and I was a young and impressionable student ready to soak up whatever he was serving. To say that I had a crush on him was putting it mildly. Of course, virtually every female student in the school had a crush on him, as did half the male students, I suspect.”

“Did you . . .” I began asking before I realized I had no idea how to finish my question.

“We didn’t. While I spent half my time in class dreaming of the fabulous restaurant Brody and I would have once we married, he was the teacher, and I was the student, so it never went anywhere despite the fact that our attraction seemed to be mutual.” She took a sip of her coffee and then continued. “Fast forward several years. I’d graduated from culinary school by this point, and Brody had his own restaurant, which seemed to be doing well. I’d been planning to launch a catering business

and, as a way of getting my name out there, had entered a cooking competition. When I arrived at the competition venue, I ran into Brody, who was there as a judge. I didn't think he'd recognize me since it had been a couple years since I'd taken his class, but he did, and I guess you could say that the attraction I'd felt as a student just beginning to learn the ropes was still there. He must have felt it as well since he asked me out, but I was married, so I had to decline. I explained why I needed to turn him down, and he seemed to understand. At that point, we agreed to be friends."

I wasn't sure that a mere friendship between two people with sexual energy would work out in the long run, but I let it go.

"Anyway, Brody and I bonded that weekend, and by the end of the weekend, he offered to help me get my business off the ground. I was thrilled, of course, and suggested we meet for lunch. He accepted, and, in my mind, a solid friendship was born."

"Just a friendship?" I asked.

She nodded. "Just a friendship. At least as far as I was concerned. Brody and I met several times over the next few months. He had a lot of good suggestions that seemed to make all the difference. I thought we were on the same page, but shortly before the wedding I told you about, he asked me to dinner to discuss the menu, and during that dinner, he made it clear that he was looking for something more. I was married, so the only thing on the table as far as I was concerned was friendship, but Brody wasn't taking no for an answer, so I ended it."

I cringed since I could see where this was going.

"After I shut him down, he got so angry. I tried to explain to him that I loved my husband and that friendship really was all I could offer, but he didn't seem to care about my marital status. When he continued to pursue me, I felt I had no choice but to be brutally blunt. I even threatened to obtain a restraining order."

"So when he stole your client, it was to get back at you."

“I believe so. Brody quoted my client a price that was so low that he had to have been losing money on every plate. The only reason I can think of for him to have done that was to get back at me.”

“Didn’t you have a contract with this woman?” I asked.

“I had a contract, but I had been so anxious to sign this particular client that I’d only asked for a small deposit, and I’d agreed to completely waive the cancellation fee if a two-week notice was given. Brody almost ended my career before I even got started.”

“And then he just showed up here today.”

She nodded. “When I opened the door and found Brody standing there, I almost decked him.”

“So why was this man with your producer?”

“Chef Litman has apparently convinced my producer that he should be a guest host on my Christmas special. I have no idea why Reno agreed, but I suppose he must owe the guy a favor or something, but since he has agreed, it appears that I’m stuck with him.”

“I’m so sorry. That doesn’t seem right at all. The show is called *Christmas with Georgia*.”

“Actually, they changed it to *Christmas at Holiday Bay*, and Brody is taking the lead while I participate in a supporting role.” Georgia got up and began to pace. “And if that isn’t bad enough, Brody is asking for all sorts of changes to the décor and the script. He also plans to change my menu, which I’ve been talking up to my viewers for months.”

Given the level of rage Georgia seemed to be struggling with, I was shocked she’d been able to engage in a perfectly normal conversation about gingerbread and a weekend get-together when I’d first come in.

“Is there nothing we can do at this point?” I asked.

She blew out a long breath. “No. I don’t think there’s anything we can do. I’ve given this quite a bit of thought, and

while I'm not happy about any of this, I have concluded that I need to suck it up and make the best of it."

"What about your contract? Can they just cut you out of your own show like that?"

"They can. My contract states that my producer has the right to assign a co-host at his discretion. When I signed the darn thing, I didn't think it would be a big deal, but now I can see that I should have given it more thought and requested changes to include my input and provide an option for me to opt-out."

"I'm really very sorry." I reached out and hugged my friend.

"Thank you. I needed a hug. This whole thing has been a shock, but I'm an adult, and Brody no longer has the power to hurt me, so I plan to ignore him and do my part. Once this whole thing is over, I may reconsider my intent to extend my contract with the show, but I called Tanner, and he advised me not to make any decisions while I was angry, and I realized he was right."

"I think he might be," I agreed. "But I thought you already extended your contract for another year."

"I did. Sort of. When my old contract ran out at the end of October, I went to Julian and told him that I planned to take his offer to renew for one more year. He told me there had been some changes at the station and that he would no longer be my producer. Additionally, the station manager suggested a three-month contract, which would feed into an additional nine-month contract if things went well."

"So the station wanted to be sure that you and your new producer would work well together."

"Basically. Julian made it sound as if it would be up to me whether to extend the three months to fill out the entire year, and at the time, I felt fairly certain that I would do so, but after working with Reno last month and then having this curveball tossed in my direction with the Christmas special, I'm reconsidering the whole thing."

“I don’t blame you,” I said. “I know you had your ups and downs with Julian, but it did seem that the two of you were usually on the same page, at least in terms of your show.”

“He did tend to let me do as I pleased.” Georgia turned and walked into the pantry. She came out with a bag of flour. I sensed she was ready to change the subject, so I honored her unvoiced request.

“Do you know if Mylie and Jeremy have left for town yet?” I asked.

“I don’t think they have.”

“Then I’m going to the carriage and house to talk to Mylie about this year’s activity list. If the late check-out ever decides to actually check out, text me, and I’ll come back to clean the cottage.”

“Thanks, Abby. That’s really nice of you.”

One of the original requests made by Georgia’s new producer was that the inn be used as a backdrop for a series of promos leading up to the cooking show. After some discussion, he decided to film actors engaged in featured events from Mylie’s activity list, such as a sleigh ride, bonfire, snowman building, and other seasonal activities. Since Mylie already had all the necessary connections and the supplies required for the craft projects, the producer had decided to put her in charge of this part of the show. While Mylie fully supported Georgia, I think she was thrilled to have the opportunity to do her thing on the air.

“It looks as if you’re ready,” I said to Mylie after I noticed the long table she’d set up in the carriage house and the supplies she had neatly organized on the table.

“I am. I admit to having second thoughts about doing this once I realized just how angry Georgia was about the changes to her part of the show, but I’d already made a commitment and hated to back out.”

“I understand. I’m sure Georgia does as well.”

“After the producer and the guest chef he had with him left today, I did ask Georgia about my part in the whole thing, and

she said it was fine. We both thought it was nice that the producer agreed to let me tell the story about Pamela and how my annual activity list came to be.”

“It is a heartwarming story,” I agreed. “While Georgia seems pretty stressed right now, I don’t think she’s angry with you or anyone other than Brody and probably Reno.”

“She was so mad when they arrived that I actually thought she might quit.”

“Honestly, she might have, but she has a contract, and apparently, there’s a clause in the contract that says that the producer can assign a co-host at his discretion.”

“Why would she have signed a contract like that?” Mylie asked.

“I don’t think she minded the idea of a co-host. I think her problem is with the identity of this particular co-host.”

Mylie offered a sympathetic look. “She told me what the man did to her. I really don’t blame her for being mad that he’s back in her life again, and there isn’t a thing she can do about it.”

“Next week is going to be tough on her, so let’s be sure to support her in any way we can.”

“You can count on me. Jeremy, too.”

That was one of the best things about my staff. Rather than having an employer/employee relationship, we were more of a family who were always there for each other. “I know I can count on the two of you and appreciate it. Speaking of Jeremy, I think I’ll go and check in with him before you head into town.”

“Check the shed,” she suggested. “That’s where Jeremy said he was heading when he left here.”

As Mylie predicted, I found Jeremy in the shed. He appeared to be digging out a ladder.

“What’s that for?” I asked.

“When Reno was here, he asked me to take down all the lights we strung along the eaves before they arrived for the shoot. I thought I’d go ahead and get started.”

“There is no way we are taking down those lights. It took you days to hang them, and I know our guests love them.”

Jeremy cocked his head. “So you don’t want me to take them down?”

“No way. The lights stay, the tree stays, and anything that I don’t approve for removal stays.”

Jeremy smiled. “Okay. I’m glad to hear that. I think the magical holiday feel of the property is enhanced by the lights on the inn’s exterior, and I hated the thought of having to take them down for no good reason other than some random guy from the city deciding that they were too Christmassy.”

“How can Christmas lights be too Christmassy?”

Jeremy shrugged.

“I’ll talk to Georgia and let her know what we are and are not willing to do. I realize we were pretty flexible when the producer wanted to change our decorations for the Thanksgiving shoot, but we had a lot less time committed to setting out the Thanksgiving stuff. Putting up the Christmas décor is a huge undertaking. There is no way that I will allow this guy to undo everything we worked so hard to accomplish.”

After I spoke to Jeremy, I headed back to the inn. Haven was walking from cottage number four, where she’d been dropping off fresh towels, toward the inn, so we stopped to chat for a minute. Like Mylie and Jeremy, Haven was somewhat riled up by today’s visitors.

“So, is this Litman guy going to be staying here?” Haven asked.

“I’m afraid so,” I answered. “Chef Litman has requested suite five next to Brittany Middleton, who is in suite four.”

“Brittany is the producer’s assistant?”

I nodded. “Reno will be in suite six, and the cameramen, Goober and Seagram, will be assigned to suites two and three.”

“And suite one?” she asked.

“Suite one is reserved for their tech guy. I missed his name, but Georgia should know it.”

“I really hate to bring any of this up to Georgia,” Haven said. “But I do like to know everyone’s name so I can greet them personally when I stop by to clean and drop off supplies.”

“I think that knowing everyone’s name is a good idea. We’re having the dinner party on Sunday evening, but at some point between getting everyone checked out and getting ready for our guests on Monday, I’ll have the entire staff sit down so we can go over everything.”

“That would be great. I can’t explain why, but for some reason, I’m somewhat nervous just knowing the folks from the television station will be staying here.”

“Yeah, me too.”

I wasn’t sure why I should be nervous. I wasn’t going to be part of the show, and I didn’t have prior relationships to navigate the way Georgia did, yet I had this churning in my gut that I couldn’t quite get rid of. Other specials had been filmed at the inn, but the other filmings had always been one-day endeavors. The television crew would come in, the filming would take place, and then everyone would leave. Why the producer felt that he needed to have an entire television crew in residence at the inn for three and a half days didn’t make sense to me. I knew the group planned to check in on Monday. I guess they’d need time to set up. But it made no sense that they would take an entire day on Tuesday to create promos for the one-hour special they planned to film on Wednesday. The whole thing seemed like overkill if you asked me, but the television station was paying us our usual rate for the use of the inn, so I supposed I didn’t really have cause to complain at this point.

Chapter 3

By the time Sunday rolled around, the storm that had been predicted had made its way north, and the snow had become steady, although not all that heavy to this point. We managed to get everyone checked out by eleven a.m., which gave us plenty of time to clean the suites and then prepare for the hoard of guests we'd invited for dinner. While throwing an impromptu gathering of friends into the middle of an already busy schedule might not have been the best idea, the party seemed to distract Georgia, who had been steaming for days over the changes that Reno and Brody had made to her original script. I thought the addition of the seasonal activities that were taking place at the inn would actually lend interest to the show, which was usually all about cooking, but I was sorry to see Georgia struggle with the idea of sharing her kitchen with the man she'd loathed for years.

"The suites are finished and ready for our guests," Mylie informed me after joining Georgia and me in the kitchen. Nikki, Eden, Haven, and Annabelle, who'd all pitched in to make the work go faster, were behind her.

"That was fast," I said.

"We were motivated to get done," Mylie responded. "I'm going to head over to the carriage house to shower and change, but before I go, I wanted to ask if you needed anything else."

"I think we're good," I answered. "Colt went with Tanner to grab some conference tables from his house to use for the food, but I don't think they'll need help setting them up."

"Do you need me to iron tablecloths for the tables?" Mylie asked.

"I already did that," Georgia said.

“It’s a good idea to line the walls with those tables so folks have somewhere to set the dish they brought to share when they get here,” Mylie commented. She looked around. “Where did Jeremy go off to? I thought he was helping you in here.”

“We’re doing a room service menu for the guests in the cottages tonight, so he went to get everyone’s order,” Georgia answered.

“Did everyone seem okay with the change in routine?” Mylie asked.

“They seemed to be,” Georgia responded to Mylie’s question.

“If you don’t need us anymore, Nikki, Eden, and I are going to go down to my room and get ready for tonight,” Haven announced.

“Can I come?” Annabelle asked.

Haven glanced at Mylie.

“It’s fine with me,” she answered.

The four young girls left, and I returned my attention to Mylie. “Did you remember the gift baskets for the suites?”

“I did.”

“Did you confirm that Brody’s basket included a live snake?” Georgia asked.

Mylie laughed. “Of course, just like you ordered.”

Both women appeared to be so satisfied with the response that I found myself hoping they were kidding.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” Mylie said. “If you need anything before then, just text me.”

Mylie headed out the back door toward the pathway that led to the carriage house, and I returned my attention to Georgia. “I think we’re ready for tonight, and I think we’re as ready as we can be for tomorrow. Why don’t you go ahead and use the bathroom first. I’ll wait for Colt and Tanner to return so I can show them where to put the tables.”

“Thanks, Abby. I may even lie down for a minute. I guess I haven’t been sleeping all that well lately, and I think it’s starting to catch up with me.”

Georgia looked tired, which was the main reason I suggested she head to the cottage first. It was too bad that the situation with her show and the man she considered to be her arch nemesis was causing her so much duress. I understood what she was going through. Sometimes, it was nearly impossible not to run scripts in your mind of what could happen in the future, along with reruns of conversations and personal encounters that had occurred in the past. Not that doing so ever really did you any good, but there were times when these running dialogues seemed nearly impossible to turn off.

We were ready by the time our guests began to arrive for our dinner party. Georgia and I had decided to use sturdy disposable plates since we didn’t know who might show up or how many place settings we’d need. The plastic plates, forks, and knives were a festive red, and the accompanying serving trays were a Christmas green.

“It looks like everyone we spoke to has decided to show up,” Mylie said as we watched a large group filter in through the front door.

“It seems like we have an even larger crowd than I ever imagined,” I agreed.

“It’s fun that everyone brought a dish to share,” Shelby commented. “With so many guests attending, there certainly isn’t a shortage of different things to try.”

“Having such a wide variety is fun.” Mylie agreed. “Oh good, there’s Lacy.” Mylie waved, and Lacy headed in our direction while Lonnie went to chat with Colt and Tanner.

“Any luck?” Mylie asked Lacy as soon as she walked up beside us.

“I’m afraid not,” Lacy answered.

“Any luck with what?” Shelby asked.

Mylie looked around and then replied. “Annabelle wants a kitten for Christmas. A fluffy white kitten. It’s the only thing she wants, and she’s been talking about it since September when Jeremy and I agreed that she could have one after we moved to the carriage house.”

“I thought Annabelle had already gotten a kitten,” Shelby said. “In fact, I specifically remember her telling me at the wedding that she had a kitten all picked out and that she was anxious for her to be old enough to leave her mommy and come and live with her.”

“She did have a kitten picked out, but the woman who had the kittens ended up giving the only white one to her sister,” Mylie explained. “Annabelle was crushed, and I foolishly told her that she didn’t need to be sad since I was sure Santa would bring her a white kitten for Christmas.”

“Oh no,” Shelby grimaced. “I can already guess what comes next.”

“If your guess is that there isn’t a white kitten on the entire East Coast, you’d be right,” Mylie groaned.

“I’m sure Annabelle will understand if you can’t find the exact kitten she’s been hoping for,” Shelby said. “It’s not like she’s a little kid who still believes in Santa Claus.”

Mylie replied. “Annabelle might be too old to believe in Santa, but she’s still young enough to believe in me, and I really want her to have this.”

Lacy joined in. “I’d heard that my neighbor had kittens and agreed to check it out, but her kittens are all spoken for. Plus, none of them are white.”

“It’s only December tenth,” I said. “We have time to find a white kitten. I’ll put out some feelers.”

“Thanks, Abby,” Mylie said. “I know I’m new to this mom thing, and I’m trying to be patient with myself when I make mistakes. This mistake is definitely one that has taught me a valuable lesson.”

“It’s never a good idea to promise anything that you might not be able to deliver,” Lacy suggested.

“Exactly,” Mylie agreed.

“There are a lot of people here tonight, and they will all want Annabelle to have her kitten, so maybe we should pass the word along in the hope that someone else in the room has a friend or neighbor who might have kittens,” Shelby suggested.

“That’s a good idea,” Lacy said. “We should be sure to mention to everyone that it is a gift so that they don’t let the cat out of the bag, but I imagine that between all of us, we’ll track down exactly what you’re looking for.”

Annabelle and a couple of her friends had headed to the carriage house, so this was the perfect time to begin spreading the word. Mylie, Lacy, Shelby, and I decided to split up so we could cover four times the territory. I headed over to chat with Velma and Lou, who, I was pretty sure, still housed cats for the local rescue.

“What a wonderful turnout,” Velma said, giving me a much-welcomed hug.

“I was just telling Velma how much I appreciate having the chance to chat with so many of my friends and neighbors before the holiday,” Lou chimed in.

“When Velma and I first discussed getting together for dinner, I have to admit I had a small affair in mind, but this has turned out to be really nice,” I agreed. “Are the two of you still featuring cats from the rescue in the bookstore?”

Both women agreed that they were.

“Great. I need a kitten. Not just any kitten, but a specific kitten.” I then proceeded to explain why I needed a fluffy white kitten of a certain age and only a fluffy white kitten if at all possible, and both women agreed not only to keep an eye out for the exact kitten I hoped to find but to personally speak to the rescue coordinator.

I chatted with Velma and Lou for a while longer, and then I headed over to say hi to Amy, who seemed to be having a serious conversation with Georgia.

“Hey, guys,” I said, giving Amy a welcome hug. “Why the serious faces?”

“Amy saw Brody in town earlier,” Georgia informed me.

“Why would Brody be in town today when the rest of the television crew is arriving tomorrow?” I asked.

“He was with Brad Kingman,” Amy informed me.

“Why would Brody be meeting with Brad Kingman?” I asked.

Brad Kingman was a friend of Tanner’s. He was actually more than a friend. He was a wealthy businessman and one of Tanner’s largest donors. I couldn’t imagine how Brody even knew Brad, nor could I venture a guess why the two men would have been in Holiday Bay together.

“That’s what I want to know,” Georgia said. She glanced toward the corner of the room where Colt, Lonnie, Tanner, and Jeremy were all chatting. “I’m tempted to ask Tanner if he knows that Brad is here, and if he’s aware of his presence, I’m tempted to ask him why the man is meeting with my arch nemesis. But the whole thing that took place the last time Brad was in town is one that I really don’t want to bring up.”

“I wouldn’t,” I said. “Not tonight.”

Tanner ended up getting arrested for murder the last time Brad was here. He, of course, had been innocent of the murder charge, but he hadn’t been innocent of everything that had caused Tanner and Georgia to break up for a short time.

“The last time Brad was here was at Christmas time,” Georgia said. “I wonder if there’s someone here in Holiday Bay he spends time with at this time of the year.”

“The last time Brad was here, Tanner had invited him,” I reminded her. “It didn’t seem that he knew anyone other than the men Tanner had also invited to spend time here in Holiday Bay.” I glanced at Amy. “Are you sure it was Brody you saw?”

“I’m sure. I know who the man is. Not only has he guest hosted on several cooking shows, but he has participated in several cook-offs when I’ve either been a judge or entered as a chef.”

“Okay,” I said. “Then are you sure the man he was with was Tanner’s friend, Brad?”

Amy held up her cell phone. “I didn’t know who the man with Brody was, but I knew Georgia would be interested in the fact that Brody was in town early, so I snapped a photo of the men.”

“The man Brody is speaking to is Brad Kingman,” Georgia confirmed.

Georgia was right. The man Brody was speaking to appeared to be the man Georgia and I interviewed when we were trying to get Tanner out of jail.

“I wonder how they know each other,” I commented. “I remember Tanner saying that Brad lived in California, and I assume that Brody still lives on the East Coast.”

