

HOME FOR CHRISTMAS SERIES • BOOK 1

HAYLEY SUMMERS

The Family Christmas Cabin



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BOOK ONE

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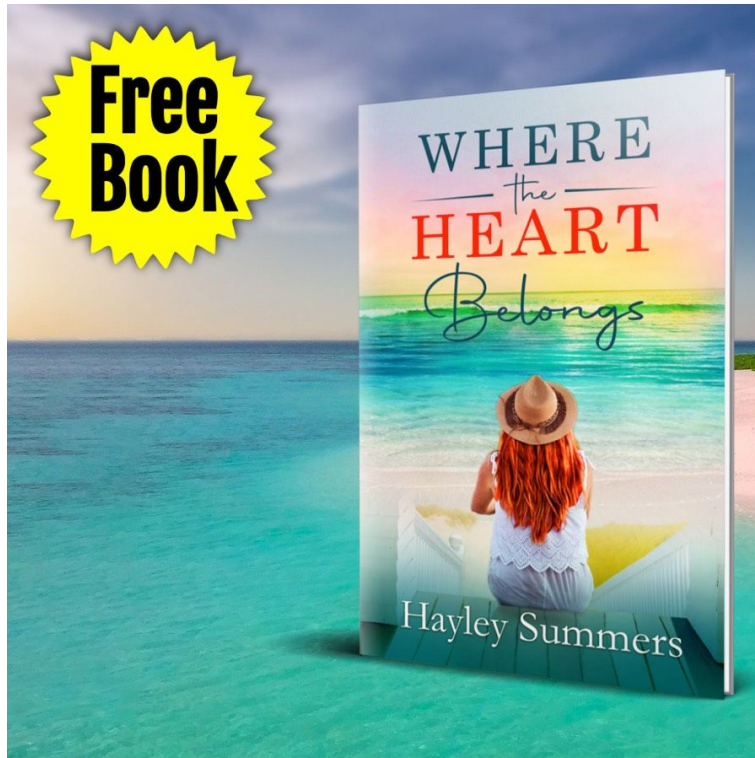
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ONE



“Come on, Becca, let’s get going or we’re going to be late.” Adria rolled her eyes.

“I’m coming. Help me load all this stuff into the trunk.” Becca stood conveniently at the back of Adria’s energy-efficient car with five suitcases around her, just for herself.

Begrudgingly, Adria moved to the back of the car and helped stuff *all* of her twin sister’s suitcases in the trunk with her two suitcases. “Did you really need to bring all this stuff? You act like we’re moving back to the cabin. While I could definitely do that, *you* would lose your mind with all the peace and distance from shopping.” She stared at her sister.

Becca smiled, holding the straw to her travel cup with her perfectly manicured fingers. “It’s the holidays. What if some handsome guy comes along and I need something gorgeous to wear when he kisses me under the mistletoe?”

Adria looked at her nails, free of polish unlike Becca’s ruby red nails, and frowned. “We’re supposed to be going to spend time together by visiting the cabin one last time before we sell it, and enjoying *our* holiday, not finding men.”

Without waiting for her sister and determined to get into the car and move, Adria moved to get in and buckle up. She knew it was going to take her sister a good five minutes before she was situated in the vehicle.

A minute later, Becca opened the passenger side door. “I can’t believe I already have mud on my new shoes. This is so not good! Do you have any tissues in there?”

“Get in the car.”

“I am, but seriously, I can’t let these five-hundred-dollar shoes get ruined. They are so cute.”

Adria rolled her eyes a second time, glanced down at her sister’s shoes which barely had a speck of mud on their ruby red color and wondered where she’d gone wrong. Their eyes met and she smiled. “You know, I don’t even know how we are sisters. Twins no less. We look somewhat alike, but personality-wise, we are so different.”

She looked down at her own sneakers and thought of their mother, missing her very much. She was wise, she was peaceful, she was calm, she was spontaneous laughter, she was everything and now that she’d been gone a few years, it was time to get rid of the cabin.

Her eyes returned to Becca’s face where the red lipstick that almost matched her shoes was smile-worthy. “You know you’re in your forties, right? You look like a clown, sister.”

Becca pulled a silly face and climbed in, searching the glove box and console for a stray tissue. “How do you travel like this? You’ve got dog biscuits and cat treats in here but not one silly napkin.”

She wasn’t even buckled in and her head was pressed against the front dash as she studied her shoes. If ever there was a moment Adria wanted to strangle her twin, it was now. “Okay, look, in two seconds I’m moving this vehicle, so sit back and get buckled in or I’m not responsible for your messed up hair, sore muscles, broken shoes, or anything else that might happen like a bumped head, not that the last one matters anyway.”

Adria smiled when her sister started parroting her. “Yeah, yeah. Fine.” She sat back with a groan. “I guess I’ll have to replace these when I get back.”

“First of all...” Adria pulled out of her sister’s driveway and headed for the interstate, irritated that she was still dealing with shoes. “Never mind, just be quiet about the shoes before I throw them out the window.”

There was silence for a long time, except for the clicking and clacking of little bags being opened and closed along with a few other things in her messy vehicle.

“Don’t you ever clean this vehicle? I’m telling you, if I have one shred of dog or cat hair on me, you’re dead, sis.”

Adria laughed, she could hear the frustration in her sister’s voice and knew for a fact there was plenty of dog hair, probably all over her clothing as she said those words. “Listen, I work for an animal rescue as a Facilities Manager and Member of the Board. It’s my duty to devote my life to animals, not to mention, I have three dogs and two cats, which is so old news.”

With the loud slamming of a makeup case closing, she knew Becca had snapped. “I know this, sister. I love you and you’re *family*, but seriously, you could have thought of me too.”

“I do. I’m sorry.” Adria smiled despite herself knowing she was only partially sorry. She loved making her very high-maintenance sister whom she adored squirm and fuss. “I just like to ruffle your feathers and loosen you up a bit. You’re so uptight, sometimes it’s exhausting. Don’t you know how to have fun anymore?”

“Yes, an umbrella drink beside a pool with suntan lotion on, or going to an exclusive restaurant.”

Adria left it at that, done being irritated by her sister and poking at her, she focused on the road. Becca seemed to be thoughtful for a time so Adria kept her mouth shut knowing it was best. Eventually, her sister who was two minutes younger would have something to say that would ruin the peace.

Adria turned on the radio and the sound of soothing jazz calmed her anxiety because she didn’t have her animals. She’d debated bringing Sadie, her black rescue dog, but thought better of it knowing how upset the other two dogs would be, not to mention her cats who loved to travel. So she took special care to find a great boarding kennel for her pets while she was gone.

So many things ran through her mind as they had many miles to cover. She thought of their mother who'd always been the sunlight in their lives. After she'd taken ill and refused to come to live with either her or Becca, it had been hard, made worse by her illness taking a sudden and devastating turn days after her diagnosis and she passed.

She fought the tears she still felt in her heart, knowing that would never stop.

"You're thinking about her, aren't you?" Becca interjected herself into Adria's thoughts.

"Her, you mean our mother?" Irritated, Adria reached for the bag of crackers she had stashed in the console.

"Yes. Sorry for the wrong choice of words. I miss her too. Sometimes I don't think I'll ever get over her passing, it happened so fast."

"Me too." Adria looked at her sister, she saw the glaze of unshed tears in her eyes and smiled slightly. "Don't cry, because if you cry, I'm going to cry and then we might end up crashing into something. Does anyone know where you're going?"

Becca laughed a little. "No, I didn't want anyone to bother us."

"And yet you were thinking about men. Wasn't the last one, what was his name, Ken...oh wait that's Barbie's husband, sorry, Jake? Didn't Jake stomp on your heart enough?"

"I guess not." Becca bit her lip, irritating Adria.

"Don't do that. Forget men for this trip, it's you and me. This is our last Christmas at the cabin before we sell it. Let's make the most of it." Becca stuck out her tongue which Adria found pretty amusing considering they were in their forties.

Becca was a famous fashion model and her face had graced the covers of numerous magazines over the years. Even in her forties she still had perfect porcelain skin, and eyes that could captivate anyone.

Since they weren't identical twins, Adria had the luck of the draw. Their hair color was the same, a soft, cool blonde, and their eyes matched their mother's green eyes, but beyond that, they were different. Where Becca was gorgeous, Adria was well ordinary, at least she believed that, anyway.

Becca mingled with the elite, famous people in Hollywood while Adria spent her days and nights with animals. It was mind-blowing, and at times she wondered who their father was just so she could know where she got these differences from.

"I think it was a good idea to use the cabin as an Airbnb. For the last couple of years, we've made a ton of money using it that way, and I never had to set foot in Michigan to do it thanks to online booking. Once we sell it, we should buy a house on an island together and use it when we have free time and for the holidays. Mom would want that." Becca said

"I don't want to think about that now. I just want to go home, make cookies, decorate the tree, string lights, bake a ham and wrap your gifts."

"If you so much as make me go sledding if it snows, I'm going to toss you in a snowbank. Skiing, definitely, ice skating, maybe if I have a cute outfit. Snowboarding I like, but sledding, *no*. That's childish."

