

THE McCORMICKS



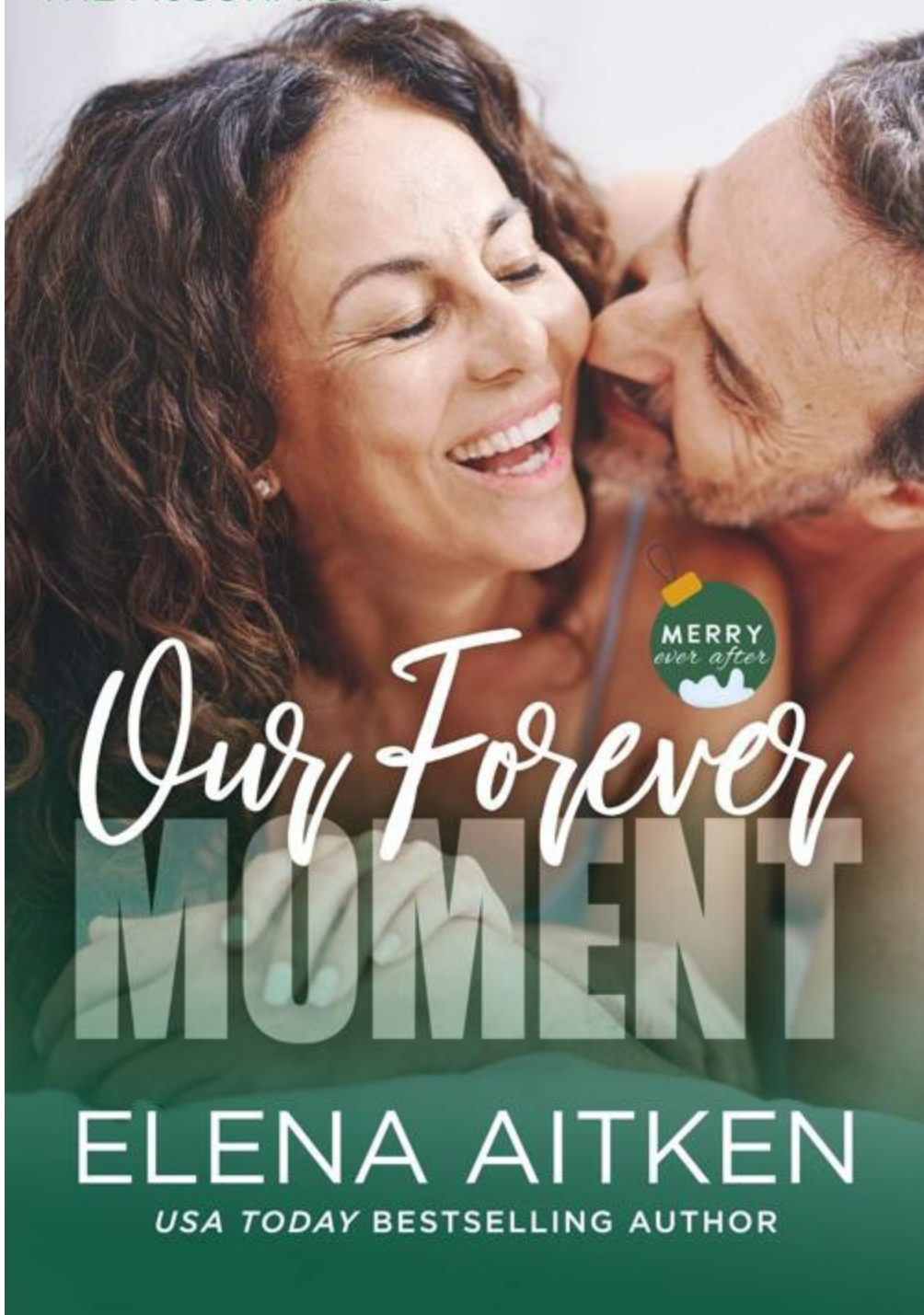
Our Forever

MOMENT

ELENA AITKEN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

THE McCORMICKS



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OUR FOREVER MOMENT

The McCormicks

Book 7

ELENA AITKEN

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Chapter One

PRESENT

CROWS' feet. Laugh lines. *Salt-and-pepper* strands.

Such silly names meant to soften the blow of getting older.

All they did was make Maureen McCormick shake her head. Or sigh. It depended on the day.

Today, she sighed.

Maureen took one last look in the mirror and tried to stifle her groan. Maybe a facial or one of those peels that the younger girls were always going on about might have helped. But it was too late for that now. The reflection in the mirror was going to have to do.

Lines, wrinkles, spots, and all.

Never in all her fifty-six years had Maureen given much thought to aging. She'd never been one to spend hundreds of dollars on fancy creams, or worry about dyeing the gray away. She'd always considered herself a fairly attractive woman, even as time began to take its toll.

But this was different.

Very different.

She hadn't seen Adam since she was a girl.

Yes. It was *very* different.

She reached for the makeup bag Jade, her daughter-in-law, had helped her pack just for the occasion. At Maureen's request, Jade, who had a lot more

experience with this type of thing, had helped her pick out a few flattering shades of eyeshadow and even a new lipstick.

Maureen pulled out the tube of lipstick and leaned in close to the mirror. If there ever was going to be a time to try it out, it might as well be now. After all, what else did she have to lose? Her sons—most of them, anyway—thought she was crazy, traveling across the continent to a remote mountain inn in the North Carolina Mountains, only a few days before Christmas to meet a man who was a virtual stranger.

And maybe she was.

She laughed at herself as she pressed the tube to her lip. Right as her hotel room plunged into darkness.

Her breath caught in her throat and panic gripped her.

“Calm down, Maureen.” Her voice was loud in the dark, empty room. “It’s just a power outage.” She laughed at herself and shook her head. She’d lived through many power outages over the years. Especially as a girl when she spent her summers in the mountainous town of Cedar Springs. Besides, she was a grown woman. There was nothing to be scared of.

Still. It *was* dark.

She’d arrived at the inn earlier in the afternoon, and even before the sun went down, it was dark and gloomy outside as the storm that had been threatening started to make good on its threats. It wasn’t yet dinnertime, but with the thick storm clouds blocking out what little sunlight there might be left, her room was shockingly dark. And when, after a few minutes, the power didn’t return, Maureen fumbled for her purse and made her way out of the room and down to the main lobby of the inn.

She made the right choice. Candles were lit among the pine boughs that seemed to be draped on every free surface for the Christmas season. And paired with the welcoming glow from the huge fireplace, it was easy to forget that there was a power outage at all since the scene was so festive.

“Not to worry, Mrs. McCormick.” Lucy Gibbons, the innkeeper who’d

greeted her earlier, appeared beside her. She set a light hand on Maureen's shoulder. "It's not unusual for the power to go out in such a heavy storm, but we do have backup generators and they should be up and going any minute now."

"Oh, I'm not worried." Maureen smiled warmly and let her gaze drift around the room. "It's absolutely beautiful in here."

The woman beamed with pride. "Christmas is my favorite holiday and there's nothing quite as romantic as the festive season in the mountains, is there?" She winked, and Maureen blushed despite the fact that Lucy couldn't have known why she was in North Carolina at the Merry Falls Inn less than a week before Christmas, or who she was meeting. "And now, with the snow coming down so heavily, it looks as if we'll be snowed in."

"Snowed in?" Maureen's head snapped around to face her. "The road is closed?"

Lucy nodded. "I just got word. The mountains are so unpredictable and although it doesn't happen terribly often, it does happen that sometimes the plows just can't keep up and—"

"But if the road is closed..." *Would Adam be able to get through?* She didn't finish the thought aloud.

"Not to worry, Mrs. McCormick. They'll have them cleared before Christmas."

Christmas? She hadn't even thought of that. Her boys would kill her if she wasn't back in time for the holidays. They really wouldn't be happy if she was trapped.

But that wasn't her primary concern at the moment.

If Adam couldn't make it, after all these years and all their careful planning...well, she didn't want to think about the idea that her sons had been right and it was a foolish idea coming so far for a man she hadn't seen in almost forty years.

Most of her sons. Declan had not only been supportive but had taken it

upon himself to locate Adam as a special Christmas surprise a year earlier. She'd dedicated her life to her boys and after her husband's betrayal, when her eldest was only eighteen, Maureen had shut her heart off to the idea of ever loving again.

But time had a way of softening things. And after she'd witnessed the way each of her sons had found their partners and a happiness she'd never seen in them before, she couldn't help but start to believe that maybe love might exist after all. And then, when her *daughters*, who really weren't her daughters at all, but her sons half-sisters—a complicated relationship if ever there was one—also found their happiness, Maureen was convinced that it wasn't necessarily too late.

She looked around the festive inn. *Maybe Adam had made it? Maybe it wasn't too late after all.*

“What about tonight?” Maureen reached a hand out and stopped the busy innkeeper before she could run off. “Will anyone be able to get through the roads tonight?”

The look on the other woman's face told her everything she needed to know, but it wasn't until Lucy shook her head that Maureen's heart fell.

“With a heavy snowfall like this, it can be pretty dangerous on those mountain roads. If anyone was out there, they probably would have been turned around before they closed the gates. But—”

“Ms. Gibbons?” A rather frazzled-looking young man tapped on the innkeeper's shoulder and shot Maureen an apologetic look. “I really am sorry to interrupt,” he said. “But there's a bit of an...” He leaned in and tried to whisper. “Situation.”

“A situation?”

“Is everything okay?” Maureen straightened her shoulders and immediately went into problem-solving mode. As a mother of four boys, it was a mode she was proficient in. “If there's anything I can do, please let me know. I can—”

“Oh no.” Lucy offered her a warm smile. “Everything is just fine. And like I said, the backup power should be on any moment now. There’s fresh coffee, tea, or hot chocolate over by the fire. The restaurant is open and the bar next door is also available for meals and, of course, libations to get you through the cold night. The band will be—”

“The Lost Ridge Ramblers are great,” the young man interjected.

“They really are.” Lucy nodded. “It should all be quite festive and fun.”

“It does sound fun.” The innkeeper was busy, and Maureen didn’t want to add to her stress by inquiring about Adam’s arrival status. She glanced out a nearby window into the snowy night and the quickly accumulating drifts, and sighed.

She didn’t need anyone to tell her what she already knew.

Adam wasn’t coming.

“Don’t let me keep you.” Maureen forced a smile. “I think I’ll help myself to a tea and sit by the fire for a while. It’s really quite beautiful in here.”

Lucy beamed. “Thank you. We take pride in our holiday decorations.”

“It shows.” Maureen made her way to the beverage cart where, instead of the tea, she opted for a hot chocolate with marshmallows in it. She probably wouldn’t be able to sleep due to the sugar, but given the storm, sleep was likely off the table anyway.

Two inviting chairs were set in front of the fireplace. One was occupied by an elderly lady working on a crochet project. The other was free.

“Is this seat taken?”

The woman looked up from her project and tipped her head. “It is now.” She nodded toward the chair and set the crochet project down in her lap. “Is that hot chocolate you’re drinking?”

“It is.” Maureen looked from her hot drink to the woman. “Would you like a cup?”

“With extra marshmallows, if you don’t mind.”

Maureen grinned. "I'll be right back."

She returned a moment later with a mug for her new friend, complete with the requested extra marshmallows.

"Don't tell my niece." The woman winked as she accepted the cup. "She means well, but she's very bossy."

A small chuckle slipped from her as Maureen took her seat. "I have the same problem with my sons. They're not too bad, yet," she added quickly with a shake of her head. "But if they knew about this storm...well, I can't even imagine what they'd say. They didn't like me coming so close to Christmas as it was."

"Well, what they don't know won't hurt them, will it?" The older woman lifted her mug in a toast. "My name is Elise, and I don't think there's anything wrong with keeping a few harmless secrets from our children."

"It's very nice to meet you, Elise. I'm Maureen." She grinned over the rim of her cup. "And I couldn't agree more."

Maureen had kept more than her share of secrets from her children over the years. It was what mothers did. But only when it really mattered. For example, children had no business knowing the sins of their father. It was the mother's job to protect her children. And that's exactly what she'd done. For as long as she could.

Despite what others thought, she'd long known about Harold's affair and the children borne from it. She'd never forget the day she'd discovered the photograph in his briefcase of the two little girls. They looked to be about the same ages as her two youngest boys, Declan and Cal, and she'd known at once exactly what it meant. The girls shared the same beautiful eyes as her own boys, along with their father's nose. There was no doubt whose children they were.

He hadn't taken great pains to hide it from her, but at the same time, he behaved as if everything were normal. Maybe she should have confronted him years earlier, but for reasons that were her own, she never could bring herself to say anything.

What would have been the point?

They had a nice marriage. Harold was a good provider. A good father. He loved her, and she loved him. It didn't matter that they weren't *in* love. In college, there'd been a time when Harold had been desperately in love with Maureen. His pursuit was relentless. He showered her with gifts and compliments and finally, when she'd run out of reasons to object, she found herself loving him back. It wasn't a passionate, couldn't quite breathe, love. But it was enough.

At least, she thought it was.

And it had been enough for a little while. It wasn't long after Mitch, her second son, was born that Maureen started to notice a shift in Harold. It was also about then when she had two toddlers in tow that she'd started packing up the boys and spending summers at the lake in the house she'd frequented as a girl that her father had left her when he passed away. After a minor bout of the *baby blues* that lasted a little too long, she'd once more been drawn to the one place she'd fallen in love as a young woman.

Maureen hadn't understood her feelings back then, not completely. But time and distance had made it perfectly clear. Cedar Springs was home. Harold was busy building his career in the city, but he found time to make the drive every weekend and join his young family in her happy place.

The mountains were healing, and she'd returned to the city in the fall rejuvenated, refreshed and pregnant with Declan.

It was also that summer that Harold had done some *healing* of his own, and unbeknownst to Maureen at the time, found love with someone else as well.

For years, they kept the charade of a happy family. Every summer,

Maureen would retreat to the lake. It was the only place she felt complete, and—although she'd never admit it to anyone, especially herself—being at the lake connected her to a time when she'd been the happiest she'd ever been.

Harold would arrive on Friday evenings with a bottle of wine and a fresh bouquet of flowers from the greenhouse on the highway. He'd spend Saturday and Sunday with the boys on the water, pulling them behind the boat as they showed off their growing water-skiing and wakeboarding skills, or teaching them to fish. On cooler days, Harold would take the boys into the forest, where they'd hike for hours. He'd point out animal signs and show them how to build shelters and make fires. He loved his boys, and he was an excellent father.

And that's why she'd stayed quiet for so many years. It was more important for Ian, Mitch, Declan, and Cal to have a father who loved them present in their lives than it was for her to have a loving or faithful husband.

If she were honest, she'd always blamed herself in a way for Harold seeking love from someone else. Certainly, she loved Harold but she'd never loved him the way she knew she should have. She'd always held back.

How could she not, when she'd already given her heart away years earlier?

“This is delicious.”

Maureen was pulled from her memory and back into the moment as the woman seated across from her sipped at her drink.

“It really is.” Maureen tested her own drink and closed her eyes as the sweet, delicious chocolate coated her tongue. “Oh wow. It really is good.” She opened her eyes to see Elise enjoying her drink the same way.

“Isn't it? They've always had the best hot chocolate here at Christmas.

Maybe it's the spirit of the season that makes it taste so good."

"Maybe." Maureen took another sip. "Or it could be the hint of peppermint."

Elise laughed, a sweet sound. She plucked a tiny marshmallow from the top and popped it in her mouth. "You're here on your own."

It wasn't a question, but something about the woman made Maureen want to talk. "I'm actually supposed to be meeting someone," she said. "But I don't think he's coming,"

Elise took a long, slow sip of her drink, and when she looked up again, there was chocolate on her upper lip. "Do you have a reason to think he might stand you up?"

She did. But at the same time, she didn't.

"Are you here with your niece?" Maureen deftly changed the subject.

The older woman laughed before leaning forward and winking conspiratorially. "She'd...how do the kids say it now? *Freak out* if she knew I was down here by myself. I told her I was going to bed, and she had some work to do. She works too much. She tried to tell me that we couldn't come this year. But I insisted."

Elise's choice of words struck Maureen, and she, too, laughed.

"This year? Do you come here a lot?"

The older woman's face softened. "Every single year for over sixty years."

"Really? Sixty?"

"Sixty-one, to be specific."

"Wow." Maureen sat up in her seat. "That must be a record. You've been a guest here for sixty-one years?"

Elise laughed. "Well, not quite a guest. At least not always. When I was a girl, much younger than I am now, I took a job here a few years out of high school. I started out cleaning rooms." She chuckled. "It was not a glamorous job by any stretch of the imagination, but for me, it was the greatest

opportunity I could have been offered.”

Fascinated, Maureen settled back in her chair, the mug warming her hands as she listened.

“You see,” Elise continued, “that was back in the days when there weren’t very many choices for unmarried girls. Or married ones, for that matter,” she added as an afterthought. “Not unless your family had a lot of money. And mine did not. It would have been different for you. I must have at least forty years on you.”

“I’ll be fifty-six next year.”

“Ah, I just celebrated eighty-eight. Those years make quite a difference.”

Maureen couldn’t argue with that. She’d often thought of her own mother, for whom going to college had never even been an option. She was also very much aware that she’d been born to a father who was a physician and, as such, had enjoyed a certain level of privilege.

“I’d grown up poor in a little town north of here with fewer opportunities than there were people. So when I heard that Merry Falls Inn was hiring, it felt very exotic, like an adventure. And I was more than ready for a little adventure.”

Maureen couldn’t miss the sparkle in the woman’s eye as she spoke about the past.

“That must have been so exciting, Elise. What an adventure, indeed. This place must have made quite an impact on you if you kept coming back for all these years.”

Elise took her time looking around the lobby, a warm smile on her face as she took it all in. “I sure didn’t know all those years ago how much of a mark on my life it would leave. That’s for sure.” She was quiet for a moment and then, as if she realized Maureen was still there, she shook her head clear. “I fell in love.”

Maureen waited a beat. “With Merry Falls Inn? Or with someone else?”

The smile on Elise’s face told her the answer, even before she spoke.

“Both.”

She knew that feeling well. Maureen smiled to herself a little, gave herself a moment to pull up the memory and started to share her story.

Thirty-Seven Years Ago...

Maureen was in love. Totally and completely in love. There was no other word for the way she felt. She could feel it in her bones and every breath that she took when she looked out, off the deck at the lake below. Maureen was totally in love with Cedar Springs and the mountain lake.

Her father bought the cabin when she was a child and had started taking Maureen and her older sister to the lake for the summers, almost as long as she could remember. But what Maureen couldn't remember was ever feeling the way she felt at that exact moment. She attributed it to the fact that she was no longer a child.

Freshly graduated from high school, and at the very mature age of eighteen, Maureen was a woman. She looked at things differently now. With an eye of maturity. Which was why when she looked out off the deck that towered over the blue, mountain lake where she'd spent her childhood summers swimming and splashing, she saw that same view now with love in her eyes.

The footsteps on the deck boards behind her interrupted her quiet moment of reflection. A second later, her best friend Sue Ann appeared next to her. Sue Ann draped herself over the railing, her arms full of bangles, clacking against the wood.

“Isn't it amazing?” Maureen continued to gaze out at the view.

“What?”

She turned to stare at her friend. “The view. The lake. This place. It’s magical, don’t you think?” With both hands on the rails, she tipped her head back and inhaled deeply.

“I think you’ve lost your mind.” Sue Ann laughed. “It’s the lake. The same lake it’s been every summer since we were kids.”

“Sue Ann!” Maureen didn’t bother hiding her exasperation. “We’re not kids anymore.”

“And?”

Maureen sighed dramatically and rolled her eyes. “I’ve decided that it’s time to grow up.”

“We *are* growing up.”

She spun to face her friend. “No. I mean like *really* grow up. It’s time to get serious. No more little girl games. We need to start paying attention to the things that really matter in life.”

Sue Ann scrunched up her nose and shrugged. “Like the view?”

“No, silly. Like *life*.” Maureen held out her arms and spun around while her friend looked on in confusion. “I’m finally ready to understand what love feels like. And I *am* in love.”

“With...”

“The lake.” Maureen was quickly growing impatient with her friend’s complete lack of understanding. “This place. I feel it in my bones. This place is special.”

Her friend raised her eyebrows in question, so she continued.

“And now I want more. I want to feel the love of—”

“Don’t say it.” Sue Ann held up a hand. “Do *not* say a man.”

“Why not?” Maureen dropped her arms. “It’s true. I’m done with boys. I’m ready for a man.”

“You’re done with boys?” Her friend laughed. “How can you possibly be done with boys when you’ve never even had a boyfriend?”

Just because it was true didn’t mean Maureen wanted her best friend to

point it out. Besides, Sue Ann was very quickly ruining her mood. She'd woken up on the first day of summer, ready to take on the world as a *woman*. Which, of course, meant she was going to need her best friend by her side. No one should be a woman on her own. Not when you were only eighteen.

"The reason I never had a boyfriend was because all the boys back home are just that—*boys*," she said matter-of-factly.

"I'm pretty sure there were men back home, too."

Maureen ignored her. "Like I said. I'm ready for a *man*."

"Whatever." Sue Ann groaned. "I don't know about any *men*. But I'm sure hoping there are some cute boys at the dance tonight. I need you to help me pick which dress to wear. I have that black lace one that's just like the one Madonna wore. Or maybe the pink one. It's hot pink."

Her earlier attempt at grown-up seriousness forgotten, Maureen linked her arm through Sue Ann's and pulled her friend into the house and up to her bedroom, where they spent the afternoon trying on dresses, teasing their hair, dancing to Bananarama and dreaming about boys—or *men*—and giggling loud enough to earn more than one warning to be quiet from Maureen's mother before she finally kicked them out of the house altogether and sent them down to the lake to play.

As it turned out, as mature and serious as she'd been about being in *love* with the place, Maureen still wasn't too old to run and jump off the dock the same way she had every summer previously.

Chapter Two

ALMOST ONE YEAR AGO

New Year's Eve

"HAPPY NEW YEAR, MOM!" Cal, Maureen's youngest son, grabbed her around the waist and spun her around, causing her to shriek. "It's going to be a fabulous year, don't you think?"

Maureen couldn't help but laugh. She scanned the room. She was surrounded by all four of her boys and their partners, all beautiful and kind women. Along with two pseudo daughters who she'd never expected. Amber and Chelsea were her sons half-sisters and her ex-husband's illegitimate daughters. Maureen had spent far too long avoiding the young women who were a living reminder of her husband's betrayal for so many years.

It wasn't their fault that their father made poor life choices. It took some time, but once she'd gotten to know the girls properly, she could see what lovely young ladies they were, and it wasn't hard to welcome them into her life with open arms.

There was nothing but love and happiness surrounding her. She'd moved back to Cedar Springs, the mountain lake community that had always felt like home to her, and she had a grandchild on the way. What else could she want out of life?

“Yes,” she answered Cal. “It’s going to be an absolutely amazing year.” She kissed her movie star son on the cheek. “Happy New Year, son.”

His eyes sparkled. He reached an arm out and welcomed his girlfriend, Milena, into their little circle.

“Happy New Year, Mrs.— Maureen.” The girl blushed and dipped her head a little. Her sweetness was a perfect complement to Cal. And judging by the way he looked at her, Cal couldn’t agree more.

A voice behind them pulled Maureen’s attention, and she was quickly led away for more New Year wishes from the rest of her family. Finally, she was able to extricate herself from the joyful crowd and retreat to a quiet corner, where she pulled the envelope out of her pocket.

She stared at the handwriting. It was somewhat shakier than her memory recalled, but that was to be expected. It had been almost forty years since she’d seen the still familiar handwriting. Her hands trembled, the paper shaking.

Adam.

She hesitated and finally stuffed the envelope away again.

It’s your turn, Mom, Declan had said when he handed her the envelope right before the clock struck midnight. Such a romantic, her second youngest child. Maureen should have guessed that after she’d told Declan about her first love, he would find Adam for her. It was fitting, really...Declan reminded her so much of the young Adam she’d known—determined to save the world, even at the expense of themselves. Fortunately, Declan realized he didn’t have to choose one over the other and had allowed himself to love.

Had Adam ever made the same realization?

