

Chapter One



My first view of Northern Illinois farmland reminded me of something mother used to tell us when we were children. *Snowflakes come from the angels having a pillow fight.* Someone up there had declared war, because the landscape—what I could see of it through the windshield of the rented car—consisted of a white blur. I took it slow and stuck close to the shoulder of the road.

The weather didn't improve as we got closer to our destination, Inglenook Resort, a family mansion that had been spruced up and turned into a four-star resort according to *Frequent Traveler Magazine*. Mansion. That's just a big house, but since this is the United States, you can call your home anything you like.

I heard a rustle and glanced in the rearview mirror. My older brother, Edward, was awake and taking in the view through the passenger window.

"Are you sure you have the directions right?" he asked.

"Positive."

He pulled his black wool coat tighter across his chest and told me to turn up the heater. I complied. When I glanced back again, he had shut his eyes, though I doubted if he would fall back asleep. He hated what lay in store for

him at Inglenook Resort—a public appearance.

At six-feet-two, with dark hair, shoulders like a bull, a trim waist, and a square jaw, Edward presents an imposing figure, much like a defensive lineman, which is the position he played in college football—an unusual outlet for an English major. The Van Dyke beard and intelligent grey eyes add a touch of arrogance.

No matter what he looked like, he couldn't pass for a seventy-year-old grandmother type, which was everybody's first thought when they picked up one of the books he wrote under the pseudonym of Aunt Civility. Extra pre-autographed copies of his latest release, *Civility Rules*, were in my suitcase, pre-autographed because his publisher's solution to the image problem was to send Edward to public appearances as Aunt Civility's official representative.

Edward always wanted to be a writer, though he envisioned a journalism career spent sitting in the press box and reporting on the latest football or basketball game. Upon graduation, he found the competition in his chosen field fierce, so when a friend suggested he apply to Classical Reads to ghost write their newest series, he sent in his resume. He had their top three qualifications: he could retain useless information (to reel off sports statistics going back to 1910 was child's play for Edward), he cleaned up well (they had requested a headshot), and he turned out copy faster than any other applicant. When the Aunt Civility series took off, he didn't have the willpower to walk away from the fat paychecks.

It's actually not that difficult to believe that Edward took to writing etiquette books. He's a romantic at heart, and he secretly sees himself in the hero role of a 1940s film. I believe his ego also played a part in his decision to stick

around. People treat you differently when you say *please* and *thank you*. If you stand when a woman enters the room, you're elevated above the slobs who stay in their chairs, and when you're not intimidated by the finger bowl at a formal dinner, your fellow guests look on you with awe. As his brother, I still see the unpolished edges.

For my part, I'm thirty pounds lighter than my brother is, a few inches shorter and clean-shaven, but I do have the dark hair and gray eyes. For the record, I played halfback. My official title is secretary, which includes the usual rigmarole of office work as well as keeping the author happy by meeting his every demand. I think of myself as a babysitter.

Edward might be able to memorize facts about which fork goes where and be able and willing to advise on the proper ensemble for an evening wedding, but head knowledge and practical application are two different animals. Edward doesn't play well with others. So, I buck him up or calm him down depending on the situation and take care of all the details in-between. Sometimes it gives me a pain in the side, but one of my best-kept secrets is that I'm proud of my brother.

We arrived at our destination by dusk, and the resort's private drive proved less hazardous than the open road. The tires of dozens of vehicles had already laid a trail of packed snow on a winding path lined with looming fir trees, their branches bowing forward under the weight of icicles.

It didn't look like the grounds of a four-star resort, but maybe there were bridle paths hidden in the woods, or else the tree line was hiding man made ski hills covered with snow bunnies. I cracked my window open. Not a sound except the hiss of tires on the snow. It was cold, bleak, and

dead and reminded me of the ominous backdrop of the horror movie, *The Shining*, minus the mountains.

"This can't be it." Edward's irritability increased every time he ventured out of his familiar habitat, and the dreary weather wasn't helping.

I countered with a light chuckle. "What are you talking about? It looks like a Christmas card scene."

"Only if Santa had been slaughtered by his reindeer and buried in the woods. It's hard to believe that anyone would live here on purpose, let alone pay to come here."