Adria tossed a cracker at her sister for good measure, just to temper her serious if not a little uppity personality. "Here, I have a cracker. Mom always thought you didn't eat enough. In fact, I'm going to fatten you up for New Year's. By the time you get back to New York, they won't recognize you. What would happen then?" She started laughing just thinking about it.

She loved her sister dearly, with all her heart but her career had always boggled Adria's mind. To be beautiful was one thing, and Becca certainly was that, but to get paid a ton of money to set an image that *no woman* could barely ever meet in their life was ridiculous.

Still, she was happy her sister was able to maintain such a high-profile career and make a fortune with just her appearance.

“You’ll do no such thing. My trainer would kill me, and I’d have to go on some crazy diet, not to mention, I’d have to hide away for a few weeks until all the weight was gone. One of those suitcases contains my breakfast and lunch items.”

Adria rolled her eyes, realizing it was a lost cause.

It was snowing like crazy in Seneca Falls, not something entirely unusual, but there had been no online alert or information. It was like the storm came out of nowhere.

Devin was determined to get home before it got out of control and he was forced to sleep on the office couch, he drove his pickup truck through town, which was pretty much a ghost town at this point.

As the town’s only attorney, he knew everyone by name and face, and knew more about their business than they did. He’d grown up in Seneca Falls, and he’d be perfectly happy if he died in Seneca Falls. There was no place on this earth he’d rather be than his childhood home.

He made it home in a few minutes but the storm was determined to be massive, with large snowflakes floating down from the sky as his dogs Cindy and Candy greeted him at the door. They were both mixed-breed dogs from the local shelter.

“Hey, how are my girls?” Devin bent down to give each a good scratch and share some treats that were always at the front door for coming and going. Both dogs happily gobbled up the treats, nuzzled his hands for a few good scratches and then took off for the back door. “I’m coming. I know you want to go out.”

In a few long strides, Devin was at the sliding glass door that led out to his backyard. Both dogs went running, falling into the snow, rolling around and barking. Devin smiled. “My girls.” He thought of his daughter Virginia off at college in Washington State. He missed her so much.

When the dogs went running, they headed towards the road. Devin's only hope was they weren't headed to Ms. Smith's house for treats. Thankfully, she had the good sense to go on vacation for the holidays.

The chilly air was blowing through the door and shaking the ornaments around on his tiny tree, so Devin quickly closed it and grabbed a drink. This year had been the first holiday he would spend alone now that his divorce was final and Virginia was off to college.

It had been a hard road, being married since the age of twenty-three and then losing it all. He'd been devastated, but as an attorney, he knew how to make things as simple as possible for everyone's peace of mind. When it was done, other than his work, Devin was a mess. He wore a cheerful face for his clients, but behind closed doors, he was a train wreck.

Still, he was determined to make the best of it. He adopted his two rescue dogs right after which made Virginia happy, but when she went off to college, something else died in him, his youth. Until that moment, he had never paid much attention to it, but knowing his only daughter was all grown up and moving away was humbling.

The dogs were barking again and Devin threw the door open with a towel in hand ready to dry them off before the entire house was ruined. Neither dog moved, but they kept barking. "What? What's the matter?"

They barked and barked, as if trying to tell him something. The last time they'd done that Mr. Carlton had been lying on the ground outside his small house after having a heart attack while raking leaves. Thanks to the dogs, Devin had got there in time to call the ambulance and Mr. Carlton made it.

"Alright, give me a second." He tossed on his coat and followed them out the door. "You're determined I freeze to death." He followed them a few paces and saw a car stuck in the snow on the road. Quickly he approached, the dogs were barking wildly at him. He knocked on the window and he saw

a gorgeous blonde woman arguing with the person next to her. “Are you okay?”

Their eyes met and reality hit. Devin smiled. “Adria! Is that you, Becca?” He was even more stunned by how lovely Becca was, but then again, being a famous model meant she had to keep up her appearance.

He opened the door and took Adria’s bare hand to help her out of the car. He didn’t miss the electric chemistry he felt when they touched. It had always been there, but she’d never been interested as a young woman. Then one day, they both moved away.

Adria smiled. “What other twins do you know in Seneca Falls, Devin? It’s nice to see you and your dogs too.”

Devin forgot they were standing in the middle of a massive snowstorm, with him looking at the woman he’d always adored as a young man. Becca was standing beside her, but he barely registered her. “I can’t believe you’re here.”

“Yeah, and I’d like to get out of the snow, Devin, so could we save the conversation for later?” Becca was her usual fussy, dramatic self.

Devin laughed, disbelieving they were back. “Right. Sorry, it’s been a crazy couple of months, well a year, but anyway, come this way. I can take you to the cabin in my truck. You should have known better than to bring that car all the way up here to Michigan with our unpredictable weather. I’ll have Carl tow it to his shop and make sure nothing is wrong with it.”

He moved along helping the ladies get to his truck with all of their luggage as the dogs danced around in the snow. Grabbing his keys, he looked in the mirror to make sure he looked okay. Of course, the dogs had to come for the ride, but when they all got in, chaos ensued.

“Did you have to bring the dogs, Devin? They are going to get hair all over my clothing.” Becca fussed and carried on shoving both dogs onto her sister’s lap. Luckily, the dogs weren’t too big or heavy.

Devin smiled. “They come with me everywhere except work. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I love dogs. It’s been so long since I saw you, Devin. Stay for a few minutes and have some coffee so we can talk.” Adria smiled.

Devin felt that smile she gave him everywhere, in every muscle, and it stirred up his insides. “Sure. I’d like that.” He nudged Becca who’d practically been his best female friend in high school. “Why the sour face?”

She rolled her eyes. “My shoes are ruined, and I chipped a nail when Adria, the race car driver ran off the road accidentally. It’s not my fault we were arguing. I had just spent endless hours listening to her drone on about the dogs at the shelter and I snapped and said something that made her furious. Then she crashed and now I have ruined shoes and a chipped nail.”

Devin smiled, knowing the twins had always been at each other’s throats when they were young. “Well, I see much hasn’t changed.”

As he drove down the driveway and up to the cabin, a car was parked in the driveway. “Do you have guests?”

Both women looked at each other. Becca spoke up first. “No, we shouldn’t. I don’t know who that could be. The last people who stayed here were gone last week, and I had the next two weeks booked up for us. We’re planning on selling it soon, but no one should be here.”

Adria was scrolling through her phone as Devin looked around. The lights were on, and he could hear the faint sound of rock music. “No, no one booked it. Who in the world is here?”

Devin barely had time to register what was happening as Adria threw herself out of the truck, clearly on a mission and headed for the door.

Two



Adria burst through the door uncertain of what she was going to find, but determined to deal with whatever it was for her and Becca. Loud music blasted from somewhere in the cabin, which could have been from many places since the cabin was rather large.

“Hello. Is anybody here?” Clothing was scattered everywhere as well as plates filled with remnants of food. There were also a few odd items such as a paintbrush, some paints, and a painter’s shirt.

Confused and getting angrier by the minute, she turned the corner from the entrance into the great room. “Hello—” Bam! She ran into a brick wall of a man, who towered over her by almost a foot.

Her eyes lifted all the way up to his and he smiled. “Hey, are you okay?”

Adria was in no mood. She was tired, she’d just driven a ton of miles and her wrist ached, and lord knew she wasn’t getting any younger. She smiled back and delicately took two steps back. She heard the sound of feet stomping the floor at the entrance and then she knew someone was behind her, as confused as she was judging by the silence.

Tempted to be rude, she bit her tongue and decided sarcasm would be best. It always worked with unruly members of the community who wanted to adopt a pet but didn’t have a home to put them in.

She leaned her head back, knowing sooner or later Becca would find her way into the cabin, complaining about her shoes. “Hey, Becca, did you hire a new cleaning guy?” She smiled at the man in question.

“I’m not the…” His smile faded. “Who are you?”

“Well, this is our cabin and you’re not supposed to be here. I guess my next question would be, “How did you get in? Then I’ll ask why you came into our cabin? And why are you still here?” She glanced past him and finally saw the massive canvas the artist was obviously working on. “Painting up a storm?”

He ran his hands through his hair, and Adria had to admit it was beautiful hair. She wanted to know what it felt like and touch it. Then she snapped out of her musings.

He started pacing back and forth, then stopped. “I’m so sorry. My truck broke down and I needed a place to stay. I can’t seem to get it fixed, and I lost my wallet and phone somewhere along my travels and I don’t even have gas money.”

She heard the clicking of shoes on the entrance tile, then silence. The man in front of her stared blankly at something or someone behind her. Adria wondered why Devin was being quiet, then remembered he always had a thing for Becca and not her.

The man in question woke up from his daydream and looked at her. He smiled. “You guys are twins, aren’t you?”

Adria was not in the least bit humored. “Yeah, we get that a lot. Yes, we are and I’m not the prettier one in case you didn’t notice. Besides, we’re not identical. Who are you?”

“Liam.”

“I don’t know if I believe his story. It sounds a little too fake if you ask me, but then again I’m just an attorney. I wouldn’t know a criminal or liar if I saw one.” Devin finally had something to say.

Turning to face both her sister and Devin, she smiled. “If either of you want to help at all, please feel free.”

“Listen, I promise you I can pay for my stay when I get back home.”

Something was off about Becca as she eyed her sister. She knew that little look in her eyes spelled trouble as she continued to look at the man in question. “Dear sister, please get whatever it is out of your head.”

