

FRAPPE TO KNOW YOU



COFFEE LOFT
SERIES



CARLY GREER

Frappe to Know You

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Chapter One

Thursday

The vibrant blue and white trim of the Morning Glory Inn stood out against the smaller surrounding houses, its turrets and wraparound porch oozing with Victorian charm. As visitors strolled through the quaint town of Willowbrook, their eyes were drawn to the grand dame, a timeless reminder of a bygone era.

Its weathered exterior bore the marks of time, hinting at a storied past. Maren Scott, the owner of the Inn for almost a year, looked at the structure with a mix of affection and hopeful aspirations.

The house boasted a distinctive asymmetrical design, adorned with ornate trim and gingerbread accents that once gleamed in vibrant colors but had now faded to soft pastels. A wraparound porch, adorned with hand-turned spindles and carved railings, embraced the front of the house. Most of the paint on the old clapboards and railings was peeling, but the bright mauve front door was pristine, having been given a fresh coat just last winter when Maren had purchased the Inn.

She often found herself gazing out through the long windows, imagining the lives that had unfolded within the walls of this Victorian beauty. Several windows were outfitted with stained glass panels, and though dimmed by years of exposure, they still cast a kaleidoscope of colors when the morning sunlight filtered through.

The roof, crowned with a weather-beaten turret, added a touch of whimsy to the overall structure. Maren envisioned the turret as a symbol of the Inn's resilience, hoping that with care and dedication, its former glory could be reclaimed.

On any given day as Maren walked along the creaking wooden floors of the Inn's interior, she felt a sense of potential lingering in the air. Each room, adorned with antique furniture and wallpaper held a promise of renewal. The staircase, its

banister worn smooth by countless hands that climbed up and down, hinted at the passage of time and the stories yet to unfold.

She dreamed of the day when she could breathe new life into its faded walls, restoring its former grandeur. For now, the Morning Glory Inn would have to await the transformation that Maren hoped to bring in the years to come.

Presently, Maren moved through the cozy rooms with purpose, a flurry of activity in preparation for the upcoming Valentine's Day weekend. It was no ordinary weekend at the Inn; all five guest rooms were booked for the hastily arranged wedding of her friend, Jasmine Carter. *Hastily arranged*, as in Jasmine had only met the guy six weeks ago.

Maren was both thrilled and concerned for her friend. Jasmine was known for her impulsive nature, and though Maren loved her dearly and wanted nothing but happiness for Jasmine, the rapid pace of events fueled her worry. Was this true love or a fleeting infatuation? Jasmine had been known for those as well.

Maren had tried to caution her friend: her longtime dream of a Valentine's Day wedding didn't have to be *this year*. Her hesitantly voiced concerns had fallen on deaf ears. And then Maren had felt bad for nearly spoiling Jasmine's electric excitement.

She was *so* in love. Just ask her. She'd tell you.

Having just supplied each guest room with fresh linens, towels, and complimentary toiletries, Maren next arranged fresh flowers in several common area locations. She delivered a tall arrangement of flowers, a mix of roses, lilies, and daisies, to the round table in the middle of the open foyer and then paused once again—for the third time this hour—to check her phone for an update on the weather.

A late winter storm was expected to sweep across Lake Erie, likely to dump several feet of snow over Willowbrook, an hour south of Buffalo, NY.

For the umpteenth time, Maren slid back the lace sheers in the front parlor and glanced across the street, beyond the smaller old homes and toward the lake, noting the clouds gathering ominously in the distance.

As if she didn't have enough to worry about, with a full house at the Inn and a wedding she had sincere reservations about, now this.

She prayed that the coming storm was not a sign of trouble for either the wedding or the marriage itself.

Determined to keep her worries at bay, Maren busied herself next in the spacious kitchen, where she started preparing tonight's planned meal.

The kitchen boasted a magnificent center island, its polished butcher-block countertop gleaming under the soft glow of pendant lights that were suspended overhead. Shelves lined with jars of spices and a rainbow assortment of fresh produce in baskets adorned the walls, while copper pots and pans dangled gracefully from a wrought-iron rack hanging from the ceiling.

It was only one o'clock and she was ahead of schedule, but the threatening storm had her feeling a bit frazzled. She immediately began trimming the asparagus and washed and de-stemmed mushrooms. The pork loin she would cook was already seasoned and waiting to go into the oven.

Thankfully, she had the Coffee Loft, from where she bought all her baked goods, including croissants and pastries for breakfast and cakes and tortes for evening desserts. She found cooking to be a more enjoyable experience because it allowed for more flexibility and room for mistakes. Baking, on the other hand, was not her favorite since it required more precision and was less forgiving of errors. Thus, aside from her tiny, all-consuming addiction to coffee, she was regularly grateful for the proximity of the Coffee Loft.

If not for the Coffee Loft, she might never have discovered her love of the old house to which the cafe was attached, nor the opportunity to have the Morning Glory Inn as her own.

The Morning Glory Inn stood at the main intersection of Willowbrook, tucked back from the road beyond a spacious front yard, facing the main thoroughfare, Maple Street, and occupying two lots down along Harmony Place. Previous owners of the Victorian house, way back in the 1950s, had built an addition to accommodate their growing upholstery business. The addition had been added on the side street, beyond the old garage that was set back a ways from the house. It had seen many iterations over the years, different businesses come and gone from antique shops to art studios. Several years ago, the old addition was leased by a franchise owner of the Coffee Loft, and subsequently outfitted as a quaint cafe. Maren had worked at the Coffee Loft while making her way through college and had come to know and love the owner of the Morning Glory Inn, Eleanor Bellingham.

Affectionately known as Ellie B, Mrs. Bellingham was a spirited and enterprising woman who, in the 1980s, stumbled upon the neglected Victorian and saw beyond its worn facade. Inspired by a passion for hospitality and a keen eye for potential, she transformed the historic dwelling into the small town's first bed and breakfast.

For years, Ellie ran the bed and breakfast with a warm heart and an astute business sense. The Morning Glory Inn became synonymous with her welcoming personality, creating a home away from home for countless guests, most of whom visited in the summer months to enjoy all the beauty the Lake Erie shoreline had to offer. However, as the winters in upstate New York grew harsher, Ellie found herself yearning for a change.

When she turned seventy, Ellie decided to retire and trade the chilly northern winters for the warmth of Florida.

For a full year, Ellie B had used all her charm and cunning to convince Maren to take over ownership of the Morning Glory Inn, letting go of the legacy she had meticulously created. She sweetened the deal by offering to hold the papers on the mortgage, knowing that Maren would not have been able to secure a mortgage for such a large amount on her own. Though the Coffee Loft's lease nearly covered the mortgage

payment itself, Maren hadn't the income at the time to convince a bank to give her a mortgage.

Ellie B now lived in Florida and occasionally exchanged letters and phone calls with Maren, offering snippets of advice seasoned with a touch of humor and nostalgia.

Maren missed her, and more than once had supposed that Ellie B would have been able to talk some sense into Jasmine had she still been living here.

Maren was sometimes successful convincing herself that any reservations about so hasty a wedding should belong only to the bride and groom, and that despite her own personal, more non-existent than treacherous dating history, true love, even love at first sight, likely did exist.

In the midst of the meal preparations, Maren heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps striding across the creaking wood floors of the long hall at the back door's entrance.

"Knock, knock," called a voice.

"Hi, Hal," Maren returned, recognizing the voice as that of Harold Miller, who lived directly across the street in a house his grandfather had built almost a hundred years ago.

A tall, gray haired man who had celebrated his 70th birthday just before Christmas appeared in one of the three entrances to the Inn's kitchen, his knit hat covered in snow.

Maren's shoulders sank. "Has it started already?" She asked unnecessarily, glancing out the closest window. "I was really hoping the snow would hold off at least until all the guests arrived safely."

"No holding it back, I'm afraid," said Hal, removing his hat and politely remaining on the rug near the door. "Might better be hoping you can get them out and not snowed in. Full house this weekend, right?"

Maren smiled. "Yes, and only for the second time since I took over, so despite Mother Nature's foul mood, I'm pretty excited about it."

“As you should be,” Hal allowed. “Bethany was just dropped off, by the way. Not sure she’ll be able to leave anytime soon, but at least you’ve got your help for tonight.”

“Oh, thank God. I’m a little nervous about a full table at dinner and managing cook and hostess duties all at once.”

“You’ll be fine,” Hal said, and then turned sideways in the doorway. “Here she is.”

Bethany Winters was a super sweet woman in her sixties with short gray hair and glasses too big for her face. She rather came with the Morning Glory Inn, having been employed by Ellie B for almost thirty years. She worked infrequently for Maren, called up whenever three or more of the five rooms were let.

Bethany was very petite, coming up to only Hal’s chest. She stepped carefully over the rug on which he stood, having left her boots in the hall, placing her hand on Hal’s coat to steady herself, her other arms weighted down with bags.

“Ugh, you can have the snow,” she grumbled. “I’m moving down south.”

“You keep promising...” teased Hal.

Indeed, Bethany had been saying just that for as long as Maren had known her.

Bethany stuck out her tongue at Hal and plopped a quilted overnight bag on the back counter and set down two canvas grocery bags on the floor.

“I’m going one day,” Bethany vowed, “and you’ll miss me when I’m gone.”

A playful glint entered Hal’s bright eyes. “I don’t think we’ll ever know, but I’d like to test it out.”

Maren shot Hal a reprimanding glare, but she was also grinning. Hal and Bethany had known each other for decades and their friendship language was simply to constantly goad each other.

“All right, out I go,” Hal said, “before she has me wearing an apron and chopping something. I’ll make sure the

walkways and porch steps are cleared now and throughout the day. Probably won't need to bring the snowplow over for another few hours."

Maren knew there was no talking him out of it. Even before she became the proud but anxious owner of the bed and breakfast, Harold Miller had rather made himself her guardian/friend/father figure. He'd celebrated each semester achieved in college, all her small milestones at the Coffee Loft over the years and had been one of the few people she'd consulted about purchasing the Inn, valuing his judgment and opinion more than almost anyone else's. She trusted Hal enough that she'd shared all the particulars of the deal and her plans for it in order to elicit the most practical and well-informed advice. At the time, his quiet but firm, "*If anyone can do it well and do it justice, you can,*" had instilled Maren with just the vote of confidence she'd needed.

After finding out how much she had paid for snow plow service the previous year, Hal insisted on taking care of all snow clearing for her. He dramatically pleaded with her to accept his offer, jokingly threatening to never speak to her again if she refused—at least Maren hoped he'd been joking. Although he was retired and his wife had passed away ten years ago, Maren knew that Hal was a purposeful and driven man. He always had a project going in his garage and loved to engage in long conversations over tea, claiming it was a necessary part of his Irish heritage to have at least three cups a day.

From a distance of ten feet away, Maren pointed her long knife at him. "And don't forget, I'll stand in the driveway and block your path—I'll throw myself under the snow blower if need be—there is to be no snow blowing or any shoveling at all unless you come for dinner tonight." That was the deal she'd made with him, since he refused to accept any money from her for his work.

Hal made a show of lengthening his long frame, pretending to look over the preparations under way on the counter in front of Maren. He sniffed with mock disdain at the

asparagus and mushrooms. “Don’t see myself crossing the street for a bowl of vegetables.”

Maren raised her brows at him. “But I wonder if you would cross the street for the Char Sui that will also make an appearance. Hm?”

Hal scrunched up his face with feigned annoyance. “How do you expect to whet my appetite if I have no idea what you’re trying to sell me on?”

Grinning, Maren informed him, “Think of it as a barbequed pork tenderloin.”

Hal raised one thick white brow. “You have my attention,” he suggested, not even bothering to hide his grin.

“And,” Maren went on playfully, “word on the street has it that some of those famous Morning Glory biscuits might make an appearance.” She shrugged then and resumed chopping, pretending it was of little importance to her if he were successfully enticed or not.

“The ones with the garlic and cheddar?” Hal inquired.

“Yep, those ones.”

“Say no more,” he said, returning his hat to his head. “And you still haven’t talked Jasmine out of this business?”

“The business of getting married, having known the guy for six weeks?” Maren asked, pausing again to toss a pointed look at Hal. “No, that was your job. Oh, but wait, you married your beloved Marjorie after—what was it? Eleven days?”

“That was different,” was his reply. “Margie was perfection. Sure enough, her friends tried to talk *her* out of it.”

“Were you thrilled to prove them wrong?” Maren wondered.

“Had nothing to prove to anyone but Margie.”

“She was a very lucky lady,” Maren said, a decision reached years ago.

“All right, I’ll give the generator a once over, make sure she’s ready in case the power goes out.”

“Thanks, Hal. See you at dinner,” she reminded him deliberately.

Easing out of her faux fur coat to reveal her denim overalls, which were rolled up to her shins revealing a pair of blue socks with snowflakes—Bethany’s style was, unapologetically, bold and eclectic—she arched one brow at Maren. “You think love should have a timeline?” She asked.

Being a self-confessed love addict, Bethany had previously let it be known that she was in full support of Jasmine and Liam’s wedding.

Maren snorted. “I know nothing about it. I’m just considering impulsiveness versus stability, and building strong foundations,” she defended her position. “Knowing someone for only a few weeks might not provide a deep understanding of their true character, is all I’m saying.”

“Bah,” Bethany scoffed, shrugging it off with a wave of her hand. “They’ve found a deep connection that goes beyond the time they’ve known each other. Some couples build strong bonds quickly. If you ever put yourself out there—in the market, so to speak—you might know this.”

Maren wrinkled her nose. Her life—the Morning Glory Inn presently—didn’t exactly lend itself to putting herself out there. “Like I said, I know nothing. I’m happy if Jasmine is happy.”

Chapter Two

Alec shifted uncomfortably in his seat as the plane landed, relieved that the plane had made it to New York before the storm hit. He normally looked forward to traveling back home to Buffalo, but this trip was different. His best friend Liam was getting married to someone he had only known for a few months, and Alec couldn't shake off his annoyance. Not only was he missing out on the highly anticipated Tech Innovations Convention, but he took serious issue with this whirlwind romance, certainly since it came so close on the heels of Liam's break-up with his long-term girlfriend, Grace.

Liam McLaughlin was known for his intelligence and competence, a good-natured individual with a quick wit and sound judgement. This impulsive behavior was a stark contrast to his usual character and Alec was, reasonably so, worried about this decision.

Liam and Grace's ten year relationship had been on-again, off-again, and constantly fraught with trouble. When they last broke up, Liam had said to Alec, "I don't want to—I can't—get sucked back in by her. I need this break to be permanent."

Alec had rarely been so happy in his life to hear those words after watching for years the deterioration of Liam and Grace's relationship. Though he was certain she hadn't always been that way, Alec knew how toxic and manipulative Grace had become. It seemed like Liam had dodged one bullet only to be put in the path of another, with this Jasmine Carter, whom he had only just met at Christmas.

Although Alec typically wasn't suspicious of people's motives, he couldn't help but wonder whether Jasmine, who worked at a café, might be drawn to Liam's wealth. Liam not only held a lucrative position as a cybersecurity engineer for a globally recognized aerospace and defense industry company but also inherited a significant trust from his grandfather. The combination of his prestigious job and substantial inheritance raised questions about Jasmine's intentions—as it would about

anyone's intentions to wed after only knowing someone for six weeks.

While Alec planned to visit his parents during this trip and had several appointments up in Buffalo next week, it made no sense to stay with his parents for this weekend since Willowbrook and the wedding were an hour away. Instead, he'd booked three nights at Willowbrook's only B & B, the only other option in the small town being a run-down motel, whose website curiously offered as one of their amenities a 'highway serenade'. *Indulge in the soothing sounds of passing traffic* had literally been written about the amenity, given that the motel was just off the New York State Thruway. Alec was no marketing pro, but even he realized the motel would have been better off mentioning their convenient proximity to the thruway rather than highlighting the effect of that.

In consideration of the coming storm, he'd ordered a car ahead of time from a private company rather than trust his life in the hands of a part-time ride-share driver, hoping for a little more professionalism—and a lot more safety—to get him from the airport to Willowbrook in one piece.

After about thirty minutes on the road, snow started to sprinkle down from above. The driver handled the car skillfully, not letting the falling snow or worsening road conditions faze him. Alec was less unnerved by this than he was made more annoyed by the whole reason for his visit.

A Valentine's Day wedding, for crying out loud. So cliché.

The last few miles of the long ride became particularly treacherous. The solid white sky he'd met at the airport was now an ominous gray and Alec twice found himself white-knuckling the seat in front of him as they went further and further south. While he was impressed with the skill of Mark, his driver, he didn't like not being in control himself.

With a grateful sigh, he spotted the elegant old house ahead. The wooden sign announcing the Morning Glory Inn had definitely seen better days, the paint chipping away to reveal the grain of the wood underneath. It leaned slightly to one side as if tired of standing in the same spot year after year.

The expansive front yard was covered in several inches of freshly fallen snow.

Mark pulled the big SUV into the half-moon driveway, which appeared to have been freshly plowed, and put the vehicle in park.

“You’re a true professional, Mark,” Alec said. “I hope you’re okay driving back up to the city.”

“It’s all part of the job, sir,” he replied. “I’ve been driving these roads for years and have seen my fair share of winter storms. I gotta get home. Valentine’s Day is an entire week at my house, whether I like it or not. If they don’t put out a driving ban, I’ll be taking the wife to dinner and a movie.”

Alec grinned, so very glad he wasn’t a henpecked husband. “Good luck with that.”

Outside, his breath formed little clouds in front of his face, which were swiftly taken away by the wind. Mark retrieved his luggage and duffel bag from the trunk and Alec shook his hand and wished him another safe drive before he made his way toward the wraparound front porch, which might prove very inviting in the summer months but right now was only a repository for blowing and drifting snow. A quick glance around revealed a nearly picturesque scene, the grand Victorian nestled in the small town’s wintry embrace.

Alec climbed the few stairs to the porch, all swept clean of snow for now, and decided he much preferred Austin’s mild winters, where snow rarely fell.

Before he reached the brightly painted front door, it was pulled open from inside.

An older man exited, dressed from neck to toe in beige canvas, overalls and a heavy jacket. He was just applying his knit hat to his head, pulling it down over his ears.

He looked Alec up and down and turned to call over his shoulder, into the house, “Maren! First guest is here!”

A muffled reply sounded from further inside the house.

The man said, “How do you do?” to Alec and moved out of the way, adding, “I’ll get the door. Get in there.”

Alec stepped across the threshold, entering the warm foyer dimly lit by a small, vintage, and sparkling chandelier. The door closed behind him and within seconds the scrapings sounds of a shovel against the porch floor were heard.

He caught a whiff of something cooking but couldn’t place the aroma, the subtle scent mingling with burning wood crackling in a fireplace, viewed through the open door of the parlor to the right. Soft classical music filled the air, also coming from the front parlor.

