

the
RIVER HOUSE

One



“We have to have badgers at your party.”

Felicity MacGregor knew her comment would raise most people’s eyebrows, but she also knew Kylie Shaw would be fine with it.

“Absolutely,” Kylie said. “Russ and I had a badger couple on our wedding cake.”

That spring, Kylie’s whirlwind romance with Russ Colton, a security consultant, had taken them both by surprise, never mind everyone else in their small town of Knights Bridge, Massachusetts. Felicity smiled. “Of course you did.” They were seated across from each other at the table on the balcony of Kylie and Russ’s second-floor apartment in a renovated nineteenth-century hat factory. The balcony overlooked the river, flowing gently on the warm summer afternoon. Russ had spent the past two weeks in Southern California, wrapping up his life and work there now that he and Kylie had decided to settle in Knights Bridge. They’d bought a house a mile or so farther up the river and were having work done on it before moving in later in the summer.

Kylie reached for her iced tea. “Russ let Sherlock

Badger oversee security for the wedding,” she said, matter-of-fact.

Sherlock was one of her popular fictional characters. “I’m sure Sherlock did a fine job,” Felicity said.

“He’s the best. Russ likes to say we’ll be fine provided I don’t confuse my Middle Branch badgers with real badgers.”

“Who says your Middle Branch badgers aren’t real?”

Kylie beamed. “Exactly what I tell him!”

Felicity wouldn’t be surprised if Kylie was only half kidding. Under her pseudonym of Morwenna Mills, she was the creator of the Badgers of Middle Branch, a popular series of children’s books. Felicity, an event planner, was helping Kylie with a party to celebrate the newest installment in the series, set in an idyllic village on a river. The mom and dad badgers were veterinarians, modeled after Kylie’s own family. A tiny version of Sherlock Badger occupied a spot on Kylie’s worktable. She’d made the mini badger herself with scraps of fabric and tufts of dryer lint.

Unlike Felicity, Kylie hadn’t grown up in Knights Bridge. They’d hit it off upon Felicity’s return to her hometown in May, when she’d bought a house farther up on the river, just down from the site of Kylie and Russ’s new house. Felicity loved her house despite her complicated personal history with it, seeing how she’d lost her virginity there. Not in the house itself. It hadn’t been built yet. But on a blanket in front of the outdoor fireplace that still stood there...

“Knights Bridge is keeping you busy, Felicity,” Kylie said.

She yanked herself out of her thoughts. “Works for me. I’m having a blast.”

Kylie studied her a moment, as if guessing Felicity’s mind had wandered to someplace forbidden. They were both wearing dresses, given the warm weather, Kylie in a casual maxi, Felicity in a knee-length tunic. Kylie had her hair pulled back, its pale blond making her blue eyes stand out. Felicity had never been good with hair. Hers was dark blond, shoulder-length and unruly unless she fussed with it, which she rarely did.

“My book party is just a week after the launch of the entrepreneurial boot camp,” Kylie said. “That won’t stretch you too thin?”

“Not at all.” The one-day boot camp, the brainchild of Dylan McCaffrey, another Knights Bridge newcomer, was Felicity’s biggest event yet in her hometown. “I did corporate event planning in Boston for three years. I love being on my own, having the chance to do more fun events. Baby showers, bridal showers—your book party. I have a Jane Austen tea party on Sunday at the local assisted-living residence.”

“The aptly named Rivendell. There’s a lot of knowledge in that place.”

“No question,” Felicity said. “The tea includes a literary lecture and Regency period costumes.”

“You must know almost everyone there.” Kylie drank some of her tea and returned the glass to the table. Lunch had been simple—salads from the local country store, chocolate, iced tea. “I’m still fairly new to Knights Bridge. I’m doing better with names and faces, but I still get lost in the connections between the locals. Russ does, too, but he figures sometimes

the less he knows, the better. He doesn't want to know who slept with whom as teenagers, that's for sure."

Felicity wondered if her cheeks had reddened, given the turn her mind had taken a few minutes ago. "I don't, either, but since I *did* grow up here..." She picked up her iced tea. "I'll leave it at that."