Becca looked at her, smiling. “What? I believe him, all that is possible...and look, he’s an artist too. A really good one it seems.” Becca clip-clopped on her ruined shoes a little closer doing the hair flip thing that no respectable woman of her age should be doing. “Do I know your work? Have I seen it somewhere?”

Adria regarded Devin who seemed to keep his own council for the moment. Their eyes met, and she felt the swirl of butterflies in her belly like when she’d been young and crushed on him. “Can you please help me out here? Do something.”

Adria had a hard time refusing puppy dog eyes and kitty cat faces but actual humans were another matter entirely.

“Hold up here. Becca, you can’t trust this man. He could tell you anything and we’d have no way of verifying it.” Devin moved to stand between Becca and Liam.

Adria wanted to pretend she wasn’t upset about the fascination and adoration he still had for Becca all these years, but she couldn’t hate him for it. Such was the way of her life when sharing a womb with a gorgeous bombshell at any age.

While Devin and Becca talked to the handsome stranger living in their mother’s cabin, Adria checked out his painting. She’d love to have a magnificent piece of art for her wall. As she scanned the few paintings standing in what *had* been the great room until he moved all the furniture out of the way, she had to admire his talent.

Colors, contrasting textures, designs, and abstract ideas screamed from each canvas. It was hard to ignore his talent. He really was an amazing artist. In the background, she could

hear the three still arguing or discussing the matter but blocked it out.

Obviously the man wasn't dangerous with a talent like this, and he wasn't likely to harm them with a name like Liam or green eyes that were probably mesmerizing Becca into thinking she'd found the love of her life.

Adria spun around suddenly. "Well, at least he had the decency to move our furniture out of the way and cover it up. If that's not a caring person, I don't know what is."

Devin gave her a look. "Seriously. That's what we're going to base this decision on? Murderers clean up after themselves too and that doesn't make them any less dangerous."

She and Becca looked at each other, both thinking the same thing. They started laughing and continued until they could take no more, and hugged each other. Becca had tears in her eyes.

Adria turned and faced Devin and Liam who were conveniently standing right next to each other. "No one who is a murderer would come to this town. Seneca Falls is the last place they'd go to hide because everyone in this town knows everyone."

Devin's eyes focused on Becca's face. It irritated Adria, but mostly she was irritated with her feelings about his obvious adoration for her sister.

"So, you're going to let him stay based on that?" He pinned Becca with a look.

Of course, Adria knew it was coming. "Sure, I think he's safe. If we find any dead bodies, I'll let you know, Devin."

Adria smirked and glanced at Liam, who just happened to be smiling back at her. "If you're going to harm someone first, take my sister as she can be very annoying. It's those shoes she's wearing."

He laughed. "I can tell I'm going to like you already."

The more she studied him, Liam looked like an overgrown surfer from California. His dirty blonde hair was shaggy, and a

little long which was right up Becca's alley. He was tall and lean, with perfectly sculpted muscles. Adria didn't know his age, but guessed he was under fifty. "Same. You know you don't look like a painter, you look more like a surfer."

"Well, I have caught a few waves from time to time. I've been to California but not recently, and my favorite place is Hawaii."

"Interesting. Do you like animals?" At the very least Adria knew she could make friends easily.

"I'm allergic to cats but I used to have a snake and a turtle."

There goes that... "Oh, well I have three dogs and two cats. I will not ask about your truck, but maybe Devin can help you fix it or something so you can get home to your family in time for the holidays."

Her brain just barely registered the fact that this man might have a wife, kids, or girlfriend. She and Becca were both assuming he didn't, but she didn't know, and not seeing a ring on his finger meant nothing.

She was a little disappointed that he would stay as a third wheel when Devin left, at least for the time being. Devin didn't live too far away, so it was possible he could come back and forth and help.

Adria really wanted to have one last beautiful family Christmas for just her and her sister. She and Becca spent a lot of time working out in the world and hardly saw each other anymore. With Becca always traveling and Adria working long hours, it got depressing without having the other around.

They were always there for each other, but it wasn't like when they were young. Adria missed that and wanted this holiday to be a chance to reconnect, reunite, and spend some time boxing up their mom's things.

"Anyway, so is he staying, Becca?" She glanced at her sister.

"What?" She snapped her makeup mirror closed and smashed her lips together to distribute the lipstick. "Oh." She

laughed. “Yes, he can stay.”

Adria turned to her new friend. “Okay, you can stay, but you have to put the living room back to the way it was fast. *And*, if I catch you touching a steak knife, Devin over there is going to escort you off the property with or without your truck.”

Liam nodded. “Great, thanks. I promise I won’t get in the way.”

“Well, I hope...” She remembered the snow as the dogs started barking at the back door. Quickly, she opened the door for them. “Oh my goodness!” The snow had doubled in the time they’d been arguing. “How much snow are we supposed to get?”

The dogs hurried back inside after a few moments and she closed the door. When she turned around, Devin and Becca were trying to use their phones.

“No service, it’s a storm.” Devin put his phone back into his pocket.

“Boo. How am I supposed to watch my favorite TV show?” Becca frowned.

Liam chimed in, surprising Adria. “No worries, once I clean up after you are settled, I can show you both how to paint. I have plenty of canvases and paint.”

Adria saw Devin roll his eyes out of the corner of her eye and bit down on her lip so she wouldn’t laugh. “That would be nice. Now I hope you haven’t taken either of our rooms.”

Thankfully, he’d slept in the spare bedroom which was an enormous relief because the last thing she or Becca wanted to do was wash sheets.

Devin was kind enough to bring in the suitcases. “Goodness, who brought the kitchen sink?”

Adria couldn’t suppress her laughter. “Not me. That’s probably Becca’s makeup bag, right, sis?” She smiled sweetly at her sister who leaned against the upstairs railing.

Becca made a face.

“You know Mother said that if we did our faces like that, they would stay that way. That wouldn’t be good for your career unless you want to make a huge career change and come work with me. The dogs and cats won’t care.”

“Don’t start.” Becca turned on her heels and headed to the bedroom, and Adria heard the slam of a door.

“I think you upset her.” Liam was standing close by, a humored look on his face as he looked up.

“Listen, she could be nothing less than gorgeous, ever. Her face is legendary, and even if she was a little less adorable and unforgettable, she’d look like me and I’m not that bad.” Adria smiled. “I know I shouldn’t, but I can’t help it sometimes, blame it on sharing the same womb for nine months.”

“You’re just as beautiful as she is, but differently. Trust me, I’m a painter. Your face is the same but slightly different. The planes of your face and jawline are smoother than hers, but it gives you a welcoming look.”

Adria wasn’t sure if he’d given her a compliment or merely tried to ease her opinion about herself compared to her sister. Whatever it was, she appreciated it, but would have rather heard it from Devin. She smiled again. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.”

Devin didn’t trust this man even if they did. He knew better and started formulating plans in his head to keep them safe while they were here with Liam.

I’ll have to take the dogs home. I can tell them I am helping him work on his truck, so I have to stay here, but really, I’ll just be keeping an eye on him while I’m trying to do that, day and night. If I have to work around the clock beside him, so it gets done before Christmas, I will. There is no way I am letting anything happen to Becca or Adria.

“Alright, girls, come on, let’s get you home.” He opened up the front door determined to get the dogs home and hurry back. He could always go back and check on them in the morning or at some point maybe insist he take that truck to the town mechanic.

Then he had a brilliant idea when he looked away from his phone to follow the dogs outside. “Well, I guess I’m not going anywhere and it looks like none of us are right now.” The dogs had stopped short on the porch just as he did as the snow was a good three feet and it was still snowing.

The dogs ran back inside and Devin realized he might be here for the long haul, but not for the reason he’d originally anticipated. He turned on his heels, determined to make the best of things. Snowstorms happened often in Seneca Falls and the residents were always prepared and equipped to handle it.

In the morning all will be well. “I think I have no choice but to stay for now. Did anyone see the snow outside?”

He watched Adria walk to the window, hating the fact she was taking a liking to this stranger, and he seemed to do the same with her. He could hear a faint cry of joy come from upstairs. *I guess Becca saw the snow.*

“Yay! This is perfect!” Adria turned around and hugged Liam. He did all he could do to *not* jump in and separate them. When she let go, both of them were laughing, and Devin thought she’d turn to him and do the same, but no luck. Adria smiled. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have done that, Liam, I forgot myself.” She then turned and went back to whatever she was doing.

Liam looked at him and chuckled.

THREE



Everyone was settled in a room, and the snow was still coming down. Adria had made everyone sandwiches and chips for a light dinner, thankful to be at the cabin. She was tired and wanted to get some sleep.

Quickly she walked to her sister's room and poked her head in. Devin was sitting on Becca's bed with her as she filed her nails while he was looking at an old newspaper their mother had left around. "I'm off to bed and I just wanted to say good night. It's so good to have you here, Devin. It's been so long since we saw you, and now we're all together again, at least for a little while."

Adria refused to be upset when he glanced at Becca first as if making sure she was okay, and then smiled at her. "Yeah, me too. Personally, I'd like to throw your houseguest out in the freezing snow and leave him there until spring, but yeah, I'm glad too. It gives me a chance to catch up." He patted Becca's hand. "Right, Becca?"