Alec’s eyes slowly adjusted to the interior, the brightness of the snow fading away. He surveyed the spacious entryway, large enough to fit a four-foot round table decorated with an impressive display of fresh flowers. Just inside the door to the left was a magnificent straight staircase made of cherry stained wood and railings painted white. The banister curved gracefully at the bottom, ending in a swirl. The walls there and going up the stairs were covered in a small floral patterned wallpaper and decorated with vintage paintings.

To the right, in front of a door that might be a closet stood a tall counter made of finely carved wood, which he assumed was the front desk or check-in area. He parked his luggage there just as he heard footsteps coming from the long corridor beyond the foyer’s table.

A tall and willowy brunette appeared, smiling warmly, the effect of her really pretty smile not lost on Alec. Auburn hair was pulled back from her face in a ponytail, but a few long strands had escaped, framing the delicate features of her face.

“You must be Alec,” she said, extending her hand as she approached. “I’m Maren. I’m so glad you made it. This storm has me so worried that some of the guests won’t get in.”

Alec mechanically reached for and clasped her hand though he kept his gaze on hers. He knew who she was. Or rather he knew of her. Liam had told him that Jasmine’s friend owned the bed and breakfast where he’d be staying. He just

hadn't expected...Well, he hadn't expected anything, hadn't given a moment's thought to Jasmine's friend.

"Alec Sullivan," he introduced, and then promptly and figuratively kicked himself. She'd just said his name. "Yeah, it was just beginning to get rough, the drive," he said, frowning a bit at himself for being distracted, his mind paused and stammering while he was completely taken aback by the stunning beauty of Maren Scott.

Maren smiled a bit awkwardly now and was forced to tug at her hand, since he was still preoccupied and hadn't let go. She slid behind the counter and faced him again, tapping away at a laptop connected back there. "I'll just need to see your ID and the credit card you booked with."

He pulled his wallet from his jeans' pocket and fished out the requested items. Leaning his arm over the top of the front desk, which sat just about mid-torso on him, he offered the two cards to her and continued to stare at her.

"Are you excited about the wedding?" She asked. "Jasmine tells me you and Liam have been friends since college."

He wasn't one to have his head so easily turned by a pretty face, but Maren Scott was obviously more than that. She was dressed casually in jeans and a cozy sweater, and he didn't know if her eyes were really so remarkably green or if the flickering light overhead and her emerald sweater were playing tricks on him. She definitely had freckles, though. That was not any play of light, the charming freckles peppered across her nose and the tops of her cheeks.

Her question pierced his consciousness then. The wedding.

"Yeah, we met at college up in Buffalo. If Liam is happy, I'm happy," he said cautiously.

Maren went still, except for her gaze darting on and off him from under a heavy fringe of lashes. Laying a receipt atop the counter and handing him a pen, she hesitantly asked, "You...have reservations then? About the shortness of their acquaintance? Or about the bride, whom you've yet to meet?"

He perceived some censure in her tone, in those words: *the bride, whom you've yet to meet.*

He had reservations about both, but asked of Maren Scott, friend of the bride in question, "Are you not alarmed by the speed of this...courtship?"

The smile she'd tried to maintain faltered slightly. "Alarm is a strong word. I'm surprised and I would have—and did—advise caution, but we're not talking about a couple of twenty-year olds. They're both intelligent adults with past relationships by which to judge love, and because I'm not in the thick of it with them, I guess I'm hoping that they know themselves and this relationship better than I do." She shrugged indifferently, maybe a little coolly. "It's not my decision or my business to tell them what's best for them."

Sensing her sudden coolness, he didn't tell her that he planned to make it his business over the next few days.

When the check-in process was complete, Maren's next smile was decidedly tighter as she stepped out from behind the desk. "I'll show you to your room," she said.

Alec followed her up the stairs, lifting his suitcase off the ground so that it didn't bounce up every step.

"Breakfast is at 8:30," she said over her shoulder. "But if you're an early riser, feel free to grab a cup of coffee next door at the Coffee Loft, where they're always frappe to know you."

Having reached the second floor landing, Alec took in the small sitting area that somewhat overlooked the foyer, complete with two arm chairs and a tall lamp upon a table between them, this vignette flanked on one side by floor to ceiling bookcases, packed with hundreds of books. A quick glance said some of them might be very old.

He realized two hallways, one going straight ahead and another to the right. He followed Maren down the right hallway and stopped when she did at the third door. She turned the key and pushed open the door.

She entered only a few steps, standing against the wall to allow Alec to pass.

He stopped directly in front of her.

“Sorry, what did—did you just say *frappe to know you*?”

She grinned. “Um, yes. I used to work there, at the Coffee Loft. When people ordered their coffees, or whatever drinks, we’d ask for a name to put on the cup and we’d always say, *Hi, So-and-So, I’m frappe to know you.*” Her lips turned up in a small, hesitant smile. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, perhaps feeling a tinge of embarrassment. “Old habits and all that.”

“I see,” he commented and entered fully into the suite, which was adorned with rich, velvety curtains and heavy, ornate floral wallpaper. A large four-poster bed dominated the room, its elaborately carved posts reaching towards the ceiling. The plush carpeting was a deep red, matching the velvet armchairs placed neatly in the corner. The antique furniture was heavy and well-kept, and arranged perfectly in the space. The high ceilings and large windows allowed natural light to flood the space, highlighting the details of the room.

“The bathroom is there to your left, around that corner,” Maren instructed. “There are fresh towels and there’s an extra heated blanket in the trunk at the end of the bed, if needed.”

Alec stared out the windows briefly, which overlooked the houses across the street and the furious lake beyond. The vast expanse of Lake Erie was transformed into a wicked winter wonderland under a relentless curtain of snow, the world beyond the icy shoreline obscured by a wall of white.

He pivoted, returning to Maren at the door, as she held the room’s key for him.

“If you need anything at all, don’t hesitate to ask,” she offered. “We will have cocktails at six-thirty and dinner will be at seven.” She pointed to the antique waterfall dresser. “I left an itinerary for the weekend there, what’s planned in regard to the wedding. And as you might expect, all the Inn’s guests are here for the wedding, so that should be fun.”

He nodded, taking the key from her hand. “Thanks, Maren. I’ll see you at dinner.”

Chapter Three

Maren moved absently down the stairs, wondering if her cheeks were red.

She wasn't sure what to make of Alec Sullivan.

Granted, she didn't know that Jasmine and Liam getting married after six weeks was a great idea either, but she wasn't sure that she'd have voiced her opinion to a stranger, even if they were friends with the couple. She bit her lip, wondering if the fact that Alec Sullivan had expressed his concern meant that he strongly opposed the idea.

That issue aside, Maren's eyes went belatedly wide for how handsome he was.

But then she wondered if she'd have noticed it if not for the way he'd stared at her, almost with some surprise—had he expected Jasmine's friend and the owner of the Inn to be an ogre? Okay, sure, likely how handsome he was rarely went unnoticed by any warm-blooded female, but was it heightened or reduced by the way he'd studied her so intently?

He'd stood tall and broad, effortlessly dominating the space of the open foyer, with a strong jawline and thick black hair that was short but wavy. His piercing blue eyes had seemed to cut through everything they'd touched upon. Maren had found herself both drawn to his sharp gaze and then feeling exposed by the intensity of it.

When he spoke, Alec's voice resonated with smooth authority, each word carrying a weight that demanded consideration. She knew he owned his own company and supposed his deliberate way of speaking, slowly and with confidence served him well in that capacity.

Oh, but that gaze, she thought, returning to what had most unnerved and stirred her, was as cold as the icy lake over which came the storm.

"Ugh," she moaned, angry with herself for giving so much thought to a guy who seemed so...well, angry.

She returned to the kitchen, where Bethany was humming to herself as she mixed the dough for the biscuits promised to Hal, but before Maren would have donned her apron again, the bell at the front door jingled once more.

She glanced at the clock. Still plenty of time unless she got held up checking in guests one after another.

“Go on, Mar,” Bethany said cheerily. “I’ve got this. We’re right on schedule.”

Returned to the foyer, Maren was surprised to find not one or two but four people just entering, shaking off snow from their boots and coats. The door, until it was pushed closed, let in a blast of icy air and swirling snow, brought in by a strong wind.

“Oh, boy,” she said by way of a greeting. “Looks like you folks made it just in time. Welcome everyone.” She positioned herself behind the antique check-in desk. “You must be Mr. and Mrs. Adamczyk,” she said to the couple approaching the counter with some urgency, as if there were a prize for beating out the other couple. She’d never met Jasmine’s parents but knew they were coming from Rochester. They looked a little road weary after the drive.

Jasmine’s mother, a woman in her late fifties with heavily painted brows, already—or still—wore a discontented expression. She adjusted her scarf and peered at Maren over the top of the desk and muttered, “Honestly, winter weddings.”

Maren’s eyes widened before she pasted on a false smile and consulted her laptop. Poor Jasmine, she was 0 for 2 in the happy wedding guests department.

“I’m sure the drive wasn’t great, but you’re here now,” Maren said. “The hard part is done, and you’ll have plenty of time to settle in before cocktails and dinner. I’m sure—”

“I told Jasmine a summer wedding would have been more sensible,” Mrs. Adamczyk interrupted, though she appeared only to be voicing her complaints and not specifically speaking to Maren or anyone else.

“Winter weddings do have their own magic,” Maren tried again.

“Do they?” Mrs. Adamczyk returned shortly.

Mr. Adamczyk stepped forward, putting his hands, which held his wallet, on the desk top. He was possibly several years older than his wife—or her sour puss had made him look that way after many years, Maren thought uncharitably—with thinning silver hair and a distinguished yet approachable appearance. His smile was warm and friendly.

“Thank you for having us. The drive wasn’t that bad and now it’s done,” he said, turning a pointed look onto his wife, who ignored him. “We’re looking forward to celebrating with our daughter.”

Maren returned his smile, and this time she didn’t have to fake it. She checked them in quickly and sent an apologetic glance to the waiting couple as she took a few more minutes to show the Adamczyks to their room, helping them to carry their luggage.

When she returned, she welcomed the next couple.

“Mark and Emily Thompson,” the petite and pretty brunette said. “We’re friends of Liam’s. He steered us toward your Inn. This house is great. How much am I allowed to explore?”

Maren liked her straight away, liked anyone who expressed appreciation for the old house and a desire to know more about it.

“Aside from the individual chambers and the stairs leading to the third floor, which is my private apartment,” Maren explained, “there are no locks on any door. Wander freely. I’ll show you a book later, about the original family who built the house.” Her voice quickened with enthusiasm. “And if you’re interested and don’t mind creepy old cellars, I’ll show you the massive basement. They used to smuggle liquor during prohibition, brought it down the lake from Canada and then up from the beach to this house. The cellar is a maze of passageways, false walls, and hidden rooms.”

Emily's brown eyes went wonderfully wide. "Oh, gosh. I'm never going to want to leave."

Her husband, Mark, who was lanky and sported a full beard and a studious looking pair of glasses, said indifferently, "If this snow keeps up, we might not be leaving anyway."

They chatted a bit more before Maren showed the Thompsons to their room.

Maren returned to the kitchen, this time able to don her apron and get to work on the appetizers, the first being mushrooms stuffed with sausage, garlic, and herbed cream cheese.

When she had the mushrooms all stuffed and in the oven, with the time set for Bethany to take them out, Maren used the back staircase and went to her apartment on the third floor to get dressed.

Ellie B had transformed the massive third floor attic into her living quarters forty years ago so that the five bedrooms on the second floor could be used exclusively for guests. Maren had only to update the décor when she took over, which had been the last thing she'd done, after focusing most of the renovations on the first two floors. She climbed up the worn and creaking steps and opened the door at the top into her small living room, outfitted with an antique Persian rug and plenty of natural light from a number of windows. Against one wall stood a mahogany bookcase, filled with her favorite novels, while plush high-backed chairs and a small, tufted loveseat were arranged for a tiny sitting area. She only used this living room on the occasions when several rooms were let *and* she had downtime, which was rare. A little kitchenette sat just beyond, with only a small bistro table and chairs and a six-foot counter and sink, microwave, and mini fridge. Even when no rooms were occupied, she mostly made use of the much larger, better-equipped kitchen downstairs.

The bedroom exuded a cozy ambiance, with an antique queen sleigh bed dressed in layers of embroidered linens and a plush quilt. A Victorian era vanity, salvaged and refinished, sat prettily against one wall. The bathroom was at the front of the

house, and featured a clawfoot tub with polished brass fixtures that Maren kept meaning to replace since it was a chore to keep clean and hard water stains drove her nuts. Normally the frosted window above the bathtub provided plenty of daylight, but today only a dreary grayness streamed through the glass.

Quickly, she washed her face and hands and brushed her teeth. She pulled out the ponytail from her hair and gave it a quick brush. For dinners with her guests, she liked to strike a balance between casual and formal in what she wore, not wanting anyone in the dining room to feel either over or underdressed. Tonight, she chose a pair of high-waisted, wide-legged black pants with a silk blouse in a soft shade of pink. Maren tucked in the blouse and tied the black fabric belt into a knot at the waist and slipped her feet into her shiny black loafers—heels were not a good idea with all the moving she'd do tonight between the kitchen and dining room. Lastly, she finished the ensemble with a gold pendant and a pair of hoop earrings.

Giving herself a final once-over in the full size mirror that leaned against the floral papered wall near her vanity, she mussed her hair a bit to give it some volume and switched off the small table lamp before going back downstairs.

She arrived in the kitchen just in time to hear the front door's bell jingle once more.

“Whew,” said Bethany. “I was beginning to worry they wouldn't make it.”

Maren was, too.

She met Jasmine's cousin, Rachel Wallace, and her boyfriend, Dan Harris.

“Ugh, I thought we'd never make it,” groaned Rachel, a twenty-something woman with a head of sleek purple and gray hair. “Three times I begged him to turn around.” She wore a short black skirt, horizontal purple-and-white striped tights, and short, heavy black boots.

“And three times I told you we would make it,” said Dan Harris, who looked to also be about mid-twenties, and was

short and stocky and giving off accountant vibes with his khaki pants, navy peacoat, thin glasses and boyish, cleanshaven face. There were very distinct red circles in the middle of each cheek.

Rachel rolled her eyes. “Well, excuse me for finding that hard to believe in that little deathtrap of a car.”

“It’s a Subaru,” said Dan, his tone affronted. “They’re literally known for their impressive handling and overall reliability.” He rolled two suitcases up to the counter. “They dominate rally races all over the world and—”

“No one cares, Dan,” sighed Rachel before landing at the desk and smiling thinly at Maren. “Your snow plow guy looks really creepy out there,” she said to Maren. “Like he’s covered in snow from head to toe, looks like a walking snowman.”

Suppressing an overwhelming urge to match Rachel’s tone and weird unkindness, Maren smiled as brightly as she could, recalling the hospitality industry’s golden rule: the customer is always right, even when they might not be. Or when they were simply mean girls.

“Let me get you checked in so you can freshen up before cocktails and dinner,” Maren said.

An hour later, after she had made introductions in the parlor so that everyone knew each other, Maren stood at the back of the long parlor, where she filled a tray with martini glasses and poured a nearly clear liquid into each glass.

Alec Sullivan hadn’t yet arrived for cocktail hour and another couple expected to stay this weekend hadn’t arrived yet.

“This is my version of a clementine martini,” she said to the room in general. “I stole the recipe from a restaurant in Philly. Apparently the place is so famous that more than one death row inmate requested his last meal be served from there. Anyway, it has to stew for forty days—the clementine vodka over a fresh, skinned pineapple—and you get this smooth,

gorgeous martini. I promise you'll never want a different drink."

"So, it's kind of an *I would die for you* drink?" Emily proposed with a grin.

"Ba dum bump," offered Dan, making the drumbeat sound normally used to mark a punchline.

Rachel threw Dan a stony look while an appreciative giggle burst from Maren.

It was too soon to know if Rachel were naturally grumpy and Dan could do nothing right, or if this displeased look was aimed specifically at him for making conversation and having fun with another woman, particularly a very pretty one, such as was Emily. Reminding herself as she was sometimes forced to do, *you'll likely never see her again after this weekend*, Maren ignored the bizarre interplay between the couple, steering the conversation towards the surrounding area.

She loved Willowbrook and she took great joy in sharing its rich history and intriguing anecdotes with anyone who would listen.

"For any of you who aren't familiar with Willowbrook, it was originally settled by a group of industrious pioneers in the mid-19th century," she said as she made her way from guest to guest, offering a tray of prepared martinis. "In its infancy, it thrived on fishing and timber industries, with a lot of people settling just inland to farm." She took the last glass for herself and settled into the huge winged-back chair in front of the fireplace. "I kind of feel like a librarian getting ready for story time," she quipped, with a roomful of eyes on her. "As I mentioned to Emily, during Prohibition in the 1920s, Willowbrook gained notoriety as a hotspot for smuggling operations. Its proximity to the Canadian border and expansive shoreline made it an ideal location for clandestine activities. Local legends speak of secret tunnels connecting lakeside houses, allowing residents to discreetly move contraband during the dark nights. The Morning Glory Inn and her owners at the time, Mr. and Mrs. Stirling Hollister, appear to have partaken of some of those activities."

“*He* probably did,” Mrs. Adamczyk chimed in. “Mrs. Hollister likely remained blissfully unaware.”

“Or maybe not,” Emily suggested. “Maybe she knew what her husband was doing but didn’t mind, so long as it kept her in this nice house and in fancy clothes.”

“We might never know,” Maren advised. “But there is some great information and old photos at the Willowbrook Heritage Society. That entity was born after the Great Fire of 1937, which swept through the town, leaving a significant portion in ashes. The Morning Glory Inn, which at that time was simply known as the Hollister House, was untouched by the fire.”

Several gazes left her and moved to the front doorway, where stood Alec Sullivan, looking almost annoyingly handsome. He’d changed clothes, and now wore jeans and a button down shirt of baby blue that accentuated his broad shoulders and lean frame.

Their eyes met, and Maren’s heart skipped a beat.

“Missed the history lesson, did I?” He quipped, striding casually into the parlor.

At best his tone could have been compared to one of polite disinterest. At best.

Maren wasn’t sure if he was simply tossing out a throwaway opening line, or if he was actually mocking her. Either way, she didn’t appreciate his flippancy and felt her cheeks warm, flustered and annoyed to have been affected by him at all.

Standing, she collected the empty tray from the chairside table and asked Alec if he would like a martini or something else to drink.

“You definitely want the martini,” coached Emily’s husband, Mark.

“Martini it is, then,” Alec agreed, crossing the room, following Maren to the bar.

“Has anyone actually heard from Jasmine today?” Mrs. Adamczyk asked the room in general. “I’ve texted her three times and she hasn’t answered.”

“I know she had a busy day, picking up her gown from Mimi’s,” Maren said over her shoulder as she filled the silver bar shaker with the pre-made drink and ice, entirely too aware of Alec’s close proximity now, standing next to her, seeming to check out her bar set-up. “I’m sure there are a lot of last minute details that needed attention today.”

