

Every Cloud

A Novel



Connie Chappell

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The four grown children of Artemus Deconcini spend their summer at Moorings, the family's Maryland estate, while he spends the season abroad. Nevertheless, his presence is felt.

Jillian is brokenhearted again. Another man raced off in pursuit of his lifelong dream. Moorings' tower room acts as her sanctuary. With mementos from this lost love, she creates uniquely expressive wall art and finds determination to launch a dream of her own. Gus covets his privacy shield. He attempts to hide an amorous relationship gone recklessly off the rails. Betsy, dear self-absorbed Betsy, arrives with mother-in-law troubles, soon to be exchanged for a female empowerment lesson. Demetri faces recurring nightmares wrapped around Moorings. Or are they wrapped around his powerful father? Or will they unwrap the sins of his powerful father?

Every Cloud focuses on life's complications, the spirit of family—drama and all—and justly deserved silver linings.

Chapter 1

Jillian

If Jillian Deconcini had to put her finger on the event that told her she desperately needed the recuperative powers of Moorings for the summer, it was the fire.

At first, though, the fire seemed a good thing, if an apartment fire can be considered positive in any way. Then Jillian stopped to think. Which fire provoked the need to race home to Moorings, her family's estate in Maryland? There were two fires. Like bookends, they propped up the last ten months of her life.

In fact, the Saturday last August when the first fiery bookend dropped into place, Jillian remembered admiring a recent purchase.

She gently handed down her newest bra-and-panty set to her beloved lingerie collection, now in piles on the dining room carpet. Straightening, she beamed at the swath of contrasting colors. The entire left side of the room, between table and wall, was lined with nylon camisoles and half-slips, stylishly slinky nightgowns and robes, yards of lace and flounce, and silks and satins that shimmered in the late morning sun shining through the windowpane. Scattered throughout were mounds of lift, support, and shapeliness.

With the last dresser drawer emptied, she carried it over to the other drawers that stood in hip-high towers near the apartment's front door. Today, her old bedroom furniture was on its way out, with new scheduled to arrive.

Back at the dining room table, Jillian gathered up three sheets of Mystiques' trademark tissue paper in passionate pink. She visited the boutique often because it carried and stocked larger sizes. Longingly, Jillian wished Mystiques offered something in the boyfriend department. While Jillian was a plus-sized girl, her dating life was lean to non-existent.

She firmly believed her dream man would fall wildly and irreversibly in love with her if he could only see the silken contents of her underwear drawer. Well, drawers, in her case. Six of them. Not to overwhelm, she'd leave one open, maybe two, with a garment dripping in lace exposed. She envisioned this beefy-sized man wandering into her bedroom alone, drawn in by that special something sprinkled over fairy-tale endings. A sensitive man with any amount of imagination would recognize just how sexy she was beneath the surface, just

a thin layer of fabric away.

But how to lure her lumberjack home, a necessary precursor to the bedroom rendezvous? She lay a finger on pursed lips, feeling them curl into a smile. By early afternoon, the biggest hurdle—the white princess-style furniture with the scalloped and gold-trimmed highlights she used as a young child—would roll south to Oakwood and the bedroom of her five-year-old niece Maggie.

Because this Lakewood apartment was small and Jillian was rushed to move in four years ago, she opted to take the princess-style furniture from her first bedroom with her, the bedroom next to the nursery. That left her grown-up bedroom intact for visits back to Maryland. Built into the Moorings mansion was a host of bedrooms, enough that she and her sister Betsy, short for Elizabeth and two years older, could walk away from the nursery suite they shared and move into side-by-side bedrooms at the big-girl ages of seven and nine.

Lakewood and Oakwood, both cities in Ohio, were three hours apart by interstate. It was just one of those fluky things that placed both sisters in the same state after they moved away from their family home. While Jillian loved Betsy's husband Preston, little Maggie, and her twin brother Henry, she always found her sister challenging. What Betsy did to fill her days, Jillian could not accurately categorize. When Betsy spoke of her society friends, Jillian noticed her nose rose a haughty few centimeters. When Betsy spoke of Jillian's life, she lowered her voice a disapproving few notes.

