

Cocoa's Christmas Love



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

JOSIE RIVIERA

COCOA'S CHRISTMAS LOVE



JOSIE RIVIERA

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PRAISE AND AWARDS

USA TODAY bestselling author

INTRODUCTION

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Josie's Newsletter



Did you know that according to a Yale University study, people who read books live longer?

This book is dedicated to all my wonderful readers who have supported me every inch of the way.

THANK YOU!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

An appreciative thank you to my patient husband, Dave, and our three wonderful children.

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CHAPTER 1



Nestled below the snow-capped peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains, the tiny town of Evergreen Valley sparkled like a gem. With a population of only ten thousand residents, the tight-knit community and frost-kissed streets came alive during the Christmas season.

Inside the cozy confines of her florist shop, Ivy's Blooms, Ivy Bennett inspected the pale lavender flowers spread before her. Delicate and intricate, each resembled a hybrid between a rose and a lily. Some tiny buds peeked open, others sat fully flourished and fragrant. She intended to fashion several bouquets for the front window.

She twisted her long blond hair into a loose bun, wispy tendrils escaping to trail down her back. The simple style kept her hair out of her face.

Today, as usual, her wardrobe of choice was a taupe-colored blouse and khaki pants, perfect for the dirt and occasional spills she encountered during her workday. To protect her feet, she wore sturdy, low-heeled leather boots, ensuring she could comfortably stand, walk, and tend to her shop without any discomfort.

She breathed in the mingling scents of dreamy florals, cinnamon potpourri, and pine garland adorning her shop's

walls. With practiced, callused hands that bore the evidence of a hard-working florist, she trimmed stems, arranged holly branches, and spun together evergreen wreaths dusted with Queen Anne's lace.

She noted the marks on her fingers by the occasional pricks and thorns from the blooms she carefully tended. With a soft smile, she felt a sense of pride in these small scars, symbols of the dedication she poured into her craft.

Here, she was completely at home, surrounded by her flowers and exquisite décor.

The bell over the door jingled as her friend Sophia hurried in, unwinding a cherry red scarf from around her neck. Her short dark hair was topped with a knit Santa hat, and her deep brown eyes brimmed with lively merriment.

"Ivy, I wanted to confirm the flower arrangements you're donating for the firehouse toy drive auction," she said. "Can you believe it's already the first of December?"

"Hardly." Ivy laughed. "I'm contributing four larger pieces—two Christmas themes and two winter mixes."

"Wonderful, thank you!" Sophia turned to exit, then paused. "What a shame that Eleanor's Toy Emporium closed its doors. We could've used Eleanor's antique toys in the auction. People always snapped them up."

"Eleanor moved to the coast," Ivy replied.

"And now there's a vacant storefront next to your shop."

Ivy nodded. Countless times, she'd thought about expanding her flower shop into that very space. However, the harsh reality held her back. She simply didn't have the funds to tackle such an endeavor.

“Well, I’m off.” Sophia was forever in a rush, organizing various benefits. “Our goal at the auction is to raise five thousand dollars this year.”

Ivy smiled, picturing parents picking out gifts with funds from the auction. Helping those in need—that’s what the holidays were all about.

The shop filled with the jazzy notes of the classic winter song “Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!” playing from a vintage radio perched between two white lilies on a shelf.

Ivy swayed her hips and bobbed her head, getting into the zippy tempo. Even after the hundredth time, she couldn’t resist smiling and sang along. “Let it snow, let it snow.”

From a far corner, her best friend and coworker, Amelia Green, snatched a broom. When the chorus began, Amelia swayed with her makeshift partner, swinging her trusty broom around the store while belting out the lyrics.

Ivy laughed until she was breathless. Amelia never failed to rouse her into giggles.

As soon as the song ended, Amelia set the broom to the side, and Ivy returned to placing finishing touches on the Wishing Blooms.

“Good afternoon, Mrs. Thompson!” Ivy pitched her voice to be heard as the elegant, older woman entered the shop. “How may I help you today?”

“I need a centerpiece for my daughter’s engagement party, dear. She’s coming in town for a few short days. And please call me by Harriet, my first name. No need for such formality.” Deep crevices framed the woman’s mouth, crow’s feet fanned out from the corners of her soft gray eyes, and her red-rouged cheeks rounded up toward her silver hair.

Ivy smiled. "I'll try."

"Since my husband passed away five years ago, it's been difficult for me to truly enjoy life again." Mrs. Thompson stared down at the crumpled tissue in her hand, shredding the edges absently. "For the first time in a long time, I'm a little happier. My daughter is marrying a charming man."

"It must be hard living alone after sharing your life with someone for so long. I can't even imagine how tough that must be," Ivy replied. "How can I make a bouquet to represent new beginnings and resilience?"

"I trust your judgment, dear."

Ivy's mind raced with ideas, her passion for creating delight and enchantment fueling her thoughts. "How about white roses mixed with baby's breath and eucalyptus?"

"Sounds lovely," Mrs. Thompson replied.

As Ivy busied herself with the floral arrangement, she reflected on the joy her flowers brought her—and, more importantly, the happiness they brought to others. She carefully selected each petal and stem, not only for their vibrancy and form but also to reflect the personality and preferences of her clients. Her talent came naturally, and she had nurtured and honed her ability over the years. As she worked, her mind turned to ways to help Mrs. Thompson beyond this small gesture and decided to schedule weekly fresh flower deliveries to her home to brighten her day.

Ivy glanced up. "Do you have any other shades in mind?"

"Maybe a few dashes of blush pink and gold." Mrs. Thompson adjusted the collar of her wool coat, a rich, canary yellow. "They're my favorite colors."

Ivy nodded. The artistry of her creations allowed her to connect with others in a way words sometimes couldn't. This was her gift—her ability to translate emotions and memories into arrangements that spoke volumes without uttering a single word.

Especially her Wishing Blooms. The petals' exceptional translucent quality enabled light to pass through and created an ethereal, otherworldly effect.

To many people in the town, the Wishing Blooms embodied the essence of the holiday season.

“Here we are.” Ivy presented the completed project a few minutes later. The roses, baby's breath, and eucalyptus intertwined, were accented by subtle hints of blush pink snowflakes and gold ribbon. “I hope this makes your celebration extra special.”

“Thank you.” Mrs. Thompson eyed the flowers on the worktable. “Are you getting ready for your annual flower-wishing ceremony?”

“Absolutely. Tomorrow morning at ten o'clock.”

“I wouldn't miss it. I plan to pick a flower and make a wish.” As Mrs. Thompson exited the shop, Ivy turned back to her worktable. She finished the Wishing Blooms arrangements, then began a standing poinsettia order for another customer, Ethan Harrison.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the reflection of a polished glass vase. Her hazel eyes sparkled with a mix of passion and dedication, and her cheeks carried a healthy glow.

“Have you seen the latest issue of *The Evergreen Gazette* yet?” Amelia hollered from across the shop, letting Ivy know

she was stepping into the storage room to grab more florist wire and picks. “Ivy’s Blooms is on the cover!”

“The article is out so soon? I assumed we were slated for the January issue.” Ivy reached behind the counter for a copy that a member of the *Gazette’s* distribution team had delivered. She had gotten busy and set it to the side.

She paused, studying the front cover.

Indeed, there it was, a stunning photograph of her precious shop. Rays of sunshine streamed through the windows on either side of the cheery blue door, and her storefront was scenically framed by lightly falling snow. The shot captured the source of her happiness right there on the cover of the town’s most popular monthly magazine.

Her gaze danced over the glossy pages, and she traced a finger over the elegant script describing her little shop.

She smiled broadly. This was even better than she imagined. Her creations, her passion, in print for all to see!

She flipped the pages, eager for more.

Mid-turn, her hands froze. Her smile vanished.

Any glowing satisfaction evaporated when her gaze landed on the bold, ominous headline splashed across the top of the page.

“Myth or Reality? Challenging the Enchantment of Ivy’s Wishing Flowers.”

She scanned the article’s contents, and her breath grew short as she read the damaging words. How could this journalist make such cruel accusations? She had worked so hard to build trust with her customers, and this felt like a personal attack on her character.

The journalist, Britney Knox, had pivoted to a critical stance, an exposé that left readers questioning the authenticity of Ivy's renowned Wishing Blooms. The article claimed to demystify the enchanting claims surrounding the flower shop. Not to be outdone, the writer went on to highlight alleged incidents of subpar quality and late deliveries. The words didn't just paint a picture of the shop in a disparaging light, they tarnished Ivy's reputation with searing accusations of dissatisfaction, fraud, and deceit.

Five years of earning her patrons' trust and cultivating a spotless name had all been smeared in one cutting article by a journalist's hand.

Ivy's eyes glazed with tears.

Her Wishing Blooms had become a symbol of hope and good will. Each carried a whispered wish, a heartfelt aspiration, and a belief in the magic of the holidays.

Regarding the alleged incidents of subpar quality, Ivy reached back into her thoughts.

During seasonal peaks, she faced a higher number of orders than usual, leading to difficulties in managing all the requests promptly. Sometimes, limited availability of fresh flowers was due to seasonality or supply chain issues. And last year's severe winter weather had disrupted transportation and caused delays.

She'd apologized and acknowledged her customers' concerns, offering replacements and refunds. As a goodwill gesture, she'd compensated with small gifts and discounts on future purchases as a token of appreciation.

Her fingers shook as she set down the magazine. She leaned forward, head in her hands, and sighed heavily.

Britney Knox. The journalist had moved to town the previous year and been known to stir up drama to sell more magazines.

Shifting her focus back towards the poinsettias, Ivy tried to lose herself in shaping scarlet poinsettias and evergreen accents for Ethan's order.

But concentration eluded her. She found herself repeatedly fixating on the open magazine and offensive article. Visions of shelves overflowing with unsold products and silent phones during the frenzied Christmas rush flashed through her mind.

She clipped the stems, leaves scattering across the table. She began assembling the bouquet, more as a distraction than anything else. Her work seemed pointless while her reputation was under attack. She struggled even with a simple poinsettia arrangement, her focus divided between the flowers and the harsh article.

Had any customers seen the write-up yet? The *Gazette* reached every single household and business in the entire town, resulting in the distribution of over four thousand copies.

Her stomach lurched imagining loyal regulars reading the critique, frowning distrustfully at Ivy's friendly hellos, then turning and walking out, never patronizing her shop again.

She knew the importance of a solid standing in a tight-knit town like Evergreen Valley. The negative publicity could have a significant impact on her business, potentially driving away devoted shoppers and deterring new ones.

Returning from the storage room, Amelia approached, her reddish-brown eyebrows knitted together. "What's the matter, Ivy? Something seems very wrong."

Lost in thought, Ivy failed to respond.

Amelia rested a comforting hand on her arm. She waited patiently until Ivy redirected her attention to her friend.

“This is what’s the matter.” Ivy handed over the magazine, a frustrated rush of air escaping her lungs.

Amelia skimmed the contents and pressed her lips together. “Why would anyone write such a thing around the holidays? I thought this was the season of giving.”

“I assumed I had rectified every one of those problems that Britney Knox listed.” Ivy steadied herself. “I’ll just make it a point to speak with her. She came into the shop a while ago but didn’t stay long.”

“Yes, I remember when you mentioned it,” Amelia replied.

When Britney had stopped by the shop, Ivy recalled thinking she looked a bit out of place in their casual little town. She was tall and slim, dressed in an expensive-looking black pantsuit and wearing bright red lipstick—more high fashion than Evergreen Valley’s laidback style. Her sleek ebony-black hair was pulled back in a severe bun.

When she smiled, it didn’t reach her pale blue eyes, which stared at Ivy coolly. Ivy got the impression that Britney was meticulously studying her, looking for any misstep or moment of weakness. In their brief conversation, Britney spoke eloquently but with a subtle sharpness, like each word was carefully chosen to extract information. She seemed to be fishing for something specific, and oddly interested in Ivy’s most popular flowers and products. Ivy sensed that this was a woman used to getting what she wanted.

“Ignore it. Ignore her,” Amelia was saying. “Don’t let that cynical newcomer upset you. Negative publicity is still

publicity.”

Ivy tried her best to understand her friend’s optimism. However, despite her desire to brush it off, the accusations pierced her heart like daggers.

Tears blurred her eyes again. She quickly blinked, not wanting Amelia to see how much this affected her.

“You’re right.” Ivy forced a smile. “I shouldn’t let this bother me.” But on the inside, doubts continued to fester. Was this only harmless gossip? Or could these lies destroy all she and Amelia had worked for?

As Amelia prattled on about ignoring the article, Ivy’s thoughts spiraled. She pictured walking into the shop tomorrow and facing accusatory glares from faithful customers. She imagined sales dwindling to nothing as the town turned against her. Her breath grew short, anxiety tightening its grip.

Amelia’s pep talk only emphasized Ivy’s powerlessness in this situation. She wanted to curl up and hide from the controversy because she was breaking inside.

Instead, Ivy turned back into Amelia’s chirpy banter. “This will all blow over soon,” she said, hoping she sounded more confident than she felt.

“Didn’t the editor check these negative points before the *Gazette* went to print?” Amelia studied the last page. “Everett Shepherd is the name credited to the photos.”

“I was so focused on the byline that identified the writer, I didn’t think about anything else.” Ivy examined the article again and noticed Everett’s photo credit in the small text. “I remember looking up one day last month to see him standing there with his camera. He said *The Evergreen Gazette* had

asked him to take some photos. I tidied up the shop and assembled several Wishing Blooms arrangements. He was professional, but very kind. He commented that I had a lovely little business here, and he hoped his photos did it justice.”

Amelia grabbed the magazine, crinkled it up, and set it on the table. “He’s a nice guy, but apparently he didn’t have much say in the article.”

“Apparently not.”

“He owned a hardware store in town before he retired. Did you ever go there as a kid?”

Ivy frowned, trying to recall the store. “No. I don’t have any memory of it.”