"Now that's a tease! Not you and Mark Flanagan—"

"No," Felicity said. "Absolutely not. Never."

But Mark, the architect who'd renovated and owned the old mill, had a brother, and he was another story altogether.

Felicity shook off *that* thought, gulped her tea and returned to planning Kylie's book-launch party. They'd chosen the Knights Bridge Free Public Library as the venue. Written before Kylie had met Russ, this latest installment featured a lonely badger aunt who helps the mice and the badger kids with their fairy-house dilemma and in so doing reunites with her own family and friends. Felicity could sort of identify with Auntie Badger. Kylie was also illustrating a series of classic fairy tales that would launch over the winter with *Hansel and Gretel*. Then came *Sleeping Beauty* and *Little Red Riding Hood*. She was working on *Beauty and the Beast*. Felicity assumed there'd be a launch party for the series, but she and Kylie hadn't gotten that far in their discussions.

"I've been holed up here working for weeks," Kylie said with a contented sigh. "It'll be good to be around people again."

"Going from solitude to a launch party is a big change."

"It is, for sure. I've kept up with my children's story

hour at the library, and I sometimes run into people when I'm out for a walk."

Felicity had come to realize Kylie wasn't the least bit antisocial. She just had protracted periods of deep work. Felicity thought she understood, but her own work as an event manager was quite different. For one thing, the events she organized were never *her* parties, meetings or conferences. Kylie's books were very much hers. She was dedicated to her work. Felicity liked running her own business, but she'd expected to have a career in finance. When that didn't pan out, she'd ventured into event planning. She'd learned the ropes working with a small, high-end business in Boston and struck out on her own nine months ago, finally returning to Knights Bridge.

In Boston, she'd never known her clients on a personal level. These days she found herself planning events with clients who were friends and neighbors. She still had a handful of out-of-town corporate clients, but her small hometown was bursting at the seams with all sorts of parties and events. Weddings, milestone birthdays, babies, retirements, new jobs, housewarming parties. She didn't plan every get-together in town, and she didn't focus on weddings—they were a particular specialty—but with an experienced event manager right there on the river, why not hire her?

"We need to throw a party for *you* one day," Kylie said, breaking into Felicity's thoughts.

"Me? I'd need something to celebrate."

"Pick something. It doesn't have to be big. Paint the kitchen. We'll celebrate."

Felicity didn't for a moment doubt Kylie's sincerity. Kylie was incredibly genuine, with none of the ma-

neuvering and artificial niceties Felicity had too often witnessed in her work. “Cake it is,” she said lightly. “In the meantime, I’m enjoying your badgers.”

“If anyone can make badgers work at a party, it’s you, Felicity.”

“Thanks, I appreciate that. I have some ideas I want to explore. Feel free to let me know if you have any suggestions,” Felicity said as they wrapped up the party plans.

“It’ll be a fun evening. Thanks for stopping by.”

Kylie started to get up, but Felicity stopped her. “I’ll see myself out. Enjoy the perfect summer day.”

“It is perfect, isn’t it?” Kylie sighed, the sunlight catching her eyes. “I came to Knights Bridge never thinking I’d stay. Now it’s home.” She shifted her gaze back to Felicity, who was on her feet, collecting lunch dishes. “I’ll get those. Sometimes I’m tempted to throw my dirty dishes in the river, but the ducks would have my head if Mark didn’t. Oh, wait. That reminds me. He asked me to tell you that his brother is a last-minute addition to the boot camp speaker lineup and is hiring you to organize a party at the end of the day.”

“Mark—Mark Flanagan’s brother?”

“Right. Only Mark I know here.”

The only one Felicity knew, too, but she’d needed to cover for her shock.

Kylie frowned. “You know his brother, don’t you? Gabe, isn’t it? Short for Gabriel?”

Oh, she knew him, all right. She’d just been thinking about him. That night before they’d set off for college. He’d been working construction and had been tanned and muscular, eager to get out of Knights

Bridge and make something of himself. She'd been working at her father's bank in the village and restless.