When Declan was a boy, the summer he’d broken his leg and was unable to keep up with the rest of the boys, he’d spent a lot of time with Maureen, sipping iced tea and eating ice cream on the deck looking out over the lake. She must have been feeling nostalgic that year when she’d told Declan all about Adam, the man she’d once known who’d left his home behind to *save*

the world. Years later, she'd see firsthand the impact those stories had made on Declan when he followed suit and created his own charitable foundation.

But what she hadn't told him until very recently was that Adam had been her first love all those years ago, and after he left Cedar Springs, they'd never spoken again.

For almost forty years, Adam Lancaster had been nothing more than a fond memory and a *might have been.*

Until now.

Present

"Because we don't tell our children everything," Elise chimed in as Maureen took a break from the story to sip her drink. "Smart woman."

"Well, I don't know about that." She set her mug down. "After all, I did finally tell him that Adam was my first love and it's because of that, and my son's huge heart and unlimited resources, that I'm here at all. Declan tracked him down and then, about a year ago, I got the letter. I guess that's when all this started." She waved her hand around vaguely before tucking it into her lap again.

"He does sound like a sweet boy."

"The sweetest." Maureen loved all her sons equally. They'd all grown into good men, and she was proud of each of them. But Declan was truly the kindest, most giving man she'd ever met. He'd dedicated his life to charity and helping others. "What about you...do you have children?" Maureen didn't want to monopolize the conversation. Besides, talking about something else would serve as a good distraction. "You mentioned a niece."

Elise nodded. "Susan. We're not actually related by blood. My best

friend's girl." Her eyes lit up when she talked about her niece. "She's the closest thing I ever got to having children of my own, but she's like a daughter to me. There's something about being an auntie and not a mother that creates a special bond."

Maureen wouldn't know. Her older sister died in a car crash shortly after her twenty-first birthday before she ever had the chance to marry or have children of her own. Sue Ann ended up marrying, but she moved to the coast. Although they still kept in touch, Maureen didn't know her children well. Still, she nodded, and Elise continued talking.

"We've always been close. Her own parents have been gone for years now, and her children are grown as well, so I guess I'm the perfect outlet for all of her worry."

Despite her tone, Maureen could see how much Elise cared for her niece and valued that concern. "They only worry because they care."

Elise looked up and shook her head slightly. "It makes you wonder, doesn't it? When did the roles reverse exactly?"

Maureen chuckled and nodded in complete understanding. "You said earlier that you fell in love with the inn and..."

"There was a special someone." Elise's gaze took on a faraway look. "I was so young and naive, I didn't even realize what I was feeling. It was my first time away from home, surrounded by new people. It was a heady feeling."

"I can't even imagine. It must have been very exciting."

Elise leaned her head back against the chair, her soft, white curls pillowed around her face. She closed her eyes and a smile slid over her lips as she lost herself in the memory. After a moment, she opened her eyes again and nodded, as if remembering that Maureen was there. "It was very exciting indeed. The first time I met Alex, I was at a loss for words. I'm sure I stood there like a dullard, with my mouth just opening and closing. You see, Alex was the child of a very prominent businessman from town and ten years

older.”

“Ohh...forbidden love?”

The older woman’s face clouded, and Maureen immediately felt bad for making her talk at all. They sat in silence for a moment before Elise once more changed the subject.

“You said your son found Adam about a year ago. But that wasn’t the start of the story, was it?”

Maureen tilted her head, confused by the sudden switch in topics. “What do you mean?”

Elise leaned forward, her crochet project once more in her hands. “When you got the letter,” she said again. “I don’t think that was the start of anything.” There was a sparkle in her eye that made Maureen chuckle. “I think it started long before that.”

She was a clever woman, and she wasn’t wrong. Maureen hadn’t spoken about Adam to anyone except Sue Ann and even then, that was a very long time ago. Yet, something about Elise made it easy to open up, and maybe it was past time to tell her story.

“I guess you’re right,” Maureen admitted. “The story did start a long, long time ago. It feels like a lifetime ago. It’s quite a long story, really.”

“That works out then.” The older woman licked her lips and grinned. “Because I have nothing but time on my hands.”

Thirty-Seven Years Ago...

Everyone was excited about the summer solstice festival. It was the biggest party of the summer, or at least, it was the *first* party of the summer. Every summer since she’d been old enough to attend, Maureen had counted down

the days until she and her girlfriends would put on their prettiest dresses, often bought new for the occasion, spend hours doing one another's hair, and, arm and arm, would run down Main Street to the water's edge, where rows of booths were set up.

Food vendors sold everything from hot dogs to popcorn and lemonade. There were usually rows of handicrafts and locally grown vegetables and flowers, but Maureen and her friends only gave them a cursory glance as they made their way to where the action was.

The dance floor.

"The band is so good. I don't know how I'm ever going to dance in this." Sue Ann had opted for the black lace dress that might not be at all like anything Madonna ever wore, but it was going to be very difficult to dance in. Maureen was happy she'd opted for the denim skirt and white sleeveless blouse—with plenty of bracelets, of course.

"You'll be fine."

"Where there's a will, there's a way. Come on." Sue Ann pulled her toward the dance floor as soon as they got close enough. "Let's dance."

"With who?"

"With each other, silly." Sue Ann grabbed her hands and spun her around and around until they were both out of breath and laughing.

"Okay, okay." Maureen pulled herself away from her friend. "I need a break. Let's go get a lemonade."

"You go." Sue Ann waved her away. "I'm not ready yet." Sue Ann grinned at Maureen and danced her way toward a circle of girls they knew from summers past as also being *summer* kids.

During the summer season, Cedar Springs was made up of two groups: the locals and the summers. Maureen and her family fell into the latter group, having spent all of her summers since she'd been a small child in the big wooden house on the lake.

The two groups would mingle occasionally, but for the most part, there

were clear dividing lines, and it was unusual to see new faces in either group. But that didn't keep Maureen from dreaming, the way teenage girls did, that this would be the summer a new, handsome young man would show up in town and sweep her off her feet.

She'd been dreaming especially hard this year, as she was newly graduated from high school and, as she'd tried to tell Sue Ann earlier, ready for a *man*. She'd had enough of the silly boys from home, and although she wouldn't turn down the prospect of a summer romance, her eye was on the fall, when she'd finally be able to leave home for college and start her adult life.

Maureen watched Sue Ann and the other girls for a moment before turning away with a laugh and going in search of the lemonade stand.

"One please." She placed her order and began digging in her purse for the change to pay for her drink when an unfamiliar voice stopped her.

"Make it two."

Her head snapped up and the words of protest she'd been planning to speak died on her lips as she stared into the deepest, greenest eyes she'd ever seen.

She stood unspeaking as the boy—no, the young man—handed over the money to pay for the drinks. He took a paper cup and handed it to her. It was only then that she found her voice once again. "I can pay for my own drinks."

"I have no doubt you can."

Maureen looked at the refreshment in her hand and back to the unfamiliar face.

"A simple thank-you would do." His eyes sparkled, and his lips twitched up into a grin.

Maureen found herself smiling in return. "Thank you..."

"Adam." He extended his free hand. "It's nice to meet you..."

"Maureen." She put her hand in his, and immediately a flash of heat shot through her. She'd only read about such things in the novels that she and Sue

Ann would sneak from their mothers' nightstands. Never had she guessed such a thing existed in the real world.

She didn't release his grasp, but instead looked from their joined hands, up to his face and back to their hands.

"Maureen."

The way her name slipped from his lips mesmerized her. Or maybe it was the touch of his skin on hers. Or maybe it was just him. But she seemed to have the same effect on him. She didn't know how long they stood there staring at each other, but finally, someone jostled past them to get a drink, and the spell was broken.

Her hand slipped from his, and they were forced apart. There was a moment of irrational panic, and then Adam was there, his hand lightly on her back. "Maybe we should get out of the way. It's a little quieter over there."

Maureen let him lead her to an empty picnic table.

"I've never seen you here before," she said once they were seated facing each other. "Are you visiting?"

"I guess I am." He shrugged one shoulder. "I'm visiting my aunt and uncle for the summer before...well, I guess before I have to become an adult in the fall." He laughed.

It was such a rich, warm, welcoming sound that Maureen found herself laughing along with him despite the fact that he looked very much like an adult already. She wasn't a great judge of age, but Adam was definitely at least a few years older than her.

"What happens in the fall?" She took a little sip of lemonade. "Are you headed to college?"

Adam shook his head. "I just graduated, actually."

She tipped her head and narrowed her eyes. "From high school?"

He laughed again. "From college."

Maureen almost spat out her drink. "You've graduated from college already?"

He shrugged again; she was beginning to recognize the gesture as a way to deflect attention. “I recently finished my last exams in optometry school, actually.”

“Wow. Optometry school?” Maureen put both hands flat on the wooden table. “You mean, you’re a doctor?”

“An optometrist, yes.” Again, he shrugged. “Not officially, actually. I still need my exam results.”

She could tell he was being modest and wasn’t worried in any way about his exams. Maureen lifted her cup. “A toast to you, then. Congratulations. I should be the one buying you the drink.”

He met her cup with a cheers, and they each drank before he spoke again. “Maybe I’m old-fashioned, but I could never let such a pretty girl buy me a drink.”

A blush heated her cheeks, and she had to look away.

“I also could never let another minute pass by without asking that very pretty girl if she would do me the honor of dancing with me.”

Her cheeks had to be flaming red, but there was no way Maureen could not accept the offer. She looked up to see a goofy grin on his face.

“May I have this dance?”

She nodded, her heart racing as she took his hand and let him lead her onto the dance floor.

Present

“He must have been much older than you.” Elise wiggled her eyebrows, and Maureen couldn’t help but giggle a little.

“He was.” She nodded. “By almost seven years. But I didn’t know that

right away.”

If Elise thought anything about the age gap, she didn't say anything, but Maureen hadn't expected her to. Back then, an older boy dating a younger girl wasn't anything unusual. She was eighteen, a young woman capable of making her own decisions. And that summer, all her decisions revolved around Adam.

Maureen once more scanned the room, as she had been all evening. There was still no sign of him. There was no sign of anyone new at the inn at all. While they'd been sitting by the fire, guests had come and gone, helping themselves to warm drinks and taking in the Christmas decorations on their way to the dining room. None of them seemed at all concerned by the worsening storm outside.

They sat in silence for a moment while Maureen let the memories from that summer so long ago take over. She hadn't allowed herself the luxury of remembering those magical, heady weeks for so long...too long.

After the solstice dance, they were nearly inseparable. Maureen would pack picnic baskets full of leftover fried chicken, deviled egg sandwiches, juicy strawberries, and of course, bottles of freshly squeezed lemonade for them to feast on as they lay on a blanket in a quiet corner of the beach, or in a grassy meadow, away from the crowds and Maureen's nosy friends.

She never could bring herself to drink lemonade after that summer.

“Excuse me, ladies.”

Both Maureen and Elise turned to see a young male employee with an armload of wood.

“If it's okay with you, I'll just be a moment stoking the fire.”

“Thank you, Billy.” Elise gave the boy a warm smile. “You take such good care of us.”

“I do what I can, ma'am.” They watched as he set about placing fresh logs in the fireplace. The wood snapped and crackled as it caught flame. “Is there anything else I can get either of you?” He glanced at their empty cups.

“Some more hot chocolate, perhaps?”

“Oh, dear. I’ll be up all night if I have any more.”

“I’m afraid I’d be the same,” Maureen added, although she had a feeling she’d be up all night worried about Adam anyway.

“Actually, can you tell me if anyone else has checked in?”

Billy’s lips pressed into a line, and he shook his head solemnly. “As far as I know, no one has made it through the storm at all. Is there anyone in particular you’re waiting for, ma’am? I’ll go check.”

She hesitated to give Adam’s name. If he’d made it through the storm, he’d already be there. Which meant he was either trapped in town at the bottom of the mountain, or he hadn’t come at all. The last thought stung. *Surely he wouldn’t stand her up? Not after so long? Not again?*

“No.” She managed a small smile and a quick shake of her head. “That’s fine. Thank you very much.”

“If there’s anything I can get either of you, please don’t hesitate to ask, okay?”

They sent him off with assurances that they would in fact ask if they required anything.

“Such a nice young man.” Maureen watched him go. “He reminds me of ___”

“Are you going to tell me, or not?”

Maureen snapped her head around to refocus on her companion. “I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “Tell you what?”

Elise lifted her eyes from her project. “Tell me what was in the letter, of course.”

Almost One Year Ago

New Year's Day

It was half past one in the morning by the time Maureen got home from the New Year's party. It was way past the time when she should have been in bed, but with the letter still unread, there was no way she'd be able to sleep.

She sat at the kitchen table and took a deep breath. She hadn't heard from Adam in over forty years. *Did he remember her?*

Obviously he had, if he'd bothered to write her a letter.

But *what* did he remember of her?

Did he remember that summer? The love they had for each other? Did he remember—

“Stop it, Maureen.” Her voice was sharp in the quiet condo.

There was no point in putting it off any longer. With shaking hands, she tore open the envelope and slid the paper free.

Dearest Maureen,

I'm not sure where to begin.

When your son reached out, to say that I was shocked would be an understatement.

I never thought I would have the chance to speak to you again, even through words on paper. I can't tell you what it means to have the opportunity.

I've thought about you so many times over the years. I wondered if you'd married. If you became the mother you so badly wanted to be. If you were happy.

Selfishly, I couldn't bring myself to ask after you. I think I was afraid of the answer. If you were happy, I would be devastated for myself. But if you were unhappy, I

wouldn't be able to bear it.

Over time, I began to think of you only as a sweet memory that never failed to bring a smile to my face.

Life has been good to me, Maureen. I hope it has been equally good to you.

We've lived a lifetime apart and if there is one thing I've learned over the years, it is that our time on this earth is limited and I don't know about you, but I'm not getting any younger. So, with that in mind, I'm going to be bold.

I'd very much like to see you again, Maureen.

There is no rush as I will be overseas finishing my work for another year before returning to North America to stay.

I eagerly await your reply.

Yours always,

Adam

Chapter Three

Present

MAUREEN FINISHED READING the letter aloud and folded it along the well-worn creases and set it in her lap. At this point, she'd read the letter so many times, she knew the contents by heart. But she liked seeing Adam's careful and precise handwriting and holding the paper he'd held in her hands. Despite the distance still between them, it made her feel more connected to him.

It should have felt strange sharing the details of their communication with a total stranger. Maureen hadn't shared the letter in its entirety with anyone. Not even her children. Perhaps that's why they all thought she'd completely lost the plot by flying across the continent only days before Christmas.

She couldn't say what it was about Elise. But something about the older woman made it easy for Maureen to open up.

"We wrote a few letters back and forth after that." She offered up the information before Elise could ask. "With his travels, it was often easier than to rely on technology, and honestly...it was kind of..."

"Romantic?" Elise grinned. "I'm not too old to recognize romance when I see it."

“I hope I’m never too old to recognize romance.” Maureen chuckled and returned her smile. “And it *was* romantic. I thought I was too old to feel that way again. After all these years and...well...” She stopped herself from going into details about her failed marriage and the reasons she probably shouldn’t believe in romance at all anymore. “After everything,” Maureen settled on the word, “you hit a point where you kind of stop believing it can happen, you know?”

With a huff, Elise put her crochet project in her lap and stared at Maureen. “I’m much closer to having a foot in the ground than you are, young lady.”

Maureen tried not to react to the absurd way she’d been addressed.

“If I can still believe in love at my *very* advanced age,” Elise continued, “then there is no reason you shouldn’t. Especially when it sounds like that’s exactly what’s happened here.”

“It’s not that I don’t believe in it. I just wasn’t sure it could still happen to me.” She closed her eyes for a minute, shocked by her own use of the word. “And you? You *do* still believe in love?”

Elise grew quiet, but after a moment she nodded. “I do.”

“Will you tell me about your love story?” Elise could have very easily said no. After all, they’d only just met. But Maureen didn’t think she would. For the same reasons that made Maureen want to open up to Elise, she was fairly sure the feeling was mutual.

Sure enough, after a moment, Elise spoke again. “I don’t know if you could call it a love story. Doesn’t there have to be a happily ever after to qualify?”

“I think that’s only for fiction. Real life doesn’t always have happy endings.”

Elise nodded sadly and focused on her crochet. “I tried not to fall in love,” she said slowly. “I did my best to avoid Alex and put my head down and get my job done. I knew that even if Alex returned the feelings that I

didn't even understand myself, we could never be together. We came from very different worlds. Maybe I didn't know much about love. But I knew enough to know that those worlds could never cross."

It had all happened so long ago, but it was clear that to Elise, it was just like yesterday. "I'd been working here for just over a year before I got transferred to the front desk." Her eyes flickered momentarily to the counter, where a handful of employees were buzzing around. "After that, it became almost impossible to avoid Alex when they came to the inn. Which felt like it continued to increase in frequency. I know it wasn't real, but it felt like they were always here. Every time I turned around, Alex was there. After a while, it was clear that my feelings were reciprocated." Elise smiled at the memory. "We exchanged little glances for months before, finally, I made a bold move."

"*You* made the move?" Maureen couldn't hide her surprise. It wasn't that she was so old-fashioned, but all those years ago, it would have been almost unheard of for Elise to make any move at all.

"I did." Her eyes sparkled. "It was a rare moment when we were alone, and I couldn't stop myself. I knew I could be fired for what I did. After all, Alex's family were always such important guests. Or even worse, I could have been rejected. But it didn't matter. My heart was so full of what I felt for Alex that I just had to do it."

Maureen clasped her hands together. "And..."

"It was the most magical kiss I've ever experienced. Except, of course, for all those that came afterward." She winked, and Maureen couldn't help but laugh.

"It sounds to me like a very happy ending, if you ask me."

"Oh, my dear. That was simply the beginning. And just like with fiction, the beginning of a story is always full of hope."

Maureen sat back in the chair as if all the air had been sucked out of her lungs. It was true. The beginnings of these kinds of stories were always so

hopeful and then...

“Would you be a dear and fetch me a chamomile tea?” Elise’s question brought her back to the moment. “I’m afraid I’ll never be able to sleep after all that sugar.”

Maureen tucked the precious letter that was still on her lap back into her purse and nodded, grateful for the distraction to collect her thoughts. “Of course. I’ll be right back.”

It was almost dark outside now, but the lobby of the inn still managed to feel warm and welcoming with the light from the fire and all the candles and lanterns that had been set out. Maureen made her way to the drink cart and set out two cups with chamomile tea bags. Right as she was pouring the boiling water, the room was once more filled with light.

A small cheer went up from the staff and a few of the guests groaned, making Maureen grin. She had to admit, the candlelight had been nice and provided a nice backdrop to the story she was telling Elise. But maybe if the lights had come back on, there was a chance that the roads would open.

Holding on to that little bit of hope, Maureen took the two cups of tea and made her way to the front desk.

“Sorry to bother you. I’m sure you have your hands full with—”

“Mrs. McCormick.” Lucy’s head shot up and if she was frazzled in any way, it didn’t show on her kind face. “You’re no bother at all. What can I help you with?”

“The power’s back,” she stated the obvious. “And I was hoping that meant that maybe...”

“It’s just the backup generators.” Lucy pressed her lips together. “It took longer than expected to get them up and running, but unfortunately we don’t expect the power back on for another few hours, maybe even a few days depending on how bad the storm is.”

“A few days?”

“Not to worry,” Lucy said quickly. “The backup generators will be

enough to handle our needs here.”

She didn't seem to realize that it wasn't the power that Maureen cared all that much about. Then again, how could she? “What about the roads? Are they open yet?”

“Not that I've heard.” The innkeeper shook her head. “Which is probably a good thing.”

Maureen was startled. “How could that be a good thing?”

“We had to adjust our bookings because of the storm,” the woman patiently explained. “It doesn't happen often, but when it does, we often have to extend some reservations for guests who can't leave. It usually all balances out with the guests who can't make it through the storm. With such a small inn, and only sixteen rooms, it can be a bit of a shuffle sometimes.”

“Wow. I guess I never thought of that.” Maureen moved to leave. “You're all so busy. I'll let you get back to work.”

“Like I said, it's no problem at all,” Lucy said gently. “Is there a particular guest I can check on for you?”

The woman's question took her off guard, and Maureen's face heated with a blush. She hadn't mentioned that she was meeting anyone at the inn when she'd arrived. Mostly because it felt a little bit illicit and she'd never done anything so reckless before that she wasn't entirely sure how to handle the situation on any level. Although she was quickly growing weary of worrying about anyone else's opinions on the situation.

“Was it that obvious?”

Lucy chuckled a little. “It really is none of my business who you are waiting for, or why. But if I can help you in any way, I'd be happy to.”

She'd hesitated to ask after Adam because there was a part of her that was afraid of the answer. She already knew he wasn't coming. But what she didn't know was whether it was because of the storm or because of some other reason. *What if he got cold feet? What if, after all these years, he'd never intended to meet her? What if he'd decided to stand her up? Again.*

She'd have her answer with one simple question. But what if she didn't like that answer?

Maureen glanced behind her at Elise, who'd picked up her crocheting again. Talking to the older woman had been a nice surprise, and for the first time in a long time, she'd been able to talk about him with an impartial person. It felt good.

"No." She made her decision. Some things were better not to know. Or at least, to postpone the knowing. "Not right now."

Nine Months Ago...

March

"Don't you think the anticipation is the best part?" Milena, Cal's fiancée, who Maureen always thought was the most romantic of all of her daughters-in-law, leaned forward on the table and put her chin in her hands.

"The best part?" Jade lifted her head from the baby at her breast. "It would be torture."

"I think torture is a little extreme." Gwen, her eldest son's fiancée, joined them at the table with a tray of cookies. "But I definitely don't think the anticipation would be the best part." She shot Milena a look. "I can't believe you haven't even heard his voice yet."

All eyes were once again on Maureen. She wasn't sure how the conversation had focused on her in the first place, and she wasn't entirely comfortable discussing her...*situation* with her son's fiancées and wives. Not

that the women had any compunction about talking about it with her. From the moment she'd stepped foot into Jade's kitchen, she'd been the topic of discussion.

"I don't think that—"

"Isn't it kind of suspicious that he doesn't want to talk on the phone?" Jade interrupted. "I know Mitch is concerned about—"

"Mitch doesn't need to be concerned about anything." Maureen stopped her daughter-in-law. "I'm an adult, and I can take care of myself. Besides, don't the two of you have your hands full right now?"

She used her head to gesture to the newborn Jade was currently feeding.

Maureen's first grandchild, Clara McCormick, had been born only a month earlier, at the end of February. After some initial worry during pregnancy that there might be complications with the baby, she was born totally healthy and absolutely perfect. Maureen was completely smitten with her and tried to spend as much time as she possibly could helping out at Mitch and Jade's house while also respecting their space. She was finding it to be a delicate balance, which was why she was thrilled when Mitch arranged for all the ladies to come over for the afternoon.

She'd even put up with the younger women's nosy questions if it meant she could sneak in some extra granddaughter cuddle time.

"We definitely do have our hands full," Jade admitted. She readjusted the baby at her breast and sank back against the couch cushion. "I swear, all I do is sit right here and make milk. I feel like a—"

"Don't say it." Evie stopped her. "This phase will pass." She offered Jade a reassuring smile. "They're always like this at first. All they do for the first month or two is sleep and eat."

"And poop." Milena giggled.

"Does she ever poop." Jade laughed. "Fortunately, Mitch handles a lot of the diapers."

"I never thought I'd see the day." Maureen shook her head. "He really is

a good father.”

Jade’s face lit up. “I’m so lucky.”

“It has nothing to do with luck.” Gwen sat on the couch next to Jade. “Amazing attracts amazing.” She squeezed Jade’s arm lightly. “Besides, you’ve trained him well.”

The ladies laughed and for a moment, Maureen forgot they’d been interrogating her about Adam and the letter she’d received on New Year’s Eve.

Unfortunately, Gwen hadn’t. “You do have to admit that it’s a little unusual.” She shifted the topic of conversation easily back to Maureen. “Writing letters is very...”

“Romantic,” Evie filled in.

“I was going to say archaic.”

Maureen’s mouth dropped open.

“I think it’s very romantic, Maureen.”

“Thank you, Evie.”

“What’s romantic?” Amber appeared in the doorway, holding a tray with a tinfoil-wrapped plate.

