



*Poinsettia
Cottage*

NINA
JAYNE

Poinsettia Cottage

Holiday Cottage Series

By

Nina Jayne

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Author Nina Jayne

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Poinsettia Cottage

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Chapter 1

Olivia Feehan packed the last of her clothes, breathed a sigh of hope that this was a good idea, and headed for the elevator in her New York City apartment building. Home was a small studio, but it suited her purpose. After all, when living in the Big Apple, one didn't just sit in their apartment. She enjoyed her life in the city, being close to her stockbroker father, and dreaming about her life as a writer.

Olivia stopped and stared at her image in the shiny metallic beam holding up her building. Yes, her image was accusing her of lying. She barely saw her father. Only went out for an occasional fancy coffee, and the last date she had was two years ago and had ended in an utter disaster.

Her dream of writing the great American novel had stopped at writing advertising copy. It appealed to her witty side and paid the bills. Her only regret was she just never seemed to find the time to write the novel that would put her on her new career path.

She ran for the subway, caught the train to the airport, and was on her way to some cottage in Sprucewood, Colorado. Not that she minded the opportunity to go skiing, but it was who she was meeting that gave her pause.

Mia. Her sister, she hadn't seen in ten years. They talked a few times each year, but that was it. When Olivia had gone to college, her parents divorced. Mia stayed with Mother, and Olivia followed Father to New York City.

How could it have been ten years already? When her parents fought, Olivia always took up for her father. Mia took Mother's side. That last day, her parents said horrible things to one another, and Mia and Olivia had done the same.

This year on Thanksgiving Day, Mia called her and suggested the holiday vacation. "Neutral turf," Mia had said. That sounded logical to Olivia. So, she was on her way. Today, she'd see her sister for the first time in ten years.

Olivia frowned. Here she was a New Yorker, used to rubbing elbows with the rich and famous, and yet, she was nervous at meeting her younger sister. On the phone call, Mia had sounded confident and so sure of herself while Olivia had stumbled all over her words. Normally, her mind was quick, and she always had an answer or witty retort.

That day, she hardly knew what to say. Finally, she heard herself agree to meet at Poinsettia Cottage. They'd spend two weeks, including Christmas and New Year, together. Something they hadn't done in a decade.

Olivia spent a day trying to find the right gift for Mia. Her sister was an elementary school teacher. The kids would get her coffee cups. She thought back to their days at home together and remembered how Mia was the girly girl, to Mother's delight. Curls, lace, fashion. So, Olivia found a pair of earrings she thought Mia would like.

The sad thing was that she knew little about her sister. A person could change a lot in ten years. They talked every Christmas, but only with superficial words. They were both fine. Sorry, they hadn't talked before. Promised to call more often. Repeat that for the last ten years.

Mia was only thirteen when Olivia had gone to college. Yes, she'd sent pictures every year. So at least Olivia would recognize her. Mia, the cute one. The girly girl Mom always wanted.

On the other hand, Olivia had taken the place of the son that Father had never had. She loved sports, jeans, and t-shirts and had a mind of her own. Fiercely independent, Father had always claimed her as his girl.

Funny, but now, looking back, Olivia had never wondered how that made Mia feel. All Olivia had ever thought was how she never made Mom happy. Always the tomboy, Olivia wanted short hair to make playing sports easier. A scholarship in volleyball took her to a college not far from New York City, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Olivia put her thoughts on hold and looked up her flight, verified the gate, and sat down until time to board. She looked out the window and smiled at the dynamic city she'd come to love. Maybe after this trip, Mia would come for a visit. Olivia couldn't believe she'd never asked her before.

Old feelings of jealousy and envy tore at Olivia's heart. She'd battled them. Even started back to church to put them away. And she thought she had, but today, they reared their ugly heads and let her know the twin monsters were still there.

The main reason she hadn't seen Mia in all those years was because her sister was Mom's favorite. Mia was the pretty one. She always had boyfriends. Even now, Mia was engaged. Olivia had barely dated. None in high school, saying the boys were all duds, and she was too busy in New York. Which was mostly another lie.

Thinking of her failures as a daughter, she wanted to put a sack over her head. Instead, Olivia put on her cheerful face. If she looked confident, people thought she was. At least, that's what she told herself.

Mia Feehan put the last of her clothes in the pink suitcase. She'd gone shopping today and bought more clothes for the mountains. Most were pink of some sort, as that was her favorite color. And she had to say, it made her blond hair and blue eyes pop.

Living in San Antonio, Texas, gave her little reason to have warm clothes, and she'd planned to do some shopping when she got to Colorado. Who knows, maybe she and Olivia could go together and help break the icy wall that had grown between them.

"Got to go, Princess." She patted her toy poodle. "You'll have fun with Roy. He really loves you, baby." She kissed the little white fluff of joy and ran into the kitchen, dragging her suitcase behind her.

A glance at the clock had her tapping her foot. Roy had promised he'd be here early. She huffed and was about to call him when she heard his truck outside. Not waiting for him to enter, she ran out the door.

Roy got out of the truck and took her suitcase for her. "All ready to go?"

"I am. Thank you for watching Princess for me."

"Not a problem."

She glanced at him and wanted to give him an award for lying under fire. He didn't like her little dog, but Mia was sure once Roy got to know Princess that he'd come to love her. He better. As her fiancé, he needed to understand that she and Princess were a package deal.

Roy backed out and started for the airport. "So, what do you think you and your sister are going to talk about?"

Mia sighed. "Please tell me this wasn't a stupid idea. We have so little in common. Hopefully, we will not discuss mom and dad."

"Yeah, about that. You don't think you'll have issues when we get married, do you?"

Mia gasped. "No, definitely not."

"But you don't get along with men. You and your boss have arguments. I know you don't like to be told what to do by men or women, but with the men, you put up a fight. It's just that my mom was concerned."

Mia put a hand to her forehead. "I'm getting a headache. How could you bring this up now when I am leaving for two weeks? I already promised that I wouldn't be that way with you. I think we need to drop it right now. Later. We can talk later."

"Later? It is always later with you. Remember how I wanted to do something special this Christmas? You told me later. Is that how our lives are going to be? Always put off what I want for another day." He glanced at her. "I love you, Mia. But my patience is running thin."

Mia had to look away. There was too much truth in his eyes. “I’m sorry. I promise as soon as I get back, we’ll sit down and talk.” She pointed. “There’s the airport.”

He turned in and found her gate. “Call me?”

“You know I will. Pray for me. And take good care of Princess.”

He nodded, set her suitcase down for her and pulled her into his arms and kissed her. “I’m going to miss you.”

“Me too. I better go. I don’t want to miss the plane.” She pecked him on the cheek and ran for the ticket counter where they waved her to the gate where she had to wait. She thought back to her last moments with Roy. She’d pecked him on the cheek. Just like mom had done with dad on his numerous trips across the country.

Mia stared at her reflection in the chrome arm of her chair. Had she turned into her mother? What about Olivia? Would she be father’s image? Would they fight like cats and dogs?

“Oh God, help us get along. I really want this to work.”

Her name was called. Mia got up and was soon seated on the plane. Next stop was Denver. She was to meet Mia at the airport, and they’d drive to Sprucewood together. The last time she saw Olivia, Mia had been thirteen. Now at twenty-five, their five-year difference wouldn’t be so drastic.

Mia was an elementary teacher with a master’s degree. She loved it and wouldn’t think of doing anything else. She’d followed in Mother’s footsteps. Well, those were big steps in

Mia's eyes. Mother was the principal of her school and one of the best around. Teachers tried to get into her mother's school.

Olivia had said what she did now, but Mia couldn't remember. Her sister had always wanted to be a writer, but as far as Mia knew, there were no books with her sister's name as an author. Father was a stockbroker. Making himself and others money and that was about all she knew about him.

Mother forbade his name to be mentioned. What a family. No wonder Roy was having second thoughts, even if they came from his mother. His father had died six months ago. That had shaken Mia and prodded her to talk with Olivia.

She glanced out the window and enjoyed the scenic view with the snow-capped mountains. She gathered her things and readied to depart the plane as soon as landing. Olivia's plane had arrived two hours earlier.

Mia didn't want Olivia to have to wait one minute longer. If she was anything like Father, her patience would be razor thin. Mia felt it was important that her sister see she wanted to make things right. Mia just hoped Olivia felt the same way.

Chapter 2

Olivia put down her phone. She'd finished the book, a sweet romance set in the old west, and glanced at the time. Mia should be here soon. Despite being the oldest, Olivia was as nervous as a cat surrounded by a ring of pit bulls.

The years separating them had kept her from really knowing Mia as more than a nuisance. As children, Mia was always in her homework, her notes from her friends, and worse, answering the phone the few times a boy called her.

A yelling match would begin, bringing in Mother, who would join in. Once Father got home from work, it would start all over. Usually brought on by Mother yelling at her. It was never Mia's fault. As the older sister, Olivia was the one who was supposed to just put up with the pest.

Olivia shook her head. "Why dredge these memories up now? Let it go, Olivia." That had been Father's advice to her when she told him she was going to meet with Mia. The hard memories made her wonder if this was the start of a mistake.

Then, out of the corner of her eye, Olivia saw pink bouncing toward her. "Mia." The regrets flew away as joy at the sight of her sister overcame her, and Olivia was up and running toward her.

They met and hugged.

Mia broke away and studied her. "I've missed you. Thank you for agreeing to meet. This means more than you'll

ever know.”

“Mia, you’re beautiful. I always knew you would be. Even in your awkward teens, you were pretty. Look at you, all grown up.”

Tears fell from Mia’s cheeks. “I missed you so.” She laughed and wiped her eyes with her sleeve. “Olivia, you’re the one who is beautiful. Your hair is so sleek and dark and really brings out the green in your hazel eyes. You’re still staying in shape, I see.”

Olivia laughed. “It’s getting harder. I go to the gym three times a week.” She twirled Mia around. “You lost all your baby fluff. I’m sorry I wasn’t around, but it looks like you’re a success.”

“Let’s get the car. We’ve got two weeks to catch up. Have you been skiing lately?”

Olivia nodded. “A few times in New York. It’s nothing like the Rocky Mountains, but I always enjoy it.”

Mia grinned. “About all I can do is snowplow. I’ve been a few times.”

Olivia pulled up the handle on her suitcase. “You teach in the same school that Mom is a principal. How do you like it?”

Mia grinned. “I love it. I was meant to be a teacher. The children are great. Mom is the best principal around, and I’m blessed to be in her school.” She glanced at Olivia. “Are you writing that book yet?”

“Still in copywriting. I just don’t seem to find the time to work on my novel. I think about it a lot.” Olivia stopped her

reasons. Lame. Even she thought her excuses were less than stellar.

“In God’s timing.” Mia smiled at her. “I’m going to church now. Mom isn’t happy about it, but it fills an empty spot in my heart.”

“Good. I’m happy for you.” Olivia pointed to the rental car counter. “I have a car in my name. I got a four-wheel drive in case we want to get a little wild.”

“Sounds fine to me, but I have to laugh. After ten years, we are still the same girls. You ready to take on the world, and me, content to follow in Mom’s steps.” Mia set her bag down. “I don’t think Sprucewood is too far. The place looks charming. The cabin is a double suite. I tried to get one for us alone, but they were out of them. I don’t know who the other renters are. We each have our own suite but share the common area and kitchen. I hope you don’t mind.”

Olivia wasn’t happy about sharing the cabin with strangers. She’d hoped they could be alone while they navigated the chasm between them. “I’m sure it will work out. Thank you for taking care of the arrangements. We’re here to have fun and catch up with each other.”

Mia nodded. “I’ve missed you, Olivia. I need your wisdom and friendship.”

Olivia took the keys, signed the card, and turned to face her. “Same, Mia. It’s like I’ve had a missing part in my life. You.”

Her eyes moistened as Mia hugged her again. “Let’s get to the mountains. I think it is supposed to snow tomorrow.”

Olivia was surprised at the joy she felt at seeing Mia. This would be a good trip. Really. It had to be.

Dane Caldwell glared at his trainer, Adam Van Winkle. “Did we really need to bring all this stuff? I came to get away, ski some, and forget about acting.”

“You need to keep in shape.” Adam stared at him. “Already, you look bloated. No more salt.”

Shaking his head, Dane got out of the car and opened the trunk. “You can bring in the exercise equipment. I’m going in and take a nap. I don’t know why they put us on such an early flight.” He continued muttering up to the door.

Adam grabbed bags and struggled to the front door. “Key is in my jacket pocket.”

Dane looked at him. “Should have had it out. I’m beginning to think this was a mistake. I just wanted some rest and relaxation. Why this place? Poinsettia Cottage? I thought we would have been sent to Aspen or Sun Valley to meet with other actors and directors.”

Adam put down half of his items and took the key. “Your agent said you weren’t ready. After the last movie, you need some time to distance yourself from that, well, debacle.”

“Debacle? Did he use that word? I’m going to have to get on to him. He’s supposed to be lifting me up so I can get better roles.” He barged through the door and looked at the cottage. “They sure like the red leaf flowers.”

“Poinsettias. That’s the name of the cottage.”

“The white ones too? Even some pink and multicolored. I heard they are poison.” Dane plopped down on the big leather sofa in front of the fireplace. “Why don’t you start a fire?”

“We need to get our bags to our rooms. There are two other people staying on the other side of the cottage. It has two suites.”

Dane stared at him. “Oh, that can’t be. I don’t want to be around other people. What if they saw *Beetle Man*? I’m so tired of people calling me June bug. Especially when in most of the country they are May beetles.” He folded his arms and pouted. “Call the main cottage and tell them we don’t want to share.”

“I tried that. They’re booked through the holidays. There’s not a hotel or cabin available for miles around. We’ll just have to make do.” Adam picked up his bags and went to their suite. “Which bedroom do you want?”

Dane shrugged. “Are they the same?”

“I think so. One is green, and one is blue.”

“I’ll take the blue one.” He lay down on the couch. “I can’t believe Mark sent me to a cabin with other people. I ought to fire him.”

Adam groaned and dropped the equipment in the blue room. He knew bringing it was a mistake, but it was all to get Dane in shape. It wouldn’t do any good in Adam’s room. What Dane didn’t know was Mark was on the verge of letting Dane go. If Dane didn’t get serious, he’d be looking for a new agent.

Adam threw his knapsack on the bed. “Be looking for a new trainer too.”

“What did you say?”

Groaning, Adam put his bag in his own room.

“Nothing.”

“Don’t forget to start the fireplace.”

Adam glared at the wall separating them. He wanted to say, do it yourself, but knew it wasn’t worth it. He couldn’t afford to lose Dane as a client, but at times, he wondered if putting up with him was worth it.

“Adam, there is another car in our driveway.”

Adam punched the light button on the fireplace. It was gas, so at least he wouldn’t be hauling wood around. He looked up and saw two women walking toward the door.

“They must be the people for the other suite. Two women.”

“I can see that.” Dane stood just as the door opened.

Chapter 3

Olivia noticed the SUV in the drive. “Looks like the other guests are here. I hope they’re nice.”

Mia lugged her bag and fell in behind her. “We don’t have to do anything with them. I plan to keep us busy. After we get settled, I would like to go shopping. I need more warm clothes.”

“I guess we can. I’ve got all I need.” Olivia fiddled with the key to get it in the lock, but before she twisted the knob, the door opened.

A handsome young man smiled at her. “You must be the guests for Suite A.” He stared at them for a moment. “Oh, here, let me help you.” He reached for Olivia’s bag.

She pulled it out of his reach. “I have it.” Olivia shrugged. “Sorry, I’m from New York City.”

Another man came from the big room to stand behind the first guy. “New York City, makes sense. People rob you blind there.”

Olivia darted a gaze to Mr. Number Two. “It’s not that bad. I love my city. It’s just that, well, we can be a little standoffish.”

Mia sighed. “A little?” She held out her hand. “Mia Freehan, and I’m from San Antonio, Texas. The friendly state.”

Mr. Number One shook her hand. “Adam Van Winkle, I’m a trainer, and we’re from sunny California. Los Angeles.”

Olivia pushed past Adam and stood in front of Mr. Number Two. “I need to get by.”

He shrugged. “I’m Dane Caldwell.”

That name meant something to her, but Olivia couldn’t place it. “Well, Dane, I need to get past you to get to my room.”

He stepped back a little. “And you are?”

She sighed. “Olivia.”

“Olivia?” He cocked his head and gestured as if to draw her words out.