I drove between two stone pillars that supported a wooden sign with the resort's name written in blood-red and caught my first view of Inglenook—an enormous shadow looming against the gray sky. By the front entrance, several small patios surrounded by snow-topped topiaries resembling wildlife met in the center around a gigantic fountain, now frozen into ice. Large planters on either side of the front door held hibernating shrubs dressed up with strings of lights in honor of the resort's grand opening.

"Not a sign of life." Edward leaned over to peer out the window on the opposite side of the car. "Not even a valet, unless he's frozen to death under that mound of white by the door."

I was distracted as the car went into a small spin, but with a little countersteering, I got us safely into a parking spot near the end of the row. Since nobody was around to witness the arrival of the pseudo celebrity, I let Edward open his own door, while I pulled our luggage from the trunk. He took his laptop and carryon and let his secretary handle the rest—a bag in each hand and one under my arm—and we headed for the entrance, our shoulders hunched and heads bowed against the pelting precipitation.

"I don't want to complain," he began.

"Then don't."

"We're in the middle of no man's land. When you said the event was in Chicago, I thought we'd be *in* the city."

"It's only eighty or so miles away," I said. "And why do you care? We're going to be indoors the entire time we're here."

"I didn't bring the right clothes for a blizzard."

I struggled to push open the front door and hang onto the luggage. "It's not a blizzard. It's snow."

A short man dressed in a red suit and black hat arrived just in time to close the door behind us. He had a face that reminded me of a bookie I knew—previously broken nose, small pale eyes, and a smile that didn't mean you were friends. It was the doorman, and his name tag read Alfred. He launched into a welcome speech, but I cut him off and told him he'd arrived too late for a tip.

Puddles of melting slush dirtied the pale marble floor of a sizeable lobby, where a small crowd hovered around the check-in counter and waited to be processed.

"I'm going to look for a cup of coffee," Edward said.

I told him to make mine black, thinking that if he really had manners he would have asked me what I wanted. Once I'd found a dry spot at the end of the line and set down our luggage, I took in my surroundings. The lighting was dim on account of there not being any windows, and the dark wood paneling seemed to suck up rather than reflect the light given off by torch-shaped sconces that lined the walls. The few lamps scattered around the room on end tables next to armchairs didn't help. It looked like the Inglenooks had decorated the place with leftover furniture, because nothing matched.

Behind a front counter of dark-polished wood, I could see through a glass wall into an office. Directly behind the counter, a man and woman about my age, early thirties, with matching dark auburn hair worked to process the guests, who looked like the kind of people you'd find at a resort in the middle of nowhere. Not a group of good-looking women in the bunch.

Off to my left, a placard welcomed the Victorian Preservation Society for their annual convention, but no mention was made of their guest speaker, Edward. That would suit my brother fine, because while he enjoyed lecturing groups that shared his interests, he hated meeting the average public, whom he referred to as cretins.

"That's a nice coat." The voice came from a short, stocky woman in a checkered dress of white and gray, black stockings, and sensible shoes. Her faded strawberry-blond hair had been hacked into a bob with bangs. She touched the sleeve of my leather jacket.

"My granddad brought back a jacket just like that from the war. You remind me of him. Of course, you're quite a bit younger. And his hair was blond. And he's dead."

"We almost sound like twins." I nudged the luggage forward with my foot and moved ahead with the line, and she moved along with me.

"I'm Zali. Are you here for the grand opening? It's been in all the papers. So exciting. I suppose everyone wants a peek inside the old Inglenook mansion, though I can't think why. It's just a big house." Zali beamed up at me with the pleasure of a child who has discovered a new playmate.

"Then why are you here?" I said, just to make conversation.

"Me?" Her hand went to her throat and she played with

the collar of her dress. She shifted her gaze around the room and puckered her lips together. "Me?" she repeated. "I'm just taking a little vacation." She grasped the fingers of one hand in the other, a gesture of comfort. "A little rest and relaxation."

My gaze traveled the room and landed on a geriatric group huddled in the corner assisted by canes, walkers, and one wheelchair. "This is the place for you, then. Don't imagine anything exciting ever happens here."

Zali clasped her hands behind her back and rocked on her feet, obviously pleased to raise my low expectations. "Oh, I would think murder's exciting enough for anyone."

Edward wandered up right then and handed me a Styrofoam cup of coffee. I pointed it at Zali and made introductions.

"She's here for rest and relaxation." I hoped to cut her off before she continued her theme of death, but she was determined to spread the good news.

"I was just telling him about the murder."