“As far as I know, Brody still lives in Boston, but it’s not as if I’ve kept up with him, and it isn’t as if I went out of my way to catch up with him when he was here with Reno earlier in the week,” Georgia said.

“Maybe Brad owns a restaurant, which could explain how Brad knows Brody,” I said. “I remember Tanner saying that Brad was a very wealthy man who liked to keep his money moving. It seems likely that a wealthy businessman who invested in or owned a share in many different companies might own a restaurant. Perhaps Brad was in town to meet with Tanner and ran into Brody.”

“I guess you should ask him,” Amy suggested to Georgia. “Tomorrow. Tonight is supposed to be all about fun and community.”

“I’ll wait to talk to Tanner,” Georgia agreed. “This whole thing really has struck me as odd, however. To be perfectly honest, I haven’t even figured out why Brody would want to be part of my show. Initially, I figured he just wanted to mess with me, and maybe that is his end game, but if that’s true, then it seems as if he’s going to a lot of trouble to mess with someone he hasn’t seen in years.”

“I guess the fact that it appears that he’s going out of his way to ruin your show and make your life difficult is odd,” I agreed.

“I don’t understand why Reno is going along with it,” Amy said.

Georgia frowned. “Yeah, that is odd. I know Reno values my contribution to the station’s ratings, so it doesn’t make sense that he would risk making me mad unless he was in a bad situation.”

“Do you think Brody might be calling in a favor?” Amy asked.

“Perhaps,” Georgia acknowledged. “Or maybe Brody has dirt on Reno and is blackmailing him. Or maybe the men are just friends. For all I know, the two men might have been college roommates or something similar.” Georgia crossed her arms over her chest. “I plan on asking Tanner about it, but not tonight. As you’ve both indicated, tonight is supposed to be about fun, so I’m going to suggest that we have some.”

Chapter 4

By the following morning, the snow had started coming down harder. If I were honest with myself, it would have suited me just fine if the snowstorm had been severe enough to close the road, preventing the television crew from arriving, but apparently, we weren't going to get out of this week's commitment quite so easily.

"Did Reno say what time the television crew would arrive today?" I asked Georgia.

"Not specifically. I think Brittany will be arriving with Hogie later this morning."

"Is Hogie the tech guy?" I asked.

She nodded. "They'll need to get organized so that when Goober and Seagram arrive, they'll have a general understanding of what needs to be done."

"Goober and Seagram are the cameramen," I verified, even though I already knew that.

She nodded again. "I'm not sure what time Reno will be here. He may come early to oversee things, or at this point, perhaps he'll leave things up to Brittany. In my opinion, Brody doesn't need to be here until tomorrow, but it seems that he's already in town, so he may show up early."

"Did you have a chance to ask Tanner about Brad Kingman?" I asked.

"I did. Tanner assured me that he had no idea why Kingman was in town and that he hadn't spoken to him in months but that he had heard that Kingman was interested in buying a television station, so he wondered if perhaps it was the television station I work for that he was in town to shop."

"Is your station up for sale?" I asked.

“Not that I know of, but if the owners are trying to sell the station, it seems likely that they would be keeping it quiet. I know the station has been struggling financially, so I wouldn’t be surprised if I found out that the owners were looking at offers.”

I picked up my Santa mug and took a sip of my coffee. “Okay, so I guess it might make sense that Kingman could be in town to check out a potential investment. Tanner has said that the man owns lots of very different businesses on more than one occasion, and I can see how a very wealthy man might want to own his own television station, but what does this have to do with Litman?”

“I have no idea. Tanner swore he didn’t know, and I believe him.” She leaned a hip against the kitchen counter. “The only thing I do know for certain is that if Kingman is hooked up with Litman, we should assume that things will end badly.”

I actually wasn’t as sure about this as Georgia was. It was true that Litman had burned her for what appears to have been a personal vendetta created by her refusal to sleep with him, but Kingman was a savvy businessman with assets in the billions. I didn’t think it was likely that the man would get into bed with someone who was only out to take advantage of him or anyone else, for that matter.

“Even if Kingman is on the East Coast to look into the potential acquisition of the television station, why would he be here in Holiday Bay? The group who owns the television station in Bangor owns two other stations, neither of which are here in Holiday Bay.”

“You make a good point,” Georgia said. “But if he isn’t here to try to buy our station, then why is he here?”

“A vacation?” I suggested. “Holiday Bay is a beautiful place to spend the holidays. Maybe the guy just wanted to get out of the city and enjoy a good old-fashioned Christmas.”

“And Litman?”

“Maybe the men crossed paths at some point in the past, and then they ran into each other while they were both in town, so they stopped to chat.”

Georgia didn't look convinced, but she didn't argue either. I just hoped the television crew would get here, obtain the footage needed, and then leave without any problems. Ever since Georgia told me about Litman, I'd had a knot in my stomach, and being stressed over things I couldn't control was not how I wanted to spend my holiday.

“I'm going to try to just do my job and not get pulled into drama that will likely only blossom if I allow it to,” Georgia said. “I was upset at first, and I guess it's true that I'm still not thrilled with things, but you don't need to worry about me having a meltdown and making everything worse.”

“I'm glad to hear that.” I smiled. “Not that I actually thought you'd have a meltdown. I know you're a professional and know how to keep a level head. But I did hate to see you suffering.”

Georgia laughed. “Oh, I'm still suffering but plan to suffer in silence.”

“So about the décor,” I said, deciding that a subject change was a good idea. “I've instructed Jeremy not to change anything without my permission. I didn't want to complain when you already had so much on your mind, but Reno asked Jeremy to remove all of the inn's exterior Christmas lights.”

Georgia rolled her eyes. “That's nuts. If anyone asks you to do anything you don't want to do, talk to me about it. I'll make it clear to them that we only agreed to make minor changes that specifically addressed an issue that might relate to a particular scene.”

I looked out the window at the falling snow. It really was getting deep along the drive. “I'll have Jeremy run the plow. I think Haven already shoveled the walks this morning, but it appears they'll need another scrapping.”

“I'll talk to Jeremy and Haven,” Georgia assured me.

“I guess we should also remind the guests in the cottages that the inn has been reserved for the filming, and the room service for all their meals will begin with the dinner meal this evening.”

“I feel bad that our guests will be denied meals in the inn, but we did warn them before they made their reservation, and we did offer them a significant discount for the inconvenience, so I suppose I shouldn’t feel too bad about things.”

“I actually think that most of the guests are excited about the opportunity to serve as extras for the scenes Mylie is working on,” I pointed out.

“I guess it might be fun for someone who has never had the opportunity to be on TV before.”

Georgia went to work cooking something in the kitchen, and I decided to check in with the rest of my staff. I found Haven outside shoveling walks, so I decided to stop and chat with her for a minute.

“It looks like you’ve made a lot of progress,” I commented as I paused near the walkway she’d been shoveling between the inn and the cottages.

“I had a lot of excess energy, and shoveling has given me an outlet.”

I laughed. “I wish I could say that I had energy to spare. Have you seen Jeremy?”

“He went to town to purchase fuel for the plow so he could finish plowing the drive.”

It sounded as if all my employees were on top of things.

“As long as you’re here, I wonder if I can talk to you for a minute,” she asked.

“Anytime.” I tried to decide if this would be a short or a long conversation, but since Haven had a solemn expression, I suggested she take a break and head over to my cottage. She agreed to my plan. Once we arrived, I put a kettle filled with water on the stove for hot tea, and she settled in on the sofa with my cat, Rufus, on her lap.

“I wonder where Ramos and Molly went off to.” I referred to Georgia’s dog, Ramos, and my dog, Molly.

“Jeremy took Ramos, Molly, and Baxter into town with him. It seemed as if all three dogs were getting angsty with all the snow, so he decided they’d enjoy a ride. Baxter loves to go for a ride, and the others seemed happy to join him.”

“That was nice of Jeremy to take them along with him.”

“Jeremy is a nice guy. Mylie is lucky to have found him. I hope I find a nice guy like that one day.” She accepted the cup of tea I offered, and then I sat down across from her.

“So what’s on your mind?” I asked.

“It’s sort of a delicate situation.”

“Okay. I’ll keep that in mind.”

I could see that Haven was nervous, and suddenly, I wondered if something was genuinely wrong.

“Just take your time,” I suggested. “We can work it out as we go.”

She nodded. “I’m in a somewhat weird position that I’m honestly uncertain how to handle.”

“Okay,” I said once again.

She set her tea on the coffee table, then sat back and wiggled around a bit as if trying to settle in. Eventually, she spoke. “I know something about someone, a secret, and the person whose secret I discovered asked me not to tell. I assured this individual whose secret I’d found out that I wouldn’t tell, but deep down, I feel like I really should tell an adult.”

“You are an adult,” I pointed out.

“I’m eighteen. I’m still using my adult training wheels. I’m talking about a ‘you’ kind of an adult. Someone older with more experience. Someone who might know the right thing to do.”

“So even though you want to tell me what you know, you don’t want to betray your friend.”

“Exactly. I’ve been struggling with the whole thing, and it’s making me nuts. I want to do the right thing but don’t know what that is.” She looked directly at me. “If someone told you a secret and you promised to keep it, would you keep it no matter what?”

I paused to think it over. “I guess it depends on the circumstances. In your opinion, will keeping your friend’s secret lead to her being harmed physically, emotionally, or psychologically?”

“Maybe.” She paused. “Probably.” She paused again. “With certainty.”

“Then I think you should share what you know.”

Haven nodded and then paused. I could see that she was still struggling, so I decided to give her a minute. Eventually, she spoke. “If I tell you what I know, will you promise to keep it to yourself until we figure out what to do?”

I slowly nodded. “I know I just said you are eighteen, but I was your guardian until you became eighteen, so whatever you tell me will be protected under guardian-ward confidentiality.”

She raised a brow. “Is that a thing?”

I shrugged.

That seemed to satisfy her. “My secret is about Lucy.”

I decided to wait to see what Haven had to say about one of her best friends, who I knew was on her own, even though she was only a year older than Haven.

“Nikki, Eden, Lucy, and I had plans to go out to dinner together last week, and we arranged to meet at the apartment building where Nikki, Eden, and Lucy live. When I arrived, Lucy told me that Eden and Nikki were both still at work, and she invited me to wait with her in the apartment she and Eden shared. Shortly after I arrived, there was a knock on the door. Lucy answered it. She got really quiet, but I could tell she was freaked out. There was a guy around her age who said something. I figured it was just a friend or a neighbor and wasn’t really listening to what the guy said, but then Lucy got all flustered and demanded to know what he wanted.”

“So Lucy seemed upset that this man was there,” I clarified.

Haven nodded. “After Lucy asked the man what he was doing there, his response was, ‘I think you know,’ and Lucy attempted to close the door on him. The guy stuck his foot inside the apartment to keep the door from closing. I asked Lucy if everything was okay, and she turned to me and told me that everything was fine and that the visitor was her brother. I’m not sure what I said at this point. It was probably something about getting help, but Lucy seemed to gather her wits, and she assured me that she was fine but needed to talk to the man standing on her doorstep. I was going to argue, but she stepped outside and closed the door behind her before I could.”

“And then?” I asked.

“And then Lucy chatted with the man she claimed to be her brother for a couple of minutes, and then she came in. I asked her if she was okay, and she said she was, but I’d been watching through the window and saw him grab her arm. When I mentioned this, Lucy asked me to let it go, and at the time, I did.”

“And then?” I asked, figuring there was an “and then.”

“And then a few days later, I saw Lucy in the alley behind that row of new businesses where Velma’s Diner used to be. She was talking to the same guy who came to her door, and another guy was with them. I was tempted to interrupt, but I didn’t. I asked her about it later, and she said the other man was her uncle. Again, she asked me to let it go, and again, I agreed.”

“And then?” I asked once again.

“And then Nikki, Eden, Lucy, and I were chatting at the party last night. It was warm in the house with so many people, and Lucy pushed the sleeve of her sweater up, and we all saw that she had a giant bruise on her arm. Nikki asked her about it, and Lucy said she bumped into a door at the Bistro. When Nikki asked her if she’d told Shelby what had happened, she said it was no big deal. Eden commented about

the danger of swinging doors, and we all had a good laugh, and that was that. Of course, I knew about the situation with her brother and uncle, so when Lucy and I were alone later, I confronted her about the bruise. Once again, she assured me she was fine and that I shouldn't worry about it. I was really uncomfortable, so I asked her point blank if she was in some sort of trouble, and she assured me she wasn't."

"But you don't believe the story about the door, do you?"

"I don't. I mean, I guess it's possible. The hallway separating the customer area from the storage area in the Bistro's bar has a swinging door, but Lucy isn't twenty-one, so she never works in the bar. I guess it's possible that she might have been getting supplies when she hit her arm, but the whole thing just hit me as a convenient excuse. Nikki and Eden were heading back in our direction, so I knew I needed to end the conversation. I assured her I wouldn't say anything in front of the others. I also told her I was worried about her. As she had a dozen times before, she assured me she had things handled, but there was this look in her eyes."

"What kind of look?"

"Fear."

Deciding I needed a minute to process everything, I sipped my tea. Eventually, I asked about the two men Haven had seen with Lucy. I wondered if she thought they actually were Lucy's brother and uncle.

"I'm not sure. Maybe. At one point, Lucy commented about families being a pain in the backside, only she didn't use the word backside. I could see she was upset, so I commented back about families in general, and then she told me that she wished her family would evaporate from earth. Of course, she immediately remembered what happened to my family and got all flustered. I felt bad for her. It's not uncommon for people to say something without stopping to think about how it might sound to someone who lost their whole family in a fire. I decided to let it go, but I can't get that bruise out of my mind."

"You did the right thing by telling me. I need to think about it a bit, but I'll handle it from here."

“Do you have to tell her I told you what I did?”

“No. I plan to tell Lucy I noticed the bruise last night and use that as a jumping-off point. Hopefully, once I get her talking, she’ll tell me the rest.”

“Lucy is really close to Shelby. I think she might listen to her. I even thought about going to Shelby with my concerns, but I’m much more comfortable with you, and I knew you’d know what to do.”

“Maybe speaking to Shelby is a good idea. It’s Monday, so the Bistro is closed. I’ll call her and see if she has time to get together and chat.”

Haven stood up, crossed the room, and hugged me. “Thanks, Abby. I feel a lot better.” She glanced out the window. “The snow is starting to come down harder. I should get back to work.”

The snow didn’t seem to be coming down any harder than it had been, but I knew Haven needed some space to process everything, so I agreed with her statement and let her go. Speaking to Shelby about the situation with Lucy was actually a good idea. Shelby knew about Lucy’s background and personal situation, whereas I barely knew the girl. I figured Shelby would be sleeping in today, so I texted her and asked her if she had time to get together today. Shelby texted back to let me know she was having breakfast with her sister, Sierra, who was home from her teaching job at Harvard for the holiday break. Shelby assured me she was free the rest of the day, so I suggested I come by her place around one.

Once that was settled, I returned to the inn to check in with Georgia. I found her chatting with a pretty blond-haired woman holding a clipboard and a tall, lanky, dark-haired man with a headset.

“Oh good, you’re here,” Georgia said to me. “This is Brittany and Hogie. Brittany is Reno’s assistant, and Hogie is the tech guy for the television crew.” She turned to me. “And this is Abby Sullivan, my best friend and the owner of the inn.”

Georgia seemed to have approached the introductions with authentic enthusiasm, so I assumed that while she was upset with her producer and guest host, she didn't seem to have a problem with the support staff.

"Brittany is going to want to walk the property, meet with our staff, and get a general feel of the property," Georgia continued. "She particularly wanted to speak to Mylie. Have you seen her?"

"Actually, I haven't," I answered. "Haven is shoveling the walkways, and Jeremy went into town to buy fuel for the plow, although he may be back by now."

"Actually, I saw Jeremy and the dogs return." Georgia looked back toward Brittany and Hogie. "Why don't the two of you come with me. I'll show you to your suites, and then we can look at the library, parlors, and other common areas."

Once Georgia left with our guests, I decided to call Colt. I wasn't scheduled to meet Shelby for another few hours, so perhaps I'd see if he wanted to get together for lunch. I'd just seen him last evening, but with so many guests to talk to, we hadn't had a chance to chat. With the snow that had been predicted, Colt decided it was a good idea to head home after the party so that if something came up that required his response, he wouldn't need to worry about getting back into town. Colt didn't answer when I called, so I left a message.

"Excuse me," the man I now knew was the tech guy for the project said after walking up behind me as I sat at the kitchen table in the inn, checking my emails while I waited for Colt to call me back about lunch.

"Can I help you with something?"

"I was wondering if it would be okay for me to set up my equipment in the library. Normally, the equipment stays in the van and runs off a generator, but we're looking at temperatures below freezing over the next few days, and I hate to leave my expensive equipment outside."

"It's fine with me if you use the library, but you might want to speak to Georgia about it. I'm not involved with the

blueprint for the shoot, so I have no idea if they plan to use the room for another purpose.”

The man slid his glasses, which had begun to slip, back up his nose. “I was going to ask Georgia, but she got a text and headed outside. I asked Brittany about it, and she said she didn’t think that setting up in there would be a problem, but since we’re going to need to move furniture and bring in extension cords and that sort of thing, she figured it would be a good idea to ask before I just went ahead and did it.”

“If Brittany didn’t see a problem with it, then I’m sure it’s fine.” I frowned. “I’ll go and find out what’s going on with Georgia. In the meantime, why don’t you go ahead and do what you need to do in the library to make it work for you.”

“Okay, thanks.”

After Hogie headed off to get set up, I decided to check in with Georgia. It seemed odd that she would head out while she was in the middle of trying to get everyone settled. I texted her, and she texted right back, letting me know she needed to return a call but would be back to help Brittany and Hogie in just a few minutes. It seemed like things were being handled, so I decided to head back to my cottage to change my clothes. Colt had called back and left a message, letting me know he’d love to have lunch. I texted him back to let him know I’d meet him at our favorite deli in an hour. I considered the chowder house near the water, but the deli was in the center of town near the park, and I really did want to have a chance to take in all the colorful lights and festive decorations the Holiday Bay Chamber of Commerce event committee had put out over the weekend.

“What’s going on?” I asked Haven, who was down on all fours, peering under the deck at the front of the cottage.

“It’s Rufus,” Haven said. “I was heading this way to shovel the path between your cottage and the inn again when I saw Rufus dart under the deck. I’ve been calling to him, but he won’t come out.”

“How did he get out of the cottage?” I asked.

Haven shrugged. "I'm not sure, but he may have scooted out when Jeremy let Ramos, Molly, and Baxter back in after he returned from getting fuel."

"I suppose that might be the case. It doesn't matter how Rufus got out; the only thing that matters is that we bring him in. It's freezing out here. Let me grab my scarf, hat, and gloves, and then I'll help you."

I dashed into my bedroom to grab them and then went out and joined Haven. Knowing all the while that I'd end up getting my pants wet and would need to change, which wasn't a problem since I'd planned on changing anyway, I knelt down and peered under the deck. Rufus didn't appear to be stuck. He was pretty far beneath the deck, but he seemed fine. "Come on out of there," I called to the cat.

He let out a yowl but didn't move.

"Are you stuck?" I asked.

He just sat and stared at me.

I looked up at Haven. "Run into the cottage and grab a can of tuna, open it, and put a scoop in a bowl. Rufus loves tuna. He'll likely come out for a treat."

Haven went inside, and Georgia, who seemed to have come from the path leading to the rental cottages, walked up beside me.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"Rufus is under the deck and won't come out."

Georgia got down on her hands and knees next to me. "It figures that this cat would decide to be difficult on a snowy day like this. I wonder why he left the cottage in the first place. We both know that Rufus hates snow."

I stood up and looked around. "I'm not sure. Perhaps there's another cat on the property."

"That's possible. I think the last time Rufus acted out of character was when he'd found a mama cat and kittens, but if Rufus followed a mama cat to her nesting place, then where is the mama cat?" she asked.

Once Haven arrived with the tuna, I made sure Rufus knew what I had and then tried to coax him out from under the deck. When he still wouldn't move, I envisioned the need to pry up the decking directly above where he was sitting in order to get him out. I didn't want to resort to that, but we couldn't leave him there. I was on the verge of sending Haven to find a prybar when Rufus finally moved toward me. Once he got close enough, I picked him up.