Olivia shook her head. “Olivia Freehan. Mia and I are sisters. Now, if you’ll let me pass.”

Dane bowed and eased backward. “Have your way, my lady.”

As she walked past him, she knew where she’d heard his name. He was a movie star. She stared at him. He was a little wider and older than she thought. Although she hadn’t seen him lately. She didn’t go for the comic hero movies, but she remembered liking him in a movie about a knight and damsel in distress.

She paused as she passed him. “The movie star. It’s nice to meet you. I hope you won’t be having any wild parties with drugs and alcohol. My sister and I are not into that.”

Dane shook his head. “Lucky you, we gave that up last month.”

Mia edged past him. “It is nice to meet you both. I hope you enjoy the holidays.”

Adam grinned. “You, too.”

Olivia opened the door to the suite. “It’s beautiful. We won’t have to mix with those two.” She charged ahead and went to the first room, looked around, and then went to the second room. “This one is mine.”

Mia took the remaining room. As always, Olivia got the first choice. She deposited her bag in her room and came back out into the common area between the two bedrooms. “I liked Adam. He was nice.”

“I thought you had a fiancé?” Olivia stared at her with that older-sister-look.

“I do. All I said was that I thought he was nice. I didn’t mean anything by it.” Mia rubbed her arms. “It is cold.”

“Give me a few minutes, then we can leave and go shopping. I’d rather look for clothes than be stuck in here with those two.”

Mia kept quiet. Olivia was beginning to sound like Mother. Always critical, judging others without even knowing them. Odd that Olivia and Mother had been apart all this time, yet Olivia was just like her. Then again, Mia had only been with Olivia for the morning and a couple of hours, and her sister was probably tired.

Mia changed tops. “All I said was I thought the trainer, Adam, was nice. He had a kind face, and I believe he was embarrassed for Dane.”

Olivia pulled on an oversized sweatshirt. “He should be. The man had inexcusable behavior.” She ran a brush over her hair and frowned at the mirror. “My hair never looks good like yours does.”

Mia laughed. “What can I say? Blondes have more fun.” She grabbed Olivia’s arm. “You’re beautiful. You just don’t realize it. Let’s go. I’m going to help you pick out an outfit or two that will have the men sit up and take notice.”

Olivia sighed. “I don’t need a man.”

Chuckling, Mia dragged her to the door. “You know, the saddest lies are the ones we tell ourselves. Come on.”

Growling, Olivia reluctantly followed. Mia knew nothing of her life, much less her needs or wants. Nothing. Yet, just like Father, her sister thought she knew what Olivia needed. Odd that Father and Mia hadn’t seen each other for ten years, yet they were so much alike.

Olivia plunged into the common room and heaved a sigh of relief that the two men were nowhere in sight. “Come on, Mia. Shopping awaits us.”

Soon they were in the car and headed for the small town. “Whew! It is cold.”

Mia looked at her. “You live in New York. How can this be cold to you? I’m the one who doesn’t have warm clothes except for this pink coat I got the last time I went skiing.” She laughed. “I look like one of those pink thing ice creams. You know, all my clothes are not pink anymore.”

Olivia gave her the older-sister look. “Really? Your suitcases were pink.”

“From the same skiing trip. Mom and I don’t travel very much. A few trips to Galveston. That’s about it. The ski trip was from my college days. What about you, Olivia? Have you traveled all over the world? I know that was one of your dreams.”

“I’ve been to London, Paris, and traveled around Europe by train. Spain was amazing. And Greece. You’d have loved it there, Mia.”

“That’s awesome, Liv. I’m glad you’ve had a good life.” Mia was quiet and looked out the window.

“And you? How has your life gone, Mia?” Olivia knew she’d done well with her teaching. She had a fiancé.

Mia didn’t move. Finally, she faced Olivia. “It’s been good. I breezed through college. Same one Mom went to. Joined her sorority. Then got hired to her elementary school. I love teaching.”

Olivia wasn’t sure what to say. Mia rattled off things as if they were from a checklist. “And Roy?”

Mia sighed. “He’s a nice man. Handsome, smart, and I know he loves me.”

“But?”

“We’ve been going together for five years and can’t seem to move forward. Mom loves him and says I won’t be able to find anyone more suited to me.” Mia sat back in her seat. “I am confused. I like him, a lot. Maybe even love him. But I’m not sure that is enough. He must feel it too, because neither of us has broached the subject of marriage.”

Olivia drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. “Oh.” She pulled into the Clothes Barn. “This looks like a cute store. Not too boutique and not too cowboy.” She chuckled and then glanced at Mia. Her sister was pulling a tissue from her purse.

“Liv, I don’t love Roy. He’s comfortable and familiar, but I don’t love him. Sitting here after telling you all that, I finally faced the truth. Mom won’t be happy.”

“It’s your life, Mia. I think it’s time you moved out on your own. She’s smothering you, Mia. That’s why Dad left her.”

Mia stared at her. “Is it?”

“That’s what he says. He’s pushed me to live my own life and be independent. Maybe too much because I have no man in my life. I shy away from crowds. I always did. I think that’s why Mom doted on you so much. You liked people the way she did.”

“Liv, Mom doesn’t do anything. She works and goes home. I remember it was Dad that wanted to party. Do you ever wonder if all their fighting damaged us so that we’ll never get married?”

Olivia swallowed back a gasp. That was her fear too. But if she faced it and declared it, would that make it true? “I don’t think so.”

“Why don’t you date?”

“I work hard, Mia. That’s all.” Olivia shut off the car. “Let’s get some new clothes. I don’t want you to freeze.”

Mia sent her a smirk. “Yes, I’m still going to get you a couple of outfits that will attract men.” She put her hand on Olivia’s head and measured to hers. “See, we’re the same size now. We can even wear each other’s clothes.”

Olivia grinned. “I guess so.” She held open the door for Mia. Took in a deep breath and went into the store.

Chapter 4

Dane paced around the common area between the two suites. Now that the girls were gone, he could enjoy the room. The view was outstanding. Or would be after some snow. The weather forecast said it would come tonight.

Finally, the call went through. “Mark, any word on the Zack Carter film? I read the script, and it was written for me.”

“No, I submitted your creds and interest. You know, just about every young actor in Hollywood is going after that role.”

Dane didn’t like the negative vibes he was hearing in Mark’s voice. “Are there any other roles coming up that look promising?”

Silence answered him.

“Mark?”

“Look, I have to be honest, Dane. After the last bomb you made, you’re not exactly on the A list. Plus, you’re thirty-two, and they want the younger guys.” More silence emphasized his agent’s words. “Dane, I hate to tell you this at this time of the year, but I’m going to have to cut you loose. I’m sure another agent will pick you up.”

Dane felt his world collapse. It was bad enough to have just starred in a dud, but to have your agent dump you meant worse news in the future. Frankly, there wasn’t a future. Dane stared at the phone. “I understand.” He clicked off the call in the middle of Mark’s apologies.

After all, his agent was the one who got him the role in the bomb of the season. That was going to be hard to live down. The upside, he had a nice nest egg to rest on. Maybe he'd take up his desire to write screenplays. He still had connections. Who knows, this could be a blessing.

He glanced at the door and threw his phone across the room.

Adam came out just as the phone slid to his feet. He picked it up and set it on the table. "Bad news?"

Dane glared at him. "What, are you a detective?"

"Sorry. Why don't you take the day off and enjoy the weather? It's supposed to change tonight. Get in touch with nature."

Dane shook his head. "Oh, yeah. I can see it now. I sit under a tree, and a bird drops on me. That's the kind of day this is." He stormed past Adam and to his room and slammed the door behind him.

Once in his room, he regretted leaving his phone. What if Mark called back with a good role? He was tempted to get it when there was a knock on his door, and Adam slid the phone under it.

That brought a smile to Dane. Good old, Adam. He was a good friend; despite the fact he mostly tortured him about exercise and weight. Dane picked up the phone and slipped it into his pocket.

There wasn't much room for pacing. Maybe he would go outside. Dane grabbed his coat and headed out. "Thanks for the phone. I'm taking you up on that walk."

Adam grinned and threw him a baseball cap. “Better wear that in case the birds take revenge.”

Dane nodded, put on the Dallas Cowboys ball cap, and went outside. It would be better if he got the anger out of his system before the women returned. They’d probably quiz him about his acting, and he needed to put on a good front.

The air was crisp, almost biting. The temperatures had dropped since they’d arrived. Blue clouds to the north signaled that storms were heading toward him. Well, he hadn’t gone to the mountains for sunshine. “Let it snow.”

Dane sang a few lines of the song. Maybe he needed to get a voice coach. He rubbed his smooth chin. A beard might be a good touch. How much of himself did he need to change to get a new script?

Thanks to Adam, Dane didn’t have to lose too much weight. He looked good. He had a good head of hair, still dark with no gray or bald spots. He could thank his mother for that. Her father lived to a ripe age and still had a head of hair.

So what was he lacking? Wisdom? From the first day when he signed for the last movie, he knew it was no good. He should have turned it down, but Mark convinced him to keep his name out front.

After that bust of a movie, Dane wondered if he should change his name. Still, he had some good films to his credit. Maybe, like Mark said, lie low for a year or two, then contact the studios again for a good role.

Dane sat on a bench in a small alcove of pines. It was so peaceful. He thought of his grandmother and the Christmas

visits to her house when he was a kid. She always had yummy things cooking in the oven and cookies on the table.

He bowed his head. "I'm sorry, Lord. I was raised better, but I haven't been to church or even thought of you in some time. Help me now, Lord. I know I have no right to call on you, but that's what Grandma Vivi always told us to do. Said you would welcome us back like the prodigal son. I'm tired of trying to be someone else. Your will be done. Amen."

Dane sat for a time and drank in the quiet. The peace that he'd missed so much. A sudden gust of wind caught his attention. A cloud marched in front of the sun, dragging shadows with it. The weather was changing. Maybe he could too.

This vacation would be a good place to start. He'd try to tame the wide streak of snarkiness he'd developed in Hollywood. Dane really didn't like who he'd become. It was time for a change.

He'd seen it happen to other actors. One bad movie and the offers became worse, and then out of desperation, they'd take the inferior, if not disgusting, roles. Sooner than later, they were broken has-beens.

Dane wasn't going to let that happen to him. A break was what he needed. Adam would help him with his attitude. He grinned to himself. His challenge would be to get those two women to like him.

The blonde was friendly enough, but her sister was something else. To change her mind might be a daunting task, but he was up to it. In fact, he felt good about the idea. He needed to engage his mind in a game of sorts.

Getting her to like him would be his first goal for his new life. Maybe followed by a beard. A neat one. He looked good in a beard. He'd had one in his earlier hit as *Conner, The White Knight*.

That had been a good movie. Made him feel good to make it. And the fans, they'd loved it. That was the one that had given him a leg up on his career. He glanced up and saw that more clouds had arrived, and it was beginning to rain.

He left the alcove and ran for the cottage. Maybe he was getting a quick answer to his prayer. "Thank you, Lord."

Chapter 5

Olivia held the front door for Mia. The weather had changed, and it was now sleeting with snow on the way. “I’d say we went shopping just in time. You would have been freezing.”

Mia laughed. “Or wearing your clothes. I was cheated out of that experience when you left home.”

“Ha. Well, looking at our suitcases, I doubt I would have had things you wanted to wear.”

“I love the little black dress you bought. It makes you look so sleek.” Mia smiled at her. “And you are going to wear it at least once on this trip.”

“I want to go skiing. With the new snow, it should be perfect.” She rushed to the suite and unlocked the door and ushered Mia inside her room. “Good, we didn’t have to see those two intruders.”

“They aren’t intruders. They paid just like we did. I’m sorry that the cabin wasn’t one of the smaller ones for one family. Anyway, there are no rooms available. Let’s just try to get along. It might be fun.” Mia picked up the dress she’d forced Olivia to buy. “I’ll hang this up for you, but really, these dresses you can wad up and keep in your glove compartment. They are great for emergencies.”

Olivia frowned. “Emergency parties? Really, Mia, we do not live in the same world.” She took out the new socks and sweatshirt that she’d bought. “I love warm socks.”

Mia sighed. “Yes, socks can really grab a man’s attention.” She walked to where Olivia was sitting and faced her. “I think you’ve given up. That’s what you usually do. I bet you haven’t written a short story, much less a book, in all these years.”

Olivia stood. “I write advertising copy.”

“Oh, what is that? Ten words?” Mia shook her head. “I read some things you wrote in high school. They were good, Liv. You’re cheating the world by keeping those stories caged up inside you.”

Turning away from her sister, Olivia walked to the window. “It’s snowing.”

“That’s right. Change the topic. I’m serious, Liv. You have so much to offer, but you settle for mediocrity. In your career, in your personal life. Don’t you think it’s time you put the past behind you and started living the life you dreamed of?”

Olivia shook her head. “I’m doing fine. I like my job. I have friends.”

“Friends? Do you go out to dinner with them?”

“Occasionally.” Olivia took in a deep breath. Time to take the offense. “And you’ve been engaged. Well, is it engaged to Roy, or are you still boyfriend and girlfriend after five years? Are you two just pretending? I bet he still lives with his mother. Like you.”

Mia gasped. “Roy and I are waiting for the right time.”

“When is that, Mia? Do you even love him?”

“Yes, I love him.” She paused and drummed her fingers on the dresser. “We get along, and that counts for a lot.” Mia retreated to the door.

“That’s right. Run to your room. It would seem we haven’t changed much in ten years. Before you escape, what do you want to do for dinner? It might be too messy to go out.”

Mia stopped with her hand on the doorknob and shrugged. “I guess we could make something. The kitchen is supposed to be stocked.”

Olivia picked at her fingernails. “What if those two guys are cooking?”

“Honestly, Liv. We’ll just combine forces and have a wonderful dinner. Calm down and enjoy what comes our way.”

“And Roy?”

“Roy is in San Antonio. He trusts me, and I trust him.” Mia rubbed her arms. “I’m going to my room to put on some of the warmer clothes I bought. I’ll meet you at the pantry.”

“Sure, go ahead. I’m going to put on one of my new pairs of socks.” Olivia held the door for Mia while she took her packages to her room. Mia was such a mess.

Olivia passed by a mirror on the way to change her socks. She stopped and stared at herself. What a mess. She grabbed her brush and tried to make her hair behave. She should have gotten it cut before she left on the trip. But her hair had tricked her into believing it looked great. She hated

when it did that. Now, it was at the point-of-no-return phase, and nothing she did would make it look nice.

“What do I care? I don’t know them and will never see them again.” She changed her socks and went out to the common area and then to the pantry. The mean guy was looking over their choices.

She stood beside him. “We’re staying in for dinner.”

“We are too.” He kept his hands on the doors and looked.

Olivia pushed one of his arms and scooted in where she could see. “Pasta, rice, soups. They have it well stocked.”

“I was looking for mac and cheese.” He sent her a daring look.

“Well, that would be good on a chilly night. Let’s see what we could cook to go with it.” She went to the refrigerator. “We have hamburger. That would work.”

Dane pulled out a can of beans. “We can have beans too.”

“Good, good. We won’t starve.”

Mia and Adam entered the kitchen at the same time. Mia smiled at him. “Well, what do you think?”

“Hamburger, beans, and mac and cheese.” Olivia smiled. “I think that will feed us.”

Adam nodded. “Is there lettuce for a salad?”

Liv checked. “Yes, there is, and salad dressing in the pantry.”

Adam held up his hand. “How about we split the duties? Dane and I’ll cook the hamburgers. You ladies make the salad, beans, and mac and cheese.”

Olivia shook her head but pulled out a pan to make the beans. Sooner than she wanted, dinner was ready, and they were all seated around the table in the commons. The girls on one side and the boys on the other.

Olivia took a bite of her burger. “Good. Thank you.”

Dane nodded. “I thought someone from New York might not eat meat and be a sushi eater.”

Shaking her head, she laughed. “I was born and raised in Texas. Beef country. Right Mia?”

“Well, I eat sushi.” Mia took a bite of the burger. “But this is good.”

Adam sighed. “I’m mostly vegan, but I make exceptions.”

Olivia grinned. “I consider myself a secondary vegetarian. The cow eats grass, and I eat the cow.”

Mia elbowed her. “Really, Liv.”

“I like that. Mind if I use that line?” Dane looked at her without his usual expression of dismissal.

“Sure. It’s a free country.” Olivia took a sip of water. “I write advertising copy for a firm in New York City. I get to work from home three days a week and go into the office the other two. It’s a good arrangement.”