Edward choked on his coffee and pulled out a handkerchief to cover his coughing fit. "Pardon me," he said, his deep baritone smoothed out in what I called his *public voice*. "I thought you said murder."

I turned my back on her. "Don't mind her. She's cuckoo."

"I'm not crazy." Her tone held an icy edge, and I pulled a face for Edward's benefit and turned back to her with a bright smile.

"Of course you're not." I patted her shoulder and winked at Edward, but he turned to stare straight ahead, like a statue trying to ignore an approaching flock of pigeons.

"There was *too* a murder. A maid went to sleep and

never woke up. Something nasty put in her evening cocoa." She squinted her eyes and nodded her head. "Probably to cover the theft of the Inglenook emeralds."

It was too much for Edward. "Excuse me," he said to Zali, and to me he added, "I'll wait for you," and then he escaped like a coward to one of the armchairs.

"Inglenook emeralds, huh?" I said to Zali. "Good choice. emeralds are rarer than rubies, which would make them more valuable."

Zali crossed her arms over her sturdy bosom. "There's no such thing as the Inglenook rubies."

"Of course not."

"Next, please." The pretty clerk looked up, and I approved of the way her dark eyes and brows complimented her auburn hair. I picked up the luggage and approached the counter.

"Name please?"

"Harlow. Nicholas and Edward."

Her fingers flew over the keyboard until she paused and frowned. "The usual spelling of Nicholas?"

"That's right. N-I-C-H-O-L-A-S."

She typed again. "Let me try Nick." She stared at her computer, and then her gaze traveled from the screen to me. "I only have a reservation for Edward Harlow."

"Both rooms will be under his name."

As she continued to type, I asked, "Have the members of the Victorian Preservation Society arrived yet? They're expecting us."

"I haven't checked in anyone from that group myself. You can look in the Welcome Room. Second door on the left, past the bar." She took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, sir. There's only one room booked under Harlow."

I froze in the act of holding out the company credit card and kept my voice low. "Please tell me you're joking."

"I'm sorry sir, but I'm not. There are two queen-sized beds in your room," she offered. "It should be comfortable."

"Comfortable my eye," I snapped with a quick glance in Edward's direction. "Have you ever witnessed a 210-pound man having a fit? I have. Just add another room to the reservation."

The clerk's coloring rose, and she ran her teeth over her lower lip. "I can't. We're fully booked this weekend. You'll have to share a room."

I leaned across the counter and attempted to reason with the clerk. Her nametag read Claudia. "Claudia, you see that man seated in the armchair directly behind me?" She stood on tiptoe to peer over my shoulder. "If you don't fix me up with another room, I'm going to have to explain it to him. I don't want to explain it to him. He's already jittery because he hates to leave home, and he's here on important business. He's the guest speaker for the Victorian Preservation Society. That's Aunt Civility's official representative."

She took one last look and put her focus back on me. "I'm afraid there isn't another option, sir."

I rubbed the back of my neck, a habit of mine when I'm distressed, and wondered how to break the news to Edward.

"What seems to be the problem, Claudia?"

The second clerk moved over and peered at the computer screen. "I'm Robert. How can I help you?"

"I'm taking care of it," Claudia said through clenched teeth. "No need to jump in and save the day."

"Everything is perfectly fine," I said, knowing how

Edward would react to a scene. "This woman is being very helpful, or trying to be."

Robert laughed. "You hear that, Claudia? Your job is safe."

"Don't be an idiot. It's just that there's only one room reserved in Mr. Harlow's name, so he and his brother will have to share."

"Could I speak to the manager?" I asked, darting my gaze toward my charge. Edward had his face buried in a magazine. "Quietly?"

Robert grinned. "Who's the manager today, Claudia? Shall we flip a coin?" To me he said, "My sister, Claudia, and I own the place. You can't get any higher than us. Robert and Claudia Inglenook, at your service." Robert leaned over his sister's computer screen. "Let me see what we can do."

Claudia stretched her hands over her keyboard to block Robert's access. "I'm perfectly capable of performing a search. There isn't—another—room—available."

Her voice had started to rise in volume, so I told them to forget it and just give me two keys.

She made a few changes on the computer and hit a button. A form shot out of the printer. I signed, took the old-fashioned skeleton keys, and signaled Edward. He joined me as I headed toward a gated lift near the base of a marble staircase, and I waited until there were several people gathered there before I gave him the news, because he'd keep his tantrum to himself if there were witnesses.