"I'm going to take him back in, and while I'm in the cottage, I'll grab a flashlight. If there are kittens under there, we'll need to get them out," I said.

Georgia and Haven agreed to watch for a mama cat or kittens while I returned Rufus to the cottage and went to look for a flashlight. When I returned, I got down on my hands and knees once again, and using the flashlight, I looked around, but I couldn't find any evidence of another animal.

"I really can't figure out why that cat came all the way over here if he wasn't following another cat," Georgia said.

"Yeah," I said, standing back up. "At least we got Rufus."

Once I'd changed my clothes, I headed into town. Colt was already sitting at a table in the corner near the window by the time I arrived. "So, has the television crew descended on you?" he asked once we'd ordered.

"Only the assistant and the tech guy were there as of the time I left, but I suspect that the rest of the television crew will be there by the time I get back."

"I didn't think that they were filming until tomorrow."

"Brittany, the assistant, told me that the television crew would be setting up today and preparing things for the filming, which will begin tomorrow with the promos and then culminate on Wednesday with the cooking segment. I'm not sure why they needed two days to tape an hour-long cooking show and a couple of promos, but perhaps there's more involved than I realize. Mylie is pretty happy about the producers wanting her to share Pamela's story and the reason

she started her annual activity list. It's a feel-good Christmas story, so I'm glad they're allowing her to put it out there."

"It is a nice story, and the special is a good opportunity to spotlight the inn."

Colt wasn't wrong about that. The conversation paused as our soup and sandwiches were delivered. Once we'd both had a chance to sample our meal, I told him the story about Rufus and his odd behavior.

"You know, he slipped out the door last night during the party," Colt informed me. "I had a call from my parents and needed to call them back, so I decided to head over to your cottage, where it was quieter to make the call. Rufus slipped out as I opened the door, but I managed to catch up with him before he could slip under anything."

"That is so odd," I said. "Rufus hates the snow. Normally, it takes a powerful bribe to get him to go outside if the white stuff is on the ground. I can't imagine what has caught his attention."

"The last time he kept taking off, he had a girlfriend and kittens."

"He did, but this time, I searched for kittens and under the deck at the front of the cottage but didn't find any. And there wasn't another cat anywhere in the area either."

Colt took a bite of his loaded potato soup. "So when you found him, he was just huddled up under the deck with seemingly no reason to be there."

"As far as I could tell. I got down on my hands and knees with a flashlight, and I didn't see anything. I think the cat is going senile."

Colt smiled. "The cat is acting oddly, but all his mental facilities seem intact. Just keep an eye on him. If he continues acting oddly, you might want to call your veterinarian. Perhaps he just went for a walk, and when he realized how cold it was, he took refuge under the deck."

"Maybe, but this is a cat who hates the snow. Rufus must have been highly motivated to venture out in it in the first

place.”

Colt agreed, but the truth of the matter was that short of learning cat language, we’d likely never know why Rufus had done what he had. I asked Colt about his call with his parents, and he told me that they wanted him to come for the weekend. Since Colt’s parents were taking the kids to visit family on the West Coast during their school break over Christmas, Colt was seriously considering doing just that. I knew Colt had mixed feelings about the kids being away for Christmas, but I had to admit I was happy that he’d be here at home in Holiday Bay with me this year.

The conversation then segued to gifts for the kids, and before I knew it, it was time for him to get back to work and for me to head over to Shelby’s. I considered bringing up Lucy’s situation with Colt while we were at lunch, but I didn’t have all the facts yet, so I decided to speak to Shelby first and then decide what to do.

“I’m so glad you called me,” Shelby said after I arrived at her home and shared what Haven had told me. “I have noticed a change in Lucy this past week, but I figured that maybe she was just missing her family with the holidays and all.”

“What exactly do you know about Lucy?” I asked.

After taking a moment to give my question some thought, Shelby responded. “Lucy came in over the summer looking for a job. We didn’t need a full-time staff person, but she was willing to accept a part-time on-call position, so I decided to give her a chance. Lucy can’t serve alcohol because she’s only nineteen, which can be a problem at times, but she will work as many hours as we need her, and she works harder than anyone when she’s there, so once we had a full-time opening, I offered it to her. She seems to fit right in. Lucy gets along with the staff and the customers. She seems to be alone here in Holiday Bay, which seemed odd to me for someone her age, but she appears to have gotten herself hooked up with Nikki, Eden, and Haven, so I think she’ll be just fine. Or at least that’s what I thought until you shared what Haven told you.”

“Do you know anything about her history?” I asked.

“On the application she filled out when she came to work for me, Lucy indicated that she was home-schooled and hadn’t attended a traditional school. I asked her about that, and she said she lived in a rural area of Virginia. She assured me that while she hadn’t had any formal education, she could read and handle basic mathematics. So far, she’s done fine as a waitress.”

“Did she mention parents? Siblings?”

Shelby frowned. “Actually, no, she didn’t. The application doesn’t ask for the names of your relatives, although it does ask for prior residences, education, and work experience.”

“And did she have any prior work experience?” I wondered.

“She did not. She commented about living in a tight-knit community and pitching in with whatever needed to be done the same as everyone else. She appears to be intelligent, and she has the ability to follow directions. I’m not sure what she did after she completed her home-schooling.” Shelby frowned. “I guess maybe I should speak to her. If her brother and uncle have shown up here in Holiday Bay, they must have a reason for doing so.”

“Based on what Haven told me, it sounds as if Lucy was very unhappy that they were here,” I said. “The situation has me wondering if she might have run away from an abusive situation only to have certain family members catch up with her.”

“I guess we should find out,” Shelby said.

Shelby thought it best if she spoke to Lucy alone at this point, which was fine with me since I certainly had enough things on my plate without adding something else that seemed to have the potential to become extremely volatile, so I agreed to leave things up to her. Shelby promised to call me once she’d spoken to Lucy.

After I left Shelby’s home, I headed back to the inn. The two cameramen had checked in and were busy taking measurements and checking shadows as they set up the

lighting by the time I arrived. I didn't speak to the men for more than a moment when Georgia introduced us, but they seemed pleasant. I asked about Brody and Reno, and Georgia informed me that she hadn't seen either man so far, which was perfectly fine with her. While I could be reading things wrong, it seemed like Georgia was even more annoyed than when I'd seen her before I left to have lunch with Colt and visit with Shelby. I asked her if anything had happened while I was away, and Georgia told me that she'd had a phone conversation with Brody that had rubbed her the wrong way. Georgia assured me everything was fine and that she'd deal with things and insisted that I shouldn't worry. I wanted to believe that was true, but based on her clenched hands and the deep furrow that had bored a crater in her forehead, I suspected that Georgia was much more upset than she was letting on.

Chapter 5

After Reno arrived the previous afternoon, he'd requested that everyone involved with the Christmas special join him in the parlor so he could explain the filming schedule and what would be expected of everyone over the next few days. Once that was accomplished, he suggested the group have dinner in town. I'd overheard Reno invite Georgia to join the television crew for dinner, but she declined, claiming to have work that she needed to attend to. As far as I knew, nothing required Georgia's immediate attention, so I suspected she simply wanted to avoid Brody for as long as possible.

"Has anyone seen Brody?" Brittany asked after the group had gathered to begin filming the promo segments scheduled for today.

I'd noticed that he was the only one missing from breakfast, but he was an "in front of the camera" sort of guy, so it occurred to me that he might simply be watching his weight.

Everyone agreed that they hadn't seen him since he'd left the bar the previous evening.

"Did you check his room?" Reno asked.

"I pounded on the door, but he didn't answer," Brittany replied.

"The guy likes to drink, so he's probably out cold," Goober snickered.

"If he's out cold, he isn't going to be much use to us today," Hogie said with a tone of annoyance in his voice.

"I have a key to all the suites," Georgia informed the group. "I can let one of you in."

I noticed that she didn't offer to go in and check on him herself. I guessed that I didn't blame her for that.

"Go with Georgia," Reno instructed Brittany.

"It might be better if one of the guys went," Georgia said. "Just in case he is indisposed."

"Okay, then Goober can go with Brittany and Georgia," Reno decided. "Goober can go in and assess Brody's state of dress, and then once we are certain he has his pants on, Brittany can pour some coffee down him so that he doesn't miss his call time, which is in," he looked at his watch, "sixty-two minutes."

Georgia agreed to the plan and headed to suite five, with Brittany and Goober trailing behind her. I figured that Georgia could handle whatever she found on her own, but since she had a rocky past with the missing guest star, I decided to tag along at the last minute.

"Did Brody leave the bar alone last night?" I asked whichever cast member might want to respond.

"He met a woman who asked the bartender to send him a drink," Brittany said. "He joined her at the bar, and then they left together."

"Did he have a way back to the inn?" I asked.

"Brody is a big boy," Goober commented, seemingly annoyed with the whole thing. "I'm sure he caught a cab or something."

"He might even have had his unlucky date drop him off," Brittany said.

The comment about the unlucky date wasn't lost on me. I couldn't help but wonder if Brittany hadn't been one of Brody's unlucky dates at some point in her past.

"Did either of you catch the name of the woman he left with?" I asked.

Brittany and Goober agreed that they hadn't caught the woman's name.

When we arrived at the suite assigned to Brody, Georgia knocked several times, and when no one answered, she used her key to open the door. Goober went inside, and after a few seconds, he called out to let us know that the room was empty and that we could join him inside. It appeared that Brody had never returned the previous evening. There weren't any clothes draped over a chair or change on a night table, as you might find if someone had returned to the room and then headed out for a walk or something.

"Reno is going to kill Brody," Brittany said. "The guy is a total slacker. This isn't the first time he's talked his way onto a shoot only to bail on everyone at the last minute."

"Has Brody worked for Reno before?" I asked Brittany.

She nodded. "I don't know why Reno allows him to talk himself onto these shoots. The guy is bad news. He has a reputation for doing exactly what it appears he has done."

If the guy had previously burned Reno, I thought Reno would have stuck with Georgia and avoided the hassle.

"I need to return a call," Georgia said, looking at her cell phone, frowning, and then heading back down the stairs.

"So what should we do now?" Goober asked once she left.

"Should we call the police?" I wondered.

"And tell them what?" Brittany asked. "Our celebrity guest host tied one on after hooking up with some random woman he met at a bar, and his actions have made him late for work."

"He could be in trouble," I said.

Goober snickered. "Not likely. The guy is doing what he often does. He'll show up. Let's give Reno the bad news and get started without him."

If it were me who had gone out with a colleague who never had arrived back at the lodging property where he'd been staying, I might have been a bit more concerned, but it appeared as if Brittany and Goober were both confident that the man was sleeping it off somewhere, so I decide to let them handle things and simply go about my day.

The three of us headed back down the stairs. Brittany and Goober went to tell Reno the bad news about their missing celebrity guest host, and I headed toward the kitchen, where I poured myself a cup of coffee and then stood looking out the window at the snowy landscape. Between the colorful lights Georgia had strung all around the room and the festive cookie jars that lined the counter, the room had a cozy holiday feel that I enjoyed.

“Do you need me to do anything?” I asked Georgia after she came back from making her call.

“No,” Georgia answered. Georgia looked so pale that I was worried she was sick, but when I asked about it, she told me she was okay. “Reno is planning to tape the promos today. He’ll do a couple of shots right here in the inn, and then he plans to head outdoors and do some shots with the extras he hired to build snowmen or take a sleigh ride. Brody was supposed to participate in the promos, but I suspect Reno will rewrite things. Unless you want to be one of the extras, you might want to make yourself scarce.”

“I think I’ll head into town,” I said. “I have a bit of shopping to do, and I definitely don’t want to get caught in the background during the shoot. Do you need me to pick anything up while I’m there?”

“No, I think I’m good, but if I think of anything, I’ll text you.”

I was heading toward the back door, which led to the cottage Georgia and I shared when Colt pulled up in his police cruiser. I hadn’t been expecting him to stop by today, but I was happy to see him nonetheless. At least until I saw the look on his face.

“What’s wrong? Has something happened?”

“Is Georgia around?”

“She’s in the inn. What is it? Is everyone okay?” I had to admit that Colt showing up unannounced while wearing his serious face concerned me more than just a little.

“I need to talk to Georgia. Maybe you can run inside and ask her to come to the cottage. It will be best if we can talk in private.”

My heart skipped a beat. “Tanner?”

“Tanner is fine. I just need to speak to her.”

I agreed to do as Colt asked and then headed toward the inn. I pulled Georgia aside and whispered that Colt needed to speak to her. When she seemed resigned rather than panicked as I had been, I realized she likely knew why it was that Colt had come all the way out here on a cold, snowy day.

“Colt,” Georgia said after we entered the cottage.

Colt hadn’t asked me to return with Georgia, but he hadn’t told me I couldn’t either, so I decided to sit in the background until someone told me to do otherwise.

“Brody Litman is dead,” Colt said.

Georgia hung her head. “Yes. I know. Isabella called and told me.” She looked toward me. “I was going to tell you, but I just found out a few minutes ago when I went outside to take that call after we checked the suite and found that Brody had never returned last night. I was trying to decide what to do when you headed back toward the cottage.”

“Isabella?” I asked. “The name doesn’t sound familiar.”

“She works at the motel off the interstate.” Georgia looked toward Colt. “How do you know I was there?”

“The security camera in the parking lot.”

Georgia sat down on the sofa. She rested her head on her hands, taking several deep breaths to calm herself. Eventually, she looked up.

“Why don’t you start at the beginning,” Colt suggested.

Georgia nodded. “I’m not sure how much of this you know, but I first met Brody years ago before I was a chef and even before I was married.” Georgia then went through the chronology of her relationship with Brody as she had with me on that first day. “The guy was bad news, and for some reason,

he seemed to be obsessed with me, which caused him to act inappropriately in the past. I guess I knew he was here to cause trouble when he first showed up, but until late in the day yesterday, he hadn't actually done anything, so I had no reason to complain to anyone."

"And what happened late in the day yesterday?" Colt asked.

"Brody texted me. It was late. I'd say around ten. He said that he had evidence proving I had colluded with my husband to embezzle money from all those people, and if I didn't want the information he had to be made public, I would meet him at a motel off the highway so we could talk about it. Since I'm innocent, I know that there is no way he can have proof of anything, but I also know that lies can still hurt you. I decided my best defense was an offense, so I agreed to meet him. He texted back with the address and room number."

I wanted to let out a string of very unladylike words but decided it would probably be best for me to be a fly on the wall and let Colt handle things.

"So Brody Litman knew that your husband embezzled millions of dollars from his clients before committing suicide in prison," Colt confirmed.

Georgia nodded. "He knew the whole ugly story, including the fact that the police suspected that I was involved in the whole thing, a theory that was never proven or disproven. The last thing I wanted to do last night was to drive into town to talk to that snake, but I have a new life now, and when Brody seemed to be offering me an ultimatum, I felt like I was trapped." She began to cry. "I love the life I've built. I have friends and family I care about deeply and a career I've worked hard for. Somehow, despite the horrible experience that completely destroyed the life I once had, I've managed to leave all of that behind, and very few people even know that I was part of such a huge mess." She looked at Colt. "I'd really like to keep it that way."

"But you were proven to be innocent," I said.

“Not really,” she responded. “While it is true that I avoided prison when the prosecution could never prove that I was involved, I don’t have any proof that I was innocent either. A lack of evidence one way or the other left people wondering. Friends and family, who I would have sworn would never betray or abandon me, did just that when they realized how difficult it was to live with doubt.” She paused and took a deep breath. “I don’t want to go through that again. I have a fresh start where no one knows who my husband was. When I talk to folks here in Holiday Bay, I don’t feel like they’re trying to figure out if I’m innocent or guilty. I love what I have, and Brody threatened to take it away.”

“So you killed him?” Colt asked very matter-of-factly.

“Colt!” I gasped.

“What?” Georgia spat at the same time. “No, I didn’t kill him. I can’t believe you even asked me that. I did go to the motel where he rented a room after he left the bar, and I did try to speak to him, but when I left, he was very much alive.”

“Okay,” Colt said in a voice so professional that it didn’t seem to be his own. “Walk me through that.”

I had to suppress my anger at the way Colt treated Georgia like a common criminal. I supposed it was his job to do what he was doing, but this was Georgia!

“Like I said, Brody texted me around ten, and I left here shortly after that. When I arrived at his room, I knocked on the door, but he didn’t answer. I tried the door, and it was unlocked, so I went in. The guy was passed out drunk on the bed, so I left.”

“Was he in the room alone?” Colt asked.

“He was.”

“And then?”

“And then nothing. I returned to the inn and went back to bed where I’d been when Brody texted in the first place.”

“So when he didn’t show up for breakfast, you just assumed he was sleeping it off back at the motel in town,” I

said.

She nodded. “Of course, I couldn’t say as much. If I had, everyone would have wanted to know how I knew that Brody ended up drunk in a seedy motel room. I couldn’t say I’d been there the previous evening, so I played dumb. Then Isabella called and told me that the man I’d been there to visit had been found dead in his room and that the police were there. I barely had a moment to figure out what to do when Colt showed up.” She looked at Colt. “So what’s going to happen now?”

“I’m going next door to speak to the television crew. I think it best that you wait here. Very few people know you were at the motel last night, so for now, I think it’s best not to mention it.”

“If we could figure out a way to never mention it, I’d be fine with that.”

“Word will get out,” Colt said. “Not right away, but it will. If you don’t want everyone to know why you were there, you might want to make up a story.”

“I hate to lie,” she said.

“Just say that Brody knew you in your past, and you needed to speak to him about a situation,” I suggested. “Keep it vague. Most people will let it go with that.”

I offered to walk Colt next door and help him get everyone organized. Colt suggested that Georgia call Tanner to come and sit with her while she waited for him to conduct his interviews and return, and she agreed to do just that. Once Colt and I arrived at the inn, we ushered everyone into the main seating area, and Colt explained who he was and why he was there to speak to them. I watched everyone’s face when Colt announced that Brody was dead. Goober, Seagram, and Hogie all exhibited surprise, while Reno seemed more annoyed than surprised, and Brittany seemed to be working hard to suppress a grin.

“Who would like to walk me through the events of the evening?” Colt asked.

“I will,” Reno volunteered. “I took the television crew out for dinner, and then we went to a bar for drinks after. Brody, being Brody, hooked up with a girl who had been sitting at the bar, and they left together. The rest of us came back to the inn. None of us realized that Brody was missing until he failed to come down for breakfast, and we sent a group up to his suite to check on him. None of us knew he was dead until you came in and told us.”

Colt looked around the room. He attempted to make eye contact with each individual. Everyone other than Brittany met his gaze. The assistant to the producer couldn't seem to keep her eyes off the floor. I couldn't help but wonder why Colt didn't interview the group individually, but I supposed that he had his reasons.

“What happened exactly?” Hogie eventually asked.

Colt answered. “Mr. Litman was found lying face up on his bed by the maid who went in to clean the room. Initially, she figured he was asleep and tried to sneak out, but then she noticed he wasn't breathing.

“How did he die?” Seagram asked.

“Mr. Litman seems to have been poisoned or possibly drugged,” Colt informed them. “I'll know more once the tox screen comes back. I understand Mr. Litman left the bar you frequented last night with a woman.”

“The Reindeer Roundup,” Brittany jumped in. “That's the name of the bar we went to after dinner, and the woman Brody left with was maybe twenty-five with short blond hair.”

Goober asked if the woman Brody had been at the motel with had been caught on camera, and Colt confirmed that they did have a video but were still working on an ID. Again, I looked around the room. I knew the woman Colt was referring to was Georgia since there was no evidence that anyone else had been to the room, but it appeared that the rest of the television crew assumed that the woman Colt was talking about was the woman Litman had left the bar with. I wondered what had happened to that woman since, according to Colt, she never had shown up on the security feed at the motel.

“So what’s going to happen today?” Brittany directed her question toward Reno.

Reno looked at Colt. “The television crew is supposed to record a series of promos today. I think we can rework the scripts to make them work. Is it okay if we proceed?”

“It is. If I have additional questions, I may be back. Will you be on the property all day?”

“With the exception of the sleigh ride,” Reno said. “I suspect we will be away for two hours filming those segments. I believe Georgia has reserved the sleigh and the driver from one to three o’clock.”

“Where is Georgia anyway?” Seagram asked.

“She’s next door taking care of some inn business,” Colt answered. “I’ve already spoken to her, so I’ll send her over when I’m done here.”