Dane frowned. “Sounds lonely. I’m an actor. You might have seen me in *Connor, The White Knight*.” He

scowled. “That was years ago. My latest was *Beetle Man*. A real bomb. They’d wanted me to be Firefly Man, but I just couldn’t get past the idea of light coming out of my backside. So, Beetle Man, it was, and kids call me June Bug. Humiliating. I’m taking a break and trying to find myself.”

Mia smiled. “I’m sure you’ll get a better role.” She looked at Adam. “And you’re his agent?”

“Trainer. I help keep the big guy in shape for those rugged roles. Although, as a beetle, it was a rough role.” Adam grinned. “I told you not to take it.”

Dane sighed. “I know. Don’t remind me. Have you ever felt like your dream job was turning into a nightmare?”

Olivia was startled by his honesty. She’d never told anyone how she felt about her career choice, but Dane’s remarks emboldened her. “I’m not happy with my career. I wanted to write best-selling novels. Instead, I write advertising copy. My famous lines were for selling broccoli pills. You get the goods without having to eat the vegetable. I’ve not written one line for my great American novel.”

Mia rubbed her back. “I’m sorry. I thought you were happy.” She sighed, sniffled, and wiped tears from her eyes. “I’m the worst fraud of all. The only thing I’ve done is follow my mother. I’m a teacher. I enjoy teaching the children, but if I had my dream job, I’d be a professor of child studies.”

Olivia looked at her. “Why didn’t you stay and get your PhD?”

“Mother said she had an opening, and I should take it. I’ve been there for three years now. Still live with my mother.

I have a fiancé who lives with his mother. Roy has been my steady for five years, and there is no date in sight.”

Dane shook his head. “Dump Roy. If he’s not made a move by now, he’s keeping you on the back burner while he’s looking for a better deal.”

Adam slapped his shoulder. “You don’t know that.” He looked at Mia. “Pay him no mind. Dane’s known for his quick temper, opinion, and blunt mouth. We don’t know Roy or you.”

Mia stared at her mac and cheese. “Roy likes mac and cheese. I make it for him all the time. I hate it. He doesn’t even know I don’t like it.”

Annoyed at her sister, Olivia pointed. “Why do you have it on your plate now?”

“Habit. I always take some and pretend to eat a little. I scatter it around my plate.” Mia shook her head. “I am a people pleaser. I always have been. It drove me crazy when Mom and Dad fought. I always felt that I’d failed and should have been able to fix it so that there was peace in the house.”

Olivia hugged her. “I’m sorry you felt that way. I just wanted out.”

Dane looked uncomfortable as he stuffed more mac and cheese into his mouth. Adam looked sad.

After several minutes of awkward silence and the lip-smacking sounds of mac and cheese being eaten, Dane finally spoke up. “It’s snowing. The skiing ought to be good tomorrow. Are you going?”

Olivia was still staring at Mia. “You need to tell him. And Mom. I can’t believe you have let them run your life.”

Mia stood and threw her napkin at her plate. “You’re not any better.” She ran to her room and slammed the door.

Olivia sat there. She was fifteen all over again. Mia had run off and left her alone. She looked at Dane and Adam. “I’m sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Dane stood and caught her arm before she could run. “It’s not your fault. She’ll get over it. Sometimes, you have to let things play out.”

She glared at him. “Is that something Firefly Man would say?”

Stung, he let her go and stepped back. “There was no call for that.” He shook his head and left the room.

Adam was still sitting at the table. “Well, that was fun. And I liked the mac and cheese.” He looked at Olivia. “Dane is really hurting right now from that movie. You didn’t need to cut him so deep.”

Olivia nodded and sat back down. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I think I learned that from my mother. She used to shred our dad right in front of us. It was her way of getting even with him, but we were the audience.” She looked at Adam. “Would you tell him I’m sorry? I didn’t mean it.”

Adam started cleaning the table. “You tell him next time you see him.”

She nodded, helped him clean the table, and put the dishes in the dishwasher. How was she going to endure two

weeks of this? By the look on Dane's face, he wasn't. He'd leave just like Father had left.

Olivia went to the window and watched the falling snow. So beautiful, but the peace had been shattered. "God help me. I don't mean to hurt others, but I did. I am sorry, Lord."

Chapter 6

Dane paced around his room. The lunch with his cabin mates had unsettled him. They bickered with another and brought him into the fight. He stopped in front of the mirror and had to admit; he didn't exactly look friendly.

His door opened and Adam walked in. "Well, that was informative. If you want to preserve your career, you might not want to insult the fans."

"They aren't my fans. Neither of them saw my last movie."

Adam shook his head. "Hardly anybody saw your last movie, and you can consider that a blessing."

Dane stopped pacing and looked at his friend. "You're right. I don't know, I just am not happy with much of anything right now. Sorry for making lunch uncomfortable."

"Accepted. You know, a lot of us grew up with bickering parents and remember that kind of meal all too often. We don't need to recreate it."

"Sorry, Adam. I didn't know about your childhood."

"It wasn't pretty. A California couple has a kid and fights over everything, even who will take the kid. That was my life in a nutshell." Adam ran a hand through his hair. "I think you and Olivia could hit it off if you gave it half a chance."

“I’m not looking for anyone. Andrea left a nasty scar over my heart, and I am in no hurry to go through that again.” Dane turned away from his friend and looked out the window. The snow-covered mountain stared back at him. Alone. That was how he felt and had felt in the two years since Andrea had dumped him for a younger, more successful actor.

Adam put a hand on his shoulder. “That was two years ago. It’s time to put the past away and live again. Let this vacation be that start.”

“I came to ski and get away from Hollywood. I don’t want other people in my life right now. You are the exception. Thank you for coming.”

Adam nodded. “I know it’s hard on you, but I think your career is suffering because of the breakup. It’s time you moved on.”

“Easier said than done.”

“Well, look at us. We’re sharing a cabin with two beautiful ladies. Going skiing tomorrow, it’s pretty much set up for us. If you can control your caustic personality. Show Olivia that spark of charm you have. I’ve seen it, and it makes women turn their heads and look at you with cow eyes.”

“Cow eyes?”

“Yeah, have you ever seen a cow with those big, innocent eyes? Anyway, I know you can wow Olivia if you want to. Just for fun. You don’t have to marry her. But you need to practice being charming again.”

“I suppose you’re right.”

Adam popped a fist into Dane's shoulder. "Good. Let's do this. I bet you can't get her to smile at you tonight."

"After that meal, what makes you think we'll even see them again?" Dane laughed. "I was as friendly as Count Dracula."

"True. So, you have a challenge. You're up to it." Adam rubbed a finger along Dane's jaw. "You growing a beard?"

"Yeah, thought I looked good in the White Knight. Going for the look. Ought to be good out here in lumberjack world." Dane nodded and looked in the mirror. "My grandpa could grow a beard almost overnight."

"Go for it, Dane. You did look good in that movie."

Dane turned to stare at Adam. "And what about you? Are you going to wow Mia?"

"She's taken."

"She didn't look taken the way I saw her look at you."

"Alright. I'll get her to smile at me then. The first one who gets his girl to grin buys the lift tickets."

Dane looked at him. "Why does the winner have to pay?"

"Because he'll be the happier man. I'm going to take a little nap and store up energy to make my lady smile."

"Good luck, Adam. You'll need it."

Olivia went to her room and sat in the large puffy chair. Oh, it was comfortable, but no matter how hard she wanted to fall asleep, she couldn't. She'd hurt Mia, and she needed to make it right.

She got up, put on her slippers, and went to Mia's room. She knocked softly. "Mia, can we talk?"

After a few minutes of silence, the door opened, and Mia let her in. "I'm glad you want to talk."

"I'm sorry. I know I was hurtful. I don't know why I do that, and I know it has cost me friendships in the past. Cost me the one man I thought might love me."

Mia settled on her bed. "I never heard about him."

"Mike. I met him at a coffee shop that I like to go to. He was a writer too, and he would come to the shop to work on his book. He got me started writing again." She glanced at Mia. "That was two years ago."

"What happened?"

"We went out a few times. Mostly met at the coffee shop and wrote. We went to Central Park in the summer. I was falling for him. Then one day, I saw him with a woman. They weren't doing anything other than talking, but I got so jealous."

Mia flipped over on the bed, closer to Olivia. "Oh, no. I can guess what happened."

That thought annoyed Olivia. "Really? You hardly know me."

“Oh, Olivia. We grew up in the same insult-driven home. Mother was always afraid that Father had found another woman and was unfaithful. This is what she would do. I may have been younger, but I watched.”

“Mother?”

“Olivia, you are just like Mother. Tell me if I’m wrong, but this is what I bet happened. After you saw Mike with another woman, you turned on him. Insulted his work. Set him up for failure. I remember once that Mother had Father meet her across town when she knew good and well he would have a difficult time getting there on time. He was late, and she blasted him.”

Opening her mouth to argue, Olivia then shut it. “I did something similar. I never saw him again.” She ran her finger over the polished wood of the chair’s arm. “Mother did that?”

“Yes. She was always playing games with Father. She’d change the rules, so she always won, and he was the loser. There were times that I didn’t like her. Yet, I stayed with her. Don’t get me wrong, I love Mother, but she’s far from perfect.”

“Am I like Mother?”

Mia nodded.

“How can you stand me? I haven’t seen Mother in ten years and have only spoken to her a few times. Yet you say I am like her?”

“Carbon copy.” Mai grabbed a pen and paper. “Want me to make a list?”

“You mean there is more than one thing?”

“Yes. Opinionated. Always right. Knows better than anyone else. Puts others down. Stays in the house and avoids get-togethers. Doesn’t like men. Should I go on?”

“No. I’ve heard enough. How can I be like Mother when I went with Father?” Olivia put her hands to her head. “I feel sick. I never knew.”

“I knew the moment I saw you sitting at the airport. You have the ability to put this vibe around you that tells everyone to stay away. Mother does it too.”

Olivia’s memory shot back to the airport scene. Mia was right. Olivia sat down, and two people got up and left her area. No one talked to her. She even remembered thinking about how she’d like to talk to somebody, but no one sat near her.

“What is wrong with me, Mia? How do I fix myself?”

Mia got off her bed and went over to Olivia and hugged her. “There, see how you pulled away from me? You don’t like to be touched. Mother doesn’t either. Practice smiling.” Mia looked at her with a frown. “Your hair needs a good cut. We’ll do that while we’re here.”

“I thought it would be all right. I was wrong.” Olivia tugged at her curls. “I am such a mess.”

“I think some of your problem is that you work from home. I bet you stay in your pajamas.”

Olivia shrugged. “How did you know? Sometimes, I put on a work shirt if we’re going to be on a zoom call. I order in food. I am somewhat of a hermit.”

“Somewhat? When was the last time you went to that coffee shop?” Mia held her arms close and went to the window.

“I don’t go there anymore. What if I ran into Mike?”

Facing her, Mia shook her head. “You would say hi. Take your laptop and start writing your story. What is it about?”

Olivia shook her head. “I don’t know. Maybe about a woman who is trying to find herself in a city where it’s too easy to lose yourself.”

Mai nodded. “Writing can be healing. Go for it, Liv.”

“Really? Do you think I can make a go of it?”

“Liv, I know you can. Don’t settle for what you’re comfortable doing.”

“Mia, isn’t that what you’ve done?”

“I am afraid so. Maybe we can both get out of the rut we’ve put ourselves in. It’s time we stopped blaming our parents.”

“How did you get so wise?”

“I looked at myself in the mirror and didn’t like what I saw. Honestly, Liv, we didn’t even see each other for ten years. I mentioned it to a friend who had just lost her brother in a car accident. She scolded me. I listened, and she was right. Thank you for coming and meeting me for this vacation. I’ve missed my sister.”

Olivia hugged her. “I’m sorry. No more cross words. Just fun and getting to know one another.”

Mia held up her pinky finger.

Olivia crossed it with hers. “Sisters for life.”

Chapter 7

Dane was just shutting his eyes for a snooze when he heard Adam shouting in the large common area of the cabin. “What now?” He stumbled out of bed and ran out to see what had happened.

Adam was pointing at the large picture window. “Look, it’s like we’re in a snow globe. Let’s go outside.”

Olivia and Mia came out of their suite. Olivia looked around. “Where’s the fire?”

Mia elbowed her.

Dane went to the window. “Look at the snow. Have you ever seen flakes that size? They have to be quarter-sized.”

Olivia went to stand beside him. “They are lovely. Floating down like feathers.”

Adam disappeared and then came back out with his coat and boots on. “Anyone want to take a walk in winter wonderland?”

Mia grabbed Olivia. “Let’s get our warm clothes on. We’ll be right out.”

Dane groaned. “I was just going to take a nap.”

“What are you, fifty? Come on, you’re not an old man.” Adam shoved his friend toward their suite. “Get ready. Remember our bet?”

Dane went in and put on his warm sweatshirt, socks, and boots. He had all the right clothes to wear. He had

everything but happiness and a career. He grabbed his ski jacket and a scarf.

He was the last one out. The others were all waiting, looking like children anticipating a fun day. His memories shot back to when he was ten, and it snowed. After mother put on their snow clothes and boots, they went outside for all of ten minutes before the cold made them scurry back inside.

Dane laughed. "All right, children, let's go." He ran for the door and was the first one outside on the back porch. He walked down the steps, careful not to slip on the ice. The snow was already six inches deep and still coming down.

He held out his hand and caught some of the huge flakes. It was a wonderland. The snow muffled the sound, making it feel as if they had stepped into some other world.

Mia and Adam ran and flopped down on a blanket of fresh snow to make snow angels.

Dane grinned and then noticed that Olivia was standing beside him. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

She nodded. "I love the snow. In New York City, it makes the place magical. I usually try to get out and enjoy it."

"Want to walk along the trail?"

"Sure. I guess Mia and Adam are having fun." She pointed at their antics.

"He accused me of being an old man. I am thankful he got me out here. I've never seen snowflakes this large." They walked toward the trees. Once inside the trail, the snow still filtered down from the pines while their branches were becoming coated in white.

Olivia smiled. “Thank you for walking with me. It was just what I needed.”

“Me too. I’m sorry I was rude to you over lunch. I’ve been going through a hard patch with my career, but that’s no excuse to take it out on you.”

Olivia stopped and looked at him. “I am sorry too. I guess we both have some adjustments to make. I’m not doing what I want to do. I mean, singing broccoli. That is definitely not how I want to be remembered.”

He took her hand in his. “The great American novel. I can see you doing that.”

She pulled her hand away and took a step. “Yes, Mia is encouraging me to write. Who knows, maybe I’ll give it a try.”

“Try. Not my favorite word. It’s got failure wrapped up in it. I like the sneaker saying, just do it. Even if you fail, you did it. Try is for quitters.”

“Ah, a philosopher actor. What is in your future?”

Dane held a tree branch to let her pass. “I’d like to write screenplays. I’m going to be very particular about any movies I might act in. I realized my agent isn’t necessarily on my side. So, my first step might be to find an agent who puts my well-being first.”

“Good luck with that.”

“That’s a cynical attitude.” Dane stopped. “I think we better head back to the cabin. The wind has picked up along with the snow.”

Olivia followed his finger. “Oh, my. We’re in a blizzard.”

“We’re all right. I see our cabin. I took a picture with the coordinates. Why so pessimistic?”

She started to say something but stopped herself. Instead, she shrugged. “I guess I’ve had more disappointments than I’d like to admit. My career. Parents. Men.”

“Ah, there is the knife in the back. Yes, I have one too. More than one, in fact. Andrea was the latest. It doesn’t pay to be the nice guy anymore.”

She laughed. “Is that how you see yourself?”

Dane nodded. “Maybe not now, but I used to be. The heart can only take so many betrayals.”

Her face softened. “I agree. I’m sorry you’ve been hurt. I guess you never know what another has been through. I’ll try to remember that.”

“Olivia Freehan, my name is Dane, and I’d like to be your friend.” He grinned as he took her hand in his. “No strings. We’re just here in this beautiful land to make a fresh start. Agreed?”

She nodded and grinned. “Yes, agree. We’re going skiing tomorrow. Want to go with us?”

“Sounds like a plan.” Dane led her out of the woods and pointed to Adam and Mia, who were now throwing snowballs at one another. “They seem to be getting along.”

Olivia pulled the hood on her coat tighter against the wind. “Yes, they do. She has a fiancé, you know.”

