

Chapter 1

Cameron Kraus gazed down the long petal-strewn grass aisle between rows of finely-dressed guests seated in folding chairs. A mass of tall rhododendrons, loaded with pink blossoms, blocked his view in the distance, while mounds of flowers poured out of urns around the periphery. The fragrance nearly gagged him.

The wedding of the year, reported the Valley Times. Perhaps not quite that, but likely the wedding of the month, at least. That's what happened when a long-standing wealthy Arcadia Valley family planned nuptials. Even Grace Fellowship wasn't big enough to hold everyone. They'd had to reserve the park.

He forced his hands to hang at his sides. No fiddling with the cuffs of his tux or adjusting the cummerbund. No shifting from one patent-leather shoe to the other. Definitely no looking at his mother seated in the front row.

Music swelled from the string quartet off to one side as a bridesmaid carrying a humungous bouquet strolled around the rhododendrons and down the long aisle wearing a royal blue dress that swished around her knees. There was money in the flower and garden center business. No doubt about it.

The matron of honor appeared next, but Cameron's eyes were trained on the gap in the bushes behind her. The violin solo went on longer than during rehearsal, but maybe that was his imagination.

Two little boys in black tuxes strutted into view, each carrying a painted sign. Both smiling.

Cameron dared to breathe. After the near tantrum this morning, he hadn't been sure how the day would play out.

The redhead — his son Oliver — pointed straight to the front and then at his sign. *Just wait until you see our Aunt Jonah.* The other twin, Evan, showed off his placard to the guests lining the aisle. *Don't worry. We're still single.*

Guests chuckled. Cameras snapped. Beaming, the boys soaked up the limelight.

Cameron glanced at his mother just as the music segued into the traditional bridal march. She smiled at the boys as they passed her, but her lips looked tight. She'd told Cameron the boys were undisciplined. Unruly. Needed a firm hand. Maybe now that she and Dad were in Idaho for the summer, she could help him get control of his hooligans.

Hooligans, indeed. The six-year-old twins ran up to him and stood, one on either side.

At the back, the bride made her entrance on the arm of her father. Traditional. Just how Cameron liked it. Eight years ago, Lisa had insisted she was her own woman and strolled down the aisle by herself, much to his mother's horror. He should have known right then and there it would never work out. There'd been clues even before that. Clues he'd ignored.

Standing in front of him and facing the audience, Evan fidgeted. Cameron gently rested his hand on his small son's shoulder. Oliver turned to his brother and stuck out his tongue.

"Boys..." Cameron growled under his breath.

Evan shifted away from his touch and looked up. "How come there's so many flowers?" he blurted out. "I'm going to sneeze."

"Shh. Just squeeze your nose."

A few people tittered. From the front row, Cameron's mother raised her eyebrows and glared at her grandsons.

Right, Mom. Children should be seen and not heard. I remember the drill.

But his sister had insisted the boys take part in her wedding, though no one was crazy enough to entrust them with the rings. Beside Cameron, the best man, Ben Kujak, shot him a sympathetic grin. On Ben's other side, the groom stood focused on his bride. On Cameron's sister.

Joanna — whom the twins called Jonah — might be two years older, but that didn't mean Cameron figured it was okay for her to get married, although Grady Akers was a decent enough guy. It was just that Cameron liked having his sister living in his basement suite, helping out with the boys after school, cooking dinner a few nights a week. The best parts of having a woman around, with none of the pain Lisa had inflicted in their short marriage.

Cameron angled a glance at Grady. Had he looked this besotted when Lisa had strolled toward him? Had Lisa worn the look of adoration Joanna directed at her groom right now? He didn't remember it, but they must have been that in love once. According to his ex, he'd always been too controlling. Too smothering. He hadn't seen it that way. He'd only tried to look after her the way his parents had taught him.

“Who gives this woman to be married to this man?”

Evan sneezed three times in quick succession, and laughter rippled across the gathering.