Becca looked up from her nail filing and blinked. "Oh yeah, we can catch up. Devin was telling me he practices law in other states, so technically if he wanted to move, he could with little fuss."

Adria wasn't about to get hopeful Devin had been talking about catching up with her. It was most likely he wanted to reconnect with Becca. He'd barely known she'd existed back in high school, other than she was his friend's twin sister. "You're right, but I think if he'd been interested in doing that, he would have done that by now, Becca." Adria looked at

Devin. “Don’t let her convince you to move to Portland. She did a photo shoot once there on the beach. I went along and it was beautiful, but the people in Becca’s world are a bit different and not what I’d consider to your liking, just saying.”

He nodded his head. *Obviously not interested in what I had to say.* “Well, good night, Becca. I love you and I’m glad we’re home. Good night, Devin, I hope you both sleep well.”

“Good night, sis.” Becca blew an air kiss.

“Good night, Adria.” Finally, Devin focused his attention on her.

Three steps down the hall she stopped at Liam’s room. He was sitting on his bed with a smaller easel beside him as he painted.

“Good night, Liam.”

“Going to bed already? Come on in and have a seat. I never got to show either of you how to paint. You’ll have a lot of fun.”

Adria was tempted to go inside and sit for a few minutes. He seemed really nice and very talented, so she thought now would be a good time to get to know him. “Thank you.” She sat on the bed next to him and watched as he made brush strokes.

“Wow, you are really amazing.” Fascinated by this man and his talent, Adria watched him paint and for a few minutes they sat in silence, side by side on his bed in his room.

Eventually, Liam spoke, looking at her smiling. “You could do it too with some time, practice, and patience.” He held out the brush to her.

“Oh, no.” Adria waved her hand in the air. “So, what would you make for Christmas? I thought maybe you could paint something for me and my sister to remember our time here, and you and this moment. This Christmas together. And by the way, don’t pay attention to Devin, he’s just overly protective of Becca. This is to be our last Christmas here and we’re selling this place come spring, it’s time. So, you being here is good too. We will have someone besides each other to

share it with and Christmas is always more fun when it's shared."

Liam frowned but continued to paint. "Thank you for saying that. I don't want to ruin the time between you and your sister, so the sooner I can be out of here once my truck is fixed, the better. Besides, I know little about Christmas."

"You don't celebrate?" Adria was stunned.

"No. I was an orphan and I spent most of my life with other kids as no foster parents seemed to want me. I was a late developer as a kid, so they thought I had a few learning disabilities. Later they found out I didn't, but at that point the damage had been done. I was sixteen and no one wants to adopt a sixteen-year-old. So, by the time I reached adulthood, I just never celebrated Christmas or any other holiday. It's foreign to me."

"And yet you were traveling to see someone when your truck broke down here? Or was it something to do with your art?" Intrigued and curious, Adria wanted to know more.

"It's the reason I travel. With everyone celebrating the holidays, I find it hard to sit still because I don't understand it and I've never experienced it."

Stunned, Adria continued to watch him fan the paint and continue to make his abstract design. Then an idea hit her. "Well, you're in luck." She smiled. "My sister and I are experts on everything Christmas and since you owe us for our kindness, you are going to do one Christmas thing to repay."

"I guess I owe you, but *please* make it something easy like sledding or something." Liam smiled.

Adria started to laugh. "Oh my, no, Liam, you're going to help us bake cookies tomorrow. How's that?"

He laughed. "Alright, I think I can do that. I love to cook and my specialty is lasagna, but sure, cookies it is." Liam looked past her to the open doorway and he smiled.

"Hey, I thought you were going to bed?" Adria realized her sister was standing in the open doorway.

“I was, but I stopped to say good night and Liam invited me in. He wanted me to do some painting, but I couldn’t do it. So, I’ve just been sitting here talking to him as he paints.”

She didn’t miss the annoyance in her sister’s eyes for a split second and then it was gone. “I wouldn’t mind trying it.”

Liam quickly spoke up. “That might be best for another time. I’m kind of tired.” He was up and moving things to put them away. Adria quickly stood up and moved to the door. “I need my rest to work on my truck, and those cookies.” He nodded towards Adria which instantly made her feel good.

“Alright, good night, Liam.” Adria knew when to take her leave. As she moved down the hall to her bedroom, she was smiling from ear to ear. It was the first time a man didn’t fall at her feet and Becca was probably going to need to be picked up off the floor in a second.

She spent the night restless and curious in her bedroom, her mind racing in a thousand directions. She was excited to be home and wanted to see if they could clear the snow around the wishing well and bake cookies. That would be a perfect first day for her.

Right now where she stood, she didn’t mind if Liam stayed until they left after New Year’s. He seemed nice, friendly, and he was handsome and for the first time in her life, when she and her sister were together, she’d gotten noticed too.

Adria knew it was ridiculous to be acting like a twenty-year-old, like she’d dated no one when she had. But coming to Seneca Falls brought back all those memories of secretly crushing on Devin.

If she thought hard enough, she could still envision the way he would look at Becca, much like he did now as a man in his forties.

Adria hated herself for being petty and focusing on all the negative stuff, she couldn’t sleep and headed to the kitchen for a snack. Her voice was soothing as Devin’s two dogs came out of nowhere to follow her. “We have to be quiet, girls. I’ll give you a treat when you go potty. She flung the back door open

again, then remembered the snow. “Mercy me!” The snow was now four feet high.

The dogs had ridiculous looks on their faces as if she was crazy for thinking they were going out there. “I know, right, you’d get lost. Hold on.” She grabbed her sneakers and started shoveling snow from the back patio door out a few feet.

It was hard work and took her a good half hour, but after all that huffing and puffing, the dogs had an easy spot to go potty in the grass that was getting covered as they went. “Come on, let’s get back inside.”

The dogs hurried inside and each took a couch in the living room to get cozy after their treats, a silly look on each of their faces. Adria smiled. “Get some sleep, girls.”

While she grabbed a snack, she thought about the snow. The last time they had recorded extremely high snow in Seneca Falls, Michigan in one snowstorm was when she and Becca were twelve.

She made another sandwich for herself, feeling it go to her hips right after the first bite when she heard a scratching noise. “What in the world?” It was coming from the solarium off of the back of the house.

Quietly, she tiptoed across the kitchen to the door and peeked inside. Seeing and hearing nothing, she stepped inside and shut the door to listen again. The sound came again but this time louder. She seemed to be on the right track, so she started walking, very alert now. Over and over she heard this scratching noise until she reached the other end of the solarium and stopped suddenly. “What is that noise? Wait, why did it stop?”

Adria glanced around, finding nothing out of place since most of the solarium was empty, but a few stacks of boxes in one corner. As she glanced that way, she saw it, the swooshing of a furry creature’s tail. “There you are, little guy!”

Slowly she stepped closer, unsure how she was going to handle things since you weren’t supposed to just pick up a wild animal and deal with him because of the potential for

disease. “You just stay right where you are, momma’s gonna get you to a safe spot.”

She knew she had no idea what she was talking about, but since it soothed her, Adria figured it would soothe the animal. Just as she was a few feet from grabbing it, the creature sat up on the box and turned around as if it had been hunting around for something.

The adorable squirrel shoved something in its mouth that looked like cereal and then dove headlong at the wall. Quickly but cautiously, Adria moved to get a closer look and found something shocking.

A giant hole the size of two basketballs in the wall was the squirrel’s escape route. She looked at the floor below and a box of cereal was open with cereal scattered everywhere. “Aw, you’re just hungry and cold, that’s why you came in here.”

She looked again at the hole and covered her mouth so she wouldn’t scream, but did anyway. Her hand just muffled it so the other sleepers wouldn’t wake up. “Oh my goodness!” Five tiny squirrel faces appeared in the open hole watching her, all chewing on the cereal.

It took all of two seconds for her to register this. She should leave them alone for now and maybe Devin or Liam could deal with them in the morning. Slowly, she backed up the same way she’d come and kept going. “It’s okay, guys, you just enjoy that snack. I’m going to have mine now.”

Adria then closed the door to the solarium.

Devin wasn’t sleeping either, but for a different reason. He was listening for sounds in the house, to see what Liam was up to. With the sound of a door closing loudly, he crept downstairs, rounded the corner prepared to do what he must when he found Liam and ran smack into Adria. “Whoops!” He grabbed her arms gently but firmly and held her so she wouldn’t fall while ignoring that excited sensation he felt being near her. “Are you okay?”

She smiled. “Yes! Thanks. I just had the worst scare of my life in the solarium.”

“What?” Devin let her go and headed for the solarium thinking that was where the evidence of Liam’s true self was hidden. *I’d forgotten to check in there.*

Flinging the door open he stormed inside to find an almost empty solarium except for a few boxes. Adria bumped into him again, sending a delightful shockwave of excitement through his body. “What is it? I see nothing.” He glanced sideways to confirm.

“Over there.” Adria pointed to the boxes.

Devin didn’t have to be told twice. Like the stormtroopers he liked to watch as a kid, he made his way to the boxes and looked around. “Wow. Well, I have to say that’s the first time I’ve seen squirrels make a hole that big. And apparently they like cereal.” Devin laughed, relieved and annoyed at the same time. “I was kind of hoping to find some evidence of mischief or mayhem, so I could have an excuse to convince you both to throw Liam out in the cold.”