“I think that’s her business. Adam is a good man. He won’t take advantage of her.”

“I hope not. I hate to see her jeopardize her relationship. It was just supposed to be us. Not a cabin with men.”

Dane stopped and put his hands on her shoulders. “I promise I’ll make sure Adam understands that she’s off limits.” Looking at his friend, he had to admit Adam looked happier than he had in some time.

But Adam’s life wasn’t his business, either. What if Mia and Adam hit it off? Dane wasn’t going to stand in the way. Olivia might, but that wasn’t his style of live and let live. He glanced at Olivia. She wasn’t anything to him. He’d enjoyed the walk with her and come to an agreement to enjoy time together, but that was it.

They were just cabin mates and nothing more. They lived on opposite sides of the country. Besides, he still had a career to revive.

Chapter 8

The next morning, Olivia put on her ski outfit and went to see if Mia was ready. Her sister opened the door with a dreamy look on her face but no ski clothes.

“Get ready, Mia. I want to get to the mountain early.”

Mia yawned. “Are the guys going with us? I hope they aren’t good. I have to ski on the beginner trail.”

“Did you stay up late?”

She nodded. “Adam and I talked. Went outside and looked at the sky. It was still snowing.” She sighed.

“You have a fiancé.”

Mia nailed a look at her. “I know that. Don’t worry. Adam is just fun to be around. A girl can enjoy herself, can’t she?”

“With her fiancé. I don’t think Roy would be too happy.”

Mia leveled a gaze at her. “Then don’t tell him.”

“He’ll find out. I won’t tell. But it happened to Father. He’d have a business lunch with a woman, and Mother would always find out. I don’t know how she did it, but don’t you remember all the yelling and screaming? I don’t think you want to copy their behavior.”

“You are so much like Mother. Anything I want to do, she’s there to tell me no. Warn me that it’s not a good idea. On

and on. You're just like her." Mia stomped to her dresser and pulled out a bright purple ski suit.

"Purple? Have you given up on pink?"

"Pink was Mother's color for me. I'm still looking for mine." Mia shook her head. "I hope this wasn't a mistake. I really wanted us to get along."

"Aren't we?"

Mia pulled the suit on, then she sat to put on her socks and boots. "I've enjoyed most of it. Just stay out of my business with Roy. Ok?"

"Sure. I won't mention it again. I care about you, though."

Mia stood and grabbed her gloves and scarf. "You seemed to enjoy yourself with Dane."

Olivia laughed. "Me with a movie star. That doesn't even sound right. Look at me. I'm a mess. He's used to elegant women who wear the top of the fashion lines."

"We're going to get your hair fixed today. After skiing. I have ideas that will get Dane to turn his head in your direction."

"I don't think Dane is interested in any long-term relationship. I'm not about to date a man who lives in LA. Besides, I don't think you can fix me up enough to compete with the starlets and fans that will follow him. Look at me, Mia. I'm plain. I don't know how to fix myself up."

Mia went to her. "I can help you."

“I’ll feel like a fake. Whoever, and that is if there will ever be a whoever in my life, loves me, will have to love me the way I am.”

Mia shook her head. “Liv, you don’t get it, do you? You are already beautiful. Just a few touch-ups are all you need. Your problem is you don’t like yourself.”

“Let’s go skiing.”

Mia stopped her from going out the door. “Let’s take our car. I think they are expert skiers, and I can barely snowplow. They might want to stay longer than we do.”

Olivia nodded. “Good idea. Let’s hit the snow.”

Dane rushed into the common area, only to see Adam pacing. “The women aren’t out yet?” At least Adam wasn’t upset that he’d had to wait on him. Sometimes, Dane slept a little too long for the trainer’s ideas.

“No, and the lift lines will be long before we get there.” Adam looked at the other suite.

Finally, the door opened, and they rushed out.

Mia, all smiles, ran to Adam and took his arm. “Sorry you had to wait, but we’re ready now. We were thinking we might take two cars, though. I doubt I’ll be able to keep up with the rest of you. I don’t want to slow you down.”

Dane nodded. “Good idea. We’ll follow each other to the lifts.” He grabbed his keys and rushed outside. To his surprise, it was Olivia who was behind him. He opened the car door. “You want to ride with me?”

She held up the keys to her car. "I'll wait for Mia."

"I guess I'll be waiting for Adam, and he was the one rushing around waking everyone up. Have you skied much?"

"A few times every year. New York has some nice ski slopes. Nothing like the Rockies, but enough to keep me entertained."

Dane twirled his keys. "I go twice a year. Usually at Christmas and sometimes in February. I usually go to Sun Valley or wherever the hot spot of the year is going to be. I didn't even want to go this year. Adam convinced me to come here. I hope no one will recognize me."

"I see you're growing a beard."

He grinned. "Like it?"

"I'd say you're one of the few men who looks good in one." She waved as Mia ran out of the house.

Mia grinned. Full of laughter and fun, she grabbed Olivia's keys. "You go with Dane. Adam and I will meet you there. We're both going to do the beginner slopes. You guys can do the Black Diamond slopes if you want to. Just don't get hurt."

Olivia shook her head. "I don't intend to." She paused and stared at Mia. "Don't you get hurt either."

"I wouldn't think of it." Mia shut her car door and gunned the engine.

Olivia sat in the leather seats of Dane's SUV. "My wild sister."

Dane grinned. "She's an active one, isn't she?"

“I really had no idea. I thought she would be married to Roy by now. I’ve never met him.”

Dane glanced at her. “If they’ve been engaged for that long, I’d say one or both of them don’t want to get married.”

“I don’t know. I promised her I wouldn’t bring it up.” She laughed. “It’s not like my life is going exactly as I thought. I don’t have any room to fix hers.”

“Are you good at skiing the black diamond slopes?”

“I love a challenge.” Olivia smiled. “I’m a pretty good skier.”

“So am I. I welcome the challenge.” He pulled into the ski lodge parking lot. “I don’t see Adam and Mia.”

“We can get our skis and lift tickets. They’ll be along. Besides, if they do the beginner slope, I doubt we will see them. I hope you don’t mind.”

Dane smiled. “Not at all.”

They’d just walked up to the counter to get their skis when a blonde woman ran up to him. “Dane Caldwell? Oh, I loved you in the *White Knight*. Can I have your autograph?”

A few more people circled him, pushing Olivia out of the way. The blonde took hold of Dane’s arm and led him to the bench to try on the ski boots. Irritated that she’d been easily set aside, Olivia made her way to the bench and sat down.

A clerk made his way to her, glanced at Dane and the blonde, and then looked at Olivia. “Looks like he got sidetracked. I saw you two come in together. Don’t worry.

He'll be back." He measured her foot and went to the back room and was soon out with her boots. "Have a good day skiing. After the snow yesterday, it looks like it is going to be a wonderful day."

"Thank you."

She looked at Dane as he had the lift tickets.

He smiled at her, disentangled his arm from the blonde, and made his way to Olivia. "Sorry about that. I was hoping no one would recognize me."

Still smarting from being left alone, she nodded. "I guess it is a hazard of being a movie star."

He grinned. "It won't happen on the slopes. With the ski hats and goggles, no one will recognize me. Come on, let's go."

Chapter 9

Olivia stood at the top of the mountain. No matter how many times that she skied, the thrill always took her breath. It was here that she felt closest to God. In the middle of His marvelous creation, it was as if her entire being praised the One who created it all.

She thanked the Lord for His goodness, prayed that He would bless her family, and somehow that she could write the stories she longed to. Olivia glanced at Dane. He was looking around with the same wonder in his eyes.

“It never gets old, does it?”

He looked at her. “No, it doesn’t. When I was a kid, I would go off on my own into the woods and sit and contemplate the meaning of life. God was so real to me then.”

Olivia nodded. “We get older, and life gets complicated. The problems overwhelm the wonder. It’s a shame, isn’t it?”

“Yes. It is. I think it’s one of the reasons I enjoy skiing. The pristine snow blanketing a meadow with pure unblemished white. Like a clean slate. I’ve felt it before. Start anew. Those are the words that I always feel in my soul.”

She sighed. “If only it were that easy. I don’t know how to blot out the failures of the past. The disappointments of the now. Fear that the future will be no better.”

Dane faced her. “I think that is called faith. Not that I have it or know how to walk in that faith and newness of life.

But that was one thing I wanted to explore on this vacation. I'm tired of the past. The mess that my life and career are now." He shook his head. "And the darkness that stands in front of me and says it's my future."

"Oh, my. How did we get so bleak and down after looking at all this beautiful wonder?" She laughed and took his hand in hers. "Let's make a pact. From now on, there is no past or future. Only now. Maybe the Lord will heal those parts that hurt us if we praise Him for what we see right now."

Dane nodded. "Done. The Lord has blessed my life. Most actors never get a major movie role, and I've had several. Thanks, Olivia. This is going to be a wonderful vacation." He pointed down the mountain. "That trail to the left."

"The one least taken." She grinned. "See you at the bottom of the mountain, Dane." She took off. It was a steep descent, leading to a trail full of moguls, until she hit a smooth portion where she picked up speed.

Olivia smiled and laughed as she picked her way down the slope. Then she burst out of the woods into an open portion that felt as if she were traveling at breakneck speed straight down. She felt so alive. So happy.

She swooshed into thicker snow and slowed down, following the trail as it spilled onto the main slope leading to the bottom of the mountain and the ski lodge. She stopped and waited for Dane.

She frowned. He wasn't right behind her. Even more surprising, she'd expected him to pass her. Tentacles of the past betrayal tore at her joy. He'd found someone prettier and

set her aside. Of course, why should she think this time would be any different?

With shock, her memories shot back to the hospital right after Mia had been born. Mother and Father were so happy, all huddled around the newborn. Olivia had been left to sit on the bench outside the room.

She'd had a runny nose, and Father said she couldn't be near the new baby. Olivia felt the pain of being set aside all over again. Is that where it started? Even after Mia and Mother came home from the hospital, Olivia was kept away.

As an adult, she knew it was because she had a cold, and they were protecting the new baby. But in her little five-year-old eyes, her parents had chosen Mia over her. As they grew up, Father seemed to favor Mia. His little princess.

Olivia stared into nothingness as she thought about the past and recognized how it colored her life even now. In shock, she stared at the snow and remembered the pact she and Dane had agreed to. "No more past."

Someone touched her shoulder. She jumped and looked up, but the sun blinded her sight as to who had touched her.

Dane laughed. "Are you all right? Sorry I was so late. A skier went down on one of the moguls and needed help. I tried to catch you, but you were out of sight. You were going so fast. I finally just enjoyed the view, and then I saw you standing here."

She smiled. "Yes. Were they ok?"

He nodded. "They will be. Wrenched their knee and promised to make it to the medics. You were really flying. I'd

say you had a good run.”

Still trying to recover from the memory and feelings of being set aside and jumping because someone touched her shoulder, Olivia nodded. “Yes. It was.” With effort, she shoved her misgivings away and remembered her run down the mountain. “It was a great run. I was surprised that you weren’t behind me.”

“How about some hot chocolate and then another run? Someone said the dark green run on the left side of the mountain was a good one and not many use it.”

“Great. Hot chocolate sounds good.” She grinned and tried to regain what she’d felt with Dane on the top of the mountain, but the feeling of being set aside lingered, tainting the day. She wanted to cry. How could she let feelings of when she was five ruin her day now? She had to get hold of herself.

Yet she understood why she shied away from any meaningful relationships. If she didn’t care about anyone, they couldn’t hurt her. They couldn’t set her aside for another more desirable person. Olivia walked beside Dane, struggling to want to enjoy his company but unable to keep the fears away. She hoped he wouldn’t notice.

Dane sipped the hot cocoa and left some of the white foam on his nose. He laughed. “So good, I’m trying to breathe it in.” He wiped his mouth and the tip of his nose.

She laughed.

“What’s wrong? Did someone say something to you while you were waiting for me?”

“No. Everything is fine.” She lied, and stared him straight in the eyes, and pretended all was good. Why couldn’t she tell him and at least explain the crazy thoughts that made her turn cold and distant?

He gave a faint smile. “You seem different. You ready for one more run?”

If she’d had her own car, she’d have left to go back to her room, but she didn’t. And she didn’t want to have to explain what had happened. “Sure. Let’s go.”

They went to the ski lift and waited in line. Olivia forced a smile. “I had a good run. I’m sorry you had to stop.”

“Someone needed me. It felt good to help them, but I’m hoping for a fast run this time.”

Olivia studied him. He looked like a young boy, carefree and ready to ski down the mountain. She envied him. She’d long ago lost her youthful joy. But then they’d made that pact and were supposed to put away the past.

The ride up the mountain helped renew her spirit. By the time they reached the top, she felt joy. “The Dark Green one, right?”

Dane nodded and pointed to the sign. “There it is.”

Olivia grinned. She was ten again and getting ready to fly down the mountain. Her first trip down the mountain had won her for life. The cold fresh air was crisp and smelled of pine. The snow was pure white and glistened like diamonds in the sun. And when she looked down, it was like jumping off a cliff. The whooshing of her skis on the pristine snow. It was magnificent.

She treasured the memory and got ready to push off when Dane stopped her.

“I just want to say that I’ve enjoyed the day with you. Thanks for skiing with me.”

Olivia smiled. A smile that was real. “I’ve enjoyed it too. Shall we go?”

“Last one down buys the cocoa.” He laughed and shoved off.

Olivia grinned and followed him. She’d keep her mind on the present.

Chapter 10

Dane loved the rush of the wind against his face as he tore down the slope. He hoped Olivia was following, but he wasn't stopping to look back. She knew the score. You don't stop on the steep slopes. Too dangerous.

All too quickly, the trail combined to the main slope, and in minutes, he was in front of the ski lodge. He turned around and saw Olivia swoosh to a stop.

She smiled. "How was that? I let you win, but I was right behind you."

"You're a good skier." He looked at the sky. "We might have time for one more run."

"I promised Mia that I'd be back before three. She has some kind of pampering plans for me. It would seem she's taken up where Mother left off."

Dane playfully fingered one of her dark curls. "I think you're pretty just the way you are?"

"Ha. I bet you say that to all the starlets that come after you."

"Nope. I ignore them."

She took off her skis and handed them to him. "Am I pretty enough for you to take my skis back?"

"Sure." Dane took off his skis and went to the ski shack. Then he met her at the boot rack. "My feet are aching.

Good thing you turned down that third run. I'll be here for two weeks."

"Me too. I'll have to check with Mia, but I believe she has plans for us tomorrow but the next day, I'd love to go down those ski runs again."

"It's a date." He pointed to the parking lot. "My ankles are sore. I hope Adam has dinner planned. I'm hungry."

"Yes, we never did get lunch."

Dane looked around. "We could stop in town and get a bite."

She looked alarmed. Then her face softened. "I have to get back to see what Mia has for me."

"Sorry, I forgot. Maybe another time."

"You don't have to."

Dane took her hand in his. "I want to. I really enjoyed being with you today."

"I'm not like that." She pulled her hand from his.

"What? I'm not asking you to marry me. I just would like to take you to lunch. Nothing more. I'm sorry if you thought I wanted to—"

"I'm sorry. Mia tells me I'm too prickly and drive people away. You know what? I had a wonderful time too. I'd love to go to lunch with you. If you can forgive me for being so obtuse."

He relaxed and pulled into the cabin drive. "All forgiven. We'll just enjoy the moment and one another. No past and no future."

“Thank you, Dane.” She pointed. “There’s Mia pointing at her watch. I better go see what she wants.”

Dane ran around the car in time to hold the door for her. “Have a good time.”

Olivia hadn’t even made it to the door when, with purse in hand, Mia ran out and grabbed her hand with the other.

“Hurry. We can just make it.”

“What?”

“Just come.” Mia pointed Olivia to the passenger door and then got in the driver’s seat. “Buckle up. It’s going to be a bumpy ride.”

Olivia could only stare at her sister. She’d never known this wild side to Mia. “Where are you taking me? I thought we were going to be pampered, not go on a thrill ride through the mountains.”

Mia laughed. “I was hoping you’d get back. I made an appointment. The only one available today.”

Olivia shook her head. “I could go tomorrow. Not like I know what I want done to my hair, anyway. It’s always a mess. I would have to get Father’s hair. Dark and with a mind of its own. Not to mention I pulled out three gray hairs this morning. The joys of reaching thirty.”