“We really need another male to fill out our script,” Brittany said. “A tall and handsome man and not Goober or Seagram.”

Neither man seemed to take exception to that, but I could see how they might have.

“Georgia has a cute boyfriend,” Brittany said. “Maybe he would be willing to stand in.”

“I’ll ask Georgia about it when she gets here,” Reno said. He looked at Colt. “Will that be all?”

“For now.”

Chapter 6

After Georgia and a reluctant Tanner left to head next door for the filming and Colt had left to go back into town, I decided to call Shelby. She'd texted earlier to let me know that she'd sat down and had a long talk with Lucy when she checked in for her shift and suggested that if I wanted to stop by, we could chat about what might need to be done next. I wasn't sure what she meant by "be done," but it sounded as if Shelby had identified a problem that needed to be resolved, so I decided to check in with her and see what I could do.

"Hey, Shelby," I said to the red-haired woman after driving to the Bistro and poking my head into her office.

"Abby. I'm so glad you could stop by. I want to talk to you about Lucy, but first, I want to hear what you know about Brody Litman."

I shared everything I knew as accurately as I could recall with Shelby.

"Did Colt really ask Georgia point blank if she killed this man?"

"He really did," I confirmed. "I couldn't believe it. He sounded so official."

"Well, I guess he was speaking to Georgia in his official capacity of police chief rather than as a friend. Given the situation, I have no doubt that the county will assign a detective to the case. If there was any indication that Georgia had received special treatment, I would imagine that could only hurt her."

I supposed Shelby had a point. Colt had just been doing his job as police chief when he treated Georgia like any other suspect. That didn't mean he really thought she did it or that

he lacked compassion for her situation. I supposed I should remember that.

“So, about Lucy,” I said after deciding that the Brody Litman situation had been explored to the extent that neither Shelby nor I had anything to add.

“According to Lucy, she was brought up in an unconventional situation.”

“Unconventional?”

Shelby continued. “Apparently, Lucy was raised in a commune. At least, that’s how she referred to the community she grew up in. In my opinion, the whole thing sounds more like a cult, but I don’t suppose it’s my place to judge.”

“A cult?” The very idea of a cult sickened me.

“Apparently, the familial structure of the commune begins with a male who is accepted to be the leader or high father of the group. Beneath him are subordinate males, each of whom has several wives. Lucy told me that her father has three wives. Keep in mind the term wife is used loosely. As far as I can tell, no legal unions exist, although Lucy did tell me there is genuine caring.”

“Wow. Of all the things I thought you were going to tell me, this was nowhere on my radar.”

“I was surprised myself. I suppose there have always been social structures in our country that can be considered nontraditional. My great-aunt on my mother’s side grew up in a commune inhabited by hippies in the sixties. The family she grew up in followed a doctrine of free love and free will. It all seemed harmless enough, and children produced by the family’s members were free to come and go as they pleased once they turned eighteen. I don’t claim to be an expert on any of this, but in most cases, it seems that participation in groups of this type is strictly voluntary. As you know, there are, however, cults who consider their members to be property. Based on what Lucy shared with me, the family situation in which she was raised seems to butt right up against the

boundary between commune and cult as far as I'm concerned."

"So the brother and the uncle are in town to bring her home."

Shelby nodded. "According to Lucy, she never really fit into the social structure in which she was raised, so she ran away on her eighteenth birthday. I guess her family has been looking for her since she left, and they have finally managed to track her down. Lucy has no desire to return, and she seems to understand that she can't be forced to return, at least not legally."

"But she's afraid that this brother and uncle will kidnap her and force her to return."

"Yes," Shelby confirmed. "That's what she fears."

"We should call someone. Maybe the FBI."

Shelby leaned forward on her elbows. "Here's the thing. Lucy told me that almost all of the individuals who live in the commune are happy there. They are taken care of by others who share their beliefs and goals. While there have been others who have left upon reaching maturity, most willingly stay. Lucy's afraid it will harm others if she files a complaint, which isn't her goal. She assures me that no laws are being broken and that children are not paired into child-rearing units until they reach the age of eighteen. I reminded her that if her brother and uncle forced her to return against her will, that would be kidnapping, and a law would have been broken, and she acknowledged as much. She also said that even though her father is a lot stricter than most of the fathers in the community, it's her belief if one of the other girls decided to leave, they would be allowed to do so."

"So then, Lucy's reason for not saying anything about her brother and uncle being here to fetch her is because she doesn't want to blow the whole thing up."

"Basically. If what Lucy said is true, she did make a good case about the group working for others even though it doesn't work for her. She asked me to imagine a place where everyone

had plenty of good food and a sturdy roof over their heads. A place where there were lots of people to call a friend, and you were never alone. These individuals live in nature, so there's plenty of fresh air, clear water, and sunshine. Other than the multiple wives thing, it really doesn't sound half bad."

"So what are you thinking?" I asked. "Even if most of the family members are happy there, we can't let them just take Lucy."

"I agree. I've been thinking about this, and I think the best way to go is to speak to the brother and uncle. We make sure they understand that if Lucy suddenly disappears, we will call the FBI, and someone will be out to look into things."

"I guess that's as good an idea as any," I said.

"If the brother and the uncle want to preserve what they have, they'll go home leaving Lucy behind. We should get the exact location of this compound from Lucy, so if she does turn up missing, we'll have a starting point," Shelby added.

I liked the idea of having an exact location. I thought someone should check the group out, but perhaps there was a way to do that without negatively impacting the lives of those who chose to be there.

"So the question is, how do we find the uncle and the brother?" I asked. "Did Lucy have a way to get ahold of them?"

"I haven't discussed my solution with her yet," Shelby admitted. "I wanted to run it past someone else first in case my logic was wonky, and my idea was terrible."

"It's a tough situation without a clear solution, but the conversation you're proposing should do the trick. I guess the next step should be to talk to Lucy to see what she thinks."

Since Lucy was working that day, Shelby called her into her office. Shelby shared the discussion she and I had just had with Lucy and emphasized the fact that we were worried about her. Shelby asked her if she thought a threat would work, and she replied that it might if it was delivered by a powerful man. Lucy clearly explained that the men in her family didn't value

women enough to bother listening to anything they might say. She suggested that sending the police to speak to her brother and uncle might backfire, so Colt wouldn't likely be the best choice. Perhaps Dawson Westwood. Or even Beck Cage, since the hierarchy in her family unit had been built on respect for the generations that came before them. Shelby and I discussed it and felt that Beck would be a good choice. He was a man in his sixties who currently worked as a private investigator but had worked most of his life for the Boston PD. He had a commanding presence, and it wasn't easy to rattle him. Once the decision was made, Shelby called Beck and asked him to come in.

Chapter 7

Once Shelby and I had spoken to Beck, and he'd agreed to speak to Lucy's brother and uncle on Lucy's behalf, I left the situation to them and headed toward the bookstore. I'd been meaning to stop in and sign copies of my books as Lou had requested. Signing copies for resale was one of many traditions I'd established with her niece, Vanessa Blackstone. When Lou purchased the bookstore, she'd asked me if I'd be willing to continue those traditions, and I'd responded that I'd be happy to.

"Morning, Lou," I greeted as I walked into the warmth of the bookstore from the snowy sidewalk. "By this point, I guess I should say good afternoon."

"Abby, I'm so glad you stopped by. I wanted to thank you once again for including me on Sunday. I had the best time chatting with everyone."

"It was a nice turnout."

"And your decorations are lovely. Very elegant, yet warm and friendly at the same time. That life-size nutcracker in the parlor was really something to behold."

"The nutcracker was a gift from Lacy on my second Christmas living in Holiday Bay. We found a note to Santa inside the nutcracker. The note was written by a little girl named Pamela and was actually a list of things she wanted to do with her parents for Christmas."

"I've heard the story. While Pamela's story had a sad ending, Mylie, who was staying with you as a guest that year, was inspired by the concept and decided to use the list to challenge the other guests staying at the inn to do some of the things listed during their stay."

I nodded. “Mylie’s event was such a huge hit that it’s been added as one of our annual events. This year, we’re getting a late start given the fact that the television crew filming Georgia’s special has taken over the place through Thursday, but we have new guests checking in on Friday, and Mylie has both indoor and outdoor events offered every day between Friday and Christmas Day. You should come out and join in if you have the time.”

“I’d love to. As you might guess, we’ve been busy on the days we’re open, but maybe I’ll stop by on Sunday or Monday. I may even bring Marnie and Cricket. The three of us were chatting recently about feeling somewhat displaced this holiday season. It will be the first Christmas in Holiday Bay for all three of us. Eden as well.”

“Georgia and I and the entire gang out at the inn would love to help you build new memories here,” I assured the woman I’d come to care about deeply since she’d moved to the area. “The reason for my being here today, however, is to sign those books you keep asking me to stop by to sign.”

“I have them here behind the counter.” She reached down and took out a stack. “I really appreciate you doing this.”

“I’m happy to. Vanessa used to tell me that a signed book was much more likely to find a forever home than one that wasn’t signed.”

“That’s true. In this day and age when eBooks seem to rule supreme, a signed copy of a paperback or hardcover is priceless to some.”

I supposed I could understand that.

“Speaking of forever homes, have you had any luck finding the kitten Annabelle is hoping for?” Lou asked.

“Not yet. And trust me when I say we have a lot of folks looking. I suppose that if we end up with a cute kitten, even if she isn’t all white, Annabelle will love her. That being said, I must admit that Annabelle really seems to be focused on a white one.”

“I spoke to Hazel about it, and she promised to keep an eye out for a fluffy white kitten. We house four cats or kittens at a time here in the cat lounge, but Hazel has access to all the cats and kittens the rescue has available for adoption. She had one lead she promised to follow up on, but when Hazel called and spoke to the family fostering the litter she had in mind, they told her that the white kitten she remembered was actually black and white.” Lou referred to Hazel Hawthorn, a longtime local and frequent volunteer who runs the local cat rescue.

“I guess we’ll just keep looking. Mylie even went so far as to call a rescue in Connecticut looking for this perfect kitten Annabelle seems convinced is meant to be hers, but the only white kitten they have has a deposit on it pending the approval of the background check.”

“That really is too bad.”

“It has been a frustrating project,” I said.

I chatted with Lou a little longer and then headed across the courtyard to say hi to Marnie and Cricket. Sisters Marnie and Cricket Abernathy co-owned the flower shop that shared the courtyard with Firehouse Books. The gang who owned or worked at businesses backing the cozy courtyard had established a real family. In addition to Marnie and Cricket, who seemed to enjoy hanging out at Firehouse Books with Lou, Velma, and Eden, brothers Eli and Andy Anderson co-owned the deli across the courtyard, and next to that was a wine bar owned by Astoria Walton and a craft store owned by Ethel Covington.

Once I said hi to everyone, I headed home. I’d been worried about Georgia all day and had an overwhelming need to check in with her to make sure she was doing as well as could be expected given the situation. At this point, I wasn’t sure if Georgia had filled anyone else in on the level of her involvement. It would be up to Georgia to set the pacing of the whole thing, but in my mind, it would be best if Jeremy, Mylie, and Haven heard about it from her. Tanner knew, as did Colt and me, so in addition to those who lived at the inn, perhaps she should share everything with Nikki, who seemed

to have a way of finding out what was going on when she really wanted to know.

“I have given this a lot of thought, and I agree that it’s time that I share a bit more about my past with those I’m closest to,” Georgia agreed when I brought it up. “I’ve realized Brody’s threat terrified me to the depth that it had was because I had this huge secret which I knew could cause all sorts of problems in my new life, but rather than dealing with it, I’d tried to bury it. After much consideration, I’ve decided I want to come clean with Mylie, Jeremy, and Haven. Tanner, Colt, and you know. I remember talking to Velma about my husband and why I was on the run when we met, so she knows most of it. I should tell Nikki. She may, after all, end up as my sister-in-law one day. The question in my mind is, where do I cut it off? Do I tell Shelby? Amy? Kennedy? Lou? And if Nikki and Haven know, I imagine I should bring Lucy and Eden in on things. And then, of course, there’s Lacy and Lonnie. Where do I cut it off once I get started?”

“Maybe you just figure out which individuals in your life you simply can’t bear to have learned of your secret from someone other than you.”

She frowned in my direction.

I decided to expand on it. “If Shelby or Amy came to you and told you that they heard about your husband from someone other than you, would you feel bad that you hadn’t told them personally?”

“Yes, of course, I would. Shelby and Amy are two of my best friends.”

“Okay, then you should talk to Shelby and Amy, which is good since I may have presented Shelby with a blurry watercolor version of what was happening when I spoke to her earlier.”

“That’s fine. I’m not trying to keep anything from Shelby.”

“Okay, so if that’s the case, then we have a baseline. Would you feel bad if Clara from the fish market learned your secret from someone other than you?”

“No. We aren’t close enough where the subject would even come up, but I do get what you’re saying, and it does help. I should probably make a list of everyone I need to talk to so no one is unintentionally left out.”

“You don’t have to make a big deal out of it. I understand what you’re saying about having no proof that you are innocent to quell those who would choose to doubt, but as you also said, there isn’t any proof that you’re guilty either. Just focus on the actions of your husband. Those of us who know and love you would never even consider the idea you may have been involved in the events that led to his arrest.”

Georgia hugged me. “Thanks, Abby. I think I’ll start with Jeremy, Mylie, and Haven. I’ll have them come to the cottage so I can practice on them since there’s no doubt I feel safe with them.”

I asked Georgia if she wanted me to stay while she spoke to the rest of the staff, and she indicated she did. Annabelle was at school, so it was a good time to chat with the others since Annabelle wouldn’t find out about the meeting and feel left out. Georgia called Jeremy and asked him to round up Mylie and Haven while I made a pot of coffee and put some decorative sugar cookies on Georgia’s Santa plate. Once the group arrived, Georgia told her story and shared why she was bringing it up now, and, as I expected they would, the rest of the staff offered her nothing but sympathy and support.

Chapter 8

The filming of the promo segments the previous day seemed to go as well as anyone could have hoped, given the situation. Tanner did a great job standing in as the male lead. The script was rewritten so Tanner never had to say a word; he just stood there looking handsome while someone, usually Georgia, said her spiel while seeming to enjoy all of the fun activities the inn and the town had to offer.

As for Georgia, she seemed to have found a way to put the worst of what was happening off to the side. I watched the cut and edited copies of the promos with the television crew when I'd returned to the inn yesterday, and I had to say that the sleigh rides, bonfire, snowman building, and marshmallow roasting over an evening fire would have had me wanting to spend the Christmas holiday in Holiday Bay if I didn't already live there.

Today was the filming of the actual cooking segment. Georgia had asked Amy to participate as her assistant for the filming. I could see that Amy was thrilled to be given the opportunity. In terms of providing extras, Reno had invited the guests currently staying in the cottages to attend a "pretend" Christmas dinner at the inn. I wasn't sure that I'd want to spend most of a day filming a Christmas special if I were in the area on holiday, but Georgia assured me that when she'd made the offer to our guests, each and everyone seemed thrilled to have been given the chance to be on TV.

As for me, I'd elected to stay close to home but well out of the range of the cameras. Like me, Jeremy and Haven had requested to be left out of any film that was shot that day, while Annabelle, who was thrilled with the opportunity to be in the spotlight, had been given permission to stay home from school to be part of the filming. Of course, most of Mylie's

lines were delivered the previous day during the filming of selected activities on her annual activity list, but Reno had been so happy with her work that he'd asked her to narrate a few scenes for today's filming as well.

"It's really coming down out there," I said to Jeremy and Haven, who'd stopped by to check in with me once they'd cleared all the drives and walkways. They looked frozen to the core, so I encouraged them to warm up by the fire while I made them hot beverages and a hot lunch before they returned to their grueling chore.

"I'm afraid that you're both going to be busy today. It will be important to keep the main drive clear, and the walkways between the cottages and the inn will need to be shoveled and deiced as well."

"I guess a storm like this is the main reason we decided not to rent out the cottages during the winter in the first place," Jeremy reminded me.

"It is. And it was a risk to reserve the units through New Year's. There have been a lot of Christmases when the storms were small, and having guests in the cottages wouldn't have been a problem. Apparently, this Christmas is not one of those."

"Perhaps you should stop taking reservations for the cottages after Thanksgiving next year," Haven suggested.

"We may do that." I emptied a plastic container with leftover soup from last night's dinner into a pan and put it on the stove to heat. I figured a thick, creamy bowl of soup with grilled cheese and ham sandwiches sounded like a perfect stormy day lunch. "Do we have plenty of fuel for the generator?" I asked Jeremy after he'd draped his wet jacket over the drying rack.

"We do. I'm sure it would be a huge inconvenience for the television crew if the power went out, but while it may affect the filming, our guests will be kept warm and fed. Not only did I check the fuel for the generator, but confirmed the freezer is stocked, every suite in the inn and all the cottages have been

outfitted with flashlights and LED candles, and I have tons of dry wood for the fireplaces.”

“It sounds like you’re on top of things.”

“That’s our goal,” Jeremy answered for both of them.

After Jeremy and Haven enjoyed their soup and sandwiches, they headed back outside, and I returned to my bedroom to log into my computer and check my emails. Our resident dogs, Ramos, Baxter, and Molly, were all hanging out in the living room near the fire, and I expected to find my cat, Rufus, on the bed. When he wasn’t there, I returned to the main living area for a second look. “Here, kitty, kitty,” I called, even though I knew Rufus wasn’t the sort of cat who appreciated cooing or baby talk. The dogs all sat up when I called the cat, but a quick search of the area revealed that Rufus was nowhere in the cottage. Jeremy and Haven had come in and gone out during their lunch break, so perhaps the cat had scooted out again. I’d found him under the deck the last two times he’d been missing, so I pulled my boots, jacket, hat, and gloves on and let myself out into the cold. The snow had drifted up over the top of the decking, so being able to look under the deck would require some snow removal. Given the fact that there was no way to easily access the underdeck area, I seriously doubted that I’d find my cat there, but the location where he’d most recently been found seemed to be the best place to search, so I grabbed a shovel and went to work.

“So you are under here,” I said once I’d cleared a small access point and got down on my hands and knees with a flashlight. “It’s cold out here, and you hate the snow. Why don’t you come on out.”

“Meow.”

At least the cat acknowledged my presence. Rufus still hadn’t moved toward me, but he was at least looking in my direction.

“Come on, Rufus. You can’t stay out here; it’s freezing. Why don’t you come on out, and we can find you a snack.”

The cat continued to stare at me, but he still wasn't moving toward me.

"I'm half tempted to just leave you here." Even as I said it, I knew I could never do such a thing, but I was getting frustrated. It didn't appear there was another cat under there with him, so I couldn't understand why he was so insistent on spending time there.

"You know," Haven said to me after she noticed me kneeling in the snow and had come over to help. "Maybe the fact that Rufus seems drawn to this spot under the deck is due to an animal other than a cat. An animal you'd be unable to see."

"If not a cat, what?"

"Something that burrows. Maybe a mouse or a mole. There may be an opening to the underground system at the back of the deck that's causing Rufus to chase the rodent to the location where you've continued to find him. If the home of this rodent is underground, then Rufus may lose the trespasser he's chasing at the point where the mouse or mole heads underground."

I supposed that Haven's explanation made sense. Every spring, Jeremy would complain about the damage that had been done to the lawn and garden over the winter by the mice and moles who burrowed under the snow.

"I think he's moving toward us," Haven said, lying flat on her stomach to encourage the cat to continue forward.

It took Haven and me twenty minutes and a can of tuna to get the cat out from under the deck, but eventually, we were successful. By this point, he was cold but seemed happy to be back inside the cottage, where I was determined to keep him.

Once we got Rufus settled, Haven took advantage of the fact that we were alone to ask me if any progress had been made with the Lucy situation.

"Shelby and I spoke to Beck about speaking to Lucy's brother and uncle. He said he would, but I haven't heard how

things went. I was planning to follow up with Shelby today. I'll let you know when I have an update."

"Thanks, Abby. I really am worried about her. I know she told you that most of the children brought up on the commune were happy and chose to stay and that she assured you that the commune wasn't a bad place to live if it was your sort of thing, but the fact that she chose to leave and that there are those who don't accept her choice has me wondering if the whole thing is as voluntary as she made it sound."

"I don't disagree with you."

"I keep wondering whether or not the family members who seem to be here to take her home won't simply force the issue."