Adria’s eyes were as big as saucers. “Devin, come on, I need to show you something else.” He was forced to follow as Adria took his hand and pulled him back to the kitchen. They stood in front of the back door. “Brace yourself.”

“For what?”

Devin was speechless when Adria opened the door to reveal more snow than he’d ever seen. “I don’t think we’ve ever had *this* much snow, ever. Wow, we’re going to be snowed in for a while.”

She quickly closed the door. Devin watched her walk, admiring how graceful she moved, and how lovely her hair seemed to float around her back as she headed for the sandwich she’d been eating on the counter. “I think I’m just going to crash on the couch now. It’s so late, I couldn’t sleep, anyway.”

Devin watched her settle in with a comfy pillow and some blankets while she finished her sandwich. “Well, I’m headed

back to bed.” As he made his way up the stairs, he debated going back down and staying with her like he wanted to do, but thought better of it.

He walked the open hallway to his bedroom, forever mindful with his eyes innocently scanning the room to make sure she was safe. He paused for a moment at his bedroom door and leaned over the railing.

Adria must have sensed him because she lifted her face to his, a soft smile on her face as she chewed her sandwich. “Good night.”

Devin nodded. Back in his room, he wanted to kick himself for not saying good night. He knew the last thing he should be doing was looking at any woman for a relationship of any kind beyond friendship.

His marriage had been everything to him until it wasn't and he ended up on the outside looking in. He'd suffered much as did his ex-wife, and the damage was probably done, but he was hopeful one day he could find love again. Sadly, now was probably not the time.

As he stared into the darkness, Adria's image kept popping up in his head. Seeing her beautiful face, knowing she was just downstairs made him happy. He would see her in the morning, and at least be friends and enjoy some time with her and Becca.

FOUR



With her stomach full, Adria was able to find some modicum of peace and sleep. She knew she'd chosen a bad spot the moment her eyes drifted closed, but then opened again in what seemed like seconds when she heard someone whistling.

She blinked her eyes open and rolled over, dusting the crumbs off her face and sat up. Liam stood at the coffeemaker, making coffee. He turned and smiled. "Good morning. Sorry, it's early."

Disgruntled, she threw herself back and rolled over. "You said you wouldn't bother us. I consider this bothering." She tried in vain to go back to sleep, and got nowhere, with the smell of brewing coffee and the sound of his continued whistling and the memory of the snowfall.

Adria didn't get up because Liam stood in front of her holding a cup. "Here, it chases away the fog."

She sat up. "Thank you. That is very kind of you."

He smiled and sat down where her feet had been after she sat up to drink his coffee. They sat in companionable silence like that for a while and Adria felt content. It surprised her. "You know, forgive me for saying this, but you're really easy, comforting almost. You have this presence about you. At first, I couldn't pick up on it, but now I can. It's relaxing being around you. You don't get flustered easily, do you?"

"Not really, life's too short to let the small stuff get to you. I've had a challenging life but not as challenging as some, so

why complain? My coffee tastes good, I'm breathing, and alive. I can paint and do it really well. I'm really blessed."

Adria smiled, continuing to sip her coffee. "You're absolutely right. That's how I am too. Sometimes it's hard to remember that, but I like the fact that I can be around you so far and just be."

"Same. You have that same quality, just so you know."

His words caught Adria off guard and she became thoughtful for a moment. "Do I really?"

"Absolutely, probably more so than me. Sure, I see you like to tease people and be yourself, but you're just as comfortable in your skin as me. But you have that way about you too. It's just that you spend too much time with animals to have it given back to you."

Adria leaned her head against the couch. "I guess." Then she looked up again. "Hey, did you see the snow?"

"No."

Adria took Liam's hand and tugged him to get up. "Come on, you don't want to miss this!" She stood at the door to the back and opened it. The snow had stopped and the sun was shining, but about four and a half feet of snow had fallen.

"Wow."

Adria couldn't help but laugh at him. "Yeah, I don't think you're going to be fixing that truck today."

He smiled. "No, but I think I can make cookies instead whenever you're ready."

Her mind started racing. "Never mind that. First, we need to get this place decorated and since you and Devin are here, you can help. I can't make one cookie without Christmas decorations."

"What about a tree, we can't go out and get one now?"

Adria was on a mission to go to the attic and find the boxes of decorations. "We use a fake one. If we wanted to decorate a

tree outside, our mother used to run an extension cord and let us light one up.”

With Liam closely following her, Adria focused on being quiet for the sleeping beauty and her prince, and wondered where the dogs were as she approached the pull-down stairs leading to the attic. “Can you please pull that down for me?”

Liam was right behind her and it was the perfect opportunity to send him into the attic to get the stuff while she stayed down inside the cabin away from the bugs and bats if any were still floating around.

“Sure.” He climbed the stairs and disappeared. Two by two he carried all the boxes down to the living room. At this point, Devin and Becca were awake, both standing in the kitchen waiting for coffee.

“Oh, hey, good morning.” Liam stared at Becca.

Adria couldn’t help but notice that Becca’s hair was out of place, and her eye makeup was like what she’d wear on the runway. “Goodness, Becca, you look like you’re ready for the catwalk. Have you looked outside lately?”

Becca silently looked at her and then spoke. “Well, dear sister, you’re in luck, I brought an extra bit of personality with me so you can borrow it.” She walked to the back door and Adria waited.

“Heaven help me, it’s been snowing forever.” Barefoot she walked back to the kitchen after closing the door and Adria wondered if she’d gotten rid of those uncomfortable-looking shoes she’d worn yesterday.

“See. So there was no need for a facelift before breakfast.”

Becca eyed her, not at all happy. “Well, one always needs to leave their grumpiness before breakfast or it puts everyone else in a bad mood.”

Adria laughed. “You got me on that one, sis. After we decorate, I really want to go to the wishing well. It’s only a few hundred yards away. Do you think we can make it?”

Adria eyed Devin, smiled and looked back at her sister. She might not pursue Devin since it was clear he only had eyes for Becca, and Liam seemed interested in her, but that didn't mean she couldn't look. Thankfully, he didn't catch her that time.

Devin spoke up. "You'll need snowshoes or a snowmobile for that."

Liam interjected with a wicked smile. "Nah, you can make them with old tennis rackets in a pinch. I apologize. I was snooping around in the attic when you had me bring down the ornaments and I saw at least six tennis rackets. Did someone play tennis?"

Adria rushed to the window, excited, and tried very hard to ignore her attraction to Devin. "So we can go!" Outside the snow had stopped, but to her utter surprise something had happened to the wishing well that she couldn't believe. "Guys, Becca, you have to see this! Come over here."

Liam filed in on one side, Devin on the other and Becca squeezed herself in between them. "What?"

"Am I seeing what I think I'm seeing, Adria?" Becca spoke up, her face plastered to the frosty cold window. "How is it possible that the wishing well has no snow on it or around it?"

"I thought it was me too. Perhaps someone slipped some rum in my coffee."

Liam said nothing, Devin threw his two cents in at that moment. "An act of God."

The sisters were determined to get to the wishing well for whatever reason they had in their heads and Liam was no help suiting them up with makeshift snowshoes and letting them go out into the snow.

He watched as the two ladies gingerly made their way over the snow and stopped just shy of the wishing well.

"Well, that is certainly odd, but whatever it is, there is some kind of magic here." Liam was talking again and Devin

wanted very much for him to stop because he didn't like him enough yet.

Still, he wanted to interject his own thoughts and memories. "They used to call it the magic cabin because their mother seemed to have a way with animals, nature, and basically anything. No matter what or who it was, she put everyone at ease. It's where Adria gets it from. I don't think Becca was lucky enough to acquire that skill, she's too preoccupied."

"I think it's pretty cool, and how lucky they were to have a mother like her."

FIVE



Thankfully, the cabin was big enough for everyone who was snowed in. Adria immediately got to work after she and her sister got back from the wishing well. Every day when they were children, they would run out to the well and toss a coin in and make a wish like their mother told them.

It had been a mystery how the wishing well had got there. Their mother had always told the story of her great-grandmother getting it as a gift from a suitor and somehow, he had it brought from far away to this spot.

It didn't matter to Adria. It was as much a part of her and Becca's family history as everything else at this cabin. She'd made countless wishes over the years, half of them probably never came true and never would. Some probably came true by sheer luck and others did by some mystical power.

What was mind-blowing was the fact that it was completely clean. "How do you think it got clean, really?" Becca was hanging decorations throughout the house, Liam had taken over assembling the tree which looked an utter mess and Devin was nowhere to be seen.

Adria was certain the dogs had found the treat drawer since things were awfully quiet in the kitchen and they were MIA. "I don't know, Becca, it's on my mind too. It is such a mysterious thing and something Mother would have smiled at, waved her hand at the heaven and earth and moved on not missing a beat."

“You’re right.” Becca stopped, clutching a beautiful angel with gold wings. “She would. She was always so easily accepting and understanding of those things that no one else was. Do you have someone like that in your life, Liam?”