“The store was on Riverstone Road for ages,” Amelia said, sweeping her arm in one direction to indicate the street. “He ended up selling the lot a few years ago.”

“We chatted for a bit, but mostly casual conversation.”

“He freelances as a photographer. His grandson, Blake Shepherd, is famous. I think he works mostly out west, photographing those elaborate red-carpet affairs and high-end galas.”

“Everett and I spoke about the town’s upcoming Christmas activities,” Ivy replied. “He never mentioned his grandson.”

“I’m sure you dazzled him with that gorgeous smile of yours,” Amelia teased, poking Ivy playfully with her elbow.

“He didn’t take any photos of me, just the shop.” Ivy’s fingers lightly brushed the scarlet petals of the poinsettia. “What if our customers accept the article’s claims as true?”

“They won’t. I get why you’re worried, but every single person in this town knows you.” Amelia gave an encouraging

shrug. “If you’re still upset, communicate with the editor or Britney directly and put your side of the story out there. The regulars will stand by you.”

“I appreciate what you’re saying.” Ivy searched beneath the magazine’s masthead and jotted down Britney’s phone number and email address.

With renewed conviction, she met Amelia’s eyes. Then she scanned her shop, noting the overflowing baskets of peppery red carnations, emerald, green coils of ribbon and tissue paper, and shelves brimming with glass vases and ceramic pots painted with sprigs of holly.

Ivy’s love for flowers budded in childhood when she tended her mother’s rose garden. She became fascinated with floral arrangements while accompanying her mom to a local florist. In high school, she got a job at the flower shop, honing her natural talents over the years. She’d cultivated her interest by completing a two-year floristry degree.

Owning a floral business had always been her dream. Now in her mid-thirties, her lifelong passion had blossomed into her own thriving shop. Though the work was demanding, seeing the flowers she had nurtured and arranged with care reminded Ivy that this successful shop was the fulfillment of all her hopes. She was exactly where she was meant to be.

She paused, realizing Amelia’s gaze was fixed on her.

She loved that Amelia was in her corner. Though right now, she needed time to process this betrayal and figure out her next steps. Plastering on a smile, Ivy started tidying up the shop, signaling the conversation was over.

As Amelia headed to the backroom, Ivy whispered under her breath, “I won’t let this destroy everything I’ve built.” She

had to fight for herself and her business—no one else was going to do it for her.

As the afternoon progressed and more customers streamed in, Ivy pushed her negative thoughts aside. Evergreen Valley, already a picturesque location, transformed into a veritable wonderland of snow and ice each December.

When dusk fell, strings of lights illuminated every street corner. Gleaming tinsel and icy-blue ribbons embellished the lampposts, and no one could deny the air of celebration.

“Are you planning to attend the Christmas craft fair?” Ivy posed the question to a young couple as they selected a deep burgundy dahlia.

“Wouldn’t miss it!” A flicker of excitement lightened the young woman’s green eyes. “This is our first Christmas here, and everyone’s been telling us about it.”

“You’re in for a treat.” Ivy trimmed the dahlia stem and chose a gift sleeve in ecru to offset the burgundy shade. “The fair is held outdoors and in the high school gymnasium, and vendors sell homemade crafts and food. I’m a sucker for the maple fudge and cranberry orange bread.”

The young man picked up a rosemary topiary shaped into a mini tree and inspected it. “We also heard a charity event is happening soon. Do you know anything about it?”

Ivy glanced at a calendar behind the check-out counter, mentally noting the date. “The fire department hosts a yearly toy drive to supply gifts for underprivileged children. The entire community comes together, and there’s a real sense of camaraderie.”

She proceeded to provide the couple with all the relevant information.

“We’d love to contribute.” The woman reached for a flyer on the counter. “We want to do our part to support such a wonderful cause.”

“Lovely. Thank you.” Ivy positioned the trimmed dahlia stem in the center of the sleeve, allowing the large flower head to remain uncovered and prominent. Then she tied a raffia bow around the sleeve and handed it to the woman. “In fact, my store is donating a portion of our profits, so your purchase today is already making a difference.”

As the couple departed, Ivy paused to stare out the shop window that she’d decorated with multi-colored lights and strings of garland. Amelia had declared it a jewel-toned oasis of Christmas cheer, causing Ivy to exchange a smirk with a stationary Nutcracker, both silently agreeing that the display was probably a bit over the top.

Across the square, a Salvation Army bell ringer grinned at a passerby while children skipped around him, their breath fogging the air. People moved from store to store, bundled in scarves and mittens, their arms laden with packages.

Ivy envisioned the just-baked treats that tempted buyers at the adjacent bakery and cafe—sugary gingerbread men, foamy peppermint mochas, and pumpkin spice lattes. In this season, the square was redolent with the buttery scents of nutmeg and vanilla, as well as the keenness of freshly cut pine.

Her anxiety over the article receded as she took in the community’s optimism. Facing her customers might be daunting, but this place and these folks were her heart. Come what may, she belonged here.

At six o’clock, she perused the shelves one last time before closing.

“Amelia, can you pass me those pinecone strings?” she asked. “I’ll wrap them around the glass vases.”

“Sure,” Amelia replied. “Who said vases can’t join the festive fashion trend?”

Ivy tied the strings around miniature potted paperwhites, creating a dainty charm, while Amelia organized a parade of pink and bi-colored Christmas cacti.

“Remember when we made our own ornaments out of pinecones and acorns?” Amelia’s hands moved with skill and precision, ensuring that the cacti looked stunning.

Ivy chuckled. “Our parents let us hang them on the tree, even though they were a tad ...rustic compared to the store-bought ones.”

“Speaking of trees, have you seen any that might be ideal for the store?”

Every December, the women decorated a modestly sized evergreen that graced a corner of the shop.

“Actually, I hoped we’d pick one out together next weekend.” Ivy stole a glance at her friend, grateful for her nod of agreement. “It wouldn’t feel right without your input.”

“Deal! We’ll spruce things up as a team. Get it? Spruce things up? Spruce?” With a humorous wink, Amelia placed a closed sign on the front door.

As the sign snapped into position, the women stood silent, looking around the shop that they had poured their hearts into—Ivy as a majority owner, and Amelia as a partner.

This was more than a business—it was a haven of creativity and friendship.

“Have you finalized your plans for the holiday break yet?” Ivy inquired.

“I’m flying home to Indiana to spend time with my family for Christmas and to bring in the New Year. And I truly miss Bailey, my mother’s dog. She’s such a sweet golden retriever—and never misses a chance to cuddle on the sofa while we watch movies. It’ll be so nice to relax with her after being apart since last summer. I really wish I could get back there more often.” Amelia pulled out her phone. “You gotta see the recent pictures that my mother sent me!”

She scrolled through her camera roll, cooing over shots of the retriever chewing on a toy bone or curled up napping.

Ivy smiled. “Look at those big paws!”

“I know, right?” Amelia pinched the photo to zoom in on the dog’s fuzzy fur. “How can you not fall in love with those soulful eyes? Bailey is so loyal and kind.”

“Okay, you’re definitely selling me on the merits of dog ownership.”

“That’s not all!” Amelia tapped open her browser. “Check out this animal shelter site. So many cute dogs needing homes.” She displayed photos of snuggly labs, peppy terriers, and a beagle with pleading eyes.

“Aww, they are all precious,” Ivy admitted as Amelia clicked through.

“You’d give any pet the best home ever,” Amelia said.

Ivy hesitated, but the adorable puppy pics had sparked a longing inside her. A dog would bring so much happiness and solace to her lonely lifestyle. However, owning a dog wasn’t in her immediate future. Not with a florist shop to run.

“Bailey means the world to you,” Ivy commented.

“Definitely.” Amelia twirled a lock of her auburn hair. “And what are your plans over the holidays? You don’t have any family here.”

“I’m used to being alone. I should be able to carve out some time off, but year-end is usually busy. Thankfully, several college students can help on a part-time basis while you’re away.” Ivy let out an exasperated huff. “Ugh, my house is so empty and quiet, with only me rattling around. Almost makes me wish for a dog to have someone to greet me at the end of the day.”

“See what I mean?” Amelia perked up. “You totally should get a pup, girl. Oh, and you could bring the dog to the shop with you, too!”

“Now that would be interesting.” Ivy grinned at her friend’s enthusiasm. “Though potty training a puppy while running the store sounds chaotic at best.” She envisioned an energetic pup bouncing around the buckets filled with branches and twigs. It would be a mess, but a cute one.

“Owning a young dog is a big commitment.” Amelia smiled. “But hey, you never know when the right guy comes along and—”

Ivy put up a hand. “I’m still recovering from my break-up with Will.”

“That was a year ago, and Will Boyd was inconsiderate. Imagine just moving away without even telling you.”

Memories of her relationship with Will and his declarations of love for her flooded Ivy’s mind. “Yes, she replied. “So much for trust.”

Could trust ever be fully mended, the way Amelia expertly arranged the flowers in a beautiful bouquet?

“All I’m saying is it’s possible that this imaginary tall, dark, and handsome new guy is a dog lover too, and you can embark on an adventure together.”

“Key word. Imaginary.” Ivy smirked at the idea coming from her friend, always the romantic. “In the meantime, I’ll live vicariously through your Bailey pictures. Who knows, maybe your dog can help me break my dating dry spell.”

“I’m telling you, dogs are great icebreakers,” Amelia teased. “You need to find a guy who can’t resist those puppy eyes and warms up to you in the process.”

“I’ll keep your suggestions in mind.”

An hour later, after they finished tidying and cleaning, watering the unsold plants, and conducting an inventory check, Ivy and Amelia huddled at the counter.

“I’ve been thinking about doing more for the auction.” Ivy pictured a wreath with pine, holly, and white berries. “Let’s design something unique.”

“How about a huge vase arrangement, too? With some frosted branches and sparkly ornaments.”

Ivy grabbed her sketchbook, mapping out evergreen boughs, woody stems, and metallic accents.

Amelia peeked at the drawings. “Awesome, girl! I can’t wait to put it all together.”

Ivy smiled, toning down her earlier elaborate vision to a more straightforward, stylish plan. With the design simplified, the winter plants could speak for themselves, unfettered by fancy embellishments.

As they admired her handiwork, the women grabbed their quilted coats and shrugged them on. Although Ivy owned a compact car, a small hatchback, she seldom used it to get around town, unless she was driving a longer distance.

Ivy turned to Amelia. “You mentioned Everett, the photographer who took pictures here? You said he owned the hardware store in town.”

Amelia nodded. “Yep! Everett’s Hardware.”

“His photos in the *Gazette* were gorgeous. Didn’t you mention he has a grandson who’s a famous photographer?”

“Blake? He grew up here, but eventually relocated. Evergreen Valley isn’t anywhere near as lucrative for a photographer as major cities.”

Ivy arranged two empty flowerpots by the door, wondering if she’d bump into Everett’s grandson around town someday. Being a world-traveling photographer sounded glamorous compared to her quiet life running a flower shop.

She smiled to herself, both appreciating the simplicity of her life, and secretly intrigued by the mystery of this local boy turned globetrotter.

Arm in arm, the women stepped outside, their giggles carrying into Township Avenue, the main street in town. Ivy’s gaze inevitably drifted to the available storefront next to her shop.

She imagined quaint, overflowing window displays, shelves brimming with garden supplies, and a comfy corner where customers could sip tea while perusing flower books.

If only I had the resources to expand, she mused, her gaze lingering on the vacant space. Perhaps one day, the stars will align.

Across the square, vendors were setting up booths for the Christmas market. Several women hung wreaths of foraged juniper, stacked wooden ornaments, and laid out glitter-dipped candles for sale. One booth sold mini cherry pies and mulled apple cider, the smell wafting across the square. Lively laughter resonated from a group of children, each clutching hot chocolate and candy canes.

As they walked, Ivy glanced at Amelia. Considering her tall frame and contagious enthusiasm, Amelia exuded a vibrant energy. Her passion for helping others was a quality that made her such a dear confidant and valued colleague.

Ivy, on the other hand, knew she didn't stand out, though she'd come to embrace her own unique qualities.

While Amelia's boisterous laughter drew people's attention, Ivy sought comfort in the quieter moments. It was okay to be petite in both stature and voice, because neither diminished her strength or impact.

Amelia's curly hair bounced with each step, eliciting a smile from Ivy. Their friendship was a tapestry of contrasts, and she was grateful that they shared this journey together, both in business and in life.

Christmas carolers passed around a sleigh bell wand for different singers to ring, their voices melding with the jingle of the bells.

"See you in the morning!" Ivy waved to Amelia as she headed toward her house, which was only two blocks farther.

"Bright and early!" Amelia walked in the opposite direction to her apartment on Cedar Street, about a fifteen-minute stroll. "It's a big day. Your Wishing Blooms always draw a huge crowd."

A few minutes later, as Ivy unlocked the door to her modest house, an unassuming Cape Cod on Winterberry Drive, a pang of loneliness hit her. The emptiness of the space was highlighted by the silence, with only her rattling around on the hardwood floors.

The home had an open floor plan with antique decor. While the living room fireplace provided a serene spot, she often wished she had a furry companion or potential partner to share the fire's warmth. An upstairs office allowed her space to work, but the absence of company became apparent as she evaluated customer orders during the wee hours or pored over feedback from lapsed accounts.

She had a Facebook page and Instagram account and posted photos a few times a month. However, social media was hardly worth the effort because she didn't get much of a response. Her business was local, and she rationalized that she didn't need to reach out to a far-flung audience.

If she hired a marketing manager, she would need an advertising budget.

But who had the money for an advertising budget?

She hung up her coat and set down her purse with a sigh. Another night alone in front of the TV or reading a book until she fell asleep. Ever since her breakup with Will, her personal life had stalled.

Certainly, she had her friends and flower shop to fill her time. But as she sank into the couch, she ached for someone to share this space with. Someone who would ask about her day and hold her when she was hurting.