"That was our fear as well, which is why Shelby and I asked Beck to talk to the men. Beck can be intimidating, and he's used to getting his way. Shelby and I hope that once Beck speaks to them, they'll simply give up and leave."

"I really hope so."

After Haven headed out to finish her snow shoveling, I checked and confirmed that Rufus was safe and sound on his favorite chair by the fire and then headed into my bedroom again to log into my computer. I'd emailed my sister, Annie, inviting her and her husband to come for a visit after the holidays, but I hadn't heard back from her. Annie had come to Holiday Bay a few times in the past, and while things seemed to have gone okay, I still felt that she wasn't a supporter of my decision to move from California. There wasn't a lot I could do about it if Annie didn't support my choices, but I did hope that the two of us could maintain our relationship. In all fairness, I supposed it was my turn to go and visit her. She'd suggested it several times, but each time she'd invited me to visit, I'd found myself looking for reasons to put it off until another day.

Deciding that an update on the Brody Litman murder case might be warranted, I called Colt only to have the call go directly to voicemail. I left a message and sent a text, asking him to call me when he could.

“Okay, now what?” I asked, looking directly at Molly, who watched me like she was trying to assess what I planned to do next.

I looked toward the book on my nightstand that I’d been meaning to get to and picked it up. Given the fact that I’d made my livelihood as a writer for most of my adult life, it sounded odd, but I wasn’t much of a reader. Sure, I’d listen to an audiobook every now and then, mostly just to keep up with the current trends, but while I’d been a voracious reader before I’d started to write, once I spent the majority of each day on that task, opening a book was the last thing I wanted to do when I had time to relax.

I made a cup of tea and turned the tree lights and the lights that Georgia and I had strung along the mantel and along the ceiling on. Grabbing a fleece-lined throw, I curled up in my favorite reading chair that was next to my gas fireplace and opened my book to chapter one. When Rufus jumped up and settled on my lap, I was happy to have him. Using the remote that was on the table next to the chair, I turned the stereo on to listen to the Christmas jazz I had cued up and turned it down low.

After reading the first two pages, I glanced out the window. The snow was coming down at a steady pace that was predicted to continue through the night and into the morning. The snow reminded me of a previous Christmas when we’d had an inn full of stranded motorists looking for a room after the road had been closed. I thought about the faces of each of those guests and the stories each had to tell, and my mind was off in a direction that I seriously doubted would include a continuation of reading my book. During the years I’d owned the inn, I’d met quite a few people and established many meaningful relationships. As I’d mentioned to Velma when we’d spoken last week, I really had been lost when I’d first arrived in Holiday Bay, but now, I could honestly say that I was living my best life ever.

The ringing of my cell phone on the table next to the chair where I was sitting startled me from my musings. “Hey, Colt,” I said after setting my book aside. “How are things in town?”

“The snow is bad. We’re getting ready to close the road between the coast road and town. I hope that everyone staying with you is with you.”

“They are.”

“Annabelle?”

“When we woke up this morning, it seemed obvious that the snow was likely to be a problem, so Annabelle stayed home from school today.”

“Are they filming the actual cooking segment today?”

“They are. Amy is helping Georgia, so I suppose she may get snowed in, but if the road doesn’t open, she can either sleep on our sofa or bunk with Annabelle or Haven. Both girls have an extra bed in their sleeping space.”

“It would be best if she stayed with you and didn’t try to drive home. The roads are icy. Alex and I have been dealing with accidents all day.” Colt referred to Alex Weston, the female officer recently assigned to Holiday Bay.

“I figured it would be bad. I imagine having to respond to so many accidents has made it difficult to investigate the Brody Litman murder case.”

“We haven’t had time to do anything with the case,” Colt confirmed. “Nevertheless, I do have some good and bad news regarding that matter.”

I raised a brow. “Oh? And what is that?”

“Given the situation, the county is sending a detective to help.”

“That’s good.” I assumed. It did seem as if Colt and Alex needed help.

“It is good, but the detective they’re sending to investigate Brody Litman’s death wants to speak with Georgia. I knew she was filming today, and I didn’t want to interrupt that, so I played up the problem with the roads and the inability of anyone, even law enforcement, to get out to the inn during a major storm. Detective Larson agreed to interview Georgia

tomorrow, but you might want to warn her that this man is unlikely to give her the benefit of the doubt the way I have.”

“Does it seem as if this detective considers Georgia to be a suspect?” I asked, knowing the answer but still needing to hear it.

“I’m not sure, but I will say that he considers her a person of interest. I’ve been so busy that I haven’t spoken to the man other than for a few minutes when we firmed up plans for interviews and whatnot, but at this point, Georgia is the best suspect this guy has. A security camera at the motel where Litman died captured Georgia’s image when she arrived in the motel’s parking lot and approached Litman’s motel room. It’s been established that the two had an acrid relationship. And while the camera did capture Georgia leaving the motel room before the death window, the poison used would have taken four to six hours to cause death after ingestion.”

“So, when exactly was the time of death?” I asked.

“The medical examiner puts the time of death at some point between midnight and four a.m.”

“So if the poison took four to six hours to kill the man, then the poison could have been ingested at any point between six p.m. and midnight.”

“That seems about right,” Colt agreed. “We know that Reno and the entire crew from the television station left the inn around six. While I suppose that it’s technically possible that someone could have slipped Litman the poison before the group left the inn, I believe it’s more likely that Litman ingested the toxin after he left with the group for dinner that evening. I spoke to Reno, who told me the group went to the steak house down by the fishing wharf west of town. He said they were there until around eight, at which point they headed over to the Reindeer Roundup. While at the Roundup, everyone from the television station, including Litman, was doing shots, although he insisted that no one was drunk. Reno told me that Litman left with a woman who’d been sitting at the bar between nine and nine-thirty. Reno swore he never saw Brody again after that, but if Brody was passed out drunk

when Georgia saw him around ten-thirty, he must have had a lot more to drink after leaving the others.”

“So technically,” I said. “Litman could have ingested the poison at the restaurant, the Roundup, while with the woman he left with, or at his motel room after he checked in.”

“Technically, yes. The ME isn’t certain which food or beverage item Litman consumed that night would turn out to be the delivery system, but he suspects that the poison was added to one of the many alcoholic beverages he consumed.” Colt paused and then continued. “Listen, I need to go. Give Georgia a heads-up about what’s going on when you have a chance, and I’ll call you later with an update.”

“Okay. And thanks, Colt. It will be better for Georgia if she knows what’s coming. I do, however, think that I’m going to wait for the filming to be done before I speak to her.”

“How’s it going?”

“No idea. I’ve been hiding in my cottage to stay out of the way and nowhere near the cameras.”

“Smart. I’d be doing the same thing if I was there.”

After I hung up with Colt, I picked my book up and tried to return to the story. The book was well written, and the blurb caught my interest, so I wasn’t sure why it was so difficult for me to get into the story. I supposed it could be because I was too distracted to focus on anything other than the series of stressors that were right in front of me. I could take a nap or have a snack. I supposed a snack made more sense, so I got up and crossed the room toward the kitchen when the door opened, and Mylie blew in.

“Hey,” I said. “How are things going next door?”

“Things are going fine. They’ve already filmed Georgia and Amy’s actual cooking segment and the television crew is setting up for the Christmas dinner scene in the dining room. Georgia sent Jeremy to let the guests who want to be included in the dining room scene know that they’ll need to check in at the front desk at the inn in half an hour. I pointed out that if they weren’t even going to start placing the food and guests

around the table for another thirty minutes, the food would all be cold by the time they got around to eating it, and Reno made it clear that no one would actually be eating the food. In fact, he told me that the food used for the shoot was fake, not the food Georgia and Amy had spent the morning cooking.”

“I remember Georgia telling me that after the Thanksgiving shoot. The turkey had a glaze on it. And not an edible glaze, but the sort that comes in a spray can.”

“I guess now that you say that, I do remember something about that from previous recordings, but it was still disappointing to find out that the food that would be viewed by Georgia’s fans wouldn’t even be her food.”

“Are you going back over?” I asked after Mylie took her jacket off, hung it on the drying rack, and stood in front of the fireplace.

“I am, but I felt as if I was in the way while they set up, so I decided to just come and check in here.”

“I’m glad you decided to stop by. I could use the company. Jeremy and Haven were here for lunch, which was nice.”

“I’m glad you fed them. They’ve been working outside all day, and to tell you the truth, I’m beginning to worry about them. It’s cold out there.”

“They have a lot of warm layers on, but I understand your concern. I think the snow is supposed to continue overnight, but the road is closed, so there’s nowhere for anyone to go. I’ll tell Jeremy and Haven to call it a day once the filming is done and all the guests staying in the cottages have been fed and safely returned to their rental unit. I guess we’ll need to get an early start in the morning to get the drive cleared so that everyone can check out, but hopefully, it will have stopped snowing by then, so there won’t be new snow to deal with.”

“I think that sounds like a good plan. I know we have a whole new group of guests checking in on Friday, which, as you know, will be the first official day for this year’s annual activity list.”

“I looked over the reservations for the next couple of weeks, and I think we’re going to have a fun group. Lots of kids this year, so I anticipate that with all the fresh snow and the younger demographic, the outdoor list events such as sledding, ice skating, and snowman building will be a huge hit.”

“I hope the weather cooperates,” Mylie said. “There have been years when there wasn’t enough snow to do everything I would have liked, but it does seem that if the sun comes out and warms things up a bit, we’ll have a perfect setup for this to be our best holiday season ever.” She looked toward the window and frowned. “As much as I’d prefer to stay here in your nice warm cottage, I guess I should get back. I want to be available to help get everyone set up for the dinner scene.”

“I thought about coming over but have decided to stay out of the way. Give me a call if you actually need me.”

“I will. I’ll let Georgia know that you’re on standby as well.”

Thirty minutes after Mylie left, the power went out. Mylie called to let me know that Georgia had turned all the LED candles on to provide light and that Reno had instructed everyone to stay put while he figured out what to do. I decided the time had come for me to head next door and lend a helping hand.

“The generator will run a few things, but it won’t run everything,” I explained to Reno. “Jeremy can assist you in figuring out what can and cannot be plugged in.”

“Where is he?” Reno asked.

“Dealing with the snow, but I’ll call him in.”

By the time Jeremy and Haven wandered in, they looked like snowpeople. It really was time to have them come in for the evening. Given the limited power provided by the generator, Jeremy and Reno diligently worked to identify which pieces of equipment would most efficiently use the power to capture the last shoot. Georgia felt that adding real candles to the LED version would give the scene a more

authentic feel, so she did that while everyone else waited. As it turned out, the long table, laden with fake food, looked lovely in the dim light. Reno seemed to have a few ideas as to how to accentuate what they had, and by the end of the session, they had filmed an hour's worth of scenes, which consisted of the guests sitting around the table talking, laughing, and passing the fake food, but not actually eating anything. In my mind, the special should have been renamed *Christmas in the Candlelight*, given the cozy feel of the fake meal, but it looked as if *Christmas at Holiday Bay* would stick, which also seemed appropriate in a roundabout sort of way.

Once the filming had concluded, Georgia offered to feed everyone with the food she and Amy had spent the morning making, and then Jeremy and Haven offered to escort all the guests staying in the cottages back to their units. Once everyone was settled in for the evening, Haven went to the carriage house with Jeremy, Mylie, and Annabelle, and Georgia, Amy, and I headed for my little cottage by the sea.

“Oh, I love what you’ve done with your mantle,” Amy said, crossing the room to stand near the fireplace. “You had the lights when I was here a week or so ago, but the greenery is new.”

“I added them over the weekend,” Georgia said. “The garland I initially had displayed there was fine, but I kept thinking that something was missing, and then I found those holly berries at All About Bluebells when I went in to pick up fresh flowers for the suites. I asked Marnie about buying some in bulk, and she was happy to call her supplier. I’m saving the rest until after the filming since I want the displays to last through Christmas, but I couldn’t wait to change the display here in the cottage.”

“It really is striking.”

“If you haven’t been into the flower shop, you should stop by. In addition to the usual Christmas bouquets that can be found at any flower shop around town, the sisters have a lot of really unique pieces.”

“I’ll do that,” Amy said. “Shelby has gone crazy decorating the Bistro, so I don’t think we’ll need anything additional there, but I might pick out something for the house.”

“How has it been with both Sierra and Sage home for the holidays?” I asked Amy about Shelby’s two half-sisters, Sierra Danielson and Sage Wilson, each of whom owned a third of the house, along with Shelby.

“It’s actually been great. I always feel a little out of place when the sisters are home. Shelby and I have our own routine, and when the sisters are home, things seem to get adjusted a bit, but they are both such nice women, and I’ve really enjoyed spending time with them. Sage is currently up north visiting with the distributor of her outdoor wear line and won’t be back until the weekend, but Sierra has been here since before Thanksgiving and plans to stay until next year.”

“Is Sierra enjoying her work at Harvard?” Georgia asked.

“She is,” Amy replied. “It sounds like the research she’s engaged in is fascinating, although I will admit that I don’t understand half of what she says.”

I laughed. “I can identify with that. Sierra’s intellect is impressive, and she’s well-versed in many areas. She also tends to assume that others in her inner circle have been exposed to those same things, which makes it impossible to follow her stories most of the time.”

“The last time we spoke, she was trying to explain this one aspect of the project she is working on, and she went off on this detailed explanation of some mathematic theory that left me totally in the dark,” Amy agreed.

I glanced at Georgia, who looked exhausted. I supposed that the past couple of days had likely zapped whatever strength she managed to bring to the project after finding out about all the changes over a week ago. I hated adding to her burden, but I felt that it was imperative that I share the details of Colt’s call with her. The thing was that I wasn’t sure I should bring it up in front of Amy. Not that Georgia tended to keep secrets from Amy, but the subject matter of our

discussion was bound to bring up all kinds of emotions, and I wasn't sure if Georgia would want to have an audience while she struggled to deal with things on an emotional and intellectual level.

I heard a ding, which caused Amy to take her cell phone out and look at the face.

"Jeremy, Mylie, Annabelle, and Haven decided to play a board game since the power's still out, and they want to know if we'd like to join them."

"I appreciate the offer, but I'm exhausted, so I think I'll pass," Georgia said.

"Me too," I added. "But you go ahead."

"I think I will," Amy replied. "I guess Haven is going to bunk in with Annabelle, so I've been offered Haven's bed. I think I'll take it."

"It will be much more comfortable than our little sofa," I agreed.

"I guess I'll see the two of you in the morning." Amy got up, crossed the room, and hugged Georgia. "Hang in there. It's almost over."

With that, she promised to see us in the morning and then left.

"I'll be fine if you want to go with her," Georgia said.

"No. I'd rather stay in. I'm going to have a glass of wine. Would you like one?"

She shrugged. "Yeah, I guess that would be nice."

I went to the kitchen, found an open bottle, and poured two small glasses. "I spoke to Colt earlier," I said, passing one of the glasses to Georgia.

"Did he have news?"

"He did." I sat down on one of the chairs near the fireplace. "I guess the county had assigned a detective to investigate Brody Litman's death."

Georgia frowned. “A detective? You mean someone from the main office?”

I nodded. “Yes, I believe that’s the case. Colt was busy with the roads when I spoke to him, so he didn’t have much time to fill me in, but it sounds as if the man will be out first thing in the morning to interview everyone.”

“The television crew isn’t going to like the delay.”

“I imagine that might be the case, but the road is still closed and will likely be closed until after the snow stops, and they can get the roads cleared, so I imagine we’ll need to allow for a late check-out anyway.”

Georgia took a sip of her wine. “Did Colt say anything else?”

I nodded yet again. “The time of death has been determined to be between midnight and four a.m. They’ve also isolated the toxin that killed the man and have determined that Brody likely ingested the poison between four and six hours before he died.”

“So he came into contact with the poison between six p.m. and midnight.”

“Yes, that seems to be the case.”

“Was it something he ate?”

“Or drank,” I expanded. “With the span of hours being so spread out, it seems to be possible that Brody could have been given the poison before he left the inn, while at dinner, while at the Roundup, while with the woman he met in the bar, or at the motel he checked into.”

“The guy was totally passed out cold when I was there. Maybe the poison was added to whatever he’d been drinking.”

“Did you notice if Brody had alcohol in his room?” I asked.

She frowned. “No. I don’t remember seeing a bottle or anything that would suggest Brody had been drinking when I arrived. Of course, I was highly motivated to get out of there, so I didn’t waste any time looking around.”

“Do you remember seeing anyone else in the area?”

“No. It was just Brody in the room, and I didn’t see anyone in the parking lot.”

“Did you go into the bathroom?”

“No. As I said, I knocked on the door, and when Brody didn’t answer, I went inside. When I saw he was passed out, I left.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if the poison would have caused Brody to pass out. If Brody had been passed out when Georgia arrived due to the poison and not an overindulgence of alcohol, that would narrow the timeline a bit. I supposed it wouldn’t prove that Georgia hadn’t given it to him, but, at the very least, it seemed that it would widen the suspect list.

“Did Colt say if they had any strong suspects?” Georgia asked.

“I’m not sure I’d use the word strong suspect, but there are individuals the detective wants to speak to.”

“Like me,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Yes. Like you. And the television crew and the woman who left the bar with Brody but who seems to have disappeared after that.”

“Does it still appear that this woman never went to the motel with Brody?” Georgia asked.

“She never showed up on the videotape from the security camera that’s focused on the parking area but allowed Colt to see the door to Brody’s room.”

“Are there cameras on all the doors?” Georgia asked.

I had to admit that I wasn’t sure. Colt had said that the camera that had captured Georgia’s arrival was a parking lot camera that had just happened to have been positioned in such a manner that not only did it capture her arrival at the motel’s parking lot but her approach to Brody’s door.

“If there aren’t cameras that show access to all the rooms, then maybe whoever killed Brody came from a connecting

room,” Georgia suggested.

That actually seemed like a good possibility. “I’ll ask Colt about it. If the killer had access to the room next to the one Brody checked into, and if there was a connecting door, then it might have happened that way, although, to be perfectly honest, that does seem like a long shot to me. I mean, why would some random motel guest who just happened to be staying in the room next to Brody decide to poison him.”

“I don’t think a random visitor would, but maybe someone arranged for Brody to be in that room with the intent of killing him. This individual might have realized that no one would ever know that he or she had been there if they entered and exited the room through the connecting door.”

“At the very least, I suppose we should have Colt find out if the room Brody checked into was the sort to have a connecting door, and if it was, then it seems we’d want to know who was assigned to that room.”

Poor Georgia looked as if she was about to pass out from fatigue, so I suggested that she try to get a good night’s sleep so she’d feel refreshed and able to deal with whatever the following day might bring. She agreed with my suggestion and headed toward the bathroom to wash up. I texted Colt and asked about the connecting room idea, and he texted back and assured me that he’d check and let me know. I supposed I’d done all I could for the day but felt too wound up to go to bed. Picking up the book I’d been trying to read earlier, I settled in next to the fire. In my heart, I knew that Georgia would never kill anyone for any reason. There was absolutely no doubt in my mind. But I also knew that unless this new detective was offered another viable suspect, it was likely that he’d come down hard on Georgia in an attempt to get her to confess to a murder we all knew she didn’t commit.

Chapter 9

As predicted, Detective Larson arrived early the following morning. I greeted him, then settled him in the library, where he interviewed each crew member individually. Once he'd completed his interviews, he allowed the television crew to head home as they had planned, and he called Georgia in for her interview. I was concerned for my friend and wanted to ask if it would be appropriate for me to go in with her, but I knew it wouldn't be, so instead, I waited. And waited. And waited.

After what seemed like forever, Tanner showed up wearing a suit.

“Are you going to pretend to be her attorney?” I asked.

He shrugged. “Maybe. Is Georgia still in there?”

I nodded.

“She texted me when she went in. It's been a long time.”

“Too long,” I agreed.

“I'm going in,” he said, heading toward the stairs.

“Good luck,” I called after him. I expected the detective to immediately kick Tanner out, and when he didn't come out right away, I began to suspect that Tanner had tried the attorney angle after all. Either that or the detective didn't care that Tanner was there. Half an hour after Tanner went up the stairs to the second floor, Georgia and Tanner walked down together.

“How was it?” I asked after giving Georgia a long hug.

“Brutal. I need a few minutes.”

“I'm going to take her to my place,” Tanner said.