"There's a slight catch," I said. "We have to share a room, but there are two beds so don't make a big deal out of it."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He then suggested we take the stairs, as if he were unaware that I was loaded down with

luggage. That's how I knew he was ticked.

We found Room 220 halfway down the upstairs hallway, directly across from a nook housing a statue of a bored-looking goddess. I unlocked the door and let Edward inside.

"Good grief."

I left the luggage and nudged past him. The first thing to assault my eye was the wallpaper. Bunches of whimsical bluebells cascaded down the walls. Deep royal-blue velvet curtains accented two queen-sized beds covered in sky-blue quilts, and an oval throw rug made of various shades of blue spiraling out of control looked like it had been inspired by a drug-induced nightmare.

"It's colorful." I went back for our bags and set them down on the floor next to a loveseat bulging with large, stuffed pillows. It resembled a blueberry about to pop.

"It looks like it was decorated by Picasso," Edward said.

"Yeah, yeah. I get it. During his Blue Period. Very funny. But don't think I'm going to wrangle us another room, because this place is packed."

I sized up the cherry wood armoire, offered as a humble substitute for closet space. I could see we'd have to fight to the death for hangers. Edward refused to let me wear anything convenient that could be folded into a drawer, like sweatpants or jeans, while I was on duty.

While he carried his precious laptop to a writing table that stood in a small enclave in the corner, I dug out our shaving kits, put them in the bathroom and returned.

Edward pulled back the curtains and looked out a set of French doors that opened onto a balcony. A small, circular table and two rattan chairs peered out from under mounds of snow.

"I imagine the place looks much better in the spring," I said, as I joined him to study the advertised view of expansive gardens and manicured lawn, now indiscernible under layers of white. He gave a long, dissatisfied sigh.

"It's pretty bleak," I said. "I'll admit that. But it's the middle of a winter snowstorm, which has its own beauty, and once the weather clears, the sun will shine and the ground will sparkle like diamonds." He grunted. "It's pristine, just like it must have been when Victorians walked the earth. Your group will love it."

I took off my leather jacket and folded it over the arm of the loveseat. "I'm starved. Let's find the restaurant." I headed for the front door. "I can unpack when we get back."

"My shirts will get wrinkled."

"Then I'll order an iron from housekeeping."

"Dinner is served at eight." Edward tapped the one page brochure that housekeeping had left on the desk. "In civilized places, dining is a formal affair. It means something more than shoving a patty of meat down your throat." He dug through his carryon bag and pulled out a stack of papers held together with a large clip. It was the dreaded speech. "Let's start on page ten."

"I can't. Not again. If I hear one more time how I should never play with a room's curtains or fiddle with the doors unless the hostess is present, I'll lose it."

He harrumphed, something I swear he must practice when I'm not around. "At least you've been paying attention."

"I could probably give the speech myself. It's seared into my brain."

"Try clearing your mind. It shouldn't be that hard."

"For someone who needs my help, you're an ingrate."

I tossed it off as a comment, not intending to spark anything, but since gratitude and manners liked to hang out on the same corner, Edward took it as a personal attack and felt the need to defend his honor.

"I'm paying you for your services."

"After deducting room and board."

"If you managed your finances better, you wouldn't need to live with me." He waved his speech. "Or work for me."

My jaw muscles twitched, because that had been a low blow. In my very first attempt at venture capitalism, my partner had disappeared with all the money, including \$30,000 that belonged to me. I'd sold everything in order to pay back the other investors. I'd also tracked the guy down, and after making it clear without words how disappointed in him I was, I helped send him on a long vacation, courtesy of the State of California. With no money, no home, and no immediate prospects for employment, I'd accepted Edward's offer to work for him after his secretary of fifteen years had discovered the opposite sex and decided to get a life. In other words, not my fault.

My brother didn't offer an apology. Instead, he said, "I'll take the top drawer."

I finished unpacking my suitcase first just to annoy him, but I was quick and efficient, and soon the whole job was finished, with everything that should be on hangers in the armoire with less than an inch to spare. As I closed the top drawer on Edward's under things, he said:

"Why don't you make sure the hotel has the right equipment for my speech?"

"That's the job of the VPS volunteers," I protested, but understanding how Edward's mind worked, I knew the

outcome of any discussion would have me doing their job to help Edward score brownie points.