Oakwood was Preston's hometown. He made a fantastic living as an engineer or architect. Jillian really didn't know the difference and used the terms interchangeably. Preston Zimmer and Betsy Deconcini Zimmer—Betsy made sure Daddy's family name resided closer to the front than Zimmer did—were driving up in Preston's father's vintage 1974 Chevrolet Impala wagon. Sadly, Preston's father was deceased, but the old wagon remained in the garage.

Jillian's and Betsy's father, Artemus Deconcini, thrived as a business magnate. When Jillian was a child, she heard him described by that term, but thought the word was magnet, which made perfect sense. Any variety of business venture, worldwide, clung to Artemus Deconcini. Still, he always found time for his youngest daughter. She lived a happy childhood at Moorings with her father, her mother Kora, and two older stepbrothers, Demetri and Gus, short for Gustavo. Her brothers dealt with their mother's death as teenagers. Her poor father grieved for ten long years before he took a second wife and was blessed with daughters. Jillian loved him madly and without reserve.

She dashed off to Lakewood after landing a job as a lingerie model. Inside her head, she heard her sister echo those words in a deep tone, but she couldn't imagine a better-suited career. The only problem was, it didn't pay well. Money became an issue. Luckily, she found she liked the production side of

the business and earned a spot laying out the shop-by-mail catalog as well. The catalog carried the name *Mystiques*, part and parcel with the boutique and its supply of pink tissue paper.

So Jillian pursued two careers, increased her income, and shopped for new bedroom furniture. By day's end, her little lingerie pretties would all be tucked away in their new cherry-wood home where rosebud-printed paper would line drawers spiced with lavender-scented sachets.

Jillian turned to inspect her apartment. She wanted it somewhat neat since she'd be entertaining Betsy and Preston for lunch. The cloth-covered table, living room couch, and masculine-sized leather recliner—she kept comfortable seating for the man in her life, when he dared present himself—were all clothing-free.

Preston had been family for nearly a decade. That included the years Betsy and he dated. Jillian and her brother-in-law were close, with hockey, movies, and long discussions about her sister's vacillating moods in common. She had no qualms about Preston seeing her unmentionables. He accepted that she was a lingerie junkie with no equal.

The sound of a car horn drifted through the open second-floor window. Jillian peered out. Lanky Preston was out of the ancient station wagon. He tapped the roof rack on an energetic walk to open the rear door. He grasped a stack of mover's blankets waiting in the cargo area as Betsy's voice streamed—in its grating fashion—through Jillian's window screen.

“What are you doing? Don't do that now.”

Betsy closed her car door. She gripped the handles of the quilted carryall packed with a pan of her mother-in-law's homemade lasagna. The luncheon repast was exchanged for Maggie and Henry earlier this morning. Mother-in-law Millie Zimmer couldn't understand hauling used furniture back to Oakwood for Maggie's room. Her son could afford new for his family and from the finest stores in southwestern Ohio. Little Maggie, however, simply adored her Aunt Jillian and everything about her apartment. When she learned Jillian purchased new, she wanted the princess furniture for herself. Preston was the first parent to cave. Betsy followed suit, Preston told Jillian later, if only to come down on the opposite side of the issue from Millie's stance. Betsy and Millie were often at cross pursuits.

Betsy swam gracefully out of the family's gene pool with their father's slimness and their mother's petite height. Jillian took the leavings. Stretched to five-nine, she inherited her mother's taste for rich decadent desserts. Too many desserts stretched her waistline as well. Throughout their sisterhood, Betsy's disagreeable nature clashed with Jillian's fiery-when-provoked temper. There was one area where Jillian gave herself points: She might model women's sizes, but she possessed a beautiful face.

Jillian thought back to her Christmas visit with Betsy's family. She'd just climbed out of her car when Preston came huffing out of the house, pinning her with a heated glare.

"I swear, someday—" He bit off the unspoken threat. His better angels helped him choose the words that came next. "I tell myself, just walk away, Preston. Just walk away."