“Okay. That sounds like a good idea. The television crew left, and the staff is all over the snow removal and the cleaning of the suites. I know Jeremy won’t mind taking care of dinner for the guests in the cottages. Why don’t you take the day off,” I suggested.

Georgia tried to smile, but she really didn’t pull it off. “Thanks. We don’t have anyone checking in until tomorrow. I’m going to grab Ramos and go with Tanner. I’ll be back in the morning.”

I felt so bad for Georgia. There was no way she was guilty, and I was sure that fact would come out in the end, but she’d already been through a situation with her husband where she was innocent but had no way of proving that innocence, and I didn’t want her to have to go through that again.

After Georgia left with Ramos and Tanner, I decided to take Molly and Baxter for a short walk. When I arrived at the cottage, I ran into Haven, who’d had the same idea and had just returned with both dogs. She still had shoveling to attend to, and I knew Jeremy was busy running the plow, so I went looking for Mylie. She was busy working on the rooms, and I decided that I might go ahead and pitch in, but then she told me that since Nikki didn’t have a shift at the Bistro today, she’d volunteered to help after she’d spoken to Tanner and had a better idea of what was going on.

“Georgia won’t be back until tomorrow morning if you and Jeremy can handle dinner for the guests in the cottages,” I said.

“We planned to handle both dinner tonight and breakfast in the morning. The fact that Georgia had to go through what that detective is putting her through just isn’t right.”

“I don’t disagree with that,” I said, “but I’m not sure there’s anything we can do about it.”

“Solve the crime and find the real killer. You’ve done it before.”

I had done it before, but this felt different somehow.

“I wonder if Colt ever found the woman Brody left the bar with,” I stated, even though my thought wasn’t really directed at Mylie or anyone else, for that matter.

“I know Colt has been busy, but I’m sure he wouldn’t mind if you left him a message asking him to call you when he has a chance,” Mylie suggested.

“I left a message yesterday asking if Brody was in a connecting room, but he never called me back. Perhaps I’ll drive to the motel and check it out myself.”

“You shouldn’t go alone. I’d go with you, but I have rooms to clean. Maybe Lacy can go with you. I’d suggest Shelby, but I spoke to her yesterday, and she mentioned how busy they were at the Bistro this week.”

“Actually, Lacy is a good choice. If she isn’t busy. I’ll call her and set something up.”

As it turned out, Lacy was free until three o’clock, at which time she needed to be at the community theater to help with a rehearsal of the Christmas play her children were in. I assured her I’d only need her help for a few hours and arranged to pick her up at her house. After she was settled in my SUV, I filled her in on the recent developments to the best of my ability. I’d spoken to her several times since this whole thing had happened, so she was already almost up to speed, but she hadn’t heard about the new detective in town.

“So, is this guy intentionally harassing Georgia?” Lacy asked.

“I’m not sure if you can classify what’s going on as harassment, but the interview he conducted with her this morning seemed to take forever. She’s pretty wiped out at this point. I feel so sorry for her and want to help, but the only thing I can think to do is to find the real killer. Georgia will be off the hook if we can do that.”

“Okay,” Lacy said. “I’m in. Where do you want to start?”

“I have two ideas. One involves a theory where the killer enters Brody’s room through a connecting door. It’s a pretty loose idea, but a connecting door would explain how it would

at least be possible for Brody to have been poisoned after he arrived at the motel.”

“Maybe he brought the tainted food or drink to his room with him,” Lacy suggested.

“It could have happened that way, but if that’s what occurred, he took the empty container or bottle to the trash since neither was found in his room.” I paused to think about this as I merged onto the highway that would take us to the motel. “I guess the idea that someone gave Brody something that had been poisoned, a bottle of booze perhaps, that he then drank and disposed of it is an easier theory than the criminal mastermind in the connecting room idea.”

“I think it is,” Lacy agreed as I turned onto the frontage road that would take us to the motel. “If Brody was stabbed or even shot, I guess I can see why someone might lure Brody to the motel where he or she waited in the connecting room. But since he was poisoned, all the killer had to do was leave the tainted bottle in the room and then send Brody a text or other message that evening asking him to meet them in the room where the bottle of alcohol with the poison was already in play.”

“If that was the case, what happened to the bottle?” I asked once again.

Lacy frowned as we pulled into the parking lot. “I’m not sure. If a tainted bottle was there, it would seem that it would still be in the room when Brody’s body was found.”

Georgia had told me that Brody had checked into room six, so the first thing we did when we arrived at the motel was to check the room’s location in relation to the security cameras that had been placed in various locations around the parking area. It was clear that the door to room six would be within the range of the nearest camera, but room four, which was actually the room directly to the right of room six, was accessed around the building on the courtyard side of the facility. Lacy and I walked around the courtyard and didn’t notice any cameras, which meant that it was at least likely that whoever was staying in room four on the night of the murder would be able

to access the room without showing up on the videotape from a security camera.

Of course, there may be other cameras in the area that Lacy and I simply didn't notice. I felt it would be best for us to check in with Colt and see what he knew.

After we walked around the property, we headed to the front office. Lacy asked the desk clerk about rooms with connecting doors in general. He responded by telling her that all the rooms had connecting doors so that all the rooms could be turned into a family suite with two or more bedrooms. When she expressed concerns about the security of each room, he assured her that there were two doors between each room and that each door could be locked or unlocked independently of the door in the connecting room. I supposed the setup was secure enough, although if someone who worked at the motel was in on things, it seemed possible that the connecting doors in both rooms had simply been left unlocked.

Once we'd done what we could without making our real agenda obvious, Lacy and I headed toward the Reindeer Roundup. They wouldn't be open for business this early in the day, but we hoped someone would be there who might know the identity of the blond-haired woman Brody had left the bar with.

Again, as expected, the police had already interviewed everyone who'd been working that night. The only staff person on site this early in the day was the janitor, who quickly shut us down.

"Now what?" Lacy asked. "I have a couple more hours before I need to head home, pick up my van, and head to rehearsal."

"I guess we're really just wasting our time with this. We don't know enough to know what we should be looking for."

"We may be wasting our time, but I think we both feel as if we should be doing something," Lacy stated.

I had to agree with that.

"Maybe Charmaine is working at the Bistro today."

“Charmaine?” I asked.

“She told us that she has been picking up a swing shift at the Roundup every now and then.”

“You think Charmaine was at the Roundup on the night Brody and the crew from the television station were?”

“Not necessarily, but she may have a way of finding out who was there without raising suspicion.”

Suddenly, I was loving Lacy’s idea. “I could eat,” I said.

Lacy smiled. “Me too. Hopefully, it won’t be too busy, and Charmaine will have a minute to chat with us.”

As it turned out, Charmaine was not only there, but she’d been assigned to our table, which made it easy to ask what we needed to ask without appearing that it was too big of a deal.

“I’m afraid I didn’t work on the night the television crew came into the Roundup for drinks,” she shared after Lacy asked about it. “Alicia worked that night, and after I found out what happened, I asked her about it. She told me it was busy and she wasn’t taking notes, but based on her memory, a woman with shortish blond hair came in alone and sat down at the end of the bar. The blond-haired woman ordered a glass of expensive white wine for herself and an even more expensive glass of scotch for one of the men at the table. Alicia said she took the scotch to the man the woman had pointed out. After she delivered the drink, the man got up and joined the woman who had sent the drink. The blond drank her wine, and the guy she sent the drink to drank his scotch, and then they left together.”

“And Alicia had no idea who the woman was?” I asked.

“She told me that she had never seen her before. The subject came up while I was working last night, and everyone agreed that the woman must have been a visitor since no one remembered seeing her either at the Roundup or any bar in town.”

“You said that the woman ordered a scotch for this man and that Alicia took it to him. Are you sure she didn’t leave

the drink with the woman who ordered it, who then may have taken it to the man herself?” Lacy asked.

“Like I said, I wasn’t there, so I can’t say for sure what happened, but when Alicia told the story, she said that she delivered the drink to the man after the woman ordered it. Of course, Alicia would have pointed out the woman who bought the drink to the recipient. That’s standard when one patron buys a drink for another.”

“Did this woman pay with a credit card?” I asked.

Charmaine shook her head. “Cash. And she left a hundred percent tip. Alicia said it was the best tip of her life since the drinks that had been ordered were very top shelf.” Charmaine shifted slightly. “I get that you guys are trying to help figure this out, and I want you to know I’m with you all the way. I told Colt everything I know earlier, and now I’ve told you everything I know, but if I hear something new from this point forward, I’ll let you know.”

“Thanks, Charmaine,” I said. “I appreciate that.”

“I’m happy to help. The rumor is that Georgia is a suspect for some unknown reason, and we all know that there’s no way Georgia would hurt a flea. She’s one of the sweetest people I know.”

I thanked Charmaine again, all the while struggling with the fact that, at this point, it looked like things could very well work out for Georgia exactly as she envisioned. If this case was never solved, then for those who didn’t know her well, she would forever exist in a state of ambiguity where she was just as likely to be guilty as not guilty.

“We really need to figure this out,” I said, directing my comment to Lacy.

“Right there with you. I’m all in, but I honestly have no idea what to do next.”

“Based on everything I’ve heard, it sounds like Brody had a few shots and apparently a glass of scotch at the bar. He then left, and half an hour or so later, Georgia showed up at his room and found him passed out on the bed. I feel as if the

person who both got him drunk and gave him the poison must have been the woman he left the bar with.”

Lacy paused as if to think it over, and then she replied. “Okay, let’s talk this through. According to what Colt told you, the only people seen going into or coming out of Brody’s room were Brody and Georgia.”

I nodded. “That’s my understanding.”

“Did Brody have a car?”

“No, he rode into town with the television crew, but when he left without making arrangements for a ride back to the inn, the crew decided that he’d likely just get a cab.”

“So if he didn’t have a car, how did he get out to the motel? It’s at least ten miles from the Roundup.”

“Good point,” I acknowledged. “Brody either took a cab to the motel or got a ride from someone else.”

“Whoever gave him the ride likely pulled up in front to drop him off. Given the way things played out, it seems unlikely that he already had a room, so he would have needed to rent one, which would mean a trip to the front desk.”

“So maybe the front desk clerk saw Brody being dropped off.”

“Or maybe the security camera you know must be trained on the front door recorded the whole thing.”

“I need to call Colt,” I said. “If he doesn’t answer, I’ll try Alex. I doubt the desk clerk at the motel will show us the videotape from the security camera that’s focused on the front door from that night, but they should be willing to show it to Colt or Alex.”

As it turned out, Colt was meeting with the detective from the county who’d requested the debrief after his morning interviews. Alex answered when I called, which was how I knew about Colt’s meeting, and she told me that they’d confirmed that Brody had arrived at the motel in a dark-colored sedan she suspected had been a rideshare. Alex said that the reservation for the room had been made online and

paid for with Brody's credit card. She also shared that room six had been specifically requested. I asked about the license number of the sedan and was told that the camera didn't pick it up. Alex assured me they were actively trying to track the car down.

"Something happened between the time Brody left the bar with the blond-haired woman and arrived at the motel," I said. "The timespan wasn't long. Maybe an hour. An hour and a half at the most. So far, it seems like the timeline is somewhat fluid, depending on who you speak to, but sixty to ninety minutes from the bar to the motel seems to work."

"Okay, so Brody leaves the bar with this woman, who likely lured him away with the promise of a hookup. That may or may not have occurred, but at some point during their roughly sixty minutes together, the woman slips Brody the poison and then kicks him to the curb. He'd arrived in town with his friends, who he may have assumed had left to return to the inn by then, so he called to arrange for a rideshare and headed to a motel. Or maybe the dark sedan belonged to the blond-haired woman who gave him a ride to the motel. Why that motel? There are much nicer lodgings right here in town. The motel where Brody checked in is way out on the highway."

"What if the promise of a hookup remained a promise," I said.

"What do you mean?" Lacy asked.

"What if Brody left the bar with this woman, figuring that she likely had sex on her mind, but after they were alone, she suggested another drink. He accepted, which is how she slipped him the poison. What if she then told him that she had something that she needed to do but would meet him at the motel on the highway. She gave Brody the address, and he called a rideshare and headed out. After he checked in, she called or texted him to let him know that she'd been detained and wouldn't be able to meet him after all. For some unknown reason, Brody then texted Georgia. I'm still not entirely sure why he did that unless the poison had begun to take effect and made him crazy. Regardless of his reason. Brody's text asked

Georgia to meet him, and she agreed, but he passed out before she got there.”

“That all works,” she agreed. “But we need to find this blond-haired woman to know for sure.” She paused and then continued. “I wonder if Colt and Alex were able to check Brody’s phone records.”

“I don’t know. I’ll call Alex back and ask her.”

Alex responded to my inquiry by informing me that Brody’s phone and financial records had been reviewed. There was nothing odd other than a phone call from a blocked number to Brody around nine-thirty the night he died. They figured that the call was related to what came next, but they hadn’t been able to trace the call, so they still weren’t sure who the call was from. She also confirmed that no calls were made from Brody’s cell phone to a rideshare or taxi company. Of course, rideshares frequently used apps, so it seemed likely that an app, rather than a phone, was used to order the ride. Alex assured me that they were looking into it.

“I guess I should have you run me home so I can pick up my van and head to the community theater,” Lacy said.

“Okay. I can do that.”

“By the way, did you ever find a white kitten for Annabelle?”

“No. As of the last time I spoke to Mylie, she was still searching for the elusive white fluffball.”

“One of the mothers who comes to all the rehearsals to watch her four-year-old daughter mentioned that she fosters mama cats and their kittens until they are old enough to be rehomed. She works with a cat rescue specializing in mama cats and kittens and isn’t directly affiliated with Hazel’s cat rescue here in town. It occurred to me that this woman might know if any current litters contain a white kitten who may still be looking for a new home.”

“Do you think this woman will be there today?” I asked.

“So far, Wanda has been there every day. If you follow me to the community theater, I’ll introduce you.”

“That would be awesome. Thanks, Lacy.”

As it turned out, Wanda was a very nice woman who seemed to be plugged into litters of kittens of every age, from not yet born to ready for new homes. I explained what I was looking for, and she agreed to make some calls. She couldn't promise anything, but she did say that the rescue she was involved with almost always had multiple litters available at any time.

After speaking with Wanda, I decided to swing back by the Bistro. It was only a couple blocks from the community center, and I'd been meaning to check in with Beck to find out how his conversation with Lucy's brother and uncle had gone.

“I think it went well,” Beck responded to my inquiry. “Once I threatened to have some of my buddies in the FBI pay a visit to their compound if they didn't leave Lucy alone, they agreed to leave town and never to bother her again.”

“I'm so happy to hear that.” I paused. “Do you think having someone check things out at the compound might be a good idea? I know that Lucy said those who stayed wanted to stay, but after what happened with her, I can't help but wonder if that's actually the case.”

“I actually called a buddy of mine who works for the state police in Virginia. He said there were other groups, such as the one I described to him, living in isolated rural areas, and while most were peaceful groups whose members chose their lifestyle, he'd quietly look into the group Lucy had been born into. If he finds a problem, he'll let me know. Otherwise, he'll likely just let them be.”

Based on what Lucy had told me, it didn't sound as if anyone was breaking any laws, so as long as everyone was there voluntarily, there really wasn't anything that could or even should be done.

After speaking to Beck, I went upstairs to see if Shelby was in her office. I found her glaring at a stack of files.

“I take it that you're no more a fan of paperwork than I am.”

She looked up at me. “Not at all. I didn’t realize how much there would be to attend to when I bought this business.”

“It does seem to be a never-ending chore. Maybe you should hire someone.”

“I’m thinking of doing just that. We’re going into the slow months, and I hate to add an ongoing expense now, but maybe I’ll look around for a service or even an individual who wants part-time hours this spring.”

“I just spoke to Beck, and it sounds like he managed to handle Lucy’s family.”

“He did. I spoke to Lucy earlier, and she said that her brother and uncle left town and that as they were leaving, they basically told her that while neither of them agreed with her choice to leave the family, it was her choice to leave, and they’d let her be.”

“As long as they follow through and leave Lucy alone to make her own choices, that problem at least should be behind us.”

“I really hope that turns out to be the case. Are you still working on the Brody Litman murder case?”

“Colt and Alex are working on it,” I answered. “I guess Lacy and I did a bit of sleuthing earlier, but it didn’t get us anywhere. We had the idea to check Brody’s phone records, hoping to find a link to the friend or rideshare that Brody used to get to the motel, but we came up blank.”

“He likely used an app.”

“That’s what we realized after thinking about it a bit.”

“You know,” Shelby said after a brief pause, “if Brody ordered a rideshare through an app, Dawson might be able to track it.”

I raised a brow. “Do you think he can?”

“Dawson worked for the NSA. He can hack into anything, any time.”

“Okay, so do you think he will?”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt to ask him,” Shelby said.

While Dawson was much more reluctant to help us than Shelby had thought he would be, he eventually agreed to hack into the rideshare system and see if Brody ordered a ride on the night he died. According to the logins to the account Brody set up, he was picked up during the window we estimated he would have traveled from wherever he’d been to the motel. Dawson ordered a ride for Shelby and me and manipulated things to ensure that the request was fed to the same driver who’d taken Brody from town out to the motel on the night Brody had died. When Dawson requested the ride, which included a rather generous tip, he indicated that we wanted to go from the Bistro to the inn. We figured that gave us plenty of time to chat with the man on the way, and once we arrived at the inn, we could have someone bring Shelby and me back into town. My SUV was parked at the Bistro, so I figured it would be fine there until I returned for it.

“So, Tommy,” Shelby started right in once the rideshare driver had picked us up, “have you been doing this long?”

“I started over the summer. It’s good money when generous folks like you remember to tip, and the hours are flexible. I have a full-time job working construction, so I’m only able to drive in the evenings or on days the construction site is closed down due to the weather like it is now.”

“I guess the construction gig has been slow with all the snow,” Shelby said.

I decided to sit back and let Shelby ask the questions. She was a gorgeous woman who demanded the attention of most individuals with a Y chromosome, and it appeared to me that our driver was as fascinated with her striking looks as I expected he would be.

“The site has been closed down all week. The problem is that we’ve had so much snow that there haven’t been a lot of folks out and about needing rides.”

“I guess yesterday was a bust,” Shelby said.

“It was. In fact, the last decent tip I got was on Monday evening from a guy heading from the Holiday Bay Grand Hotel to a motel out on the highway.”

“So funny you would say that,” Shelby said. “I may know the man you’re talking about. Tall. Dark hair. Good looking.”

“That’s the guy. He was totally drunk. The woman who put him in the car and gave me the address of the motel he was heading toward tipped me a hundred bucks.”

“So the guy was with a woman?” Shelby asked.

He snickered. “A really good-looking woman. I’m just the driver and not one to judge, but if it had been me with that woman, I would have been hanging onto her rather than clutching the bottle of scotch the guy seemed to have plans with later that evening.”

“So you think this man had plans to get even drunker than he already was,” Shelby confirmed.

“It seemed to me that was the case.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good idea,” I said.

“It doesn’t, but it seemed like the guy had it all planned out. In my mind, the motel he chose seemed to be proof enough that the guy was looking to do some serious drinking.”

“And why do you say that?” Shelby asked.

“In my experience, when rich folks who can afford designer clothes like this guy was wearing head to motels such as the one the man was heading toward, they’re planning to do something they don’t want anyone to know about.”

“Like go on a bender?” Shelby asked.

He nodded.

“So this guy was already drunk, and it appeared he was going to get drunker,” Shelby confirmed. “People die from that. Maybe you should have alerted someone.”

“I’m a driver and not a babysitter, but as it turned out, the guy left his scotch in my car, so I suspect he was fine.”

“Do you still have the bottle?” Shelby asked.

He nodded. “It’s in my trunk. It’s an expensive scotch, so I figured I’d track the man down the next day and give it back to him. Of course, the roads were so bad yesterday that I couldn’t even get out of my driveway. I’ll track the guy down today.”

“I’m afraid the man you picked up and dropped at the motel on the highway did die the night you dropped him off,” I said.

“Died? From the alcohol?”

“He was poisoned.”

“And you think I did it?”

Shelby didn’t answer.

“You knew this before I even picked you up,” the man accused.

“We did,” Shelby said in her sweet southern drawl. “I guess we should have told you who we were and what we were after from the beginning, but we weren’t certain how you were involved until we spoke to you. We’re sorry if we lied.”