“And we’re having the rehearsal dinner here tomorrow?” Mrs. Adamczyk continued. “That makes no sense, certainly because neither Emily or Rachel are actually in the wedding. Why didn’t they book the Harbor View?”

“Jasmine wanted her out of town guests to be included,” Maren said, as that had been part of Jasmine’s reasoning when she’d asked Maren if she could comfortably accommodate twenty-two for dinner. “I’m rather hoping after tonight’s dinner, you might be happy to know you’ll have another meal here tomorrow.” She strained the drink into a clean glass and handed it to Alec.

“One might think,” Alec said quietly to Maren, “that there were plenty of issues to take with this wedding aside from the venue and schedule.”

“Meaning?” Maren asked, arching a brow.

“The speed at which it came about.”

“Oh, yes. You did mention you had reservations about the quality of their relationship.”

“Don’t you?”

“I know that Jasmine is happy,” she said purposefully. “Didn’t you mention that as a concern earlier about Liam?”

He was not chastised at all.

“Obviously, I don’t know Jasmine the way you do. But Liam is very...he’s comfortable, and it does raise an eyebrow that he’s tying the knot so swiftly with a barista he just met.”

Her spine stiffening, Maren struggled to contain her anger. What a jerk.

“You are correct,” she said in a low and cool voice, not wanting to be overheard. “Obviously, you *don't* know Jasmine. But hey, her parents are here. Let's ask them if their daughter is gold-digging. That's what you're suggesting, right?”

“I'm not suggesting anything—”

“Aren't you?” Maren turned her back on Alec Sullivan and addressed the room at large, her voice returned to friendliness, or as much as she could muster. “If you will excuse me, everyone. Dinner is in five minutes. I'll just duck into the kitchen and make sure everything is ready. Feel free to start heading to the dining room,” she said and pointed toward the end of the long room, “through those French doors there.”

Chapter Four

All right, she definitely knew what she was doing as far as running a bed and breakfast went. Though Alec was generally a cold beer guy, the martini she'd pressed into his hand was possibly the best mixed drink he'd ever had. And he wasn't sure what was stuffed inside those mushrooms on that fancy silver tray in the parlor, but those things were magnificent, not soon to be forgotten. He was rather sorry that he'd not arrived in time for the full cocktail hour and more hors d'oeuvres.

He moseyed around the parlor, eyeing the well-stocked bar of the bed and breakfast. It was made quaint inside a refurbished China cabinet, which had been painted a soft blue and purposefully weathered, the back wall of which was wallpapered in a pale plaid pattern. The entire bottom of the piece of furniture had been reconfigured so that when you opened the lower doors, one side revealed a wine and beer cooler. Up top, there were bottles of brandy, whiskey, bourbon, and several cordials. Admittedly, it was too pretty to suit his tastes, but he appreciated how the old piece of furniture had been adapted.

He thought her little history lesson was rather cute. He could sense and hear her enthusiasm in her subject matter, the Inn and the small town, making even the most mundane details seem extraordinary. He felt a little bad for squashing her fervor. His little quip to announce his arrival had turned her attention toward him, but it was unfortunate that the sparkle of excitement in her green eyes had been nearly completely extinguished by the time her gaze had landed on him.

Alec wasn't here to make new friends, and frankly he wasn't too concerned about what people might think of his opinions about the too-fast wedding, but then he felt oddly, uncharacteristically bad for having upset Maren Scott, as he'd evidently done earlier in the parlor.

Admittedly, she intrigued him. She was gorgeous, captivating, and unerringly nice, even when he wasn't. Unfortunately, that was a combination he didn't run into so

often in Austin. Maybe there was something to be said for small towns.

After a few minutes, Alec followed the inn's guests to the dining room, where the table was set for twelve.

Maren and another woman came and went, bringing covered dishes to the table, where apparently they would dine family style. Maren waved a gloved hand, advising there was no assigned seating, and to just sit anywhere.

“Unfortunately,” she said, “Liam’s cousin, Jim, and his wife, Heidi, just sent me an email saying they were stuck on the thruway, where a tractor trailer has jack-knife. They’re still a hundred miles out and not sure if they can make it at all—or, sadly, even get off the thruway anytime soon.”

Which might mean, Alec guessed, that there were two extra places at the table.

He took the seat next to the chair at the foot of the table.

Alec was surprised by the arrival of the man who’d held the door open earlier and had ushered him into the inn. The elderly gentleman had changed into a pair of brown trousers, a dress shirt, and a cardigan sweater.

Maren, returning with another large dish for the table, introduced him warmly.

“I’d like you to meet my neighbor, Hal Miller,” she said. “He lives across the street and has made owning the Morning Glory so much easier, so much better for having him as my friend. Hal is a regular at the Coffee Loft and knows Jasmine as well as I do and will be joining us for the wedding.”

She then went around the table, introducing the three different couples, which actually helped Alec out as he didn’t know anyone here.

“This is Mr. and Mrs. Adamczyk, the very proud parents of the bride, our friend, Jasmine,” she said, moving around the table. “That’s Mark and Emily Thompson. Mark and Liam have known each other since grad school. Emily works at a non-profit organization, focusing on community development up in Buffalo. This is Rachel, Jasmine’s cousin, and her

boyfriend, Dan. Dan, you teach computer science, right? And Rachel is a travel blogger—or is it vlogger?”

“I am a documenter of adventures,” Rachel corrected.

The purple-haired woman said this without emotion so that Alec could not tell if she was admonishing Maren for giving false information or if Rachel was merely attempting to embellish her job description.

“How does a blizzard rank by way of adventure?” Hal asked.

A tight and condescending smile was Rachel’s only response, which barely masked her disinterest in engaging with an old-timer like Hal. Though Rachel had turned her attention back to the phone in her hand, Maren stared at her for another second. Alec speculated that if there were no other guests, Maren might have allowed her lip curl to evolve, as it appeared she was holding something back. And then he wondered if Maren had any sort of *Checkout-Can’t-Come-Soon-Enough* list of people, and if Rachel had just shot right to the top.

“And that’s Alec Sullivan,” Maren said next as she set down the platter at the other end of the table, “a friend of Liam’s as well.” Maren announced she had one more dish to bring and disappeared into the kitchen again.

Hal Miller took the chair at the foot of the table, giving a polite nod to Alec, and snapped out his napkin, laying it in his lap. “I hope you came hungry,” he said to Alec.

“I did. And I’m sure you worked up quite an appetite trying to keep up with the snow.”

The old man leaned over toward Alec and whispered with some disgruntlement. “She told me not to come in unless every flake of snow was cleared.”

Before Alec caught himself, his eyes widened.

Thankfully, Hal Miller didn’t let his little fun drag on. Instead, he chuckled. “Settle down, son. I’m just teasing. Does she look like she needs to crack the whip on anyone?”

No, she most certainly did not.

“She’s been busy,” Hal said next, maintaining a quiet tone, leaning a bit toward Alec, “so I haven’t told her how bad the snow is getting out there. We’re in for a doozy. Where are you from, Alec? Are you accustomed to snow like this?”

“I live in Texas now, sir. But I’m originally from the area—from Buffalo, actually—so yes, I am familiar with Western New York’s weather. And no, I do not miss it.”

“If you don’t like it…” Hal began expectantly.

“Wait five minutes,” Alec finished with a grin.

Hal grimaced a bit. “Might better wait a few days on this one. It’s only going to get worse tonight and tomorrow.”

“Won’t make for a very pleasant wedding.”

“Nope, not one bit,” Hal agreed. “Let’s hope it’s not a bad omen.”

Alec tightened his jaw, reluctant to again put forth his views on the wedding. Not after hitting that hard brick wall with Maren.

Maren returned shortly, and lids were then removed from all the dishes and dinner was served. A savory pork tenderloin was the centerpiece, accompanied by rosemary roasted potatoes, a wild mushroom risotto, and grilled asparagus with little spiraled lemon rinds.

“Did I hear you say you live in Texas, Alec?” Asked the bride’s mother, Mrs. Adamczyk. “I have a sister near Fort Worth.”

“That’s about three hours north, up near Dallas,” he commented.

“What prompted the move to Austin?” She asked.

“Business,” Alec answered. “Austin is friendly to new tech start-ups, which is what I have.”

“You own your own company?” Mrs. Adamczyk persisted. “How interesting. What kind of tech do you make? Or do you manage tech? I know nothing about all these new advances.”

“We would fall mostly under the software development realm,” he said. “We focus on innovative solutions for streamlining business processes. We’ve also developed advanced machine learning algorithms and AI models, which can be and are applied across various sectors, including healthcare, finance, and cybersecurity.”

A blank look crossed the woman’s face. “Way above my head.”

When Mrs. Adamczyk shifted her attention to her niece, Rachel, Hal handed a basket to Alec after he’d plucked out two biscuits. Alec made to pass it on—he was a money food guy and didn’t normally fill himself with bread.

“Oh no, son,” Hal interceded. “You don’t want to pass on that. She makes ‘em from scratch. Garlic, cheddar, and” —he put his fingers to his mouth and made a chef’s kiss— “whatever other magic she conjures in that kitchen. Do yourself a favor and take two. Trust me, she’s got two more baskets in the kitchen. She always does.”

Alec chuckled and nodded, doing as suggested and plucking out two warm biscuits. Hal’s endorsement was hard to resist, and the tantalizing aroma wafting from the warm bread only heightened his anticipation.

The conversation flowed easily around the table as everyone indulged in the delicious meal. Alec found himself drawn into the lively banter, forgetting for the moment his initial reluctance to be part of this wedding celebration.

Maren presided with effortless grace and poise over the elaborately set dinner table, a confident and accomplished hostess in every aspect. The dining room was softly lit by an elaborate crystal chandelier dangling over the center of the table, the golden light landing favorably upon Maren’s flushed cheeks. In the middle of the table, a vase filled with freshly cut flowers stood, surrounded by perfectly placed fine China and what seemed a formal arrangement of silverware. And yet it was all so casual, didn’t feel overly starchy at all. She asked the bride’s father to pass the bottle of wine on down the table rather than standing and delivering it herself. While the

purple-haired woman, Rachel, shot daggers from her eyes at her boyfriend, Dan, when he dropped an entire piece of tenderloin on the embroidered tablecloth, Maren waved her hand dismissively.

“No worries, Dan. I don’t consider it a proper dinner party unless the tablecloth wears some of the meal,” she said before she stood and reached between Dan and Rachel, moving a dish and its trivet to cover the spot. “There. No one will ever know.”

He tried not to give it too much thought, how effortlessly charmed he was by Maren Scott—in all probability, she was not single; he couldn’t imagine that someone like her could be—but as the evening progressed, Alec found himself stealing glances at Maren. There was a certain energy about her, an infectious joy that seemed to radiate from her. And as much as he tried to dismiss it, he couldn’t deny the spark of attraction that pulled his gaze so often toward her.

But then he was equally entertained by Hal—*almost* equally—who provided quite of bit of the dinner conversation, being as generous as Maren in that he tried to speak to or engage each person at least once, and also because he told good stories.

“What’s the worst storm you ever remember, Hal?” Mark Thompson asked.

Hal didn’t even have to think but answered directly, seeming happy to reminisce. “No doubt, the first winter after we bought the house. We were kids, Margie and me, didn’t know what we were doing half the time. So that would have been the storm of ’79. It wasn’t a blizzard, mind you, there was no sustained wind, but wow, the snow that fell, haven’t seen the like, not before or since then. Just dumped it straight down, sometimes three and four inches an hour.” He chuckled a bit. “Anyway, Margie was worried about the weight of the snow on the roof over the breakfast nook. So we bundled up and went out the back door, got the ladder from the garage. I spent an hour up there on the roof, clearing off the snow while Margie watched and ‘guided’ me,” he said, using air quotes, “from the rear of the yard. Now did I mention we were young

and stupid at the time? Yep. Turns out, all the snow I'd pushed straight off the roof completely blocked the door we'd gone out. The front door was rarely used, so that was locked. No cell phones back then and I had only the one shovel. Took me more than an hour to dig us *into* our house," he finished, smiling and shaking his head at his own foolishness.

The guests lingered long after dinner was done, until Maren suggested they return to the parlor, where she would serve after dinner drinks and where there was a variety of board and card games available.

While the others stood and did as suggested, Alec approached Maren, wanting instead to return to his room where he might get in some work this evening. He thought that was what he wanted; certainly it was what he had planned. So then he was a bit surprised by the genuine regret by having to decline her open invitation to the group.

"Dinner was excellent and your hospitality is truly tempting," he said, catching her as she collected two empty dishes from the table, "but I'm afraid duty calls tonight. I have a bit of work that needs my attention."

"Of course, Alec," she allowed graciously. "Have a good night."

With a nod of gratitude, Alec excused himself while Maren turned toward the kitchen. His eyes lingered on her for a moment before he headed upstairs, reluctant to examine his own disappointment that he'd made the choice he did.

And certainly, he shouldn't have expected that Maren would have expressed any displeasure that he wasn't going to hang around, surely not when he'd all but disparaged her friend before dinner. In truth, she probably thought him a jerk for how indelicately he'd handled the situation. Obviously, there were probably a hundred other ways he might have broached the subject of Jasmine's reasons for wanting to wed Liam. Possibly, Maren and maybe many other people would have told him it was none of his business anyway. Actually, Maren essentially already had.

It's not my decision or my business to tell them what's best for them, she'd said.

Ah, but old habits, as Maren had referenced this afternoon. Alec was the older brother of three sisters. Having witnessed the rollercoaster of emotions that came with relationships, Alec had developed a keen sense of suspicion when it came to *everyone's* intentions.

Returned to his room, he opened up his laptop and scanned the newest emails, which included notes and reports from his CFO about the tax incentives available for businesses wanting to establish a presence in different towns in Western New York. Another email from his company's Business Development Manager included material on market research, financial analysis, and the legal and regulatory requirements, the material meant to guide Alec in evaluating the suitability of a large commercial building and warehouse, the property he would be inspecting next week for the potential establishment of Quantum Tech's second location.

Austin, TX had been a welcoming home for Quantum Tech, but it wasn't home for Alec personally. His heart resided in Buffalo, where his parents, sisters, and a sprawling extended family shared their lives, and which Alec was only able to visit a few times a year.

By eleven o'clock, Maren was wilting and frankly, quite thrilled to bid good night to Mark and Emily, the last two guests inside the parlor. She'd bid goodnight to Bethany more than an hour ago, when her husband, Marv, arrived to pick her up. Maren had been nearly horrified at the time, by the snow that had fallen, blown, and drifted up around the side door, and then had been very grateful that Bethany had not driven herself and that she lived only seven streets further down Maple Street.

Pleased to have the first day and night behind her, Maren briefly reviewed what she considered a successful night of hosting. She had no influence over her guests' behavior—looking at you, Rachel, and your antagonistic demeanor; and

you, too, Alec Sullivan, with your unreasonable and rude opposition to the wedding, like why did you even come?—but she was happy that nothing had gone wrong on her end. Ellie B had counseled her time and again that was where her responsibility began and ended, with the services she offered at the inn.

After she'd turned out all the lights on the first floor, she was guided upstairs by the many dim nightlights stationed around the house, mostly for guests' use and safety purposes.

Her phone, which had politely remained in the kitchen all evening, showed a barrage of messages, most of which were from Jasmine, worrying about the weather and the dozen guests who hadn't been able to make it to Willowbrook because of the storm. While Maren wondered if Jasmine had texted her mother—she couldn't believe Mrs. Adamczyk wouldn't have mentioned her daughter's anxiety—Maren typed quickly, with as much reassurance as she could manage, while also trying to be practical.

Jas, we can't control the weather. Let's not panic. There are two more days before the wedding. Plenty of time for things to improve.

Expecting that Jasmine was still awake, riled by her anxiety, Maren wasn't surprised to receive a reply almost instantly.

But what if it doesn't get better?

Maren bit her lip and went to the short attic window in her bedroom, immediately wincing at the snow swirling and dancing under the golden streetlamps. Of course she had no answers for Jasmine and thought she should only try to remain positive and practical.

I suggest you keep open lines of communication with your vendors, your venue, and the guests, as I'm sure you are. I might also suggest you will have to be flexible, if things do need to change.

Jasmine's response to that began with a crying face emoji. *But with half the guests in from out of town, flexibility really*

needs some help from Mother Nature.

Unable to clearly gauge her mood and the extent of her worry, Maren texted, *You might get some really awesome winter wonderland wedding photos.* She added a winking emoji to that and then decided Jasmine was worried, but hadn't melted into a full blown panic yet, based on her response.

'Snowbird in the storm of the century' sounds like a nice little headline for our announcement in the Willowbrook Gazette.

She's fine, Maren thought. For now, anyway.

She texted back, *Warning: Incoming Cheesiness: Above all, remember that the most important aspect of the day is the love between you and Liam.*

You've always been my favorite nerd, Jasmine replied. *Hopefully, I will see you tomorrow at the rehearsal dinner. IF we can get there.* This was followed by a series of hearts and several more emojis, including a bride avatar, a snowflake, an engagement ring, and a cloud dropping snow.

Maren wished her a goodnight and said they'd talk tomorrow. She clutched the phone at her chest and cast one last, lingering glance out the window.

Hopefully.

Chapter Five

Friday

Hope pulled a disappearing act overnight, inside the blizzard's fury.

Maren woke to the ominous creaking and groaning of the huge pine tree in the inn's backyard. She arrived at the window at 4:58 AM, just in time to hear a resounding snap and see the shaggy limbed behemoth crack and break, falling over across the yard and the part of the driveway that wrapped around the back of the house and separated it from the garage. Even as she was instantly relieved that it missed the garage by mere feet, it now blocked the garage's big front door, and more than half the driveway, and a clear path to and from the house. Aside from being something that she simply wouldn't have time to address this weekend, she made a face at the inconvenience of it. Her car was in the garage, along with the bulk of the firewood used for the three fireplaces in the house, and the commercial fridge where she kept more than half of the perishables she would need for the remainder of this weekend.

With a weary sigh, Maren flipped on the lamp near her bed, supposing she was up for the day and—ugh—would probably have to brave what looked like at least two feet of snow and now the fallen tree as well to get to the garage to get what she needed for the day. Quickly, she washed her face and brushed her teeth, and dressed, opting for a pair of black leggings and both a long-sleeved T-shirt and a heavy sweater, knowing she would be throwing on her long down coat and her tall winter boots.

As quietly as she could, she made her way downstairs, hoping the inn's guests were snug and sleeping in their beds still. She didn't need to turn on any light until she reached the back hall, where she kept her coat and boots in the extra large hall tree out there. This small room was not heated, and the

windows were old and drafty and already she felt the cold as it was forced inside by the relentless wind.