She gazed at various photos and a framed inspirational quote on a side shelf and stepped over to it. There, she read the

quote out loud, “Bloom where you are planted.”

Such true words. She loved that quote.

Then, she lifted the framed photo behind it—a photo of herself and Will back when things were good. It served as a reminder of where she was and how far she had come.

They stood against the backdrop of the movie theater in town—arms linked and smiles wide. Him with his black hair neatly combed, and her blond hair catching a hint of sunlight.

Did she miss him or just the idea of not being alone? She had loved him once, before the arguments and distance grew. Ivy knew she deserved better than how he had treated her in the end. But part of her worried she’d never find that connection again.

Now in her thirties, she wondered if her chance at love and starting a family had passed her by. Maybe she was meant to be the single, career-focused woman who spent more time with her flowers than with people.

Ivy set the photo down. She wanted to believe there was still someone out there who would embrace both her independent spirit and her tender heart. Although on nights like these, it was hard not to lose hope.

Brushing away a tear, she pushed down the sadness. Someday, the right man would walk through that door and finally fill her house with laughter and love. She just had to be patient and ignore the creeping voice inside that whispered it was too late.

Before retiring, she mustered up the courage to reach out to the journalist. Steeling herself, she mentally prepared, and a glimmer of hope stirred. Perhaps Britney and her editor would

be open to hearing Ivy's side, and they could find common ground.

She punched in Britney's number and left a considerate voice mail, aiming to address any misunderstandings. She politely requested a meeting to discuss the article in depth, seeking an opportunity to present her side of the story.

As she hung up the phone, Ivy's heart raced with uncertainty. The journalist's words caused Ivy to feel exposed and vulnerable, and she needed to set the record straight.

She turned off the lights and lay in bed, her mind filled with thoughts of what the meeting might bring. Sleep was elusive as she replayed the events of the day, her emotions tangled in a knot that refused to loosen.

Her phone pinged with a text. Ivy grabbed it, squinting at the bright screen. The message was from an unknown number.

It simply read: *Sweet dreams.*

Before Ivy could respond, another text appeared: *Tomorrow is a big day...*

Ivy's pulse quickened. Who was this? How did they know her name?

She hesitated, unsure whether to reply. The number provided no clues.

Tomorrow was the flower-wishing ceremony that most of the people in town attended. Although this text felt more sinister than a friendly reminder.

Ivy locked her phone, heart pounding as she huddled under the covers. The mystery texter's identity and motives remained unclear. But whoever it was, they knew too much.

As Ivy finally drifted off, she wondered what awaited her after sunrise.

CHAPTER 2



An invigorating gust of wind filled Blake Shepherd's lungs as he stepped out of his Jeep Wrangler. The vintage jeep stood with a rugged charm, its exterior coat faded to a rustic red, rumbling the numerous rides on winding roads and open highways.

Blake's journey from Seattle, Washington, to Evergreen Valley, North Carolina, had taken forty-five hours. That amount of time didn't account for the rest breaks, meals, and three nights of lodging.

However, here he stood. Back in his hometown.

The nostalgic scent of cedar trees and pristine snow brought both comfort and an ache to his weary heart. He'd always considered Evergreen Valley his hometown, and now it was a refuge from the sadness of his colleague's tragic accident.

"Welcome home, Shutterbug. Ten Valley View Road hasn't changed a bit since you left." His grandfather, Everett Shepherd, appeared on the front porch. His hands, with visible veins and aged spots, cradled a mug of coffee, steam curling up into the chilly morning air.

Shutterbug.

When Blake was a boy, he explored with his camera, a simple point and shoot model with a built-in flash and took snapshots of everything and everyone. His grandfather started calling him Shutterbug, a name that stuck and became a cherished reminder of Blake's early artistic spirit.

"Thanks, Grandpa." Blake's breath misted in front of him as he spoke. "I could've stayed at the Evergreen Valley Inn."

"No need for that. You're always welcome here. Family's family, and that's what holds us together."

Blake surveyed the snow-covered landscape that encircled their ancestral home—a place where memories and history were woven into every creak of the floorboards. He glanced up as the whistling song of a male northern cardinal nestled in the fir trees.

"Come on in, I've got some breakfast ready for you." Everett ushered Blake inside, the familiarity of the house enveloping Blake as they stepped through the threshold.

Blake sniffed as he set his bags in the hallway. The irresistible scent of sizzling bacon wafted toward him.

As they settled around the kitchen table, plates heaped with fluffy scrambled eggs and crispy bacon, Blake marveled at how easily he slipped into the rhythm of this place. Every nook and cranny told a story, from the faded wallpaper adorned with delicate flowers to the worn leather armchair next to the fireplace. On rainy days, he would often lose himself in books, mostly kids' photography guides.

"Seems strange being back here," he admitted, glancing out the window at the snow-covered garden that had once been his playground. A mix of innocent laughter and carefree moments rushed in from his childhood. Memories from when

he had a dear companion by his side. CooperCam, his loyal and loving black Labrador, who had shared countless adventures with him.

“Do you remember all the fun we had with our dog, Grandpa?” Blake asked, breaking the silence.

“Yep.” Everett reached for a slice of toast and spread a thick layer of homemade strawberry jam on it. “Those were special times. CooperCam was your partner in crime.”

Blake grinned. “Yeah. He was the best.”

As the conversation progressed, Blake changed to a more subdued tone.

“I couldn’t keep a dog in my Seattle penthouse. The landlord had a strict no-pet policy. Plus, with my frequent travels, it wouldn’t be fair to the dog.”

“That isn’t why you broke your lease.”

“No.” Briefly, Blake shifted his gaze to his half-eaten breakfast. “I communicated my intent to leave and paid an exorbitant early termination fee.”

“You were desperate.”

“That’s not the word I was looking for, though maybe it’s the right one.” A lump formed in Blake’s throat. “Truth is, I missed home.”

“Oh, my Shutterbug,” Everett set down his toast and placed his hand on Blake’s hand. “The pull of familiar streets and remembrances—it’s a force that can’t be denied.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Blake said.

In his quiet moments, he admitted the truth. No achievement would ever be enough to fill the vast hollowness

inside.

Everett leaned back in his chair. “Big city life can be quite the whirlwind. I suppose it has its excitement, but it can also leave a person feeling disconnected. Here in this corner of the world, the pace is different. There’s appeal in both, I reckon, but the choice is up to you.”

Blake speared a forkful of eggs. The unpretentious breakfast was a stark contrast from Seattle—where he frequented trendy coffee shops and munched on slices of avocado toast. “This place is quite a change.”

He was in his midthirties, yet he couldn’t shake the guilt that he should have life figured out by now. Uncertainty tugged at him, wondering for the millionth time if returning home was a step backward or the possibility for charting a different course.

“Change is difficult.” Everett took a slow sip of his coffee, his blue eyes mirroring Blake’s own. “But sometimes it’s exactly what we need.”

His grandfather’s words lingered, and Blake’s mind retraced the path that had brought him back to town. The lifestyle he’d left behind in the city—the endless hustle, the constant noise and towering buildings, and the relentless pace that consumed him. A season of his life teeming with aspirations and ambitions, but also marked by heartache and mourning.

“Six months have passed since your colleague passed away.” Everett’s face bore the graceful marks of age. Faint lines etched near his eyes and mouth, hinting at a life rich with stories.

“I should’ve been there. Jason was my most trusted friend.” Blake swallowed hard, forcing down the remorse that threatened to surface. “I was too absorbed in my work.”

As photographers, Blake and Jason had supported each other through their college days, collaborating on assignments, attending exhibitions, and encouraging each other.

The memory of Jason’s accident was an ever-present reminder of loss.

Blake’s thoughts were overshadowed by regret. The guilt persisted, an unwelcome companion that seemed to grow stronger with each passing day.

“You traveled the world. Pay attention to all the recognition you gained,” his grandfather was saying.

“But look what I lost.”

“You didn’t know there’d be an accident. You can’t predict the future.”

“Jason claimed it was a once-in-a-lifetime photo expedition in Switzerland.” Blake’s gaze drifted. Through the window, a solitary cardinal perched on a snow-covered branch. The sight brought a fleeting moment of wonder, a glimpse of nature and all he had missed. “We had discussed traveling to Switzerland all through college.”

Over the last few years, Blake had been swept away in a tumultuous cyclone of success, leaving no time for the things that truly mattered. He neglected opportunities to collaborate with his friend, postponing their planned photography trips and forgoing their meetings.

Jason’s trip to Switzerland was one of those times.

“I was committed to several high-profile assignments I couldn’t get out of,” Blake murmured. “A luxury car show and a handful of VIP parties. My buddy Rob was involved, too.”

Rob was another colleague Blake had worked with. The man was on his way to becoming a resounding success—marketing, branding, and developing client relationships as if there were no limits to his future. Throughout their careers, the men maintained a cordial competition, a friendly rivalry, forever pushing each other.

Late at night, when Blake sat alone in his penthouse apartment, he wondered if this was all his life had become—a chase for some fulfillment that always danced just out of reach. Rob always seemed to be one step ahead of him.

With each sunrise, he buried the ache under crisp shirts and fake smiles, rushing once again towards the next fancy photography event, the next so-called win. His unshakable competitive spirit was a driving force in his life, and one that held him in its grip.

“I understand, and I well remember,” his grandfather said, pulling Blake out of his reverie. “There’s no need to reiterate; I respect your feelings.”

“I rationalized my decision and declined Jason’s invitation.” Blake fidgeted with his coffee mug, swirling the liquid distractedly. “I couldn’t pass up another opportunity to elevate my career. I assumed we’d have another chance.”

“Chance is an odd word. Options are not always definite or predictable. Some are unique and may never come around again.”

“I was constantly stressed and adapting to my clients’ demands,” Blake continued. “It’s an excuse, and it shouldn’t

be. I told myself that I embraced change—diverse job assignments—entertainment events and all that. Though I didn't. I prefer photographing riverbanks, sunrises, and sunsets.”

He'd minored in environmental science at a prestigious university. During his education, he received a strong foundation in conservation, which he'd applied to his original profession as a wildlife photographer. How had he gotten so switched around?

“You're not alone,” Everett replied. “Many people feel like you do. It seems more and more lately. Speaking of change, I've converted one of the rooms upstairs into a makeshift studio and moved my camera gear aside. You can set up all your equipment and continue your projects there. And your old bedroom is still waiting for you.”

“Thanks. You mentioned that you've developed an interest in photography now that your hardware store is closed.”

“A few freelance jobs keep my mind fresh.” Everett patted at his lips with a napkin and stood. “Take the rest of the day to unpack. Most mornings, I'm out early, visiting a farmer's market or heading out of town for a doctor's appointment. Nothing as stunning and exciting as my famous grandson's life.”

“Hardly.” Blake pushed his half-eaten eggs aside. “You've always been my inspiration.”

In this quaint town, Blake was back at his starting point. The place of his youth.

He'd resisted. He'd once considered Evergreen Valley too constricting. He'd been convinced that by going home, he was admitting defeat.

But here, he intended to immerse himself in his true passion—documenting the beauty of nature through his lens. Unfailingly, it brought joy, even in the darkest hours.

Jason's passing had been a turning point, prompting Blake to reevaluate his priorities. The idea of spending a holiday season in Seattle wandering Snowflake Lane by himself was unbearable.

"Your grandma was thrilled whenever you were here at Christmas," Everett said softly, his eyes glistening with unshed tears. "She always believed in you and your talents."

"After my parents passed away, you and Grandma raised me from when I was little. I can't tell you how much I appreciate all you did for me." Blake rose and faced his grandfather. "I promise I'll make her proud."

"You already have, Shutterbug. Just by being alive." Everett squeezed Blake's hand. "Your grandmother and your parents would be overjoyed to see the remarkable man you've become. They were gone too soon."

Blake was briefly rendered speechless by overwhelming gratitude. His grandfather's care and understanding were a balm to his bruised soul. He was grateful beyond words for the opportunity to heal and rediscover himself.

THE NEXT DAY, Blake woke to the amber light of sunrise filtering through the frayed plaid curtains. He laughed to himself as he stretched out on his boyhood bed, realizing how much smaller it seemed now compared to his six-foot, two-inch frame.

Transported back to the days of superhero capes and pillow fights with his friends, he felt like a time traveler.

Tattered posters still hung on the walls, featuring his prized band obsessions—most notably The Rolling Stones, Queen, and Green Day—iconic legends and American punk rock.

He showered quickly and reflected on his appearance in the bathroom mirror. His light brown hair fell in an unkempt manner, and he ran his hand over his beard stubble. His associates often teased him, suggesting he “clean up” for special occasions. He’d assured them it wasn’t an impressive display of facial hair by any means. His bristles resisted all his attempts at a smooth shave.

He pulled on an oversized cable-knit sweater in charcoal gray, paired with jeans, well-worn boots, and a faded leather jacket. His grandfather’s note revealed that he would be gone for the day, but cinnamon rolls from the local bakery and a steaming pot of coffee sat on the stove.

Blake indulged in bite after bite of soft doughy layers, cinnamon sugar, and sweet icing. His eyes briefly closed in pleasure, and a contented hum escaped his lips.

After washing the dishes and placing them to dry by the sink, he grabbed his camera bag, slung a burgundy and gray tartan scarf around his neck, jammed fleece gloves into his pockets, and headed out. The snowflakes that had begun to fall during the previous night dusted the ground in a sparkling white blanket.

He snapped shots of frost-kissed branches and icicles hanging from eaves. His breath fogged up in the cold air as he lost himself in the art of finding the extraordinary in minute details.

As he roamed the familiar streets, memories washed over him like the gentle waves of the river that ran through town. He pictured himself at nine-years-old, tromping through the

forested trails that lined the riverbanks, his sturdy little boots splashing in the muddy shallows. Fear had welled up in his chest when he lost his footing on the slippery rocks and fell into the chilled water.

His bottom lip had quivered as he emerged, clothes dripping and tears springing to his eyes. But then his grandfather was there, wrapping him in his strong, comforting arms.