Cameron didn't need to pat his pockets to know he had nothing to catch the drips. Darn tuxedo.

“Her mother and I do,” Dad intoned as Mom ducked low and pressed a tissue into Evan's hand, glaring at Cameron.

Right. His fault again. Everything was.

“When I get married, there's gonna be no stinky flowers.” Evan sneezed again.

Oliver turned to his brother. “I’m never gonna get married. Girls are yuck.”

“Boys,” Cameron whispered, infusing threat to the tone as he tightened his grip on two small shoulders.

Once again, all eyes were on them. Now Dad’s accusatory glare joined Mom’s. Other guests looked less indulgent than a few minutes ago.

Why had he agreed to stand up for his sister and Grady, let alone conceding when Joanna begged him to allow the boys to take part? Not as ring bearers, but in any role whatsoever? He’d figured it would be easier to keep an eye on them if they stood beside him.

“When can we go play?” begged Oliver, looking up at Cameron.

Never. Not in rented tuxedos.



“Don’t touch!” a woman called as a man yelled, “Look out!”

Alaina Silva turned toward the voices as the extravagantly tall wedding cake teetered. She caught her breath. The groomsman dashed closer and steadied the table before it went over.

Whew. Disaster averted. Dad didn’t keep a spare wedding cake in the cooler, and the staff at his country club had plenty to do for this reception without

cleaning up a massive cake spattered across the tile floor.

The groomsman's hands gripped the shoulders of the small sign-bearers as he bent over them. His lips moved as he spoke first to the blond then the redhead, both of whom scowled back at him. Alaina's mom had whispered during the wedding that he was the bride's brother and tut-tutted that he had his hands full with those two rascals and no wife.

As an early childhood educator, Alaina had met her share of single parents and messed-up kids. She'd been able to infuse stability into some of those families. Help the children cope and become happy well-adjusted members of society.

She sidled closer, her need to fix things overwhelming her common sense. "Hi, I'm Alaina. Would the boys like to come with me? There's a playground out back. I can watch them until they're needed back in here." Although... the boys wore miniature black tuxes. At least they weren't white.

The man straightened and narrowed his gaze at her. "No, that's fine. They can stay with me."

An older woman stepped in front of Alaina. "Come with Nana, boys. We'll go sit down and wait quietly." Her voice held a hint of a British accent.

The man's jaw clenched. "I'm sure Joanna needs you, Mom. I've got the twins. You don't need to worry."

"I'm only trying to help."

“I know, but it’s okay. Really.”

The boys exchanged a glance then, as one, ducked free of their father’s hands and bolted for the door.

“Cameron...”

He shook his head and dashed in their wake, leaving Alaina with the disgruntled grandmother. Um, no. She was so out of there. “Excuse me, please.” But where? Out the door. Too bad it wasn’t the one to the playground. She bolted after them.

The boys headed straight for the fish pond. Short of falling in, they couldn’t get in too much trouble.

“Look, Dad. Goldfish!” One of the little guys leaned over the low wall of stacked volcanic rock.

Not there! A golf cart had rammed that spot just last week, and the rocks were loose. Her father had hired a mason to come in Monday to repair the stonework where the cement had cracked away.

As if in slow motion, the little redhead tipped headfirst into the pond, taking several rocks with him. The resounding splash seemed an after-effect.

“Oliver!” yelled his father.

Alaina sprinted for the pond. Those years of lifeguarding to pay her way through college surged to the surface, and she reached for the child just as his father did. Between them, they hauled him to the surface.

“That was *awesome*,” breathed the other twin.

Cameron pivoted, yanking the drenched boy out of Alaina’s grasp. “Don’t you dare, Evan. I mean it.”

Oliver coughed and struggled in his dad's arms.

Okay, whew, he was going to be all right. Other than two soaking tuxedos.

The father crouched and stood the child between his knees. "You okay, Ollie?" His voice was strangely gentle, all things considered.