"You really ought to deck her. I would," Jillian shouted after him, "without a second thought." The *her* was, of course, Betsy.

In her heart, Jillian held two convictions to be true: Preston Zimmer would never, never harm his wife, and she, Jillian Deconcini, would never, never become a Bossy Betsy when her dream man entered her life.

Still perched at her apartment window, Jillian watched Betsy step over the curb to the grassy strip, still focused on her husband's activities.

"Leave the moving pads inside and close that up," Betsy barked.

Jillian abandoned her lookout point. She heard the wagon's rear door close as she crossed the floor. The sound spoke to Preston's passive compliance.

"That's the way to get through this," Jillian muttered under her breath. "Don't be a moron. Follow his lead."

She pushed through her apartment door and buzzed left toward the stairs. She could beat them to the apartment house's entrance and throw the door open before they rang the buzzer. Then she heard a sound she recently learned to loathe. Behind her, air was forcibly squeezed from a metal tube. Before she could react, her apartment door's latch scraped across the jamb's strike plate. The arm that reached for the banister fell limp to her side instead. She'd just locked herself out for the sixth time in ten days.

Robotically, she rerouted herself and stamped across the hall to Evie Hendricks' apartment.

Evie answered the knock and easily read the look on Jillian's face. Evie was a little bit of a woman. A little bit plump. A little bit opinionated. And a little bit lifesaver. "Oh, dear," the latter said, raising a hand to her cheek. "Not again."

"Betsy and Preston pulled up. I forgot and just ran out the door."

"That's right. Today's the day," the seventy-seven-year-old retired home economics teacher said. She grew into a confidant in Jillian's life. Evie stepped across the hall with warm brownies the day Jillian moved in.

Jillian frowned up at the automatic closure arm on Evie's door. The building's maintenance man installed one on every apartment door. When Evie went to retrieve Jillian's spare door key, Jillian stood in her stead, stubbornly preventing the offensive device from doing its duty.

The younger woman studied the older woman's shuffling gait over to the mahogany writing desk. She was pleased to see Evie had no problem remembering in which drawer her neighbor's key was stored, no problem

distinguishing the item she sought. Lately, she had noticed some confusion on Evie's part.

As Evie re-crossed the room, she seemed to bring an inviting aroma with her. Jillian sniffed the air and smiled. "Vegetable soup?"

"Beef vegetable, and on its way to a long flavorful simmer," Evie said, using an mmm-mmm tone. "If your family's gone by suppertime, come over for a bowl."

Jillian visualized the ages-old pot on the back burner, its lid askew. "I'd like that." She slipped the spare key into the lock. As soon as she cracked the door, she heard the downstairs buzzer. She crammed her upper body through the opening to finger the nearby intercom panel. "Coming, guys. Just a minute," she sang out.

She grabbed an empty dresser drawer off the closet stack and wedged it between door and jamb, returned the borrowed key, and gave Evie a peck on her warm wrinkled cheek.

Jillian felt certain her sister would comment on how she sounded like a herd of oxen on the stairs. Which she had. But when she opened the door, she found Betsy, smiling serenely, hanging on her husband's arm. She handed out the pouch of lasagna as if her part had been more than just pick-up and delivery. Betsy owned charm when she wanted to use it. The rub was, her charm and her moodiness changed positions as rapidly as a swinging door.

Up in the tiny entrance hall of her apartment, Betsy stared at Jillian's lingerie on display and gave a haughty sniff. Jillian ignored her sister and made a move toward the kitchen, announcing her intention to put the lasagna in to reheat.

"No," Betsy said. "Give it back to me."

"Why?" Jillian wanted to know, but passed the casserole over.

Betsy cocked her head toward the bedroom. "You two go decide on a plan of attack. After we're done with the furniture, we'll sit, talk, and be civilized while the lasagna heats."

Preston and Jillian shrugged at each other. How could they argue with that?

With very little fuss, they maneuvered the long side-by-side dresser to the apartment entrance.

"Got your key?" Preston asked.