“It’s alright, Shutterbug,” his grandpa had said. “No reason to cry. What do you say we get you home to dry off?”

His cheeks sticky with tears, Blake had grabbed his grandfather’s weathered hand and held tight. As they walked, his grandfather pointed out fiery red and burnt orange leaves drifting on the river’s surface.

“See there? Looks like the trees are sending us their finest artwork,” he remarked. “Bet we can find some nice ones to photograph later, hmm?”

Blake had smiled up at him. His grandfather invariably saw the bright side of any situation. With him, Blake was safe and cared for.

Back in the present, Blake sighed at the recollection. Even in difficult moments, his grandfather had known how to comfort him and kindle his artistic nature. Their bond had been a steady foundation throughout his childhood.

The nostalgic charm of the town square triggered another rush of sentimental emotions. The lampposts were wrapped in a string of shimmering lights, lush wreaths accented by bursts of red berries suspended from doors, and carefully curated holiday scenes transformed storefront windows into inviting displays. He stopped to take a photo of pre-school children

playing in the snow, their flushed cheeks and bright smiles a testament to pure bliss.

He stood on the corner of Township Avenue and Breckenridge Road, briefly closing his eyes and inhaling deeply. The sharp, earthy aromas of pine and cedar mingled with traces of cinnamon and baked bread floating from the cafés nearby. Evergreen Valley came alive through its smells.

He soaked in the jubilant tones of carolers singing on the street corner, blending with the merry jingling of store bells as customers entered and exited tiny boutiques. The town had its own soundtrack, its own rhythm. One he had missed during his years away.

As he resumed his walk, the packed snow snapped under his boots. He passed by the Evergreen Theater with its grand vintage marquee and the public library where he had spent endless winter days immersed in adventure stories as a child.

McKinley's Ice Cream Shop stood across the street, walls covered in memorabilia from his high school hockey team. Many winters, he'd celebrated victories with his teammates over hot fudge sundaes.

A father pulled his daughter on a wooden sled, her delightful squeals of laughter creating a heartwarming soundtrack. In the town park, toddlers waddled and tumbled into drifts, chubby legs churning as they created snow angels. Other children pushed each other into snowbanks, their grins extending from one ear to the other.

There was a liveliness here, a sense of community, that the coldness of Seattle had never allowed. This town was a part of him, as steadfast as the soaring evergreens, and he had been away for far too long.

As he continued, a recognizable voice called out, “Blake Shepherd?”

He turned. Mrs. Reynolds, his former third-grade art teacher, waved at him. Though her hair was frosted with white now, her eyes still radiated the same warm-heartedness.

“I can’t believe it’s you, all grown up and so accomplished.” Along the lines of experience, her smile held the repeat of countless lessons. “Your work is being showcased in galleries everywhere! I especially liked your photograph of Lake Serenity at the foot of the Redwood Forest. I saw the photo online, and it truly moved me. I love keeping up with your career.”

“How great to see you, Mrs. Reynolds.” Blake grinned. He recalled those delightful days when the classroom buzzed with ingenuity, where paper and paint transformed into imaginative worlds, and popsicle sticks became bridges for endless creativity. “Those art projects were the best part of your class.”

“I still have a few of your drawings framed in my home office,” she said. “Even as a boy, I could tell you had talent. I’m retired now, but I sometimes substitute teach.”

With a goodbye, Blake promised to visit his old school soon. This town was woven together by moments like this.

Just a week ago, he had been surrounded by the constant hustle of a sprawling city. Back in Evergreen Valley, he was struck by the slower tempo. No more honking horns or crowds jostling him on busy sidewalks. Instead, there was the quiet sigh of a soft wind and friendly nods from passing shopkeepers.

This place operated on its own timeline, a place guided more by seasons and community than formal schedules. In

Seattle, he needed to rush to keep up. Here, he could finally breathe. Hours spent wandering and photographing were the norm, not a luxury.

He turned another corner, drawn to a quaint storefront adjacent to the bakery and cafe. The sign above a blue door read Ivy's Blooms in flowing calligraphy. A riot of flower colors and textures, as well as a lively crowd gathered outside the shop.

Nearby, a middle-aged woman wore a crimson coat decked with a faux fur collar. Not far off, an elderly couple strolled arm and arm. Their matching purple sweaters displayed whimsical patterns of reindeers and snowflakes.

A resplendent cart reminiscent of a fairy tale, with intricate carvings and delicate, lace-like patterns, stood outside the flower shop. Positioned above the cart sat an attractive sign with the words: "Make A Wish! Discover The Magic Of Christmas. Free Wishing Blooms For All" inscribed in hand-painted letters. The cart overflowed with translucent deep purple and lavender flowers that seemed to glow, as if lit from within.

A gentle breeze blew past him, seeming to whisper the cart's mysteries, carrying the essence of ancient secrets, and forgotten dreams.

Intrigued, he stepped closer and captured the moment with his camera. The sunlit morning cast a golden radiance on the dazzling blooms and brought a touch of magic to the setting.

Magic? And what on earth was a Wishing Bloom?

He lowered his camera and rubbed his eyes, trying to confirm if what he witnessed was real or a mirage.

As the enthusiastic crowd lined up to receive the mystical blooms, a nagging doubt crept in. This whole concept of wishing flowers granting people's deepest desires seemed too fanciful and unrealistic.

He tried to keep an open mind, though his natural skepticism made it difficult to accept such a whimsical premise at face value. As a photographer, he was wired to search for concrete evidence and confirmation.

Wandering nearer, Blake observed the blond-haired woman and her flower cart. He wanted to believe her motives were purely altruistic, though he couldn't help wondering if this was an elaborate event designed to take advantage of people. Perhaps she purchased inexpensive flowers and spun an enticing story around them to attract publicity and sales. After all, belief could be a persuasive force. He had seen it time and again.

For now, he told himself, he would try to remain balanced between openness and healthy uncertainty.

"What's going on?" He directed his attention to the elderly couple.

"Ivy Bennett's flower-wishing ceremony, and that's Ivy handing out her Wishing Blooms." The woman gestured to the blond-haired woman. "The flowers hold the power to grant wishes."

Clad in a vibrant red quilted coat that perfectly complemented her radiant blond hair, tied in a stylish bun, the petite woman stood beside the cart.

She was gorgeous.

Her face was framed by loose strands that accentuated her delicate features and fair complexion. Despite the cold, her

demeanor was gracious and friendly, treating each customer as if they were cherished friends.

As Blake's gaze lingered on her, their eyes met, her hazel-eyed gaze locking to his. His heart skipped a beat, caught off guard by the unexpected connection.

Time slowed. The surrounding crowd vanished into the background. For a fleeting second, they were the only two people in the town.

Blake was struck by the genuine warmth emanating from Ivy's smile, an aura of kindness he seldom encountered.

A tall woman with curly auburn hair stood near Ivy, her attentive gaze focused on the display of flowers. Now and then, he caught her adjusting the arrangement to ensure the blossoms were presented artfully for the customers.

He advanced as an enthusiastic Ivy motioned to the cart. "A beacon of hope," she explained to the eager audience. "Each flower has a way of touching people's hearts."

He scanned his surroundings, a detached observer amid a mass of believers. The ceremony seemed a heartwarming showcase of optimism and positivity, but his skeptic's mind searched for a different, more rational explanation.

Was this a charming spectacle, carefully orchestrated to evoke emotions? A clever marketing strategy? He expressed his thoughts out loud, and the elderly couple turned to him, exchanging a knowing smile.

"I've never seen anything quite like this before," Blake muttered. "How can she afford to give away flowers for free?"

"This is no gimmick," the woman replied. "Ivy's flower-wishing ceremony is a labor of love. She trusts in the potential of these blooms to spread happiness and hope."

“But still,” Blake persisted. “Surely it must cost a fortune to donate all these flowers. What’s the hidden catch?”

The elderly man laughed. “You’re not alone in your doubt. People willingly contribute the money so that Ivy can purchase these flowers. This is a community effort.”

Blake’s lips formed a half-smile. “But what’s in it for Ivy?”

“The delight she shares. Isn’t that enough?”

Blake shook his head, dismissing the event as lovely but ordinary.

He focused on the middle-aged woman wearing a crimson coat who stood a few feet from him. She held a Wishing Bloom, its fine petals quivering in the slight breeze, and closed her eyes.

What deeply held wish had she entrusted to the fragile flower?

As a photographer, he was trained to observe people and details. Perhaps she wished for healing—for herself or a loved one. Or was she hoping for strength and comfort through a difficult loss?

Maybe she wished for reconciliation—the saving of a struggling relationship or marriage. Or something more profound, like searching for meaning amid life’s unknowable mysteries.

Even the simplest wishes held power. Wishes for peace, purpose, or rejoicing.

As the woman clutched the flower to her chest, Blake was struck by how vulnerable and human her body language was.

Despite his reservations, he couldn't dispute the longing reflected in the woman's face. His natural curiosity compelled him to open his mind, even just for this moment, to the power of belief.

He focused his lens on her. The camera shutter clicked, freezing the image into a single frame, a fleeting instant of vulnerability, anticipation, and a hint of trepidation.

The ceremony concluded, and the woman traced a loving trail over the stem before walking away with the flower.

He didn't reject the appeal of holiday traditions, but a simple illusion influenced people's convictions. He'd witnessed enough shiny advertising campaigns covering significant Hollywood happenings to know that, and his training had ingrained in him a habit of considering every angle. Doubt was a lens he couldn't easily remove and extended to other aspects of his daily life.

The ceremony drew to a close, and Blake dawdled. The concept of wishing flowers sounded implausible when said aloud. But the anticipation and yearning etched on each person's face as they cradled their delicate blossoms was real.

Perhaps the actual magic was the spark of positivity the ceremony inspired, the childlike belief that sincere desires could become reality.

Life often didn't align with fantasies, yet Blake was moved by the sincerity of the participants. For a moment, he had seen past cynicism and doubt to something purer, a faith in possibilities. While he still sought tangible evidence for ideas, today he was reminded there were intangible wonders in the world off the measurable grid. Forces that, perhaps, science alone could not explain.

As he meandered farther into town, the beautiful Ivy and her Wishing Blooms occupied his thoughts, like an enigmatic puzzle begging to be deciphered. And her hazel eyes radiating with warmth and joy stayed imprinted in his mind.

CHAPTER 3



“Can you believe that it’s eight o’clock already and two hours past closing?” Amelia nodded toward the antique clock on the back wall. “I’m thrilled that our Wishing Blooms ceremony was a grand success this morning.”

Ivy looked up from arranging the spiky leaves on a bunch of sturdy holly branches. Beyond the wide front windows, darkness had fallen outside. The mellow gleam of the shop’s pendant lights enveloped the interior, providing a relaxed sanctuary against the winter night.

“Time certainly got away from us,” Ivy replied, setting the branches down. She removed the apron from her slender waist and breathed in the enchanting fragrance of roses and lilies. These flowers, roses in particular, reminded her of a summer garden, delicate and sweet.

“We both were caught up in the moment of endless work,” Amelia chuckled, tending to a potted amaryllis plant. “As usual, I might add.”

Ivy tidied the scattered ribbons and leaf trimmings. “Everyone left with smiles on their faces this morning. That’s a good sign.”

“The best kind of sign, but I’m beat and headed home.” Amelia slipped on her coat. “I can’t believe Britney Knox

hasn't returned your phone call. Notice that she didn't cover our Wishing Blooms event. We would've appreciated the positive publicity."

"Maybe she's out of town. I worried about our business suffering, but everything is holding up well for now."

Ivy refrained from mentioning the odd late-night text she'd received after phoning Britney. There was no need to worry her friend about what was most likely a prank message.

"Don't work too late," Amelia admonished.

"Me?" Ivy pointed to herself. "Never."

In between arranging flowers, Ivy spent the subsequent hour dusting and cleaning the shelves and display counter. By the time she stepped outside, the town's holiday lights had automatically shut off, and only the streetlamps emitted a faint amber glow.

Most of the shops were already closed for the evening, with only a few restaurants and the movie theater still lit.

As Ivy began her customary route home, the full moon provided only minimal light on the deserted sidewalks. The wind whistled as it wove through the bare branches of trees and sent stray newspapers skittering across the pavement. A chill seeped through Ivy's coat, and she shoved her hands in her pockets and quickened her pace.

She walked into the residential area after leaving the town square. Light gleamed from windows of welcoming homes. In her mind, families had shared chicken casseroles and hot cocoa while laughing together. At this hour, parents read bedtime stories to their children by lamplight, tucking young ones under snug, hand-stitched quilts.

Her boots lightly tapped on the wintry pavement, and her breath formed frosty puffs in the darkness.

Her ears perked up at the subtle rustling of movement, and she slowed her steps. In a dimly lit alleyway, a thin tabby cat crouched motionless beside a trash can. The cat's whiskers trembled, ever so slightly.

Ivy advanced, her footsteps slowing. The cat scrutinized her with wary eyes.

The lid of a trash can clattered as it hit the ground. The cat sprang back and disappeared into the alley.

Ivy jumped, then went to turn, but a flicker of movement followed by a faint whimper made her pause.

Another motion.

She peered into the shadows, struggling to catch sight of whatever it was. Perhaps there was another creature who sought refuge or assistance.

The form moved again, and two sparkling eyes peered up at her.

As she crept closer, the shape revealed itself to be a puppy, and she glimpsed its fluffy body and wagging tail.

Her breath caught in her throat. The poor abandoned creature looked so small and helpless. How could someone leave this innocent puppy out here alone to freeze?

Kneeling on the cold ground, she spoke softly so as not to startle it.

“There's no need to be scared,” she whispered.

The puppy flinched back.

She extended her hand, pale in the dim light.

The puppy hesitated, then inched forward to sniff her, its wet nose nudging her palm. Winter's chill left traces on its matted fur, and its protruding ribs were visible.