Felicity nodded. "Gabe is Mark's younger brother." She tried not to sound too stiff. Keep it casual. Matter-of-fact. "It's just the two of them."

"That's what I thought." Kylie swooped up her tea glass, no sign she knew she'd stepped on a hornets' nest. "Mark had to be out of town this morning on business and wasn't sure when he'd return. It must be late in the game to add a party, but if anyone can swing it, it's you, although I suppose you could always say no."

"Thanks for letting me know." Felicity reminded herself she'd been hired to do a job, and if Gabe had been added as a speaker and wanted to sponsor a party, she would have to manage. Even if her stomach was churning. "It's short notice, but the boot camp is straightforward as events go—sort of an open house with speakers. It'll be fine."

The one-day event was meant to provide a taste of what Dylan had in mind for the periodic entrepreneurial boot camps he planned to host in Knights Bridge throughout the year. He was an ex-professional hockey player and a multimillionaire businessman from California who'd fallen in love with Olivia Frost, a graphic designer who'd returned to her hometown last year to open an inn. They were married on Christmas Eve. A few months earlier, Olivia's sister, Jessica, had married Mark Flanagan. That was just one of the many connections that were part of life in their small town.

Felicity smiled, trying to take any shock and dread out of her expression. She was a pro. She needed to

act like one. She swallowed, breathed. “Gabe isn’t in town yet, is he?”

“I don’t think so,” Kylie said. “Mark didn’t say.”

Felicity gathered dishes and started toward the glass doors into the apartment. “I assume Gabe will be staying with him. Doesn’t matter. Thanks for the information.”

“Mark will be back soon if you want to talk to him.”

Felicity thanked her again and headed into the apartment. She dropped off her dishes in the kitchen. The mill’s dozen apartments were spacious, sleek and modern, with an industrial feel to them—Mark hadn’t fought the building’s origins—given their tall, arched windows, cement floors and brick walls. Felicity loved the views of the winding, shallow river. Kylie had added her own touches to her apartment, now shared with her husband. Sherlock Badger, propped next to a task lamp on her worktable, oversaw her sketches and scribblings, as she liked to call them.

“Wish me luck, Sherlock,” Felicity said under her breath as she headed out.

When she reached the parking lot in front of the mill, Felicity forced herself not to break into a run. She had no reason to run. She wasn’t late for anything. She wasn’t being chased by a bear. She had her workload under control. She was letting herself get freaked out for no reason. So what if Gabe Flanagan was speaking on Saturday and wanted to throw a party? Despite that night between high school and college, they’d never been an item. They’d been friends. They’d had a falling-out and hadn’t seen each other in three years, and it was

natural that would be on her mind. The trick now was to put it out of her mind.

She took in a breath, releasing some of her tension. She'd walked to the mill, enjoying the mid-summer day before heat and humidity had a chance to build in over the next few days. Nestled on the river, the Mill at Moss Hill had started its life in 1870 as a manufacturer of straw hats, immensely popular at the time. They hadn't been made here since the first years after World War I. The mill had enjoyed a few short-lived incarnations before giving up life as a factory—well before Mark had seen its potential for a new century and got to work. Felicity remembered the sprawling, abandoned property he'd gotten hold of, with its boarded-up brick-and-cement buildings, Do Not Enter and Danger signs and overgrown grounds.

She looked across the quiet road to woods that rose steeply to the top of Moss Hill itself. The trees with their lush foliage and evergreen needles were unmoving under the blue summer sky. As teenagers, Mark and Gabe both had vowed to get out of Knights Bridge and never return. They'd been ambitious and driven, determined not to repeat their father's mistakes and drift through life, dreaming and complaining about what might have been. Mark's vow never to return hadn't stuck. After a few years in Boston, he moved back to his hometown, launched a successful business as an architect and married Jessica Frost, who'd never lived anywhere else.

Gabe had never returned to Knights Bridge to live.

Felicity hadn't expected to return, either, but she had never made any vows to the contrary. Her hometown *was* small and a bit off the beaten track, changed

forever with the construction of the sprawling Quabbin Reservoir early last century. Felicity's own family had been displaced from Prescott, the smallest of the four small towns lost to history in the now-flooded Swift River Valley. They'd been bankers, accountants and bookkeepers, never farmers and factory workers. She had to be the first MacGregor event planner...now with a party to plan for Gabe Flanagan.