“Maureen’s letters.”

“Ohh.” Amber set the plate on the table and took a seat across from her. “I agree. So romantic.”

“But you have to admit,” Jade said. “It is unusual.”

“Of course it’s unusual,” Evie said in support. “But the whole situation is unusual. When was the last time you heard of two lovers reconnecting after almost forty years.”

“I don’t know if lover is...”

“You *were* lovers, weren’t you?” Amber stared at her, eagerly waiting for an answer.

The last thing she wanted to talk about with the girls was her sex life. Even if it had taken place so long ago. Yet, she also knew when she was

outnumbered. They were not going to be satisfied until they got some details. Not that there were very many to give out. Even if she wanted to. Which she really didn't.

Amber wiggled her eyebrows, and Maureen couldn't help but laugh at the girl she'd come to love as her own daughter despite the fact that she and her sister Chelsea were both constant reminders of her husband's long-running affair. There had been a time not too long ago when she wouldn't have been able to be in the same room as either of the girls, but that was also when she couldn't bear to return to Cedar Springs either. So much had changed.

Her sons had believed for years that the reason they'd left the lake house after learning of Harold's affair and secret family was because the memory of learning about her husband's betrayal in her favorite place was too much for Maureen to bear. But it couldn't have been further from the truth.

It was true that Maureen had known of Harold's affair for years. Just as she'd known about Chelsea and Amber's existence. She'd never told anyone about what she knew because she'd secretly hoped she would never have to. Naively, she'd assumed that if she ignored the fact that her husband had a secret life, they could all go on existing as they always had. She'd keep looking the other way, Harold could have it all, and her boys would never need to know about their father's betrayal.

Of course, things hadn't turned out the way she'd hoped. Not even close.

She remembered the day that everything had changed as clearly as if it were yesterday. It was the night of the summer solstice festival and dance. It was also her favorite night of summer, but not for the reasons everyone else had.

As the boys had gotten older, she'd gradually bowed out of attending the festivities in favor of spending the night alone. She'd sit on the deck, sipping a glass of wine and allow herself the luxury of remembering.

It was the one night a year when Maureen would allow herself to think of the life she could have had. With Adam. Deep down, she knew it wasn't fair

to her husband or her family to hold any kind of feelings for another man—or another life—at all. But she'd convinced herself that one night a year couldn't hurt.

Until that night.

The boys had gone to the dance. Their father was late coming from the city, and Maureen had just assumed he'd go straight to the festival the way he always did. If Harold knew why Maureen preferred not to attend the summer solstice festival when she enjoyed all the others so much, he never said. But that night, instead of going straight to town, he'd come by the house. To talk.

It was over. He could no longer lead two lives, and he'd made the decision to leave her and the boys to be with his other family.

Just like that, Maureen's world imploded, and she knew at once that she was at fault.

She'd never loved Harold the way he'd deserved. Logically or not, Maureen blamed Cedar Springs, the lake, the summer solstice festival, and the memories that she just couldn't seem to let go for the destruction of her family.

Somehow, Ian had sensed that something was amiss and had returned early after dropping his brothers off at the dance to find her quietly crying on the deck. Her eldest son, the same age as she'd been when she'd fallen so deeply in love with Adam in that very spot, sat with her while she sobbed.

The next day, they'd packed up and returned to the city. Maybe it was to punish herself or maybe it was to protect her heart, but Maureen could never bring herself to return until recently, when Declan convinced her she couldn't miss Mitch and Jade's surprise wedding.

Maybe it was the love her sons had all found in the same place that held that magic for her, maybe it was just the passing of time, or maybe she just finally understood that her memories from so long ago weren't to blame for her husband's infidelities. Whatever it was, Maureen was long past punishing herself.

“You know what I think?” She put both hands flat on the table and looked around the room. She waited a beat before zeroing in on Jade, who’d shifted the baby to her shoulder to burp. “I think I’ve waited long enough for baby snuggles.”

A few of the women protested, but Jade dutifully handed over the baby. Maureen spent a few minutes cooing over the little girl and dropping kisses on her tiny cheeks.

“I appreciate everyone’s interest in my life,” she said when she looked up again.

“Your *love* life.” Gwen giggled but Maureen simply shook her head and ignored her.

“Adam is an old friend, and I’m very much enjoying reconnecting with him again. I assure you all that there is nothing suspicious or odd about writing letters back and forth. Not everyone was born in a technical age. Letters are a perfectly normal way to communicate.”

“I think it’s so romantic.” Milena sighed. “Do you think Cal would write me letters?”

“I think Cal would do whatever you asked him to,” Evie said with a laugh. “That boy is totally smitten with you.”

Milena blushed, but it was true. All her sons were completely taken with their women. It made her feel better about her own decisions that she’d somehow still managed to raise good boys, who’d turned into better men who loved their women fiercely.

“Maureen, will you tell us about him?” She turned to see Amber watching her carefully. “I mean, I know you might not want to tell the guys all the dirty details, and I’m not suggesting you tell them to us either,” she added quickly. “Unless you want to.” Again, she wiggled her eyebrows. “But maybe a few details?”

“Like how you met?” Evie asked.

“Or your first date?” Milena leaned forward. “I bet he picked you up at

your front door with flowers.”

It didn't matter how much time had passed, Maureen remembered those days as if they'd been yesterday. “We met at the summer solstice dance,” she told the girls.

“I'm sorry I'm late!” Chelsea burst into the room in a whirlwind of color and noise. She and her boyfriend Lucas were always on the move, traveling from place to place, and although the nomadic life seemed to suit her, it had also made her perpetually late to...well, everything. She bent to kiss Maureen on the cheek and fussed over baby Clara, who'd fallen asleep in her grandma's arms. “Are we talking about the dance?” she asked as she moved away to find a seat. “I love the summer solstice dance.”

“We're talking about the dance *forty* years ago,” Gwen said. “Maureen was about to tell us how she met Adam.”

“*The* Adam?” Chelsea's mouth dropped open. “You met him at the dance? They had that way back then?”

Maureen pressed her lips together and shot an unimpressed look at the youngest of the women. “First of all, it wasn't quite forty years ago. And, yes. They certainly did. And just like it is now, the festival was the kick-off to summer.”

“And love.” Amber drew out the word and burst into giggles.

“Do you want to hear about how we met or not?”

“And your first date,” Milena added, lest she forget.

Resigned that she was not going to get away without giving them some details, Maureen took a sip of her tea and for the first time in a very long time started to tell the story.

Thirty-Seven Years Ago

The cool lake water soothed Maureen's aching feet. She let out a satisfactory sigh and laid back on the dock next to Sue Ann.

"I told you not to wear those shoes."

Maureen didn't bother opening her eyes. She knew without looking that Sue Ann would have her *I told you so* look on her face.

"The shoes were perfect with that dress and you know it." Maureen stretched her arms up over her head and sighed again. "Besides, the blisters are totally worth it. I wouldn't change a thing."

After that first dance together, Adam had simply moved straight into the second song by mutual agreement, and then the third. They'd danced their way all around the floor, completely unaware of anyone else.

"It was like something out of a movie."

Next to her, Sue Ann giggled. The dock beneath them moved as she flipped to her side. Maureen finally opened one eye to see her friend staring at her. "Tell me everything," Sue Ann said. "I want *all* the details."

Maureen didn't have to be asked twice. She'd been dying to talk about the boy—the *man*—who'd swept her off her feet. Literally.

"Isn't he handsome?" She flipped over to her side. "Those eyes." She sighed and squeezed her own eyes shut, remembering the way he'd looked at her as if she were the only girl at the dance.

"He *is* handsome," Sue Ann agreed. "But a little old for you, don't you think? I mean...you *just* turned eighteen, Maureen. He has to be at least thirty."

Her eyes snapped open, and she stared at the girl who was supposed to be her very best friend. "I turned eighteen over four months ago, Sue Ann. I'm practically an adult."

"Practically," her friend murmured under her breath.

"And he is *not* thirty." Truthfully, Maureen didn't know how old Adam was. It was obvious that he was older than her. Especially considering he'd told her he'd just finished university. But he couldn't be more than four or

five years older, and that was a perfectly acceptable age gap. She told her friend as much. “Besides, I’m very mature for my age. A few years doesn’t make any difference at all.”

Sue Ann didn’t look convinced. She raised an eyebrow and made an annoying clicking sound with her tongue. “You do know what boys that age want from younger girls, don’t you?”

Her stomach clenched, but not in a painful way, and a shot of excitement flew through her body. “Do you really think so?”

“Maureen!”

Sue Ann was thoroughly scandalized, but Maureen could only laugh.

“I guess we’ll find out,” she commented off-handedly, causing Sue Ann to squeal again. “He asked me if he could take me for ice cream.”

“What?” Sue Ann sat up straight on the dock and grabbed her hands. “How could you not tell me that? You’re going on a date? Tonight?”

“Ice cream.” She tried but failed to sound casual about it. Especially because she felt anything *but* casual about it. “He’s picking me up at seven.”

“What are we doing out here?” Sue Ann jumped to her feet. “We have to pick out your outfit.”

Maureen laughed and let her friend drag her up the dock toward the house.

A few hours later, dressed in stonewash denim shorts and a black tank top with a matching denim jacket that Sue Ann assured her looked very mature, Maureen was ready for her date when Adam picked her up in his uncle’s borrowed car. He rang the doorbell like a gentleman and shook her father’s hand politely.

Maureen was certain she heard her sister giggle when Adam handed her the bouquet of daisies he’d no doubt picked alongside the road where they

were currently growing in abundance, and tied with twine. They were the most beautiful flowers she'd ever seen, and Maureen knew without looking that her older sister would be simply green with envy at the handsome young man picking *her* up for a date and bringing her flowers.

Not that Maureen bothered to spare Linda a glance. She was far too smitten with Adam, who, as soon as it was polite to do so, excused them so they could go to town for ice cream.

She'd been so worried that the magic from the night before at the dance wouldn't shine so bright the next day, but she shouldn't have wasted her time with such thoughts because the moment he opened the door for her and his hand gently brushed her arm as she sat in the front seat, the sparks flew once more.

"You look very pretty tonight, Maureen." Adam held her gaze.

"So do you." Her blush burned her cheeks. "I mean...you look very handsome."

"Oh." He pretended to look disappointed. "Too bad, because I really was going for pretty."

They both laughed as they drove down the gravel lane, and the nervousness between them vanished. Being with Adam felt easy, like she could be herself. But at the same time, when she was near him, the air felt like it was charged with something. It was both comfortable and exciting at the same time.

"I bet you like chocolate," Adam guessed as they walked toward Sandy's Scoops, the ice cream stand that set up for business on the edge of the beach every season.

"Chocolate?" She stared at him. "Do I look like a girl who likes chocolate?"

"Don't all girls like chocolate?" Adam laughed. "At least, most girls like chocolate. It's a well-known fact."

She pretended to be offended and put her hands on her hips. "Well.

There's something you should know about me, Adam."

He paused as they reached the end of the road that led to the beach. "And what's that?"

She stopped and looked him in the eye, with a sassy smile. "I am not *most* girls." She winked before hopping down from the asphalt and onto the sandy beach.

Behind her, she heard him chuckle. "No, Maureen. You most certainly are not most girls."

She ended up ordering a strawberry waffle cone and Adam got a scoop of chocolate. Like most summer nights, the beach was still full of people. Some still swimming, because the sun didn't set until past nine so early in the summer, but most camped out on blankets, enjoying the late evening heat before packing up for the day.

Naturally, they started to walk away from the crowds, farther down the beach, where the sand got rougher and old logs from the mill on the other side of the lake had washed up over the years.

Maureen climbed up on a big log and swung her feet while Adam leaned on one hip next to her.

"So is it just ice cream? Or do you not like chocolate at all?"

She laughed, amused at his interest in her dislike of something so popular. "I love hot chocolate," she said. "But when it comes to ice cream, there are just better options, you know?"

"And you always go for the better option?"

She dropped her chin and looked up at him through her eyelashes. "I'm here with you, aren't I?"

She should have been shocked by her boldness, but just like everything else with Adam, it felt natural.

"I don't know if I'm the *better* option," he said with a shake of his head. "But I sure am glad that you're here with me. I had a lot of fun last night."

"You're a very good dancer."

“I had an excellent partner.”

They flirted back and forth until their ice cream was gone and the sun started to sink behind the mountain.

“I should probably take you home.”

She sighed deeply, knowing it was the right thing to do, although it was the last thing she wanted. She might be eighteen, but she was still under her father’s roof and there were expectations. She was a *good girl*, after all.

“Okay.” She hopped off the log. “But only on one condition.”

Adam tilted his head and humored her. “And what’s that?” He took a step closer to her.

“Will you agree to take me out again?”

“Absolutely. On one condition.”

“You can’t make a condition on a—oh.” The words fell from her lips as Adam took another step and reached out with a hand to cup her cheek. Her stomach flipped, and she hardly dared to breathe. *Was he going to kiss her? On their first date?*

She’d only been kissed once before. But it didn’t count when her next-door neighbor, whom she’d grown up with, kissed her smack on the lips in the playground in seventh grade at lunchtime. Maureen had given him a sharp knee to the groin and he’d dropped like a sack of flour. They’d both ended up in the principal’s office—which, to this day, she thought was a massive injustice.

And there was the kiss in Sue Ann’s basement with Conrad, a friend from school when they were playing spin the bottle. But she didn’t count that either. It was messy and wet and the only thing that made her feel was disgust.

But she wasn’t thinking of the neighbor boy or the sloppy kiss in Sue Ann’s basement at that moment. Not with Adam standing so close she could feel his breath on her lips, the slightest trace of chocolate in the air, his palm heating her skin. Ever so slowly, as if she were a fawn that would be scared

away if he moved too quickly, he stroked her cheek until she closed her eyes, a small sigh slipping from her lips.

And then his lips were on hers. So soft, she could hardly feel them at first. A flutter. Barely a touch. And then more as his mouth pressed onto hers. She'd been afraid that she wouldn't know what to do, but she needn't have worried. Her mouth moved, just a little, in response to him. It wasn't too much. But it was perfect and just enough to send her heart soaring.

When the kiss was over, all too quickly, he pulled away, and her eyes fluttered open. Adam's lips were curled up in a sweet smile, as if kissing her had been the sweetest surprise. It certainly had been for her. She was already anticipating the next one.

He took her hand with a shy smile and together they walked down the beach toward Main Street.

She didn't know exactly how yet, but she knew this summer was going to change her life. Forever.

Chapter Four

Present

“YOU TOLD your girls that story, too?” Elise took a sip of the chamomile tea Maureen had brought her. “That’s very brave of you.”

Maureen laughed. “Some might say it wasn’t a great decision. But I think it was time to tell them something about Adam after so much time had passed.”

Elise nodded. “Probably true.” She held her mug with shaking hands and inhaled deeply. “There’s just something so soothing about chamomile tea, don’t you think?”

Maureen nodded and settled into the chair across from her. She’d barely taken her first sip when Elise picked up the thread of their conversation.

“He was your first love.”

It wasn’t a question, but Maureen nodded without hesitation. “I fell hard and fast after that.”

“All it took was one kiss?”

Maureen laughed. She’d like to say that it took more than that, but it hadn’t. Not really. Certainly, there was a lot more to their relationship than the sweet kisses that, over time, became a lot more urgent and insistent. But

she'd known then, just as she still knew now, that it had been that first perfect kiss that had sealed her fate.

"I know it sounds silly," she told Elise. "Especially now that I'm older and wiser about these things." She chuckled a little to herself. "Or at least I'd like to think I am. The moment I saw him at the dance, I knew there was something special about him. But when we kissed, it was as if everything became crystal clear, and I just knew."

"Knew he was the one?"

Maureen hesitated but finally nodded. "Just like that. I knew I loved him." She looked up at Elise. "Do you think that's silly or naive?"

"Not at all." Elise's voice was soft, her eyes glassy. "I felt the same way after that very first kiss with Alex."

Maureen sipped at her tea. "You mentioned that the beginning of your story was full of hope." She knew she was taking a chance asking Elise more questions, and she didn't want to be too pushy or forward, but at the same time, it felt like they were past that part of their new friendship. And something told Maureen that Elise wanted to talk just as much as she did.

"It *was* full of hope," she said after a moment. "Just like you described it to be with Adam. That's how I felt with Alex. Like we could take on the world. As long as we were together, everything would be fine."

Something in her tone told Maureen that it wasn't fine at all. "And then?"

"And then reality intruded." Elise curled her lips together so they almost disappeared. She lifted her tea to her mouth and blew carefully over the hot surface before taking a tentative sip. It was only then that she spoke again. "Alex's father was never going to accept our relationship. Even if he did like me and think of me as a quality employee at his favorite inn. That's all I'd ever be, working class. While Alex was the heir to the family business and that came with *expectations*."

"Did Alex tell him about the two of you?"

Elise shook her head. "It was never an option. We knew that. The world

was...well, it was different back then. Even after I was promoted to front desk manager, which was simply unheard of for a woman back then, that was as much as I could ever hope for.”

Her eyes took on the now familiar faraway look as she spoke.

“So you just kept sneaking around?” It sounded awful to Maureen to have to hide true love like that for years on end. But maybe having love, even in secret, was better than not having it at all.

“We did. For years, when Alex would visit the inn, we could be together. And as a senior employee, I could find all kinds of reasons that I might need to go down the mountain to town and volunteer to be the one to run any errands that required a trip. But after a while, I had to call an end to it.”

“Oh no.” Maureen leaned forward. “Why?”

“I loved Alex too much not to.” She took another sip of tea and, with a shaking hand, set the cup down on the end table. “Mr. Milsrise was insistent that Alex marry and give him heirs to the family fortune. At that time, their business was thriving. They started spending more and more time up at Merry Falls Inn, entertaining suitable families and candidates for marriage.”

“Like an arranged marriage?” Maureen didn’t bother hiding her surprise. Even for the time, it seemed extremely old-fashioned.

“Not quite.” Elise shrugged. “But not too far off. There were plenty of suitable marriage candidates for Alex. Mr. Milsrise made sure of that.”

“And Alex just agreed to it? Just like that?”

“There was no other choice,” she said sadly. “Not back then. It didn’t take long until the wedding was announced and my heart broke.”

Maureen’s heart broke for her new friend and the pain she must have been in so many years ago.

“For a while, I thought about leaving the inn altogether and finding a new job far away, where I wouldn’t have to witness the love of my life marry another, but by then, this was my home. I didn’t know anything else. And I think part of me decided that it was better to be near Alex, in at least some

small way, than not at all.”

“That’s heartbreaking.”

“It was.” Elise smiled sadly. “But it was a long time ago. And I was right. It was better to have pieces of Alex, even if from afar, than nothing at all. Especially when their little girl was born. I can’t imagine not having had Susan in my life.”

Maureen’s eyes widened as she put the pieces together. “Your niece?”

Elise winked. “It was Alex’s greatest gift to me, allowing me the space to be close to Susan. When she was born, I knew I would never move away.”

“That’s so sad.”

“Is it?” Elise looked her straight in the eye. “Isn’t it better to be surrounded by love than to be alone? I had little Susan. She filled my heart in ways I didn’t know were possible. It was a kind of love I didn’t know existed. If I would have left, I never would have had that.”

“But...what about Alex? To just stand by and watch them be a family while you—”

“I was family, too. In a different way.” She nodded and clasped her hands together.

For the first time, Maureen noticed the gold band on her left hand. She didn’t have a chance to ask before Elise started speaking again.

“After a while, I left the inn and moved down into town to work for a different hotel. Over time, I became the general manager there and held that position until I retired just over twenty years ago. But the Merry Falls Inn was always special to me and held a piece of my heart.”

“Which is why you come back every year?”

Elise nodded. “But the most important position I ever held was being Susan’s aunt and Alex’s best friend. I supported the marriage. How could I not, when little Susan was the product of such a union? So I simply shut off that part of my heart and focused on all the other parts. And there were many. It was a full life I had. With more love than I ever could have imagined.”

She finished talking and laid her head back against the chair, as if telling her story had taken all her energy. Maybe it had. Elise's eyes were closed for so long, Maureen thought maybe she'd fallen asleep.

She waited and sipped at her tea, thinking about what Elise had said.

The older woman wasn't wrong. There were plenty of kinds of love. She, too, had experienced them. After Adam...there'd been a time when Maureen was sure she would never love again. But if she had let that feeling take hold and take over, she never would have had her boys. And that love was one that was greater than any other.

"Tell me more." Elise spoke, startling Maureen. "About Adam. And your perfect summer."

"Perfect?"

She opened one eye. "Nothing is perfect. But it sounds like it came close."

"You're right," Maureen said. "Nothing is perfect."

"But?"

"You're right. It was as close to perfect as you can get."

Six Months Earlier

June

Cedar Springs was bustling with activity. It seemed that over the years, the summer solstice festival had only grown larger. Maureen hadn't remembered so many vendor stalls set up along Main Street before. But it was more likely that the passage of time had affected her memory.

She hadn't been to the festival since the boys were little. She'd attended a

few times, and then when they were older and needed her less, she'd insisted that it was a good opportunity for their father to spend quality time with the children. Over time, it turned into *their* thing and Maureen was left alone to sit with her memories.

Now, as she walked slowly down the busy street and took in the sights, she knew she'd been wrong to avoid it for so long. She'd been wrong about a lot of things, but there was no point in dwelling on those things because there was nothing she could do about it now.

"Mrs. McCormick!"

Maureen spun at the sound of her name to see young Jonah running through the crowd toward her. At once, a smile lit up her face, and she bent to catch the boy in a hug. Evie's son, Declan's soon-to-be stepson, was a very affectionate nine years old. Maureen had fallen for the boy right away. They'd bonded over ice cream and treats the way all good *grandparent* relationships should, and she'd very quickly started to think of Jonah as her own grandson.

"What did I say about calling me Mrs. McCormick?" she gently chastised him and ruffled his hair.

He shrugged sheepishly. "But then I don't know what to call you. Mom says I can't use your first name because it's not 'spectful."

"Respectful?" She tried not to laugh.

"Yeah. That."

"What about Momo?"

"Momo." Jonah tried out the name. "Momo...yeah. I like that."

"So do I." Maureen stood and offered the boy her hand. "What are you doing, running around? Is your mother here somewhere?"

"She's got a table set up." He pointed down the street toward Evie's store, Live, Love, Lake. "Come on. I'll show you."

With little option, Maureen let herself be led through the crowds toward the booth Evie had set up outside her storefront. Just like the shop itself, the

little booth was full of beautiful things. There were a variety of cups and mugs with cute sayings on them. Yummy scented candles and bath products and a selection of locally made jewelry. Evie truly had an eye for gorgeous things, and Maureen wasn't the only one who thought so. Evie's store had been very successful with both tourists and locals, and judging by the lineup of customers waiting to talk to her now and ask her questions, it looked like the summer solstice would be another busy day for her.

"Hi, Mom." Declan emerged from the shop and placed a box under the table before straightening up and looking at her again. "Mom? What are you...you never come to the festival."

She opened her arms for a hug as Declan moved around the table to join her and Jonah. "I thought it was about time," she said when he released her from the embrace. "Long past time, actually."

Declan nodded. "I agree." There was a small, knowing smile on his handsome face.

Out of all her children, Declan was the most in tune with her feelings. Truthfully, Declan was more in tune with *everyone's* feelings. He had a huge heart, which was exactly why he'd spent his life helping others with his charity organization. There'd been a time when Maureen worried that Declan spent so much time immersed in other people's lives and problems so he wouldn't have to think about his own life. She'd been so concerned that her kind-hearted son would spend his life alone.

She needn't have worried because Evie, who was just as warm-hearted as Declan, and her beautiful son had created the perfect family for Declan.

"Why didn't you come to the festival before, Momo? It's awesome."

"Momo?" Amused, Declan looked between Maureen and Jonah with a raised eyebrow.

"Yes, Momo."

"I like it."

"So do I." She grinned and turned her attention to Jonah. "I agree, Jonah."

The festival *is* awesome. I never should have stayed away as long as I did.”

“Why did you?”

“Yeah, Mom.” Declan didn’t bother to hide his grin. “Why *did* you stay away for so long?”