“I do have a good friend named Deanna. She is an herbalist and gardener who has three kids. I’m good friends with her husband, and to say that he adores her is an understatement. When they first started dating, I often asked him if she cast some strange spell on him, but she’s so sweet and welcoming. She reminds me of that lady everyone in the community or town goes to for answers and comes out feeling so much better, even though, she hardly did anything.”

The front door slammed and then they heard the stomping of feet. They then heard Devin say “I can’t make it five feet out there and I’d die trying to get to my truck. This is madness.”

“Well then, it’s a good thing we stopped on the way here before the race car driver over there crashed our vehicle. We got a ton of stuff at the grocery store because we didn’t want to have to go out for Christmas dinner since it was just going to be the two of us, but we have more than enough to carry through till New Year’s with you two,” Becca said as she smiled at both men.

Adria groaned inside and continued to string the lights up the railing and around it. Later she’d attach the greenery once she found out which of the ten boxes they were in. “Maybe we’ll be able to find my car by spring. It’ll come as a pleasant surprise when we are still here to sell the house, but who cares? I still can’t believe we got this much snow, *and* we have no cell service.”

She looked at Devin and he was smiling at Becca. “I like where you put that. In fact, all the decorations are looking good.” She looked in the other direction to distract herself from that misery and Liam was looking at her.

He smiled. “I like your lights, Adria. They swirl nicely around the railing. Are you going to take them all the way to the end over there?”

She felt a little connection with Liam that she didn't feel with anyone else, but sadly missing that deeper more exciting connection, Adria smiled. "Yes." *He seems interested in me, but what if I don't feel something for him? How awful would that be?*

By the time they were all done, she was ready to beat her head against the wall because she couldn't get that mess out of her head. She wished with all her heart that her mother was here to guide her during this difficult time, but she wasn't.

Adria always had difficulty with relationships. She was the woman all men wanted to befriend, but none wanted to date, except a few. Those usually turned out to be weird and short-lived. There had been romance, marriage and love, but it never lasted, which hurt her heart the most.

She hated it when everything was quiet. "Devin, can you go upstairs into my bedroom and get that portable record player in the closet? It should have some Christmas music with it."

He said nothing, stared at her for a few seconds and then smiled. "You know I hate Christmas music, right? I might throw myself out in that snow just so I don't lose my mind. My mom always played it the entire week before Christmas. Honest to goodness, I think she played it day and night because I would wake up in bed hearing it and fall asleep to the soft whisper of it downstairs."

"Devin! Please go get it. I want to hear some Christmas music too." Becca chimed in.

His smile changed from pleasant assistant to happiness. "I guess if *you* want it, I will have to go get it, but if there is some other music in that box, I'm going to bring that instead." Off he went to do Becca's bidding when he should have been doing Adria's.

Tired of thinking about it, she turned her attention to the man who was arranging the tree and taking a break by painting a small canvas. "So, Liam, how are you liking all these Christmas activities so far?"

He smiled, turned around and waved his blue-covered paintbrush in the air. “I love it. It’s perfect, thanks to everyone here.”

“Wait a minute...” Becca moved in close to stare at him. Adria could feel the energy between them and she didn’t like it one bit. Not a competitive person, and less likely to be one if she was with her own twin sister, she watched as the two stared at each other.

The tone of her sister’s voice changed and it became lower and more mysterious like she was flirting. “So, you’ve experienced *nothing* of Christmas in all these years? No candy canes, no hanging ornaments, no mistletoe, no caroling, nothing?”

It was a moment before Liam responded that Adria also heard that subtle change in the tone of his voice too. She watched as she tossed the dogs more treats hoping they didn’t turn out to be stuffed so big like a Christmas turkey.

“No, as I said before, I never experienced Christmas the way others do. People tried to get me to experience it over the years. For example, this one girl I dated in my twenties was big on Christmas and she tried to get me in the Christmas spirit, but it was at the point I was breaking up with her because I was moving and not ready to be married.”

Adria didn’t miss it when Becca gently touched his arm. She could tell by the look on both their faces something was up, then pitied Devin for the broken heart he was going to have. Then she thought better of it.

“Well, we are going to have to change that Liam. We can’t have you going through your entire life not experiencing all the joys of Christmas.”

“I’d like that.” Liam turned his hand over and moved in the most fluid, gentle way to clasp Becca’s hand and hold it. “Thank you.”

Adria had to look away, or she was going to be sick. “Well, the good news is I have all the cookie dough ready.” Adria said.

“And I have the record player, but only Christmas music. Why? Why do I have to be subjected to Christmas music every holiday? Even my ex-wife loved it.” Devin said.

“It’s a woman thing, I think. We just love the positive, joyful sound of it.” Becca tried to be helpful.

Adria watched as Devin turned his head to acknowledge Becca, saw the way the pair were still holding hands and then looked at her. Adria saw something there but his emotions were unreadable in his eyes. He plugged it in and started it up. Elvis was the first singer to blare out his tunes.

“Alright, now if you’ll excuse me, I’m going to keep shoveling snow until I pass out.”

Adria watched Devin go, almost pitying him. “Okay, so the cookie dough has to chill and that was always a must according to our mom, Liam. Right, Becca?”

“Yeah, we would never listen, and steal cookie dough from the refrigerator every chance we got.”

“So, I’m going to do some more decorating upstairs and maybe we can all decorate the tree together now that it’s really taking shape. Becca, go get Devin, he’s going to try to hide, but he’s helping too.”

Devin was within earshot and ready when she came around the corner. He tossed some silver tinsel at her. “Take that, Becca. I’m not decorating that tree with all that Christmas music playing in my ear just so you know.”

Becca pouted. “Stop that. You’re going to mess up my hair.” She tossed a few strands back at him.

Devin gave her a little nudge then leaned into her. “Not possible, ever. Be careful with that guy. I know he seems nice, but I still don’t trust him. What kind of stories is he telling you? He might be delusional.”

Of course, Becca was her usual hopeful and cheery self. He could tell she was already half in love like she’d always been, but his mind was getting overshadowed by Adria and how to pursue her without making it obvious and scaring her

away. The friendship she was building with Liam was a little unsettling.

The man thinks he's a Casanova.

“I am being careful, but I’m telling you I have a good feeling about him. He’s really nice. Sometimes bad things happen to good people. Besides, he’s really handsome, and no one that handsome could be bad, right?”

Devin could think of a few people who fit that description. He’d known over the years as a lawyer that they were capable of bad things, terrible things, but he’d keep his mouth shut. There was no use trying to explain things to Becca if she hadn’t learned them already in life. Her innocence was a tremendous surprise considering how far she’d come in life.

“Just be careful.”

“I will. Now come on, you’re decorating this tree with us. Mom would want you to help, Elvis or no Elvis.”

Devin let Becca lead him by the hand. He’d always preferred his women quiet, and less fussy or dramatic in appearance and personality like Adria.

Then he remembered Adria was more reserved and shy back in high school. He’d never gotten the chance to ask her out and took Becca to the prom since they were such good friends. When he rounded the corner, Adria was coming down the stairs in a Santa hat looking as cute as ever. He smiled even though she wasn’t looking at him because her eyes were focused on Liam.

“Okay everyone, let’s open those boxes and get decorating. You guys have to find a way to help us get that star up there and I’d like Liam to do it since he’s never done it.”

The tree was larger than life. A good fifteen feet tall, it stood against a ceiling window that their mother had put in when the girls were teenagers. With the open floor plan and vaulted ceiling in that section of the house, it made a grand statement. Devin thought it was a shame they were the only ones to see it.

For the next few hours, they decorated the massive tree and talked about Christmases gone by in Seneca Falls. Devin cherished every moment he'd spent with Becca and Adria, and their mother.

"I'm sorry I didn't get to make it to her funeral. I was in Washington D.C. at the time. I really loved her, I hope you both know that."

Both ladies smiled at him and Devin felt that familiar stirring of emotions deep in his belly when Adria looked at him.

"Thank you, Devin." Becca rubbed his shoulder. "She loved you too."

"She did. She always talked about you and your family, and how many times Becca or I would bring over extra cookies. Trying to ride my bike carrying a large bag of goodies was miserable."

"Yeah, she was a generous person, but then again, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree." Devin hoped Adria knew he was talking to her.

Her eyes turned when Liam handed her and then Becca a cup of cocoa. "Now this is one thing I *do* know ladies like... cocoa, but I don't think we can put it in the Christmas category as it belongs in the winter and snow category."

Devin groaned inside, wishing with all his heart he could ask Santa for an early Christmas gift and send this man and his belongings packing.

SIX



By nightfall the decorating was complete and they were all exhausted. Liam had a smile on his face from ear to ear which made Adria feel good. No matter what happened, she wanted to make people happy.

She knew at her age, the chances of finding love were slim because she was too set in her ways as were the men in her age group. Still, she remained hopeful. Liam seemed kind-hearted, artsy, and cheerful which were things she valued.

Devin had disappeared after dinner, and Becca had her head buried in her mirror as she sat on the couch next to Adria.

“Oh, for the love of heaven, can you put the mirror down, sis? There are no fans here, and no one is taking any pictures, not yet anyway. Can’t we play a game? We have checkers, Monopoly, and chess in the closet.”

Becca rolled her eyes. “I don’t want to play a game and it was a busy day despite it snowing. I just want to relax and unwind.”

