

Chapter One

For the first time in the five days since she'd started work as a small-town New England innkeeper, Adrienne Portale felt relaxed and comfortable as she took her coffee outside on a beautiful early September morning. She stood on the edge of the stone terrace off the kitchen of the classic center-chimney house built in 1803 on what had been then, and was now, a quiet country road.

She looked out at the inn's extensive herb and flower gardens. "I'm not in over my head," she whispered to herself. "I didn't bite off more than I can chew."

The Farm at Carriage Hill was a unique establishment. It wasn't exactly a farm, and it wasn't a traditional inn, either. It wasn't open to drop-ins. Adrienne's first guests wouldn't arrive until next weekend. The inn was booked through the popular foliage season with the type of small events for which it was ideally suited—showers, weddings, birthdays, lunches, seminars, reunions. The antique house-turned-inn was off the beaten track, part of its appeal. It was situated amid rolling fields and woods two miles from the center of Knights Bridge, a classic New England village west of Boston.

Adrienne sat at a round table and listened to birds twittering in the trees, herbs and flowers. She didn't know what kind of birds. She could learn. *Wanted* to learn. She recognized some of the herbs—parsley, oregano, thyme, basil, cilantro, at least three kinds of mint—and could tell a maple tree from an oak or a white pine. She wasn't bad with flowers. Not great, but not bad. She'd trimmed a bed of coreopsis yesterday. The property needed a regular gardener. That was right at the top of the list of changes she planned to recommend.

She leaned back, cupping her mug with both hands. The garden had bark-mulched paths and was bordered by an old stone wall. Carriage Hill, for which the inn was named, loomed across fields dotted with wildflowers. Adrienne promised herself she'd hike up to the summit before she'd need to do it in snowshoes. The locals liked to joke it could snow any day now, but she knew that was an exaggeration. She smiled, enjoying the perfect late-summer morning. She'd finish her coffee, whip up breakfast in the big country kitchen and then get on with her day.

She heard someone humming and sat up straight in surprise, almost spilling her coffee. Olivia McCaffrey, Carriage Hill's owner, who lived up the road with her husband, Dylan? Maggie Sloan, Olivia's business partner?

No. Not Olivia or Maggie.

Adrienne set her coffee on the table and jumped to her feet. She was still in her nightgown and robe. Before she could leap back inside, a man, humming merrily, materialized in the side yard. He stopped abruptly, a heavy-looking sack of something on one shoulder.

She recognized him immediately.

Adam Sloan.

He was one of six Sloan siblings—five brothers and one sister. Adam was—fourth? Adrienne thought so but she'd have to consult the cheat sheet Vic had emailed her detailing the family connections of the people she'd most likely encounter in her new job. Vic Scarlatti being her birth father, a retired diplomat and her reason for ever having stepped foot in Knights Bridge in the first place.

Adam was tall, broad-shouldered, dark-haired and as sexy as she remembered from when she'd first met him last winter, when she'd house-sat for Vic. Adam was the stonemason Sloan. Quiet, she recalled.

He took her in with a quick glance. His charcoal- gray canvas shirt was rolled up to his elbows, his forearms tanned and muscled. He was dressed for physical work, including sturdy work boots. “Adrienne. Hey, there. Welcome back to Knights Bridge.”

“Adam. Hi. Adam. I...um...”

Adrienne cleared her throat. She was never at a loss for words. She’d drunk wine with a European prince. She’d stocked a world-famous actor’s wine cellar. Why was she tongue-tied now, with a good-looking stonemason?

Because you aren’t dressed, for one thing.

She subtly tightened the belt to her bathrobe. It wasn’t one of the inn’s sturdy terry robes that hung in each of its guest rooms. It was a slinky, lace-trimmed black robe over a matching nightgown. Not her usual style. She felt downright exposed but did her best not to look self-conscious. “It’s good to be back.”

He frowned. “Maggie and Olivia forgot to tell you I was coming.”

“Or I missed it. It doesn’t matter.” They were her employers, and Adam was Maggie’s brother-in-law. No way was Adrienne saying more. She waved a hand, careful given the precarious state of her attire. “Feel free to do your thing.”

“I’m just dropping off supplies.”

“Supplies for...what, exactly?”