"I'm okay, Dad. The rock broke. I was trying to be good, I promise."

"I know, buddy. Just... you two *have* to settle down. You don't want to ruin Aunt Jonah's special day, do you?"

Both little heads shook.

"There are probably towels in the clubhouse. Want me to go look?"

Cameron looked up at Alaina with a surprised expression on his face. He'd obviously forgotten her presence. "I'm sorry. You started to introduce yourself earlier...?"

"Alaina Silva. My parents own the country club. They're old friends of the Akers family. It's your sister who's the bride, right?"

He rose, fully looking at her now.

Good thing she was all dressed up. She'd been her own sister's maid-of-honor just last weekend in Spokane and drawn the attention of several of Adriana's single guy friends in this dress, so she'd figured why not wear it again. This shade of green suited her, and the style was flattering.

“Pleased to meet you. I’m Cameron Kraus. Yes, my sister, Joanna, is now married to Grady Akers.” He gave a rueful shake of his head and held out the hem of his formal jacket. “I think it will take more than a towel to fix this. I need to take the boys home so all of us can change. Yes, Evan, you can change, too. I won’t make you stay in that tux if Ollie and I get to wear something else.”

“Yes!” The little guy pumped his fist.

“Still Sunday clothes. No shorts and T-shirts.” Cameron’s gaze hadn’t left Alaina’s face. “Do you think there’s enough time? We live just a few blocks from Grace Fellowship. It will probably take me half an hour to get there and back.”

His eyes were clear and brown and seemed to go on forever, like a well of dark coffee. His brown hair, not much longer than a buzz cut, didn’t look like it would muss if a woman ran her fingers through it.

Alaina took a step back, unable to look away. She shouldn’t be thinking things like that, even though Mom had said he wasn’t married. He was either divorced or widowed. Just because she liked kids didn’t mean she should think twice about a man who had some. Bad idea. Really bad idea.

Still, no matter how her brain screamed at her eyes to look away, she couldn’t do it. Wait. He’d asked a question. She cast her memory back over the past few minutes.

“It’s not a sit-down reception, so I’m sure you’ll be back before they cut the cake. It will be pretty casual for a while.”

Cameron glanced toward the clubhouse then back at Alaina, a rueful grin softening his face. “I honestly don’t want to face my mother right now, but I hate to ask you to let her know where we’ve disappeared to.”

Alaina touched his sleeve. “Don’t worry about it. I don’t mind.”

“Are you sure? She can get pretty... intense.”

“I noticed.” Alaina smiled up at him. “My mom’s no walk in the park, either. I can handle her.”

“It’s just that my parents don’t really know the twins. They live in England and only pop through for a quick visit every year or two. This time they’re here for—” his eyes closed for an instant “—another ten weeks. Not that anyone is counting.”

“I’m sure she means well.”

He shook his head. “I’m sure she does.” But he didn’t sound like he believed it. Cameron’s eyes widened and he whirled. “The twins.”

“Over there.” Alaina pointed the opposite direction, where the blond — that was Evan, right? — climbed onto a golf cart.

“Evan!” bellowed the boy’s dad. “Oliver! Get over here right now.”

Alaina grinned. This was a man who needed eyes on the back of his head more than most. She rested her

hand on his arm. “Get them changed. I’ll make sure they hold the festivities for you.”

He stared at her fingers before covering them with a light squeeze. “Thanks. I owe you one.” Those gorgeous eyes looked deeply into hers for just a few seconds. Then he took the boys’ hands. They cavorted beside him as they rounded the building toward the parking lot.

Alaina straightened her shoulders and touched the back of her hand where his warmth lingered as she turned back to the clubhouse. And looked directly into the unsmiling face of Mrs. Kraus.

Purchase *Rooted in Love*

by Valerie Comer

from your favorite online retailer:

<http://valeriecomer.com/books/rooted-in-love/>