Adria knew better. She petted Devin’s dogs, hoping to sneak in a few more dog treats because she wanted to make sure they were happy and eating enough. Christmas was all about bringing joy, and if no one else but his fur babies were happy, she would make it happen.

“Then why are you sitting there looking at your face?” Adria sipped the last of her third cocoa, thankful the wholesale food store had a giant box she’d thought to buy before they came.

“Because I have this awful zit in my face. I never get zits anymore and it’s kinda weird at our age, don’t you think? Do you see any wrinkles?” Becca turned to face her, a serene, camera-ready look on her face.

Adria couldn’t help herself. She got closer, pulled out her reading glasses and stared. “Wow! I do, Becca, and there are more than a few actually. Have you been using that special serum because I don’t think it’s working?” She leaned in and touched her face at the center of her brows, and then beside her lips. “Yup, I see some sagging, it’s awful.” She smiled, started laughing and then stopped the moment her sister nudged her with her foot.

“Stop that! I really want to know.”

“Becca, your face is porcelain and thanks to our good genetics you will have that glowing, youthful skin for many years. Mom had it well into her sixties and then when it started, she only had a few wrinkles.”

Becca smiled, nudging Adria again playfully. “You’re right, she was so beautiful and had the best skin. You should let me give you a manicure. We can paint your nails red and I have these cute Christmas trees we can set into the polish.”

Liam had also disappeared for a moment but came trotting down the stairs like he’d clearly made himself comfortable and at home. “Okay, who wants to play chess?”

“I will.” Becca sat up and tossed her mirror aside.

Feeling disgruntled by her sister, she got up and went in search of Devin. *This was supposed to be our sister’s time. She doesn’t want anything to do with that now that men are involved. Sometimes she only cares about attention.*

Rounding the corner of the kitchen, she ran into Devin, their faces inches from one another. “Oh.” She stared up into his eyes. All the thoughts fled from her mind as she looked at him and he smiled a little.

Her throat closed, and suddenly she had nothing to say. She felt silly.

Devin's eyes softened a little, and she saw the slightest hint of something. "I solved our little problem." He cleared his throat and stepped back.

The butterflies that floated in her stomach settled down and Adria's racing heart continued to beat a hundred miles per hour. "What problem?"

"The solarium problem." Devin looked at her like she was nuts.

Adria felt foolish, and she struggled to catch up. Obviously, it was all her as he felt nothing. "Oh, right, the squirrels, I forgot all about them. I don't think we ever told Becca and Liam."

"Well, let's go..." Devin stepped forward and headed for the great room.

Adria stopped him, her shaky hand grabbing his arm lightly. "Let's go have a look ourselves first. You can show me what you did and then we can tell them."

Not only did Adria not want to disturb Becca and Liam and possibly upset Devin but she also wanted a few minutes alone with him. Everyone seemed to be flocking to Becca as they usually did her whole life. She was always the life of the party even though she barely did anything but pout her lips.

To say that Adria was jealous wouldn't have been a lie and she had been over the years. Now, she'd pretty much resolved herself to that problem since they had busy lives and didn't move in the same social circles.

She loved Becca so much but she was starting to feel cranky and they still had so much to do before Christmas arrived.

"Okay." Devin turned and walked with her to the solarium. "I fixed it really well with some things I found and I don't think they'll be coming back."

He led the way to the spot where the big hole had been the night before. "Have a look and let me know what you think."

Adria smiled, honored he'd want her opinion, even if she knew nothing about construction work. As she leaned over, she was surprised to find he was quite handy even though he was a lawyer. It was perfectly covered and the material he used blended in nicely with the rest of the wall. "Wow, that's a really nice job. You do great work. I didn't know you were so handy, Devin."

He must have been trying to lean with her to look again because when she stood up, they were so close, she felt his breath fanning her cheek. "Thanks, I appreciate that. I learned a few things over the years."

"Oh." Again that breathless, dizzy feeling. She swallowed her nervousness and smiled. "I bet you did. Maybe you could fix a few other things around here."

"What do you need fixed, Adria?" His eyes were so intense and her heart raced a thousand miles an hour that Adria thought she might faint. She wanted very much to kiss him, just to see what it felt like after all these years but didn't have the courage.

She was a lot of things, but she wasn't bold and brazen when it came to men unless she wanted them to be more than a friend. "I don't know. I'll think about it and maybe you can do a few things if we're all snowed in here."

There was a long silence as they both looked at each other. Adria felt his body heat and thought for sure he was going to kiss her when he leaned slowly forward.

"There you two are!" Becca's loud voice broke the magic between them.

Devin lifted his head up quickly and turned around with a smile. "Hey. We didn't get to show you last night, but we found a family of squirrels in here. They made a giant hole in the wall and you wouldn't believe it, but they had a box of cereal they were surviving on."

Becca came over and leaned down to look and Adria backed up. Their moment was gone and she looked at Liam with a smile. "Did you beat her at chess?"

“I did. But she’s good. Now it’s your turn if you want to play.”

Liam was too hard to resist as he was handsome, sweet, and more than a little fun. “Sure, I’d like that.” She took one more look at Devin and he had an odd look on his face as she walked away.

Half an hour later, she’d beaten Liam twice, and it was now her turn to play her sister. When she beat her too, it was Devin’s turn.

“Okay, Adria, show me what you got since they have no chess strategies that work.” Devin sat across from her.

Adria’s hands were shaking again. She felt that nervousness she only got when she liked a man, and hoped Devin didn’t see it. “Okay, be prepared to lose too, then maybe tomorrow after we bake cookies, you will be prepared to play a different game. Nobody beats me at chess. My mom was wonderful at it, and Becca didn’t learn that skill, but I did.”

“I remember you playing the game once with Billy over on Locust Lane and he was so mad. He played you three times thinking he could one-up you and you won every game.”

She glanced over at Becca and Liam as they sat together talking quietly while sipping more cocoa and looking at the lights. It didn’t bother her; in fact, she couldn’t help but think how adorable it would be if Becca finally found a reliable man, a man who would love and cherish her the way she deserved so she wouldn’t be alone anymore.

They’d both had more than a few terrible relationships, but Becca needed a man in her life, it was just her personality. Personally, Adria knew she could survive without one even if her heart longed to have a man to love too.

“Hold on, I want to take a picture of them with my phone. We might not have cell phone service out here right now but they look absolutely adorable. Look at the way the tree twinkles next to them with all those beautiful ornaments and the railing covered in garlands and lights on the other side.”

Adria nudged Devin with her hand, not really focused on him. She grabbed her phone and snapped pictures. Both seemed oblivious to what was going on around them, and they were smiling which was a good sign.

“Hey, Becca, after this I am playing you so don’t get too comfortable with the stranger. Besides you guys are looking a little too cozy over there, maybe we need to put some space between you.” Devin said.

Becca pulled a face, then smiled. “You know I love you, Devin. But you’re playing chess with Adria right now. When you’re done, there is plenty of room on my other side.” She laughed.

Adria tried not to let her frustrations get the better of her. She knew Becca was this way, always wanting to be the center of attention. Still, Adria regretted mentioning anything to Devin and ruining their moment.

He seemed irritated after that, and even his dogs didn’t cheer him up. They played chess and Adria beat him twice before he gave up. “Thanks, Adria, it’s been fun but I’m going to bed.”

She watched him go, her heart going with him. The last thing she wanted to do was disrupt Becca and Liam, but two minutes later he left too, leaving just her and Becca.

“Hey, sis. This was quite a busy day. I think it’s going to be an amazing Christmas. The cabin looks beautiful, we did it.” Adria said as she sat down on the couch where Liam had been.

“Yeah, we did a nice job. You know I kind of like it when it snows. I really wanted to have just you and me time, but this snow won’t be here forever and we will be here until after New Year’s. We have plenty of time to do things together, but it’s also kind of nice to reconnect with Devin and get to know Liam.”

“You’re right. So tomorrow, I want to bake cookies. We have chocolate chips and sugar, so we can shape and decorate those. It will be fun, Becca. Besides, I think Liam will have a

blast. He's never had a Christmas, so we can give him a first Christmas and the best Christmas ever."

Adria was getting into the spirit of things. It would've been very easy to crumble and let the unusual situation with the men at the cabin get her down, but she would not let that spoil her time with Becca.

Before she knew it, they'd be back to their normal lives and there would be limited time to see each other.

"Do you ever wish we knew Dad anymore?" Becca wrapped her arm around Adria and snuggled up.

"I used to want to know who he was, but Mom never told us and we have no clue. I don't think I've thought about that in a long time. It does kind of make you think that with Mom gone, maybe knowing our dad would be nice, but who knows?"

"It's so pretty, Adria, with all the lights and the angels. Mom always loved angels, but how are we ever going to divide all this up? I love everything and I know you do too."

Adria could hear how tired her twin was. They yawned in sync and both laughed. Claspng her sister's lovely hand with her less-than-perfect one, she laughed. "We are going to buy a house somewhere where the sun shines all the time. We are going to keep it just for us and spend every Christmas and holiday there so the decorations can go there."

"Then why are we going to sell the cabin?"

Before Adria answered, she heard the slight sound of snoring and looked down at her sister who was fast asleep nuzzled against her. Smiling to herself, Adria thought long and hard about that question for quite a while.