"I won't hurt you." She wanted to pick up the quivering animal and warm it but waited patiently for it to come closer.

She scratched behind its frostbitten ears, eliciting another tail wag. Her gaze darted about the alley, searching for any hint of an owner, but the surroundings remained silent and deserted.

She unbuttoned her coat and rose, lifting the puppy.

She was reminded of her own yearning for a puppy in her childhood days. She'd brought home stray dogs she found, begging her parents to let her keep them. Pleading her case, she promised to care for the puppy and assume full responsibility.

But her parents, worried about added expenses and chaos, always said no. "Perhaps when you're older," they told her, although that day never came.

An only child, Ivy keenly noticed the absence of a constant companion in those early years. She daydreamed about romping across grassy fields with her very own loyal dog at her side.

Now, decades later, Ivy held an orphaned pup that desperately needed her care. She cradled the puppy, feeling a deep sense of responsibility, and reversed her steps.

Her heart raced as a tall figure approached, casting a lengthy shadow in the alleyway. Squinting, she clutched the puppy tighter.

"Hey there. Is everything okay?" A man held up a gloved hand in a friendly wave. He wore a faded leather jacket and a

tartan scarf.

“Oh, umm. I’m fine.” She opened her coat just enough for the man to glimpse the puppy’s face, and big brown eyes peered out at him.

“Cute! Poor little guy.”

“The puppy isn’t yours, by any chance?” She glanced at the stranger. “I think it was abandoned, and it’s so cold out.”

“Nope. Not mine.” The man stepped closer. He had a strikingly attractive ruggedness, with defined features that suggested a well-experienced life. Strong jawline and dark, furrowed eyebrows, while his intense blue eyes bore traces of strength and kindness.

“Here.” He slipped off his scarf, which was intricately woven in deep burgundy and gray. “Take this to keep the little guy warm. I’m Blake, by the way.”

“Ivy. Ivy Bennett.” She accepted the scarf, surprised at its pleasantly substantial texture. Quickly, the puppy snuggled into the luxurious fabric.

Blake smiled, genial and appealing, as if he and Ivy were long-lost friends. “You’re the flower shop lady. We met this morning.”

“We did?”

“Yes.” His blue eyes glimmered with a touch of mischief. “I attended your Wishing Blooms ceremony.”

“I...I remember. I’m grateful you came to the ceremony.”

“I didn’t intend to. I stumbled into it.”

“Thanks a lot.”

“No, that’s not what I meant.” He chuckled softly, his gloved hands adjusting the collar of his jacket against the chill. “To clarify, we didn’t exactly meet, but I was there.”

“Stumbled into it.”

“Right. It’s nice to formally meet you, Ivy.”

“Likewise.”

He hesitated. “Don’t I get a polite Nice to meet you, Blake?”

“Alright.” She offered a tentative smile. “Nice to meet you, Blake.”

She recalled him more clearly with each word of their conversation. A tall man with a camera slung around his neck who had remained at the fringes of the crowd. She became aware of him watching her during the ceremony. When their eyes briefly met, she’d felt the faintest flutter in her heart.

Snowflakes floated down, leaving a fine white layer on their jackets.

Blake glanced up at the sky, as if contemplating an impending storm. “I’m available if you want me to walk with you.”

“No, I—” She began lifting his scarf off the puppy, fully intending to give it back to him.

“Please keep the scarf. Consider it my gift to the puppy.” He touched her hand, lightly, to slow her movements. “I recently returned to Evergreen Valley and moved into my grandfather’s house at Ten Valley View Road.”

She nodded. She knew where the road was.

“When did you return?” she asked.

“Yesterday.” He laughed. “I’m a thirty-something guy in the middle of a career transition. At least, that’s what I’m telling myself to feel better.” He made no sudden moves, keeping a reasonable distance. His voice was calm, his hands visible and non-threatening. His laughter, presumably at himself, came readily and sincere.

Ivy smirked. “Welcome to the thirty-something club.”

“I owned a black Labrador retriever once, a long time ago, and I still miss him. He had the goofiest antics, but I’m grateful for every minute we had together.” Blake’s tone faltered. “I hate the thought that this little buddy was out here alone.”

The puppy peeked out of Ivy’s coat and sniffed Blake’s fingers.

Blake’s thoughtful manner, his obvious love for animals, and the puppy’s own instincts helped assure her he was on the level.

“Thank you.” Ivy hugged the tiny dog closer as the wind picked up. “I appreciate the company.”

She stole a sideways glimpse at him as they hurried along the snowy sidewalk. His wavy hair peeked out from under a knit cap. With his jacket hugging his broad shoulders and washed-out jeans accentuating his muscular legs, he cut a good-looking figure.

He cast her a quick, inquisitive glance. “Have you always lived in Evergreen Valley?”

She scanned the well-known scenery. The town exuded a quiet charm under the cover of night, its quaint buildings illuminated by scattered pockets of light, a subtle contrast against the dark backdrop.

“I grew up here.” Her gaze briefly touched the old oak tree that stood sentinel at the crossroads. “After college, I relocated briefly to Pittsburgh to work in a flower shop.”

“What made you return?” he asked.

“The slower pace, the sense of community, the changing seasons... This place aligns better with my soul,” Ivy replied.

“I can relate. I lived in Seattle for several years.” Blake kicked absently at a small mound of snow near the curb, sending a spray into the air. “A city of over seven hundred thousand people and noted for its iconic skylines.”

“Impressive.”

He shrugged. “Maybe for some people.”

Ivy brushed a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Are you here for the long term or visiting family for the holidays?”

“I’m not sure yet. I had sent a portfolio to a well-known gallery in New York City a while ago for a holiday exhibition.” He slid his hands into his pockets and looked upwards. “It would’ve been a terrific chance to showcase my work, but I never heard back.”

Ivy scratched the tiny puppy behind the ears, eliciting contented little grunts. “I’m sure the right opportunity will come along. In the meantime, taking time to reset might be exactly what you need.”

“In Seattle, the constant hustle left me ungrounded.”

Ungrounded. She pondered the word. How accurately it described her state of mind before she’d moved back to Evergreen Valley.

“You’re seeking a simpler, more meaningful life,” she said aloud.

Blake adjusted his knit hat, his lips parting as he exhaled. “Ah, you’ve managed to put my thoughts into words.”

“Do you regularly wander the streets at night searching for abandoned puppies?”

“Not often. In fact, not ever,” Blake chuckled, studying the little furball sleeping in Ivy’s arms. “Ever since I owned CooperCam, I’ve loved dogs.”

“CooperCam?”

“My black Labrador retriever I mentioned earlier.”

“You named your black lab CooperCam?”

He smirked. “Yeah, it was a name with character.”

“And then some. Were you preparing your dog for a future in photography?”

“Hey, he was a smart dog. He had a hidden talent for snapshots. Get the name?”

“Got it. Sounds like he was special.” Ivy shifted the puppy onto one arm so she could adjust Blake’s scarf with her free hand. “Are you sure you wouldn’t be interested in a dog?”

“Good try, Ivy, but sadly, no.” Blake shrugged. “I’m fairly certain my grandfather would banish me to the doghouse if I brought home a puppy right now.”

“Your grandfather doesn’t know what he’s missing,” she grinned down at the pup. “This little guy is irresistible.”

“That he is,” Blake agreed.

When they arrived at her home, she hesitated, toying with the fringe of the scarf.

“Thank you again for accompanying me,” she said.

“Happy to help.” Blake’s gaze settled on her for a few beats longer than necessary before he looked away. “Take good care of the little one.”

“Of course.” Her gaze flicked to her front door, and she considered, for a fleeting second if her house could accommodate more than herself and the puppy. Of course, it could. That wasn’t an excuse. She hesitated. Should she ask Blake to come inside?

No. Certainly not. She scarcely knew him.

“Well, I should go. I would invite you in, but...”

“Please, I’m fine.” Blake’s smile took over his handsome face. “By the way, have you ever owned a dog before?”

She grinned. “I’ve never even owned a goldfish.”

“I’m no expert, but what are you planning to feed the puppy tonight? I assume you have no puppy food lying about.”

“Only a leftover tossed salad. Any suggestions?”

“Try plain white rice and bits of cooked chicken.” Blake used his hands to show the portion size. “In the morning, a scrambled egg. And water to keep the puppy hydrated. Canned pumpkin is supposed to be good, though I’ve never tried it.”

His advice eased her worries, and she nodded. “Okay, thanks. Tomorrow, I plan on visiting the vet, and then I’ll try to locate the owners of this pup.”

“Wishing you the best of luck.” A sly smile crossed Blake’s lips as he leaned in, as if sharing a secret. “By the way, challenge accepted.”

“What challenge?”

He chuckled. “I’ll see to it that our paths cross again.”

“Oh, really. What do you have in store?”

He paused. “I know where you work. I’ll show up at your flower shop and buy a bouquet of your finest blooms.”

“For who?”

“For you.”

“I’m already the owner. I don’t need more flowers.”

He grinned. “True.”

“Are you in the market for flowers?”

“I’ve never bought them before.”

She laughed and couldn’t resist asking, “What about my Wishing Blooms?”

“Sorry, Ivy. When it comes to those flowers, there’s not a chance.”

“They’re free.”

“Free isn’t the issue. Either way, I’ll pass. I’ll bring you a coffee, too.”

“There is no comparison between my Wishing Blooms and a cup of coffee.” Ivy adjusted the puppy in her arms. She found herself drawing nearer to Blake, the shared moment oddly intimate in the darkness. “Besides, I prefer tea.”

“What kind of tea?”

“Peppermint.” For some reason, her voice sounded as if it were a soft invitation.

“Peppermint tea it is.” Blake’s tone carried a subtle promise that caused her heart to quicken. “And trust me, Ivy Bennett. I have more to offer you than a cup of tea and pretty bouquets.”

His comment ignited her curiosity, filling her with unexpected excitement.

“*My* bouquets,” she reminded.

“Right.” He winked.

She was flirting with a man, something she hadn’t done in ages.

Blake turned, and Ivy watched him go. She gave a little wave as he glanced back at her when he neared the end of her walkway. Then she moved inside, the sleepy puppy nuzzling against her cheek.

She set the puppy on the floor and prepared the chicken and rice as Blake had suggested. As the puppy ate, Ivy fingers gently explored the velvety fur.

“I don’t know how much time we’ll spend together,” she said, “though I promise to make it as wonderful as possible.”

After a warm impromptu bath in her kitchen sink, she wrapped the puppy in a fluffy towel, patting it dry with an attentive touch. The puppy’s eyes blinked open, revealing a newfound calmness.

After drying off, the puppy slept soundly on Blake’s scarf by the fireplace. She grinned down at the tiny belly rising and falling. Every so often, quiet cries pierced the silence when she tried to doze, tugging at her sleep and demanding attention.

She carried the puppy outside to go potty, staying close in the fenced backyard as the curious pup explored the grass.

Back inside, whenever it shivered, she cradled it closer. She knew the tiny creature’s vulnerability, and her compassion

expanded. Steadfast in her effort to protect, she layered on an extra blanket, creating a safe nest.

With each passing hour, she stayed fixated on the slight form, watching for any signs of discomfort. Each tiny whimper or movement sparked a quick response from her, adjusting the blankets or offering a gentle, reassuring pat.

The sun was barely up and filtering through the curtains as Ivy awoke to the puppy's energetic barks. Although she was reluctant to abandon the luxury of her comfortable plaid couch with the soft cushions, this fragile life depended on her.

She showered quickly, dressed in her usual attire of khaki pants and blouse, and pulled her hair up into a bun. Then she scrambled eggs for herself and the puppy and phoned the vet to schedule the earliest appointment.

Ivy set out for the vet's office as the sun rose over Evergreen Valley. Snuggling the puppy in Blake's scarf and an extra blanket, she walked into town.

The chill from the night before had lifted, and the air held the brisk freshness of early morning. Store owners were sweeping sidewalks outside their shops to get ready for the day. The rich aroma of roasted coffee beans wafted from one of several local cafés.

Ivy inhaled as she passed the bakery, the yeasty scent of fresh bread and cinnamon rolls drifting from within, creating an irresistible invitation to passersby. The movie theater was just putting out their signature spinning display of candy and popcorn.

Up ahead was the Evergreen Valley Inn with its old-fashioned veranda. The owner stepped outside to shovel the steps and waved cheerily to Ivy.

The sights, sounds, and smells of the neighborhood coming to life brought sentimental comfort. She was reminded of school days long ago when she walked this route to the bus stop, dreaming of the day ahead.

She greeted the early risers, meeting their interested smiles at the puppy with a brief nod, and entered the vet's office.

Dr. Emily Mitchell, the veterinarian, was a picture of confidence and compassion, and she examined the puppy as Ivy looked on anxiously.

"He's a boy. Overall, he seems healthy," Dr. Mitchell said. "A little underweight, but we can give him some nutritional supplements."

Ivy nodded, relief flooding through her.

As Dr. Mitchell administered the puppy's shots, then checked for a microchip, she glanced at Ivy. "You seem quite concerned. I can tell you two have bonded already."

"Last night, I found him abandoned and freezing. I want to make sure he's okay."

"Not everyone would have been so eager to rescue an orphaned animal." The vet smiled knowingly as Ivy's fingers explored the silky texture of the puppy's coat.

"He was just so cute and helpless. I couldn't leave him." Ivy lifted the puppy and cradled him. His little body tucked perfectly against her chest.

"Have you considered keeping him yourself?" Dr. Mitchell folded her hands. "I think he's already quite attached to you as well."

Ivy paused, surprised by the vet's words. Could she provide him with a forever home?

The puppy's big trusting eyes looked up at her, and a powerful ache rose within her. She wanted to be the person to give him the love he deserved.

"I don't know," Ivy said slowly.

"In any event, you have yourself a fine dog here." Dr. Mitchell's one hand stroked the puppy's back, while the other held a flashlight to examine its eyes, ears, and mouth.