"They obviously haven't arrived yet or you would have told me. I want to make sure it's done properly. Besides, it would be a nice gesture to help them. I'll meet you in the dining room at a quarter to eight."

That's how I wound up on my way downstairs—alone but dressed for dinner in a slate-blue suit, white dress shirt, and rose-colored tie.

The maid who serviced our floor was pulling a tray out of a dumbwaiter. She carried it to the room two doors down from ours, set the tray on the floor, knocked on the door, and stepped back. From inside the room, someone jangled a bell with the enthusiasm of a Christmas Santa collecting for charity. The door to the room next to ours opened, and a woman with purple hair marched over to the tray, picked it up, unlocked the door, and went inside, kicking the door closed behind her. The ringing stopped.

I grinned, sharing a moment of camaraderie with a fellow servant.

"I'm Nick."

I held out my hand, and we shook.

"Maggie."

I ran an appreciative gaze over her petite figure, skin the color of latte, and curly brown hair. She wore a traditional uniform—a black dress that ended right above shapely calves, a pure white apron, and a matching cap. I could have pulled it off a costume rack at any theater. She also had a crooked front tooth that gave her an adorable goofiness, and I thought beneath that professional exterior lurked a woman who wanted to snuggle—or at least wouldn't slap my face at the suggestion.

"It's like watching one of those cuckoo clocks," she said with a nod toward the door. "The ones where the soldier marches out when the clock chimes. They went through the same routine at breakfast and lunch. I'm supposed to set the tray down and knock, then Mrs. Waterford rings the bell and Ms. Mayfield takes it into the room. I suppose I could just leave after I knock, but I can't resist watching the entertainment."

"If that's entertainment, you must be hard up for laughs."

"I suggested to Ms. Mayfield that it might be more convenient to use the communicating door, but she said that Mrs. Waterford keeps it locked."

"I shudder to think what she's hiding," I said, and Maggie giggled. Edward's the only one who doesn't appreciate my wit.

"The stories I could tell you about guests of hotels I've worked at. You wouldn't believe half of them." She flushed. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean—that is, I don't—"

"No worries," I soothed. "I'm not a guest here. I'm a prisoner, dragged here by my brother."

She giggled again, but I could tell she felt she had stuck her foot in it. "Enjoy your stay, sir," she said, and I watched her walk back to the head of the stairs, her hips swaying under her crisp black dress. She stopped before a door on the opposite side of the hallway marked "Private," and she glanced back once before stepping inside.

I made my way to the staircase. A few ladies in heels waited for the elevator on the other side of the landing, but I jogged down the marble steps to reach the lobby. The crowd had cleared up, so I crossed to the front desk and asked Claudia Inglenook if the conference room was ready

for the VPS gang.

Her brow wrinkled. "Ready? There's not much to do. It's in the Gold Room at the end of the North wing, but the waiters won't set out the water glasses and such until tomorrow morning."

"Is the projection screen permanently installed, or will I have to carry it over there? I'd also like to test the microphone. And I'd like to see where the outlets are so I can position the podium. I don't want the boss's laptop to run out of gas before he does."

Her cheeks flushed a light pink, which would have been attractive if I hadn't suspected the cause. I leaned my elbow on the counter. "It will be easier if you take a deep breath and let it all out at once. What do I need to come up with?"

"Well, we don't have a podium."

"He can stand and hold his speech. He won't like it, but he can do it."

She shuffled a few papers for something to do. "Or a microphone."

I saw that one coming. A place that doesn't have a podium probably isn't prepared for speakers. "He has plenty of hot air, so we'll make due."

She opened her mouth and closed it, and my shoulders tensed.

"Okay. I'm going to assume you don't have a projection screen." She nodded. "Is the wall white?"

She shook her head. "Wood paneling."

I rubbed my hand across the back of my neck. This was a problem. Edward was proud of his samples of early photography, and he had carefully selected images to go with his topic. I wasn't sure where I was going to come up with a portable wall, but I slapped my palm on the counter

twice and thanked Claudia. It wasn't her problem; it was mine.

I got in contact with Alfred, the doorman, who was still miffed over the missed tip. Once I handed him a twenty, he helped me search a storage room for partitions, screens—or anything that might work as a screen. We found zilch. I had to give him another twenty in exchange for his oath to rig a white sheet against the wall at the front of the Gold Room by tomorrow morning.

My watch read seven-thirty, so I made my way back to the dining room to prepare the way for Edward.