“I’m rebuilding a stone wall that was disturbed during construction of the new addition.”

The addition included a first-floor suite for a live-in innkeeper, a first for the Farm at Carriage Hill. Its design, both inside and outside, fit seamlessly with the rest of the attractive antique house with its narrow, cream-colored clapboards and double-hung windows.

“It’s not a big job,” Adam added.

Adrienne had noticed the pile of stones and broken mortar behind the house but hadn’t thought much about it. She’d assumed it was debris from construction and would be hauled off eventually. “Sounds good.” She kept her tone neutral, no betrayal of her awkwardness. “Is there anything I can do for you?”

His blue eyes settled on her just long enough to make it clear he was well aware he’d caught her before she’d had a chance to get dressed. “All set.” He paused ever so slightly. “Don’t let me keep you from anything.”

Such as a shower, clothes, shoes, breakfast. More coffee. It was tough to deal with a rugged stonemason while under-caffeinated, never mind in nightclothes. She pushed back her hair—long, dark, curly, messy—with one hand. “Sure thing.” She thought she at least sounded unselfconscious. “Give me a shout if I can help with anything.”

“Will do. Have you heard from Vic since you got here?”

Adrienne nodded. “A few emails.”

Adam shifted the bag on his shoulder. “I won’t be long right now, but I’ll be back later this afternoon. That work?”

“Works fine.”

He continued past her to his pile of rubble. He was muscular, fit. Made sense that a man who hauled rocks and mortar and sledgehammers and such for a living would be in good shape.

Adrienne drank the rest of her coffee. It was lukewarm but she didn’t care. She’d realized pretty much everyone in Knights Bridge knew about her and Vic Scarlatti, but she still wasn’t used to people mentioning him to her. She’d learned he was her biological father a year ago. He hadn’t known about her, either. She’d figured that out when she’d house-sat for him last winter, not telling him that her mother had finally admitted she and Vic’d had a fling in Paris and Adrienne was the result. He’d retired after a forty-year career as a respected diplomat and was in the process of moving full-time into his country home on Echo Lake in little Knights Bridge, Massachusetts.

It hadn't been easy, but they'd made their peace with her mother's revelation. Adrienne had worked on her wine blog and consulting business while house-sitting for Vic, and then she'd taken a job at a Central California winery, owned by Noah Kendrick, a San Diego billionaire with his own connections to Knights Bridge. It'd been a great job. She'd done well. Yet when Noah and Phoebe, his fiancée and Maggie's sister, mentioned the Carriage Hill job, Adrienne had jumped at the chance.

The Knights Bridge effect, Vic would call it.

She took her mug inside, managing to keep her bathrobe secured around her. She owned flannel pajamas, too, but it was too warm to wear them. She'd bought the robe and nightgown on a whim last summer when she'd gone to Paris, where her mother and Vic had enjoyed their week-long affair. The Left Bank, cozy cafes, liaisons in a romantic hotel near the Musée d'Orsay. Sophia Cross had returned home to California and her fiancé, Richard Portale, passing off Adrienne as their child when she was born not quite nine months later.

Her parents had divorced when Adrienne was seven.

No wonder.

Finding out about Vic had explained so much about her mother in particular.

Adrienne set her mug on the counter in the big country kitchen. She was still obsessing about her attire. Had she made the wrong impression with Adam Sloan? Would he go back and tell his brothers about her sitting out back in a slinky black bathrobe and nightgown? The Sloans knew everyone in Knights Bridge. It could get around. Vic Scarlatti's California daughter out at Carriage Hill in a sexy black robe... she'll never fit in here...she'll get fired before Thanksgiving...

"More coffee," Adrienne groaned. "*Lots* more coffee."

She reached for the coffeepot and saw Adam through the front window. He had the back of his work van open as he lifted out another bag. He placed it on one shoulder and balanced it with one hand as he shut the van. Then he retraced his steps through the side yard to the back of the house.

Adrienne had no idea how long it would take him to rebuild the stone wall, but she'd be sure she was prepared the next time he showed up.

She put on more coffee and slipped through the old center-chimney house to the innkeeper's suite. Its wood floors coordinated with the wide-board floors in the main part of the 1803 house. Olivia Frost McCaffrey, who owned the house, was a graphic designer, her unerring sense of style and color evident in the suite's throw rugs, linens, soothing colors and woodland prints. Adrienne would have gone with white and called it a day.