Jillian patted her jeans pocket. She already informed her visitors of the auto-locking device. The key would be needed only in the event of a misfire. Guided-missile Betsy pulled duty as door matron. She jammed a rolled-up newspaper under the door to hold it wide.

The threesome maneuvered the dresser down the stairs without mishap and out to the sidewalk. They stood in a loose knot, peering into the old Chevy's cargo hold. An envious Jillian took in the dimensions. They appeared longer and wider than the floor space in her bathroom.

“I say we go get the drawers for this, then load it in on this side. If we unscrew the legs, there ought to be room for the nightstands to go one behind the other over here.” Preston and his precise engineer’s eye discerned the measurements. Yes, that’s right! Preston was an engineer.

“No, let’s get all the pieces down here first,” Betsy objected. “You’ll have an easier time judging when everything’s in front of you. Otherwise, you’ll have things in and out multiple times until you get it right. And who knows how many scratches and dings that will add?”

Betsy’s last word fueled Jillian’s anger. She had showed this furniture extreme care. Each piece was pristine. Jillian was ready to tell her sister just that when her brother-in-law choked her comment off with an attempt to ground his wife.

“Hon, I’m sure—”

“Preston. No. Listen to me for once,” Betsy said, adamant. “And besides, that dresser may need to be loaded on top.”

Preston’s laughter burst out. Betsy’s ludicrous suggestion stunned Jillian, who looked from the dresser to the roof rack. Preston began spouting calculations about wind speed and gas consumption due to a complete lack of aerodynamics.

The bickering went on for a moment more. Over the years, Jillian wisely learned to keep her opinions to herself when these two discussed life’s little obstacles. She was much more adept at consoling a wounded Preston when the battle was over, than negotiating a truce.

Forty-five minutes later, the tall narrow chest, bed rails, mirror, nightstands, and headboard joined the long dresser. They looked like an odd grouping of very pale people waiting at a bus stop. The tie-downs and padded blankets lay scattered in the grass.

Jillian hated to admit it, but Betsy was right. It helped to have all the pieces together. And, just eyeballing it, Preston was right. The larger pieces would all fit inside the roomy old station wagon.

Before one stick of furniture left the concrete for loading, a low-scale argument between husband and wife warmed again, so Jillian decided to walk back inside and do the same for the lasagna.

Since she didn’t plan on returning to help with the furniture, she dug the keychain out of her pocket. Once inside, it and the newspaper were laid on the lamp table next to the couch.

She got halfway down the hall to the kitchen, then a high-pitched screech stopped her. She backtracked and took a few steps toward the open living room window, only to realize the sound was not blaring up from the street. She rushed to the apartment door and pulled it open.

Immediately, squealing decibels assaulted her eardrums. She ran to Evie’s

door. The scent of smoke hovered around it. Panicked, she cried Evie's name and pounded repeatedly on the locked door. When Evie didn't answer, she tried to shake the door from its hinges. She forced herself to break off the futile effort in order to call 9-1-1. Get help coming first, then try rescue, the mantra repeated in her head.

She lunged for her own apartment door. It wouldn't budge. She slapped at her pants pocket. The key wasn't there. Her heart fell. She was trapped in the oversized hall, unable to complete the rescue, unable to phone in the emergency. Swearing, she spun and raced back to revive her pounding. Seconds passed before a haggard-looking Evie released the lock. Strands of pewter hair had escaped her eternally neat bun.

Jillian straight-armed the door as she looked the elderly woman up and down. "Are you all right?" she yelled.

Evie gave a meager nod and pointed toward the back of the apartment. "The soup. I can't turn off the burner."

"Have you called the fire department?" Frustration flashed onto Jillian's face when Evie shook her head. Jillian, determined to keep hers, found a cookbook in the tiny wooden case just inside the door and used it as a doorstop. Evie's two claw-like hands grasped Jillian's arm and dragged her haltingly into the apartment.

"We've got to call 9-1-1," Jillian said, looking around. "Where's your phone?"

Evie ignored the question. She tugged Jillian toward the gray haze and that awful screaming.

Behind the smoke was fire.

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