Mark trotted out from the main building and caught up with her before she started up to the road to her house. He was tawny-haired, blue-eyed and lanky, dressed in a polo shirt and khakis. He and his younger brother bore a strong resemblance to each other, but Gabe's eyes were a deeper marine blue, his build naturally more muscular.

"Hey, Felicity," Mark said. "I just got back from meetings in Worcester. Did Kylie tell you about Gabe?"

"She did, yes."

"Great. I hope it's not a problem."

"No problem. Did he give you a budget?"

"I'd spend what you need to make it nice and hand him the bill. You know what you're doing."

"Will do." Felicity hesitated but decided to ask the question gnawing at her. "Does Gabe know I bought the river house?"

"I might have mentioned it. He knows I sold it."

Not the same thing but Felicity didn't pursue the subject. She motioned up the road. "I should get going."

"You walked? Do you need a ride? I can drop you off."

"It's a great day for a walk."

Mark didn't look convinced, but he simply said goodbye and returned to his office.

Felicity heaved a sigh and crossed the parking lot to the road. She had known Gabe's name would come up now that she was living in Knights Bridge, and she anticipated she'd run into him at some point. He'd attended Mark and Jess's wedding last September. Felicity had been invited but had been on the road for a major conference that weekend, her last before giving notice. She doubted she'd have attended even without a conflict. She hadn't wanted to risk any unresolved, long-buried emotions rising to the surface. Mark's wedding wouldn't have been the right time or place for her and Gabe to see each other again.

The entrepreneurial boot camp wasn't the right time or place, either, but there was nothing she could do about it.

She came to a narrow bend in the river and crossed a red-painted covered bridge, a plaque noting it had been built in 1845. She veered off onto a one-lane paved road that wound through open fields then toward the river. It looped back to the river road, but Felicity's house was located on the curve, tucked among evergreens, oaks, maples and birches on the edge of the steep, wooded riverbank. It was contemporary in style but blended with the landscape, a hallmark of Mark Flanagan's work. He'd designed and built the house two years ago on land his paternal grandfather had purchased decades ago as a campsite. Mark had lived there for a short time, but he and Jess had opted to restore an old house in the village.

Felicity turned onto the driveway, which led to a detached garage. Given its connection to the Flanagans, she'd thought twice before she'd toured the

house. Then she'd thought more than twice before making an offer.

And now here she was.

She'd grown up on a quiet residential street near the high school, but she'd loved to ride her bike out along the river. Her parents still lived in town but were visiting friends in Virginia. They'd retired a year ago. Her father had presided over the local bank, and her mother had been a CPA in town. They'd loved their work and now they loved retirement. Felicity's older brother—her only sibling—had followed their father into banking and lived outside Amherst with his wife, a hospital administrator, and their two small children. The little ones—a boy and a girl—*loved* to visit their aunt Felicity and get into her supply closet. Stickers, ribbons, balloons, streamers, markers, paints, colored pencils, paper of all types and sizes. Kid heaven. She'd finally had to lay down a few rules after they'd decorated her house one time too many.

Her parents had never trusted Gabe. Not that they'd ever said so outright. Not their style, but Felicity was adept at reading between the lines. "Driven, ambitious, not ready to settle down." Those and many similar comments had been code for "stay away."

If only she'd listened.

Restless and on the verge of being out of sorts, she bypassed the front door and went up the stairs to the back deck. The views of the river, the sounds of the water coursing over rocks and the potential for a variety of gardens had sold her on the house. It was perfect for days such as today. Its history was just part of the deal. She'd weighed the pros and cons of buying the house. There were many pros. Convenience, size, cost, quality, land-

scaping, layout, proximity to friends and family. The only serious drawback: her history with the property.

Gabe.