“Oh, you just wait. I have the perfect style for you. You’ll love it. Maybe even Dane will take notice.”

“Dane? We just went skiing together. He could get any number of women to go with him. I’m nothing special to him.”

Mia glanced at her and smiled. “Oh? That’s not what his face and eyes said as he looked at you. I think, my dear sister, that you wowed him on the slopes.”

“Maybe you should be the writer. You’re the one with the imagination.”

Mia wheeled the car into a parking lot and stopped in front of The Mane Event. “Here we are. Prepare to become who you were meant to be.”

Olivia rolled her eyes but got out of the car. “Why I let you talk me into this?”

“Oh, come on. It will be fun.” Mia opened the door. “Calvin, I’m here with Olivia Freehan. We’ve come to be made over.”

A charming man came over, bowed, and took Olivia’s hand. “A beauty for sure. Come to my easel and let me do my work. Such a pretty lady.” He turned to Mia. “You were right. The style you chose will be perfect.”

Calvin pointed to a chair. “Sit, relax, and prepare to see my masterpiece.”

Olivia sat down, darted a glare at Mia, and shook her head. She mouthed, how much? But Mia looked away. “This is my Christmas present to you. One of them anyway.” She grinned a knowing look. “I hope you will like them all.”

Calvin nodded. “What a perfect gift. You, Olivia, will be amazed. I consider myself on the level of Michelangelo and Leonardo. I see a rough model like clay or marble the masters

worked with.” He played with her hair, stepped back, and nodded. “Yes, when I am finished, you will fall in love with the woman in the mirror.”

Olivia hauled in an awkward breath. “I like a wash-and-wear haircut.”

Calvin nodded. “I see that. You just sit back and relax.”

Olivia had to admit, having someone play with her hair always made her more than sleepy. First, he washed her hair in water, which was the perfect temperature. His hands deftly caressed her scalp, rubbing her head and hair gently with shampoo that smelled like heaven.

She couldn’t quite get hold of the scent. Honeysuckle, fresh cucumber, even peppermint and pine. Whatever it was, she was about to fall asleep. She figured he must have put some kind of relaxing oil on so that his customers didn’t care what he did to their hair.

With effort, she forced her relaxed muscles to stand and walk to the next stage of her artistic makeover, as he called it. Trying to keep an eye on what he was doing, she soon succumbed to the gentle stroke of his fingers in her hair and the snip, snip of the scissors.

Olivia realized she didn’t even care what she looked like when he finished. Never had she been so relaxed. Where Mia had gotten off to, she had no idea. Unlike her, Mia’s hair was never in a mess. Her blond tresses were always neatly falling around her shoulders like glory in a Christmas picture.

Mia had Mother’s hair. Soft and golden. So, unlike her coarse, dark hair. There was nothing nice about Olivia’s hair.

On Father, it looked good. On her, it was a mess. And the gray showed up like garish fingers, pointing out that the years were slipping away from her.

Calvin went on and on in a conversation with himself. Then finally, he stopped. “Finis!”

His loud acclaim startled her awake. Olivia glanced in the mirror and gasped. “That’s me?”

Calvin took her hand and put it on her hair. “Soft. Pliable. I have tamed the wild beast.”

“Yes, you have. But is it something I can do?”

“Of course, I do not turn my ladies out with something they can’t achieve on their own.” He went to a shelf and brought a handful of products to her. “Use these, and your hair will submit like a tiger in the circus.”

“Thought they got rid of circuses?” She took the bottles. Afraid to even ask what they might cost, but she had to admit, she’d never looked so good.

Calvin grinned. “You like?”

“I love. Thank you, Calvin.”

He smiled and bowed. “My work is done. Please follow Christine and she will check you out. Have a wonderful vacation and a very Merry Christmas.”

“Yes, thank you again, Calvin.” She shook his hand and followed the gorgeous woman, who would no doubt take most of Olivia’s money for the haircut and products.

But Mia, her hair looking like a million dollars, stepped in front of her. “I said it was my treat. For the products

too.”

“Oh, Mia. I don’t have anything for you that is even close to what this must have cost.” Olivia reached for her credit card.

Mia pushed her hand away. “I meant it, and I’m happy to do it for you.” She handed her card to Christine. “How about you treat me to a stay in New York City and show me the town?”

“Deal. When do you want to come?”

“I have a birthday in February. Will that work?”

Olivia shrugged. “As far as I know, it will. You might enjoy the city more in the spring. Central Park is beautiful when the flowers and trees are blooming.”

Mia nodded. “That sounds beautiful. We’ll plan it in the spring.” She turned and took her card from Christine along with the fancy bag containing the products. “I hope you’ll use these.”

Olivia glanced at her hair in the mirror. “I will. Calvin is a miracle worker.”

“I can’t wait to see Dane’s face when he sees you.” Mia glanced at her watch. “Oh, we better get a move on. We’re going out to dinner tonight.”

With a sinking feeling, Olivia figured that little black dress would be involved. Not that she didn’t wear dresses, but she always felt awkward. Like she never measured up to the women around her. But after the miracle with her hair, perhaps tonight would feel different.

Olivia had to admit she felt a little like a princess. As long as it wasn't Cinderella and the clock was close to midnight, this just might be an enjoyable, memorable night.

Chapter 11

Dane found Adam relaxing in front of the big window. “That’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it.”

Adam looked up. “Sure is. I see you made it down without breaking a leg. Did you have fun?”

“Yes, I did.”

Adam sat up and studied him. “I take it part of that reason was Olivia?”

Dane nodded. “Yes, it was. It was refreshing to have a woman by my side who wasn’t busy trying to wow me with her sex appeal. Olivia wasn’t trying to get anything from me. I haven’t felt that way with a woman for some time.”

“Here we go. Twenty different reasons for keeping Andrea out of your life. I admit she used you, but it wasn’t all bad. She did like you. In fact, I don’t think you were fair to her.”

“Drop it, Adam. That’s history, and I’m moving past the situation. I only want to live today. Olivia and I made a pact to do just that. No past. No future. Only today.”

“Well, if it works for you, go ahead.” Adam drummed his fingers on the back of the couch.

Dane saw his friend’s tell. A sign that he was irritated with him. “Look, I’m not looking for a long-term relationship. Just a few days at the mountain. Maybe a dinner out. Is that so wrong? Did you have a good time with Mia?”

Adam's shoulders went up enough to tell Dane that he'd struck a nerve.

Taking the hint, Dane stood. "I'm going to hit the shower and relax. Do we have plans for dinner tonight?"

Adam turned to look at him. "Mia wants us to go to dinner with them."

"Them as in Mia and Olivia?"

"Maybe another."

Dane stared at his friend. "Mia's boy friend?"

Adam nodded. "And her mother."

Dane sat back down. "Mother? Does Olivia know this?"

Adam shook his head. "Mia wanted to surprise her."

"Oh, well, I am sure it is going to do that." Dane ran a hand through his hair. "It will be awkward, but for Olivia, I think it will be a good idea if we go along."

"I told Mia I didn't think it was a good idea to just spring it on her. But she'd already made the arrangements. Her mother is on a flight that is landing about now. She wasn't sure if Roy would come or not." He looked at Dane. "I'm not sure she cares for him. I think it's more of a case of Mia not knowing how to get out of an awkward situation."

"Don't get involved with her until she makes her position clear. Women straddling the fence like that are nothing but trouble. I should know."

Adam nodded. "Jessica. I remember. She used you to get Michael to ask her to marry him. Sorry, I forgot. But Mia

wouldn't do that.”

“Ha. Women are like kittens, cute, cuddly, but they have claws.”

Adam shook his head. “Mia is different. We had some good conversations. She understands me.”

“Adam, no one understands you.” Dane grinned. “We better get ready. When are Olivia and Mia getting back?”

“Should be any minute. Why don't you wait until you see her?”

“Did Mia pay someone to fix her up?”

“I would say so. I think it might be worth the wait.” He looked out the front window. “I think they just drove up.”

Dane set his focus on the front door. She'd already looked good in his eyes. He was about to say that to Adam when the door opened.

Mia walked in, looking like a polished blonde. Then, behind her, Olivia walked into the room. Dane couldn't help himself, and before he could stop it, “Wow,” flew out of his mouth. “I mean, Olivia. That is the perfect haircut for you.”

Dane knew he'd stepped in it by the embarrassed look she gave him. He walked to her. “I thought you looked nice, but they did a good job cutting your hair.” He wanted to slap his own face while Olivia turned another shade of red.

She brushed past him and headed for her suite.

Mia glared at him. “You didn't have to embarrass her.” She smiled at Adam and followed Olivia.

Adam skewered her with a sharp gaze. “What was that? What happened to the suave, sure leading man from the movies?”

“I didn’t have a script. She took me by surprise. I mean, I thought she was pretty, but seeing her fixed up like that. Well, you have to admit, the difference was drastic.”

“That might be, but you never tell a woman that.”

Dane frowned. “I didn’t tell her that.”

Adam shook his head. “Wow told her without so many words. Then you made it worse by trying to take it back.” He sighed. “And this isn’t the biggest surprise. Watch out the front window and let me know when their mother shows up.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Go talk to Mia and try to convince her to let Olivia in on the surprise. I got a bad feeling. Olivia didn’t take your reaction well. I’m thinking that seeing her mother might set off World War Three.”

Dane had to agree. Olivia wasn’t a woman who enjoyed surprises.

Olivia wanted to slam the door, but Mia caught it before she could.

“Liv, Dane meant it all as a compliment. You look great.”

Olivia turned on her sister. “So, all this time, I looked like what, a frumpy old woman with hair that’s turning gray?”

“No. Your hair looks amazing. And that shade of lipstick really sets off your lips and face. Dane noticed, is all, and he liked the look. Can’t you just accept it like that?”

“No, Mia. I can’t. All my life, I’ve looked like the mess I am and have been set aside because of it. I’m not used to having people look at me like that.”

Mia grinned. “Get used to it. You’re going to turn heads tonight. We’re going to the Polar Bear Restaurant. It’s a fancy place.”

Olivia calmed down a notch. “Are the guys going with us?”

Mia nodded.

“Well, all right. I’ll behave.”

“And wear your black dress. Better get ready.”

Olivia glanced at her phone. “Are we leaving that soon?”

“Soon enough. I made reservations for six.”

“Mia, the guys weren’t ready.”

“I’m sure they’re getting ready right now. They can shower and dress in less than ten minutes.”

Olivia heard a knock at the front door and Dane’s voice. She shook her head. “Great, who did he invite over? Now I’ll have to contend with his rich Hollywood friends.”

Mia put a hand on Olivia’s. “Brace yourself.”

She looked at her sister. “Is it Roy? Are you getting married?”

Mia shook her head. “No, I invited; well, put on your black dress and stay here until I come and get you.”

Olivia glared at her sister. “What have you done? I can’t even imagine what is at that door.” She watched Mia run to her room. What had her sister done? There was no telling. Olivia hoped it wasn’t some kind of dating service to bring men to wine and dine them.

She slipped on the dress, put on her heels, and then grabbed the necklace Mia had left for her. “Yep, I look like a doll. All dressed up. Brace myself?”

Mia rushed in, looking every bit like the beautiful woman that she always was. “Let’s go.”

Olivia followed her sister out the door. They walked into the common room, and she saw Dane. He nodded, a smile on his face. And then Olivia looked to the side and stared at the woman looking out the window.

A glare at Mia told Olivia that she was right. She braced herself, just as Mia had said. “Mother? What are you doing here?”

Mother turned and smiled. “Oh, Olivia. I have missed you so. You’re beautiful.” She ran to her and pulled her into her arms.

Mom. She smelled like the mom Olivia remembered. Warm and sweet with that gardenia perfume she always used. Olivia stepped back. “It’s so good to see you.”

Mia joined in the hug. “You’re not mad?”

“Surprised. Why didn’t you tell me?” Tears burned to be set free. Olivia had missed her mother. Ten years was too

long. Just last year, one of her friends lost her mother. What if that had happened, and Olivia had never made amends?

Mom took her hand in hers. “I know we talk once a month, but it’s not the same as seeing you. I love you, Olivia. Never forget that. I know we have our differences, but we’re family.” She touched her hair. “You’ve done something different.”

Olivia laughed. “Mia took me to see Calvin. He is a hair artist.”

“Well, it’s lovely. And that dress. You’re a knockout, honey.”

And there it was. The old feelings resurrected as Olivia felt the put-down. Mother had said it with such surprise, as if she never thought to see Olivia as beautiful or someone who would be desired.

“I guess we’re going to dinner.” Olivia looked at Dane. He was handsome in his navy-blue suit. Hair perfectly in place, even his growing beard was manicured.

Mia smiled, but Olivia could see the worry in her eyes. Once again, Olivia felt like the outsider. Had they all known Mother was coming?

Chapter 12

Dane and Adam drove their car. The women were going in the other just in case they wanted to be alone for a while. Dane tapped his thumb on the steering wheel. A habit he did while thinking.

“What do you think Olivia thought of seeing her mother?”

“Not sure. At first, it was all love and hugs, but just before we left, I saw her draw back. Not sure what our cabin will be like. Wish there was another place we could stay.”

Dane glanced at his friend. “I’m surprised to hear you say that. Thought you liked Mia.”

“She’s engaged, and now, with Mama here, she’s really engaged. Mia said that she’d give her mother her room, and she’d stay with Olivia.”

“So much for our relaxing two weeks with no drama. Olivia didn’t look happy.”

Adam grinned at him. “But she sure looked nice, didn’t she?”

“Yes, she did. I don’t think she’s comfortable being the center of attention. That’s Mia all the way.”

Adam nodded. “You’re right there. I hope they get along all right. It’s hard to believe they haven’t seen each other in ten years.”

“Yeah, it is.”

Adam sat back in the seat. “I see my pops every year. We go fishing for trout in Montana. My brother, I don’t guess I’ve seen him in four years. He joined the Marines and travels a lot. We talk once a month or so. I guess families don’t get together like they used to. Remember that show *The Waltons*? Sometimes at night I’d wish I had that many brothers and sisters.”

Dane watched the traffic. “That was a different time in our nation. I think the rural life led to larger families. Who knows if they were closer or not?”

“What about your family? You never talk about them.”

“My parents divorced when I was six. Mother remarried soon after, and my father remarried three more times. The last one was last year in Maui. I don’t have any full brothers and sisters, but I have three half-brothers and two half-sisters. I wasn’t close to any of them, and they’re scattered across the country now.” He chuckled. “Not much of a family for Christmas.”

“No, I wouldn’t guess so. I had a sister, but she died when she was fourteen. Tore our family apart. We couldn’t talk about it. Mom drifted away. Oh, she was in our home, but she was always crying. My brother joined the Marines as soon as he could. I went to college and never looked back. Mom died last year. I miss her. That’s why I try to stay in contact with Pops.”

Dane laughed. “Aren’t we a merry bunch? Let’s put aside the sadness and losses and concentrate on the beautiful place we are in. Thanks for coming with me, Adam. The holidays get lonely.”

“Agreed. You know, with my mom dying, I started going back to church. We all went as a family before Deanna died. She had some kind of nasty cancer that took her within six weeks of finding it. Day by day, I watched the life go out of her eyes. But the one thing I remember was her faith. She’d talk about Jesus as if he were right beside her. That going with Him was the greatest thing that could happen to her. Lately, I’ve started thinking about that.”

Dane nodded. “I admit that being in the mountains and all the beauty of creation make me think about God. The world is spinning out of control and believing in a God who knows what is going on is comforting. I even brought a Bible with me to read while on this trip.”

“I have it on my phone.” Adam pointed. “There’s the restaurant.”

Dane looked at his friend. “Get ready. I think this could be a wild dinner.”

Adam chuckled. “I agree.”

“Let’s go.” Dane got out of the car and waited for Olivia to park. He wondered how the drive here had gone and what their conversations had been about. He glanced at Adam. Funny, he’d known his friend for two years and had never heard about his family.

Olivia grabbed her bag and glanced at Mother. She sat ramrod straight, just like you’d think a principal might. The conversation had been sparse. How was the flight, and the skiing, today, and plans for tomorrow?

“I hope you’re hungry. This place is supposed to have excellent food.” Mia stepped in between them.

Olivia wasn’t sure about Mother, but her stomach was full of bees buzzing with anxiety. “Good choice, Mia.” She pointed. “There are the men.”

Mother looked at her. “I can’t believe you’re sharing a cabin with two men you don’t even know.”