Maureen knew she wasn’t going to get away without fessing up, even a little bit. She shot her son a look but bent down to look into Jonah’s eyes. “Have you ever had a place that reminds you of someone or some time in your life? Like maybe the playground reminds you of a certain friend?”

The boy nodded. “I think I know what you mean. Like every time I play Mario Kart, I think of my dad because we play it a lot whenever we’re together.”

“Yes.” She smiled warmly. “It’s kind of like that. And Mario Kart is a good memory, but sometimes places or things, well...they make you think of sad memories. Or the memory is so good that it makes you kind of sad to be reminded of it.”

Jonah screwed up his face. “What’s so good it’s sad?”

“I know it’s hard to understand.” She straightened up and looked at Declan, who was watching her with understanding.

“I had no idea, Mom.”

“There was no way you could.”

There was still so much her family didn’t know about Adam and how different her life could have been. They might not ever know, and that would be okay, too. Some memories were best to keep to yourself.

“But I’m happy to be here now,” she said brightly. “Jonah, what’s your favorite part of the summer solstice festival?”

The boy immediately started to chatter about cotton candy, ice cream, and mini donuts.

“Your mother would not be happy if I let you eat all that junk,” Declan said. “But maybe we can have one thing,” he added with a conspirator’s whisper and a wink. “Can you go grab that other box by the counter inside

first?”

Jonah didn't have to be asked twice. He took off at a sprint, Eager to help...but even more eager for the promised treat.

“He's a good boy.” She laughed as he ran off.

“He is.” Declan turned his attention back to his mother. “I really do think it's great that you're here today, Mom. I had no idea that the solstice festival brought up bad memories for you. I just always thought it was a father-son thing.”

“They weren't bad memories, Dec.” She let her gaze drift down the busy street to where the tents for the band and the dance that would happen later that night were set up. “Those memories were far from bad.”

“Maybe it's time for some new memories.”

“It absolutely is.” She spent another second looking toward the tent before she looked again at Declan and grinned.

“I like seeing you so happy, Mom. It wouldn't have anything to do with a certain pen pal you have, would it?”

She laughed. “You don't think it's silly and old-fashioned that we're only writing letters and haven't met in person yet?”

“Not at all.” Declan didn't hesitate. “Like Evie says, the letters are romantic.” He shot a glance over his shoulder to where his fiancée was busy with a customer. “Maybe I should write some letters of my own?” He shook his head and focused on his mother once more. “Besides, you've met before.”

“We have.”

“And I'm sure you will again. When the time is right.”

The idea warmed her through.

“But I trust that when you do meet up, if he asks you to go with him to Africa again, your answer will still be no, right?”

Momentarily confused, Maureen took a step back. She nodded vaguely, recalling the version of the story she'd told Declan that wasn't entirely the truth. Time and distance had a way of changing your memories, and her

children never needed to know the way things had really played out.

Maureen remembered. She remembered exactly how the rest of that summer *really* went.

Thirty-Seven Years Ago

“Isn’t it amazing, Maureen? I didn’t think it was even a possibility, but now...” Adam’s eyes took on a faraway look while her own head spun with the information he’d just given her.

Less than an hour earlier, she’d been in her room in her father’s lake house, taking care to curl her hair and apply just the slightest amount of Linda’s lip gloss that she’d snuck out of her purse. Her heart raced with the idea of seeing Adam Lancaster, just the way it had all summer every time he picked her up for a date or—more recently—when they snuck away to the dock hidden in the trees.

They’d exchanged dozens of kisses since that magical first one. As far as Maureen was concerned, there would never be enough kisses to make her happy.

Every time his lips pressed to hers, it was as if she flung out of control. Her body went numb, but at the same time felt as if it were on fire. The world spun around them as if they were the only two people in the world.

They’d even had a few times in the back seat of Adam’s uncle’s car, where he’d been brave enough to slip his hands under her blouse. The first time it happened, Maureen dared not breathe, but it felt so good to have his hands on her body. Together, they’d grown bolder and explored more and more of each other.

When she confessed the details to Sue Ann, her friend never failed to tell

her to slow down and be careful. After all, Adam was an older boy, who only wanted one thing from her. But Maureen knew that wasn't true. They didn't spend all their time making out. Mostly, they talked and talked. In only a few short weeks, Adam knew everything about Maureen. Her hopes and dreams, even the silly ones. And she, in turn, knew about Adam. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that they were meant to be together. Forever.

There had never been a love like theirs. It was so perfect.

Soon, every moment they had was spent together. They'd spend their days at the beach with the other summer kids, playing volleyball or swimming and splashing in the lake. When they wanted to be alone, they'd go for a picnic or hike to one of the natural hot pools higher in the mountains.

Their evenings were spent at bonfires, or walking hand in hand down the beach. Adam had taken her for dinner a few times at the local restaurants, but her favorite nights were spent on the dock on the edge of town that was partly hidden by the trees and far enough away from the lights that when they laid down on the blanket and looked up, the stars were dazzling overhead. She'd lay in his arms, her head on his chest, and count the shooting stars, making wishes on all of them in between kisses until she was dizzy from their love.

Now, with the news he'd just given her, Maureen was dizzy for a totally different reason.

Just as she had every time she met Adam, Maureen ran down to the dock, anticipating yet another kiss.

Instead, when she'd arrived, Adam was pacing on the long, wooden dock. When he saw her, his face lit up. He grabbed her hands and started talking so fast, she could hardly keep up.

"Wait." She shook her head after a few moments and forced herself to look away because she knew without a doubt that she'd agree to anything as long as those sparkling eyes were fixed on her. "You're going where?"

"Africa. Isn't it incredible?"

"Africa?"

“Yes!” He vibrated with excitement. “Well, no.”

“No?”

“Maybe.” He shook his head, and Maureen worked to keep up. “Nothing is for sure yet, but I’ve made it to the next round of applicants.”

She only had a vague idea of Africa from the little bit she’d learned in school. From what she knew, it was a wild land full of wild animals and wild people, not at all like the safe, suburban world she knew and understood. The concept of Africa at all was so foreign, Maureen couldn’t really wrap her mind around it.

“There’s such a demand for quality health care there.” Adam’s voice deepened. He paced to the far end of the dock and shook his head. “It’s awful, Maureen. There are so many people, and in so many of the villages, they don’t even have the basics, like fresh running water. Can you imagine?”

She couldn’t.

“And there’s almost no such thing as health care at all. Can you believe it? There are millions of people who don’t have any access to the things that we take for granted.”

Guilt flared low in her gut. Before meeting Adam earlier in the summer at the solstice dance, her biggest worries had been about frivolous things: a new dress for the dance, the grades on her final exams, and what college courses to sign up for in the fall.

She’d never once thought about having access to running water, or having a roof over her head. She’d certainly never considered the idea of not having access to health care if she needed it.

Adam made her think of serious things. Real things. He was older than her by seven years, but he was also the smartest, kindest man she’d ever met, and he wanted to make a difference in the world. Even if at eighteen she could hardly understand it, she was very quickly falling in love with his ideals. And him.

“I can’t imagine,” she admitted after a moment. “It’s like a whole other

world.”

“Exactly.” Adam moved so quickly toward her, the dock swayed under their feet. “It *is* a whole other world. Think of the difference I could make there.”

She nodded numbly as she tried to process what he was telling her. There was no doubt he could make a huge difference to the people of Africa. *If* he could get accepted into the program. She had no doubt that he would. Adam was perfect for such a thing. *But where did that leave her?*

She forced herself to swallow back her selfishness. “I didn’t know you were considering something like that.”

For the first time since she’d arrived on the dock, the smile slipped from his boyish face. “I didn’t want to say anything at first,” he said. “It was a long shot, and we’d only just met. I guess I was hoping...well, I don’t know what I was hoping. But I didn’t really think anything would come of the opportunity.”

“But it has.”

He nodded solemnly. “It *maybe* has.”

Maureen turned away and walked to the edge of the dock. She stared into the cold, blue lake.

Were there blue lakes like this in Africa?

The thought sprang into her mind so unexpectedly, she started to giggle.

Her giggles very quickly turned into full-blown laughter and then, to her horror, sobs.

“Don’t cry, Maureen.” Adam slipped an arm around her shoulders and pulled her into his chest. “Please don’t cry. Nothing is for sure yet. There’s still a lot of hoops to jump through, and I haven’t made any decisions yet.”

But she knew he had.

“And I know it doesn’t seem like it right now,” he continued. “But this is a good thing. And I know it’s unexpected. I mean, already this summer has been unexpected. *You* were very unexpected.”

His words stilled her. She swallowed her sobs and wiped at her face, embarrassed she'd let him see her that way. She took a deep breath and turned to face him.

"You were very unexpected, too."

Adam put his hands on each of her arms and stared deeply into her eyes. "I won't know anything for a while yet," he said. "Let's not think about it. Not until there's something to think about, okay?"

She nodded in agreement.

"Let's just enjoy our summer. Together."

She nodded again. "I'd like that very much."

Maureen knew she couldn't ignore reality forever. But she was still naive enough to believe that if she didn't think about something, it would just go away.

Adam's lips curled up into a small smile. He used his thumb to stroke her cheek and gently pull her toward him, where he pressed his lips to hers and just like that, Maureen wasn't thinking about anything else but the feel of Adam's lips on hers and how perfect they were.

Chapter Five

Present

“EXCUSE ME, LADIES.”

Maureen sat back and wiped at her eye and the tear that she hadn't realized had slipped out as she recounted that summer evening so long ago. Her story had been interrupted by a young bellboy, who nodded apologetically in Maureen's direction, but focused on Elise. “I thought maybe you ladies would like some cookies, Ms. Bell. They're your favorite.”

“Oatmeal chocolate chip?” Elise tilted her head and narrowed her eyes at the plate in front of her.

“Of course, Ms. Bell.” The young man held the plate closer.

“You're new here.” She took a cookie from the plate. “Have we met?”

He nodded eagerly. “Once before. My name is Max. I've only been here since September.”

“Then you know not to call me Ms. Bell.” She spoke sternly, but the sparkle in her eye gave her away. “Please,” she said, her voice softening. “Call me Elise like everyone else.”

“Of course. Elise.”

He was rewarded with the older woman's bright smile.

Max offered Maureen a cookie as well. “I was told to check if you’d like dinner in the dining room tonight or here in the lobby with your new friend.”

“Dinner?”

Maureen hadn’t given any thought to food at all, besides the cookie now in her hand. She’d lost all track of time talking to Elise. Sure enough, when she glanced at the time, it was dinner time. She looked to Elise, who shook her head.

“Not for me,” Elise said. “I’m quite comfortable here and not at all hungry. Unless you would like something, Maureen?”

Maureen shook her head. “I think this cookie will hit the spot.”

Max looked between them and nodded. “If you change your mind, just let me know. I’d be happy to get you whatever you need.”

The poor boy looked a little disappointed that he wasn’t able to help. Elise must have noticed as well. “Actually, Max. Would you be a dear and fetch us a fresh pot of chamomile tea from the kitchen? And maybe a few muffins, if the cook has any left over from breakfast.”

His face lit up with the task. “Of course, Ms...Elise. I’ll be right back with that.”

After he left, Maureen couldn’t help but giggle. “Poor thing was so eager to please. You’re like royalty around here.”

“Not royalty.” Elise waved a hand away. “More like a pain in the ass.”

“You said your niece doesn’t know you’re here right now.”

“Well, she knows I’m at the inn since she brought me like she does every year. I like to come up at Christmas to take in the decorations and the festivities. There’s nothing quite like Christmas time up here.”

“I can appreciate that.”

“But I wanted to be alone tonight, and I knew she had some work to do. She always does.” Elise sat up straight, looking pleased with herself. “So I told her I was off to bed early and snuck down here.”

“You’re quite the rebel.” Maureen laughed.

The older woman winked and sat back as Max reappeared with a tray laden with a fresh pot of tea, muffins, and a bowl of grapes. It wasn't until he left under assurances from Elise that she would let him know if there was anything else she needed that Elise picked up the thread of her story again.

"Adam's news must have put quite a damper on the rest of your summer."

"Not at all." Maureen shook her head. She chose a muffin off the tray and picked at the paper wrapper. "In fact, we didn't talk about it at all."

"How could you just ignore such a thing between you?"

Maureen looked seriously at her new friend. "Probably the same way you did with Alex."

Elise sat back in her chair. She was silent for a moment but then she nodded. "Sometimes it's just easier to pretend than to face the truth. At least for a little while. But it never works forever, does it?"

Maureen could sense that Elise wasn't ready to tell her more about Alex. At least not yet.

"No," she admitted. "Hiding from reality didn't work forever. But it definitely worked for a little while." Her face warmed with the memories of their summer together. "And I'm sure glad it did."

Thirty-Seven Years Ago

It had been weeks since Adam had brought up the awful idea of moving to Africa at the end of summer. Maureen had put it out of her head. Mostly. Only occasionally did she let herself think about what it might mean if the opportunity came to fruition. Would he really leave Cedar Springs, and her, at the end of the summer? Sure, she had planned to leave Cedar Springs at the

end of August, too. But that was different. She'd be going to college. This was so very different. Adam was talking about Africa.

Africa!

It was a whole world away.

Ever since that evening on the dock, they'd managed to avoid discussing the future in any specific way. Sure, they spoke about generalities and how one day Maureen dreamed of children and a family of her own. But mostly, they spoke about the present and they lived for the moment.

And living in the moment was exactly what Maureen planned to do that night.

Her mother and father had gone to the city for a few days, and she'd begged and bribed her older sister to sleep at a friend's house. It had cost her a week's worth of chores and her favorite sweater, but it would be worth it to spend time alone with Adam.

They'd planned to spend the evening on the beach at a bonfire with their friends, but when Adam came to the door to pick her up, Maureen held it open. "Why don't you come in for a bit first?"

She batted her eyelashes in a way that felt ridiculous, but judging by the way Adam looked at her, had been just as effective as she'd hoped.

"My parents are gone for the night," she added when he hesitated. "Linda is at a friend's. We have the house to ourselves."

Realization as to what exactly she was saying to him dawned slowly on Adam's handsome features until his mouth hung open slightly. "You mean... you want...I should..."

She nodded and held out her hand.

He took it and allowed her to lead him inside. "I wasn't expecting this." He held her gently in his arms, and she knew in that moment she'd made the right decision. Sue Ann would be scandalized to know she wasn't planning to wait until marriage, but Maureen had never felt anything more right than when she was with Adam. There wasn't a doubt in her mind that they would

be together forever.

He lowered his head and kissed her gently. "I love you, Maureen."

The words flowed through her, lighting little explosions of happiness throughout her body. Her heart soared. "I love you, too, Adam. So much."

He kissed her again, more urgently this time.

Heat pooled between her legs and something low in her gut clenched. It felt like her body was on fire as he deepened the kisses and their tongues twisted together. She was out of breath, her chest rising and falling quickly, as she pulled away from him. "Come with me."

Maureen led him upstairs to her bedroom and her tiny twin bed.

Adam hesitated in the doorway. "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure." She undid the buttons of her blouse and let it fall back off her shoulders, to prove her point.

His nostrils flared a little. He stepped into the room, toward her. "You are gorgeous, Maureen. The most beautiful girl in the world." He kissed her again. This time his hands traveled to her breasts before circling behind her back to unclasp her bra.

She gasped as her breasts were exposed, but then Adam was pulling his own shirt off and they were skin to skin, their kisses and their need growing in urgency.

"You're sure?"

Wrapped tight in his arms, his hot skin pressed against hers, Maureen had never been clearer of anything else in her entire life. She tilted her head up so she could look into his eyes and whispered, "Yes. I'm so sure."

He kissed her again. "I love you, Maureen. I didn't know it was possible to feel this way about someone else."

Her heart soared.

Maureen knew she should be nervous for her first time, but she felt nothing but confident and secure. Adam had that effect on her. He just made everything feel...right.

She pulled from his arms long enough to undo the button on her skirt. The fabric fell to the ground around her feet. She watched as Adam shed his pants and boxers.

She couldn't have hid the little gasp that slipped from her lips if she'd tried. At eighteen, Maureen's experience with boys was very limited, and it certainly had never included any nudity. She'd never seen a naked man before and the sight of Adam sent shock waves of excitement through her.

He tilted his head in question. "You're still—"

"I'm very sure." To prove her point, she stepped forward, closing the distance between them, and ran her hands down his bare chest. He shivered from her touch. It made her feel powerful and more in control, despite the fact that everything inside her felt out of control...in the very best possible way.

They kissed and touched and explored each other for what felt like hours. Neither of them were in a rush. Each of them grew bolder with their touching and exploration until finally Adam leaned over the side of the bed and rummaged through the pocket of his discarded pants for the condom, he'd later tell her, he carried around *just in case*.

Maureen was on her back.

Adam held himself up, hovering just over her. He brushed a strand of hair from her cheek. "I'll go slow."

She nodded and bit her bottom lip.

He pressed his lips to hers as he entered her.

A gasp slipped from her lips as her body stretched, and he froze. "No," she said quickly. "It's fine."

And it *was* fine.

In the bathrooms at school, the girls would gossip and giggle about how painful sex would be and how awful and awkward it would be. But as Adam filled her completely, the only thing Maureen could think of was just how wrong they all were because she'd never felt anything quite so perfect in her

entire life.

She opened her eyes to see him watching her with a mixture of concern and lust on his handsome face. She smiled and nodded a little. It was all the reassurance he needed. When Adam began to move inside her, the feeling of perfection exploded into one of sheer pleasure.

It wasn't long before her fingers dug into his shoulder, she squeezed her eyes shut tight, and a moan she didn't know she was capable of slipped from somewhere deep inside her. Above her, Adam made a similar noise; his body shuddered and he collapsed next to her on the bed. He pulled her toward him until her head rested on his chest and held her.

They lay like that, his hands stroking her hair and her back until they both fell asleep, and Maureen couldn't imagine anything ever feeling so perfect.

Four Months Earlier

September

The end of summer had always been bittersweet for Maureen. Years earlier, the shorter days, cooler nights, and the slow changing of the leaves had historically meant that it was time to pack up the boys and start thinking about returning to the city for the start of school. Those last few days before leaving, there had always been an urgency in the air as Maureen tried to pack all the remaining bits of summer fun into a short time. It was exhausting and a little stressful.

But more than that, it had been incredibly sad.

Leaving Cedar Springs in the fall filled her with an intense melancholy, the likes of which she'd only felt once before, also at the end of a summer at

the lake. For weeks once she returned to the city with the boys, Maureen would mope around the house, take long naps to pass the days, and find herself staring vacantly into space.

When the boys were still in grade school, Harold insisted that she talk to a psychologist about her depression. Maureen had made the appointment, but she'd canceled it two days before she was supposed to go. She knew what was wrong with her, and it wasn't anything a stranger would be able to help her with.

She couldn't avoid the end of summer, just as she couldn't avoid her memories. She just needed to work through it and move past it. And she always did.

By the end of September, Maureen had once again fallen into the rhythm of daily life in the city. She immersed herself in volunteering at the boys' schools, driving them to their extracurricular activities, and being the best mother she could. Soon, the memories of the summer were just that, memories.

Until the next year.

After the divorce, when she'd stopped her summer visits to Cedar Springs, the fall sadness had disappeared. She was simply too preoccupied with trying to rebuild her life to focus on things she couldn't change. Like the past.

Now, as Maureen walked the quieter streets of Cedar Springs in the first week of September, she was struck by how different the end of summer felt. It was the first autumn since she'd moved there permanently. And, of course, there were the letters from Adam.

Instead of the familiar melancholy, Maureen felt a sense of excitement and hope about the future.

Adam's latest letter was tucked into her purse. She'd read it on the deck that morning while she drank her coffee and then she read it again.

He wanted to arrange a meeting.

The idea thrilled her. But at the same time, it terrified her.

It had been so long since they'd seen each other. An entire lifetime had passed. She was *old*. Then again, Adam was older.

The thought made her giggle as she opened the door to Dream Puffs, the home of the best cinnamon buns in Cedar Springs, or anywhere, as far as everyone in town was concerned. As good as they were, it wasn't the cinnamon buns she preferred.

"What's got you laughing this morning?" Suzy greeted her. "Don't tell me I have flour on my face again." The baker swiped at her face.

"You do," Maureen pointed out. "But that's not why I'm laughing."

"Care to share what's so funny?" Suzy grabbed a napkin and wiped her face before throwing it in the trash. "I could use a laugh today. I got distracted and left a tray of cookies in the oven a few minutes longer than I should have."

"Oh no. I'm sorry to hear that." Maureen did a quick scan at the display case of all the other delicious goodies. "And really, I'm just giggling to myself at an inside joke. It's really nothing to share, sorry."

"It was worth a try. What can I get you today?"

Ever since she was a child, Maureen had loved Dream Puffs's apple Danishes. The recipe had been passed down for generations, and as far as Maureen was concerned, had only gotten better over the years. She had to limit herself to having one only once in a while or on special occasions, or she wouldn't be able to fit into her clothes anymore.

The arrival of Adam's letter was certainly a special occasion.

She ordered herself a warm pastry and a cup of peppermint tea and took both to a quiet table in the corner.

As soon as she was settled, Maureen pulled Adam's letter from her purse.

Dearest Maureen,

I love hearing about little Clara. Your granddaughter sounds delightful, and I'm sure she provides you with an endless amount of joy. Sometimes I wonder if I made the right decision by not having a family of my own. It's true, I lived a life of service to others and I've had my share of adventure. But as you know, those experiences came with a certain amount of sacrifice as well.

There have been many times, especially in the quiet of the night when I am left with only my own thoughts, that I wonder if I made the right decision.

Although, I'm sure most of us feel that way from time to time when it comes to life's bigger choices. No one can really know if the choices they are making are the right ones. And is there ever really a right way to live life?

The best we can hope for is to live a life that makes us happy and gives us purpose. I have done that on many levels but as I near the end of my time here, I find that my thoughts turn to other things.

It has been such a pleasure getting to know you again, Maureen, through these letters, and I would love nothing more than to see your beautiful smile again.

If I may be so bold, I would like to invite you to a very special place I found years ago. Every time I visited over the years, I thought of you, and I think you will find it to be a magical place, particularly during the holiday season. I will make all the arrangements and reserve two rooms if you

would do me the honor of agreeing to see me again.

Your room will be reserved in your name at Merry Falls Inn in the mountains of North Carolina from December 18-20 to give you plenty of time to return home for little Clara's first Christmas.

I must confess that in anticipation of your agreement, and because the holiday season can be especially hectic, I have already gone ahead and reserved the rooms. Please excuse my boldness. However, in a week's time, I will be heading into the rustic and remote mountains and communication will be difficult for a few months.

I eagerly anticipate returning to civilization and receiving your response. Until then, take care and enjoy your family. Especially that precious little grandbaby.

All my love,

Adam.

She finished re-reading the letter, pushed it to the side and tore off a piece of her Danish.

There was no doubt in her mind about how she would respond. Of course she was going to say yes. The letters they'd exchanged over the last few months had brought some of the brightest spots in her already very bright days. Some of the letters were short, scribbled on the back of an old envelope or recycled paper. Others were pages and pages long, full of details of Adam's life for the last almost forty years.

In return, Maureen had opened up about her marriage to Harold. Her summers in Cedar Springs with the boys when they were young. And of course, the divorce, and the quiet years following. She told Adam about all her children, including the girls whom, against all odds, she'd come to love like her own. She detailed their relationships and the new *daughters* and *sons* in her life. She told him how her boys had convinced her to return to Cedar Springs after so many years of staying away. She'd even confessed to him that after the divorce, the reason she'd stayed away from the lake town was to punish herself for the choices she'd made.

She'd wept, while reading and writing the letters, as they both opened up completely.

Even though Maureen hadn't actually heard Adam's voice in decades, she could hear his voice in her head as she read his words, and it was as if no time had passed between them at all.

She'd been given a second chance, and Maureen was old enough to know how rare that truly was.

She put another bite of the warm, pastry in her mouth before pulling her letter writing paper that she'd recently purchased from Live, Love, Lake, along with her favorite pen.

Dear Adam,

I received your latest letter this morning, and immediately I knew that your impending return to North America and civilization deserved a celebratory apple Danish from Dream Puffs. I am writing this from a corner table as I enjoy the delicious treat. Do you remember how good they were? I don't know if it's just the passage of time, but they are even sweeter now. One day perhaps you will return to Cedar Springs and experience one for yourself.