Indeed. Why are we going to sell this cabin? For years, Adria had thought about retiring. She'd made plenty of money on stocks and other financial gains and there was no need for her to work at all.

She could volunteer and take care of animals anywhere and there was no need for her to get paid to do it. The shelter

and board would be devastated by the loss, but she would give them time to find a qualified and skilled replacement.

The gentle glow from the Christmas decorations soothed her mind, as did the silence of the cabin. For a few moments, she forgot all about the two men sleeping in the cabin, and it was just her and Becca.

She smiled, looking around at the angels, Santa, the snowmen, reindeer, and the multi-colored decor. Her heart swelled with joy as she recalled so many Christmases spent in this cabin as a child with her mother flitting around doing everything to make her and Becca happy.

It humbled her, the blessings of having a mother as they had. She'd never wanted for anything, and neither did Becca. Their mother was a free spirit, quick to forgive, and patient and understanding. She loved with all her heart and never asked for anything in return but their love.

The gorgeous white, gold, and silver angel that Liam had placed atop the tall tree reminded her of her mother. Her gorgeous blonde hair and cool blue eyes, the serene smile she always wore and that graceful beauty she carried inside and out.

Adria shed a few tears as she sat quietly letting her sister sleep. So much emotion welled up inside her, she felt like she couldn't breathe. Everyone always thought Becca was the emotional one, but little did they know the secret she had, that she was a hot mess on the inside all the time. It was one reason she helped and volunteered.

Without moving her sister, she reached around and grabbed the jolly Santa and Grinch blankets off the back of the couch and covered them. She stared at the beautiful Christmas snow globe that her mother loved so much. Its lights twinkled in blue on the coffee table in front of her.

Finally, sleep took over, and everything was quiet for a while as her body settled into a restful sleep. Morning came fast, with someone nudging her. Blinking her eyes only a little open, she saw it wasn't her sister.

She didn't register what they were saying, but both Devin and Liam were standing in front of her. Adria closed her eyes again.

"I don't know what happened, but I think they are both out cold." Devin stepped away and grabbed two cups of coffee. At this point, he knew Liam wasn't dangerous but he didn't like it yet. He was warming up, so offering to grab a cup of coffee for them both was a simple gesture he hoped Liam wouldn't confuse for a friendship.

"Thanks." Liam sat down in a chair next to the couch Becca and Adria occupied. "It's so strange, I can't understand what happened here."

Devin studied the room. He was a lawyer, not a detective or officer of the law, so he had no clue what he was looking for or what happened. "They must have changed their mind and did something else. That's the only explanation because I don't have a clue what could be going on here. The good news is the snow is melting so maybe we can work on your truck soon."

"Yeah, that would be great. Listen, I know you don't like me very much, but clearly you can see I'm not a psycho. These two ladies are really special and I would do nothing to hurt them."

Devin rocked back on his heels, happy to hear that. Still, he needed more. "Do you have a record?"

Liam smiled. "You mean a criminal record? No. Nothing at all, not even a traffic violation that I know of. Sorry, now that I think about it, there might be a parking ticket I need to pay that I missed, but otherwise nothing."

Devin shook his head impressed. "Okay, I'll have to take your word for it right now since I've got no way to verify it, but if I find out otherwise..."

"Yeah, I know. Hey, do you think we should try to wake them up again? They have some explaining to do."

"Yeah."

The sensation of someone shaking her awake again was too much to ignore. Adria felt agitated, blinked her eyes open, feeling the pain in her neck and remembered where she was.

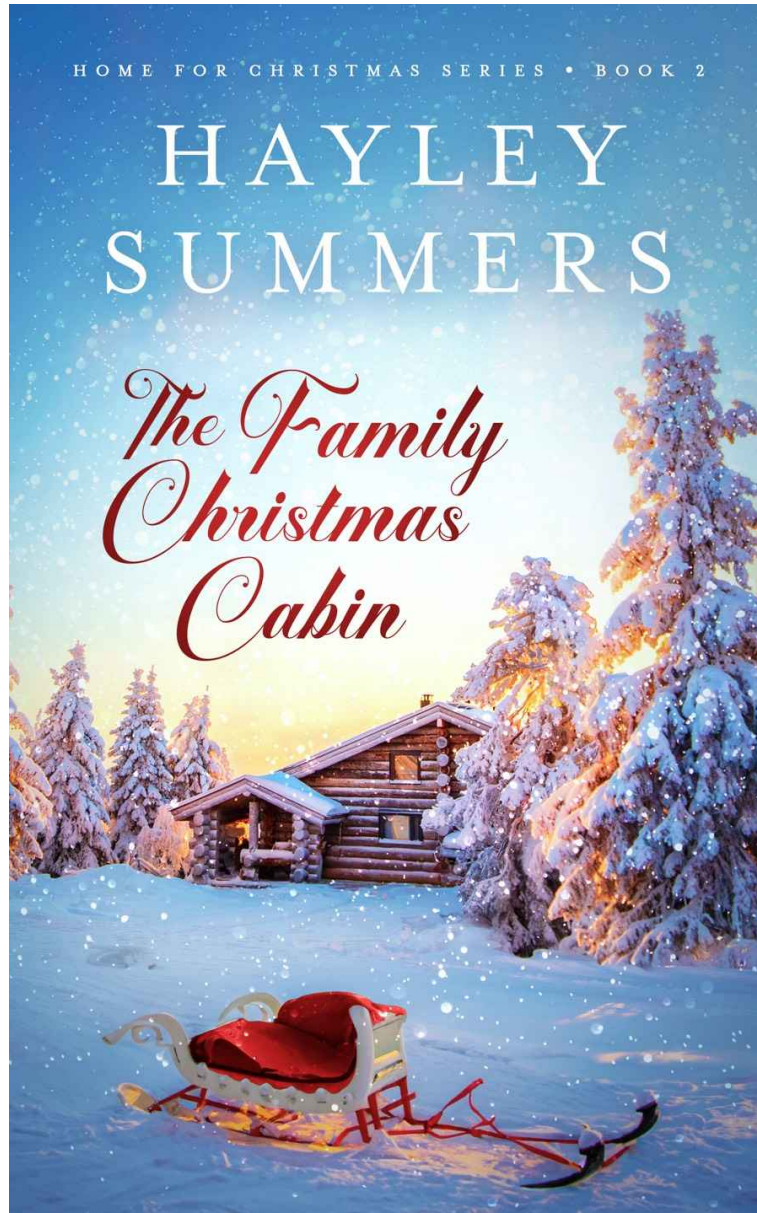
Devin was looking down at her. “Wake up, Adria.”

“What? What’s going on? Is something wrong?” Adria sat up.

Becca was still sound asleep with no intention of waking up, apparently. She blinked and frowned, then her eyes focused and shock hit. “Oh my! What in the world happened to all the decorations on the tree?”

Continue the story!

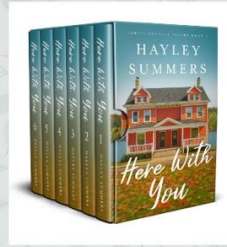
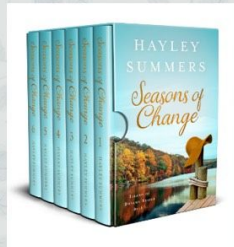
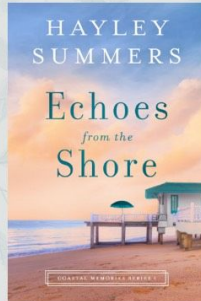
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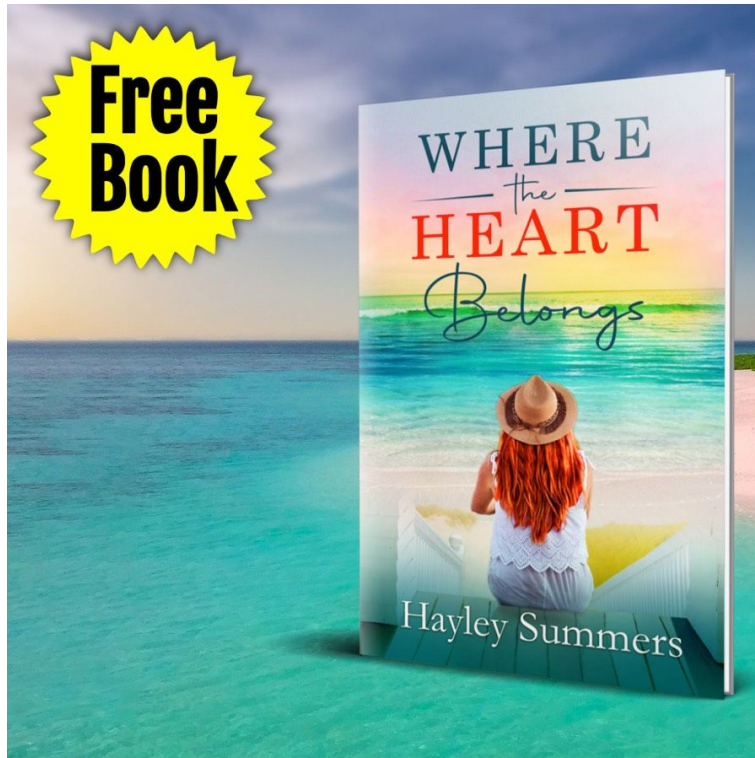


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