“We didn’t have a choice. It’s a cabin with two suites and a large common area. Like a mini hotel. It’s no different from staying in a hotel.” Olivia could hear the criticizing voice her mother had always used on her while growing up.

Mia seemed oblivious to the growing storm between them. Then she always had. Of course, Mia could do no wrong. Not where Mother was concerned.

Dane came over to her and offered her his arm. “This is a great restaurant.”

Olivia looked at him, thankful that he’d come to stand by her. “You’ve heard of it?”

“Oh, yeah. If you don’t mind, let me take charge, and we’ll get a prime table where we can see the mountain. They’ll turn on the lights tonight.”

She looked at Mia. “Is that all right?”

“Of course. Thanks, Dane.” Mia stayed by her mother and away from Adam.

They entered the restaurant. A giant stuffed polar bear greeted them at the entrance. The head waiter recognized Dane. “Mr. Caldwell, welcome.”

Dane nodded. “Any chance a prime table is open?”

“Of course. For five?”

“Yes.” Dane patted Olivia’s hand and followed the waiter to the back and then up some stairs.

“I think this is the best table. I’ll be back with complimentary appetizers.” He left them.

Dane and Olivia sat together, Mia on Olivia’s other side. While her mother quickly sat beside Mia, leaving Adam to sit between Dane and the mother.

“Have you ever been skiing, Mrs. Freehan?”

She smiled. “You may call me Geena. Yes, I have been, but it has been some time. I think I’ll just enjoy the view and being with my daughters.”

Dane nodded. “There are other things to do. Sledding, snowmobiles, and a Winter Wonderland.”

Geena focused a look on him. “I understand you’re an actor. Have you been in any movies that I might have seen?”

“*Connor, The White Knight. One Summer Day.* There are others, but they are the comic book hero-type movies.” He felt his neck get hot and prayed she’d not seen *Beetle Man*.

“Oh, yes. I’ve seen several of those. I’m surprised that you would be here alone without an entourage of fans.”

Dane could see Olivia out of the corner of his eye. She’d stiffened and her lips were tight together. He knew what she’d tried telling him on the slopes. Her mother always had a bite of criticism aimed at her. He was feeling it right now.

He found her hand and squeezed it. “Well, Geena, Adam and I wanted to get away from the Hollywood scene. So far, it’s been an enjoyable vacation.”

Olivia squeezed his hand back. She pointed at the menu. “I think I’ll have the steak and lobster. Two runs down the slopes have made me hungry.”

Dane nodded. “Looks good. I think I’ll have the same.”

Geena smiled. “The Tuscan Salad looks good to me.” She gave a hard stare to Olivia.

Mia smiled at Olivia. “I’ll have the Greek Salad.”

Adam went for the stuffed chicken. He sent a kick to Dane and, as he bent to pick up his napkin, whispered, “Glad we brought two cars.”

Dane chuckled.

Olivia cut into her stuffed mushroom. “Mia, what did you have planned for tomorrow?”

“Oh, well, nothing really. I’d like for us to hang out together. The girls. Sorry, boys.”

Dane waved her off. “No problem. I think we’ll go sledding.”

Olivia frowned. “Oh, I wanted to do that.”

Geena sat upright, stiff and unyielding. “I think you can stay with Mia and me for one day.”

“Yes, of course.” Olivia hurriedly stuffed the mushroom in her mouth to keep herself from saying something she shouldn’t. How had nothing changed between them? A

ten-year gap, and Olivia felt as if she were back at home and fifteen again.

Mia laughed nervously. “The food is delicious.”

“Lot of calories. We have to watch our waists.” Geena darted a glance at Olivia.

“Mother, I am in good shape. I go to the gym in my building.” Olivia finished her appetizers. The main course couldn’t come quickly enough.

The waiters came out and gave them their meals. Olivia enjoyed every bit of her lobster and half of her steak. She thought about taking the rest back to the cabin, but Mother would create a scene of how that is typical of those of the lower class.

Geena ate most of her salad and was very complimentary to the waiter. “It has been a long day. If you don’t mind, Olivia, I’d like to go back to the cabin.”

Olivia glanced at Dane. “Sorry, we’ll see you tomorrow.” She got up and helped her mother get her coat on.

Suddenly, Dane looked out the window. “Wait. The lighting of the mountain is about to start.”

“Oh, beautiful. We can stay and watch, can’t we, Mother?”

Looking unhappy, Geena nodded and sat down. “It is a pretty sight.”

Olivia watched with Dane. She sat close to him and wished that she could stay with him. But Mother would have a

fit. Poor Mia looked miserable. *Well, little sister, you should have talked to me before you invited Mother to come.*

Dane reached over and took her hand. "I'm glad you invited us to go along."

She whispered. "I am so glad you came. I don't feel so vulnerable."

He patted her hand. "I'll be praying for you."

"Thanks. I have no doubt I will need it." She pointed. "Look at that line of blue lights going up the mountain."

Once the show was over, Geena was on her feet. "All right, let's go. That was wonderful. Thank you, Dane, for pointing it out. Mia, Olivia. Let's get back to the cabin."

It was a quiet ride. Olivia missed Dane. She didn't want to let him into her heart, but it felt so good to have a man look out for her.

Once in the cabin, Mia took Mother's bag to her room. "I thought I could stay with you, Liv. Mother, you can have my room."

"Thank you. I feel like I could sleep for a week." Geena went to her room and closed the door.

Olivia turned to Mia. "That was awkward. Thank you for the haircut and for making me buy the black dress."

Mia smiled. "You like Dane, don't you?"

"Yes, probably too much. I need to remind myself that he is from Hollywood and has dozens of women after him."

"He looked happy with you."

“Maybe, but it’s not realistic.” She stretched. “I am tired.”

Mia changed into her pajamas and perched on the bed as she had on Olivia’s bed so many years ago at home. “Liv, I have a confession.”

Olivia slid under the covers. “What? You like Adam?”

She nodded. “That’s not it.”

“I would think that is a pretty big thing since you’re engaged to Roy.” Olivia’s eyes closed. “What is it, Mia?”

“Well, you know how I invited Mother to come?”

“Yes. It will be all right.”

Mia pulled the blanket over her. “Well, there’s more.”

“Don’t tell me you invited Roy? I don’t know where we can put him.”

“No. Not Roy.”

Olivia sat up. “You don’t have another man you’re interested in, do you?”

Mia shook her head. “No. Not exactly.”

“Then what?”

“I talked with Father. I asked him to meet us here. He’s coming tomorrow.”

Olivia stared at her sister. “Are you crazy? What are we going to do?”

Mia started crying. “I just wanted our family to be together for Christmas. Just one more time.”

Olivia was up and pacing now. “Oh no. This is tragic.”

“I know.” Mia cried.

“Shush. You’re the one who has caused this. We’ll sleep on it, and tomorrow morning, come up with a plan.”

Chapter 13

Olivia woke up to see Mia sitting by the window, praying. The clock said it was only six. Of course, that was eight in New York City. Not an early riser herself, Olivia struggled up and grabbed her robe.

“Did the Lord give you a plan?”

Mia looked at her. “No. Not at all. But the verse that says *Love Never Fails* keeps rolling in my head. So, I’ll go with that.”

“I guess that is as good a one as ever. What were you thinking, Mia? The two of them fought like cats and dogs all the time.”

Mia stood. “They had to have loved one another at one time. I just wanted one Christmas when we were a family again. I don’t think that’s a bad thing.”

Olivia grabbed her clothes and headed for the bathroom. “No, it’s not a bad thing. Who knows, the brochure about the cottage says they were made to restore relationships. Maybe we’ll be surprised.” She was about to close the door but stopped and looked back at her sister. “But I believe the biggest surprise is going to be Mother’s, and she doesn’t react well to surprises.”

Mia nodded. “I already had my shower. I’ll meet you out in the commons.”

Olivia let the hot water flow over her, praying it would take away all the hostile feelings that were boiling up inside of

her. Hadn't she and Mia spent enough time between two angry adults?

But they were also adults now. Who knows, miracles still happened, and that's what it would take for Geena and Maxwell Feehan to get along for more than a few seconds. Yet neither of them had remarried.

Olivia had thought that odd that her father never dated. She'd seen him a few times with a woman on his arm, but she could tell by his expression that it was merely a formality, and he wasn't serious.

And Olivia figured her mother's testy attitude would drive any well-meaning man from her life. That was a long time for them to be alone. Maybe Mia was right. Love never fails and, if given a chance, could reignite between them.

Finished, she stepped out of the shower and dried off. Mia hadn't said when Father was coming. Maybe there'd be a blizzard somewhere, and he wouldn't even come. Olivia wasn't sure she was up to the challenge of refereeing between them.

Dressed, she gave a last look in the mirror. Even after washing, her hair looked great. Calvin had made a masterpiece out of her messy hair. Now to face Dane and Adam. If Father was coming, he'd need some place to sleep. She thought the couch in the common area folded out to a bed. Father was not going to like that.

She went out to the commons and saw that she was the last one to make it to the table for breakfast.

Mother looked, frowned, and pointed to the chair by Dane. “I see sleepyhead finally made it up. Just like when you were at home. I hoped you’d learn to be an early riser once you got a real job.”

“Oh, Mother. I’m never late for work.” Olivia did a mental check. There were a few times she’d stayed up way too late and came into work tardy, but mostly, she was on time.

“How is your writing going, Olivia?”

“Fine.”

“Have you finished your book yet?” Mother poured herself some orange juice. “I thought you’d have it finished your first year out of college.”

“Not yet. I’ve been busy.” She stabbed a couple of pancakes and put them on her plate.

Mother watched her with an eagle eye. “The syrup is high in corn fructose. Only put a dab.”

Olivia swapped gazes with her mother. “I like syrup.” She drizzled on a generous dose. Almost too much for her likes but enough to rattle her mother.

Dane chuckled. “I like syrup too. What’s the point of having a pancake if you can’t have the syrup?”

Mia kept her head down and ate. She glanced at her watch and then looked at Olivia with a panicked expression.

Olivia took in a deep breath. Father must be due any minute. She stuffed a bite of pancake in her mouth. Yep, too much syrup, but that was ok. She was going to need that sugar to get her through the next few hours, days, weeks.

Now she wished she'd spent time praying. As the minutes ticked by, the knot in her stomach tightened. Poor Dane and Adam. What were they going to think when they had to share a cabin with two loud, crazy people and two sisters that were reliving their childhood?

She took another bite. Think of the Waltons. Big happy family. It could happen. She almost laughed as she imagined the night scene. Good night, Dane. Good night, Mia. It was a sweet picture. Olivia was determined to try to keep her mind on her version of the Feehans in Colorado.

Mia took a drink of orange juice. "That is good. So, refreshing."

Mother nodded. "It is good. Can't have it much as it is too acidic for my stomach. What are our plans today?"

Mia choked and nearly spit out the orange juice.

Olivia stabbed another pancake, slathered it with butter, and bathed it in syrup. There was a reason the term comfort food had come about. Right now, she needed comforting. Then she heard a car door shut.

She looked at Mia.

Her sister froze. Her face was white with fear.

Mother was oblivious and talking about butter and sugar.

Dane and Adam kept quiet, eating their food.

Olivia wondered if they sensed World War Three was about to hit the cottage. Could they feel it? Footsteps sounded

on the porch. A knock as loud as a nuclear bomb sounded on the door.

Dane looked around. "I'll get it."

Olivia watched him. Poor man was going to battle and didn't even know it. Should she jump up and save him? She decided no. Maybe it was the mailman. Or the owner of the cottages. It didn't have to be Father.

"Hello? Can I help you?" Dane's calm voice asked.

"I'm looking for Mia Feehan." Father's voice questioned Dane.

Mia gasped. Olivia chewed her pancake. And Mother. Mother glared at her and then Mia. Mother's face was white as snow and gradually turning red.

Dane stepped aside and let Father enter the cottage. He saw them. All of them. And Olivia saw his face pale. His eyes narrowed. She thought he might turn around and run. She almost hoped for it.

But he didn't. He strode into the area and stood before the table. "What is the meaning of this?"

Mia stood. "Daddy, I missed you so." She ran around the table and flung herself into his arms.

Olivia was hit with two thoughts. One, she never hugged Father. Two, he never hugged her. Jealousy stung her, and she pictured her white face turning red. Then she looked at Dane.

He was smiling and walked over to her. "What a surprise. Did you know?"

Olivia stared at him, and out of the corner of her eyes, she saw Mother looking at her. Lie or tell the truth? Then she looked at Mia. She was smiling and holding onto her father. The joy in her face and eyes helped Olivia choose.

“I just learned last night that he was coming.” The truth. No apology. She wasn’t responsible for the outcome. And Mia, for whatever reason, must have needed to see her father.

Mia led him to the table. “Did you have breakfast? We have plenty.”

Mother, her eyes mean, poured the last of the orange juice into her cup. “Out of orange juice.”

Adam jumped up. “I’ll get you a plate. We have plenty of pancakes, and I can get more orange juice.”

Father nodded. “Yes, thank you. By the way, you can call me Max.”

Dane nodded. “Welcome, Max. I’m Dane Caldwell, and the man getting the plate is Adam Van Winkle. Welcome to Poinsettia Cottage.”

Father looked around. “I see why it is called Poinsettia. I’ve never seen so many and with all the varied colors.” He looked at Mother. “Geena, I am surprised to see you here.” He turned to Olivia. “I’m glad both my girls are here together. You two need to get together more often.”

Olivia stared at him. “This will be the first time in ten years.” He ought to know that. She wanted him to remember that. Even though it was their marriage they dissolved, it tore her away from her sister.

Father nodded. "I am aware of that. I've asked Mia to come. I guess we're all too busy."

Olivia stuffed another bite of pancake into her mouth. She didn't want it, but she ate it anyway. Then was sad that the comfort she desired didn't come. She was stuffed and almost sick from all the syrup.

Olivia could feel the cold drift of feelings from Mother.

Father tried to keep it pleasant. "Dane, what is it you do?"

"I'm an actor on hiatus. Adam is my trainer, and we decided to spend the holidays skiing. We thought we had a cottage to ourselves, but this was the only one available." Dane was asking without asking where Father was going to sleep.

Adam put the plate of pancakes in front of Father. "I can room with Dane, and you can take my room."

Father nodded. "That is most gracious of you. I only plan to stay a few days." He looked at Mia. "After Christmas, I'll go back to New York."

Olivia glanced at Dane. He didn't look happy, but he said nothing.

Dane pushed his plate away. "I had way too many pancakes. Adam and I are going skiing today. If anyone else wants to go with us, I figure we'll leave in an hour."

Olivia nodded. "I'd like to go with you. I want to get as much skiing in as possible. I love the Rocky Mountains."

Father frowned. "You go ahead. Mia, you can go too."

“No, I’m staying here today.” She smiled lovingly at Father.

Olivia thought Mia looked like a little girl again. She was so happy to have Father with her. Sadly, Olivia didn’t feel the same about being with Mother. Maybe they were too much alike.

She got up and took her plate and Dane’s back to the kitchen. Dane had followed her and stopped her from going back out to the table.

“Olivia, are you sure you want to go skiing and not stay with your Father?”

“Yes. I see him all the time in New York City. I think Mia needs time with him.”

Dane nodded. “Ok. I can get that. I’m glad to have you go with me. Adam doesn’t like the hard slopes. Let me know when you’re ready to go.”

“I’ll be ready any time.” She wanted to go on that she didn’t want to spend another minute in the cottage. The others might not see it, but she knew it was only a matter of time before Mother exploded and the war would be on.

Dane nodded. “Olivia, I’m glad you’re going with me.”

“Thanks, Dane. That means a lot to me.” She walked back into the common area and was met with a blast of tension heavy in the air.

Mia was trying her best to be the peacemaker. Telling Mother and Father how happy she was to see them. She smiled at her as she came by. Mia, the little sister, wanted nothing but peace and a happy family.

Olivia's heart went out to her sister. She didn't believe it was possible, but the light in Mia's eyes made Olivia want to believe. Then she glanced at Mother. She was sitting ramrod straight, with no joy on her face or in her eyes. She'd not forgiven Father for whatever it was that she thought he'd done.

Father, well, he was uncomfortable but happy to see Mia. His eyes lit up when he looked at her. So it had always been growing up. Once Mia came along, Father cherished her. Maybe that was the connection with Mother. Both of them were jealous of how Father loved Mia.