As to your question. Of course, my answer is yes. I would be very happy

to join you at the Merry Falls Inn. It sounds delightful at Christmas time, and I've never been to North Carolina.

I hope you have a safe journey and this letter finds you well when you return.

I very much look forward to seeing you.

Love always,

Maureen.

Chapter Six

Present

MAUREEN WORRIED MAYBE she'd told Elise too much. She'd been caught up in her storytelling. She could hardly believe she'd just told a virtual stranger such intimate details. "I'm so sorry, I never should have—"

"Scandalous." Elise sat back and shook her head. A small, wicked grin slid over her face. "Simply scandalous, Maureen." She wiggled her eyebrows, and Maureen couldn't help but laugh, too.

"It was." She shook her head. "In hindsight, it really was. And I guess by today's standards, it wouldn't even rank on the scandal scale, but at the time..."

Elise nodded. "You loved him."

The laughter on Maureen's lips died. "I did," she answered seriously. "Very much." She let her gaze travel toward the front door of the inn again, as if the love she'd felt all those years ago could will him to walk through the door. "Years later, I wondered if it really was love or if I was just too young to understand."

"You understood just fine."

Maureen looked at the older woman. Elise got it. She knew. "I did."

Maureen nodded. “It was true love, and I was absolutely sure that we were meant to be together. Fate had brought Adam Lancaster into my life, and I knew with no uncertainty that he would be my husband.”

Obviously, that’s not how things played out, but she didn’t need to say that out loud.

Maureen put the mostly uneaten muffin back on the plate and sat back with a sigh.

“You haven’t mentioned Africa again.”

“That’s because we never talked about it.”

“Not at all?” Surprised, Elise sat up in her chair. “I know you said earlier that you didn’t discuss it again, but it just seems like something you would talk about with the love of your life. Did you not speak about the future?”

“Of course we did.” Maureen explained to Elise how she and Adam both spoke about the future, without really speaking about the future, almost as if they were planning dream lives with no basis in reality. They discussed how they would split their time between Cedar Springs and exotic cities in Europe like Paris or London. They’d have a nanny to care for all eight of their children while the two of them dined at the best restaurants and shopped for designer clothes. They never once spoke about their careers or what they would do for work or money. It was a lark. A fun game they’d play when Maureen was lying in Adam’s arms after they made love.

“It was silly,” she told Elise. “But it just seemed easier than talking about the hard stuff. We were young, and I guess I was naive in thinking that if I ignored it, the problem would just go away.”

“They never do.” Elise shook her head and pressed her lips together. “No matter how much we’d like them to. I played that old game myself long ago.”

“Ignoring reality?”

Elise laughed. “Oh yes. Only maybe it was worse because instead of just ignoring reality, I would find myself making up a very pretend world.” She sighed deeply. “Our imaginations can be quite powerful.”

Maureen sat back and let her continue her own story.

It took Elise a moment, but then she once more started talking. “I told you that Alex’s greatest gift to me was allowing me to have a close relationship with Susan.”

Maureen nodded.

“Once I moved down into town, I was closer to them a lot more and often got the chance to babysit. But...there were a few occasions when I babysat Susan in their home.”

Maureen took a sharp breath, realizing where Elise was going with her story. “You didn’t?”

“I did.” She nodded once. “When I was alone with the baby in their house, I could pretend that it was my house that I shared with Alex, and little Susan was mine. I never went so far as trying on clothes or jewelry, but when the baby was asleep, I’d walk around the house talking to myself and... well...I did say that our imaginations could be quite powerful.”

“You did. But...that must have been so painful.”

There was a tear in Elise’s eye as she nodded. “But it was as close as I was ever going to get to being married to Alex.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, respecting the pain of unrequited love from so long ago.

“And then one day, Alex came home unexpectedly and caught me talking to myself in the kitchen. After that, I never did it again. Alex never said anything, and thankfully I was still allowed to babysit. But...it never felt the same pretending after that.”

“That must have been so hard.”

“It was a difficult time.” Elise took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and then once more picked up her crochet project.

“What are you making?”

“A blanket. Susan’s daughter is expecting.”

“That’s so exciting. “I’ve very recently become a grandmother myself.

It's amazing."

"It has been a true blessing to have Susan and then her daughter, Charity. Now..." Elise's eyes shimmered with unshed tears. "So wonderful." She fingered the cream and yellow blanket, examining it for a moment before resuming her stitches. "Although I fear I won't finish."

"When is she due? I'm sure you have time."

Ignoring the question, Elise continued. "The children have been such a blessing in what could have been a very lonely life. Alex was very generous with allowing me to be part of it. I can't imagine life without them all."

"Alex must have loved you very much."

Elise didn't speak for a few minutes, but Maureen didn't miss the tear that slid down her cheek. She was about to apologize for bringing up such a sensitive topic when Elise spoke again.

"Tell me how it happened."

"How what happened?"

"That he went to Africa and you did not."

Thirty-Seven Years Ago

Despite their silly dreams and ridiculous conversations about their futures, both Maureen and Adam knew all too well that none of it was based in reality. And that's what made it so fun and easy.

For a little while.

The reality was that Maureen was scheduled to start school in the fall and Adam...Maureen refused to think about what Adam was going to do, or what would happen if the opportunity in Africa ever came to fruition.

But reality couldn't be ignored forever.

As the summer began to wind down, and they edged ever closer to the last few weeks of August, it became harder and harder not to think about the one thing they'd avoided talking about. She knew it was only a matter of time before they'd have to face it. The worry of it started to churn in her stomach. The ache in her gut grew worse and worse every day until the day that Adam took her hand and said, "I have news."

She knew with those three simple words that she wasn't going to like what his news was.

Together, they walked to the dock where they'd spent so many private nights. Maureen stood, frozen, while Adam laid out a blanket and pulled a bottle of wine and two glasses from a basket.

She'd only ever had small sips of wine before, at Christmas or on other special occasions. Was *this* a special occasion?

It didn't feel special.

It felt ominous as Adam held out a hand and asked her to come sit with him.

Maureen was stiff as she sat next to Adam on the dock. She pulled her shoes and socks off and stuck her feet in the lake. The cool water snapped her out of her daze. She focused on moving her feet back and forth in the water, watching the bubbles and swirls they left in their wake as Adam removed the cork from the wine and poured them each a small glass.

"What's this for?" She almost hated to ask.

"Just because."

She narrowed her eyes. "Wine is for celebrating."

"Not necessarily." He winked and, before she could protest, leaned over and kissed her slowly.

The feel of his lips on hers dissolved the remainder of the tension she was feeling, and just like that, the worry was gone. Whatever he was going to say, it would be okay. As long as they were together.

"That being said, I do think we should celebrate."

Maureen searched his eyes for a clue, but he gave nothing away.

“I’d like to make a toast.” He raised his glass. “To us.” He waited until she raised her glass to meet his. “I’m so glad I decided to go to that dance the night I got to town,” he said. “And I’m even more glad that I made the decision to buy the really cute girl a glass of lemonade.”

She giggled.

“Maureen, you have surprised me from day one.”

“Surprised you?” She lowered her glass. “How?”

“I knew you were beautiful.” He winked. “That was easy to see. But getting to know you these past few months, I’ve realized just how smart and funny you are.”

“Go on.” She wiggled her shoulders and laughed.

“You’re kind and caring and…” The smile fell from his face. “You’re amazing. I have completely fallen for you, Maureen.”

His words were laced with sincerity and despite the fact that they’d told each other dozens of times that they loved each other, there was something special about this time.

With his free hand, he took hers and squeezed. “I love you.”

She looked straight into his eyes. “I love you, too, Adam.”

They kissed before finally toasting their love.

The wine was sweet, and her tongue tingled with the taste of it. It wasn’t until she took her second sip that Maureen remembered. “You said you had news.”

She knew before he said anything that it was about Africa. There was only so much denial one person was capable of.

“I heard back from the committee.” He kept his gaze fixed on his glass as he spoke. “I’ve been accepted into the program.”

Her gut clenched.

“I’ll be working with the head optometrist, starting in South Africa. There’s a team of us. All kinds of specialists working together to bring health

care to so many underprivileged people who might never have the ability to have this kind of care otherwise.”

She could tell he was trying to temper his excitement for her benefit.

“That sounds amazing, Adam.” It really did sound amazing. “You’re going to make such a difference.” Her heart was breaking, but at the same time, he was so excited she couldn’t let him see how devastated she was. Her hands shook so badly, she had to put the wine glass down before she spilled all over herself. “The people in Africa are so lucky to have you.”

“Come with me.”

“What?” She scrunched up her nose. “What did you say?”

“Come with me.” Adam reached for her hands and held them tight. “To Africa.”

“Africa?” Just saying the word sounded foreign on her tongue, let alone actually *going* there. “I don’t...I’m not a doctor.”

“There plenty of non-medical roles. It’s not just medical personnel. There’s a need for facilitators, of course, and people to help with the care of patients and things like water. Can you believe that a huge amount of the population over there doesn’t even have access to fresh drinking water? We can make such a difference to so many people, Maureen. Together.”

Together. Africa.

Maureen’s head swam with the possibility. In all her daydreaming, and all their pretending about the future, they never once talked about going to Africa *together*. Was it even possible? Could she go? Did she *want* to go? What would it mean?

Stunned, she looked up at Adam’s handsome face. She knew without a doubt that she loved him, but could she leave everything she knew and everything she ever wanted out of life to go with him to the wilds of Africa?

She opened her mouth, but he pressed a finger to her lips.

“Don’t answer me right now. It’s a huge decision.”

She nodded in agreement.

“And I know I just sprung it on you out of the blue. That probably wasn’t very fair.”

She blinked slowly.

“So, think about it, okay? I mean, really think about it. I have to leave on Sunday, but—”

“Sunday?” She slapped his hand away from her mouth and almost cried the word. “But that’s four days from now.”

“I know.” He took her hands again. “I wish I had more time but I need to go back home to do the paperwork and pack.”

Four days.

He was going to *leave* in four days? They’d just started to build their relationship. *How could he go now? What would that mean for them? Could they survive such distance between them?*

But maybe they didn’t have to. He said she could go with him.

Maureen’s mind spun.

Could she really go to Africa? Just pack up and go? What about school? Her family? Her life?

She looked into Adam’s beautiful green eyes.

But what about Adam? Would she be able to live without him if she stayed?

She loved him. There was no doubt about that. But would love be enough in a place like Africa?

“Hey.” He must have seen the struggle in her eyes. “I know it’s a lot.”

“A real lot.”

“Didn’t really expect it would work out this way,” he said. “And I really didn’t expect that I would fall in love with the most amazing girl this summer.”

“But it did.”

“And I did.”

She blinked hard, trying desperately not to cry. She knew he was excited.

This was what he wanted. She refused to make him feel bad when he should be happy for his future. She would *not* be the girl who begged and cried and tried to make him choose between the career that was so important to him, and her.

“So did I,” she said with a small smile she didn’t feel. “Fall in love, I mean.”

He brushed his thumb along her bottom lip. “I knew what you meant.” He kissed her. Soft and slow.

With his lips on hers, Maureen forgot about the impossible decision in front of her, if only for a second. The only thing that mattered was Adam. Because, at least for the moment, they were together and everything was perfect.

“You really want me to come?”

His lips curled up, transforming his handsome face. “I really do. There are plenty of opportunities. It would be the most incredible experience. Think about the difference we could make together. All the people we could help. It would be unbelievable.”

“It really would be amazing. But—”

“Don’t answer me now.” He pressed a finger to her lips. “I know it’s a major decision and I’ve had months to think about it while I just sprang this on you.” That was true. “Think about it,” he said. “Talk to your family if you like.”

There was *no* way she could do that. Maureen knew exactly what they’d say. There was no way they’d be able to stay unbiased for such a decision.

Four days. *Four* days. How was she supposed to make such a major life decision in only four days? “I wish we had more time.”

“I know.” He pulled her close. “Me too. Let me take you to dinner on Friday,” he said when he released her. “Tell me your decision then.”

“Friday.” She found herself nodding. “Okay.”

“I promise, no matter what happens, Maureen, I will always love you.”

Two Months Earlier

October

It wasn't very often that Maureen was able to have her whole family in one place these days, even for a special occasion. Canadian Thanksgiving fell on the second weekend of October, and with the latest season of *Mr. Summer*, the television show that Gwen had sold based on her real-life personal blog and the events of her and Ian's life, done filming, most of the McCormick clan was still in town and had some free time.

The television show was a bit of a family affair, with Cal starring as his older brother, Ian. Maureen worried that it would be a little strange for her youngest son, who was a mega celebrity in his own right, to play the role of his older brother, but it had worked out perfectly and Cal had even earned himself a few award nominations for his part.

Jade had taken a short maternity leave from working as the producer on the show when Clara was born but had quickly found some work/life balance by bringing the baby to work with her when Mitch had to teach his classes. The television show had turned into a phenomenon and had been renewed for another season, and Maureen couldn't be prouder of all of them.

"It's so nice to have you all here," she said as they took their seats at the dining room table in her old house that Ian and Gwen now called their home. "Well, most of you," Maureen added.

"Maybe we can FaceTime Amber and Cole later?" Gwen offered.

"Yes." Maureen smiled. "I would like that. It's good that they went to see Cole's sister, but it would be nice if we were all here together."

"It would be," Cal said from the other end of the table. "Especially

because we have something we want to say.”

“Wait until everyone is sitting down at least.” Milena chastised him, but there was a smile on her face as she stood to join him.

“What’s going on?” Evie looked to Jade, who shrugged as she fastened a bib around Clara’s neck.

The baby looked delighted to be sitting in her high chair at the dining room table, but less thrilled with the bib her mother was struggling to keep in place.

Maureen pulled her attention from her granddaughter to her youngest son, who was grinning broadly.

“So tell us already,” Mitch called out. “The turkey is getting cold.”

Cal’s mood wouldn’t be dampened.

“You’re having a baby!” Chelsea clapped her hands together.

“A baby?” Maureen tried not to sound too hopeful. “Really?”

“No.” Milena shook her head. “Sorry, Maureen. We’re not pregnant.”

“Then what?” Gwen tried and failed not to sound disappointed.

“We’re getting married.”

“When?”

“What?”

“Congratulations!”

Everyone started talking at once with Cal’s announcement. But it was Ian who asked, “Are you even engaged?”

Milena giggled and shook her head a little before finally shrugging. “Yes and no. But it doesn’t matter because we can’t do anything the traditional way.”

It was true. With Cal’s superstardom, everything they did was picked up on almost at once by the media and the paparazzi. Living in Cedar Springs gave them a little bit more privacy, but even then, the world seemed to be hungry for news about *Calina*.

“And that’s why we’re keeping this all a little hush-hush,” Cal added.

“It’s also why we’re going to have the ceremony on Christmas Eve.”

Maureen almost choked on the sip of water she’d just taken. “What? *This* Christmas?”

Milena nodded. “We thought it would be the best time to do it, when all the reporters should be home with their families and not expecting anything like a wedding.”

“I don’t think any of us were expecting a wedding at Christmas.” Declan stood and gave his brother a hug. “Congratulations. I think it’s fabulous.”

“We all do,” Gwen added. “And I agree with you. I think the timing is perfect.”

Maureen had to agree. The timing *was* perfect. Or it would have been except for the little trip she had planned to North Carolina the week before Christmas. A trip she hadn’t yet told any of her children about.

“To the happy couple.” She raised her glass. “It’s going to be perfect.”

They all toasted to Cal and Milena and began to pass around platters of food.

Maureen only picked at her dinner, trying to work out in her head the logistics of traveling so far away, so close to both Christmas and now the wedding of her youngest son. The timing was already quite tight, but she’d managed to get some good flights that had her home late on the afternoon of the twentieth. It didn’t leave a lot of room for error, or any disruptions, but it was the best she could do. And it should be enough time for everything.

“I have something I’d like to say, too.” She tapped on her glass with a fork before she lost her nerve and changed her mind. It took a moment, but everyone quieted down and turned to look in her direction.

Maureen dabbed at her lips with her napkin. “I have quite a bit to be thankful for this year. Having my family all together, with the exception of Amber and Cole, of course. And I’m especially thankful for my beautiful granddaughter.”

Everyone murmured and nodded.

Maureen took a sip of wine before continuing. “I have something else to be grateful for this year, too.”

Declan winked in her direction. “What’s that, Mom?”

She had a feeling he might already suspect what she was going to say.

“You all know that I’ve recently reconnected with Adam.” More murmurs and a few giggles. “It’s been really nice to get to know him again after all these years, and we’ve decided to meet in person.”

“What?”

“That’s great!”

“When?”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea?”

“Cool.”

The responses were as mixed as she’d expected when she decided to tell the children about her upcoming trip over their family dinner. She hadn’t been expecting Cal and Milena’s announcement, however, which was going to make the details of her trip an even bigger deal than she’d originally anticipated, planning it so close to Christmas.

She took a breath, put a smile on her face, and told them the details she’d previously arranged.

“Whoa.” Ian was the first to protest, the way she knew he would. “You can’t be serious.” Out of all her boys, Ian had experienced most of the fallout from his father’s betrayal all those years ago. He’d taken his role of the eldest very seriously and had become the *man of the house* at the tender age of eighteen. Although he’d been supportive when Declan had found Adam, he was still the most concerned about her.

He protected and looked out for her. It was sweet, really.

Only, Maureen was a grown woman and didn’t need protection.

“I’m very serious.” She calmly reached for the jug of iced tea and poured herself a glass.

“You’re going to travel across the continent to meet a man you only know

through letters?” Ian shook his head. “Why is it that you haven’t spoken on the phone? That’s weird. You do know there’s a thing called video chat, right?”

“It’s not weird.” She fixed her gaze on her eldest. “I’ve explained this before. We write letters because Adam is working in very remote parts of Africa. It’s an easier and more reliable way to communicate. People have been writing letters back and forth for hundreds of years, Ian.”

“I think it’s sweet.” Gwen gave her a wink. “Very romantic.”

“It is ridiculous.” Mitch was the next to object. He set his cutlery down and folded his hands over his plate. “The entire world is connected,” he continued. “There’s no reason you have to be so old-fashioned.”

“I happen to like being old-fashioned.”

It was true that letter writing had its drawbacks, but she’d grown to enjoy it and look forward to the letters. She agreed with Gwen. It was very romantic. Every day, she was excited to check the mailbox and her heart would skip a beat, just as it had when she was a girl, when she saw the envelope with the familiar handwriting. And with the letters, unlike with email, there was no pressure to respond immediately. Instead, she had time to read and reread each letter and carefully think about the response before sitting down to write her own letter. Somehow, it had felt a lot more natural the way they were doing it.

“I don’t like it.” Ian shook his head. “What do we really know about this guy, Mom?”

Maureen almost choked on her iced tea. “Excuse me?”

“What are his intentions?”

Intentions?

“Mom, at your age—”

“Enough.” Maureen pushed up from her chair, put both hands on the table, and glared at her son. “First of all, I do not appreciate your tone, young man.”

Ian opened his mouth to protest the way she addressed him, but fortunately for him, had the good sense to close it again.

“Second, Adam is a few years older than me. And he is *not* old. Nor am I.” She waited for Ian to acknowledge her with a quick nod. “I assure you I have plenty of life left in me, son, and part of that life is going to involve reuniting with an old friend, which frankly, is none of your business.” She looked around the table at each of them in turn. “I do apologize if I gave any of you the impression that I was looking for your opinion on the matter. I am not.”

Maureen didn’t make a habit of raising her voice at her children. She never had, even when they were a pack of rambunctious boys trying every one of her last nerves. So when she did, it had the desired impact. Ian and Mitch, particularly, looked properly chastised.

After a moment, Maureen took her seat and, with a shaking hand, took a sip of her iced tea.

“Okay.” Declan stood up from his spot at the table. “I think Mom’s made her point.” He smiled in her direction. “And it’s a good one. I would just like to add that Adam Lancaster is a respected optometrist who has a very successful practice on the East Coast. He’s spent most of his career traveling to impoverished countries to provide free optical care for people in need, only returning to Canada and his practice to raise more funds for his charitable work. He’s dedicated his life to his philanthropic causes.” He offered Maureen a supportive smile. “But most importantly, he’s an old friend of our mother’s, and I don’t see any reason why we shouldn’t all be anything less than supportive.”

Maureen let her shoulders relax, as the tension she’d been holding in them released a little. “Thank you, Dec.”

He nodded and gave her a wink before returning to his seat. Evie looked at him adoringly and squeezed his hand.

At least she had the support of two of them.

“It’s not that I’m not supportive, Mom.” Cal cleared his throat. “But I do have to ask, were we the only ones who noticed the dates? Do you really have to go at Christmas time, Mom? That’s the wedding.”

“It’s also Clara’s first Christmas, Mom.” Mitch raised an eyebrow.

“I’ll be back for the wedding,” she assured Cal first. “I wouldn’t miss your special day for anything.” She directed her last comment to Milena, who did not look reassured at all. “And of course, I wouldn’t dream of missing my granddaughter’s first Christmas. You all are worrying over nothing. I’ll be gone for a few days and back on the twentieth.”

“That’s cutting it pretty close, Mom.”

She didn’t disagree with Cal, but there was nothing she could do about the timing.

“The plans are already made.” She picked up her fork and knife and sliced into the turkey on her plate. “I wasn’t actually asking anybody for their permission.”

She didn’t lift her head to make eye contact, but she didn’t miss the chuckle from Declan’s direction and the sigh from Ian’s. They could think what they wanted to. She was a grown woman, and she didn’t need her children’s approval to do anything, especially when her children were acting as if she were completely incapable of caring for herself.

As far as Maureen was concerned, the subject was closed.

After a few minutes of silence, Chelsea changed the subject easily by asking Milena questions about the upcoming wedding. Soon, conversations sprang up all around her, and Maureen’s announcement was forgotten.

It wasn’t until later when Maureen was cleaning up in the kitchen that her impending trip came up again.

“I’m sorry, Mom.” Ian, a stack of plates in his hand, joined her at the sink. “I don’t mean to give you such a hard time,” he continued. “I’m just concerned is all.”

“I know you are.”

“I can’t help it that I’m a little protective over you.”

She tipped her head and examined her eldest before pulling her hands out of the soapy water and drying them on a nearby towel. Maureen knew all too well the extra responsibility Ian felt over her. She’d often wondered whether maybe she should have dated more, or let someone else into her life in order to lessen that for Ian after the divorce. But there was no going back in time. And even if she could, Maureen knew she wouldn’t have.

Love wasn’t in the cards for everyone. She’d resigned herself to that many years earlier. Even before Harold’s betrayal was made public. She couldn’t imagine trying again with anyone new.

Anyone but Adam.

“So, he’s an optometrist,” Ian said, bringing her back to the moment. “What else should we know about this man?” He held up a hand. “And before you get mad again, I’m only asking because I should have asked a long time ago when Declan gave you the letter. I swear I won’t try to stop you, but it’s long past time I asked some questions. Besides, I think it’s fair that I should have some of the information.” He winked. “You know, just in case.”

“In case I get abducted?” She laughed at the absurdity of it but resigned herself to telling him what she could. “Adam and I met a very long time ago.” She began to tell him the story, leaving out most of the romantic details.

“So, he was your boyfriend?”

Maureen squeezed her eyes shut for a moment. She’d never discussed such things with her boys before. It felt, odd, to say the least. Particularly considering it had been almost forty years since she and Adam had even seen each other.

“We didn’t really use those kinds of labels back then.” She skirted the question easily and moved on. “I had just graduated from high school and was excited about the future in front of me, and he was on his way to Africa to save the world.”

“It sounds like he’s still doing that.”

“It sure does.” Maureen smiled to herself. She’d been so pleased to hear that for all these years, Adam had been making the difference he’d always hoped he would. “And when he’s not in Africa, he’s got a practice out East in Northern Ontario.”

“So if he was your boyfriend but he ended up going to Africa...” Ian raised his eyebrows.

She shot him a look, and he pressed his lips together instead of offering up a comment.

“As I said, we didn’t use those labels. But basically, at the end of the summer, he went to Africa, and I...” She gazed past Ian, out to the mountains before answering. “I met your father.”

