

Second Chances: Romance & Mysteries

Three Romantic Suspense Novellas

Bedlam at Bridal Falls

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Deadly Reunion

Sharon H. Carpenter



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Chapter One



Claire Anderson winced at the infernal racket of grinding gears. Her feet danced between the clutch and the gas as she downshifted to get more power to her little red Beemer.

She should have arrived at Bridal Falls Lodge hours ago, but absolutely nothing had gone as planned. Atlanta traffic snarled on every highway, and a wreck on one of the mountain roads caused not only delay, but anxiety, and that was before the deer tried to become a hood ornament.

“I wish Ben were driving.” A picture of the handsome hunk, her ... friend ... filled her mind. The term “boyfriend” seemed juvenile, since they were in their fifties.

A long, arduous day evolved into a past-dinner arrival. Her mouth watered for a steak, but she’d probably need to be satisfied with cheese and crackers. If she was lucky.

Topping the rise, Claire sighed and hummed the Hallelujah Chorus under her breath. A large chalet-style structure seemed to materialize from the trees, illuminated by the beautiful full moon. The windows glowed a golden welcome.

She parked her car in the circular driveway and stared at the picturesque porch and the wreath-decorated, oversized double doors, seeing nothing.

Her heart hopeful for the days to come, she wanted to move on from old hurts and grievances. A shared history—the good and the bad—was a solid foundation for restoring relationships. She'd pulled away, limiting contact to Christmas cards and the occasional phone call or text, but finally realized if she wanted these friends back in her life, she needed to show up.

And now was the time to do it because the only grievance she wasn't ready to deal with wouldn't be here.

Okay, Lord, let's do this. And help me not mess it up? Please. Warm air enveloped her as she stepped into the foyer.

"Hello, and come in. Welcome!" The young woman behind the highly polished wooden desk smiled, looking like a model in a toothpaste commercial.

"Hi. I'm Claire Anderson. I'm here with—"

"I'm so glad you arrived, Ms. Anderson," the perky blonde interrupted. "It looks like you're the first of your group to get here." She tickled the computer keyboard with bright red, Santa Claus nails. "My name's Mabel Reece, but everyone calls me MayRee. You know, like Jesus' mama."

Claire looked at the girl's nametag. It said MayRee. Wasn't Jesus' mother's name Mary?

"Well, Mary ..." Claire started.

"MayRee. Not Mary. The southern version."

"Okay. May ... Ree." Claire tried again, with a tired smile. "I'm tired, so I hope my room is ready."

MayRee's already bright countenance doubled in wattage. "Yes, ma'am! You are so blessed. Management put you in my favorite cabin. It's Bouquet. You know, like what the bride carries."

"Um, I didn't book a cabin. Our group had a block of rooms for the Whitfield College Reunion. I reserved one of those."

"Yes, ma'am, but we needed to upgrade you because of a problem with your room. And there's no extra charge because the power going out was an act of God. It's been renovated. We weren't anticipating putting guests there yet, but it's ready for you." MayRee's smile was about to put her eyes out. "Management's sorry for any inconvenience. But is there any downside to getting the

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prettiest honeymoon cabin on the property for the price of a Lodge room?”

Probably not, except it's weird to be in a honeymoon cabin without being a bride.

MayRee handed Claire a key with an attached carved wooden piece.

“Okay, I’m going to agree to be blessed. But do you expect me to keep up with this clunky keychain? You don’t have key cards?”

MayRee’s smile dimmed. “Where is the romance of a key card? That ‘clunky thing’ is a piece of black cherry wood, hand-carved into a beautiful bride’s bouquet by a master whittler. It’s like a permanent symbol of love.”

Claire tipped her head to the ceiling, blew out her breath with a chuckle, and looked back at MayRee. “Who needs practical if you’re in love, right? Please tell me I have a place to relax this evening before my friends get here.”

“Of course! And if you want practical, there’s an electronic keypad lock you can use after you get in. The carved key is only for the deadbolt. You don’t have to use it all the time and take it with you. It’s like extra security.”

“Sounds perfect. Thank you. Now, my cabin? How do I get there?”

“It isn’t far. You took the left fork to come up here.” She pointed at a small map on the counter. “You go back and take this road. Bouquet is the last on the left, closest to the falls. You’ll find it, easy-peasy.”

Claire gathered the key and paperwork. She was ready to unpack, freshen up, and get a good night’s sleep before meeting her past head-on.

* * *

Claire stretched and held it for a moment, relaxing into the soft pillows. Peeking through her lashes, she noticed soft light filtering through the windows and the French door. She scrunched her cold

nose, enjoying being warm and snuggly, but accepted she had to get up and start the day.

She pushed into a sitting position, got up, and padded to the bathroom for her morning rituals. After brushing her teeth with her eyes barely open, she looked into the mirror and grimaced at the dark smudges around her eyes. There were traces of lipstick on her mouth.

“Ugh ... one night of exhaustion destroyed years of skin care.”

Mentally reviewing the prior evening, she rolled her head from shoulder to shoulder, stretching her neck muscles, and stood up straight when she realized she’d forgotten to check in with Ben.

Determined to call him ASAP, Claire lathered her face with warm water and the feel-good, foamy stuff that promised no wrinkles and silky, blemish-free skin. After rinsing and drying her face, she felt better. A white robe hung from the door hanger, and she slipped it onto her body, shrugging into the soft cotton folds. A definite upgrade from her department store housecoat.