“Are you with the cops?” he asked.

“Sort of. In a freelance capacity,” Shelby answered.

“I’m afraid that the police are going to want the bottle you have, and they’ll want to speak to you,” Shelby informed the man. “It would be easiest if you just drove us back into town. We can have someone meet us at the police station.”

“I’m not in some sort of trouble, am I?”

“No. Not at all,” I promised the man. “It sounds as if you are a witness, however.”

I called Alex while Shelby continued to reassure the man who’d agreed to turn around and return to town. I hoped that Alex would be the one to interview the man since he was much more likely to open up to a pretty young woman than a seasoned male cop. She informed me that she was in the office while Colt and the man from the county were out and would be happy to handle the interview once we arrived.

“I’m hoping the bottle will not only contain the poison that killed Brody Litman but will have the fingerprints of whoever gave him the bottle on it as well,” I said to Shelby after she’d called Dawson to come and pick the two of us up at the police station and take us to the Bistro.

“I hope so as well, and I hope that Alex is extra gentle with the rideshare driver.”

“I noticed that Coop was there.” I referred to Alex’s emotional support dog. “Coop has a way of diffusing potentially stressful situations.”

“He really has been an asset to the local police force,” Shelby agreed. “While any dog providing comfort would be a benefit, Coop has a special gift that makes him unique.”

My cell phone dinged, letting me know I had a text. “It looks as if the woman Lacy introduced me to might have found a kitten for Annabelle.”

“Call her,” Shelby encouraged as Dawson pulled up at the curb to let Shelby and me out before continuing to the back of the building where employee parking was provided.

“I will when we get inside. If this woman has a fluffy white kitten, I hope she lives in Maine rather than somewhere that’s too far away for a trip to look at the kitten to be practical.”

Chapter 10

I called the woman Wanda thought might have the perfect kitten for Annabelle, and she sent me a photo of an adorable white kitten. I decided I should let Mylie know about the kitten rather than just heading out to view the kitten on my own, so I sent her a text along with the photo. She texted me back to let me know she'd be leaving the inn in a few minutes and would stop by the Bistro to pick me up.

The woman with the kitten lived in Belfast, which meant neither Mylie nor I would be able to help with dinner for the guests in the cottages, but Mylie assured me that between Jeremy and Haven, they'd get it handled.

"I hope this works out," Mylie said as she sped toward our destination. "I've looked everywhere, but there just don't seem to be any white kittens to be found."

"Are you sure Annabelle wouldn't be just as happy with any kitten? I know her heart is set on pure white, but a kitten with a small amount of black or gray would be just as snuggly."

"She really wants all white for some reason. To be perfectly honest, I'm not even sure why she's being so specific. And I understand what you're saying. When I was Annabelle's age, I would have been thrilled with any kitten my mom and dad would have allowed me to have. Color wouldn't have mattered a bit."

"Maybe there's a story there that we don't know about," I suggested. "Perhaps Annabelle read a children's book that featured a pure white kitten, which put the idea of having her own pure white kitten in her head in the first place."

"Maybe," Mylie agreed.

Wanda owned a lovely home on a quiet street. Even though we arrived right at dinnertime, she seemed willing to show us the babies she was fostering, even indicating that we were free to stay and play with them if we wanted to get a better idea of their personalities. There was one white kitten, but she had a black spot on one side near her shoulder. It hadn't shown up in the photo since her other side had been featured, but the black spot was shaped like a heart, which, in my opinion, was adorable and unique.

"Do you think Annabelle will really care about the black spot?" I asked Mylie.

The kitten was otherwise perfect. She was fluffy and playful, and I was sure this little kitten would make a perfect companion for the little girl.

"I'm not sure. Annabelle has been so specific about wanting white, but this kitten is so cute, and that heart on her shoulder is truly unique."

"How about I adopt the kitten," I said. "I'll tell Annabelle that I'm doing a favor for the foster mother and have agreed to find the kitten a good home. If Annabelle falls in love with her, that will be that, and if she doesn't, I'll find a wonderful home for this little girl, and you can keep looking."

"Do you think the foster mother the kitten has now will agree to that?"

"I'm not sure. I'll ask her."

As it turned out, the foster mother was heading out of town to be with family over the holidays, so she was highly motivated to place the kittens. She made me swear to find the kitten the perfect home if I wasn't able to keep her, and I promised I would. Since the woman had read my books and knew who I was, she made an exception to her usual guidelines and trusted me with the kitten. She had a cat carrier for the ride home, so in less than an hour, Mylie and I were on our way back to Holiday Bay.

"So, how should we play this?" Mylie asked.

“I’ll take the kitten home and introduce her to Rufus and Molly. Ramos is with Georgia at Tanner’s, so that will have to wait until another day. Once she’s settled in a bit, you can mention that a friend asked me to foster a kitten in need of a forever family and that you’re going to come over to my place to see her. Annabelle will likely want to come along, and we’ll see how it goes.”

“Okay,” Mylie said as she pulled into the Bistro’s parking area so I could get my SUV. “Text me when you’re ready for us to come over.”

As was the plan, I took the kitten home and introduced her to Rufus and Molly. It was love at first sight for Molly, but Rufus actually hissed at her. “Be nice,” I said to my giant cat. “She’s just a baby. We don’t want to scare her or make her feel unwelcome.”

Rufus sent me a look and then headed toward the bedroom. The kitten wasn’t afraid of Molly, so I could only assume she’d been exposed to dogs in her foster home. Once I felt the kitten was relaxed enough to introduce another stimulus, I texted Mylie and told her to come over.

“She’s so cute,” Annabelle said. “She can play with my all-white kitten when I get her.”

I looked at Mylie. Her smile had slipped just a bit.

“I’m not going to be able to keep the kitten,” I explained to Annabelle, although truth be told, if Annabelle didn’t take her, I’d likely keep her rather than rehome her. “I’m just taking care of her while we look for a forever family for her.”

“She couldn’t stay with her mom?” Annabelle asked.

“Her mom was a stray and will be rehomed as well. There were four other kittens. Two gray and white ones, one black, and one with orange and white stripes.”

“And all the kittens found homes except this one?” she asked.

I wasn’t actually sure if the other kittens were spoken for, but I decided to play on Annabelle’s heartstrings by saying

that the other four kittens had already been adopted, and only the white kitten still needed to find her forever human.

Annabelle got down on the floor, and the kitten waddled over to her. “What’s her name?” she asked.

“She doesn’t have a name yet. I think her new family should be the ones to name her.”

Annabelle changed positions, and as she was lying on her stomach, the kitten playfully swatted at her face. “Are you sure you can’t keep her?”

“Not forever, but she’ll be here a few days if you want to help me care for her.”

Annabelle sat up. The smile on her face was accompanied by an immediate agreement to take care of the baby until she could find a new mommy, which gave me a bit of hope that Annabelle would come around and the kitten would end up living in the carriage house.

“Can she stay with us now?” Annabelle asked.

Mylie hesitated.

“Abby is busy with the inn, but it’s almost the weekend, so I have time to take care of her,” Annabelle persuaded.

Mylie glanced at me.

“Taking care of a kitten is a big responsibility and a lot of work,” I informed the preteen. “You have to clean their litter box, make sure they are fed all the right foods in the correct amounts, and always have fresh water.”

“I can do that,” Annabelle promised. “And she can sleep in my room so she won’t get scared at night.”

I looked at Mylie again. She gently nodded.

“Okay,” I said. “We’ll try it out for one night and see how it goes.”

“I don’t have the supplies I’ll need,” Mylie said.

“I have everything, including an extra litter box.”

Once Mylie, Annabelle, and the unnamed kitten left, I went to the refrigerator to scrounge up something to eat. I'd settled on having scrambled eggs and toast when Colt called.

"Hey, stranger," I greeted.

"Hey, Abby. I'm sorry I didn't call you back sooner."

"It's okay. I spoke to Alex, and she said you had your hands full."

"I have at that. I'm off now for tonight, however. Alex has agreed to be on call, so I shouldn't need to come in until tomorrow. I was going to pick up a six-pack and a pizza. If you haven't eaten, I can bring it out there."

"Beer and pizza sounds perfect, and I haven't eaten yet."

Colt had already called to order the pizza, so he figured he'd be at the cottage in about half an hour. The poor guy sounded exhausted, and the last thing I wanted to do was to bring up work when he was trying to relax, but I was curious to know if the bottle the rideshare driver had turned over today had provided any evidence that would get Georgia off the hook once and for all.

Chapter 11

Colt had not only been willing to discuss the case, but he had actually been the one to bring it up once he'd had his fill of beer and pizza. He confirmed that the poison that had killed Brody Litman had been added to the scotch he left in the rideshare, and he confirmed that they'd found four different sets of fingerprints on the bottle. One set belonged to Brody, another was matched to the rideshare driver, and the other two sets of fingerprints had yet to be matched to anyone.

Colt had fallen asleep in the chair while I'd taken care of the few dishes we'd used, so I suggested he head into bed. He stayed at the cottage often enough that he'd left clothes and toiletries there, so after a bit of consideration, Colt decided that between his complete fatigue and the two beers he'd consumed, staying at the cottage that night was a good idea. Of course, he'd slept deeply and snored loudly, so the quality of my sleep wasn't the best, but Colt seemed happy and rested when he'd left that morning. We had an entirely new group of guests checking in today, so I consumed some extra strong coffee before heading next door to help where I could. When I entered the kitchen through the back door, I found Georgia standing at the stove, stirring something that smelled wonderful.

"I wasn't expecting you this early," I said.

"The borrowed detective called to let me know that, based on the statement provided by the rideshare driver and the bottle of tainted scotch he provided as evidence, they feel certain that Brody was already poisoned before I arrived at his motel room, so I'm no longer a suspect."

"That's a relief," I said.

She smiled. "You have no idea."

“I was expecting to find Mylie and Jeremy handling breakfast. Are they around?”

“Jeremy is deicing the walkways, and Mylie and Snow White took Annabelle to school.”

“Snow White? The kitten has a name?”

“Apparently. Annabelle told me that she had plans to name her all-white kitten Snowball, but she wanted a unique name for her foster kitten, so she decided on Snow White.”

“So she’s still talking about an all-white kitten?”

Georgia tapped the spoon she’d been using on the side of the large saucepan. “So far, but it seems as if, at this point at least, she’s hoping to end up with two kittens. Once it sinks in that she can’t have two kittens, I suspect she’ll decide that Snow White is here to stay.”

I really hoped that was the case. I knew how hard Mylie had worked to give Annabelle exactly what she wanted, and I would hate to see Annabelle disappointed on Christmas if Mylie, and apparently half the residents of Holiday Bay, couldn’t come through.

“I wanted to speak to Mylie about her activities list for the weekend. I guess I’ll just wait here until she returns from taking Annabelle to school.”

“I know that she’s planning to do a bonfire and roast marshmallows in the firepit on the deck after dinner tonight, but I think that’s all for today since we’re expecting such a large turnover today.”

“Do we have guests checking into all six suites today?” I asked.

Georgia nodded. “Every one of them. Since I don’t know everyone’s arrival time, I’ve planned a buffet for dinner. If I have food out for a couple of hours, most everyone should be accommodated. Once everyone checks in, we’ll provide them with a schedule for the week, and they can plan accordingly.”

“Are there any guests who I need to know about?” I asked. There were times when we had a guest checking in who we

knew to be a travel writer, a “difficult” guest, or a guest who recently suffered a tragedy. If there was a guest who I needed to pay extra attention to, I liked to know in advance. Not that I didn’t pay attention to all my guests, but a family with children who were only here for a weekend was likely to get less attention than a widow or widower alone on their first Christmas without their spouse.

“The Chapman family will be occupying suites two and three. They’re here for five nights, but I was told they have family living in Holiday Bay who they are here to spend time with, so I expect them to be away from the inn most of the time. A woman named Hannah Sandoval will be staying in suite one for a week. She’s in town about a teaching job.”

“Mid-year?”

“I guess Alice Farthington has decided to resign her position as a kindergarten teacher and move closer to her family.”

“I know she has been struggling since her husband died.”

“She really has. I think this move will be good for her.”

“And suites four and five?” I asked.

“A single dad and his five sons,” Georgia answered.

“Five sons? That must be a challenge.”

“The father did warn me that his sons are the energetic sort, and he hoped that we would have a lot of activities for them. I assured him that with all the snow, there would be sledding, ice skating, snowman building, and snowball fights to keep them occupied.”

“I hope the boys don’t disrupt the other guests.”

“I don’t think they will,” Georgia said. “It might have been better to have them in one of the two-bedroom cottages, but all the cottages are full.”

“And suite six?” I asked, hoping that someone with patience and a tolerance for noise would be assigned to the suite directly above the boys.

“I actually had a cancellation for that suite, but I have a long waiting list, so I have no doubt I’ll fill it. I just haven’t had the opportunity to make any calls yet.”

“Before you make your calls, you might want to consider the noise that most likely will be generated by the five boys staying below.”

“I’d be more concerned about the family below the room the boys are staying in, but they have children of a similar age, so I’m sure they’re used to the noise.”

I looked toward the drive. “That sounds like Mylie now. I guess I’ll go and have a chat with her about this weekend’s activities before she gets too busy.”

“Before you go, I wanted to ask if you had an update on the murder case. While I received a call from the detective assigned to the case letting me know that I was officially off the hook, he didn’t provide any additional information.”

“When I spoke to Colt last night, he was trying to figure out who gave Brody the bottle. They have four sets of fingerprints but no matches for two of them. Hopefully, they’ll find a match and put this whole thing to rest once and for all.”

After I spoke to Georgia, I headed toward the carriage house to talk to Mylie. When I passed the cottage that Georgia and I shared, I noticed Haven, who was holding something. I changed direction, intent on taking a closer look.

“What do you have there?” I asked.

“A bunny.” She opened the front of her jacket just a bit. The tiny white rabbit was nestled next to Haven’s chest, twitching its nose as it stared at me. “I was heading down the pathway from the rental cottages toward the inn when the bunny darted in front of me. I watched him to see where he was heading, but it looked as if the bunny was confused by the snow. It seemed like he was trying to get under the deck, where I suspect he lives with his mama and littermates.”

“The burrowing rodents that we suspect have attracted Rufus’s attention.”

She nodded. “I was going to remove the snow from the front of the deck and show the little guy where to go, but then I started to worry about the whole human scent thing. Did I make a mistake picking him up? Will his mama reject him now?”

“I don’t know a thing about wild rabbits. I’ll call my veterinarian and see what he has to say.”

As it turned out, the odds were that the mama would accept the kit back into the nest, but we needed to return the little guy to his nest sooner rather than later. We slid the juvenile bunny under the deck and then waited. He headed directly to the spot where we’d determined the entrance to the nest was likely located and then disappeared. At this point, all we could do was hope that all would be well and the little guy was safely reunited with his family.

“I hope he’s going to be okay,” Haven said.

“The vet seemed to think he’d be fine, but he did recommend that we keep an eye on Rufus. The cat knows where the nest is and seems more than just a little interested in checking it out.”

“I’ll be extra careful when I go in and out of the cottage,” Haven promised.

Now that the mystery of Rufus’s obsession with the underdeck area was solved, I figured we’d need to keep an eye on him until the rabbit family moved on. Hopefully, once that happened, he’d forget they were ever there.

Once the bunny was settled, Haven returned to work, and I continued to the carriage house to talk to Mylie. After I’d done that, I returned to my cottage and sat down with my notepad and pen. I knew that Colt, Alex, and the detective from the county were working on the Brody Litman murder case, and now that Georgia was in the clear, I felt a lot less motivated to be involved, but I still had ideas running around in my head. I figured it would be a good idea to try to organize my thoughts a bit so that I could have a focused conversation with Colt the next time we had the opportunity to discuss the matter.

Based on my current understanding of the events leading up to Brody's death, it appeared that it was most likely the blond-haired woman who'd picked Brody up in the bar was the one who killed him. I wasn't sure why she'd done things the way she had, but it did appear she was our best suspect at this point. Brody's cause of death was poisoning, and it had been determined that someone had added poison to a bottle of scotch he'd been drinking from. Before leaving the bar with the blond-haired woman, he'd been with the crew from the television station. No one from the television crew had commented that Brody had been carrying a bottle, so it seemed reasonable that he'd obtained it after he left the Reindeer Roundup.

If this woman had been the one to give Brody the bottle of scotch, why had she done so? An even more interesting question in my mind was to ask why she had done things the way she had. The woman had made herself a suspect by showing up at the bar where Brody was drinking with five other people, buying him a drink, and then leaving with him. She had to know that if she picked the man up and then he later died, everyone would be looking to her for answers.

So why do things that way? Perhaps someone else had actually done the killing.

I scribbled the names of random individuals who might have a motive to want Brody dead on my notepad. I then drew lines between the names in an attempt to identify connections. Once I realized I was looking for connections that didn't actually exist, I scribbled out my notes and started over. I was on the verge of giving up and moving on to something else when Colt called with an update that allowed me to look at things from a different angle.

“One of the two unidentified sets of fingerprints on the scotch bottle that Brody Litman left behind in the rideshare belongs to a woman named Emmalee Riverton. Emmalee matches the description of the woman in the bar who picked Brody up on the night he died, and she matches the description the rideshare driver gave to Alex of the woman who paid for

Brody's ride and provided the address of the motel Litman was taken to."

"So she must have picked him up and then killed him. Who is she? Why did she do what it appears as if she had?"

"I don't have the entire picture at this point, but things are beginning to come into view."

"Okay, so what do you have?"

"Before I answer that, I need to speak to Georgia. Is she with you? I called her cell phone, but she didn't answer."

"She was in the kitchen when I last saw her. I'll walk over and grab her. She may have set her cell phone aside since she was making breakfast."

"Actually, don't bother. This is probably a conversation that might be better to have in person. Find Georgia and ask her to meet us in the cottage in thirty minutes."

I had to admit that I was anxious to hear what Colt had to say. If he had prints, then he must have a suspect. If he had a suspect, maybe we could get this case wrapped up before the end of the weekend.

"Colt was able to pull prints from the scotch bottle Brody left in the rideshare, and they found a match. He wants to go over things with us," I said to Georgia after I found her mixing dough for what I hoped were fresh rolls for dinner.

"Is he here now?"

"He'll be here in thirty minutes. He wants to meet us in the cottage."

Georgia nodded. "That should work out fine. I'll finish mixing this and then leave it to rise. Did he say what he found?"

"He said that one of the two sets of fingerprints on the bottle of scotch that didn't belong to either Brody or the rideshare driver belonged to a woman named Emmalee Riverton."

Georgia stopped what she was doing. "Emmalee?"

“Do you know her?”

“I do, actually. Or at least I did a long time ago.”

Okay, this suddenly got even more interesting.

“Emmalee and I were in culinary school at the same time. We both had Brody as an instructor.” She paused briefly before continuing. “I seem to remember that Emmalee had a huge crush on Brody. We all did. Not only was he young and handsome, but he was already a famous chef while we were all just starting out.”

“Do you know if Brody and Emmalee ever got together?” I asked.

She answered. “I don’t know. We weren’t friends. In fact, we were bitter rivals. Emmalee had ambition, but she wasn’t all that good of a cook, and while we both had a crush on Brody, he only seemed to pay attention to me. I didn’t mean to upstage her, but I think that was how she felt. She never really had much time for me.”

“So you didn’t stay in touch?”

“I ran into her a few years after we took classes together. I’d started my catering business and was working hard to get it off the ground, but she’d gone on to something else.” She paused again. “I think she worked as an administrative assistant or perhaps a legal secretary or something along those lines. We didn’t speak long. She asked me about Brody, and I told her I hadn’t run into him for a while. This was before he burned me with the wedding I told you about.” Georgia narrowed her gaze. “Do you think she killed Brody?”

“I guess we’ll need to wait to see what Colt has to say to know that with any degree of certainty, but it does look that way. She picked him up in the bar and then had the rideshare pick him up at the Holiday Bay Grand, and then she sent him off to a motel with a bottle of poisoned scotch.”

“I wonder if he recognized her,” Georgia commented.

“I suppose that would be interesting to know.”

“Brody was a womanizer who I suspect had a lot of women panting after him since he reached maturity, so I wouldn’t be a bit surprised to learn that he had no idea who she was when he picked her up at the bar. Still, it also seems possible that Emmalee might have at least seemed familiar to him.”