“Do you mean to tell me that this mystery Adam could have been my father if—”

“No.” She stopped him from going any further.

“Really? Because I’m kind of getting the impression that maybe you and Adam—”

“Wanted different things. I’d just graduated from high school and I was looking forward to going to college and experiencing everything that came along with that.” Maureen smiled at the memory of her eighteen-year-old self, so full of possibility and hope. “He was older, recently graduated from college, and knew exactly what he wanted out of life already.” She shrugged as casually as she could. “The timing wasn’t right.”

It was the same thing she’d told Declan when he, too, had asked why she and Adam hadn’t worked out. In fact, she’d told herself that very thing so many times over the years that, for a time, she’d even started to believe it.

Ian nodded as if he understood. “That makes sense.”

It didn’t.

It never had.

“You had to make a choice.”

Maureen nodded sadly. "I did."

"And you chose your future," Ian said matter-of-factly. "That makes sense."

She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply before responding. "That's just it," she said when she opened her eyes again. "I didn't."

Chapter Seven

Present

ELISE'S HEAD was pressed back into the headrest, her eyes closed when Maureen finished telling her about her children's reaction. She sat for a moment, sure that the older woman had fallen asleep.

"Why did you stop?" The older woman's eyes snapped open. "You're just getting to the good part."

"The good part?" Maureen shook her head. "I thought you were sleeping."

"I was resting my eyes. At my age, they get tired of looking at things all the time."

Maureen raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"And yes, the good part," Elise said again. "The part of the story that brought us here to today. Obviously you told him no. You broke the poor boy's heart and sent him to Africa alone."

Maureen had to chuckle at Elise's certainty. "Well, if you know how it ends already, why are you asking?"

Elise shook her head and picked up her crochet. "I don't know how it ends. No one does. Not even you."

“I do know.”

“No. You don’t.” The old woman’s hand stopped moving and she stared at her. “Because if you did, you wouldn’t be here, waiting for him to walk through that door.” She gestured with her head toward the door that, no matter how many times it had opened and closed as guests braved the blizzard to go next door to the pub, hadn’t produced Adam.

“I’m not—”

“You are.”

Maureen blew out a breath. “Okay, I am,” she admitted. “I can’t help it. But yes, I am hoping for some sort of a miracle that the roads opened and Adam is on his way.”

“Because you don’t know the end of the story yet.”

“I guess I don’t,” she reluctantly agreed. “But I don’t think he’s coming.” It was a thought she hadn’t wanted to speak out loud. Even before the storm, she’d worried he wouldn’t come. It wasn’t completely rational, but there was part of her that couldn’t help but think that he’d changed his mind.

“Why would you think that?”

Maureen shrugged. “Do you think that sometimes history repeats itself?”

“Sometimes, certainly. But I don’t think that’s the case here.”

“I haven’t finished telling you what happened.” Her smile was sad, and Maureen looked down at her hands. “The end of—” She caught herself. “Well, I guess it’s not the end, not yet,” she added. “It’s just what happened next.”

“Exactly.” Elise nodded in agreement.

“What about you? Do you know the end of your story?”

Maureen regretted the question as soon as it slipped from her mouth and Elise’s face fell.

“I’m sorry,” Maureen said quickly. “You don’t have to answer—”

“No. It’s fine. We’re sharing stories, and I’m happy enough to share all of mine. As it turns out, I do know the end of my story.”

Judging by her face, Maureen assumed it wasn't a happy one. "I'm sorry."

"For what?"

"That you didn't get your happy ending."

The skin around Elise's eyes crinkled as a mischievous grin took over her features. "Who said I didn't?"

She leaned forward in her seat, eager to hear the rest of her new friend's story. "What happened? I don't understand. Alex was married and—"

"It wasn't a happy time." Elise grew serious. "Cancer is an awful thing."

Maureen's heart fell and knew at once what had happened.

"You see, despite my private feelings, I'd grown to love Alex's family as if they were my own. They were married forty years when Alex was widowed."

"Oh." Maureen's hand fluttered to her chest. "That is awful."

Elise nodded. "It was hard on everyone. Especially Susan. She had only just married herself. Such a tender time to lose a parent."

"I can't imagine how hard that must have been on everyone." She reached across the distance for Elise's hand. "And you."

She smiled sadly. "I grieved in my own way, but I did my best to be there for them both. We'd always remained close. The best of friends." She smiled with a private memory. "And over time...when Alex was ready..."

"You were together?"

The older woman smiled, and Maureen caught a glimpse of what a beauty she must have been when she was younger. She radiated with happiness and joy. "The love between us never died and after all those years, things had changed and it was a different time. Our relationship was more accepted by then. And for those who didn't accept it, we didn't care. We were in love, and the universe had conspired for us to finally be together. When Alex was widowed, it really hit home for us—life is short. There isn't any time to waste."

It was easy to see the love on Elise's face, and Maureen could feel her new friend's happiness radiating. "You got your happy ending. How excellent." She clasped her hands together and smiled. A moment later, that smile slid from her face when Elise spoke again.

"Oh dear, I never said that was the ending. It was only the next chapter."

"Do you ever regret the way things happened?"

Elise didn't hesitate in her answer. "Not for a second. Our story wouldn't have been the same had we been together all those years ago, and we would never have had Susan. I don't regret anything."

That was a good way to be.

Maureen thought about her own life for a moment. There had been times over the years when she'd wondered what it would have been like if things had gone differently, but that was normal. And after Harold left, maybe she could have looked up Adam then or tried dating other men. But she wasn't ready. She needed to spend some time seeing the last of her boys raised and out of the house and then focusing on herself. If life had turned out differently, if she'd ended up going to Africa with Adam, she wouldn't have her four boys and her wonderful daughters. There wouldn't be little Clara and so many other grandbabies she knew she would have in the coming years.

She would have missed out on so much life. And what a wonderful life it was.

"I don't regret anything either. Life has a way of working out the way it's supposed to."

"And is Adam supposed to walk in that door tonight?"

The question startled Maureen. She was saved from answering it when Elise spoke again.

"Why don't you tell me what happened when you met Adam for dinner? How did you tell him that you couldn't go with him?"

"That's just the thing." Maureen sank into her chair with a sigh and let her head drop back. "I didn't."

Thirty-Seven Years Ago

Time seemed to speed up in the days since Adam announced he'd been accepted into the program that would take him to Africa. Maureen spent most of her time staring at the clock, wishing for time to slow down. She needed more time.

It was an impossible decision to make.

Especially considering it was one that she had never dreamed of. Her whole life, there was one path. She would go to college and earn a diploma or certificate in business administration or education or nursing. While she was there, she would meet a nice boy from a good family with excellent job prospects and they'd get engaged. Probably in her senior year because it was important for Maureen to finish her education, even if she wasn't sure about what kind of career she might actually want to have.

They'd marry in the summer after graduation and settle down in a little house not too far from where she grew up. Her best friend Sue Ann would move in next door, or maybe down the street so they weren't *too* close, and then Maureen and her new husband would start a family. She wanted lots of children. Three girls and three boys. She would spend her days baking cupcakes and helping with homework. When the children were older, maybe she'd go back to work part-time or find a charity she was interested in supporting.

And every summer, Maureen would take her little family to the lake, where they would spend their summers.

It was the only life she'd ever dreamed of. It would be a quiet and happy life.

In all her daydreams, she had never one time dreamed of leaving her

family and friends, abandoning her education, and moving to Africa. Not once.

Adam told her to think about it before she answered him, and that's exactly what she did. It was *all* she'd done after leaving him that night. She barely slept and after the second night, Maureen woke early to ask her mother for her car keys before her sister got the chance. And without even eating breakfast, Maureen was gone so she could be at the Cedar Springs public library before the doors even opened.

For a town so small, the library was surprisingly well stocked and the librarian was eager to help in Maureen's *research project*. "I need everything you have on Africa," she told the portly woman whose glasses continually slid down her nose. "Especially anything recent, like a magazine article or newspaper story."

"Absolutely. What part of Africa are you interested in specifically?"

The question jolted her. "What part?"

"Yes. What part of Africa? Is there a country specifically that you're interested in? It's quite a large continent."

Maureen felt the flush wash over her cheeks. In all of their conversations, she had never asked Adam what country he would be going to. But there was a flash of memory. "I think maybe South Africa. But could we maybe start with a bit of everything? Would that work?"

"Absolutely." The librarian shoved her glasses up her nose. "Let me see what I can find for you to get started."

Maureen spent most of the day at a table in the back of the library, reading every single thing she could find about *Africa*. She read about the wild animals, the different tribes that occupied various regions, and the bigger cities like Johannesburg. She scanned articles about civil unrest and wars. She learned about the independence of many of Africa's nations and the political changes. And when she was done learning everything she possibly could about a part of the world that still seemed so wild and foreign

to her, Maureen left the library and walked down to the lakefront.

She wasn't sure what her research would reveal, but on some level, deep down, she'd been hoping for some nugget of information that might make her decision obvious. But ultimately, there was nothing in any of those books or news articles that could have helped her make up her mind.

Choosing Adam would mean giving up everything she'd ever known. Her family, friends, and home. College and her dreams for the future.

It was unthinkable.

But so was not choosing Adam.

It was both an impossible decision and an easy one.

She knew what she had to do even though it would break her heart in a million different ways. There was only one choice.

Maureen walked to the end of the beach and found an old log to sit on. She pulled up her legs and rested her head on her knees. She sat that way for hours, staring out at the lake until finally, it was time to go home and get ready to meet Adam for their dinner date so she could give him her decision.

They'd agreed to meet at the restaurant. A quiet bistro set back from the busier Main Street, with candles and fresh flowers on every table. It was romantic and intimate and absolutely the perfect place for Maureen to tell Adam of her decision. Her body vibrated with nerves. After tonight, everything would change and as much as she wasn't quite ready for that change, Maureen knew there'd be no going back from it.

"Right this way." The hostess greeted Maureen and led her to the table in the back of the restaurant. "I'm afraid your date isn't here yet, but can I get you something while you wait?"

Maureen took her seat and smiled at the woman. "Two glasses of lemonade, please." She ordered what had become *their* drink. Ever since the

night of the summer solstice dance when Adam had bought her a glass of lemonade and changed her summer. And her life. “I’m sure he’ll be here any moment.”

The drink was cold and tangy on her lips. She sipped it slowly and mentally prepared herself for what she was going to tell Adam. There’d been no doubt in her mind about what she had to do. It sent a cacophony of nerves and excitement through her that made it almost impossible to sit still, but she was one hundred percent sure of her decision. She was going to go to Africa with Adam.

And she couldn’t wait to tell him.

Her drink was almost empty when the waiter came by to check on her. “You are still waiting for one more?”

“I am.” Her cheeks heated with a blush. “I’m sure he’s just running a little bit late. What time is it, please?”

“It’s quarter past six,” the waiter offered. “Could I get you a refill?” He gestured to her almost empty glass, but Maureen shook her head.

“No. Thank you. I’ll wait until he gets here. I’m sure he’ll be along any minute.”

“I’m sure he will be.”

Maureen didn’t miss the way the waiter looked at her with just the slightest bit of pity on his features. He thought she’d been stood up. But he didn’t know Adam the way she did. The waiter had no idea that they were about to go to Africa together and start a life full of adventure and excitement. Adam would never stand her up. He loved her.

Still, the worry started to niggle at the back of Maureen’s brain as she considered the options that might have kept Adam from being on time. He would never be late on purpose. All summer, he’d been early for their dates. Picking her up at least ten minutes before their agreed-upon time.

Something must have happened. *Maybe a flat tire?* She wouldn’t let her mind travel to anything worse, and there was no way she would entertain the

idea that Adam would stand her up. It wasn't a possibility. Especially on such an important night.

Still, as she looked across the table at his empty seat and his glass of lemonade with the ice cubes long since melted, beads of water sweating on the side of the glass, a sense of dread settled over her.

When she couldn't stand it a moment longer, Maureen pushed back her chair and was about to go in search of the hostess to see whether she could use their house phone when the waiter once more reappeared.

His face was set in a thin line as he handed Maureen an envelope. "This was delivered for you."

"Who delivered it?" Fear raced through her veins. She craned her head, trying to see the front door and who might have delivered the envelope the waiter still held in his hand. She refused to take it. Afraid of what it might contain.

"Miss." The waiter shook the envelope, and when she still wouldn't take it, he set it on the table in front of her. "If there's anything else I can get you..."

His words trailed away. Maureen couldn't focus on anything else except the envelope in front of her, and her name written in Adam's precise handwriting.

He wasn't coming.

She felt it in her gut before she even picked up the envelope. Somehow, Maureen managed to stuff the offending paper in her purse, put a few dollars on the table, and walk out of the restaurant with her head held high. It felt like everyone was looking at her.

Her heart was breaking in a million pieces before she got to the beach and the log where she'd sat only a few hours ago. It was only then that she pulled out the piece of paper and read Adam's note.

Dearest Maureen,

Words will never be able to properly express how much I care about you. As you know, I never expected to fall in love this summer. I never expected you. Some of the very best things in life are unplanned. And you are one of the very best things in my life, Maureen. That is what makes this so hard.

I would love nothing more than for you to come to Africa with me. Together, I know we would make such a difference where it really matters, and we would never have to feel the pain of saying goodbye.

If I know you the way I think I do, Maureen, I know you agree with me. I know you will say yes to me so we can leave together. And that's why I couldn't meet you for dinner tonight. Selfishly, I want nothing more than to walk hand in hand with you into the greatest adventure of our lives. But I cannot.

I love you too much to let you come with me. I know you dream of getting married and having a family of your own. And you will be the most amazing mother. I cannot let you give that up for me and my dreams. I know in my heart that I will not be able to give you what you need and desire so much out of life. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I knew that you'd given up what you want most in life for me.

Please forgive me for my cowardice, Maureen. It

breaks my heart to know that by the time you read this I will already be gone and I will not be able to say goodbye properly, but I fear I'm not strong enough to walk away from you.

You deserve to be happy. Happier than I will ever be able to make you.

If only we had met at another time or place, maybe it could have been different, but I will never regret meeting you or having the most wonderful summer.

I will think of you often.

Forever and Always,

Your Adam

A Few Days Earlier

December

She'd been packed for three days already.

It had been a long time since Maureen had taken a trip, and even longer since she'd had to use her passport. She'd had to double-check that it hadn't expired. It hadn't. And the passport now sat atop her printed flight itinerary, the reservation confirmation, and the instructions on how to meet the shuttle that would take her from the airport to the Merry Falls Inn in the mountains of North Carolina once she arrived.

Declan was due to arrive in twenty minutes to drive her to the airport.

There was one more thing she needed.

In her bedroom, Maureen pulled a shoebox off the top shelf of her closet and sat with it on the bed. Inside, there was a selection of items from over the years, including the hospital bracelets from when each of her boys were born, various newspaper clippings of important events, including her marriage announcement to Harold. And underneath everything, the first letter she'd ever received from Adam.

Even after all these years, she'd only ever read it one time. But she still remembered every word.

If only we had met at another time or place.

They were about to do that. A different time. A different place.

Would it be different?

What if he stood her up again?

Maureen had never felt grief the way she had after Adam left. She'd taken to her bed for days until her mother finally forcibly made her get up because they were returning to the city. For weeks after school started, she walked around in a daze, unable to process the fact that he'd left for Africa without her.

At first, Sue Ann encouraged her to ask Adam's aunt and uncle for his contact information so Maureen might write to him, but Maureen couldn't bring herself to do so. "He doesn't want me."

"He doesn't want you to give up your future," Sue Ann would tell her over and over. "It's different. He loves you."

"It doesn't matter."

And it didn't. He was gone. After a few months, the pain lessened. Maureen reluctantly let Sue Ann drag her to parties and dances on campus. Somehow the years went by and eventually she met Harold and the rest of her life fell into place.

Maureen took the letter and slipped it into her purse with the other, more

recent letters from Adam. A moment later, there was a knock on her door.

“Come in, Dec. I’m almost ready to go,” she said as the door opened behind her.

“That’s good. But I’m not Declan.”

She spun around to see her youngest son.

“Some would say I’m far more handsome.” Cal grinned cheekily.

“You’re all very handsome.” She greeted him with a kiss on her cheek. “This is a nice surprise. I wasn’t expecting you today.”

“I wanted to make sure I saw you before you left.” Cal dropped his head, and Maureen could see there was something on his mind.

“What’s going on? Is it Milena? Is everything okay for the wedding?”

“Oh yes. She’s fine. Milena’s great, actually. We’re so excited, and I don’t think the media has any idea about the wedding, which is exactly what we wanted. You know how they can be.”

Maureen laughed. “I’ve definitely seen it, yes. You two are making an excellent decision to have a small, intimate ceremony. It will be beautiful. And I won’t miss it for anything, Cal. You know that, right? That’s not why you’re here, is it? I told you I would—”

“No, Mom. I know you won’t miss it.” He took a step forward and put his hand on her arm. “I’m here because I couldn’t let you leave without telling you how sorry I am.”

“You have nothing to be sorry for.” She tried to laugh, but Cal wasn’t smiling.

“Seriously, Mom. I really am sorry, for all of us.” He shrugged. “Except maybe Declan.” It was only then he smiled. “We haven’t been very supportive about all this, and I think that’s actually really shitty of us. Sorry,” he added quickly. “Crappy.”

“No,” she said as seriously as she could. “I think shitty is a much better word for how you’ve all been behaving.”

He cracked a smile, and Maureen shook her head before pulling her

youngest son in for a hug. “You have nothing to apologize for. I know this must all be very strange for you boys. For all those years, I never dated and —”

“That’s just it, Mom. You never dated. And you should have. If you wanted to, that is. We just want you to be happy, Mom. You’ve given all of us so much. It’s because of you that we’ve all been able to find the loves of our lives.”

“No, Cal. It’s not because of me. It’s because you are all amazing men with so much to offer. That is why you attracted such amazing women.”

Cal flashed the smile that made him famous. “And why do you think we all grew up to be the men we are, Mom?”

He waited for an answer he didn’t get. Instead, Maureen shook her head and chuckled. “Thank you, Cal. It means a lot that you stopped by.”

“I just wanted to make sure you know, Mom. Mitch and Ian support you, too. Even if they have a harder time showing it. It’s only because Ian thinks he needs to be responsible for us all in some weird way, and I think Mitch is just so wrapped up in his own brand-new family that he forgets sometimes that it’s okay for the rest of us to have things going on. I think he’s worried that you’re going to run off with this guy and miss Clara’s first Christmas.” He shrugged. “I mean, it’s not like she’ll remember it.”

“I assure you that I’m not going to run off with anyone, and I will not miss Clara’s first Christmas, or your wedding. I promise.” She held her arms out for another hug right as there was another knock on the door, followed by Declan.

“Are we all ready to go?”

Maureen pulled away from her youngest son’s embrace and smiled at Declan. “I’m so ready.”

“Remember, Mom,” Cal said a few minutes later as they were loading her bag in the back of Declan’s car. “Don’t fall in love and run off with this guy.”

“No way, Mom.” Maureen was about to speak when Declan interrupted.

“Fall in love if that’s what you want to do.” Cal looked like he was going to protest, but Declan focused on his mother. “A very wise woman told me once that it was never too late for love.”

Maureen smiled to herself. She’d fallen in love with Adam years ago, and she wasn’t entirely sure she’d ever stopped loving him.

“But maybe don’t run away with him, though, okay?” Declan added, making them all laugh.

Chapter Eight

Present

ELISE LOOKED tired by the time Maureen was done telling her story. She glanced at the time and realized with a shock that they'd been sitting and chatting for hours. "I've kept you too long," she told Elise. "I should probably let you get to bed."

Elise sat up straight. "Did I say I was tired?"

"No, but—"

"I haven't finished telling you my own story. Unless, of course, you don't want the sad details on how it ends."

Maureen's face twisted in concern. "Why would it be sad? A good love story should always have a happy ending."

"Ahh." Elise's smile was so sad it almost broke Maureen's heart. "That's where most people get it wrong. There is no happily ever after. That's a myth. I presume people tell each other that because the alternative is just too depressing."

"Elise." Maureen leaned forward in her chair and reached across the space between them. "I don't understand. You and Alex...you said you were able to be together in the end. That's a good thing."

“It was a good thing.” She nodded. “And make no mistake, all the years before that, they were good, too. Just because we were not lovers does not mean my life and heart were not very full by having Alex and all of them in my life the way I did.” She closed her eyes for a moment. “But nothing lasts forever, Maureen. Alex and I were together. But by then we were over seventy, and life has a way of catching up to you sooner or later.”

Maureen blinked back the tears that sprang to her eyes, but Elise continued.

“We were very happy for a time. By then Susan and her new husband were running things at the family business, and I’d retired from my job as well.” There was a hint of a smile on her face. “We had a cute little cottage close to the ocean,” she continued. “We spent our days walking the beach, reading books and playing cards. We both loved to cook, and we had so much fun working our way through cookbooks, trying out new recipes.”

“It sounds lovely.” She couldn’t help but think how nice it would be to have that kind of love and companionship in her own life. Maureen’s thoughts went to Adam. *Would he like to do those things with her? Would they have a chance at that kind of companionship?*

She pushed the thoughts away to listen to the rest of her new friend’s story.

“You always think you’ll have time,” Elise said. “That’s a lie. It only took a few years for the cancer to take hold.”

She’d suspected it was coming, but still, Maureen gasped. “I’m sorry.”

Elise acknowledged her with a nod. “It wasn’t a kind disease. But cancer never is.” She took a shuddering breath as she recalled a memory. “In the end, I’m thankful that I was there with her. I held her hand and eased her way from this world as she took her last breath. No one else could have done it.”

“That must have been so hard. I’m so sorry, Elise.”

A small tear slipped down the older woman’s cheek, and it was only then that Maureen registered what Elise had just said.

“Alex. Alex was a—”

Elise nodded. “As I said, it was a different time. We never could have been together.” A smile crept across her face. “From the moment I met Alexandra, I knew she would change my life. She was my lover, my best friend, the mother of the little girl who became the light of my own life, and eventually, she became my wife. We were married before she passed. We had eight amazing years together. I wouldn’t have traded it for anything. The world truly has come a long way.”

Maureen squeezed Elise’s hand gently before releasing it again and sitting back in her chair. “It really has.” She shook her head and took a moment to absorb everything Elise had been through. “I’m sorry your story had to end that way and you didn’t have more time.”

“Oh, like I said, dear. There is no such thing as a happy ever after. Just happy for right now. And I’ve been so happy. We never know how much time we will have. So be happy. Be happy now, with whatever that looks like and whatever life gives you.”

“That’s good advice.”

“Damn straight it is.”

Maureen laughed.

“Maybe that happiness is with your Adam?” Her smile was mischievous but Maureen’s faded.

She’d always wished that Adam would be her happy ever after. Or, as Elise had put it, happy for right now. Either way, on some level, Maureen had to admit that for most of her life, she had secretly thought of Adam as her *one*.

But what if he wasn’t?

What if, after all this time and years of wondering, never mind the last few months when she’d secretly hoped that maybe now, maybe finally, it was their time...what if he didn’t come?

What then?

“He’ll be here.” Elise spoke without opening her eyes, reading her mind.

“But the storm...”

“He’ll be here.”

Before Maureen could speak again, or protest that the storm was too intense, there was a ruckus at the front desk, followed by the front door of the inn opening with a rush of wind and snow, along with two heavily bundled individuals covered in a layer of snow.

Maureen rose from her chair and took a tentative step toward the commotion. *Adam?* It couldn’t be. Or could it?

Through all the layers of clothing and snow, it was impossible to tell who the individuals were. Even if Maureen knew what Adam looked like after all this time, there wouldn’t be any way to know whether he was one of the new arrivals. *Yet...*

She took another step forward and then another.

Behind her, she was certain she’d heard Elise say, “I told you he’d come.”

But it wasn’t until one of the snow-covered individuals turned to face her and pulled off his knit cap that she knew for sure. Adam’s green eyes, set in a familiar, but older face, looked directly at her. His smile widened as he searched the room, his gaze finally landing on her.

“Maureen.” He shook his head a little, as if he couldn’t believe it was her. “Sorry I’m late.”

He looked so different. But at the same time, he looked exactly the same.

“Adam.”