“Of all weekends,” she muttered to herself as she sat on the hall tree’s bench and wrestled on her unattractive but serviceable duck boots. She pulled on her coat and buttoned it up tight and found her pompom-ed hat and thick gloves in a basket on the shelf. She donned those, hoping she could make it to the garage and back without mishap, hoping she could walk around the tree and not have to climb over it. From her window, it had looked as if the top of the tree actually reached Harmony Place, where the town’s truck had plowed, possibly several times by now, creating a wall of snow at the edge of the street. If she walked around the trunk end, where it had cracked in the yard, she would be forced to trudge through several feet of snow covering the lawn. Her best bet might be the driveway, as Hal had kept up with that fairly well yesterday, but then that would mean she had to climb and cross over the tree itself.

Fully dressed for the furious elements, Maren unlocked and pulled open the back door.

And was stricken mute and motionless by the sight that greeted her.

The bottom portion of the storm door was buried in snow. Literally, the steel panel and tempered glass were covered at least halfway up, reaching the height of Maren’s waist.

She circled her gloved hand around the frosted window at eye level and peered through cold glass. Snowflakes danced chaotically in the gray light. A thick layer of white covered every single thing. The picture was somber and eerie, and her shoulders sank, gripped by the stark scene.

“I should’ve bought a bed and breakfast in Florida,” she murmured.

“And miss all this excitement?”

Maren startled and whirled around and had to push the hood off her head to see that Alec Sullivan stood in the inside doorway.

He wasn't looking at her but beyond, through the bank of windows along the back of this long mudroom. Dressed in jeans and a red hoodie, he appeared surprisingly wakeful and utterly relaxed, his hands tucked into the kangaroo pocket of his hoodie.

"Well, that looks awful," he commented and turned his gaze onto Maren.

She used her gloved hand to swipe away a loose fringe of hair that was not contained inside her hat. "Do you mean the amount of snow in general? Or this, that's blocking the door? Or do you refer to the tree that just fell and barely missed hitting the garage?"

Alec shrugged. "Any of those. All of those. Where are you going? I hope you don't mean to shovel or clear the snow? None of us can go anywhere, so there's no need to plow a path."

"I know. But I have a second refrigerator in the garage," she said with a wince, "and firewood—"

She stopped, interrupted by the small globe light overhead flickering and then going out.

Alec leaned back inside the doorway briefly, glancing into the kitchen. When he reappeared, he announced hesitantly, grimacing with sympathy, she would later think, "The power is out."

Maren's shoulders drooped once more and lower this time. But she waited, staring at the light above her until it sprang to life again.

She smiled with relief at Alec, but then that reminded her of something else. "The generator kicked on. But the extra gasoline for that is also in the garage."

"So, plenty of reason for you to get out there," Alec concluded. "Let me get dressed. I'll give you a hand."

"Oh, gosh, no," she was quick to refuse. "I mean, thank you, but I can't have you, a guest, shoveling around the Inn during your stay."

For some odd reason, this amused him. The chuckle that came was...well, it was nice, actually, she decided, in that she heard nothing negative in the rich sound.

“Maren, it’ll take you half a day to shovel a path to the garage,” he said. “And that’s if you can even get the door open.”

Stunned by this possibility, Maren turned around again and confronted the wall of snow outside the door.

“Oh, but it’s light, right? Not packed,” she said, turning the handle down and attempting to push the door out. “Seriously?” she grumbled when it barely budged.

“Let me try,” Alec said, coming to her side.

Maren sidestepped a bit to allow him to get a good position, not averse at all to accepting this small aid.

He wasn’t rough with the door, not enough that she worried he would break anything, but he did give a much firmer shove. It moved about four inches. He did this several times until he had forced it open wide enough so that possibly Maren could squeeze through. But then he pulled it closed again and faced her.

“Not to be fatalistic or a doomsdayer, but it is really treacherous out there,” he said, his gaze intent on her. “Can you wait? It will take me less than five minutes to suit up. I don’t want you going out there alone.”

Ever the consummate host, Maren protested again. “I really don’t want my guests battling a blizzard on my behalf.”

Alec rationalized, “But you *do* want to feed your guests, right? And presumably, you’d like to give them breakfast before noon, which is how long it is likely to take you to get there and back.”

Maren closed one eye and wrinkled her nose, expressing her doubt. “Okay, that’s a bit of an exaggeration.”

Alec grinned. It wasn’t unattractive. Not at all. It sparkled with good humor.

“Okay, but work with me,” he said, using his hands as he spoke. “I’m embellishing to create dramatic effect, to really hammer home the impact of the danger.”

“I see. And to play along, I’m expected to...?”

“Just wait. That’s all you have to do. Two, maybe three minutes tops. So that your extremely grateful guest can repay your warm and tremendous hospitality by doing this small favor for you.”

“Wow,” she replied, grinning a bit herself. “That’s laying it on pretty thick.”

“Again, dramatic effect,” he said, feigning seriousness and then clarified, rather charmingly with a hand to the side of his mouth and a stage whisper, “It is really great hospitality, though. I had dreams about that martini last night.”

Lifting her hand, Maren raised one gloved finger to ask a question, enjoying his unexpected playfulness. “Dreams last night? You mean like an hour ago, maybe?”

Alec shrugged sheepishly. “Maybe. Or less than that. Possibly the dream was rudely disrupted by the tree crashing down.”

“Stupid tree,” Maren commiserated.

Alec arched a brow. “Will you wait?”

Maren nodded.

“Thank you,” he said, another grin teasing one corner of his mouth, since obviously it should be her thanking him.

“You’re welcome.” Maren smiled innocently. “I fear I have no choice, less my hospitality be questioned.”

“And because you do realize that without me, it seriously would take you many hours just to get out the door?” He fished.

“Yes. That, too.” She rolled her lips inward, pretending that she wanted to stifle a guilty grin.

“I’ll be right back,” he said and disappeared inside the house.

Unconsciously, Maren leaned against the door frame, her smile lingering as much as Alec's presence did in the long mudroom. Her mind reran the playful exchange and then considered his willingness—his eagerness—to help. He was a different person today. Admittedly, he'd been mostly kind to Maren yesterday, had only been offensive when discussing Liam and Jasmine's wedding. Obviously, he had a strong opinion about his friend's decision to wed.

But was he now, with this easy banter and effortless charm, trying to make up for that rudeness of yesterday?

I should at least let him try, Maren thought, raising a wall—well, maybe just a net—of reluctance, unwilling to be made a fawning admirer so that he might clear his conscience.

I should at least let him try as long as it takes to get what I need from the garage.

He would have offered to help, but he would help so much more happily in Maren's company.

Did she know how gorgeous her smile was? She had to know, right? Most people were self-aware. Alec knew he was a decent looking guy, not likely to win any prizes, but also not expected to frighten children. He knew he was at times brooding, and that he could be brusque, and that—as evidenced here yesterday—he had trouble concealing suspicions of sketchy people, circumstances, or stories. He grew up with three sisters, so he had no choice but to be fairly self-aware.

In all probability Maren knew her smile could make a man look forward to trudging out into three feet of snow with a blizzard churning around, traversing a fallen tree, maybe even shoveling a path to wherever she needed to go, right? And yet, not one ounce of him believed for a second that she'd used that enticing smile with any premeditation. He sensed that about her, that she was a genuine person, that what you saw was what you got.

He emptied his winter gear out of his duffel bag, heavy coat, hat, gloves, and his winter boots, imagining he was probably going to wish he'd brought his taller boots rather than these six inch ones. He carried those down the stairs and returned to the back hall, pulling the inside door closed behind him, where he sat on the bench to don his boots.

Maren had waited but was not inactive. She'd pulled her hood back up, and her back faced him as she kicked snow away from the door, through the skinny opening he'd made. Alec glanced around the hall while he tied his boots. In the corner sat three snow shovels of varying height and design, and a long snow brush, likely meant for a car.

"All right," Alec said as he stood, putting on his gloves. "Let me at it."

Maren turned her body a bit and then was forced to turn her head even more to see beyond the edge of her furry hood. She stepped back inside, holding another shovel. Already, her cheeks and the tip of her nose were painted red by the wind and cold.

"It's not the pretty, white fluffy stuff," she cautioned, her lips parted, maybe winded from her brief exertions. "It's that heavy, wet stuff."

Great.

But he shrugged internally. They had to go through it, light, heavy, or otherwise.

Considering that the shovel in her hand appeared the sturdiest, with a thick plastic scoop, he asked, "May I?"

"By all means," she said, moving out of his way as she handed him the weapon. "May the snow gods be kind to you."

He took the shovel and compelled the door to open a bit more, just enough so that he could wedge himself through the opening. Once outside, the wind smacked him hard, pelting him with icy snow crystals. *Are you kidding me!* He moved quick, positioning himself behind the door, and thus protected from the wind, working first to free the door completely.

Maren followed, working on shoveling a path toward the garage. She tossed the snow several times off to her left before she realized the wind was tossing it right back at her and switched sides, throwing each shovelful off to the right. Wisely she tried to keep her back to the oncoming wind. Her progress was slow, having to shovel each next step three times, once to clear the top of the drift, again to remove another foot of snow, and then finally, to reach the blacktop of the driveway or close to it.

Alec joined her as soon as he'd cleared the door and the back step, hopping up in front of her and taking the top two tiers off the snow they needed to move, in order to expedite the process.

"Tell me there's a nice big riding tractor in that garage," he called over his shoulder, "with a wide snowplow attached to it."

"Actually, there is a snowblower," Maren returned, having to holler a bit to be heard, "but it hasn't been used this year or last because Hal insists on doing all the—gah!"

Alec whipped round, just in time to see Maren, made blurry in his vision by the eddying snow, go flying onto her side, the shovel extended beyond her, as if the wind had given her a little shove when she'd tossed the snow off the shovel.

Jabbing his shovel into the uncleared snow so that it stood without falling, he went to her, biting back the laughter that likely would have come if he knew her better, if they were friendly enough to laugh at each other's mishaps. Before he reached her, however, she rolled stiffly onto her back and proceeded to make snow angels. She only scissored her arms and legs twice before Alec was standing over her.

Now *there's* a picture, he thought. She lay in a bed of snow, outlined by an angel's shape, with a dusting of snow covering her hat and coat and gloves while her rosy cheeks were dewy as each snowflake landed and succumbed to the warmth of her skin. A few more flakes, un-melted, clung to her long lashes.

Maren wasn't looking at him, but at the sky above her, her gaze filled with a combination of wonder and wry amusement. "It's ugly beautiful," she said, a strange serenity to her stillness and her shiny gaze.

Extending his hand down to her, Alec deemed the pre-dawn scene harsh, annoying, and overdone, anything but beautiful.

He easily pulled her to her feet once she'd clapped her hand into his.

He did not release her gloved hand immediately.

"Ugly beautiful?" He questioned when they stood face to face, though she was compelled to tip her face up to him to meet his gaze.

"Fierce, but mesmerizing," she said, her eyes moving over his face. "Nature's wild chaos," she concluded, almost absently.

Alec returned her stare, his chest heaving a bit, same as hers, for their labor thus far. But neither of them moved. For what seemed a long moment but likely was only three or four seconds, in the hushed exchange of glances, a burgeoning awareness of attraction took hold of him, and he would have sworn a similar energy passed through Maren as her lips parted and her gaze went still, fixed on his eyes. The wind and the world faded away. Alec believed the moment was pregnant with possibilities, foremost being a want to kiss her. Before he moved to make that happen, but after he'd shifted his gaze to her bright pink lips, Maren blinked and laughed awkwardly.

"Listen to me," she said self-consciously, lowering her clear blue eyes. "*Nature's wild chaos*," she repeated, seeming to make fun of herself. She bent and retrieved her shovel. "It's a blizzard. A big, ugly, fat, angry blizzard."

The spell broke, Alec breathed again and stared a moment longer as Maren got back to shoveling.

Don't kiss her, was probably a better idea than what he'd been thinking.

And yet the abrupt shift from silent-but-rife-with-promise to Maren removed, her hand gone from his, returned to shoveling, left him briefly disoriented. More alarming though was the sudden pang of regret, caught between the momentum of what could have been and the hollowness of a road left untraveled.

Chapter Six

Truth be known, she was more than only a little thankful when Alec offered to consult with Hal, who'd been out plowing his driveway across the street by the time Alec and Maren had returned to the house from the garage. Alec had carried two full stacks of firewood while Maren had transferred an armful of necessary groceries.

Alec said he'd ask Hal about a chainsaw so that he might start cutting up the tree. Of course, she should have insisted he'd done enough—which he had—but, she wasn't embarrassed to admit to herself, she was pleased to be relieved of his company.

Oh, my gosh!

Had he been about to kiss her?

Good heavens, but had she wanted him to—had she hoped he would?—before she'd gained control of herself and thwarted whatever his intention might have been? Surely, a staring contest hadn't been his goal. But wow, talk about a smoldering gaze. Maren was sure her insides were still toasty, an hour and a half after that most scintillating moment.

It had taken them over an hour to clear a path, climb over the fallen tree, which was basically her and Alec crawling up and over a squishy pile of fir limbs, and then load up with necessities from the garage and return to the house. Though having only just fallen, already the downed tree had been covered with a two-inch blanket of snow.

Currently, she stood in the kitchen, watching over two pans on the vintage stove. In one she turned over sausage links that she was frying and in another, she was occasionally stirring the sausage gravy to go with the biscuits she'd made two days ago, and which were in the warming drawer beneath the oven. Inside the oven itself was a long casserole dish filled with baked scrambled eggs. In the second oven of the antique appliance, the bacon was cooking. She much preferred to cook

those two things in the oven, freeing up time and her hands to get ready other components of breakfast.

Bethany had texted that she was sorry, but there was no way she could make it to the inn today as planned. Maren wasn't so worried right now, but expected she would have her hands full later today, getting everything ready by herself for the rehearsal dinner tonight.

The Adamczyks, the Thompsons, and Dan Harris had trickled downstairs over the last half hour, apparently early risers all save for Rachel, who had yet to show herself. Maren had put out a carafe of coffee and one of tea to hold them over until breakfast was ready in another ten to fifteen minutes.

On the other side of the kitchen there was a small desk and chair, which sat between two banks of cupboards and counters and under a window that overlooked the middle of the driveway. There sat Aiden Abelstad, the twenty-two year old morning opener of the Coffee Loft. He was very comfortable with Maren and the Inn, usually being happy to deliver her infrequent weekend orders of pastries and other breakfast sweets. He'd arrived ten minutes ago and was currently paging through the Morning Glory Inn's trifold brochure, plucked from the stack kept at her desk there. Turning around, he threw his arm over the back of the chair and flipped the long swag of bangs off his forehead. The thick brown hair fell immediately back down, nearly covering his eyes.

"Mar," he called her attention. "What is this? A secret garden retreat?" He asked and then read from the printed brochure. "*A hidden outdoor space with lush greenery, perfect for quiet relaxation?* Where is this enchanted garden? Are you marketing lies?"

Maren grinned but did not turn around, busy giving the sausages another quarter turn. "It's behind the garage, or rather on the south side." she told him. "Or, it is in the summer. Haven't you ever seen it? It's quite pretty, with hydrangeas and peonies and well, there will one day be a profusion of roses if I don't keep killing them."

“Huh,” Aiden said with a bit of wonder. “Never noticed it.”

“Aiden, I’m not trying to get rid of you,” she said next, turning down the gas and putting a lid on the pan with the sausages, “but shouldn’t you be actually at the Coffee Loft while on the clock? I can’t believe you opened the café today. I can’t believe anyone would be upset or surprised if the Coffee Loft was closed all day.”

“Mom said we should open in case any essential workers or road crews need a little pick me up, their morning joe.” He plucked his cell phone out of his pocket and waved it at Maren. “I hooked up my phone to the front door camera,” Aiden explained. “I’ll get a notification if anyone comes in.”

Which might be unlikely as Maren hadn’t noticed any vehicle but a plow the entire time she’d been outside.

Maren positioned herself at the island counter, going through the three café boxes Aiden had delivered.

“Are you bringing a date to the wedding?” She asked cheekily, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah, my mom,” he groaned. “Or rather she didn’t have a date so didn’t want me to have one either so we can hang out all night. Lucky me.”

“You be nice to your mother,” Maren chided lightly as she arranged the pastries, muffins, and tarts in two different linen lined baskets.

Aiden was raised as an only child by a single mom. They were, despite Aiden’s attempt to pretend otherwise, as close as a mother and son could be without being weird. Shannon Abelstad was strict but kind, generous and loving, and Maren thought Aiden one of the luckiest people in the world, to have such a nurturing, involved parent. “She is always so proud to arrive anywhere on your arm and spend time with you.”

“I know,” Aiden admitted, dropping his façade of annoyance. “She’s pretty excited, but Mar, I had to draw the line when she said she wanted us to wear coordinating outfits. I was like, *Mom, it’s not the prom.*”

“Gosh, I hope Jasmine is actually able to have her wedding,” Maren remarked.

“What would she do?” Aiden wondered. He stood and arrived at the end of the island counter, tapping his fingers on the edge. “I mean, can you just say, hey, let’s try it again next weekend? What if the venue, or the photographer, or whatever other things are involved, aren’t available?”

“What a nightmare,” Maren said. “I have no idea how that would work, but I will keep it in mind. If ever I do decide to get married, I will schedule it in the summer.”

Aiden sighed, with a theatrical flair. “I’ve offered, haven’t I? Many times. But no, you think I’m too young.”

“Because you are.”

“You’re only five years older than me.”

Only because she knew he wasn’t serious—this was a longstanding joke between them, going back years—she *tsked* with mock sternness. “I don’t know why you’d want to chance ruining such a great friendship. And what would Jennifer Kearns have to say about that, you suddenly becoming unavailable to her fawning admiration?”

Aiden grimaced and pretended to shiver and then stole one of the mini muffins from the basket, tossing it up in to the air and catching it. “Never mind that, and don’t try to change the subject,” he said, just as a whoosh of wind and a creaking hinge were heard, as the back door was opened. “We’re not talking about me,” Aiden continued, taking a bite out of the muffin. “We’re talking about you.” He chewed and swallowed and then adopted another voice, one that wasn’t his own and that might possibly be from one of those adult cartoon shows he regularly watched. “You know, Missy, you’ll need a boyfriend first if you expect to have any chance of a wedding.”

“That does seem to be the prevailing wisdom.”

Hearing Alec Sullivan’s voice behind her, Maren sent a reproving glare at Aiden before turning around.

Just what she wanted Alec to hear!

Alec closed the inside door to the mudroom and pulled off his hat, his piercing blue eyes locked on her even as he ran his fingers through his hair. The barest hint of a grin threatened to curve one side of his mouth.

“At least that’s my understanding,” he said, moving his gaze off Maren. He smiled and inclined his head at Aiden. “Step one: identify-slash-find-slash-locate a boyfriend. Step two: convince him he’s the one. Step three: upgrade boyfriend to groom. Simple, really.”