She shut the door and exhaled, letting her robe come undone now that she didn't have a sexy stonemason eyeing her. She'd run into him multiple times last winter. Even as preoccupied as she'd been with her situation with Vic, she hadn't been oblivious to Adam's physical attributes. That he was the quiet Sloan only added to his appeal. A highly physical man of few words...

Adrienne groaned again. What was the matter with her? She shook off the question and pulled off her robe and nightgown, leaving them in a heap by the bed as she ducked into the suite's private bathroom. She'd hoped Vic would be in town to greet her, but he'd left for Washington ten days ago for unspecified meetings. Almost a year of retirement hadn't settled his naturally restless soul. She got it. She was restless herself. But Vic was also driven and ambitious, a contributing factor to why he hadn't known he had a daughter until Adrienne had shown up at Echo Lake last winter. It hadn't been just her mother's doing. Vic had played a role, too. He hadn't asked questions.

He'd never married. He'd implied he'd come close at least once, but Adrienne hadn't pursued the subject with him. He was in his early sixties, and while it wasn't out of the realm of possibility, she doubted he ever would marry. Her mother hadn't remarried. She

wasn't restless, but she was driven and ambitious. She'd built a successful marketing company based in San Francisco from the ground up.

"I'm a slug by comparison."

Adrienne laughed to herself as she turned on the water to the separate shower. At least her mother had never even hinted at any disappointment in her daughter. They might not have the chummiest mother-daughter relationship, but they understood each other.

Fifteen minutes later, she was showered, dressed in black jeans, a black-and-gray top and black ankle boots and on her way to the kitchen. She refilled her mug with fresh coffee. She'd more-or-less adjusted to East Coast time, but she needed two or three cups of coffee first thing in the morning. Getting startled by a stonemason had thrown her off her schedule.

She sat at the kitchen table by the front window. Adam's van was gone. She felt a tug of loneliness. Vic was her only connection to Knights Bridge—to the East Coast, in fact—and he was out of town. He hadn't greeted the prospect of his long-lost daughter returning to his adopted town as an innkeeper without question. "Are you sure, Adrienne?" he'd asked when she'd called him with the news.

Of course, she *wasn't* sure. She was winging it. Just as she had with her wine blog, her wine consulting, house-sitting for him. It was how she operated. She would put everything she had into the job, but she didn't know how long she'd last. A month? Six months? Six years?

Not six years, she thought as she drank her coffee. Right now she'd focus on six days.

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Adrienne was bleary-eyed after spending the morning in the small office off her suite. By the time she entered the kitchen, she was ready for lunch and a change of scenery.

Maggie Sloan was unloading two bags of groceries she'd set on the butcher-block island. She was a whirlwind of red curls, freckles, turquoise eyes and boundless energy. Although she wore multiple hats, catering was her primary job and the kitchen, therefore, her domain. She eyed Adrienne. "Uh-oh. You've been organizing paperwork? You've got that look."

"I'm a big believer in mega-batching. I dove in and got it done."

Maggie winced. "Was it awful? Olivia and I have just been tossing stuff on the desk for weeks."

"Everything made perfect sense." Including, Adrienne thought, the Post-it note she'd discovered stuck under a pile of insurance papers: *Adam 1st thing Th. for wall*. She'd recognized Maggie's handwriting. "I only have one more drawer to sort."

"Wow. I'm impressed."

"It helps we don't have any major events until next weekend."

Maggie nodded as she set a bag of apples on the island. "Definitely. I hope it wasn't torture."

Adrienne smiled. "I opened a window and listened to the birds."

It was true. She'd appreciated the breeze, too, as she'd plowed through information on vendors, paid and unpaid invoices, business cards, catalogs, tear-sheets from magazines with garden, decorating and food ideas, monthly printouts of a digital events calendar and vague handwritten notes like the one about Adam.

"Did you find our someday/maybe sheets for this place?" Maggie asked.

"I did." Adrienne grabbed a bag as Maggie emptied it. She folded it and placed it on the counter by the refrigerator. "I didn't read them. I wasn't sure if they're private."