Maureen stepped closer, Elise and the conversation they’d been having completely forgotten. Her only focus was on the man in front of her. *He’d come.* He’d made it through the storm. He hadn’t stood her up. Again.

“How did...” She shook her head and tried again. “They said...” Words continued to fail her. “But the roads are...”

“The roads are closed.” He chuckled a little and brushed snow from his jacket. “Trust me. They are very closed. I’d only made it to the turn-off from the highway when I ran into the closure. They told me there was no way I would make it up here tonight.”

“But here you are.”

“Here I am.” His grin grew even wider, if it were possible. “Nothing was going to keep me from meeting you tonight, Maureen.” Adam’s face got suddenly serious. “I made that mistake once before. I was not going to stand you up again.”

Maureen’s stomach fluttered like she was eighteen again. Before she could ask any more questions, the other snow-covered man approached them.

A big man, with a frost-covered beard and a cap pulled low on his head. His eyes sparkled with life and despite his imposing size, Maureen could see he was a jolly man. “Sorry to interrupt,” he said with a slap on Adam’s shoulder. “This must be—”

“This is Maureen.” Adam introduced her. “Maureen, this is Kevin, the man responsible for getting me up to the inn tonight on his snowmobile in what can only be described as—”

“An impossible scenario.” Kevin laughed. “It’s a good thing I enjoy a challenge.”

“A snowmobile?” That would explain the amount of snow covering both the men. “But...why? I mean...”

“When Adam here explained to me how important it was that he get up the mountain tonight, there was no way I could refuse.” Kevin spoke matter-of-factly. “Besides, it was just a little snow.”

“A little snow?” Lucy Gibbons appeared behind them, a scowl on her face as she took in the amount of snow the men were dropping on the floor. “Can I please take your coats, gentlemen? I’m sure you’re going to want a

chance to warm up for a few minutes before we discuss the accommodation situation.”

“Don’t worry about me, Lucy. My buddy Russ works out here in maintenance. I can crash on his couch tonight and head back down to town in the morning.”

The innkeeper nodded. “If that’s okay with Russ, it’s okay with us. But please do not risk your life again to head back down until it’s safe.”

The big man shrugged off the concern. “Just because the plows can’t get through doesn’t mean I’ll be stopped.” He laughed while Lucy shook her head.

“At any rate, thank you, for delivering Mr. Lancaster to us. It was incredibly dangerous, but—”

“Worth the risk.” Adam looked directly at Maureen. His green eyes flashed, and she couldn’t help but blush a little.

She really did feel like a girl again.

Kevin laughed and slapped his thigh. “See?” he said to Lucy. “It was worth it.” He turned to Adam and once more slapped him on the back. “Enjoy your stay, buddy. It was nice to meet you and hear all about your lady here.”

By now, Maureen was sure her face was on fire.

“Hold on, Kevin.” Adam reached into the inner pocket of his thick jacket and pulled out his wallet before shrugging out of his jacket and handing it to the innkeeper. “I need to square up with you.”

“Your money is no good with me.” The other man held out his hand and shook his head. “Merry Christmas. I’m just happy I could be a small part of your story.”

“Kevin. I told you I’d pay you. I—”

“I won’t accept it.” He crossed his arms and grinned. “Merry Christmas. To both of you.” He nodded in Maureen’s direction and added, “He was very determined to get up here tonight. I think he really likes you.”

“Okay. Kevin, that’s enough. Stop dripping all over my floor.” Lucy Gibbons grabbed his arm and began to drag him away.

“Have fun, you two,” Kevin called as the innkeeper dragged him away.

Maureen watched him go and took the chance to compose herself before facing Adam. “He seems like quite the character.”

Adam laughed. “That’s putting it mildly. I met him in a pub in town, and when he heard my story...well, I guess *our* story...he insisted on helping me out.” Adam’s face turned serious. “And I’m really glad he did.” He reached for her hand. “It’s...well, it’s incredible to see you again, Maureen. You look every bit as beautiful as you were when you were eighteen. More so.”

“Thank you.” She looked down at her hand in his and closed her eyes for a brief moment, unsure she could trust what she was seeing and feeling. “It is absolutely incredible to see you, Adam. I didn’t...I wasn’t sure... Well, I didn’t think you were coming,” she finished honestly.

“I’ll admit, the weather is not ideal.”

“It wasn’t just the weather.” There was no point beating around the bush. “I worried that maybe you might have changed your mind.”

“Never.”

He looked so sincere, any doubts Maureen had vanished.

“Nothing was going to keep me away, Maureen. I’ve waited an entire lifetime to see you again.”

Her heart fluttered, just like it had all those years ago when he bought her that very first lemonade.

Remembering herself, Maureen shook her head. “You must be freezing. Let me get you a tea or a hot chocolate. It’s absolutely delicious here. And maybe we should see about your room.” It occurred to Maureen that earlier she’d been told that all the rooms at the inn were full because of the storm, and Lucy Gibbons mentioned there being a situation with the accommodations, too. “I think they might have given away your—”

“Maureen?” Adam caught her hand in his and held her back from heading

to the front desk.

Her breath caught in her throat, and she had to remind herself to breathe as he slowly tugged until she turned around to face him.

“Would it be too forward if I hugged you right now?”

The smile split her face and warmth rushed through her. “Not at all.”

The moment she was in his arms, her body and her heart remembered, and the years melted away. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, letting herself relax into his embrace.

The hug was unhurried and everything about it felt *right*. Adam pulled away too soon for Maureen’s liking, but she was mollified when he took her hand and squeezed. “Now, what was this about a hot chocolate?”

With his hand still in hers, Maureen turned to lead Adam toward the fireplace to introduce him to Elise. “She is just the sweetest woman with such an amazing story,” she told Adam. “We spent the evening talking, and I think she’d really like to meet you.”

But when Maureen got close enough, she could see that Elise was gone. Her crochet bag with the unfinished blanket she’d been working on sat on the floor. “She must have...” Maureen turned in a circle, but there was no trace of the older woman. “I’ll take her bag to the front desk and be right back with some hot chocolate.”

Adam tugged her hand a little to keep her from going right away. “I’ll be waiting right here.”

He looked directly into her eyes, and her heart flipped. She didn’t think it was possible to feel such a reaction from a man at her age. But then again, it wasn’t just any man making her feel this way. It was Adam.

Her Adam.

She smiled broadly. “I’ll be right back.”

Maureen hurried to the front desk with the crochet bag.

“Mrs. McCormick,” Lucy, who was already back behind the desk, greeted her with a smile. “It’s quite remarkable that your friend made it after all.” She shook her head in disbelief. “I am trying my best to work out a solution to the room shortage,” she continued. “I’m afraid we really weren’t expecting anyone to make it up the road and since we had to extend some stays, I’m really not sure what we can do. But please rest assured that we are working on it.”

“I’m sure you are.” Maureen handed the bag across the counter. “The older woman I was sitting with...in all the commotion, I didn’t realize she’d excused herself.”

“Oh yes, Elise. She retired to her room for the evening.”

Maureen felt a twinge of guilt for not saying goodnight after the lovely evening they’d shared. But somehow she was sure that Elise would approve of her distraction. “She must have left her crochet bag when she left,” Maureen said. “I wouldn’t want it to get lost.”

“Of course.” Lucy smiled with a nod. “I’ll be sure she gets it. And I will be sure to let you know when I have a solution to the room situation. In the meantime, please feel free to have a late dinner on the house. Just charge it to your room, and I’ll be sure to take care of it.”

“Thank you. That’s very generous.”

“It’s the least we can do under the circumstances.”

It was clear from the concerned look on the innkeeper’s face that the room situation might be a little harder to solve than she was letting on. But Maureen wasn’t worried. Adam was here. He’d made it. He hadn’t stood her up. For the moment, that was all that mattered. They’d figure out the rest later.

“Thank you. I’m sure a hot meal would be appreciated after his journey. And you’ll make sure Elise gets her crocheting back? I know she wanted to finish the blanket.”

“Of course, Mrs. McCormick.” The young woman’s smile was friendly.
“Please let us know if there’s anything else we can help you with.”

Maureen turned and looked at Adam, who was warming his hands by the fire. “I think I have everything I need now.”

Chapter Nine

Present

A FEW MINUTES LATER, Adam decided to forgo the hot chocolate and opt for a warm dinner instead. They were seated in the hotel restaurant that was decorated for the holiday season just as nicely as the rest of the inn.

With the snowstorm still raging outside, candles on the table and the smell of pine mingling with the delicious aromas coming from the kitchen, and Adam sitting across from her, Maureen was very cozy.

“I still can’t believe you’re here.” She shook her head and sipped at the glass of wine she’d ordered. She rarely indulged these days, but reuniting with Adam was the most special occasion she could imagine.

“I told you, I wouldn’t have missed this.” He reached across the table, and she let him take her hands in his. His skin was still cool, but the moment he touched her, there was nothing but heat. “But maybe I can see how you might think I wouldn’t come.” His gaze dropped. “And I don’t mean because of the storm.”

“It did cross my mind,” she admitted. “I feel like maybe this question is almost forty years too late, but I’m going to ask it anyway.” Talking to Elise had helped Maureen remember that there was no time to waste in this life.

Not anymore. And as far as she was concerned, there was no point in not taking the opportunity to get some answers.

“Please.” Adam nodded. “Ask me anything. But I think I already know what you’re going to ask.”

She wasn’t surprised. Instead of vocalizing the question, Maureen took a deep breath as Adam began to explain.

Thirty-Seven Years Ago

Adam woke up before the sunrise. Truthfully, he’d hardly slept at all the night before. Or for the last few nights.

Not since he’d told Maureen about the opportunity to go to South Africa and work on the medical team.

It was his dream. Ever since his third year of optometry school when he’d first heard about the charity that went from village to village helping impoverished people by treating their eye infections, passing out old donated prescription glasses and manning eye health for people who would never normally have access to that kind of care, he’d known that it was exactly what he wanted to do when he graduated.

His entire life, Adam had wanted to help people in a way that would really make a difference. So when the opportunity to apply for the position came up, he jumped at it.

It had been a long shot. The program only took a few candidates every year. But he had to try because he couldn’t imagine doing anything else.

That was, until he’d met Maureen.

In an instant, the moment he heard her sweet voice ordering a lemonade, he knew it was the only sound he ever wanted to hear again. And then, later,

when he pulled her close on the dance floor and stared into her eyes, his heart knew it before he did.

He was lost to her.

When his Aunt Judy and Uncle Jack extended the invitation to spend the summer with them at the lake, Adam jumped at the offer. He was exhausted from spending the last six years at school. The last two especially had been intense with all the board exams and clinical work. He was overdue for a break and a few months to relax, have fun and figure out what he wanted to do now that he'd graduated. *If* he didn't get accepted into the program in South Africa.

He hadn't planned on meeting Maureen.

Not that he'd change the last few weeks for anything. They'd been some of the best of his entire life.

Adam replayed every moment with her as he slipped from his uncle's house and made his way through the quiet streets to the city dock so early in the morning, there were only a few people launching fishing boats. But otherwise, he had the dock to himself, which was exactly what he needed to think. He sat on the edge, pulled his shoes off, and dropped his feet into the cool water.

There were twelve hours until he was supposed to meet Maureen for dinner.

He dropped his head into his hands.

"Adam?"

He looked up slowly to see his Uncle Jack, his father's brother, standing next to him.

"I thought I might find you out here." He gestured with his head. "May I sit?"

Adam nodded and moved over a bit to make room on the edge.

"I didn't mean to wake you," Adam said. "I needed to think and..."

"You've got a big decision in front of you."

His aunt and uncle had been thrilled for Adam when his mother called with the news that a letter had arrived from the foundation. She'd read it to him over the phone, and Aunt Judy had pulled out a special bottle of wine that was dusty on the shelf to celebrate. He may not have seen them much since he was a kid, but they'd kept in touch, and both Uncle Jack and Aunt Judy knew exactly what this opportunity meant to him.

They also knew what Maureen meant to him.

"I don't know what to do."

His uncle was quiet for a moment before he spoke again. "Are you sure?"

"Sure about what?"

"That you don't know what to do," he said simply. "Because I think you might know more than you think you do."

Adam shook his head and stared at his foot in the water as he traced circles with his toe.

"Sometimes I find it helps to talk it out," Uncle Jack said. "And if you like, I can be a pretty good sounding board."

It couldn't hurt.

"The way I see it, there are a few potential outcomes and they're all impossible."

Jack nodded, so he continued.

"I could turn down the offer and stay here with Maureen."

His uncle raised one eyebrow.

It wasn't a question but Adam shook his head. "We could be together, Uncle Jack. Maureen would go to school, and I could start up a practice. We would get married and have a family. Hell, maybe we could even spend our summers at the lake here? That wouldn't be too bad."

"It wouldn't."

The idea of having a life with Maureen made him smile. He could picture it. It would be a good life.

"You'd give up your dream for her?"

“Yes.” He didn’t hesitate.

“And Maureen would be okay with that?”

The smile fell from Adam’s face. “No.” He’d always known the answer to that question, which was why he’d never really considered it an option before. She would never let him give up his dream for her. She loved him too much. And if for some reason she did, there would be disappointment in what he missed out on. In time, resentment might grow. “She would never let me give up my dream. Not even for her.”

Jack nodded. “And what about her? You said you asked her to come with you.”

He nodded. That was the best possible outcome, in Adam’s mind. Together, they could change the world and make a difference. It would be an amazing adventure.

“And what do you think she’ll say?”

She loved him almost as much as he loved her. Adam knew he’d caught her off guard when he’d asked her about Africa with no warning, but he also knew Maureen. “I think she’ll say yes.”

“You do?” If his uncle was surprised, he didn’t show it.

“I do.” He lifted a foot and let it splash down into the water. “Maureen is a beautiful girl,” he said with a smile. “But more than that, she’s smart and passionate and stubborn. She won’t give up on us. If I know her, she’s probably spent the last few days making lists and researching and learning everything she can about Africa.” He smiled at himself and shook his head a little in wonder. “She’s incredible.”

“Then what exactly is the problem?”

“The problem is...she’ll say yes.” Adam turned to look at his uncle, who immediately reached over and put an arm around his shoulders. He pulled Adam close, as if he were a small boy again. In his uncle’s embrace, for the first time, Adam let himself cry because he knew what he had to do. He loved Maureen too much not to.

After a few minutes, he wiped his eyes and sat up straight. “I need you to do something for me, Uncle Jack.”

Present

“It was your Uncle Jack who dropped off the letter.”

Adam nodded.

Even after so many years, Maureen heard the emotion in his voice as he told her his story.

“I waited for you.” Her own voice cracked.

“I know.”

He reached for her hand again. She hadn’t realized she’d pulled away.

“I can’t even begin to tell you how sorry I am for the way I left like that. But I don’t regret my decision, Maureen.”

He squeezed her hand, and the simple act of it made her want to cry.

“I was devastated, Adam.” Her voice was quiet, almost unrecognizable. “I didn’t think I would survive it.”

“But you did.”

She looked up into his eyes. “I did,” she said simply.

“And you understand?”

Maureen nodded. “I do.” She inhaled deeply. “I didn’t at first,” she admitted after a moment. “But in time, I did.”

They sat in silence for a few minutes, simply looking into each other’s eyes. “You have a family.”

She nodded. “A beautiful family.”

“I knew you would.”

And that was why he’d done it. That was the entire reason he’d stood her

up all those years ago. “Five sons and two sort-of daughters.”

“Sort of?”

She laughed. “It’s a long story.”

“I’d love to hear it.” Adam stroked the back of her hand with his thumb. “I’d love to hear all of it. And it turns out that I’m newly retired, and I have nothing but time.”

Elise’s words from earlier echoed in her head. *You always think you’ll have time. That’s a lie.*

“Adam, would you like to go dancing with me?”

“That’s not what I was expecting you to say.” He chuckled. “But, yes. Of course. I’d love to go dancing with you, Maureen. More than anything, I’d love to hear all about your life, dance the nights away with you, and drink lemonade on a dock, looking out at the lake. I know it’s been decades, and this might be a little bit forward, but I would hate myself if I didn’t say it, and I’m far too old now for regrets.”

She sucked in a breath.

“All those years ago, the timing wasn’t right. We were on different paths.”

She nodded in agreement as he spoke.

“I don’t regret the way my life turned out, and I’m sure you don’t either.”

“I don’t.”

“But I do regret one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Not looking for you earlier.” Adam looked into her eyes. “I told myself that when I finally retired, I’d look you up and see...”

“If I was married?”

He nodded.

“I couldn’t come to grips with it in my head,” he said. “More than anything, I wanted you to be happily married and have a house full of children and grandchildren. But at the same time...” He dropped his head and

gave it a shake before looking up again. “Truthfully and selfishly, I was terrified that you would be happily married and wouldn’t welcome the intrusion of an old boyfriend in your life. I know how that sounds, but I really did only want you to be happy.”

“I know,” she said with a sad smile. That was never more true than now after she heard his version of how things went that summer. She’d always known why he left, but to hear it from his own mouth, after all this time, hit differently.

“I never stopped thinking about you, Maureen. Not for one day. You were it for me.”

The idea that Adam had been alone for all these years struck her as terribly sad. “You never married?”

He shook his head. “There were women over the years. Some I was quite fond of.”

“But?”

“None of them were you.”

Maureen sucked in a breath. “You don’t mean that.” She could see by the look on his face that he did.

“Your husband?”

“Ex.”

“Ex-husband,” he corrected himself. “He—”

“Wasn’t you.”

Chapter Ten

Present

THE BAND, the Lost Ridge Ramblers, was fun and upbeat.

They could have stayed at the restaurant and talked all night about the years they'd spent apart, filling in the blanks from the letters they'd written, but Maureen had meant it when she'd asked him to dance. So they braved the storm that had lightened up considerably and made their way the short distance to the pub right next door to hit the dance floor.

It had been years since she'd danced with a man, but together, they fell easily into step. Just like everything about them, it felt like no time had passed since they'd been together.

The main difference was that so many years later, they were older and didn't have the same type of stamina to stay on the dance floor, despite their best efforts.

After a few songs and spins around the dance floor, Adam led Maureen to a table in the corner. He excused himself to the bar and returned a few minutes later with two tall glasses.

"Is this lemonade?" She accepted the glass with a smile.

"Of course." Adam's boyish grin made her laugh. "It's our drink, after

all.”

She took a sip of the sweet liquid, closed her eyes, and savored the moment. “It’s delicious,” she said when she opened her eyes again. “Do you know that I haven’t had a glass of lemonade since that summer?”

“What? But you had kids. How did you manage that?”

“I know it’s ridiculous.” She shrugged. “But I think it was self-preservation.”

He reached for her hand. “I hate that we wasted so many years.”

She hated it, too. But at the same time...

“I think things work out the way they’re supposed to.” She twined her fingers through his. Touching him felt so natural, she never wanted to let go. “If we’d reconnected any sooner, you might not have ever been able to start your charities and continue with all the good work you’ve done in Africa over the years. And I, well...I don’t think I would have been in a place where I was ready for this. It’s taken a lot of years of healing after Harold. Time I needed with my children and now with their partners, and the girls...” She let herself drift off as she thought of the last few years and everything that had changed both with her family and with herself. “It was important time,” she said. “Because now I know without any uncertainty what I want and what I need. That’s why I’m here.”

A smile played at the corner of his lips. “And what is it that you need and want, Maureen?”

There were a million reasons she should slow down, proceed with caution, or play it cool, or even think about what her children might say about her relationship with a man she hadn’t seen or spoken to in almost forty years.

But there was one, very important reason she shouldn’t.

Tomorrow wasn’t guaranteed. Time was finite, and they’d already let so much time go by.

“It might be crazy.” She shook her head. “But I don’t care.” She took a

breath. She'd already taken the biggest risk by getting on a plane mere days before Christmas and her son's wedding to meet with Adam; there was no bigger risk. Besides, judging by the way he looked at her, Maureen was pretty certain there was no risk at all. "I want to be with you, Adam." Her free hand flew to her mouth, and she chuckled in disbelief at her brazenness. It also emboldened her. "After all these years, I want to see what we could be together."

He'd begun to nod slowly while she spoke. "It wasn't our time then." Adam swallowed hard and took her other hand in his. "But I believe that it might just finally be our time now, Maureen."

"There's only one way to find out."

"I couldn't agree more." His hand cupped her cheek and when his lips touched hers, the room around them disappeared.

Maureen was floating on air the next morning as she made her way down to the lobby of the inn. The night before, after they shared what had to be the very best kiss of her entire life, dancing was forgotten as they made their way back to the main building, and up to Maureen's room.

It had been so long since Maureen had been with a man that she should have been nervous but with Adam, everything felt natural and *right*. It was as if no time had passed between them at all.

She'd fallen asleep in his arms, knowing that she was exactly where she belonged.

The storm had settled overnight, and the sun shined through the windows as she descended the steps into the busy lobby. Now that the storm had stopped, Maureen assumed many people were trying to make arrangements to get home for the holidays. She bypassed the chaos and headed straight for the beverage station, to get a coffee while she waited for Adam to finish his

shower.

She'd just poured herself a cup and was heading toward a bench by a window when Lucy Gibbons caught up with her.

"Mrs. McCormick." The woman wrung her hands and looked as if she might cry. "I'm so sorry about last night. I meant to find you and Mr. Lancaster to sort out the room situation. I looked for you in the restaurant and —"

"It's fine." Maureen gave the woman the most reassuring smile she could. "Mr. Lancaster...ended up...well..." She shook her head and laughed a little at her ridiculous embarrassment. She was a grown woman, after all. "Well, he stayed with me last night."

"Oh. I..."

"It's fine, Lucy. But thank you for your concern. I do appreciate the attention to detail you all have."

The woman pulled back her shoulders and beamed with pride. "I'm glad it all worked out, Mrs. McCormick. Thank you for being so understanding." She glanced behind her toward the desk. "It's a bit chaotic here this morning, and along with the roads being closed for the next few days, we've had a bit of a situation come up. Please excuse me if I—"

"A few days?"

Lucy nodded seriously. "Oh yes. When a storm like this comes along, the roads are always closed for a few days as the plows get mobilized and..." Something across the room caught her attention, and she looked away.

"You're busy," Maureen said. "I don't want to keep you."

"I will let you know just as soon as the roads get cleared. I am sorry."

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't do anything about the weather." Maureen waved her away. "Don't worry about me at all. I've enjoyed my stay here very much. Go. Take care of whatever you need to."

Lucy made a few more apologies before finally leaving Maureen and returning to the desk and no doubt a growing to-do list.

For a few minutes, Maureen sipped her coffee in peace as she gazed out at the snowy landscape. The mountains of North Carolina were beautiful. Very different from the Rocky Mountains she was used to back home, but equally stunning. With everything outside covered in snow, she felt cozy and warm inside the inn.

Maybe a few more days trapped in the inn with Adam wouldn't be so bad. Her face flushed with the memory of the night before.

Oh no. It wouldn't be bad at all.

Eventually, she'd have to go home, and to the real world. With the road closure, she'd be cutting it close for Cal's wedding, and Clara's first Christmas. But she'd make it.

And maybe she wouldn't have to go alone?

The thought was so unexpected that it shocked her momentarily. But only for a second, as she let herself think about what it would mean if she asked Adam to accompany her back to Cedar Springs and how perfect it would be.

"Excuse me."

Pulled out of her thoughts, Maureen turned to see a woman with red-rimmed, puffy eyes standing behind her.

"I don't mean to interrupt," the woman said. "I'm sorry. I just—"

It was then that Maureen noticed the bag in the woman's hands. The same bag she'd returned to the front desk the night before. "Susan?"

The woman nodded.

"I'm glad you got her crochet bag back. Elise mentioned how determined she was to finish a baby blanket." Maureen's smile stretched across her face. "Such a lovely woman. I really enjoyed chatting with her last night and it looks like we all might be stranded—" A tear slid down Susan's cheek, and the smile fell from Maureen's face. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes. I mean...no." Susan shook her head. "I'm sorry. This is all so..."

"Sit." Maureen waved to the empty seat next to her. "Please."

She waited until Susan was seated before she reached out and patted her

hand. “If there’s anything I can—”

“She’s gone.”

Maureen froze. Something in Susan’s voice told her what she needed to know. Still, she asked, “Gone? You mean—”

“She passed away in her sleep last night.”