“Ah, the old relationship flowchart,” said Aiden, who evidently didn’t mind mocking Maren to her face or in the company of a stranger. “Or, there’s always the effective *Boyfriend Wanted* sign. Forget the *Vacancy* notice.” He slanted another mischievous grin at Maren. “Or maybe you could have like a lemonade stand, but for selling yourself as a girlfriend. *Freshly Squeezed Romance, Limited Time Offer.*”

“Are you done?” She asked Aiden, her withering glower apparently useless.

With her cheeks flaming red once again, she didn’t dare face Alec but then was saved from having to do so—even as he came to stand at the counter next to Aiden—by her phone coming to life on the counter, ringing and vibrating at the same time.

And normally she wouldn’t have answered it in front of guests, but it was Jasmine. She tapped the screen to take the call and put the speaker on.

“There’s the happy bride,” she greeted. “Aiden’s here and you’re on speaker.”

Without a greeting or any preamble, Jasmine whined, “They’ve just announced a driving ban.”

Maren winced, even as she was, frankly, a little surprised it had taken this long.

“Oh, no! Jasmine, I’m so sorry,” she commiserated. “Okay, but wait. We don’t need to panic yet. You don’t technically or officially need the rehearsal dinner tonight. As long as they lift the ban by tomorrow, as long as the storm moves out as they

predict, all is well. The wedding can still happen.” But she grimaced, supposing this might be a long shot. So far, the storm had exceeded the expectations of the local and national meteorologists, as the band of snow seemed not to be moving but hovering directly overhead.

“But Maren,” said Jasmine. “I feel so bad for all the money you’ve probably put out for the rehearsal dinner. That’s such a waste.”

“Jasmine,” Maren said firmly, “the rehearsal dinner was my gift to you. And that is the least of your worries—not your worry at all, in fact. Let’s just figure out how to make the wedding actually happen tomorrow. The Harbor View is still good to go for the ceremony and reception, right?”

“As of right now, yes,” came the reply followed by a huge and vocal sigh, which settled heavily inside the kitchen. “But then I just found out that the town was using the banquet hall’s huge parking lot as a dumping ground until the big trucks can get down from Buffalo so I’m not sure about access or parking.”

“Hi Jasmine,” Aiden called out into the dispirited silence that followed.

“Hi Aiden,” came the glum reply.

The phone *was* on speaker so *technically*, it wasn’t eavesdropping, but Alec did pay a fair amount of attention to the conversation, even as he retreated from the counter and washed his hands in the sink. He held up his wet hands, much like a surgeon about to enter the OR, while looking for a towel. He found it draped over Maren’s shoulder and helped himself to the end of it hanging down her back.

He couldn’t help but steal glances at her profile while she sorted pastries into baskets and continued speaking with the bride. While her focus on those tasks seemed unwavering, he knew she wasn’t oblivious to his proximity. He thought he sensed a slight stiffening in her posture, but was unsure if he should read that as sparked awareness or cringing displeasure.

Based on the intensity of their ‘moment’ earlier, he was betting on the former.

Certainly, his awareness of her was greater now, and he found himself captivated by the subtle details of her profile that made her uniquely alluring—the curve of her jawline, the sweep of her cheekbones, the gentle slope of her nose, those freckles. Her auburn hair, slightly mussed—possibly from her hat and hood of an hour ago—fell loosely around her shoulders while one section was raised as if teased on the crown of her head.

Feeling a pair of eyes on him, Alec finished drying his hands and dropped the towel back on to her shoulder. He returned to the end of the counter and met the watchful gaze of the kid who’d been playfully pestering Maren when Alec had come in.

You’ll need a boyfriend first if you expect to have any chance of a wedding.

Very interesting, but something that would have to wait until later for him to examine. At the very least, though, the kid’s teasing revealed that Maren was single, after all.

While the phone call continued, Alec met the kid’s curious stare and stuck out his hand, introducing himself quietly. “Alec Sullivan.”

“Aiden Abelstad.”

“Is that Alec?” was called from the phone. “Hi, Alec! It’s Jasmine. Oh, my gosh. Liam has told me so much about you. He’s so thrilled you made it here.”

She giggled a bit. And while he was prepared to find fault with her, and possibly ulterior motives for her want of this hasty wedding, he had to admit her laugh wasn’t one of those false, cloying giggles but sounded...fine, as far as giggles from strangers over a phone went, he guessed.

“Hi, Jasmine,” he called down to the phone. “Nice to meet you. Sorry about the weather.”

“Ugh, I told Liam I wanted to wait at least until spring,” she said, surprising Alec with this bit of information.

“Anyway, Alec, Liam said there were about six other people he wouldn’t cry over if they somehow missed the wedding, but he would have been super bummed, he said, if you hadn’t been able to make it, so I’m thrilled that you’re here. Welcome to Willowbrook. I hope—well, actually, I have every confidence—that Maren is taking very good care of you. Oh, gosh, that sounded—earmuffs, Aiden,” she directed impishly. “That sounded suggestive. But you know what I mean.”

He’d essentially heard the same thing from Liam himself, since they’d been texting back and forth since Alec arrived. “I wouldn’t have missed it for the world,” he said, assuming such a reply was expected. “And yes, Maren is an excellent hostess. But is it normal that she makes her guests work for their meals? Shoveling through three feet of snow and chopping up fallen down trees? Your father and mother are still out there,” he joked, “haven’t gotten their section cleared yet.”

Jasmine was obviously bright and could sense when lies were being told and didn’t buy his quip for one minute. “She would never,” she called over the phone, with a mock gasp. “Although, really, what are you guys going to do all day, stuck in that big house?”

Without missing a beat, Maren put forth, “Actually, since Bethany couldn’t make it in, I thought I’d form a cleaning brigade of the guests. It’s a good day for an early spring cleaning, don’t you think? Floor to ceiling, woodwork, windows, and all. I bet we can have the first floor sparkling by dinnertime.”

“Yikes,” uttered Aiden, as he glanced at the phone in his hand. “Oh, that’s my cue, and just in time. By Mar. See you, tomorrow, Jas!” He turned to Alec and struck out his hand. “Nice to meet you. I gotta get back to the Loft,” he said, waving his phone briefly, which showed a flashing picture of what looked like a security camera image, and three men standing near the café’s counter.

He pumped the kid’s hand while Maren and Jasmine both called goodbye.

Alec helped himself to a cup of coffee from the maker on the counter behind Maren.

“All right, Jas,” Maren said next. “I have to go. I’ve got to get breakfast out on the table. Listen, we can’t do anything about the weather. We just can’t. All we can do is make contingency plans. I’ll give you a call later, before dinner, and let’s see where everything is at, okay?”

“Thanks, Mar,” said Jasmine. “Love you. Bye, Alec, nice to meet you.”

“Take care, Jasmine,” he replied. “See you tomorrow.”

Maren clicked off the phone and directed Alec, “Creamer is in the fridge—oh, but there’s sugar and creamer on the dining room table. Everyone is out there already. Well, everyone if Rachel has since come down.”

Alec went to the fridge and poured a splash of creamer into his cup.

“Do you mind guests hanging out in the kitchen with you when you’re trying to get breakfast ready?” He asked as Maren adorned her hands with two pot holders and removed a large pan from the oven.

“Um, not at all. Although I’m almost done here.” She flashed a smile at him. “Obviously, with all the help you’ve given me today, you’ve probably earned the run of the house and first dibs on all the goodies in the baskets if you want.”

“Hal came over and gave me a hand with the tree. We got some of it done—not even a quarter of it, sorry.” He considered the antique stove with its polished chrome accents and classic porcelain enamel finish. “That’s an old stove,” he remarked.

“My prized possession,” she boasted. “I found it at a salvage place—in this fabulous condition if you can believe it. It’s a 1950 O’Keefe and Merritt stove—two ovens, one broiler, one warming oven, and the snazzy griddle up here between the burners.”

“Very cool.” It was indeed a great aesthetic for this old house.

She lined up several dishes on the island and then began to fill those serving pieces with food from the cooking pans. The first to be transferred was a pan of fluffy scrambled eggs, which happily appeared to contain either chopped green onions or chives.

“I can’t thank you enough,” she said. “And I’m sorry that I haven’t even had a chance to peek outside again.” She flashed him a grin before turning back toward the stove and saying over her shoulder. “Otherwise, I promise, I would be more effusive in my gratitude. What’s Hal doing now? I should’ve told him to come in for breakfast.”

“He was working on his own driveway and went over to help the neighbor next to him, I guess.”

“Oh. Mrs. Giacomini, I bet. I’ll catch up with him later.”

Alec stepped in when she was about to empty a large stock pot of what looked like his mom’s old fashioned sausage gravy into a square, footed serving dish with a lid. “Here, let me hold that,” he said. “You can scrape it all out.”

Maren let him take the pot, the handles warm but not too hot. He tipped it over the dish while she used a spatula to steer the thick gravy properly.

“So, Jasmine seems relatively calm,” he noted, “despite the very real possibility that her wedding might have to be delayed.”

Though he was pleased with what little he’d discerned of Jasmine from her phone call, he was indeed still fishing, wanting to know more about her character.

“Possibly, a lot of money might be lost if they’re forced to cancel,” he added when Maren was slow to respond. “Not all vendors and venues will be gracious regarding the storm.”

“I know, and that would be awful,” she said, standing side by side with Alec. “Although, I know Jasmine didn’t want to spend a lot on the wedding,” she said and glanced around Alec at the swinging door to the dining room, “despite what her mother wanted in contrast. Hence the small guest list.” She stood up on her toes to scrape the walls and bottom of the pot.

“Jasmine has some idea in her head that the more money spent on a wedding, the greater chance of that marriage ending in divorce. And since she’s nuts about Liam, I know she doesn’t want that.”

With the pot empty, Alec returned it to the stove while Maren brought over a pan of bacon, which had cooked on a wire rack, the grease all dropped and still sizzling below.

She used tongs now to move each piece of bacon from the pan to the center of a rectangular serving dish. Alec decided she’d cooked enough bacon to feed ten more people than presently occupied the inn. She brought over a frying pan from the stove and filled up both ends of the long pan with two dozen sausage links.

“Do you subscribe to the same theory?” He asked.

“What? About the correlation between the cost of the wedding and the chances of the marriage surviving? No, I don’t think about things like that.”

Alec grinned, and unable to help himself, kidded, “Oh, that’s right. You will need a boyfriend first if you expect to have any shot at a wedding.”

Maren rolled her eyes, but a grin teased her pretty lips.

“Har, har,” she said, placing the ceramic lid over the sausage gravy and sliding the dish toward him. “Just for that, I now demand you help me carry everything out to the dining room.”

“I would have helped,” Alec said, “even without the imperious command.”

A grateful smile transformed her face once more. “I know. Thanks.”

With dish in hand, Alec followed Maren to the dining room. All the while a mental tug-of-war ensued. On one side, the warmth of her smile, and how comfortable and easy he felt with her beckoned him to imagine a potential connection. On the other hand, reality urged him to maintain a polite distance. The fifteen hundred miles between her home and his loomed large, as did the memory of his initial behavior toward her

yesterday, which might still be a shadow coloring Maren's perception of him.

Chapter Seven

So it was both a bit of a bust, the rehearsal dinner being cancelled, and then also somewhat of a relief. She had a houseful of guests to entertain today and dinner for thirty, including the roasted beef tenderloin she'd planned for, would have taken a lot of her time without Bethany here to help. The change of plans, and the fact that she only needed to put out dinner for eight—nine if Hal showed up—made a much more relaxing day.

Over breakfast, and while the blizzard essentially still churned outdoors, albeit with what many agreed was a reduced wind, Mr. Adamczyk, Mark, and Alec collectively voiced their opinion, persuading Maren that there was little sense in clearing the still-falling snow or addressing the downed tree with any urgency, since no one was coming or going anytime soon. Though it blocked the rear driveway, the fallen pine was far removed from the guests' vehicles, all parked in the circular drive at the front of the house.

Breakfast proceeded smoothly, with everyone seeming to enjoy the food, but frankly, Maren felt like a teenager all the while she sat at the dining room table, stealing shy glances at Alec, wondering if he felt, thought, or imagined the same things she had. She was visited by a thrilling sense of excitement at the prospect of a mutual attraction and then analyzed every fleeting glance and longer gaze, trying to decode potential signs of his thoughts and feelings. All very juvenile, she convinced herself, but then it had been a long, long time since anyone had stirred her interest as Alec Sullivan did.

Again, she was brought back to reality by several factors, first and foremost being his initial rudeness, how he'd judged Jasmine before meeting her and his vocal reservations about the wedding and then the other matter of how far away he lived. Still, and try as she might, she couldn't escape his presence or her awareness altogether. And yet the butterflies in

her stomach, provoked by any bit of attention aimed her way by him, were dampened a bit by apprehension and uncertainty.

She was almost relieved when Mrs. Adamczyk focused her attention on Maren after grilling Mark and Emily about their families, home, work, and their plans for having children —“Back in my day, we didn’t waste any time. I had four children by the time I was your age.”

“And what about you, Maren?” Mrs. Adamczyk pivoted, her mauve polished fingernails tapping on her coffee cup. “Jasmine’s been mentioning your name for years, but I feel I know so little about you. Are you from Willowbrook originally? Where are your parents? Local?”

Almost relieved, Maren amended.

“I grew up in Willowbrook,” she answered, choosing her words carefully. “My grandparents played a significant role in my life. It’s been a while since I’ve seen my parents.”

“That’s a shame, honey,” cooed Jasmine’s mom. “Where are your parents that you haven’t seen them?”

“Jean,” chided her husband for pressing on despite Maren’s obvious reticence.

“What? I’m just asking,” she defended and returned her attention to Maren. “Family is everything, dear. You must miss them terribly. Where are they now?”

Skillfully deflecting without revealing too much, Maren responded. “My father and I haven’t been in touch for quite some time,” she said. Not since he walked out on Maren and her mother, when Maren was eighteen months old. “And my mother, well, she has her own path.” Her path involved some guy name Billy and last Maren had heard, which was more than ten years ago, an entire life somewhere near Albany that included lots of drama and several arrests, but did not include Maren.

Despite the conscious effort she made not to look at Alec, not wanting to encounter any perceived sympathy in his gaze, curiosity tugged at her, compelling her to steal covert glances at him.

Though he wore what seemed like a poker face, Maren believed she imagined a glint of understanding in his powerful blue gaze. Not sympathy, as in he shared a similar messy story, but in that he understood her discomfort presently, for being grilled in mixed company.

When no one made any response to her last remark, and while she felt her cheeks warm with a flush, Maren stated, “Sometimes the best way to move forward is by focusing on present relationships, the ones that bring positivity and support into our lives.” Essentially, she was only echoing words that had been gently drilled into her head by the lovely therapist, Mrs. Suddaby, who had guided Maren through her adolescent years.

“Amen,” agreed Mr. Adamczyk, tapping his hand lightly on the table.

“But I—” Mrs. Adamczyk began again.

Only to be interrupted, intentionally—Maren would never believe otherwise—by Alec.

“Did I hear some mention of a tour of the catacombs below the house?” He grinned charmingly at Maren. “You can’t just run around accusing the former owners of the inn with smuggling and not back it up with some evidence.”

Admittedly, with that deft change of subject for her benefit, Alec Sullivan’s value rose tenfold in Maren’s eyes.

Emily was equally lovely, pouncing on this idea with enthusiasm. “Oh, yes, please. I’ve been chomping at the bit since you mentioned false walls and secret passageways. I want to get down there and go full-on Nancy Drew.”

“I would love to,” Maren agreed, with a grateful smile. “Let’s meet back here in an hour. I have the kitchen to clean and I want to get a few things done toward dinner tonight.”

“Mind if I join you on that tour?” Mr. Adamczyk wondered.

“Not at all. That would be great.”

“I’ll give you a hand in the kitchen,” Emily offered, standing and collecting dishes from the table.

“I’ll see you then,” Alec advised. “I think I’ll head outside and see if Hal needs any help.”

Maren nodded her thanks for that, and Dan, who’d been mostly quiet during breakfast, spoke up.

“I could help you with taking that tree apart.”

“That’d be great,” Alec accepted.

Mark Thompson blew out a breath, apparently as a bit of feigned resignation. “Me, too. I can’t sit in here while you two are being politely helpful.”

Alec pointed at Mr. Adamczyk and raised a brow, a silent invitation.

Mr. Adamczyk chuckled easily and said, without shame, “I’m too old, boys—for either the cold or the chopping or whatever else you’ll be doing out there. I’ll keep the parlor warm for you, maybe stoke that fire.”

Everyone moved off in different directions then.

Maren felt a genuine satisfaction for the camaraderie that had just unfolded and cast a final glance at Alec before she backed into the swinging door, pushing it open into the kitchen. She couldn’t help but appreciate him for everything he’d done today, not least of which was saving her from that increasingly awkward situation with Mrs. Adamczyk. Alec, however, headed toward the side door and the hallway, was unaware of her lingering gaze.

She held the door open for Emily who followed, her hands full like Maren, and then let the door swing closed just a moment before Alec turned in her direction for one last glimpse of her before he exited the room.

“I feel like I’m going to get in trouble if I allow you to continue while we all head inside,” Alec said to Hal more than an hour later, who was snow blowing the inn’s driveway, but had throttled down the machine when Alec approached him.

Hal waved off Alec's half-serious concern. "What else am I going to do all day over there?"

Alec smirked. "Over here," he said, tossing his thumb over his shoulder at the old Victorian, "you can come in and warm up for a while and join the tour of the smuggler's cellar."

"Seen it, heard it," Hal chuckled. "You guys go on in. That's a huge help, just getting all the walkways shoveled and so much more of that tree cut up. You're making me look good."

"Easy to do," Alec assured him. He liked the guy, couldn't help but like someone who went out of his way to support Maren. He started backing away, so as not to face the wind so soon, and wagged his gloved finger at Hal. "She'll be disappointed if you don't show for dinner, though," he reminded him. Even though it was presumptuous, he had a feeling he was right.

"I'll be there. I'll wrap it up in a bit and head on home for a shower before I come over."

Further away now, Alec gave him the thumbs up and followed Mark and Dan around to the back of the house, to enter there so that they didn't make a mess in the foyer.

The three of them cleaned up a bit and joined Maren, Emily, and Mr. Adamczyk waiting in the front parlor. Alec wasn't bothered that they'd been gone longer than an hour and judging by the constant chatter and laughter overheard as they'd returned and even while he was upstairs, he didn't suppose those waiting were perturbed at all by the amount of time passed.

"All set?" Maren asked when Alec joined them, the last to arrive. "Great. Let's get started." She began by providing flashlights for the tour. "Of course there are lights down there, but you might want to peruse every nook and cranny. I know I did, and still do quite often."

While the steps leading to the basement were sturdy, they were narrow and not very deep. The cellar was much cooler than the house, with low ceilings and the thick, musty scent of

time. Alec and Mark, who was also over six feet tall, were forced to duck a bit to avoid conking their heads every few feet. There were plenty of exposed stone walls and remnants of the old knob and tube electrical components. It was also as intriguing as billed, with a labyrinth of passageways and spaces, so large that Alec began to believe the basement had a greater footprint than the house itself.