"Oh, you can read them. Olivia and I did one night over a bottle of wine. That's before she got pregnant. We took two sheets of graph paper and wrote down a hundred things we'd like to do with this place. All our hopes and dreams. No censoring ourselves. We just wrote down whatever popped into our heads, and we had to get to a hundred."

"I did notice purple stains on the sheets."

"That's the wine. It was terrible but we drank the whole bottle."

"And you got to a hundred?"

"Exactly to a hundred. Hiring an innkeeper was up at the top." Maggie grinned as she lifted a jar of mayonnaise out of one of her bags. "It was one of our more sensible ideas."

Adrienne helped herself to an apple. They were local apples, of course. Paula Reds, according to the handwriting on the bag. Maggie and Olivia were hardworking, creative and can-do, but they'd taken on a lot over the past year, both personally and professionally. "I'm glad to be here," Adrienne said.

"Five days and we haven't scared you off," Maggie said cheerfully. "I ran into Adam in town. I forgot to tell you he'd be here today. He says he startled you."

"It worked out fine."

"He's quiet. Stealthy, Brandon says." Brandon was Adam's older brother and her husband, an adventure-travel guide and carpenter. "He swears Adam got away with all sorts of mischief when they were kids because he never looked guilty or tried to talk his way out of trouble. Brandon always dug himself in deeper. Still does."

Adrienne didn't know if she'd ever sort out the subtle personality differences among the Sloan siblings, especially the brothers. "Adam said he plans to stop by again this afternoon."

"He thinks he'll finish work on the wall before we get busy here." Maggie pulled out more groceries from her second bag. Locally made blueberry jam, pickles, salsa. "I have Aidan and Tyler with me, and their friend, Owen. They've gone out back to play dinosaurs. Have you met Owen yet?"

"I haven't. He's the new librarian's son, isn't he?"

"You're catching on. He and Aidan are both six. Tyler's eight. They all know more about dinosaurs than I ever want or need to know. Omnivores, carnivores, herbivores, raptors, this-a-saurus, that-a-saurus."

"I never played with dinosaurs as a kid," Adrienne said with a smile.

"Me, either. Zero interest. My younger sisters did. They used them for their first stage productions. No surprise they became theater majors." Maggie lifted a carton of frozen phyllo dough from the bag. "One thing I don't make from scratch is phyllo dough."

"Does anyone?"

Maggie pulled open the freezer and shoved in the phyllo dough. As the freezer door shut, she pushed back her hair, blew out a breath and then inhaled slowly. "I've been running around all morning. School can't start fast enough. The rest of today, tomorrow, Labor Day weekend and then it's Tuesday. Freedom. The boys are ready. They're bored. I think Adam's work on the stone wall is the only thing I forgot to tell you."

"We warned each other we'd be figuring things out on the fly," Adrienne said. "You've never hired an innkeeper and I've never been one."

"But you've run a high-end California winery," Maggie said.

Not for long, and "run" was a bit of a stretch. "I straightened things out at the winery and helped get the right person in place for the job—someone more suited to what needed to be done next than I was. Noah and Phoebe made everything easier for me."

"They're quite a pair, aren't they?"

They were, indeed. Phoebe O'Dunn was Maggie's older sister and the former director of the Knights Bridge library. Now she was engaged to billionaire Noah Kendrick. Noah had made his mark with a high-tech company he'd started in San Diego and expanded with the help of his childhood friend, Dylan McCaffrey, Olivia's husband. Noah had met Phoebe after Dylan's arrival in Knights Bridge. Although not a couple anyone would have put together, they were ideally suited to each other, and, from everything Adrienne had seen in her months with Kendrick Winery, deeply in love.

Knights Bridge had been on a roll lately with drawing unlikely couples together.

Was that why *she* was here? Never mind her long-lost father and her new job. Had she returned to Knights Bridge in hopes she'd find herself a man?

It'd be an unlikely man for sure, Adrienne thought, amused. When she'd left town for Kendrick Winery, she hadn't harbored a secret attraction for any of the men she'd run into during her winter on Echo Lake. She'd remembered Adam Sloan as particularly sexy but hadn't gone beyond that. She'd been preoccupied, house-sitting for a man who didn't know she was his daughter and making peace with her mother's dishonesty.