She sat at her square wood table, shaded by oak, hemlocks and white pine at the back of the house, above the river. People often said Knights Bridge had the feel of a place where time had stopped. Since moving back to her hometown, Felicity sometimes felt as if time had gone backward for her, but she hoped that would pass once she finished decorating and made the place completely hers. Gabe's unexpected appearance at the boot camp wouldn't help. She could be a professional about it. They weren't teenagers anymore. They weren't even friends.

Today was Wednesday and the boot camp was Saturday.

It'd be done and dusted in no time, and he'd be gone to wherever he was hanging his hat these days.

Feeling calmer, Felicity listened to the rustle of leaves in a light breeze, stirring the stillness of the summer afternoon. Through high school, she and Gabe would come out to his grandfather's "camp" on the river to sneak down to their personal swimming hole, play cards by a campfire, meet up with friends. They were in the same class, but as an October baby, he was almost a year older than she was.

They'd been tight. Good friends. He'd been a reluctant student with big ambitions after high school. She'd been a good student with no real focus for after graduation. She figured she'd get a degree in finance. Something like that. She'd put a lot of her energy into encouraging Gabe.

She chewed on her lower lip, pushing back the flood

of memories the news about Gabe's impending return to town had triggered.

One memory in particular, of a night much like last night had been. Warm, still, starlit. She and Gabe had a fire going in the outdoor fire pit, the only permanent structure then on the Flanagans' riverfront campsite. They hadn't needed the fire's heat. The flames were atmosphere, creating a glow that encompassed just her and Gabe, as if they were in their own little world. They'd been getting ready to leave for separate colleges hundreds of miles apart, feeling the mixed emotions of what lay ahead of them. Fear, uncertainty, excitement, resolve. They'd all bubbled up that night. Neither of them had lived anywhere but Knights Bridge. What would life be like outside their small town?

"We'll stay friends," she'd said, half to herself. "We'll always be friends, won't we, Gabe?"

"Always, Felicity. Always."

He hadn't hesitated. She'd believed him, had needed to hear—wanted to hear—those words.

Later, with the fire dying and stars glistening overhead, they'd gotten carried away.

Felicity let out a long breath. It'd been a wild night. No question. She wondered if Gabe even remembered it.

She put it out of her mind. Her life in Knights Bridge was good. Fun, energizing, busy. It was different from where she thought she'd end up when she'd left for college in upstate New York, and maybe it wasn't what her friends and family or anyone else had expected.

No maybe about it. It was *definitely* not what anyone had expected.

“Except Gabe.”

The words were out before she could stop them.

She could hear him now, on a cold February morning three years ago—the last time she’d seen him. “You have to do what you *want* to do, Felicity. You’re doing what everyone *expects* you to do.”

“What if what everyone expects and what I want are the same thing?”

“They aren’t.”

That was Gabe. Always so certain.

No way had he changed in three years.

Sometimes she wished he’d fought harder to maintain their friendship, but he hadn’t fought at all. If he had? Would she have taken that first event management job, or with him breathing down her neck would she have tried again as a financial analyst—to prove to him she could do the work, *wanted* to do the work? Giving up fit right into his ideas about her, but would he have approved of her alternate career? Would he have encouraged her, or would he have told her not to “settle” as a party planner?

She checked her phone for an email, text or voice mail from Gabe about the boot camp party, but there was nothing. He wouldn’t have understood her choice of new career. He’d have wanted it both ways. She’d face her failure as a financial analyst *and* come out on the other end in a stable, high-paying job.

She did fine as a party planner. She’d paid down her debt, reined in her spending and bought a house.

She sent Saturday’s caterer—a friend from town—a quick email to set up a time to discuss Gabe’s addition to the day.

She let that be enough for now. She'd work on Kylie's party and tackle Gabe's party later.

She brought all eight books in the Badgers of Middle Branch series out to the deck and set them on the table for inspiration. She grabbed her brainstorming colored pencils and a pad of lined yellow paper and a pad of plain white paper.

Badgers. She'd think about badgers.

But she was positive when he'd told her she was hacking away in the wrong jungle and needed to get out of finance that Gabe Flanagan hadn't envisioned her figuring out how to incorporate badgers into a party at the Knights Bridge public library.