Maren flashed her light on old wooden barrels and carved wood wine racks built into the walls as she made her way toward the front of the basement, which would be the section closer to the road, and thus the lake. She stopped inside a room that might have been 12 x 12 and waited for everyone to enter the opening.

“Here’s another wine rack,” she said, approaching that old apparatus against one wall. With a subtle push on one of the shelves, the entire rack and the wall behind it grunted and was pushed forward.

Several flashlights aimed at the opening Maren had just revealed.

“This is as far as it opens these days,” Maren said, which was about two feet wide. “And though the wall itself is cool enough, I want you to see the tunnel here. It’s quite ingenious, but then it’s also much colder since it leads to a trap door in the front lawn near Maple Street. But if you want to follow,” she invited, stepping through the opening, “you’ll see that the tunnel was lined with concrete—it actually looks like a hollow tube of concrete. There is a walking space, just wide enough for two people but then there’s also a ledge that runs the length of the tunnel. It’s sixty-six feet long, by the way. And I’m guessing that the ledge was used to move the crates and barrels of liquor. The ledge is more than a foot wide, as you can see. They’d bring in each crate and put it up on the ledge and just walk along the tunnel, pushing each crate along with them. I suspect barrels, if they transported those as well, were simply laid on their sides and rolled all the way in and then back out when it needed to be moved again.”

Maren’s face was barely visible, the darkness of the cellar and her flashlight pointing elsewhere not allowing him to

gauge her expression, but he sensed her enthusiasm for the subject matter in the quickened, higher voice she used.

He thought it was kind of cute.

“Down at the other end, if you’re interested in venturing further, the tunnel ends at a set of concrete stairs, which go up to a trap door laid flat in the lawn. Hal contends that back in the day, the top of that door would have been covered with sod or sections of grass, if you will, so that it blended in with the lawn. The ledge continues there, right next to the stairs, so when the crates came in, they simply had to slide them down from ground level and men down here would move them along.”

“This is fascinating,” said Emily. Her flashlight moved the most, darting over every dank and damp inch of the tunnel. “I’m sure not every crate or barrel arrived and made it safely along the ledge. A person could probably get drunk just by licking the floor.”

A round of chuckles greeted this supposition.

“I just think it’s so cool,” Maren said, “that I own this piece of history—even if it is illicit. I like to imagine Al Capone types, or you know, those classic movie guys in slick 1920s suits. I bet this place just buzzed with Prohibition-era shenanigans. Can’t you just see them down here, maneuvering crates and barrels of contraband?”

“I seem to remember,” Mr. Adamczyk said, “that several commercial buildings in the business district at the time—back then, it was down by Johnson Street and Lakeside Drive—had their cellars transformed into speakeasies.”

“They did!” Maren exclaimed. “There are five that remain in Willowbrook, mostly untouched. Many others were boarded up or simply renovated over the years. Likely, this house supplied the liquor to those establishments.”

They walked on, as far as they could, until Maren flashed her light up ahead, where the floor ended and a set of wide stone steps was seen.

“They don’t normally look like this, obviously,” Maren said, referring to all the snow that had blown in between cracks in the trap door. It was drifted against the entire right side of the stairs, all the way down to the floor of the tunnel. She shivered and rubbed her hand over her arm. “Wow, I can feel that wind. I thought it was letting up.”

“It’s much better than it was,” Dan remarked.

The group made their way back to where the secret door was. Mark helped Maren pull it closed again.

“Feel free to wander around,” she offered. “There’s plenty to see, and despite the way some of the passageways snake around, you really can’t get lost. Oh, wait, I’ll just show you one more thing.” She led them back the way they’d come but made a new turn down a different corridor, which opened into another wider space. This area was different than any other part of the cellar, having an old, peeling linoleum floor and walls that were decorated with some pretty fancy wood paneling. “Wait here,” Maren said, the dim light of lowered flashlights showing an expectant grin on her face. “And turn your flashlights off in ten seconds.” She left them, exiting and disappearing into another corridor.

Emily counted aloud for the group. When she reached ten, they all turned off their flashlights. Only one or two more seconds passed before a light came through one of the walls, moving from one tiny peephole to another, five in all, just about eye height.

“It’s a false wall,” Maren called from the other side, her voice sounding muffled. “There’s nothing but the framework back here and it could be knocked down onto anyone poking around, authorities, I presume.”

“Or shot through,” Mark proposed. “Gangsters loved their machine guns.”

“Unless we presume this wall was rebuilt,” Mr. Adamczyk said, “looks like they never got the chance to use this cover.”

Curious, Emily led the group through the passageway, around two corners until they found Maren, standing inside a

gravel-floored chamber, with an antique metal table and an old safe, laying on its side with the door open.

Emily went directly to the safe.

“Empty,” Maren advised, “and though it looks small, it’s too heavy to lift.”

“What’s the neatest thing you ever found down here?” Dan asked.

“Hm,” Maren considered. “Honestly, by the time I took over the inn, most of the basement was empty, as you see it now. But as you might have noticed, aside from general nooks and crannies, the stone walls have little notches here and there, and I once found a note tucked inside one. It was so sweet, written in what I’m guessing was a child’s hand, and stating simply, *I will love Martin forever.*”

“Aw,” cooed Emily, her interest and fervor a fine match to Maren’s.

“There is a chamber toward the back of the house that has brick walls. I have no idea why, but some of the bricks are loose. I haven’t tested every single brick, but I’ve always wondered if I might remove a brick one day and—”

“The whole house crashes down?” Dan suggested wryly.

“Well, that, too,” Maren conceded, “Or, more exciting, that I might find buried treasure—treasure being some historical document or relic from the past, maybe another secret chamber.” Her expression clearly asked if anyone else was as excited about this possibility as she.

“That would be so cool,” Emily confirmed. “I could never own this place—or certainly I could never run it as a bed and breakfast. I’d be spending all my days down here, exploring.”

“Or maybe you could,” suggested Mr. Adamczyk, glancing between Emily and Maren. “Maren is obviously nuts about this old house and she’s managing the business, quite capably, I would say.”

“You really are nuts about this old house and all its history, aren’t you?” Dan asked of Maren, seemingly charmed by her

passion.

“I *love* my house,” she gushed. “What I wouldn’t give to know each story, from every day of its life. I think it’s fascinating.”

Though she was shadowed a bit, as all of their faces were by flashlights kept politely low, the sparkle in her eye when she spoke was unmistakable. Maren’s accompanying animated gesture, laying her hand over her heart, painted a vivid picture of someone deeply connected to the house and its lore.

Alec could avoid the truth no more. He thought *Maren* was fascinating.

Chapter Eight

Maren was forced to return to the garage, as that larger fridge was where she'd placed the fifteen pounds of beef tenderloin she'd brought home from the butcher two days ago. She was almost pleased that Alec had gone up to his room after the cellar tour, not wanting him to again have to brave the storm to go to the garage, wanting to help, as she was sure he would have offered to do.

She agreed with Dan's earlier assessment: though the wind still blew, it was definitely less gusty than even this morning. Sadly, what remained of the wind still had the power to create blinding conditions and had filled in so many of the areas that had been shoveled and plowed. The tree still lay across the driveway, but Alec and Hal's minimal clearing of that had wisely and thankfully been right across the middle of the trunk so that a nice path was carved out between the back of the house and the garage. Sawdust and smaller limbs lay all around the opening created as Maren passed by.

She didn't know what she was going to do with so much meat, but was determined that at the price per pound, she wasn't about to let it go to waste. Heading back to the house, she carried that heavy, white-papered package along with a few other things that had been purchased and stored for the rehearsal dinner, including the goat cheese, parmesan cheese, and bacon, and the vegetables needed for tonight, fresh green beans and carrots.

Back inside the kitchen, she plopped everything on the island and divested herself of her coat and boots in the back hall before going to the small kitchen desk and the laptop there. She was thinking that a good way to use more of the beef was to serve some of it as an appetizer and recalled that last fall she'd made beef tenderloin crostini with horseradish cream, which had been a huge hit. The recipe was easily recovered in a folder she kept on the laptop and after perusing the ingredients, she figured she could make it happen. She had fresh chives but not parsley, but she wasn't sure the lack of

parsley would affect the end product so much. She didn't have baguette loaves but supposed she could run next door to the Coffee Loft and buy some of their ciabatta rolls that they used for sandwiches and make do with those, slicing them very thin.

Glancing at the clock on the wall, Maren decided she better do that sooner rather than later, before Aiden shut down for the day.

She blew out a resigned sigh and returned to the back hall to once again don her coat, hat, and boots.

The few challenges faced in her first year as owner of the Morning Glory—maintenance issues, unexpected cancellations, difficult guests—had only been warm-up exercises compared to this, not only being trapped in a house with seven strangers, but being responsible for their well-being, their meals, and to some degree, their entertainment, all the while pretending she wasn't the least bit frazzled and apprehensive, *and* worried about Jasmine and Liam, who had been so looking forward to this day.

Though she'd not admit it to another living soul—except maybe Hal—she couldn't help but wonder if the blizzard was the universe's way of making Liam and Jasmine hit the pause button to consider how big a step this was.

Anyway, though Maren did find some satisfaction in navigating the complexities of this weekend—she embraced challenges—she was pretty sure she would sleep like the dead when the weekend was done, and the Morning Glory Inn was once again vacant.

She was just stuffing her feet back into her boots when Alec popped his head around the door and into the back hall.

“I'll go out to the garage if you need anything,” he said.

He looked like he had just showered. His dark hair was tousled and still held a bit of shiny dampness, a stark contrast to the frosty ambience outside.

Maren grinned with some satisfaction for his timing. “I already went to the garage again,” she told him proudly. “I'm

going around the corner to the Coffee Loft to get some bread.”

“I can do that so you don’t have to go out,” he offered. “I’m sure you’ve got plenty to do here.”

“You’re either super solicitous and love helping people,” Maren guessed, “or you’re already going stir crazy and want to get out.”

Alec chuckled, admitting, “A little bit of both. I can’t sit idle too long. And since it’s Saturday, there’s hardly any work to keep me busy.”

Maren straightened after tying her boots and put her hands on her knees. “Your hair will freeze,” she cautioned lightly, discovering she wouldn’t mind having his company.

Flashing a wider grin, evidently unfazed by the warning, Alec took his coat off the hook and shoved his feet into his boots. “I’ll risk it for the sake of bread-fetching. I’m going to guess that whatever your plans are for bread, I won’t be disappointed.”

“I’ve never met a guy who didn’t like beef tenderloin crostini with horseradish cream sauce,” she tried to entice him, pulling on her gloves.

His eyes widened and he moved forward, waving his hand at her with a feigned urgency. “Enough said,” he urged, grinning. “Hurry up, let’s go before the café closes.”

Once outside the back door, Maren flipped her hood up over her head and hat. She squinted against the snow blowing at her. “Normally I would cut through behind the garage,” she told Alec, “But I’m going to guess it’s a mess back there. We’ll have to go down the driveway and out on the road.”

“Probably a wiser course,” Alec acknowledged.

Despite the wind, it was quiet outside, as if a hush had descended with the snow. Though the driving ban allowed for emergency services to operate and essential workers to be on the road, there wasn’t a car around. The driveway was mostly plowed, except for drifts that had been blown back onto the asphalt, but mostly they were not forced to navigate any great depths of snow. The expansive front lawn, where two old

maple trees and a small row of pine along the left side, whose boughs swept the ground, was picturesque for how pristine and undisturbed was the glistening snow.

“It’s very pretty, at any rate,” remarked Maren.

“On a postcard or Christmas card, maybe,” Alec allowed.

“So you don’t miss it? The snow?” She asked.

“I do and I don’t,” he answered. “I love to ski and yes, there is some charm to freshly fallen snow, if you will, but I don’t miss driving bans and mounds or drifts of snow taller than me, or the grayness of Western New York winters.”

“But this...hasn’t been awful,” she commented, admittedly fishing a little.

“Not at all.”

At the end of the long driveway, they turned right into the street. Alec walked on the traffic side and took hold of Maren’s arm as they paraded along the slushy edge between the slick roads still covered with a few inches of snow and the huge pile of snow to their right, where the plows had been pushing the mass of white stuff.

“I’m not being forward or anything like that,” he said, “but this is pretty greasy, and I don’t want you falling.”

Before she responded, she was visited by a fleeting but tantalizing thought: *maybe I want you to be forward.*

Attempting to keep things light and relaxed, Maren teased, “Are you sure you’re not hanging on so that you don’t slip and fall.”

“Well, obviously, that’s part of it,” he wasted no time admitting.

“My grandmother used to say that,” she told him, “that the roads were *greasy* when really they’re just slick or slippery.”

“My mom calls it *slickery*.”

“Slickery,” Maren repeated, testing it out. “Perfect.”

Thankfully, not one vehicle passed them on Maple Street. They turned the corner onto Harmony Place and walked along the edge of the road again as the sidewalks were not cleared of snow. Past the narrow side yard and the side of the house, and the tall white fence that closed in the Inn's back yard, past the north side of the garage itself, which was yet fifty feet off the road, and then finally, they came upon the Coffee Loft, with its refurbished brick exterior and a bank of frosty windows.

“Oh, good, they're still open,” Maren noted, her words accompanied by puffs of white breath. “I meant to text Aiden to make sure but then forgot.”

“And a good thing, too,” Alec said, indicating the three vehicles in the parking lot, two of which were pick-up trucks with plows attached, likely private contractors, and a large town plow, which was parked sideways in the shallow lot, taking up three spaces. “Looks like they need sustenance.”

Alec let go of Maren's arm and pulled open the door to the café, allowing her to enter first.

Inside two guys in canvas coats and baseball caps were sitting at a table by the windows while two more men, wearing yellow reflective vests over their winter gear, were being waited on by Aiden.

With her arms bent at her chest, huddling against the cold that had been deliberately ignored while she walked but now seeped into her bones, Maren gave a tiny happy wave to Aiden, who acknowledged her and Alec with a grin.

Standing side by side with Alec, Maren perused the counter-to-ceiling chalkboard menu, as if she didn't know the thing by heart even though she hadn't worked here in more than a year, and as if she didn't feel Alec watching her.

She turned toward him, and he did not remove his gaze, didn't pretend he hadn't been staring at her.

“What?” She asked and lifted her gloved hands to lay them over her cheeks. “They're bright red, aren't they? They always do that in the cold.”

“No, it’s not—well, yes, they are bright red,” he answered. “I was just wondering about something.”

Maren lifted her brows, wordlessly encouraging him to say more.

“So, do you...um, how do I ask this—do you plan for conversation at dinner?” Alec inquired. “In advance, I mean.”

Puzzled, Maren asked, “What do you mean?”

“You are very capable—as a host and conversationalist—but I get the sense that if there were an extended silence at a dinner table of ten people, you would find it awkward. So, you prod conversation by asking questions about your guests. I guess you might be curious as well, but are those questions posed mostly to keep any conversational lulls at bay?”

A sheepish grin answered after his clarification.

“I’ve been found out,” she confessed. “I do, actually—prepare, that is. I mean, not laboriously, just enough to have some conversation at hand. Well, not conversation. I can’t just spew into an awkward silence, in a stilted voice, as if I’m reading off cue cards, *Say, Mrs. Adamczyk, can you tell us about your favorite color and why you like it so much.* That would be awkward and be contrived. But I give some thought to questions I might ask the guests, to draw them into conversation. I steer clear of politics, religion, and most current events. I’d rather let the guests be the subject.”

“You didn’t ask me anything,” he remarked.

Caught off guard by what felt like a complaint, Maren stammered, “I-I didn’t know anything about you. Or, I knew very little about you.”

Thankfully, he relieved her of his scrutiny, shoving his hands into his coat pocket as he now consulted the big menu written in chalk. “And you didn’t want to know more?” He followed up.

Maren wondered if his casual tone was intentional or not.

“No, it’s not—well, I feel as if I know the Adamczyks, for all that Jasmine talks about them. And she’s mentioned her

cousin Rachel a few times over the years, when we worked together here, so I had some insight there.”

“You worked here? At the Coffee Loft?” Inside his coat pocket, his hand moved, seemingly pointing toward the floor.

“I did,” she answered. “While I was in college. That’s how I met Ellie B, the previous owner of the Morning Glory.”

“I see.”

“And when I told Jasmine that Mark and Emily had booked a room at the inn for the wedding,” she explained further, “she talked about them a bit, how Liam and Mark had met in grad school, and that Emily worked at that non-profit. I think Jasmine only said that you had gone to college up in Buffalo with Liam.”

He nodded, still contemplating the menu, while the two guys in front of them had finished ordering finally but now waited on Aiden to deliver their coffee and food.

“I was just wondering,” Alec went on, again with apparent indifference, “if you didn’t advance conversation with me at dinner last night because you were a little miffed about the way I expressed my concern about the speed at which this wedding came about?”

Oh. Well, yeah, there was that.

“To be honest, yeah,” Maren said, seeing no reason to lie about it, “that might have had something to do with it—but I will qualify that response with I have since learned you are not a bad guy.”

“Not the jerk you originally thought?”

If she recalled correctly, she had actually and specifically thought him a jerk, so she couldn’t very well lie and say she hadn’t. She chose instead to evade a direct answer. “You have been wonderfully helpful and for that, I really am grateful.” When he only nodded at this, Maren pursued hesitantly, “Do you...want to tell me about yourself?”

Alec turned his mesmerizing blue eyes upon her. “Do you want to know about me?”

While she already suspected that he was a forthright person, she hadn't expected to be put on the spot like that. It seemed to be a fully loaded question. She knew the answer, but hesitated, recalling that he lived in Austin and was here for a only a few days, so what was the point?

For lack of any other way to respond—and then being saved by Aiden becoming available to them as those two big guys moved away with their purchases—Maren smiled brightly at Alec. “I’d be frappe to know you.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” said Aiden, who waited with one hand laying over the top of the cash system.

He didn’t quite get his question answered. At least not to his satisfaction.

It had only been a couple of days, but he knew he was nagged and goaded by an intense desire to know more about *her*. So, yeah, basically, he’d put out a fairly transparent feeler, wanting to know if he was the only one who felt this way. The speed at which he found himself captivated by Maren took him by surprise, and really had him eager to meet Jasmine. If he discovered that Maren’s friend was also beautiful inside and out, was possessed of hypnotic eyes and a vibrant charm, handled stressful situations with poise and confidence, and could melt a guy with little more than a smile, then he might understand Liam’s desire—or his lack of resistance—to get married so soon after meeting.

Upon their return to the inn, Alec excused himself to take a phone call from his mother, seeking privacy upstairs in his room, and then found that there were several work emails that required quite a bit of his time and attention. By the time he returned downstairs, the trapped-indoors group was already gathered in the parlor. He was glad he hadn’t changed for dinner as no one seemed to have fussed. Blizzards did that, made things really casual, really fast.