She shuddered, refusing to think about those troubled days. If she'd learned nothing else this past year, it was that she wasn't a driven mover-and-shaker. Not that she hadn't already known on some level, but now she knew it to her core—to her bones.

It felt right, being back in Knights Bridge, being here at the Farm at Carriage Hill, at least for now.

Maggie put a bag of fresh green and wax beans from her widowed mother's garden into the refrigerator. "Be careful with the beans. The boys helped pick them. I'd watch for anything and everything. Stems, leaves, ants."

"Thanks for the heads-up," Adrienne said with a laugh.

"I'll putter in here while the boys play out back. I won't be in your way?"

"Not at all."

"I know I have to let go around here. That's why we have you. I piled too much on my plate. Now with Olivia in her third trimester..." Maggie stopped herself. "I'm not a control freak but delegating doesn't come naturally to me."

"That's often true of entrepreneurs." Adrienne smiled as she grabbed a hunk of cheddar cheese from the refrigerator to go with her apple. "That's what my mother tells me, anyway."

"Sounds about right."

Adrienne took her lunch out to the terrace. The day had warmed up nicely but it wasn't hot. Maggie was obviously good at a lot of different things, and she liked to do them. She enjoyed the variety, the challenge—the activity. Finally, though, she'd admitted she was feeling harried and overwhelmed and needed some help. How much she'd let go, though, remained to be seen.

The apple was crisp and perfect with the cheese. Adrienne loved California, but this quiet corner of New England spoke to her. It had even through a cold, snowy winter when she'd been torn apart about so much. Part of her had wanted to hate Vic Scarlatti and blame him for not knowing about her. But she'd come to realize she didn't blame anyone. Not him, not her mother, not her dad.

She noticed the gray stone of the terrace. Had Adam Sloan built it? She shook her head in answer to her own question. It had been added by the previous owners before Adam was born, at the same time they'd installed the flower and herb gardens. She finished her apple in the garden, walking on a bark-mulched path past fragrant purple basil. Markers for various plants would be a nice touch for guests. She'd have to make sure she got the names right, but there was no rush. She had a long list of more urgent priorities.

Toward the back of the garden, she could hear Maggie's two boys and their friend Owen playing behind a small shed, apparently their usual spot. She slipped through a gap in the stone wall onto a path that led up to the McCaffrey property. There were plans to improve it. Olivia and Maggie didn't lack for plans, that was for sure.

The boys went silent. "Who's that?" one finally whispered.

"It's me, Adrienne. Your mom—Maggie's in the kitchen."

"Okay. We thought you were a giganotosaurus."

Adrienne smiled at the relief in the young voice—Tyler's, she thought. "That doesn't sound good," she said.

"It's a dinosaur," he added. "It's a theropod. That means its limbs have three toes."

"There you go," she said. "I have five toes and five fingers."

The boys giggled and returned to their play.

Adrienne noticed signs of autumn—red-tipped leaves, brown edges on ferns, yellowing field grass. Her lunch break finished, she decided to run a few errands in the village. She let Maggie know and took the ancient car Vic had loaned her. He'd kept it at his house on Echo Lake for years. It was rusted and not exactly sleek, but it ran like a top, as the saying went. She was grateful to have use of it until she figured out what to do about transportation. She'd sold her own car when she'd quit the winery and moved east. It hadn't been sleek, either.

The Farm at Carriage Hill was the last house on the dead-end country road. When Olivia's pretty house was built, the road had wound deep into the Swift River Valley, long before engineers had eyed the region for a reservoir to provide drinking water for growing, thirsty Boston to the east. By the 1920s, four small valley towns were depopulated, disincorporated and razed. Everything went. Homes, businesses, inns, camps, gas stations, general stores, factories and farms. Winsor Dam and Goodnough Dyke were finished, allowing the Swift River and Beaver Brook to flood the valley, creating the pristine waters of Quabbin Reservoir.

It was a short drive to Knights Bridge village with its classic green ringed by old houses, churches, town offices, the library and a handful of businesses. Adrienne parked on Main Street and made quick work of her errands at the post office, hardware store and country store. She didn't run into anyone she recognized and was on her way again in thirty minutes.