Olivia excused herself and went to change. The sooner she got to the slopes, the better. Mia had brought this all on herself, and she could deal with it by herself. Olivia had only agreed to have a ski vacation with Mia.

Besides, she's spent years trying to referee between her parents and mend their brokenness. She was past that now. It was their problem, and they were the ones who needed to deal with it.

She had a life she needed to get on with. Dane liked her company, as unlikely as that seemed. And Olivia had to admit, she enjoyed being with him. Not that anything could ever come of it. They were from opposite worlds and opposite sides of the country.

But it felt good to have someone in her corner. For once, she wasn't the outsider alone and by herself. Olivia just hoped it continued.

Chapter 14

Olivia had just slipped into her ski pants and shirt. She grabbed her jacket and purse and was just about to leave her room when her mother knocked and entered.

“Olivia, I see you’re on your way out. Why did you invite your father, knowing that we have issues?”

“Mother, I didn’t invite either of you. Mia did that. All because she wants a family Christmas. You shouldn’t have let her watch the Waltons holiday specials.”

“Don’t be coy with me. This is serious. You should know that the last person I want to see is your father.”

Olivia turned to face her. “Maybe if you thought more about what Mia wants and needs, you’d be a happier person. It’s not always about you, Mother. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m going skiing.”

“With that Dane? The actor? He will hurt you, darling. Some starlet will snatch him out of your hands.”

“We’re just skiing, not getting married.”

Mother stared at her. “Honey, you are no match for the glamorous women he is used to.”

“I never measure up in your eyes, do I? Well, I am not trying to measure up. We are just enjoying the moment.”

Olivia brushed past her mother and out the door. “Dane, I’m ready.”

Dane and Father were talking by the door.

She went to them and smiled. "I'm ready. It's so beautiful on the mountain. Sure you don't want to go, Father?"

"Not today. That was an early flight this morning. I think I'll relax."

Olivia looked over her shoulder and saw Mother watching them. "Good luck."

Father laughed. "Don't you worry about us." He sighed. "I've changed."

That surprised her. She hadn't noticed her father being different. But then she hadn't seen him in a few weeks. "I won't worry. We're going to enjoy the pure beauty of God's creation. Right Dane?"

Dane nodded. "That's right. Adam, we're leaving."

Adam came from the suite. "I moved my things to Dane's suite. Here's the key to mine. Enjoy."

Father took the key. "Thank you so much. I'll make it up to you somehow."

Adam grinned. "Think nothing of it. Let's go."

Dane walked her out the door and to his car. "It's another nice day. I'd like to get in at least three runs."

"I'm game." Olivia looked at Adam. "Are you going with us?"

"No, I like the gentle slopes. I'm not here for a thrill, but I enjoy skiing. When you two get done with your death-defying runs, I'll be waiting in the lodge at the cocoa shop."

Dane found a close parking place, and they walked to the lodge. Olivia raced him to the boot section and then to get

their skis. She was so grateful to escape the tension back at the cottage. Still, her father saying he'd changed intrigued her. She wondered if he'd retired.

Dane headed for the lift. "Your father seems nice."

She laughed. "And my mother?"

Dane looked at her. "Hurt sometime in the past. I can see it in her eyes and the way she always tries to put people off. A little like you."

"Me? That really insults me."

"You're hard on your mother. Really, you didn't seem all too friendly to your father, either. I get the feeling you expect a war between them."

"You would be right. I lived through enough battles. Poor Mia, she expects to have a family Christmas. Takes more than getting a family in one room to make it a TV special Christmas."

Dane jumped on the lift. "True. But at least they are going to try."

"Yeah, you're right there."

He took her hand in his. "And you? Are you going to try? I mean, you're here with me rather than staying with them."

"I came to ski. I didn't sign up to relive my teenage years. I spent all my teen years trying to protect Mia from those two acting like childish children. I'm not ready to go through that again."

Dane squeezed her hand. "I know that must have been hard."

"You have no idea."

"Well, we're here now. Let's enjoy the mountain."

Dane pushed off the lift and skied to the black diamond marker. "You game?"

"I am. I enjoyed it yesterday." Olivia stopped beside him.

Dane looked around. "We're on top of the world." He looked at her. "All our problems are below us."

"That's a good thought. Maybe we should stay up here." She laughed, but there was no joy in it.

He grinned and took her hand. "Remember our pact. We're here now. For the moment."

"True." She pulled her hand from his. "But we're going back down there. The problems didn't go away."

Dane nodded. "But we don't have to let them rule our lives."

"Good point. Let's enjoy the run." Olivia pushed off and started down the hill. Again, the fresh clean air, the pristine snow, and the joy of the run captivated her. Soon, her parents didn't exist, the problems didn't exist, and it was just her and the mountain.

Mia finished cleaning up the kitchen and then wiped down the table. Father was looking out the window. Mother

was nowhere to be seen. So, it was just like she remembered while growing up.

Her parents avoided one another. She wondered about her father. He'd said he'd changed when she called him. It had taken every nerve in her to get up the courage to ask him to come. She'd always felt as if she had caused her parents problems.

Olivia just scolded her and said she didn't. But Olivia didn't know everything. She was away at school. Mia would see her parents fight. She'd be sent to her room, and the yelling would start.

It must have been something she'd done. Mia never could figure out what it was that she did. Then she started school. She always tried to think her parents would kiss and make up. Isn't that what they told her and Olivia to do when they got into a fight?

She went and sat beside her father. "I'm so glad you came."

He nodded. "Me too. Your mother isn't too happy. But maybe I can make amends while I'm here. I've never stopped loving her."

Mia stared at him. "What? How could you after the way she treats you?"

"She had reasons. I was a fool. I destroyed her trust. Betrayed her. Don't blame your mother. With my own hands, I destroyed my family. I see that now."

Mia sat in stunned silence. She'd always blamed her mother and knew that Olivia did too. "What happened?"

“That’s between Geena and me.” He smiled at her. “I love you, Pumpkin. I don’t want you to ever believe it was because of anything you did. You were our joy.”

Mia felt tears well up, and soon they slipped down her cheeks.

Father took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped her tears. “Don’t cry, baby. I’ve always loved you. I just didn’t know how to show it. I was closed off from the world. I’ve got peace in my heart now.”

“How? What did you do to get that peace?”

“I went to church. I got desperate and didn’t like myself or anyone around me. I was at the end of me and looked up. God met me where I was and helped me see things. See the truth of Him and me and what I did to our family. I asked the Lord to forgive me, and Jesus walked into my heart. I’ve never been so happy.”

Mia stared at him. “It was that easy?”

“Yes, and no. I guess when the time is right, it happens. I just knew I couldn’t go on the way I was. Will you forgive me for destroying our family? For not being the kind of father that you deserved?”

Mia sat in stunned silence. This was not the father she remembered. Now, he was meek and gentle. Before, she remembered him as loud, forceful, and scary. He had changed. She nodded. “Give me some time. I’m glad you came.”

“Sure.” He kissed her cheek. “I’d like to talk to your mother. Alone.”

Mia nodded. “Want me to get her?”

“Yes, I think if we talked now while the others are out, it would be best.”

“I think so, too. I’ll get Mother.” Mia stood and walked to her room. She wasn’t at all sure Mother would talk to him. Or ever talk to her again. Mia knocked on the door.

After a minute, Mother came to the door. Her eyes were red, and she looked flustered. Something Mia never saw in her mother before. “Father would like to talk to you. Alone.” She fidgeted nervously before her mother. Mia took Mother’s hand in hers. “He’s changed, Mom.”

Mother’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, Mia. You always did live in a fantasy world. But I’ll talk to him.”

Mia stepped aside as Mother went past her. She prayed for peace between her parents. Yet, she braced herself and waited for the screaming to start.

Chapter 15

Geena walked down the hall to meet with him. The man who broke her heart all those years ago, but time hadn't healed a thing. The scar still bled. A reminder not to trust men, and sometimes it seeped over into not trusting anyone.

After all, he was supposed to be the love of her life until death parted them. No one told her that betrayal could kill the love between them as sure as brutal violence could kill the body. Here she had not a scratch, but her soul was irreparably damaged.

Just ask her daughters. Olivia, she hadn't seen in years. Could it be ten? Her oldest daughter had moved out to go to college and stayed in New York City, where her father lived and worked.

Mia, the youngest, lived with her still. Yet, even between them, there was a chasm as wide as the Grand Canyon. Polite pleasantries were all that passed between them. Even when she wanted to talk to her daughter about her engagement to a man that seemed unable to make a commitment, she couldn't.

Geena lived in a prison of her own. She kept to herself. Kept her feelings bottled up because acknowledging them hurt too much. So why was she on her way out to talk to the man who had put her in this lonely jail?

She should tell him to leave. Now, before Olivia returned. This was to have been her time with her daughters to

make amends. Then again, one look at Olivia had told Geena that peace would not come easily between them.

She turned the corner and walked into the commons. Max was standing by the big window, looking out at the scene. Geena studied him. Still familiar after all these years. There was a time when she saw him that a spark would go through her, igniting the flame in her heart.

His dark hair was peppered with gray now. Max had filled out, but he was still in good shape. He was always the one who turned heads. Geena should have known women would be after him.

She stopped in the middle of the room and folded her arms. “Mia said you wanted to talk?”

Max turned. He smiled at her that old way he used to have when he’d come home and see her.

Her breath caught. After all these years of turmoil, how could he still have that effect on her? Not that she wanted to admit it. He needed to pay for what he’d done to her and their family.

Max pointed to the couch in front of the window. It was a loveseat, really. “Can we talk here? The view is so beautiful.”

She shrugged. “I guess so.” The trouble was, she wanted nothing more than to throw herself into his arms. How could her feelings betray her now? Geena ignored the temptation and strode to the window.

She sat down without looking at him. She was thankful for the big picture window and gazed outside at the pristine

snow and the majestic mountain. Such beauty. How could life be so ugly?

Max stood beside her as if he were thinking about what to do.

If she had any courage, she'd point to the door and tell him to leave. She'd not come to this cottage to talk to him. What had Mia been thinking?

Nervously, he cleared his throat. "When Mia asked me to come, she didn't tell me you would be here. I had hoped it might be the case because I really wanted to talk to you. We never cleared up the past. And, Geena, I've changed. I'll tell you about it if you want, but I am not the same man that –"

"Betrayed me?" She was glaring at him now. If he thought this was going to be some easy kumbaya moment, he was wrong.

Max nodded. "Yes, I admit. I was wrong. I hurt you badly, and I am so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?"

Geena shook her head. "It's not that easy. It will take more than a few words to erase the pain you have caused me and the girls." She held her arms tighter about her. She was not letting him in. Even if her heart was yearning for the old days.

When she looked at him, her mind slipped back to the days when they were in love. When she couldn't wait for him to come home and feel his arms around her and his breath on her neck. It had been so long. No other man had filled Max's place in her life.

Max kneeled before her. "I started going to church. Jesus walked into my life, and I've never been the same. But

He put a desire to make things right between us. I am truly sorry and apologize for the terrible way I threw away what we had. I was wrong. Evil even. Trying to fulfill my lust and selfish wants at your expense. I take full responsibility for the demise of our family.”

Tears burned her eyes, but Geena held them in. No. One apology didn’t make up for all the hurt he’d dished out. “And you think you can apologize now, and it all goes away? What is it you want, Max? My blessing to move on and marry another? I give you that. In fact, I gave that to you ten years ago.”

“I don’t want anyone else. I never really did.” Max reached for her hand.

Geena pulled away from him.

“How have you been? Mia said you were the principal at her school. You’ve done well.”

She glared at him. “What do you care?”

“I do, Geena. I know that is hard for you to believe, but I have beaten myself up for the way I wrecked our marriage.”

“Sorry, Max. This is too little too late. I’m not even sure what it is you want from me.” Geena stared at him, daring her feelings to return. The anger had taken over. The hurt, raw and raging, pushed any idea of reconciliation from her.

He looked down. “I know. I am sorry.” He looked at her. The pain in his voice and eyes appeared real. “There are nights I go outside. My apartment has a balcony. I look up at the stars and remember the nights we’d search the stars together. When our love kept us in each other’s arms, and I

remember that feeling. I miss you, Geena. The day I left; I began missing you.”

“You never called me.” Geena dared him to disagree.

“I did right after I left. Even before I got the job in New York. I called, but you never answered. I gave up. You were right about me. I had traded your trust for a few one-night stands with women I cared nothing about. Eventually, I gave up calling when I realized that I was no good.”

Geena shook her head. “What? Do you want me to feel sorry for you and pat you on the back?” She jumped to her feet. “You hurt me. Betrayed me. I never looked at another man. You even brought one of your floozies into my home. My bed. So, I don’t want to hear any poor me talk coming from you.” She walked away and went to the far side of the window.

“I would undo that a thousand times if I could. I failed you. I failed my girls. I failed God. It wasn’t until I turned my life to the Lord that I could face you. I still love you, Geena.”

She didn’t answer or look at him. He was ridiculous. To think he could undo all the harm with a few words. Turning his life to God or not. How could she ever trust him? She stared out the window at the clean snow.

Then he was behind her. His arms were on hers, rubbing them the way he used to. “Go for a walk with me. Out there. That’s all I ask. Please. For old time’s sake.”

“And then what, Max?”

“We just talk. Maybe help our girls. Mia said she’s engaged to a man that lives with his mother and has been

steady with him for five years. I don't think that's a good relationship for her. Olivia never has a man interested in her. She hides in her apartment and work. Help me heal our daughters."

That struck a chord in Geena's heart. She nodded. "The girls need us. If we can call a truce, maybe we can set their hearts free from the turmoil we put them in." She turned to face him. Her heart stuttered. There it was. The old feelings. The ones that she fought so hard to keep at bay.

She gasped and eased away from him. "I'll get my coat. Maybe a walk outside will be good."

Geena went down the hall and nearly ran into Mia. "You weren't eavesdropping?"

Mia shook her head. "I wanted to. But I stayed in my room. I just came out to get a drink."

"Max and I are going for a walk."

Mia ran inside her room and brought out boots and a ski jacket. "Take these. And here are some warm gloves."

Geena took them and sat at the end of the bed to put on the boots. "Thank you, Mia."

Mia nodded. With tears in her eyes, she hugged her mother and then went to the kitchen.

Geena found Max where she'd left him. "I'm ready."

He smiled. "You have on Mia's coat. I see there's a trail around the cottages. It's a beautiful day and should do us good."

“Yes. Well, let’s go.” Geena went to the door and wondered what she was doing.

Chapter 16

On the second run down the mountain, Olivia stopped Dane and pointed to the Chili House. “Let’s get some lunch. I’m starving.”

Dane nodded. “Sounds good.” He waved at someone and then walked her to the busy diner halfway up the mountain.

“Someone, you know?”

“Yeah. She was in a movie I played in.”

“Oh.” Olivia wanted to hide. How long would it be before Dane left her for a more beautiful actress?

Dane took her hand. “Olivia, I’ve really enjoyed my time with you.”

“I know. You see others you’d rather be with. It’s all right.” She felt the same sting that her mother must have felt all those years ago.

He pulled her to face him. “No. I haven’t enjoyed anyone as much as my time with you in years. I don’t want it to end.”

She tried to see if he was telling the truth. “You don’t have to pretend.”

“I’m not. I really like you. I know it’s only been a few days, but there’s something about you that I can’t get enough of. I don’t want this time to end.”

Olivia sighed. "I'm sorry. I just have a hard time believing you."

Dane held the door for her. "No, you have a hard time believing you are worth my time. I don't have a problem. I know what I see. You've wowed me, Olivia."

She stared at him. "Really?"

"Why do you think I'd lie?"

She knew. Because her father had lied about them all. He'd traded his family for a few one-night stands. They didn't mean anything to him. "I have trouble trusting. Especially men."

Dane took her to a table. "I'll get us lunch. Want a bowl of chili? I hear it's great."

"Sure." She waited and wondered if she could trust Dane. Not that anything could come of this time at the cottage. Another week and they'd part company and go to opposite sides of the continent.

Dane came back with two bowls and a handful of crackers. "I am hungry. We can eat, relax a little and then go for our third run. A good day."

Olivia nodded, took a bite of chili, and enjoyed the burst of warmth and flavor. "This is good. So good."

He looked at her. "I'm sorry you doubt my feelings for you. I know it's quick, but I want to see where this can go."

She looked at him. "It's going to go with you to LA and me to New York. I don't see a long-distance relationship working."