Ivy's gaze connected with Dr. Mitchell's as she inquired, "What type of breed is he?"

"A Pomeranian, possibly a purebred, and I estimate him to be around fourteen weeks old. These dogs are a small breed, and an adult typically stands about six to seven inches tall and weighs around three to seven pounds. Today, he weighed in at over three pounds, and ten inches in length from the tip of his nose to the base of his tail." Dr. Mitchell rested her palms on the examination table. "A Pomeranian has a high energy level, and your dog will require lots of walks and play and frequent grooming. The good thing is he can comfortably fit into your hands."

"I don't have time for a dog." Ivy traced patterns on the sleeve of her quilted coat. "And, to clarify, he's not mine."

"He might be a stray, or lost, or a victim of neglect. Sadly, it happens often." Dr. Mitchell placed her hand on Ivy's arm. "Some owners struggle to provide adequate care due to the associated costs."

"My heart breaks to think that someone could abandon such a precious animal."

"This is a heartbreaking reality, although I'm glad you brought him here." The vet nodded. "I have a certain protocol in place to deal with lost animals, including recommending

temporary shelters or animal control. Do you plan on bringing him to an animal shelter if you can't find the owner or don't plan to keep him?"

Ivy pondered the question, her gaze drifting down to meet the puppy's chocolate-brown eyes, filled with innocence and trust.

"I'll house him until I locate his owners if that's okay?" She hugged the puppy, relishing the silky sensation of his fur against her palms.

"So, you'll provide temporary care?" the vet asked. "Then yes, I'm okay with that. This is a small town and I know you'll ensure his well-being."

A bulletin board held Ivy's attention as she exited the office. Jammed with photos of rescued pets and their forever homes, she paused, touched by the uplifting stories behind each happy ending.

As she made her way toward her shop, her quickening steps matched the increasing buzz of activity in town. Joggers were hitting the trails around the river. Families walked their dogs, the air resonating with the lively sounds of barking companions. School-age kids with backpacks hurried to classes.

A woman strolled past and fawned over the puppy. Ivy held her precious bundle tighter, a protective measure.

"How can I take him to a shelter?" she thought. "He needs me."

CHAPTER 4



*A*s Ivy entered her shop, she smiled at Amelia, who had her curly auburn hair fastened in a loose bun. She wore a plum-colored sweater with a floral apron tied around her generous waist. Her fingers, stacked with dainty gold rings, moved swiftly and skillfully as she wrapped a bouquet of white lilies in shimmering gold paper.

She greeted Ivy with a spirited tap on her watch and a hint of curiosity in her eyes. “What gives? You’re never late.”

Ivy laughed in response. “I had a good reason today. I stopped at the vet.”

“Dr. Mitchell’s office? Why?”

“Because of this little guy.” Ivy held up the puppy.

“Wait, wait. You’re kidding.” Amelia raced over and caressed the puppy’s fluffy fur. “Finally, you adopted a dog.”

“Temporarily, and only until I find his owner, or the animal shelter finds him a forever home.” Ivy was quickly becoming aware of the responsibility of caring for a pet. The practical voice in her head reminded her of the commitment required, but the pull of concern and the puppy’s endearing presence tugged at her heartstrings.

“The most unexpected thing happened,” she continued. “Last night, I was walking home after I left the store and heard this soft whimpering behind a trash can in an alleyway. There he stood, this little cuddle ball looking up at me with irresistible brown eyes.”

“Oh, how cute!” Amelia lifted the puppy out of Ivy’s arms, fussing and snuggling him.

“I couldn’t just leave him there,” Ivy said. “So, I scooped him up, and right at that moment, Blake appeared out of nowhere. He knew exactly what to do.”

The memory of his unexpected arrival was vivid—his gentle demeanor, his willingness to assist, and the sense of comfort she felt in his presence.

While Amelia held the puppy, Ivy stepped behind the counter to ensure all the deliveries were on track. She’d hired a high school student who often rode a bike after school to deliver flower orders.

“Blake?” Amelia raised an eyebrow. “Who’s that?”

“He’s someone I met last night while I was with the puppy. He recently moved back to Evergreen Valley and gave me this scarf for the puppy.” Ivy held up his scarf.

Amelia chuckled. “Lucky you, coming across a cute puppy and meeting a charming rescuer all in one evening.”

“Please, it wasn’t like that.” Ivy fussed with Amelia’s bouquet, her heart beating faster than normal. “But yes, he was kind enough to walk me home and even offered some good advice on puppy food. Turns out, he’s had experience with dogs, and his help was invaluable.”

Amelia leaned against the counter, her gaze probing with mischief. “And he gave you his scarf.”

“He said it was a gift for the puppy to keep him warm.”

“How thoughtful of him.” Amelia examined the scarf. “An expensive tartan scarf. Sure.”

Ivy laughed. Amelia read her like an open book. “You and your wild imagination. Seriously, he’s a friend.”

“A friend who makes you blush the way a teenager does with a secret crush.” Amelia tilted her head. “Sometimes the most beautiful stories unfold in the most unexpected ways.”

“Now you’re a poet?” Ivy quipped.

“I’m a romantic. And that wasn’t a poem. It was a declaration.”

Ivy grinned at her friend’s loveable quiriness. Amelia had always been the one to nudge her toward different possibilities, even when Ivy showed reluctance to embrace them.

OVER THE COURSE of the morning, the puppy followed Ivy as she went about her work, snuggling at her feet and eagerly awaiting belly rubs.

“Come on, Ivy,” Amelia urged. “You’re such a loving person, and this little guy clearly needs someone like you. Just think about adopting him if the owner doesn’t show up, okay?”

Ivy hesitated, torn between her desire to help the lost pup and the sobering reality of her already overwhelming workload. She glanced down at the puppy, his big chocolate-colored eyes brimming with trust and hope. His plume-like tail wagged with unbridled enthusiasm, keeping time with the lively pace of her pulse.

“I’ll finalize packing the flowers for delivery before the high schooler arrives.” With care, Amelia gathered the pup in her arms. “And I’d love some assistance from our new best friend. I’ll also run to the animal supply store with him. He needs food, water, and bowls, correct?”

“Blake advised me on food, though the puppy can’t live on cooked chicken and scrambled eggs forever.”

“We can set up quarters in the back room and ask the store to suggest the best nourishment for a little dog.”

“Thank you. Excellent ideas.” Ivy picked up the phone to review upcoming customers’ orders, ensuring she had all the necessary details and materials.

As the jingling of the bell above the door announced the arrival of a customer, she looked up and extended a welcome. Blake sauntered in with an easy confidence, a foam cup in hand, his charm undeniable.

Her heart skipped several beats.

His wavy hair tousled just enough over his forehead to give him a laid-back appeal. His eyes, a magnetic shade of blue, held a secret sparkle. Tall and confident, wearing faded jeans and a tan leather jacket, he commanded attention without even trying.

Ivy set down the phone. “Well, well, if it isn’t the puppy’s rescuer!”

“That would be you, not me.” Blake flashed a charismatic smile. “I gave in to the impulse and came to see the guardian angel and the adorable pup.”

“You really think I’m an angel for rescuing a puppy?” The idea of being an angel was oddly gratifying, but she wanted to clarify the sincerity behind his words. “I’m really not.”

“You really are,” he said. “Rescuing that little guy was quite a heroic act.”

The appreciation in his gaze was unexpected, and she found herself experiencing a curious blend of pride and humility.

She reached for a small decorative dish of polished stones on the counter, and began arranging the stones in intricate patterns. “He was a stray pup who needed assistance, and it’s reassuring that he’s safe.”

“Not everyone would’ve taken the time to help. By the way, where is our rescued pup?”

“He’s off on a shopping spree with my co-worker, getting all the treats he deserves,” Ivy replied with a chuckle. “What brings you to my flower shop today?”

“I was curious about where you worked your floral magic. I saw the exterior, and I wanted to see the interior.”

“Welcome to my kingdom of blooms.” Her fingers still moved gracefully over the stones in the dish, the clinking providing a soothing rhythm to their conversation. “Do all my flowers pass the test?”

Blake feigned contemplation. He looked around, scanning the shelves of frosty white candles and arrangements of pink peonies. “Hmm, it’s a tough one, but you definitely earned a coveted spot on my Floral Artist Wall of Fame.” He exhaled a dramatic sigh. “Don’t let it go to your head, though. The flower fashionistas are a jealous bunch.”

Ivy placed a hand over her heart in mock astonishment. “Moi? Perish the thought!”

“Besides, I couldn’t resist the temptation of seeing these enchanting flowers and the even more enchanting florist.”

Blake flashed a roguish grin.

“I try my best.”

“And you succeeded.”

Ivy’s cheeks warmed. She picked up a vintage watering can behind the counter and sprayed a few imaginary drops in his direction. “You’re quite the smooth talker.”

“And you’re incredibly talented.”

As they traded quips, Ivy smiled, enjoying their relaxed rapport. “Although truly, what’s your reason for stopping by today?”

“The flowers, naturally.” He motioned to the mini-Christmas trees grouped by the window, glittering in tinsel and candy-colored baubles. “I thought I’d repay last night’s angel with more flowers. Any recommendations?”

The word *angel* made Ivy laugh softly. “Flowers for an angel, huh? Like I said last night, these are my flowers. Mine. So, you plan to gift them back to me?”

“That’s the plan,” Blake said. “You can call me a smooth operator, as well as a smooth talker.”

His mischievous gaze prompted her smile to grow wider. “How about some red roses? They represent admiration and gratitude.”

“A bouquet of red roses for my rescuer, then.”

“Correction,” she replied. “You mean the puppy’s rescuer? I didn’t rescue *you*.”

He shrugged, that mischievous glint ever present in his gaze. “Perhaps you did.”

His words seemed to carry a hidden meaning, and a delightful warmth spread through her.

He wandered around the shop while she arranged the bouquet, and she was grateful he didn't see her flustered fingers and flushed cheeks.

"All set." She lifted the flowers, then handed the bouquet to him as he approached the counter.

His gaze met hers, a silent connection. He accepted the bouquet and immediately handed it back to her. "These are for you, Ivy. What do I owe you?"

"Consider it a gift. I'll do my best to give *my* roses the care they deserve." She contained her laugh as she arranged the flowers in a vase, then went to the sink to fill the vase with water. "I must say, you're quite the gallant rescuer yourself."

"It's easy to be chivalrous when I'm near a captivating woman." He set the foam cup on the counter. "This tea is for you. I've been carrying it around, so it probably cooled off by now."

She gasped, taken by surprise. His thoughtfulness was unexpected, and she wasn't sure how to respond. A part of her melted at his sincerity, though another part held back, hesitant to let her guard down.

"Thank you," she replied, genuinely appreciative.

She lifted the lid, the cool minty scent of the tea soothing and revitalizing. "You didn't forget our conversation from last night."

He grinned, clearly pleased. "Of course not. I clung to it like it was my lifeline. It was the perfect excuse to spend more time with you."

Excuse? Time with her? Was he flirting or merely being friendly?

Stop, she told herself. You're overthinking things.

"You didn't have to go through the trouble," she said aloud.

"No trouble at all, I assure you." His smile spread to his ocean-blue eyes, coaxing a tender, softened look from them. "However, I forgot your tea preferences. Cream? Sugar?"

"I never said."

"I ordered plain tea." He patted his jacket pocket. "I brought packets of cream and sugar, just in case."

"Plain is fine." She sipped and let out a satisfied, "Mmm, it's perfect."

"Anything for a talented florist and a new friend. You are my friend, right?"

She smiled. "I am."

"Good." Casually, he touched her hand. The gesture was simple, though it had a surprising effect on her, leaving her slightly breathless.

Ivy took another sip, buying herself time to think. She glanced at Blake's handsome face and embraced the moment. "You're extremely kind. I appreciate your thoughtfulness more than you can imagine."

"No worries, Ivy. That's what friends do."

Friends. New friends. Ivy clung to the words, letting them temper the burst of emotions inside her. For now, friends were enough. She would simply enjoy getting to know this fascinating man.

“Hey, remember us?” Amelia emerged from the back room, cradling the puppy in her arms. “I got all the supplies, including a leash, and set up an area on the floor for him near all the seasonal stock. He’s sure to get into mischief chewing up the Boston ferns.”

“Let’s hope not,” Ivy replied, then hesitated. “Wait, is a Boston fern a pet-safe plant?”

Amelia laughed. “Yes. Just kidding. We don’t need a floral disaster on our hands. So, I bought a bumpy teething ring and a bunch of cute stuffed toys—a cuddly lamb and a furry raccoon.”

Blake joined in the laughter. “Hi there, little fella,” he said, bending to scratch the puppy’s head.

“He’s a boy,” Ivy clarified.

With a genial smile, Blake winked. “So, I assumed.”

“Aren’t you just full of assumptions?” Ivy smirked. “Dr. Mitchell said that he’s a Pomeranian.”

“This lady here saved you from a freezing and lonely evening in the cold,” Blake whispered, speaking to the puppy.

“Forgive my rudeness.” Ivy turned to Amelia. “This is Amelia, my best friend and co-owner of the shop, and this is Blake, the guy I was telling you about.”

“Ah, the mysterious stranger from last night.” Amelia nudged Ivy and gave a conspiratorial smile. “Nice to meet you, Blake.”

He stood and held out his hand. “Likewise. I hope Ivy didn’t bore you with the story about my dog.”

“Nope. We hadn’t gotten that far. She was sharing how you accompanied her home. Gotta say, wrapping the puppy in your

designer scarf was a bold move. I hope you don't expect to get it back in one piece."

"Hey, that scarf was sacrificed for a worthy cause."

"Uh-huh. We all know you wanted an excuse to play the dashing hero." Amelia turned to Ivy. "Looks like he's taken a liking to you. Chances are you should keep him."

Was Amelia referring to Blake or the puppy?

"I'm sure he has someone waiting for him," Ivy replied, trying to sound nonchalant.