She parked behind Maggie's car at the inn and smiled at the sheer beauty of this place. For the first time since arriving in Knights Bridge, she didn't feel the smallest shred of doubt about her decision to take the Carriage Hill job. She got out of her car, shut the door. She could hear the stream on the other side of the road, tumbling over rocks as it worked its way toward the nearby reservoir. She breathed in the pleasant air. She could smell grass, mud and something else—a touch of mint, maybe? Was that possible this far from the backyard and its gardens?

She went inside through the separate kitchen door, painted a warm, welcoming blue, and set the bags on the butcher-block island. She noticed the mudroom door was open but assumed Maggie had gone outside to check on the boys.

A distinct moan drew Adrienne up short. "Maggie?" She ran through the mudroom onto the terrace. "Maggie—are you okay?"

She stopped abruptly, spotting Maggie sprawled on her side halfway to the shed where the boys had been playing. Adrienne leaped off the terrace and ran to her. Maggie tried to sit up but moaned again and sank back onto the bark mulch. She had one hand pressed to the right side of her face, blood seeping through her fingers.

"Easy, easy, Maggie. Let's have a look."

"I'm okay. The boys..." She leaned on her left arm and sat up partially. "Aidan, Tyler..." She couldn't seem to find the words to finish her thought. "Owen."

"They're playing dinosaurs. Did you slip on your way to fetch them?"

"I heard them yelling."

Adrienne felt a coolness inside her. "The boys? Were they caught up in their game?"

"Scared. Adrienne..."

"Hell, Maggie." It was Adam Sloan, leaping down the path to his sister-in-law. He dropped on one knee, taking her by the arm, steadying her. "Ouch. What happened?"

Her pain-racked eyes widened with unmistakable fear. "Adam. The boys. They're gone."

He looked up at Adrienne, his own eyes narrowed, mission-focused. "What's going on?"

"I just got here. I was in town. When I left, Aidan and Tyler and their friend Owen were playing behind the shed. When I got back, I heard Maggie and found her here. She says she heard the boys yelling."

Adam gave a curt nod and shifted back to Maggie. “The boys took off on you?”

“I thought they were getting carried away with their dinosaur game. I came out to give them a two-minute warning that we were going to head home.” Her voice cracked. She lowered her blood-smeared hand, revealing a swelling, two-inch gash on her right temple. “They were gone. I called them but they didn’t answer. I was running back to the house to grab my phone and call Brandon.”

“You tripped?” Adam asked.

“I must have. I went flying and hit my head on a rock or something. I don’t think I blacked out. Then Adrienne got here.” Maggie started to get up, flailing her non-bloody hand, but Adam held her steady. “I’m okay, Adam. I need to find the boys.”

“Whoa. You’re not going anywhere. Where’s Brandon?”

“He’s working in town.”

She tried to get up again but faltered, and Adam sat her back down on the mulched path. “You need to stay put and see to that head. Adrienne will help. I’ll get in touch with Brandon and whoever else we need. We’ll find the boys.”

“I can’t just sit here and do nothing...”

“Someone needs to be here if they come back.” Adam got to his feet and touched Adrienne’s shoulder. “Tend to Maggie, okay?”

“Of course.”

He nodded and ran down the path. He was already on his phone as he disappeared behind the shed where the three boys had set up their dinosaurs. Adrienne figured he’d call in whatever cavalry he felt was needed. He was a local. Family. He had everyone’s number.

She helped Maggie up, reassuring her as she got her feet under her. She had on wide-legged linen pants, a loose top and flip-flops, not great for charging through a garden. Blood dripped onto her shirt. “We’ll get some ice for that cut,” Adrienne said.

“I’m fine, Adrienne. Help find the boys.”

“I don’t know the woods. I’ll just be underfoot, and imagine if I end up lost—”

“You’d never hear the end of it.” Maggie attempted a smile. “I don’t know why they took off. I need to check where they were playing again. I was focused on them not being there—I didn’t notice anything else. Maybe I missed something.”

“Maggie...”

She raised her chin, a stubborn look in her turquoise eyes even with blood dripping down the side of her face. “I can go on my own.”

“There’s no need.” Adrienne put out her hand. “I’ll go with you.”

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