Her hand flew to her mouth. “But...I was...” Maureen couldn’t formulate the thoughts she needed to. “She seemed just fine. We had such a lovely conversation last night.”

Susan nodded. She gestured toward the front desk with her head. “They told me you sat with her most of the evening last night.” Susan shook her head and chuckled a little bit. “I thought she was in bed. She told me...”

“She did mention that you’d be upset with her if you knew she was downstairs instead of in bed.” Maureen smiled a little, remembering the conversation she’d shared with the older woman the night before.

“I wanted her to rest,” the other woman said with a sigh. “I should have known better to know that she wouldn’t. She was so stubborn.” A sob escaped her throat. “It feels wrong to speak about her in the past tense. She should...”

Maureen waited while the other woman pulled herself together.

“She was sick,” Susan said after a moment. “I don’t imagine she told you that?”

Maureen shook her head. “We talked about a lot of things. But she didn’t mention that.”

“She wouldn’t have. Like I said, she was stubborn. She knew she didn’t have a long time left, but she refused to do anything about it. I think she was ready.”

Maureen put her hand on Susan’s arm. “To be with your mom.”

Susan looked at her in surprise. “You did talk about a lot of things.”

“We did,” she said with a soft laugh. “It was an evening I’ll never forget.”

“Elise had that effect on people.”

The two women sat in silence for a few minutes before Susan spoke again. “I don’t know what I’m going to do with this.” She lifted the crochet bag with the half-finished baby blanket in it. “I can’t really give the baby half a blanket, now can I?”

Maureen looked at the bag before letting her eyes drift toward the fireplace and the chair where Elise had sat all night, determinedly working on the project. “I know this might be a little odd.” She turned back to Susan. “But would you let me finish it? It’s been a long time since I’ve crocheted, but I know how important it was to her, and I’d be happy to finish it and send it to you when it’s done. Kind of like a thank-you for the wisdom she imparted to me. I can’t really explain it, but she really helped me yesterday, and I’d really like the opportunity to repay the favor.”

Susan looked down at the bag in her lap and was silent for so long that Maureen wondered whether she’d overstepped. When she looked up, there were tears in her eyes, but she was smiling. “I think that would be really nice. Thank you.”

The women exchanged information and a hug before Susan handed her the crochet bag and left to take care of the details of Elise’s passing.

A few minutes later, Adam appeared. He greeted Maureen with a kiss on the cheek. “What’s that?” He pointed to the bag in her lap.

Maureen already knew what she wanted to happen next, but talking to Susan and hearing about Elise had only strengthened her resolution. “This is a reminder.” She blinked slowly. “To not waste one more minute. Life is short, Adam.”

He nodded in agreement, despite the look of confusion on his face.

“I don’t want to waste one more day. It sounds like we might be trapped here for a few days, but when the roads clear...” She pulled her shoulders back, took a breath, and asked her questions. “Will you come back to Cedar Springs with me for the holidays? Cal gets married on Christmas Eve, and I know it might seem a bit fast and—”

“Of course.” He stopped her and lifted her chin gently with two fingers. “I will go anywhere with you, Maureen. And no, it doesn’t seem fast. It’s been almost forty years. There’s nothing fast about that. I said it before, and I’ll say it again and again. It’s always been you, Maureen. It will always be you.”

Tears slipped down her cheeks, but she wasn’t sad as she leaned forward and kissed the love of her life.

Epilogue

“YOU LOOK ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS.” Maureen clasped her hands together and gushed over her soon-to-be daughter-in-law. “Milena, you are truly the most beautiful bride I’ve ever seen.”

“You say that to all of the brides,” Milena protested, but Maureen didn’t miss the pink glow on her cheeks.

“Maybe I do.” Maureen laughed. “There’s just something about love that lights a woman up. And you, my dear, are positively radiant.”

She gave the bride one last hug and, along with the other girls, left Milena in her father’s very nervous hands—the poor man looked like he might pass out with the role of giving his daughter away—and they moved into the hallway.

Because it was such a small and private wedding, Cal and Milena had organized it at Mitch’s big house on the lake. The same place Mitch had held his surprise wedding to Jade. It was very romantic, especially with the pine boughs and pops of red holly berries that had been draped on every open surface.

It might be a small wedding, but Cal had spared no expense.

“Speaking of women in love...” Chelsea slipped her arm through Maureen’s. She wiggled her eyebrows and laughed.

“Oh, definitely,” Gwen added as she appeared on Maureen’s other side.

“You are glowing, Maureen.”

She didn’t bother trying to deny it. They were right; she was completely, head over heels in love with Adam.

“And don’t worry about the boys.” Jade lifted an eyebrow. “They’ll come around.”

The “boys” she referred to were Mitch and Ian.

Although most of her children and their partners had been very accepting and welcoming of Adam when Maureen surprised them all the day before by returning to Cedar Springs with him after their extended stay at the Merry Falls Inn, Maureen’s oldest two sons had been less thrilled, and they hadn’t done an excellent job hiding it.

“They’re just being protective,” Chelsea added. “Trust me. Once they got over *who* I was, they took their big brother roles very seriously.”

Maureen chuckled. She knew all about when Chelsea had first come to town to stay with Ian and the growing pains they’d had. She also was well aware of how protective her two oldest could be with the women in their lives.

“Well, they better get used to it soon,” Maureen said as they reached the living room, where a few rows of chairs had been set up for the very few people who’d been invited. She scanned the small crowd and found Adam in the second row. “Because he’s not going anywhere.”

“Good.” Gwen squeezed her shoulders. “I love seeing you so happy.”

“We all do,” Jade added. “But we better take our seats. I think it’s supposed to start soon. I’ll get the guys.”

“Let me.” Maureen put her hand on her daughter-in-law’s arm. “I’d like to say a few words to Cal first.”

“Of course.”

The women headed into the living room to take their seats, and Maureen made her way to the kitchen, where the men were huddled around Cal.

She paused in the doorway, taking in the sight of all her sons together.

There had been a time when she wouldn't have been able to imagine all of them like this, here in this place. Now, she couldn't imagine them being anywhere else. Her heart swelled with love for all of them.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, boys."

"Mom." Declan turned around and saw her first. He held out an arm and beckoned her closer.

Happily, Maureen joined her sons in their circle.

"We were just giving Cal some last-minute advice." Ian chuckled.

"Is that right? Odd, since only one of you has managed to get married so far."

"Boom!" Cal howled. "She's right, brothers. Get it together."

They all laughed, but Maureen knew it was all in fun. All her sons were equally committed to the women in their life. Wedding ceremony or not.

"I do think we should place bets on who's next," Mitch said.

Declan let out a low whistle. "My bet's on Mom."

Maureen froze, as did the room around her.

"What?" Ian shook his head. "No way."

"Why not?" Declan defended her. "When you know, you know. And anyone can see by looking at the two of them that they know."

Married?

The idea should have been ridiculous, considering they'd only *just* reconnected. But it didn't feel ridiculous at all.

"They just met, Dec," Ian protested. "You can't just marry off Mom."

Maureen shook herself out of her thoughts and put a hand on each of her son's arms. "We're not here to talk about my relationship. This is Cal's day." She gave them each a stern look. "The only relationship we're talking about is the most important one today." She focused on Cal and smiled softly. "I'm so proud of you, son."

He wrapped his arms around her and squeezed her tight. Maureen worked hard to keep her tears at bay as she embraced her youngest.

“Thank you for everything, Mom. I mean it. Everything.”

She sniffed and squeezed her eyes shut, losing the battle against the tears. She couldn't speak for fear that if she did, she'd start to sob.

“It's because of you that I am the man she deserves.” He squeezed her again and stepped back.

It was only once he released her that Maureen realized they were alone.

There were unshed tears shining in Cal's eyes, but he grinned from ear to ear.

“You are going to make an amazing husband, Cal. I really am so proud of you.” She swallowed hard and waved her hand in an effort to ward off the tears. At least for a few more minutes.

“Will you walk with me?”

Taken aback, Maureen was speechless for a moment. When Milena and Cal had decided on a small, intimate wedding, they'd agreed not to have any wedding party at all and do away with most of the formalities.

“I'd love nothing more.”

Together, they walked down the small aisle to where the officiant was waiting for them. Maureen gave Cal one last hug and kissed him on the cheek. “I love you, son.”

“I love you, too, Mom. And for what it's worth, I think Declan's right. You'll be next,” he added with a wink.

The ceremony was short and sweet, and absolutely perfect.

Maureen didn't bother to hide her tears as her youngest son read his vows to the love of his life in what felt like the most romantic wedding she'd ever seen. Of course, she was sure she'd thought that about Mitch and Jade's wedding, and there was no doubt she'd feel the same about the rest of her children, too.

At some point during the ceremony, Adam slipped his hand into hers and squeezed gently for support. When the ceremony was over, they walked down the short aisle together, hand in hand.

“That was beautiful,” Adam whispered to her. “They are so obviously very much in love.”

“They are.” She smiled up at him. “I’m so happy for him. For all my children,” she added.

“And for yourself?”

The question was unexpected, but it didn’t take her off guard. She’d spent a lifetime coming to terms with her feelings. Maureen didn’t hesitate with her answers. “Oh yes, definitely for myself, too.”

They didn’t have time to discuss what that might mean any further, as they quickly got swept up in wedding festivities. Maureen was kept busy with photos and all the other duties for the mother of the groom while Adam was left to his own devices.

Not that she was worried at all about him or how he’d fit in. In the very short time since they’d been back in Cedar Springs, Adam had slipped easily into her life. It was probably way too soon to make such declarations, but Maureen had a sense about these things and it didn’t take an expert at relationships to see how easily he got along with everyone.

Even Mitch and Ian.

Her eldest sons were putting up a tough front with some sort of misguided need to protect her, but it was clear to see that they, too, could see what a good guy Adam was.

It wasn’t until much later, after the dinner and the toasts, when Maureen found herself with some uninterrupted time with Adam on the makeshift dance floor.

“Thank you,” Adam whispered into her ear after spinning her easily and pulling her back into his arms.

“For what?”

“For including me in your life like this. Today was a very special day.”

She felt the warmth through her body and down to her toes. “It really was. Cal and Milena are—”

“I don’t mean just the wedding,” he interrupted her gently. “Although it truly was the perfect celebration of love.”

She gave him a confused look, but he only chuckled.

“Today was extra special for me because seeing you with your family and how much you all love each other is truly remarkable. You have created something absolutely wonderful here, Maureen. *You* are truly wonderful.” He guided them into a quieter corner of the dance floor and held her close. “Allowing me to be part of this, is...well, there really are no words except for, thank you.”

She let her hand slide down his cheek and rest there as she gazed into his eyes, which were both familiar and completely new to her. “Adam, I can’t imagine today without you here. You fit in so well and...” She inhaled deeply. What she had to say next scared her, but scared or not, she refused to waste any more time. “I’d like you to stay.”

“Well, that works out then.” His smile lit up his face.

“It does?”

“It sure does.” He lowered his head so his lips were only inches from hers. “Because I don’t plan on leaving you again anytime soon.”

Her heart melted with his words. Maureen could feel his love right through to her core. She closed her eyes and leaned forward into a kiss.

“May I cut in?” Ian’s arrival jolted them apart moments before their lips could touch.

Maureen looked at her eldest son and back at Adam. “I don’t know if—”

“Of course.” Adam graciously held out Maureen’s hand to Ian, gave her a wink, and stepped back.

Seconds later, Ian swept her up into an easy dance.

“Listen, Ian. I know you’re not excited about me dating, and you think

that maybe I'm moving too quickly. But Adam and I—”

“Mom.” He stopped her with a grin. “It’s okay.”

Of all the things she’d expected him to say, *okay* wasn’t one of them. “What do you mean?” She eyed him suspiciously.

“I wanted to tell you that I was wrong. I’m sorry.”

Completely flabbergasted, Maureen stumbled over her feet and stopped dancing altogether to stop and stare at her son. “I’m sorry, you were what?”

He laughed. “I was wrong.” Ian shrugged. “About Adam. About the two of you. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything.” He took her hand again and once more started moving through the dance floor. “I just want you to be happy, Mom.”

“Thank you.” Maureen blinked back tears. “Can I ask you what made you change your mind? I mean, I know this must seem fast to all of you. But it’s been a lifetime for Adam and me and—”

“That’s just it, Mom.” Ian looked down into her eyes. “I was so caught up in protecting you that I couldn’t see it until it was pointed out to me.”

Maureen tilted her head in question but let him continue.

“Gwen made me see and once she did, it was clear.”

“What was clear?”

“The way he looks at you, Mom.” Ian shook his head in wonder. “I’m not an expert in love or relationships or anything like that, but I can see it, too. He loves you, Mom.”

A tear slipped down her cheek, but she didn’t move to wipe it away. “And I love him.”

“I know, Mom.” His smile was genuine, and it filled her heart to know she’d raised such a caring and loving man. “I’m still going to be protective of you.” He tried to look stern. “But the more I get to know him, the more I can see what a good guy he is. And we all just want you to be happy. You deserve it.”

Maureen hadn't noticed that while Ian was talking, he'd guided her back to where they'd left Adam until Ian stepped back and offered her Maureen's arm. "Be good to her."

"Always." Adam looked first at Ian, and then to Maureen as he took her in his arms.

It was just the two of them when Adam looked into her eyes. "I love you, Maureen. It's always been you."

Through all the years, her marriage, raising children and her divorce, Maureen had always known the truth of her heart, too. "It's always been you, Adam. And finally, it's our moment."

"Forever."

She laughed. "Our forever moment."

I hope you enjoyed the McCormick family.

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Never Let Me Go

Please enjoy this excerpt of *Never Let Me Go*

WHEN CHASE CARLSON pulled the door to the Bean Bag open, he was greeted with the same familiar combination of jingling and clacking of the old bells that hung over the glass door that had been there for years. The sound, accompanied by the rich, overpowering scent of freshly roasted coffee beans that hit him when he stepped inside, was just as he remembered it. He paused, the door held open to the stifling late summer heat a moment longer than was necessary as he looked up at the bells and inhaled deeply.

Some things never changed.

Then again, he thought as he looked past the bells and the doors to the bustling plaza outside, crammed with tourists and maybe a few locals who were brave enough to wade into the throng of people, some things *really* changed.

The last time Chase had been to his hometown of Trickle Creek, the idea of tourism still hadn't fully caught on. The golf course was still in its infancy, there was only one beat-up motel on the side of the highway, and no one had

even conceived of the idea of vacation home rentals, let alone entire condo buildings devoted to the tourists who most of the townspeople couldn't believe would ever come.

But they had come.

And judging by the amount of no-vacancy signs and out-of-province license plates, *a lot* of them had come. He shook his head as he closed the door behind him and turned to face the inside of the cafe.

If he thought there were a lot of people outside, there were even more stuffed into the small space. Almost every table was full. A few people milled about by the doorway, either coming or going. Chase wove his way through the crammed tables and found an empty seat at the counter next to the coffee station.

It would have to do. Besides, the noise and utter chaos of the place would be good for him. A sharp contrast from the somber scene he'd just left. Not that a funeral should be any other way. Yet somehow Chase had expected his father's funeral to be...well, if he was being truthful, he didn't really know what he expected because he hadn't given it much thought.

He was there out of duty for the man who put a roof over his head and gave him his name when he'd married his mother when Chase was just a boy. Michael Carlson was technically his stepfather, but he'd been the only father Chase had ever known. Not that he'd ever really known him well. For far too long, Chase had felt like an afterthought, an *extra*, an unwelcome addition that came as part of the package with his mother and younger sister.

For some reason Chase could never completely figure out, Charli, two years his junior, had found a special place in their stepfather's life. But not Chase. Not ever. And especially not when their mother died when Chase was only twelve.

Which was why he'd asked to go to boarding school. Maybe insisted was a better word. Either way, he was just shy of his thirteenth birthday when he'd left his sister Charli as well as his half brothers and sister—Asher, Craig,

and Kat—behind.

There'd been a few visits back to the mountain town over the years, for holidays and a few summers, but it didn't take long for Chase to realize his presence hadn't been missed, so pretty soon, even those had dwindled completely. It had been almost fifteen years now since he'd been back.

Which probably had a lot to do with why he felt so out of place. And why he hadn't stuck around after the service. He needed a few minutes alone and a strong cup of coffee before the will reading.

Coffee.

Chase glanced around for the waitress, who still hadn't been by to check on him or take his order. Her back was turned to him, her notepad out as she frantically scribbled the orders for a table of six. A bell rang, indicating an order was up in the kitchen. Chase couldn't see any other waitress working.

Shit. He didn't have time to wait for her to have a free minute.

He slipped from his stool and moved around the counter, where a fresh pot had just finished brewing. Casually, Chase filled a mug for himself. He was about to replace the pot when he noticed the gentleman sitting next to him also needed a refill. As did the woman on the other side of him. Quickly, he moved behind the counter, refilling the coffee cups of a handful of customers. When a nearby table noticed and waved him over, he shrugged. *Might as well.*

Chase found himself smiling for the first time all day as he made small talk with the customers as he provided them with their refills. Caught up in the moment, he was about to visit another table when a small hand clamped around his arm.

“What do you think you're doing?”

He turned to see the waitress, a pretty brunette, her hair tied back in a clip against her head, with two pencils shoved into the top. Her face was bare of makeup. She was cute, in a very girl-next-door kind of way, despite the dark smudges under her eyes and the obvious exhaustion that she seemed to wear

like a scarf around her neck. Something about her was vaguely familiar, but that wasn't unusual considering he'd grown up in town.

Chase held up the coffeepot with a small smile. "I'm pouring coffee." He gestured to the table who'd noticed the pot and was looking hopefully toward the potential of a refill.

"Well, you need to stop," the waitress said. "You don't work here."

"It doesn't mean I can't help." Chase surprised himself that he even cared. After all, he'd only wanted a cup himself. And it was currently growing cold at the counter. "You seemed a little—"

"I've got it." She took the pot from his hand and moved toward the waiting customers. As an afterthought, she turned and said, "Thank you for helping."

Her gratitude, no matter how minor, brought the smile back to his lips. "Anytime." He nodded toward his seat at the counter and held her gaze.

"I'll be over in a second to take your order if you want lunch," the waitress offered, and then the moment was gone as she got back to work.

Annie delivered the last of the lunch rush meals to her hungry customers, did a quick check on the remaining tables, and finally returned to the counter to set another pot of coffee to brew. If she was lucky, she might be able to sneak in a few sips of water before duty called once again. Monica had called in sick. Again. And with no one else to cover the shift because they were short-staffed, just like every other place in town, Annie got to handle the lunch rush on her own for the second time that week.

To say she was exhausted was an understatement. She was so tired she could hardly remember what day of the week it was. Not that it mattered. All her days looked more or less the same: work her shift at the Bean Bag, change clothes and grab the list of vacation rentals she needed to clean and

turn over for the next guests before picking up—

“Hey.” A friendly and somewhat familiar voice snapped her from her thoughts. “I could use a refresh, but I don’t want to overstep.”

Annie turned to see the man who’d helped her out earlier by refilling coffee cups. He was tall and his broad shoulders filled out his dark-navy suit and crisp white shirt very nicely. Even so, the suit, as sexy as it was, stood out in the mountain tourist town of Trickle Creek known for the world-class golf courses that dotted the valley, a vast network of mountain biking and hiking trails, and stellar fly-fishing in the summer months, as well as one of the best ski resorts in the Rockies in the winter months. Not that Annie ever had a chance to partake in any of Trickle Creek’s offerings. Still, she knew her sales pitch inside and out from years of selling it to throngs of tourists.

“Sorry.” Annie reached for the coffeepot that had just finished brewing. “I was waiting for a fresh pot.” She winked and grinned.

His smile reached his blue eyes that flashed with humor. He was handsome and—it didn’t matter. He was a tourist. She hadn’t seen him around town before, and having spent her entire life in Trickle Creek, she knew almost everyone. Annie had a rule: don’t get mixed up with tourists. No flings. No one-night stands. No free drinks. No nothing.

Sure, there were plenty of local women who took advantage of the all-men golfing groups that swarmed the plaza almost every night, looking for a good time away from their wives and lives for a few nights. Most of the women used the opportunity to have a few free drinks and a little entertainment. But a handful took it even further, and out of those few, there were a few more who then had to live with the consequences of those choices. Like her sister.

Annie may not have learned much from her older sister, but she’d definitely learned what she didn’t want for her life. Now she just needed to figure out how to get what she *did* want.

“Thanks, Annie.”

The man put his hand on her arm. It was a light touch, barely there at all. She looked down at his hand, then back up at the man.

“You’re welcome.” She took a step back. “How did you know my name?”

He laughed and nodded to her name tag. “I just assumed it wasn’t an alias.”

That made her laugh, too. “You assumed right.” He was friendly and something about him made her relax, so despite her first instinct, she leaned back against the counter and made conversation. “What brings you to town? I have to say, you don’t look like you’re here to golf.” She pretended to think. “And I’m going to guess you’re not biking or fishing. So unless you’re hiking in that suit...”

“I’m here for a funeral.”

“Oh.” The smile fell from her face instantly. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t—”

“Don’t be. My father and I weren’t close.”

He picked up his cup, and it was only then that Annie put the pieces together. To be fair, she was working on only a few hours of sleep and there weren’t really that many pieces to the puzzle.

“Chase Carlson?”

He almost choked on the hot coffee when he heard his name, but somehow managed to swallow and still look perfectly in control when he set his mug down, crossed his arms on the counter in front of him, and answered her. “Do I know you?”

“Yes,” Annie answered quickly, realizing that she may have sounded creepy. “I mean, no. You do, but you—”

“But I don’t?” He raised an eyebrow and his lips twitched. “Which is it?”

She sighed and placed her palms on the counter behind her, leaning back. “You *used* to know me,” she started. “Or at least, I used to know who you were. I’m Annie.”

“We’ve established that.” His eyes drifted to the name tag on her chest,

which was currently shoved out and on display because of the way she was reclining.

Annie quickly stood up and wiped her hands on the apron tied around her waist.

“Annie Darling.” She said her full name, not that it would help. “I’m friends with your little sister, Kat. I was probably only about six or so when you moved away, but Kat and I are close.”

“I’m sorry to say I had a lot going on,” Chase said. “Not much time for paying attention. And really, I have to admit, I probably wouldn’t have remembered my baby sister’s friend.” He extended a hand to her. “Let’s start over,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you, Annie Darling. I’m Chase Carlson.”

She took his hand and blinked hard against the heat that flashed through her body at his touch.

Was he always so handsome?

No.

He was a kid. So was she.

She swallowed hard. “I’m sorry about your—”

He stopped her condolences with a hand. “Please,” he said. “Save your condolences for Kat. As I said, we weren’t close.”

She knew that much. Kat had talked about her oldest brother for years and the way he’d more or less run away from the family. When she mentioned him at all. Which, truthfully, wasn’t often.

“Well, how long are you in town for, Chase?” She switched the subject and found herself really wanting to know. Something about him made her want to forget all her responsibilities, lean up against the counter all day, and—*shit*. “Hold that thought.” Annie held up a finger to silence him before he spoke and grabbed the notebook from her apron pocket. “Table three is probably ready to pay and table six will need water refills and—no. You can’t help,” she added with a wink, as he moved to get up from the stool. “I’m pretty sure I’ll get fired if I keep letting the customers do my job for

me.”

Chase didn't move to return to his seat, so Annie tilted her head, ready to press the issue, when he chuckled and said, “I won't help. But I do need to get going.” He glanced at the watch on his wrist.

A real watch, Annie noted, not a smartwatch like she would have expected.

“I have this *thing*.” A shadow crossed his face, but it just as quickly disappeared when he met her gaze again. “But to answer your question, I'll be in town for a few days. Maybe we can grab a drink or something?”

She stood mute and stared at him.

Had Chase Carlson just asked her out? On a date?

No.

It was just a friendly thing to say because you're his sister's friend. He doesn't even know how to—

“I'll ask Kat for your number.” Chase tossed some money on the counter. “It was nice to properly meet you, Annie.”

He flashed that killer smile one more time, and then he was gone, leaving Annie to wonder what the hell had just happened. Because it had been a very, very long time since she'd ever felt any of the feelings that were currently flowing through her body thanks to Chase Carlson.

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