I crossed my arms over my chest and leaned back against the counter as I organized things in my mind. “It seems as if this woman planned everything that occurred that evening,” I said as Georgia kneaded the dough. “She showed up at the bar where I suspect she knew Brody would be and bought him a drink. How did she know Brody would be there?”

“Reno made it sound as if going to the bar after dinner was fairly spontaneous,” Georgia added.

“Maybe Emmalee had someone from the television crew helping her. Maybe Brittany. She seemed to hate Brody quite a lot.”

“Okay, I’ll buy that,” Georgia said.

I continued. “So Emmalee somehow knows Brody is at the Roundup or will be at the bar, so she arranges to show up and buy him a drink. Her plan is to get him to leave with her, which he does. She then takes him to the Holiday Bay Grand Hotel and gives him a drink containing the poisoned scotch. I’m not sure if they slept together at this point, but whatever happened at the hotel seemed to lead to Brody being put in a rideshare and then sent to the motel on the highway.”

“Why did Emmalee do that?” Georgia asked. “If Brody had already been drinking from the tainted bottle, why not allow him to return to the inn? Why a motel, and why that motel?”

Good questions. “The desk clerk told Lacy and me that the room had been booked online and that room six had specifically been requested. If I had to guess, Emmalee is actually the one who booked the room, and she’s the one who wanted to make certain that Brody was not only at the motel but was in that specific room.”

“The parking lot camera,” Georgia said. “She wanted me to go to the motel, and she wanted proof that I was there.”

“You said that you got a text from Brody informing you that he needed to talk to you about proof that he had that you’d colluded with your husband. The text said he needed to speak to you in person about it and asked you to meet him in room six at a motel off the highway.”

Georgia covered the dough and set it to rise. “You think Emmalee orchestrated the whole thing to frame me for Brody’s death, don’t you?”

“It does appear that way,” I said. “If I had to guess, Emmalee sent the bottle of booze with Brody, figuring that he’d take it inside when he reached his destination. When his body was found at some future point, the murder weapon would be discovered in the room you were seen going into.”

“But why would this woman do this to me?” Georgia asked. “I get the fact that we were rivals a million years ago, but why now?”

I shrugged. “Opportunity, I suppose. If she was obsessed with Brody, she may have been watching him. When she realized you were both going to be in the same place at the same time, she decided to kill Brody and frame you for his murder. Two birds, one stone.”

Georgia washed her hands in the sink and then picked up a clean dish towel to dry them. “I don’t know,” she said. “I guess the narrative fits the series of events leading up to the discovery of Brody’s body, but why on earth would this woman go to so much trouble? It just doesn’t make sense to me.”

I supposed that when all was said and done, I agreed with Georgia until Colt showed up with the final piece of the puzzle.

“Emmalee worked for my husband?” Georgia said with shock evident in her voice after Colt shared that exact fact with us.

Colt nodded. "I really hate to be the one to tell you this, but apparently, based on what we've dug up, it appears that Emmalee not only worked for your husband but at the time he was arrested for embezzlement, they were romantically involved."

"How did I not know this?"

The poor thing looked to be completely stunned.

"Did you know everyone who worked for your husband?" Colt asked.

"No," she admitted. "I was so busy trying to get my catering business going that I paid little or no attention to my husband's career. It hadn't always been that way, but we'd begun to grow apart. He had his job, and I had my catering business. He'd leave early in the morning, and I often had catering jobs that went late into the evening. We really were living separate lives by the time everything came crashing down. Not that we ever spoke of splitting up. I suppose that in order to discuss something like that, you'd have to make time to speak to each other. But there was definitely tension in the marriage."

"Were you aware that others who worked in the same office where your husband worked were charged as accessories when the walls came crashing down?" Colt asked.

She frowned. "I guess I remember something about that. I was so shocked and devastated that I totally fell apart. I retreated into myself, pulling all my shields around me. I knew what was going on with my husband. I knew he'd been arrested and spent a lot of time in court and with his lawyers. Despite what my husband said, I knew he was guilty and would be sentenced to serve time in jail. I remember the whole thing being so completely overwhelming that I wanted to dig a deep hole and crawl inside where the world and all the problems of the world couldn't get to me."

"So you didn't watch the news on TV or read newspapers?" Colt asked.

“I absolutely did not. When the crew from the television that had started following me around made living my normal life nearly impossible, I hid inside my house. Once I was informed that I was free to move about as I saw fit, I packed up my few personal belongings and ran. I don’t doubt that Emmalee had an affair with my husband. Given everything I know about her, that actually fits. But what does that have to do with what’s going on now?”

Colt answered. “From what I have been able to dig up, Ms. Riverton was sent to prison as an accessory to the embezzlement and has only recently been released. She blamed you and Brody for everything that happened to her.”

“Me and Brody?” Georgia squealed. “Why would she blame me and Brody?”

“I don’t think the woman is in her right mind,” Colt said. “Everything she did from the moment she met you and Brody was calculated to get back at you for gaining the attention of the man she claimed to love but who only seemed to have had eyes for you. She became enraged when she became entangled in the whole mess with your husband. If there are two things you can say about rage, it’s that it isn’t always logical, nor is it always well directed.”

“So are you saying that it’s your belief that this woman both went to work for my husband and had an affair with him because she wanted to get back at me?”

“That seems to be the case.”

“That’s nuts,” Georgia said.

“I think we’ve established that this woman is nuts,” Colt agreed.

“And has she confessed to all of this?” I asked.

“Most of it. When the Boston PD caught up with her and brought her in for questioning, she admitted that she’d been totally obsessed with Brody Litman since she’d first laid eyes on him and had wanted nothing more than to make him her own, but he apparently only had eyes for you. When she tried to establish a personal relationship with Litman during the

years Emmalee and you were his students, he flat-out rejected her. This apparently created a wound that continued to grow and fester. After you were married, Emmalee decided to go after Litman again, but he still rejected her. Then she saw the two of you together in a restaurant. Emmalee knew you were married, and she suspected you were cheating on your husband, so when she couldn't have Brody, she decided to go after your husband."

"That must have been during the time you told me about when the two of you tried to be friends," I said.

"I guess it must have been," Georgia agreed. "But I can't believe this woman would go to so much trouble. It sounds like the only reason she started working with my husband was to romantically worm her way into his life."

"That would seem to be the case," Colt agreed.

"So are you saying this woman has been planning her revenge all this time?" I asked.

Colt nodded. "She admitted to the detective who questioned her that she began to devise a plan to get back at both Brody and Georgia while she was wasting away in prison for helping Georgia's husband steal millions of dollars from his clients. It particularly angered her that Georgia got off scot-free. She was certain that Georgia was as much of an accomplice as she was, and it enraged her that Georgia wasn't sent to prison as she had been." He looked directly at Georgia. "I'm going to ask you this since others will, but are you sure you had no idea about Emmalee's role in your husband's life?"

"No. I swear. I had no idea Emmalee worked for my husband, I had no idea they were sleeping together, and I certainly had no idea she was in on the embezzlement." She paused and took a deep breath. "That was such a dark time for me. As I've already stated, I intentionally removed myself from everything that was happening. I never left the house other than to show up for the court appearances I'd been subpoenaed to show up for. I guess my coping mechanism at the time was to let my attorney handle everything, and other than doing what I had to do, I really did remove myself from

the process. Once it was over and my husband was sent to prison, I took to the road and never looked back.”

“I believe you,” Colt said. “And I’m sure Detective Larson will as well, although you may need to speak to him.”

“Why does she have to speak to him?” I asked.

“Larson just needs to wrap things up. That really will be all that there is to it. You can have Tanner or anyone else you request to be with you during the interview.”

“I’d like to have Tanner with me,” she answered.

“Did you ever figure out who the fourth set of fingerprints belong to?” I asked after I’d had a few minutes to process everything that we’d discussed.

“We think the fingerprints belong to the clerk who sold Emmalee the bottle of scotch, but as of the last time I spoke to the detective in charge, that hadn’t been confirmed.”

I supposed the clerk would have had to have handled the bottle, so the fact that his prints were found on the bottle made sense. In fact, it seemed like lots of different prints would have ended up on the bottle.

Colt assured Georgia that the worst of it was over and that she could allow herself to relax now. Both Colt and Georgia looked like they had been put through the wringer. Colt planned to leave tomorrow to spend a couple days with his family, so I asked him if he wanted to spend tonight at the cottage with me. He said he did. Georgia informed me that she planned to finish what she was working on, and then she and Ramos would head to Tanner’s. Once everyone was checked in, Jeremy, Mylie, and Haven could handle the bonfire and marshmallow roast, so I decided to leave them to it.

“This has been a rough week,” I said after I’d handed Colt a beer.

“It has been a really long week,” he said to me after we both sat down on the sofa in front of the fire. The white lights on the mantle looked lovely, as did the lights Georgia had strung on the tiny tree we’d tucked into one corner.

“We never did get a tree for your place,” I said.

“I don’t think I’ll bother. The kids won’t be here this year, and I thought I’d spend most of my nights out here once I return from visiting my family. At least on the nights when Alex can be on call.”

“Are you ever going to get a third person for the team?” I asked.

“Actually, there’s been talk about that. It would make life easier. Alex doesn’t seem to mind being on call, but I hate to ask her to do it too often, and if I’m the one on call, I don’t feel like I should spend the night all the way out here. A third man would allow all of us to have more free time. I’ve asked the county numerous times, but to this point, their response has always been that they’re working on it.”

“At least you have Gabby now.”

Gabby Gibson was Colt’s dispatcher and administrative assistant. She filled the void that was created by the murder of the woman who’d filled that role since Colt was a brand-new recruit.

“I guess Alex really wants to spend Christmas Eve and Christmas Day with Leo, who also lives too far out of town to be close enough for on-call duty to work for Alex, and I plan to be out here for the holidays, so I’ve requested a sub. I’ve been told that if the sub works out, I can request a permanent transfer since he’s indicated that he wants to move to Holiday Bay and is willing to live in town.”

“You live in town. Alex lives in town,” I pointed out. “Maybe you just need to specify that this new recruit can only date women who live in town.”

Colt smiled. “That isn’t a half-bad idea.” He reached an arm around my shoulder and pulled me onto his lap. He leaned in and was about to kiss me when Rufus jumped up into his lap.

“It looks like someone is jealous,” I said.

Colt scratched Rufus beneath the chin. “We can’t have that. How ya doing, big guy? Have you been staying out of

trouble?”

“Meow.”

“Yeah. I didn’t think so.”

“There’s a family of bunnies living under the deck that Rufus is totally fixated on,” I informed him. “I’m hoping they’ll move on once the babies get a little bigger, but in the meantime, we need to be careful not to let Rufus out.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Colt leaned in for the kiss even though the cat was still in his lap. Rufus hissed at him and then jumped down. If Rufus had his way, all the hugs and kisses doled out by Colt would be focused in his direction, but as far as I was concerned, Rufus would need to get in line.

Chapter 12

Colt left to visit his family early this morning, so I decided to get up and help with our guests. I found Mylie and Georgia in the kitchen, discussing the sleigh ride and bonfire we had planned for later in the day and the alternatives we would be offering to the guests choosing to do the sleigh ride tomorrow rather than today.

“Those who don’t go on the sleigh ride will be able to choose between sledding and wreath making today,” Mylie said as she crossed the room, picked up a schedule, and handed it to me. “Tomorrow is ice skating or cookie decorating.”

“With so many kids here this weekend, I have a feeling that Jeremy is going to be busy with the outdoor activities,” I said.

“Haven is going to help him,” Mylie informed me as she leaned a hip against the counter. “I’ll handle the crafts, and Jeremy promised to be back from his outdoor activities in time to deal with the bonfire.”

“It sounds like you’ve developed a good plan,” I complimented. “What’s Annabelle up to this weekend? Will she be around, or is she visiting with a friend?”

“Actually, Addie is coming over here to meet Snow White.” Mylie referred to Kennedy Swanson’s daughter, Addie Swanson.

“I was going to ask about the status of our almost all-white kitten.” I smiled.

Mylie smiled right back at me. “She’s in. Annabelle adores her. I explained that we couldn’t have two kittens at the same time and she’d need to wait until another time to get an all-white kitten, and she said she was fine with that. Snow White

really is the sweetest thing. She doesn't bite or scratch the way some kittens do, and she seems perfectly happy to hang out with Annabelle as often as Annabelle wants her to."

"I'm so glad it worked out," I said as I sat down at the little table in the kitchen nook. "I could see how stressed you were about finding the perfect kitten, and it turns out that the perfect kitten was just a tiny bit imperfect after all."

"I really learned an important mom lesson with this one. I never should have promised something I didn't know whether or not I could follow through with."

"Parenting is hard," I said. "But you're doing great."

"I hope so." She hesitated and then continued. "I wasn't going to say anything just yet, but by this time next year, Annabelle is going to have a cousin."

I grinned. "You're expecting."

She nodded.

"We're having a baby!" Georgia ran around the counter from behind the stovetop and hugged her.

"Congratulations," I said as I followed Georgia with my own hug.

"I didn't realize you were going to start a family so soon," I said as second and third hugs were shared. "Not that I'm not thrilled," I added. "Because I am. But I'm also surprised."

Mylie crossed her arms over her chest. "Honestly, we hadn't planned to start a family quite this soon after marrying, but one thing led to another, and it looks as if Baby Slater is impatient to make his or her appearance. I've only told the two of you and Jeremy so far, so please don't say anything. I'm excited to share my news with everyone, but Jeremy and I want to tell Annabelle first."

"She's going to be so excited," Georgia said after she walked back around the counter to the stovetop to give the food she was preparing a good stir.

A look of doubt crossed Mylie's face. "Do you think so? I know she's expressed fear in the past that she would be less of

a daughter to Jeremy and me if we had a biological child, and I've done everything in my power to assure her that simply isn't the case, but I can't help but wonder how she's going to take the news."

"I think that if you're careful to make her part of the whole thing, she'll feel included and want to be part of it," I said. "Maybe she should be the next person you tell, and then let her be the one to announce it to everyone else. Maybe we can have a small get-together when you're ready to share your news with those closest to you. That way, Annabelle can be in the spotlight."

"That's a great idea," Mylie said. "She was nervous about the wedding when Jeremy and I first told her about it, but then I asked her to be my bridesmaid, and her nervousness turned to excitement. Including her in the process really did seem to make all the difference. I want her to know that the new baby will be part of our family and that the entire family, including her, will need to work together to care for him or her." She hugged me and then walked around the counter and hugged Georgia again. "Thanks for the talk. I'm glad I told the two of you."

"So are we," I said, but what I was really thinking was that now I had a secret to keep, and keeping secrets wasn't really all that easy for me.

After Mylie went to look for Jeremy, I turned my attention to Georgia. "Wow, a baby. I must admit that I didn't see that coming quite yet."

"Yeah. Me either." She furrowed her brow. "I'm really excited for Mylie and Jeremy, but it seems so soon."

"It is soon after the wedding, but not so soon in terms of their relationship. And Mylie seems to want to have a large family, so I guess it makes sense that they might want to get started."

Georgia looked at me. "How are you feeling?"

I knew exactly what she was asking. "Honestly, I'm not sure. I knew when Mylie and Jeremy decided to get married

that there would be children at some point. And I guess I began to picture a little baby boy who wasn't mine living on the property. I think I'm fine, and if I find that I'm not completely fine, I will figure out a way to be that way. I am so excited for Mylie and Jeremy, and in no way do I want my tragedy to mar their joy at bringing this new life into the world." I looked at Georgia. "How are you feeling about it?"

She shrugged. "Like you, I'm really happy for Mylie and Jeremy, but I suspect that a new baby in the mix will reopen the conversation Tanner and I have been having for years about where a baby might fit into our future. Once we decided to take a step back and reevaluate our relationship, we've been taking things on a day-by-day basis. I love Tanner, but I don't know that marriage and a family are for me. I know he wants both, so nothing has really changed between us. Yet we really do love each other, so I guess our current status of living in the moment and not worrying about the future seems to be working for us."

"I think all we can do at this point is be happy for Mylie and Jeremy and support them in any way we can. If the fact that we'll soon be welcoming an infant on the property brings up issues for you and me, maybe we can rely on each other to work through whatever we need to."

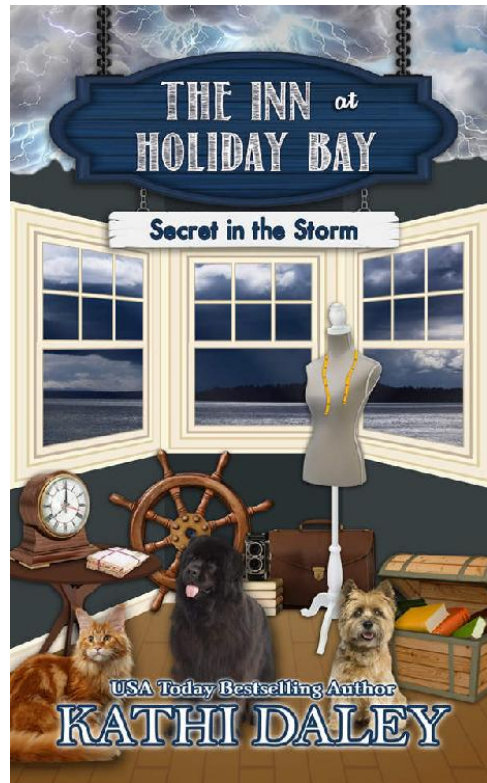
"Deal," Georgia said. "I really am happy for them. I want to be happy for them with my whole heart. As long as I have you to share things with, I think I'll be fine."

"I wonder if it will be a boy or a girl," I said. "Blond or dark-haired, light or dark eyes."

Georgia crossed the room and sat down at the table across from me. "Wow."

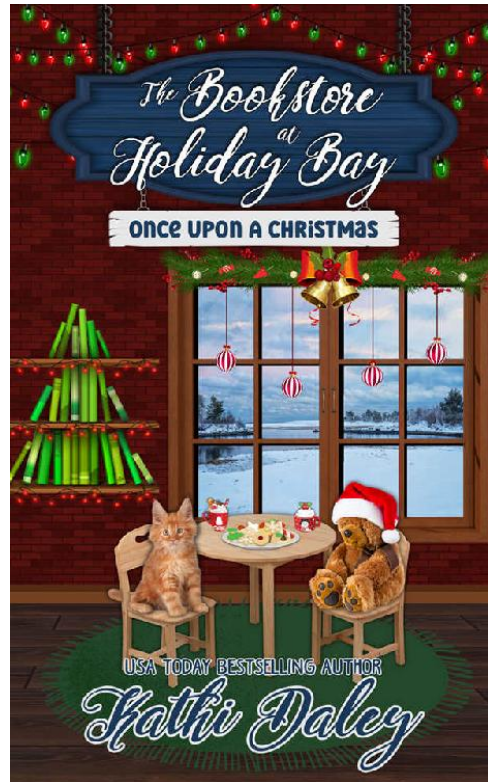
I put my hand over hers. "Wow is putting it mildly."

Up Next up from The Inn at Holiday Bay



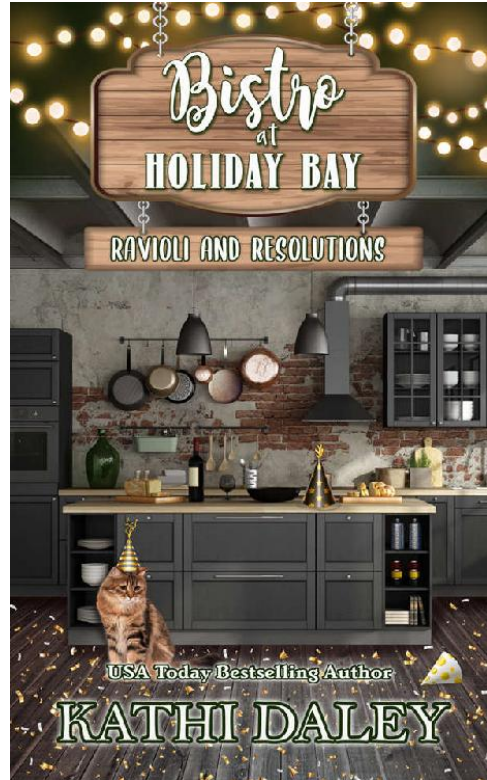
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