"He doesn't," Blake chimed in. "By the way, have you named him yet?"

Ivy shook her head. The weightiness of the decision was tangible. Naming the puppy would make it even harder to say goodbye when the time came.

Amelia, ever the decisive one, stepped in. "Let's think of one," she said, temporarily stepping away to attend to a customer's inquiries.

Blake leaned against the counter. "How about something classic, like Max or Charlie?"

Amelia returned, immediately adding her input. "Nice, but we need a more unique name. This is the Christmas season, after all."

Ivy nodded. The puppy deserved a distinctive title that suited his personality. She gazed down at the dozing bundle of fur.

"He's frisky, and definitely has a mischievous side," she said, her thoughts drifting to the puppy's bouncy antics.

The threesome observed the puppy as he slept at their feet.

“How about Cocoa?” Ivy broke the silence. “It’s sweet, just like him, and fits those adorable eyes.”

Blake raised an eyebrow. “Cocoa? Are you sure you’re naming a puppy and not a dessert?”

Ivy feigned offense. “He’s as irresistible as a warm cup of cocoa on a winter’s day.”

Amelia chuckled. “I like it.”

“Cocoa it is, then,” Blake said.

Ivy sighed and glanced down at the puppy. This small but meaningful act marked forging the connection between them. An unspoken understanding now existed. With a simple moniker, she had claimed a place in his world and him in hers. He was no longer a stray, but someone deserving of an identity. The choice of the name was straightforward, but the significance behind it was profound.

“Cocoa fits him perfectly,” Ivy decided.

“I agree,” Blake replied.

She offered him a smile. Being around Blake stirred feelings she had locked away after her breakup with Will. They’d dated for a while, but their relationship had crashed and burned when Will admitted he didn’t share Ivy’s vision for a future together. Furthermore, she discovered that Will had been secretly in contact with his ex-girlfriend, meeting her behind Ivy’s back, and planned to relocate with her. This breach of trust created a lasting sense of doubt and insecurity.

She was devastated. She dove into her floral business, shielding her heart from any potential hurt. Currently, Cocoa’s unconditional love and Blake’s thoughtfulness were thawing her reservations.

“I realize it’s silly, but I feel a bond with this little guy already,” she said. “Letting Cocoa go when the time comes will be difficult.”

“That type of connection is instinctive.” Amelia extended an understanding smile. “He’s won you over, hasn’t he?”

“I know nothing about his background.”

“Your heart doesn’t care about details,” Blake put in. “It knows a good fit when it sees one.”

Ivy took another sip of tea. “He’s such a sweetheart, and I can’t deny how much I already care for him.”

A subtle change in Blake’s expression revealed his empathy. “Is it possible that Cocoa was meant to be in your life for a reason?”

Perhaps.

Yet hesitation tempered her attachment. She had no experience caring for a pet. What if she fell short in providing Cocoa what he needed? The fear of making mistakes was a heavy presence.

“I worry that I won’t give him the time and attention he deserves,” she admitted.

“Yesterday morning,” Blake began, “I wandered into town and witnessed the Wishing Blooms ceremony. There you were, spreading goodwill with your free flowers.”

Ivy’s eyes widened. She hadn’t expected him to bring up the event. However, he’d been quick to steer their conversation regarding adopting Cocoa to a different topic, and his insight into her feelings cheered her up.

“Hang on, Blake. I thought I recognized you.” Amelia placed her hands on her hips. “You were the guy with the

camera yesterday. Are you some sort of a photographer?”

“Some sort,” he replied with a nonchalant shrug.

“A photographer.” Amelia’s raised eyebrow was hard to miss, as well as her quick, almost imperceptible glance toward Ivy. It was as if she sent a silent signal for Ivy to pay attention.

Ivy felt a faint flicker of suspicion. Amelia’s glance was so subtle that it could easily be dismissed as a casual movement. The name Blake Shepherd had come up in their earlier conversation, and she couldn’t shake the feeling that there was a connection.

She mulled over the possibility that he was the famous photographer but decided not to jump to conclusions or ask him outright. Instead, she’d piece together the puzzle if more clues emerged.

“The ceremony was charming, and I couldn’t help myself,” Blake was saying. “I captured the special moments.”

“Did you make a wish?” Amelia pressed.

“With the Wishing Blooms?” There was more than a hint of disbelief in his tone. “That kind of stuff isn’t for me.”

“Please don’t use any of your photos on social media.” Amelia glanced at Ivy. “We’ve had enough bad publicity lately.”

“Anything I can do to assist?” he asked.

“Long story.” Ivy smiled gratefully. “We’re set, at least for now.”

“Well, it seems like fate is bringing you two together at Christmas time.” Amelia clapped her hands. “I propose a toast to friendships and adorable puppies!” She grabbed three small

vases and filled them with evergreens, then handed a vase to each of them.

As they raised their vases and clinked, Ivy couldn't help thinking that Amelia was right—perhaps this encounter with Blake and the puppy was more than a coincidence. Sometimes, the universe had a funny way of bringing people together.

Amelia picked up the puppy and led Blake into the storage room, inquiring if she had purchased the correct food for Cocoa.

Soon afterward, Ethan stepped into the shop.

“Hi, Ethan. I'm just about done.” Ivy grabbed his order and weaved gold tinsel through the poinsettia leaves.

“Hi, Ivy. No rush.” Ethan looked around, then approached the counter. “By the way, have you heard?”

“Heard what?” Ivy sprinkled faux snow on the arrangement to give it a wintery feel, then glanced up. She hoped he wasn't going to relate some bad news about the critique of her shop in the *Gazette*.

“There's another florist moving in,” Ethan answered.

“Who?”

“It's a franchise called Garden Elegance. Have you heard of it?”

Of course she had. The franchise had locations all over the country. She'd heard rumors that another florist might be opening.

Ivy's heart dropped. Competition was the last thing she needed right now, with Britney Knox's scathing article casting a shadow over her shop's reputation.

“When are they supposed to move in?” She forced a smile, handing the arrangement over to him. She’d worked so hard to build her modest floral business. Could she weather both a PR crisis and a brand-new rival on the scene? Her perseverance had seen her through difficult times before, though this threat was daunting.

“Soon,” Ethan replied. “Word is around Valentine’s Day.”

Blake strode from the storage room and hesitated, studying Ivy’s face.

“Everything okay here?” he asked.

“It will be.” Ivy exhaled slowly. “Somehow.”

No matter what, she refused to give up without a fight, only now she didn’t have one fight. She had two.

CHAPTER 5



The following day, Blake sat at the polished kitchen table across from his grandfather. They had decided on an early lunch.

Late morning light filtered through the gingham curtains covering the window above the sink. The aroma of ripe tomatoes and crispy, golden-brown bread permeated the vintage 50s-style kitchen with checkerboard tile floors.

A bowl of steaming tomato soup and a grilled cheese sandwich lay before him, the gooey cheese still melting. His grandfather dunked a corner of his own sandwich into his soup and took a hearty bite.

Outside, snow drifted past the curtains as the two ate in companionable silence. Blake swirled another spoonful of soup, letting the comforting flavor warm him on this clear, chilly day.

His grandfather finished chewing and wiped his mouth with a napkin. “The *Evergreen Gazette* arrived the other morning, and I’m freelancing for them part-time. I left the magazine under a pile of newspapers somewhere. I’ll check to see if they used any of my photographs. I shot a bunch a while ago.” He shuffled into the living room and returned to his seat at the table.

“Well, will you take a look at this.” His grandfather held up the magazine. “One of my photos is on the cover!”

Blake smiled indulgently. His grandfather loved when his work was published.

“And here we are again.” He thumbed through the magazine, grilled cheese in hand. “They featured all my shots of Ivy Bennett’s flower shop.”

“Ivy Bennett?” Blake paused and set down his spoon. “Can I see the article?”

His grandfather passed Blake the magazine. “She’s a sweet woman, and her shop is lovely. Have you met her?”

“As a matter of fact, I have.” As soon as Blake read the accompanying article, his smile faded. While the photos were stunning, capturing the whimsy and vibrancy of Ivy’s shop, the harsh words aimed at her business didn’t match the images at all.

Blake’s muscles tensed as he skimmed through the cruel critique. His jaw tightened. His hands clenched into fists around the magazine.

This was completely unfair. Ivy dedicated herself to her flower shop.

He recalled the discussion between Ivy and Amelia the previous day.

“Please don’t use any of your photos on social media.” Amelia had glanced at Ivy. “We’ve had enough bad publicity lately.”

“Anything I can do to assist?” Blake had asked.

“Long story.” Ivy smiled gratefully. “We’re set, at least for now.”

He'd wondered about the discussion, though he hadn't pressed for details.

So that's what it had been about.

"The portrayal is extremely unfair," Blake said, unable to keep the frustration out of his voice. "The tone of the article is off, Grandpa, despite your gorgeous photos. Ivy puts her whole heart into that shop, and she doesn't deserve to be criticized this way."

His appetite abandoned, Blake stood and placed his bowl in the sink. He snatched the magazine and his jacket, then yanked open the door.

"I'm going to Ivy's shop to show my support. Thanks for lunch, Grandpa. Is there anything you need while I'm out? I can pick up some groceries."

His grandfather's gaze dropped to Blake's half-eaten sandwich; the cheerful mood now fractured. "Not a thing," he murmured, the critical article about Ivy's Blooms settling between them like an unwelcome guest.

"I'll see you tonight, then," Blake replied.

A short while later, the bells on Ivy's florist shop made a tinkling sound as Blake entered.

The acoustic guitar strumming "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas," a nostalgic tune, complemented the seasonal interior. The windows were lined with animated blooms—amaryllis, cyclamen, and cheerful paperwhites. Slowly, he was learning the names of Ivy's precious flowers.

Several Christmas candles burned, and the surroundings were rich with the delightful scent of pine needles and spiced oranges.

He spotted Ivy behind her worktable, meticulously arranging peppermint-striped carnations into a cylinder vase. Her blond hair cascaded in loose waves around her shoulders, and a faint squint accompanied the determined set of her hazel eyes. A smattering of freckles graced her cheeks and the bridge of her small, turned-up nose, giving her a youthful and innocent allure.

Everything about her had an understated appeal that drew him in.

Nonetheless, her movements were rapid and tense. Managing the puppy in addition to her business was clearly taking a toll.

Blake held back, not wanting to disrupt her creative process. There was something captivating about watching her craft floral arrangements. The way her elegant fingers skillfully transformed stems, flowers, and leaves into art.

After a final tweak to the bouquet, Ivy glanced up.

A radiant smile curved her lips, a vision that cast an undeniable brightness to the space. “Blake, you’re here!” She circled the worktable to greet him. “How good to see you again.”

“I had an urge to stop by.” More than an urge, though that would do for now.

Casually, he folded the magazine and placed it in the inner pocket of his jacket. His hands itched to crumple those unjust pages.

She’d been functioning tirelessly. This conversation about the negative article was emotionally taxing, and he decided it was better to wait. Yet beneath his calm exterior, indignation churned.

He strode over to her, his thoughts a storm of contemplation. The desire to press a quick, friendly kiss on her cheek flickered through his mind, though he held back. Friends—that was the label they wore. But did it encompass all they were? The uncertainty persisted, a question he couldn't quite answer.

“I hoped for an update on how you and Cocoa are getting along,” he said.

At the sound of his name, the puppy came bounding out from the back room. His little legs carried him enthusiastically over to Blake, tongue lolling in a doggie grin.

Ivy laughed, her cadence inviting and melodic. Her clear fondness for the dog awakened an emotion Blake couldn't quite label. Was it contentment? Affection? Or something deeper?

He squatted to give Cocoa's ears a friendly rub, earning a happy wag of the tail in response before the puppy scurried off.

Blake complimented her festive shop as he rose.

“I love this season.” Ivy's eyes gleamed. “Everything is more magical in December.”

“It's only December fourth. You have an entire month to celebrate.”

“That's the beauty of it, Blake. With a whole month of magic ahead, there are countless opportunities for celebration.”

He nodded, though he didn't fully understand. Christmas had lost its luster ever since Jason had passed away. Before that, even. Way before that. Nonetheless, seeing Ivy's

enthusiasm made him wish he could recapture that childlike awe again.

“Is our favorite puppy being a good boy?” he inquired. A mischievous rustling drew his focus, and he chuckled as the furry culprit attempted to unravel a ribbon from a stack of gift boxes.

“That depends on your definition of good,” Ivy said.

“Uh-oh.”

“Cocoa is a handful.” Her voice lacked the usual rise and fall, a monotone betraying her tiredness, though a fond smile creased her lips. “This morning, I caught him trying to sneak away with a pink feather from one of the displays. And then I rescued my prized garden gloves from his clutches. He’s quite the curious explorer, though his boundless energy is undeniably appealing.”

Blake smiled. “Undeniably, I’m sure.”

His heart went out to her as he imagined the scene with a mixture of empathy and amusement. A frisky chaos, the tug-of-war over feathers and gloves, the inevitable mess that accompanied a feisty puppy.

Here, he witnessed her in a different perspective—not the composed florist. Instead, a woman who laughed in the face of unexpected antics, who embraced the whirlwind side of life with an open heart. His admiration for her patience and resilience grew, and he wanted to provide some relief for her.

“How did last night go?” he inquired.

“You mean, did I get any sleep?”

“Yeah.”

“Umm. No. That tiny scamp kept me on my toes long after the shop closed. As soon as we arrived home, he started chewing on everything he could get his teeth on—my boots, the coffee table legs, you name it.” Ivy shook her head. “I finally settled him with a toy Amelia purchased. He loves the furry raccoon.”

“Where is Amelia, by the way?” Blake asked.

“She had a dentist appointment and should be back within the hour.” Ivy turned to trim the stems of a bouquet, her attention divided between the flowers and Blake. “Anyway, I sat down to sketch a design for a sunroom display for a client, and Cocoa was off again, racing around my kitchen table.”