Rachel was present now but looked a bit sullen sitting on the antique wood-framed sofa. Emily and Mrs. Adamczyk sat there as well, side-by-side, looking at Emily’s phone,

presumably at photos, while Mark and Dan discussed the Buffalo Bill's latest season, sitting in the two matching arm chairs.

Alec found Hal returned and pouring himself a drink from the bar server.

They exchanged greetings and Alec asked, "How's it out there now?"

"It's better than yesterday is all I can say," said Hal practically.

"Liam texted me," Alec said, making himself a gin and tonic, which would likely prove very pedestrian after that martini of the last two nights, "and said they're not too optimistic, but will hold off until tomorrow about officially postponing the wedding."

Hal nodded. "Yeah, Jasmine just called her mother," he said, pointing his drink in Mrs. Adamczyk's direction, "and said the same thing. Poor kids."

The swinging door to the dining room slowly pushed open. Alec caught it when it was wide enough for Maren to come through but before it would have bumped into Hal, possibly causing him to spill his drink.

"Oh, thanks," said Maren as she entered with a tray in hand. She offered up the tray to Alec.

On a linen cloth sat a dozen little ovals of bread, spread with some white sauce, topped with thinly shaved beef, and garnished with chopped chives.

Hal wasn't shy and reached for one before Alec would have.

With a straight face, Maren lightly slapped his hand away. "Guests first," she said and smiled beautifully at the older man.

"I'm a guest," countered Hal, unperturbed by her actions.

"You're my friend," Maren corrected, "and you didn't walk with me to fetch the crostini."

Grinning, Alec lifted his hand, and was surprised to have it smacked away as well before he'd claimed one of the mouthwatering appetizers. Curiously, his smile only increased as he met Maren's gaze, looking for an explanation.

She pivoted a bit, putting the tray directly in front of Hal even as she spoke to Alec. "Sorry, Alec. The walk was kind, but really, think of all that snowplowing Hal did. He should have first dibs, right?"

Hal reached again, but he did so slowly, watching Maren, ready to retract his hand if she swung again.

"You're safe, I promise," she pledged.

And he was and claimed his treat while Maren winked playfully at him.

Maren then smiled sweetly at Alec. "Okay, you're good now."

Amused, Alec took one of the hors d'oeuvres and then Maren moved further into the room. He and Hal exchanged glances and didn't bother with any polite nibbles but shoved the whole thing into their mouths. After a moment, in which time they savored the tender beef and tangy horseradish sauce, and crostini that was neither too soft nor too hard, Hal said, even as he hadn't swallowed fully, "She could've smacked me upside the head, or right across the face—many times—and I'd swear it'd be worth it. Boy, she's got some good ideas with food."

Alec agreed. "She could give me about twenty of these. That'd make for a perfect meal."

Dinner that evening was quite enjoyable, the guests now familiar enough with one another that Maren didn't once have to fill any void with conversation. The tenderloin was nearly butter-knife tender, and cooked to perfect temperature since she'd prepared two pieces for different lengths of time, able to offer either medium-rare or medium. They enjoyed a leisurely dinner, no one in any hurry to be anywhere, and lingered over coffee, tea, and dessert, the fruit topped torte Alec had carried back from the Coffee Loft.

Alec, Mark, and Emily helped Maren clear the table before the party moved back to the parlor.

Once the entire group was convened in the parlor again, Maren asked if anyone was interested in another game night.

“Trivial Pursuit was fun last night,” Mark said, “but I’m not going up against Hal again. The man’s got a steel trap for a brain, apparently.”

Maren went to the built-in shelves on the right side of the fireplace and opened the lower cabinet doors, announcing, “We’ve got Monopoly, Uno, Scrabble—”

“Ooh, I love Scrabble,” said Emily. “Who wants to play? We can play in pairs, but I have to warn you, I’m pretty good.”

“There’s a gauntlet I don’t mind picking up,” Mrs. Adamczyk said. “We’ve been playing Scrabble for fifteen years since we started going to Key West. There, people bring their games right down to the pool area. Oh, gosh, they’re nuts about it down there, and even arrange tournaments. We just love it, don’t we, Rich?”

“We do, even though she failed to mention that we’ve yet to win one of those tournaments,” supplied Mr. Adamczyk.

Mrs. Adamczyk defended, “Yes, but we are regularly in competition with a librarian, a physicist, a professor of English Literature, and don’t forget about Marlee, who reads seventy books a year.”

“Rachel and Dan? Are you interested?” Emily inquired.

Dan patted Rachel’s knee and spoke for both of them. “Sure.”

“Hal?” Emily asked next.

Hal grinned, shaking his head. “Nah, not my cup of tea.”

Maren pleaded with an enticing smile. “Come on, it’s just a friendly game. It’ll be fun.”

Adopting a mock caveman voice, Hal shrugged playfully. “Me prefer grunts. Grunts easy. Words, not so much.”

“And what are these very nice people going to make of it,” Maren asked, “when I tell them that you and I play at least once a week in the evening to pass the time?”

“They might suppose, correctly, that I’m tired of losing to you.”

“Fine, have it your way. You could have been on my team.” She put her hand to the side of her mouth and said in a stage whisper, “On the winning team, Hal, unless Emily can back up her claim that she’s some kind of Scrabble champ.”

“Oh, there’s another gauntlet,” Emily happily played along. “Alec, you’ll play, right? You have to, so Maren has a partner. She’ll need someone to blame her loss on.”

Alec smirked. He supposed that someone like Maren, who seemed to have all her bed and breakfast ducks in a row, everything organized and carried out so perfectly, probably hated to lose.

He pushed out a great, big sigh. “Fine. Everyone needs a scapegoat.”

Emily laughed. “That’s the spirit.”

They decided to return to the dining room table to make the board accessible to everyone, and soon took seats in pairs around the table. Hal joined them as well, sitting in his usual chair at the end, pleased, it seemed, simply to watch.

Alec and Maren sat in two side chairs, moving them fairly close so that they could both consult the tile rack and move around the letters.

The game proceeded smoothly, with the pairs evenly matched. Drinks were refilled and conversation flowed, making for an enjoyable evening.

Mark cheerily advised Dan, “Don’t ever play poker, man. Your face lights up whenever you get good letters.”

At one point, Alec and Maren had on their wooden rack, e, a, o, r, i, u, and h.

Alec leaned over and whispered to Maren, “Five vowels is not good.” Her hair smelled like fresh flowers.

He needn't have worried about the vowels.

Maren rearranged the letters on their holder—e, u, h, o, i, r, a—and leaned over to whisper in Alec's ear. "Euphoria."

Alec glanced at the board, spotting the open and available 'p' in the previously played 'helper'.

Yes, well, her warm breath in his ear and her sweet scent was indeed a certain kind of bliss.

He nodded, pretending he wasn't at all intrigued by her proximity, or any and every other thing about her that charmed him.

It wasn't *euphoria*, but Maren laying down *bazaar* that won the game, landing on a triple word score and adding fifty-one points to their total, edging out Mark and Emily by three points. Dan and Rachel weren't far behind, only six points below them.

Mrs. Adamczyk remarked, "I've always thought a lot could be assumed or known about a person by how well they lose at Scrabble—or any board game, or in sports, any competitive thing really. Losing and how they deal with it reveals volumes about a person's character and resilience. Kudos to all of you, for handling the loss so well. What polite people you are."

Her husband gently reminded her, while not at all attempting to conceal his smirk, "And to you, dear, since we came in last place."

"Yes, well, that was your fault for drawing such terrible letters from the bag."

Chapter Nine

Saturday

Saturday morning started well and wonderfully, with a clear blue sky. Sadly, little time had they to exclaim over this. By nine in the morning, a wall of thick gray clouds began to move in, visible from any window at the front of the house as those clouds rolled in over the lake.

Despite this, Maren was rather pleased that her guests were decidedly more comfortable, mingling and chatting with greater ease, and convening inside the large airy kitchen with Maren as she prepared breakfast.

“Don’t bother setting up a coffee station in the dining room, honey,” Mrs. Adamczyk suggested. “It’s pretty, but only makes more work for you. We can get our coffee and tea right here in the kitchen.”

Alec, Mark, and Dan strode by, all headed toward the back hall.

“We might as well make good use of the clear sky and relatively windless morning,” Mark said in answer to several raised brows. “We’ll do some more clearing before breakfast.”

“You guys are awesome,” Maren said, moving her gaze from one to the next. “Thanks so much.”

They passed a pleasant hour, Maren and the women. Even Rachel joined them in the kitchen and all four of them had a hand in the cooking of breakfast. Mrs. Adamczyk even put her husband to work, telling him he couldn’t be idle while everyone else was busy, instructing him to set the dining room table for breakfast.

Emily convinced Maren she didn’t need more sweets from the Coffee Loft. “There’s plenty of food here, and we still have leftover pastries, and some of that torte from yesterday.”

The guys returned within an hour, just as those stormy clouds moved in. All three of them had armfuls of wood for the fireplaces. Hal followed them in, announcing there was still plenty of snow blowing to do but he'd already worked up quite an appetite. Maren adored that he felt so much at ease, to essentially invite himself in for breakfast.

Maren had just set down the last platter at the table after everyone was seated when Jean Adamczyk's phone rang.

"Oh, it's Jasmine," she said. "I asked her to call me with an update—how do I put the speaker on?"

Dan, sitting next to her, tapped her screen and then Jean laid the phone in the middle of the table. She leaned forward and proceeded to speak loudly as if the speaker was actually a tin can attached to a string.

"We're all here, honey," shouted Mrs. Adamczyk. "We just sat down to breakfast."

"Good grief, Mom," was Jasmine's response. "Why are you yelling?"

"Oh, I didn't know if you could hear me."

"Me and most of Willowbrook can, I'm sure," Jasmine said, laughing a bit. "Okay, is Maren there? Maren?"

"I'm here."

"So, here's the story," Jasmine said, "and it's not good. They haven't lifted the travel ban yet and aren't expected to today, since apparently—ugh—more snow is coming. The Harbor View has declined to host the wedding, which I totally understand—they have their license and insurance things or whatever to think of—but," she said, emphasizing the *but*, "Liam had an idea and I don't think it's nuts. Well, not completely, but it hinges upon you, Maren."

"Me?" Maren asked, laying her fingers against her chest. What did she have to do with Liam and Jasmine's wedding? Or the weather? "I'm listening."

"Liam just talked to Nathan Bennett," Jasmine said, referring to Willowbrook's police chief, "and Nathan said he

would have no problem with the wedding happening, but advised he'd feel better if he and his deputies assisted with transporting people. We talked to Carl Dawson, who lives on Jasper Lane, and he has agreed to step in to officiate since the minister won't be able to make it down from Springville. Carl said his grandson was stuck there with him and could bring him on the snowmobile. I'm not worried about flowers or the cake or even the meal, but..." she paused, leaving that thought hanging.

Maren raised her brows, still wondering what this had to do with her.

"But I was wondering," Jasmine continued, her voice turning plaintive, "how you would feel, Maren, about hosting the wedding at the Inn?"

All eyes turned to Maren, some with excitement.

While a thousand thoughts instantly ran around inside Maren's head, Mrs. Adamczyk chastised her daughter. "Boy, talk about putting her on the spot," she called out loudly toward the phone on the table. "Jasmine, you're on speaker. This should have been asked in private. I'm all for not having to leave the house to see this wedding happen, but that's a big ask—on short notice, and without giving her—"

"Mom," Jasmine interrupted, "you're the one who put it on speaker, and Maren knows she can absolutely refuse. It is a big ask, I get it. A lot of pressure. But I will say, Maren, that of the original fifty guests, it looks like only thirty would be able to make it, and that includes you guys there at the Inn. So it's just twenty more people coming. Maren, I don't expect any heroics. We just need a place to say *I do* and celebrate with family and friends. Maybe later, in the summer if we want, we can have a larger reception. Honestly, Maren, you can throw out some bowls of peanuts and potato chips and it would be fine. And you can, obviously, say no, you simply can't do it."

Maren was, admittedly, shocked, her brain whirling with what this could mean, everything it would entail. Of course, her initial inclination was not to deny her friend. And so she didn't. "Yes, of course, you can have the wedding here," she

said. The hesitancy in her voice was provoked purely by wondering how she could and would make it wonderful and special for Jasmine and Liam. She happened to glance over at Hal.

He shrugged. “If anyone can pull it off,” he said, “you can. Don’t overthink it.”

“Absolutely,” agreed Jasmine.

Alec spoke up, drawing her gaze to him.

He surprised her by agreeing with Hal. And offering, “You’ve got plenty of help here to make it happen, to do justice to your Morning Glory Inn.”

Emily clapped her hands together at her chest. “Of course, we’ll all help. This is going to be so much fun.”

A small breath of a laugh erupted from Maren. “All right, let’s do this.”

“Oh, thank you so much! I love you—all of you,” Jasmine gushed. “I trust whatever you manage to do will be perfect.”

“But you better leave us to it, honey,” suggested her mother. “You take care of everything you need to, to get yourself here, and we’ll take care of everything here.”

“Guess that answers what we’ll be doing all day,” Mr. Adamczyk added, grinning a bit.

There was a little more discussion with the bride before they hung up.

“I can see your gears churning,” Hal said to Maren. “But breakfast first, before you get on with it. The guys and I can handle everything outside, get it in shape to receive cars and people.”

“We need to make a list,” Maren suggested to Jasmine’s mother. Admittedly, she felt only a little panicked.

“I say we skip any kind of sit down dinner,” Jean replied. “That’s too much.”

“You might be right. There’s plenty of food and plenty of options but the logistics of seating thirty people would be

tricky.”

“Then it’ll be a cocktail party wedding,” Emily suggested cheerily. “We got this, ladies.”

The Morning Glory Inn buzzed all the rest of the morning and early afternoon, with the unexpected energy prompted by the change of venue and the guests’ eagerness to help. While Rachel advised she would be useless in the kitchen, she offered to transform the parlor and dining room into an impromptu reception area.

“Have at it,” Maren happily allowed. “Inside the buffet drawers and the built-in’s cupboards, there are plenty of linens and dishes, and old décor and fancy serving pieces. Help yourself.”

Jean, Maren, and Emily made a list of what they could make to feed twenty people, all with ingredients available presently. Thankfully, Maren always bought more than needed, never wanting to run short on food, and there were still four pounds of beef tenderloin left, uncooked and wrapped in the fridge. Jean and Emily convinced Maren the tenderloin appetizer of last night could absolutely be made again, as it was so fabulous. Otherwise, they had all the makings and a plan for mini quiches, mini beef wellingtons, Buffalo chicken turnovers, and an avocado shrimp appetizer, since Maren had a package of frozen shrimp in the freezer and avocado in the fridge. Additionally, they decided to put together a few large dishes, as extras, and rather as a very casual buffet. Emily declared there was everything she would need to put together a Caesar salad, while Jean remarked that a baked ziti dish would never go untouched.

“You’ve got cans of tomato puree and sauce, onion, and garlic,” she said. “I can whip up sauce fairly quickly. And there’s ground beef here as well,” she said, poking around in the freezer. “I can make meatballs to go with it.”

“Deviled eggs,” Emily pronounced, thrusting her finger into the air as inspiration struck. “I’ve never met a deviled egg I didn’t like. And they’re so easy to make.”

Rachel popped into the kitchen after a while to wonder if Jasmine would need a bridal suite and how they might accommodate her.

Maren had already given that some thought. “The room that Jim and Heidi were going to use is empty. Rachel, do you mind making that ready for the bride and however many of her bridesmaids can make it?”

“Not at all.”

When she left, Mrs. Adamczyk gasped. “Oh, heavens. We need a cake!”

Emily echoed her gasp while Maren’s eyes widened.

“I’ll text Aiden at the Coffee Loft,” she decided. “We simply won’t have time, or the oven space—I don’t even know if I would have enough powdered sugar for a respectable buttercream frosting. Maybe...Aiden can figure something out?” More a question than stated with any firm belief. “Oh, wait, how about a cupcake tower?” She knew for certain that the café would have plenty of pink and red cupcakes for Valentine’s Day.

“Perfect,” said Emily. “There, another dilemma solved. This impromptu wedding business is easy.”

Maren let loose a dubious chuckle. “I’m going to revisit that statement with you in twelve hours and see if you still believe that.”

The groom arrived a little after noon. He was dropped off at the inn not by a police cruiser but by one of the town’s huge plow trucks, whose wide plow was able to be lifted as the truck turned off Maple Street since Hal and the guys had the driveway cleared almost to pavement—for now.

At Mrs. Adamczyk’s request, with which Alec was happy to comply, Liam would use Alec’s suite to dress for the wedding. After greetings were made and a big hug given to Maren for her generosity, and then much discussion about the weather and these last minute changes, Liam followed Alec up the stairs to his room.

While he settled in, hanging up his bagged suit in the narrow closet, and after Alec had cleared up space in the attached bathroom for any toiletries that Liam might have, Alec shook Liam's hand again, smiling with greater ease now, knowing a diminished sense of reservation about the hasty wedding.

They stood eye to eye, being roughly the same height, but that was where any similarities ended. While Alec exuded an air of rugged strength, being broad and muscular, Liam McLaughlin carried a more lean and lanky physique.

"I have to tell you, buddy," Alec said inside the room, "I was a little concerned about this quickie wedding." He held up his hand when Liam immediately made to return either an argument or a justification. "But, having been here for these few days with Jasmine's parents and her friends, I'm looking forward to meeting your bride."

Liam relaxed, sighing with some contentment.

"I won't lie, Alec," he said. "I think initially, I latched on hard to Jasmine with some hope that I couldn't possibly be pulled back to Grace—you know how that relationship yo-yo-ed for years, how I kept being sucked back in. But then I realized how sweet and warm and funny Jasmine is, and I just knew: this—she—is exactly what I'd always hoped Grace and our relationship would have been, but never was. Jasmine showed me this is how it's supposed to be." He shrugged, grinning, a man helplessly in love. "When you know, you know."

"I'm really happy for you."

The wedding took place at six o'clock, when the last of the expected guests had been dropped off at the Inn and Carl Dawson arrived on the back of a snowmobile. Hal informed Alec in an aside that Carl was Willowbrook's go-to mechanic, known for being able to fix anything with an engine of any kind. He was also, surprisingly, an ordained minister, having obtained his credentials online a few years back. He performed the ceremony dressed from head to toe in snow gear, with his goggles pushed up onto his forehead.

Alec had met Jasmine briefly upon her arrival. The warmth of her greeting and the sincerity of her gaze dispelled any lingering qualms he might have had. Alec hadn't said as much to Liam earlier, but it had been in the back of his mind that he hoped Liam wasn't being taken for a ride or manipulated as he had been in that previous relationship. He felt confident though, having sensed a profound authenticity in Jasmine—not unlike Maren—a down-to-earth charm that resonated well with Liam's easy-going nature. If Alec hadn't known the particulars, he never would have guessed of the blithely happy and utterly calm bride that her entire wedding expectations had been upended, and that nothing that she'd planned would be part of her big day. She was refreshingly cool and collected, seeming more happy to visit with Emily, Rachel, and Maren than to worry over what she couldn't control .