Fully awake, she lifted a brow at the marble tub, the wooden floor, and the beautiful fixtures. Branded lotions, potions, and soaps were in the shower and on the counter. Everything fabric was embroidered with a tiny, sage-green Bridal Falls Lodge and Resort logo. Clean, natural, and luxurious.

Claire stepped into the bedroom, stared at the rumpled king-sized bed, and admitted to herself opulence slept exceptionally well. The bed looked like a massive cloud of white with a puffy comforter and plush pillows, plus a Christmas quilt in shades of cream, white and silver. The walls were barely-there green with a creamy white trim. The ceiling was tongue-and-groove wood, which complemented the light wood antique furniture. Frothy white curtains billowed to the sides of the windows and French door.

“Wow ... this is ... romantic. Perfect for a honeymoon.” She bit her bottom lip and halfway giggled. “Maybe it’s a good thing Ben is back in Florida.”

Seeking morning elixir, she stepped through the door to the living area. She could imagine herself with Ben, cuddled up on the tanned leather couches, watching a fire in the stacked rock fireplace.

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Dark hardwood floors grounded the room, and the vaulted wooden ceiling echoed the soft brown tones. So cozy. The wool rug was shades of green, cream, and blue.

She turned to the open kitchen, rejoicing at the sight of a single-serve coffee maker sitting on the quartz countertop. Hopefully, the lovely wood cabinets would yield coffee pods, and the stainless refrigerator hid creamer. As she started her search, someone knocked on the door.

“It’s only seven-fifteen. Really?”

Claire opened the door to the cabin to see two insulated bags on the porch. The note on top read, “The Sandersons.” A winterized, green side-by-side sat beside Claire’s red BMW. A wizened little man wearing a red-and-white striped beanie, a flannel shirt, and bib-overalls was lifting a leg to get in. He looked a bit like a grizzled, coveralled gnome.

“Hey! Good morning.”

The little man turned around and waved. “Greetings! Grace and peace to you.” His deep and clear voice was at odds with his appearance.

She chuckled. How unusual. “Well, grace and peace to you as well.” She reached down to lift the bags and caught a whiff of coffee.

“Oh, I hate to say it, but you left this at the wrong cabin. There are no Sandersons here.” She tried to keep the sorrow from her voice as she held out the bags.

“Yup. The Sandersons didn’t make the honeymoon, not sure they even got to the wedding. They aren’t here to eat their breakfast, so I guess it’s yours.”

“Oh, thank You, God!” She set the food bag back on the porch and opened the other. Two extra-large, stainless-steel, insulated cups filled with morning nectar and sporting the Lodge’s logo nestled inside. “And thank you, too, kind sir.”

“Name’s Hank. I’m the handyman around here.” He smiled and stepped onto the porch to reach out a knotty, arthritic-looking hand and shake hers. His grip was stronger than his hands implied. “God will supply all you need from His riches in glory. It’s what He does.”

Claire let go of Hank’s hand to reach in and get the two coffees.

She held out the second cup. "This is a blessing because I was stumbling around looking to start a pot. This one's for you."

"Why, thank you, sweet lady, but I'm going to pass. I need to get about my Father's business, and you might need another cup to get going this morning." He waved as he stepped off the porch, got into the little vehicle, and drove away.

Claire stepped back into the cabin. "What an odd encounter." She pulled the robe closer around her neck and went into the bedroom to dress.

* * *

Ben Hastings's anxiety kicked up another notch when Claire's voicemail picked up again. Ben, the director of security for Trinity Sands Beach Club, swiveled his chair around to his desk and threw down his phone, knocking over his half-full, cold cup of coffee.

"Whoa. Maybe I should come back another time?" Police Sgt. Mike Spencer, Ben's good friend, held up his hands as he walked into the office.

Ben grabbed tissues from the box on the bookshelf and blotted coffee from papers and files on his desk.

"Hand me some of those paper towels, will you? This is typical of how my morning has gone."

Mike chuckled. "Are you having a hard time with your ladylove away?"

Ben blotted harder. "Nope. I'm having a tough time because she isn't answering her phone. I got a generic text from her last night." He blew out a hard breath, lowered his shoulders, and threw the coffee-stained tissues and paper towels in the garbage. "I'm not trying to keep tabs on her, but I'd like to talk to her."

"You do realize it's not daylight? If she's awake, she's probably in the shower." Mike shook his head and walked over to perch on the corner of Ben's desk.

"I'd call the hotel to make sure she got there, but it'd probably make her mad. And you know how she gets when she thinks I'm

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putting her in bubble-wrap.” He sat down hard and put his head in his hands. “I’d like to know she’s ok.”

“She invited you to go with her, didn’t she?”

“Yeah, but I had jury duty.” He looked up at his friend and grimaced. “Prosecution made a last-minute deal. I could’ve gone but didn’t know ’til she’d left.”

Mike pursed his lips and nodded, eyes fixed on the wall calendar. “Are you still thinking about popping the question?”

“Done thinking.” Ben smirked and cocked his head. “I’ve decided.”

His friend looked at him and chuckled. “You’ve got a ring?”

“Yep.”

“Why’re you waiting? Take some time off and go seal the deal. Even you can make it romantic in the mountains.” Mike got up, slapped Ben on the shoulder, and walked to the door. “Don’t mess it up, man. Claire’s a keeper, and time moves on, waiting for no one.”

Ben stood and moved around the desk. He put his hands in his pockets, lifting to his toes. “I think you might be right. About this. I’ll wrap up some loose ends and be gone within the hour.”

Ben pumped his fist in the air like a victorious warrior. “I’ll go home, throw some stuff in a bag, and surprise Claire for dinner.”