“Aren’t you at all tempted to try?” He touched his chest. “You’ve touched my heart. This is me talking. Not some actor. I’ve been lonely for years. Sure, women want to date me and be seen with me, but not because I’m Dane Caldwell, but because I starred in a few movies. But you see me for who I am.”

Olivia smiled. “I do. We get along. Let’s enjoy these two weeks together.”

He nodded. “What do you say that after we quit skiing, we stop and get a Christmas tree? The brochure says there are ornaments and lights in the closet that we can use to decorate the cottage and tree. In fact, they even have a contest on who has the best cottage.”

“I haven’t done that in years. It sounds fun.” She finished her chili. “I wonder if my parents will still be there when we get back.”

Dane chuckled. “I bet they will. Who knows, maybe they’ll forgive each other and get along.”

“That would be a Christmas miracle.” Olivia looked out at the mountain and the snow. Could it even be possible? She sent a silent prayer to the Lord.

Dane took her to the ski lift to the top. “How about the dark green run this time?”

Olivia nodded, still trying to decide if he was telling the truth about wanting to be with her. Yet, they were skiing together.

She smiled at him. “Thanks for the great day.”

“I’m enjoying it too. I hope you can believe that. Ready?”

She grinned and started down the steep slope. Soon, she was in another world of speed, white, and thrills. But it was when she glanced over her shoulder and saw Dane that her heart warmed and felt alive.

Olivia turned her attention to the turns and jumps. But it was Dane that had captured her heart. Then she scooted out onto the main slope and skied to the lodge. Dane was right behind her.

He caught her and held her. His warm hands were on her arms. She faced him, smiled, and he kissed her. She didn’t draw back and returned his kiss.

Dane stepped back. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to, I just couldn’t help myself. I hope you don’t—”

“No, it’s all right. I felt it too.” Olivia didn’t know what else to say. But when she looked into his face, she’d felt as if she belonged. That they belonged together.

Adam walked out of the ski lodge. “I was wondering what you two were doing. Now I know.”

Dane frowned. “What are you doing sneaking up on us?”

“Guilty conscience?”

Olivia swatted Adam’s shoulder. “We had a wonderful time skiing.”

Adam grinned. “And you were just congratulating each other on getting down in one piece.” He laughed. “Ready to go

back to the cottage?”

Dane nodded. “First we are getting a Christmas tree.”

“Oh, that’s interesting. I didn’t know you did Christmas trees?”

“I haven’t in some time. Olivia pointed out that there is a contest for the winning cottage, and I thought it sounded like fun.”

Adam opened the car door. “Good idea. Might be smart to have something for us all to do. Especially with Geena and Max there.”

Dane shook his head. “Really, Adam. Olivia is right here.”

She looked back at Adam. “It’s all right. I agree completely. Those two in the same room can be loud and unsettling.”

Dane turned down their street. “Oh, oh. I see another car. Did anyone else have a surprise to tell us about?”

Olivia shook her head. “Not me.”

Adam groaned. “Any ideas?”

Dane parked in the street.

All three of them looked at each other and answered at the same time. “Roy?”

Chapter 17

Mia saw the headlights and heard the doors shut. Finally, the others were back. She needed backup and quick. Roy had shown up just a few minutes ago. So far, Mother was all over him to welcome him and force him to stand by Mia.

Father looked like he wanted to eat Roy and spit him out.

Roy looked confused, but the good thing was he'd brought Princess with him. They'd driven since early this morning from San Antonio.

Mia braced herself as the door opened, and Princess barked. She grinned and took hold of Roy's arm. "Look who surprised us."

Olivia glared at her sister. "Hi Roy, I guess it is. We've never met. I'm Mia's sister, Olivia."

Roy pushed his dark glasses up. "Nice to meet you. I didn't know the cabin would be full."

Dane held out his hand. "Dane Caldwell, and this is my friend Adam Van Winkle."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Roy Corbin. I live in San Antonio. Mia and I are engaged." When Roy said the word engaged, he looked right at Adam. Roy shrugged. "I thought Mia sounded lonely when she called me, so I thought I'd surprise her."

Mia nodded. "I'm surprised."

Father ushered everyone into the common room. "Let's all sit down."

Adam shook his head. "We have a Christmas tree." He punched Dane's shoulder. "We'll bring it in."

Father looked at them as they ran out of the house. "A Christmas Tree?"

Olivia nodded. "We're decorating tonight. Christmas Eve they are going to have a contest and name the best tree and house."

Mother stepped between them. "We don't have decorations."

"They're in the closet. That's what the brochure said." Olivia went to the hall and pointed to the boxes on the shelf. "There they are."

Mia grinned. "How wonderful. It will be just like a real Christmas. Remember how we used to decorate the tree? I get to put the star on top."

Roy smiled. "This will be fun. We can make hot chocolate with marshmallows."

Mother shrugged. "I guess it will be fun. We can all help." She looked at Father. "All of us. And that includes you, Roy."

He had sat down and was petting Princess. "Mia, you'll be happy to know that me and Princess are best friends. I never knew a dog could be so precious and fun." He looked at Mia. "I love her." He kissed the poodle, who in turn licked his face.

Mia sat beside him. “I can’t believe you drove all day to come here.”

“I wanted to spend Christmas with you.” Roy took her hand. “From the moment you left, I was miserable. Mia, I put down on an apartment. Mother and I had a good talk. She is doing fine now, and it’s time that I started my life. I’d like to start it with you.”

Mia smiled, flew into his arms, and kissed him. “I have waited so long to hear those words. Are you sure?”

Roy nodded. “Yes. I wanted to, but after my father died, I was afraid to leave my mother alone. Mom surprised me and told me she was fine and wanted to get on with her life, and it was time I did with mine. I couldn’t wait for you to come back.”

Mia was crying now. “And you like Princess?”

“I never had a dog before. I love her. We get along real well.” Roy hugged the dog to him. “I move out after the New Year.”

Mia kissed him. “That’s the best Christmas present I could ever have.”

Father cleared his throat. “Young man, you might want to ask my permission for her hand in marriage.”

Mother started to say something but looked at Father and held her peace.

Olivia was shocked. That Mother didn’t explode was a miracle. Something was going on in this cottage. She expected to come back to a loud fight. Instead, things were actually

peaceful. She stepped around the boxes that the guys were unloading out of the closet.

“We have enough ornaments and lights to decorate half of Colorado. Look at all this stuff.” She kneeled by the first box and pulled out a string of lights. “Colored or white?”

The guys answered, “colored.”

Mother looked at the window. “How about white on the tree and colored around the window?”

Olivia nodded. “I like that. The tree looking like it has snow on it, surrounded by the colors of joy.”

Mia set Princess down. “Yes. I like that.”

Father sat down by the box and started unraveling the strings of lights and separating white and colored boxes. “Dane, you and Adam put the tree up by the window. Roy, you can watch and make sure it is centered and straight.”

Roy grinned. “Yes, sir.”

Olivia started going through the ornaments. “Mother, do you see a theme we can use in any of these?”

Mother sat between her and Mia. “Let’s see. Mostly balls. We can separate them by size. Then by color. Do we want to stick with one color?”

Olivia gazed at the ones they had out so far. “I don’t know if we have enough for one color. Red, of course, would be beautiful on a tree with white lights.”

Mia nodded. “Oh, yes. Perfect. I think if we incorporated bells in with the balls, there might be enough.”

The women laughed together as they looked at some of the funny decorations. Olivia looked at them and thought how she couldn't remember the last time they'd had fun together.

"The right. No, the other right." Roy was directing Dane and Adam.

Father laughed and got up to help supervise. "It's leaning to the right. Now the left. Turn it twenty degrees."

Dane looked at him. "If I knew what twenty degrees looked like I might be able to."

Olivia stood. "Aim the top at the center beam."

Dane nodded and sent her an okay signal. After a few more grunts and twists. The tree was straight and in the center of the window.

Father hugged her. "You had the perfect instructions. Amazing what we can all do if we work together." He smiled at her. "You know, when you moved to New York City to be near me, I was so proud. I'd thought I'd lost all my family. I know I didn't show it, but your decision helped me through a really rough time in my life. I'm sorry I never told you."

He kissed the top of her head. "I watched over you. I'm sorry we didn't do more together, but you were always in my thoughts."

"Thank you for telling me." Olivia handed him a string of lights.

Mia couldn't stop looking at Roy. She loved him so. All that fun with Adam had been just that. Fun. But Roy, she

loved him down to the core.

Mother tapped her shoulder. “I can see love in your eyes for that man.”

She nodded. “I don’t know why I was talking about him in such a mean way.”

Sighing, Mother stretched her back. “I’ll tell you why. It’s because my broken heart spread all the hurt and distrust to you. I’m sorry. I thought I was protecting you, but I was keeping you from the happiness you deserved with Roy.”

“So, you don’t mind if I marry Roy?”

Mother shook her head. “Not at all. The’s a fine young man. That he put his life on hold to make sure his mother was all right is commendable. He’s honest, loving, and if I don’t say so myself, quite a catch. You have my blessing.”

Mia hugged her mother. “I love you, mom.”

“I know you do. I am sorry I haven’t been able to show how much I love you and Olivia. Unforgiveness is a bitter pill that colors every area of life. I had a long talk with the Lord last night. He showed me some things about myself that I’m not proud of. Father made mistakes, grievous ones, but I didn’t do much better. I used them as battering rams to beat him with. Then swallowed the bitter pill of unforgiveness and hate. Soon, I had few friends, and the ones I had were looking for an escape. I almost lost Olivia.”

“We love you, Mom.”

Mother hugged Mia. “You were always the one who looked at me like I might be worth loving. My lifeline. You have no idea how your trust and love helped me through the

darkest hours. What is it you like to say? Love never fails. That is you, my darling daughter.” She looked at the far corner where Olivia was setting out ornaments by size, shape, and color. “I need to talk to my oldest daughter.”

Olivia picked up the biggest red ball when Mother came over to her. “This one will look great in that hole in the branches in the middle.”

“Yes, it will.” Geena took Olivia’s hand and led her to the nearby loveseat. “I wanted to tell you how sorry I was for the way I treated you. Mia has told me you always felt on the outside. That you never measured up in my eyes. Dearest Olivia, you are so much like me.”

“Like you?”

“Oh, yes. All my life, I felt like an outsider. Even when married to your father. I felt like he’d only liked me until he found someone better. My jealousy grew until the love we had between us couldn’t be seen or felt for the high weeds of jealousy, contempt, and fear that I allowed to come between us. I feared losing Max, and my fear came upon me. Instead of showing him love, all he saw was my disgust toward him. And when that was realized, my anger and wrath spilled out into my relationship with you. I am sorry.”

“I don’t know what to say.” Olivia tried to understand the colliding emotions inside her.

“Nothing right now. I hope you can come to forgive me.”

Olivia nodded. “I know I will. I know I need to. It might take some time.”

“Let it take all the time you need. I hope we can get together. If you’d like it, I would love for you to show me your city.”

Olivia hugged her. “Any time Mother.”

Dane watched the family come together. Even Adam and Roy were laughing as they wrapped the tree in the white lights. It would seem everyone was having a good time but him. Standing off to the side, he couldn’t help but think this was the way his life always went.

Everyone else was talking and laughing. He was by himself, watching their fun and relationships being restored. Olivia was hugging her mother. Only he was alone.

He was about to go to his room when Olivia came over to him. “You look lost.”

He grinned. A fake attempt at looking happy. “Lost?”

“I know because it is how I usually feel. The reason I stay away from parties or even talking to others.” She put a hand on his shoulder. “I’m always afraid to reach out because I fear being rejected. But I’m reaching out to you. And it scares me. You, a Hollywood actor, and me, a no one as far as the dating scene goes. But I am going to take a chance. I have feelings for you that I’ve never had for anyone. I know it’s only been a few days, but the deep sense of connection I have with you is real. If you want to have a long-distance relationship, I am willing.”

He stared at her. “I have those same feelings. I won’t hurt you.”

She put a finger to his lips. “Knowing my background and my family, don’t make promises that are out of your control. Instead, let’s purpose to forgive each other and talk about each other’s shortcomings. We’re human. I’m sure we will hurt each other at some time or another. But if we can shine a light on it and forgive one another, the hurts won’t overpower us.”

Dane took her in his arms, pointed up to a sprig of mistletoe, and kissed her.

Epilogue

One-year later,

Olivia was waiting at the San Antonio airport. Her sister's wedding was this weekend. Mia and Roy. They were so in love. Mia was now attending the university to get her Phd. Roy had his apartment and doted on Mia. He'd also bought his own poodle, Prince. The two pups were having their own puppy wedding at the same time.

She laughed at the thought. Mia and Roy were meant for one another.

Father had moved to San Antonio two months after last year's vacation. Geena and Max were once again an item. They were taking it slow, but Olivia had no doubt there would be renewed vows and wedding bells in the future for them.

She looked up just as Dane walked toward her.

"My flight was a little late. I hope you didn't wait long." He ran to her, picked her up, and hugged her to him. "It's an airport. We wait. Hey, good news. I'll be in New York City for the next six months doing a movie. I wanted to tell you in person."

She squealed and kissed him. "How wonderful. Will we have time to see one another?"

"You know we will. I think about you every time we're apart. How's the book coming?"

She grinned. "I'm up to ten chapters now. I should finish in a couple of months. The writing is really flowing. I'm so thankful that Dad gave me his apartment lease. No more copywriting."

Dane led her to the car rental line. "Adam asked Julie to marry him. She said yes, and they'll start their own training gym the first of next year."

"Good, I'm happy for him." She held Dane's hand.

Dane signed for the car and drove her toward San Antonio but took a different turn from her sister's house and drove downtown. He parked, grinned at her, and opened her car door. "Follow me."

Olivia got out and took his hand. "I will follow you to the moon."

He smiled. "And back?"

"And all around. I have become very brave with my heart. I fear nothing."

"That's my girl. Almost there." He led her down to the river that was decorated for Christmas with lights all around.

The day had been mild, the air still warm for December, even in San Antonio. Dane led her to a grotto that was filled with lights. He offered her a small bench.

Olivia loved the city and the river. More, she loved the man standing in front of her. She sat on the bench.

Dane kneeled before her, took her hand in his, and looked deep into her eyes. "Olivia, I love you more than I can

say. Will you marry me?" He presented her with a small box and opened it. A diamond ring gleamed in the colored lights.

"Yes. With all my heart. I love you, Dane."

He put the ring on her finger and then kissed her. "I love you."

"And love never fails."

Dane held her close. "I've arranged for a stay at the Poinsettia Cottage next month before the movie starts shooting. I still have the tickets we won for decorating the cottage last year. A week's stay and lift tickets."

"Wonderful."

"I thought we should have chaperones, so I invited your mother and father to come too."

Olivia smiled. "I think that's a noble gesture. What did they say?"

"They'll meet us there, but get stay in the hotel. I was thinking that I don't want to wait too long for our wedding."

"No, me either."

Dane caressed her hand. "So, I was thinking that we get married on the mountain."

"Oh, Dane. Perfect. You don't think we're rushing things?"

"I only want to please you. I am sure that I want to marry you. No doubts in my mind."

Olivia kissed him. "Then it's settled. We get married on the mountain and have our honeymoon at the cottage." She

sighed with contentment. Life was still complicated, but it was also good.

Author's Note – I hope you enjoyed Poinsettia Cottage. They were a loud bunch of characters, but I like the way they resolved their troubles.

I have another book in the collection – [Candy Cane Cottage](#)

The Holiday Cottages are magical places, where those who come to Sprucewood, Colorado, to get away find themselves. Hopes are renewed, relationships kindled, and dreams come true. Read the twelve Holiday Cottage books in this series.... Book 9 Candy Cane Cottage by Nina Jayne Sometimes all you need is a push. She's working on a life list. He's working for a billionaire. Neither one is prepared for what they find. Ava Stoller is a counselor with a big heart who helps everyone but herself, but when a client dares her to enjoy life, Ava rises to the challenge. As an avid bird watcher, she sees that a Snowy Owl has been spotted near Sprucewood, Colorado. The perfect place to start her vacation. Noah Carlson works for an eccentric billionaire as his cowboy outdoorsman. His latest job is to find rare birds for Mr. Rigby. While Noah fills the billionaire's list, he finds his own life is lacking. Can a stay at Candy Cane Cottage transform Ava's life into the desires of her heart? Will Noah find more than birds on his trip?

~~You can find all the Holiday Cottage books here > [Holiday Cottage Series](#)



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