At six o'clock Jasmine glided into the parlor on her father's arm, her eyes only for Liam. Alec was sure the bride was beautiful, but he was more certain that Maren was stunning. She wore a black and gold flowing skirt with a high waist and a floral pattern, paired with a clingy, long-sleeved top that crossed in the front, creating a figure-flattering design. Her green eyes glistened with excitement and maybe even watery tears as Jasmine and Liam said 'I do'. She wore high heels and her hair was swept back in an elegant arrangement, and Alec hadn't been able to take his eyes off her as the guests assembled around the fireplace where the vows had been said an hour ago.

Alec knew little of planning, hosting, and managing a wedding, but had to say, as an onlooker, it went off without a hitch, and frankly, one would never know that Maren and Jasmine hadn't been planning exactly this for months.

There was plenty of food, stationed all over the first floor, some in the parlor after the ceremony had concluded, more in the kitchen for any who might wander there, while the bulk of it was laid out on the dining room table. The chairs had been pushed back to the perimeter of the room, allowing people to graze around the table, sampling at least ten different appetizers and side dishes, while in the center of the table a

two-foot-tall pyramid of pink, red, and white cupcakes substituted for the wedding cake that couldn't make it.

Presently, Alec strolled through the parlor toward the dining room, catching snippets of conversation as he passed by. Unfortunately, most of the talk seemed to center around the storm and not so much the happy couple, but maybe that was to be expected. Liam and Jasmine were in their own little world and possibly they either didn't notice, or they didn't care.

"I don't know," said one woman to another, "I think it's kind of romantic, making everything work to make it happen like this."

Elsewhere, a man posited, "I'm telling you, this storm is exactly like the one we had back in '03, except for the wind. And of course, that one only dumped about two feet on us, and it only lasted a day and a half."

In response to this, a woman pertly replied, "So, nothing like this blizzard, you mean."

Another wedding guest seemed more interested in the ornate woodwork of the house, specifically the staircase and banister. "They don't make 'em like that anymore. Woodwork nowadays has no style."

Alec smirked and continued through the parlor into the dining room.

He saw Maren at the bar, where he was headed.

"Does it feel good to have it behind you, the wedding?" He asked when he reached her side.

Maren's gaze softened, becoming thoughtful. "It does."

"You have a knack for handling chaos," he noted, scanning the room filled with celebratory chatter. "The cupcake tower is a nice touch."

Maren shrugged, grinning. "Desperate times call for creative dessert solutions. That was not me, though. That was all Aiden."

“You’ve added another chapter to the town’s history,” Alec remarked, “and Liam and Jasmine now have a wedding to remember.” He lifted his glass in a toast. “Cheers to you, Maren Scott, to a job well done.”

Maren tapped her champagne flute against his rocks glass. “And to you, Alec Sullivan. Your presence and your help made a huge difference.”

Chapter Ten

The kitchen was bathed in the soft, muted glow of the table lamp at Maren's desk. It was well past midnight, but she couldn't sleep. The last guests had been gone for more than an hour—the police and road crews had to ferry them back from where they came before the change of shifts.

From the drawer at her kitchen desk, Maren pulled out the journal she'd kept since taking over the Inn. The pages were not yet worn out but one day they would be, maybe in a hundred years when another owner gloried in delving into the rich history of the house. Her pen glided across the paper, recording another chapter in the house's rich history, the first wedding she'd hosted. It was a ritual Maren had maintained since she first opened the doors, wanting to put to paper—to record for history—the essence of the Inn's guests and each story that made up the fabric of the old Victorian house. She thought rather fancifully that when the journal was full, maybe this one and several more, she'd remove a brick from that basement chamber and hide the books back there for some eager, future owner to find one day.

The house was as silent as ever at this time of night. It was never eerie but always serene—unless trees were falling. She loved the muted creaks and groans, caused by the wind, or as Hal had once suggested, by the house 'settling'.

She tapped the end of her pen against her chin and stared blindly at the pages, reflecting upon Jasmine's utter and absolute joy tonight. How gorgeous she'd been with her happiness. How boyish and charming had been Liam with his very transparent love for Jasmine.

One day I will have that, she thought. Not just a man, not just a husband and a wedding day, but someone with whom to share secrets and dreams, someone to whom she couldn't wait to tell her latest news, whatever that might be. Someone who was happy at the end of the day, even or especially a bad one, just to see her.

Lost in her reflections, Maren was not aware of someone approaching until a presence was felt, not seen or heard. She turned her head, easily recognizing Alec Sullivan's presence, as he stood at the entrance to the kitchen from the long hall, his broad silhouette blending a bit with the shadows but still unmistakable. Slowly, softly, she closed the journal.

"Can't sleep?"

He shrugged lightly. "Mind if I join you?"

"Not at all. I was just finishing up with the house's journal."

Alec helped himself to a bottle of water from the fridge. With a casual grace, he hopped up on the island's counter, sitting directly across from her as Maren had her arm over the back of the chair. "The house has its own journal?"

"It does."

"Will you tuck that away in the cellar when it's filled?"

A soft smile creased her lips. "Actually, I thought I would. Or at least, that's the plan."

Quiet for a moment while Alec took a sip of his water. "They looked really happy tonight," he commented.

Knowing he spoke of Liam and Jasmine, Maren nodded, in complete agreement. "So happy, in fact, I don't even think they minded that there would be no honeymoon suite in Aruba, but rather a wedding night in Jasmine's apartment." Thankfully, they'd purchased insurance when they'd booked their honeymoon, and likely would reschedule. "You'll probably be thrilled," she said, "to get back to Austin, and away from the snow."

"I will not miss the snow," he said, slowly shaking his head. "Not this much anyway."

Even while he was sitting so casually, so relaxed, with his shoulders leaned forward and his elbows on his thighs, he was still imposing and impressive. And she was not immune, not yet, maybe not ever, that she felt the weight of his probing

stare, which didn't unnerve her so much as it once had, so much as it now enlivened her.

“Back to...Quantum Tech, is it?” She asked.

Alec lifted his eyes to her, measuring her with his gaze.

“Liam mentioned it tonight, I think.”

“Yeah.”

“That's pretty ambitious, a start-up tech company,” she acknowledged, imagining he was Liam's age and thus, maybe thirty or thirty-one.

“No more impressive than taking on a hundred-year old house and a bed and breakfast business,” he returned.

Maren grinned. “Yeah, well, I know nothing about tech, so this seemed a safer bet.”

Alec grinned. “Lonely business, right?”

She frowned a bit, considering the houseful of people presently occupying the Inn.

Alec clarified, “I mean being a business owner. Doesn't matter if you own a company with five hundred employees or a small business of one, it's a solitary journey.”

Understanding now, Maren nodded. “It is lonely in that regard. The autonomy can be empowering, but it also means there's no one to share the load, with either success or failure.”

“Not for the faint of heart.”

“No, it isn't.” Sensing that he was in no hurry to excuse himself and say goodnight—and rather ridiculously pleased by this—Maren asked him about his family. “Jasmine said your family is in Buffalo? Three sisters? Please don't tell me you're the baby brother—it won't make sense.”

“Three younger sisters,” he confirmed. “Why would that not make sense if they were older?”

“You give off first-born vibes, clearly having strong leadership skills. You strike me as a very organized and

structured person, and responsible, and maybe...achievement-oriented.”

He moved his head side to side, as if it were slowly bouncing off one shoulder and then another, while he considered this. “I guess that about sums me up.”

Maren knew, she just knew, that only scratched the surface. What a shame she’d not get a chance to uncover more about him. A pang of melancholy enveloped her, realizing this connection, however nebulous, had an expiration date: tomorrow.

“What are you parents like?” She asked, wanting to know so much more about him.

“My parents are easy-going,” he said. “They don’t get riled too easily. I figure they were perfect to raise three girls, teenagers all at once at one time. Dad was a steel worker, retired just last year, and Mom is Nurse Jackie—because Jackie is her name, not *Nurse Jackie* like the TV show, with a drug addiction and episodic drama,” he explained, smirking a bit. “They are grandparents now and loving it. They were great parents—*are* great parents—but they are awesome as grandparents.”

“And you are Uncle Alec?” She pictured a little dark haired girl or blond-headed boy calling out his name with excitement, wondering if he might be the stereotypical *fun uncle*.

“I will be, I guess, when they start talking. Two of my sisters had babies a little over a year ago, and my sister Kayleigh just had her first about three months ago.”

“Oh, wow. Do you wish you lived closer, to be near all that fun? Or are you happier visiting, with a definite departure date?” Maren bit her lip, wondering if that was too intrusive, or came across as judgmental? “I’m sorry, I’m not saying—I don’t have siblings so I guess I’m just curious about the dynamics of brothers and sisters.”

Evidently not rubbed the wrong way by her question, Alec offered, “Well, I can tell you that I like my sisters a whole lot

more than when they were teenagers. And yes, I do sometimes wish I was closer and could see the babies—well, everyone, my sisters and my parents, too—more than only a couple times a year.”

A real shame, that he didn't live closer, in Willowbrook. Would I want to get to know him better if he did? A resounding yes answered her internal query. She recognized that he definitely had an effect on her, that she wasn't immune to...so many things about him.

Just as she thought this, Alec's gaze fell to her lips, as if drawn by some magnetic force.

In turn, Maren's heart quickened. Nervously, she turned on the chair and pulled the little chain on the lamp, darkening the kitchen so that it was lit only by the few night-lights. “I should get to bed. I'm exhausted.”

She shouldn't kiss him, she knew that, having some suspicion that she'd read his lingering stare correctly. *I'll be sad to see him go tomorrow*, she decided. *I shouldn't make it worse by kissing him and allowing hope to rise.*

Unnerved by the very idea, she pushed the chair back with greater force than necessary, and it scraped loudly against the floor.

Alec hopped off the counter at the same time Maren stood and turned.

They were face to face, less than a foot apart.

Lifting her gaze to his, Maren glimpsed a yearning in his dark eyes that only grew when he lowered his gaze once more to her lips. She held her breath, suspended in the moment. She'd had her share of first kisses, so she recognized this for what it was, the prelude. All it needed was for either of them to move forward and cut through the suddenly charged air.

His eyes, normally brimming with self-confidence and occasions of playfulness, now held a depth that seemed to reach into a reservoir of silent intensity. Maren would swear she observed a fleeting glimpse of a vulnerability in his motionless expression. His posture mirrored the heightened

awareness between them. The casual ease he typically exuded gave way to a subtle tension as if he, too, wrestled with longing and restraint.

Maybe he was thinking as she had: what's the point, considering the reality of geographical distance?

For an instant, time stood still as they teetered on the edge of possibility. The warmth of his proximity was exhilarating, but not nearly as intoxicating as the possibility of a kiss.

Yet, as swiftly as the moment had materialized, a silent and somber agreement passed between them as their gazes locked once more.

Their lips never met, the near-kiss dissolving into the quiet night.

“Good night, Maren,” he said, his voice a husky whisper.

She nodded tightly, more disappointed than she would have imagined.

“Good night, Alec.”

Sunday

Maren stood in the doorway, the inside door pulled wide open while the storm door remained closed. The snow-covered landscape had been transformed, possibly by road crews working overnight, into a more recognizable scene. Gray skies hung overhead but the blizzard had finally relinquished its hold on Western New York. The streets though still laden with remnants of the storm were now navigable, and the driving ban had been lifted.

All the inn's guests were scheduled to depart this morning.

Breakfast, an hour ago, had been a lively affair, with most of the conversation dedicated to recounting yesterday's wedding.

She and Alec had reverted to their polite host-slash-guest familiarity, friendly but not personally or overtly so. He'd been

the first to depart the breakfast table, but she hadn't thought it intentional, except that he said he wanted to give Hal a hand outside, as the whirring engine of a snowblower had been heard moving up and down the driveway. Alec had said he would shovel the porch and steps.

Rachel and Dan had been the first to leave, waving a breezy goodbye to Maren as she'd been clearing dishes from the dining room. Mark and Emily had just left, which was what had Maren at the door. Emily had embraced Maren, saying that she was thrilled she only lived an hour away. "I hope you won't mind if I call you this summer and invite myself down for a visit. I would love to see you again."

"And the house, of course," Maren teased.

"Well, naturally," Emily had said, not bothering to hide the truth, "but more you. I think you're great, Maren. Thanks so much for a truly memorable experience."

Upon hearing more footsteps on the stairs, Maren turned to find Alec coming down, his canvas duffle bag thrown over his shoulder while he carried his hardside spinner suitcase.

She stepped back and grabbed his receipt from the front desk, where she had it ready and waiting and greeted him with a forced smile, even as she sensed in him the same palpable reluctance in the air, as if he was also hesitant to let go of the fleeting connection forged in the midst of the blizzard.

"Looks like the weather is finally cooperating," he remarked. Though his tone was casual, the strength of his gaze betrayed a deeper sentiment.

"Funny," Maren replied, "how things can change so quickly." A wistful smile tugged at her lips. "It's been wonderful having you here. I am very happy to have met you and I hope you have an uneventful flight back to Texas."

"Actually, I'm staying up in Buffalo for a week, visiting with my parents."

"Oh, well, then. Enjoy your visit with your family and have a safe flight after that."

He nodded. “Everything was excellent this weekend, Maren. You’re a natural and made it all look easy.”

“I had tons of help, not least of which was yours. I can’t thank you enough for all that you did. Honestly, you made the whole weekend so much easier.”

A silence lingered between them, pregnant with unspoken words. Maren had a flash of a thought: this thing between her and Alec might be more assumed and hopeful imagination—on her part—than anything else. She felt a pang of regret that she would likely never know.

She stuck out her hand at the same time he smiled awkwardly and opened his arms.

“Oh, yeah,” she said witlessly, laughing, and walked into his hug. “Take care, Alec,” she said at his neck, closing her eyes, reveling in the feel of him, in his scent, and in his arms holding her more tightly than politely.

“You too, Maren,” Alec replied, surprising her by pressing a kiss into her hair.

Neither Alec nor Maren let go immediately. She fought back tears and acknowledged the presence of conflicting emotions, a blend of melancholy and gratitude for a connection that, though brief, felt oddly profound.

And then he was gone.

He dropped his arms and stepped back, wearing a tight smile while he adjusted his duffel bag.

“Take care, Maren,” he said, holding her gaze for one more moment before he pivoted and walked out the door.

Maren sighed, realizing her heart might be just a tiny bit broken.

Chapter Eleven

She swiped the paper towel over the mirror for the third time before bringing the crinkled sheet closer to her face, frowning at it. Had she bought the cheap paper towels? Is that why they were leaving lint all over the bathroom mirror? Maren consulted the spray bottle of glass cleaner—was this the culprit?

She sprayed and wiped again, moving her hand in such a way as to bring any and all offending lint with her hand, down, down, down, until the mirror was eventually streak, splash, and lint free. There. Much better.

Dressed in her joggers and an old T-shirt and wearing cleaning gloves and a colorful headband in her hair, Maren meticulously scrubbed the rest of the first floor half bath. Over Monday and Tuesday, she'd managed only to straighten the inn, get all the bed linens washed and changed, and vacuum rugs and carpets. Today was for deep cleaning, kitchen, bathrooms, floors. After a weekend of non-stop excitement, such as the blizzard and wedding had provided, Maren was content with the quiet of the house, and hadn't even brought her phone, ear buds, and music with her while cleaning.

She was bent over the toilet, brush in hand, when the doorbell's chime interrupted the rhythmic swish of her scrubbing, prompting her to straighten and turn, glancing in the direction of the front door, as if that alone would have advised her of who stood outside the door, ringing the bell. When it did not, she left the bathroom and walked through the kitchen and down the hall, toilet brush in hand. The sign in the door's window, displaying the Morning Glory's hours and contact information, prevented her from seeing who stood on the other side of the door.

But nothing would have prepared her to find Alec Sullivan standing before her when she opened the door.

Certainly she hadn't forgotten how handsome he was, but boy, what sunshine did for him!

Under a clear blue sky, with the sun heading down over the lake just beyond his shoulder, he was cast in a warm and ethereal hue. His hair glistened and his eyes, a shade of blue that corresponded with the winter sky, held a warmth that contrasted with the chill in the air. Dressed in a winter coat that accentuated the breadth of his shoulders, Alec exuded the same effortless allure that had attracted Maren over the last week, in person and in memory. The crisp air couldn't diminish the vitality of his gaze—in fact the still-snowy backdrop only seemed to enhance his natural magnetism.

It had only been three days since he'd left but it might well have been three hundred, so happy was her gaze to rest on him.

“Hello. This is a surprise. Did you...leave something here?” She asked, as much perplexed as she was ridiculously happy by his unexpected appearance.

A mischievous glint entered his warm blue eyes. “I think I did.”

“Oh,” she said, a bit confused and undeniably, disappointed. How silly she was, to have allowed the thrill of hope to come to life so immediately at the sight of him. “Um, I've mostly cleaned the rooms from last weekend, I didn't see —”

“No, it wasn't left in my room. She's standing right in front of me.”

It took her a moment, and admittedly she needed Alec's barely repressed smile to help her figure out what he was talking about.

She tapped her gloved finger against her chest. “Me?”

“Yeah. This is corny as—fine, I'm just going to say it. I think I left my heart here.”

Maren's face softened. “You did? You do?”

“Yeah. Any chance you're holding it? And willing to make a trade? Or at least have some discussion about it?”

Her heart raced with bubbling joy. Caution swiftly interceded. “But...Alec, you live in Austin.”

“I do. At the moment. But yesterday, I signed a contract on a lease for a commercial property halfway between here and Buffalo. I’d been thinking about launching a second location and moving back near family.” He paused and smiled sheepishly. “Maren, I can’t stop thinking about you.”

Her hand moved helplessly in front of her, tremendously shocked by both his presence and the reason behind it. But the bright pink and red polka dots on her bougie cleaning gloves caught her eye, which then reminded her of her complete—and utterly humiliating, wholly unsuitable for *this* moment in her life—ensemble. Good grief, she was holding a toilet brush in her hand!

“Why did you have to come today—now!—do you see how I’m dressed?” She blurted out, a mixture of embarrassment and surprise evident in her tone.

Alec raked his gaze over her from the top of her paisley headband and messy bun, over her old and frayed t-shirt and well-worn pink joggers, to her very serviceable pink flannel gripper slippers. Another smile arose, from just a curve of one side of his mouth until it grew to full strength, dazzling for its beauty.

“You are perfect,” he said.

Though caught off guard, Maren had never felt more beautiful than at this moment.

A warm and joyful smile creased her face. “In that case, won’t you come in?”

The air inside the Inn seemed to shimmer with newfound excitement as Maren moved backward and Alec stepped inside, his smile unwavering, closing the door behind him. Little did she know, but this unexpected reunion would become a cherished memory, etched in the pages of the Morning Glory’s history, marking the beginning of another enduring and fascinating chapter.

The End

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