“You dared to sit down?” Blake teased.

“I know. What was I thinking?” She rolled her eyes. “I puppy-proofed my living room by getting on the floor to see things from Cocoa’s perspective. I tied up and hid cords and wires, anything temptingly chewable.”

“Did it help?”

“Yes, although Cocoa tried to climb my Christmas tree. Luckily, I stopped him.”

“Your tree is up already?”

“Next week is almost the middle of December, so yes, my tree is up. A three-foot fir, nothing too fancy. I decorated it with mini white lights and red and gold bulbs. Oh, and I placed a few ornaments on it—a miniature snowman with a garland, a glittery pinecone, and a crimson bow.” She laughed. “Needless to say, that tree is no longer on the floor. I set it on an end table. Thank goodness puppies don’t fly.”

“Most likely, your home mirrors your style,” Blake acknowledged. The image she narrated took shape in his

imagination, her living space radiating her personality.

“My home is an ideal fit for me.” She smiled. “As I sat in my kitchen, I visualized where else I could add holiday flair—perhaps a tiny village with cotton-like snow on the mantel, or a vanilla-scented candle in a glass holder on the end table.”

“Always the artist,” he murmured.

“Nothing over the top.” She kept her smile undisturbed, even as she noted the mess Cocoa had made with the ribbon. Excusing herself from their discussion, Ivy lifted the puppy before he created any more havoc.

“Cocoa, you little rascal.” Her grip on him tightened as his tiny paws scrambled against her hold.

She came closer to Blake. “Do you mind holding him for a minute while I deal with this mess?”

“Sure.” Blake grinned as Ivy handed him the wriggling bundle of fur.

As Blake steadied the pup, he felt the energetic vibrations coursing through Cocoa’s tiny body. The puppy’s inquisitive stare connected with his, and Blake found himself drawn into a moment of shared curiosity.

“When we turned in for the night, I hoped we’d both sleep soundly,” Ivy continued, as she discarded the chewed ribbon in a trash can. “But no, Cocoa had other plans. Up every other minute, whining and licking my face. At dawn, I was zombie-like, barely able to drag myself out of bed.” She sighed softly, her fatigue seeming to ease as she reminisced. “I had to remake my bed three times while he destroyed another pair of my shoes. Though one look into those big brown eyes and I can’t stay mad.”

Blake chuckled. He inched closer to Ivy, and a meaningful smile passed between them—an unspoken understanding of the pup’s lively nature. “You’re doing an excellent job with him, Ivy.”

“I’ve contacted my friends and some of my loyal customers, inquiring if they were interested in adopting Cocoa or knew someone who might be. The vet said it was okay to do so.” She stepped back behind the worktable and selected eucalyptus leaves and juniper sprigs, crafting a fragrant Christmas wreath. “I also posted some flyers in town.”

“I saw a couple on the park’s notice board as I walked here.”

“My goal is to find Cocoa a home.” Her stance shifted slightly, as if torn between two choices—the urge to keep the pup and the practicality of letting him go.

Blake caught the emotional turmoil in Ivy’s eyes, a flash of uncertainty that gave way to a guarded mask.

She had already bonded with the puppy. Losing him would shatter her heart.

“He sure is a cute little rascal,” Blake said. “Reminds me of all the trouble my own pup, CooperCam, caused at that age. There was this one time when...”

Quickly, he steered the conversation to a funny memory, hoping to give Ivy a brief respite from her worries.

When she laughed, he asked, “Are you planning to purchase a Christmas tree for your shop?” As the little pup moved restlessly in his hold, he eased him onto the linoleum floor, and Cocoa promptly darted around the counter.

“I planned to pick out a tree with Amelia this upcoming weekend, though she volunteered to select the tree without me.

I have plenty on my plate with keeping up with this puppy.”

Ivy’s description of trees and decorating stirred Blake’s memories of the Christmas tree at his grandfather’s house.

The tree was situated in the living room, a solid six-foot fir. When he was a child, it had been decked out with shimmering glass baubles, resin figurines, and piles of neatly folded gifts, every ribbon precisely curled.

Sadly, since his grandmother had passed, Blake had only returned to Evergreen Valley a couple of times and noticed that his grandfather’s holiday decor was more understated. The tree was adorned with silver tinsel and a handful of heirloom enhancements—Blake’s favorites being a vintage train carriage and antique miniature sleigh. No more massive piles of presents.

Still, the tree filled the room with the magical scent of pine. In the commotion of arriving, Blake hadn’t commented on it.

He smiled to himself. Here, he had just teased Ivy for having her tree up already, and his grandfather’s tree was up as well.

He made a mental note to accompany his grandfather to pick out a tree topper, because the shiny metallic star had broken some years back. A nostalgic ornament would keep the old traditions alive.

A FEW DAYS LATER, the sun hung low in a gray sky as Blake strolled toward the park with Ivy and Cocoa. A whisper-thin layer of snow covered the grass, with the air hanging motionless.

Ivy had agreed on taking the afternoon off while Amelia stayed at the shop with a couple of extra part-time workers. Ivy had worked endless hours, and Blake convinced her that a break would do her good.

Ivy was bundled in dark jeans, tan boots, and her red quilted coat. Her blond hair spilled out from under a substantial ivory scarf. Her cheeks were tinged pink, whether from the chill or the laughter they shared, Blake couldn't tell.

He wore his favored brown leather jacket, the one Ivy said made him look like an old-time pilot. He hoped she meant it as a compliment. Beside him, Cocoa frolicked through the snowdrifts, his red sweater that Amelia had bought for him making him easy to spot.

Initially, Ivy had been hesitant to take Cocoa for a walk, but Blake reminded her how important exercise and socialization were for puppies. However, she pointed out potential dangers lurking around every corner. There were sharp objects on the ground, aggressive dogs, or getting lost in the snowy landscape.

“Stay close, Cocoa,” she warned, maintaining a firm grip on his bright neon-green leash.

Their stroll continued, and Blake noted a sight that held a special place in the heart of the community—the Evergreen Chapel. Its walls were constructed from sturdy fieldstone, and a steeple rose majestically, crowned with a pristine white cross that seemed to reach for the heavens.

“Even when I was young, I admired the windows,” he said. Adorned with intricate stained glass, the colors painted the ground with vivid hues of red, blue, and gold.

“Do you attend church often?” Ivy asked.

“When I was a kid, I went with my grandfather. Not so much anymore.” He turned to her. “You?”

She smiled. “Every Sunday.”

As they drew closer, the distant strains of a Christmas hymn, “Silent Night,” sung by a choir, carried by on a light wind. The wooden doors were carved with meticulous detail, and a modest wreath of evergreen and holly graced the entrance.

They soon passed Nonna’s Bistro, a much-loved spot for Blake. The restaurant was known for its unmatched Italian dishes, and the air carried subtle traces of melted mozzarella, garlic, and simmering tomatoes.

“I’ve traveled a fair amount, and I’ve never found food that compares to theirs,” Blake said. “Especially their homemade fettuccini in a white Alfredo sauce.”

“I’m with you on that, though it’s a fancy place for Evergreen Valley.”

“This town is fortunate to have a restaurant of this caliber,” he said. He reminded himself to treat her to a meal there soon. Ivy’s compassionate heart and caring spirit exuded more grace than any conventional socialite. “Although the company is what makes any meal truly special.”

He gazed at Ivy, taken by her inner and outer beauty. She could wear a potato sack and still outshine anyone.

She blushed. “You certainly know how to make a woman feel special.”

He smiled. “I just want you to know how special you are.”

Children in fleece-lined coats squealed and lobbed snowballs at a freshly minted snowman, and Ivy’s face

brightened. “Shall we build a snowman for Cocoa?”

“He’d love that. The park is safe, so let’s unleash him for a few minutes.” Blake smiled, delighted to see her excitement break through the cloud of exhaustion that had surrounded her.

Kneeling, Blake and Ivy packed icy handfuls of snow into a large round base. Cocoa darted around them, his tail reflecting his enthusiasm as he tried to catch the falling flakes.

“Ready for the snowman’s head?” Ivy shaped a smaller sphere, her slender fingers reddened by the cold. Blake confirmed and lifted the head onto the base with a dramatic grunt.

Ivy gathered sticks, breaking them to size for arms.

With tongue peeking out, Cocoa pressed his paws into the snowman’s middle, molding imperfections.

“He’s helping!” Ivy said. She found a discarded Santa hat on the ground, slightly worn. Carefully placing it on the snowman’s head, the hat transformed the snowman into the beloved figure of Santa Claus.

At least, that was what she declared. Although Blake was inclined to disagree, he kept his opinion to himself.

The best part wasn’t the snowman itself. The best part was the way Ivy’s spirit had been reawakened. He kept that thought to himself, too.

He slung an arm around her shoulder, both admiring their creation—lumpy in spots, though Blake labeled it as enchanting.

“Not bad for amateurs,” he said. “What do you think, Cocoa?”

Barking with enthusiasm, the pup leapt with surprising height, trying to nip at the snowman.

Afterward, Blake, Ivy, and Cocoa walked through town, the puppy secure again on his short leash—light and adjustable with a swivel clip.

“I’ll hold his leash for a while,” Blake volunteered. He soon realized that walking a puppy proved more challenging than he’d anticipated. Cocoa seemed to have a mind of his own, pulling at the leash and stopping every few feet to sniff something, most notably snow-covered rocks or puddles of melting snowflakes. Blake found himself constantly tugging Cocoa along, trying to establish some semblance of control.

Ivy released a sigh as they passed an empty storefront on Central Avenue, a couple of blocks from her shop. “This is where Garden Elegance is moving in. I can’t compete with a franchise. They have brand recognition, support, and a business model.”

Blake nodded, understanding the significance. “Hey, your shop is irreplaceable. Customers value a hometown business because you bring a personal touch.”

“Sadly, it will be overshadowed by their marketing and advertising budget. And then, there’s the issue of pricing. The store’s buyers have the funds to purchase flowers in bulk and will potentially undercut my prices.”

“You provide uniqueness and artistry. They don’t.”

“Still, customers might flock there seeking more affordable options.”

“They won’t. You’ll see.”

There was a hint of warmth in Ivy’s smile, though the crease between her eyebrows told a different story—one of

underlying apprehension.

Blake hesitated and handed Ivy back the leash, then pulled *The Evergreen Gazette* from his pocket. He might as well tackle another difficult subject. He'd been carrying the magazine around for days.

“Speaking of unique, my grandfather took some beautiful photographs of your Wishing Blooms. For a hobby photographer he's quite talented.”

He opened to the article featuring the shop.

Ivy winced and held up a hand. “I've seen this. Thanks.”

“My grandfather didn't realize—”

She blinked. Once. Twice. “So, it is true. Your grandfather is Everett Shepherd.”

“Yes.”

“And you're Blake. Blake Shepherd. I suspected but wasn't sure.”

Blake nodded.

“Why didn't you come clean about this sooner?”

“I wasn't trying to hide anything. In any case, we're on your side.” Blake paused and locked gazes with her, forcing her to stop walking. “As a professional photographer, I realize how special your shop is. Don't lose heart. This town needs your gifts.”

“Hang on, Blake. Let's go backward for a minute.” She shook her head, as if trying to clear it by stating his name. “Then you're Blake Shepherd?”

“Yes, we've established that.”

“The photographer?”

“Yes. I told you I was a photographer. Remember? The night you found the puppy.”

“No. You mentioned sending a portfolio to a well-known gallery in New York City for a holiday exhibition. I assumed you were an artist.”

“I am. A photographer is considered an artist.”

A stunned silence wedged its way between them, and she shook her head.

“I should’ve asked you outright,” she replied. “In the flower shop, you mentioned you were sort of a photographer.”

“No. I said some sort.”

“That’s even more vague. You were obviously evading the question. I wondered. I should have—” Sharply, she inhaled. “All these...disclosures...revelations...in one afternoon. What else are you hiding?”

“Ivy, there’s nothing more to it. No hidden agendas, I promise.”

They continued until Main Street intersected with Birch Avenue, and she settled onto a wooden bench outside of McKinley’s Ice Cream Shop.

“Thanks for being honest with me, though this is a lot to absorb. And knowing your grandfather shot those photos for the article...” Ivy sighed, looking away. “Truthfully, it stings.”

Blake scuffed his boot against a patch of ice. “I’m sorry. I should’ve been upfront. For what it’s worth, my grandfather had no idea what would be written in the article. We both recognize your effort and how irrational those criticisms are.”

“Is there anything else I should know?” Ivy managed a weak smile, but Blake knew the wounds ran deeper than his

words could heal. Rebuilding trust took time.

“Do you want me to begin with my life story?” he half joked.

“We can start there.”

He debated what details to share as he sat across from her. “My grandfather encouraged me to pursue photography at a young age. Over the years, I made a name for myself. I shot magazine covers for *National Geographic*, won some awards. Did a stint as a celebrity photographer in LA.”

“Because you’re Blake Shepherd.”

“Nothing to brag about, I assure you.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “The glitz and glam never suited me. I told you I returned here to regain my footing, and that’s true. I want to discover the simple pleasure of taking photos of nature and people again, like my grandfather once inspired me to do.”

Cautiously, he made eye contact with her. Would she treat him differently now? See him as some hotshot rather than Blake, the guy from a small town? The guy who shared that same small town with her.

Her hazel eyes, usually lively and expressive, held a muted wariness.

He cleared his throat and focused on the icicles dangling from the pine trees, refracting the sunlight into a spectrum of rainbow colors.

Neither he nor Ivy spoke.

With a friendly grin that tempered the lines in his face, Mr. McKinley, the owner, emerged from the entrance of his ice cream parlor, chalkboard menu in hand. The silver threads in

his hair glinted in the flickering lights strung across the shop's window.

“Afternoon folks. What can I getcha? The usual, Ivy?” His apron showed a splash of shades reminiscent of his frozen dessert creations.

“A scoop of pistachio ice cream in a dish, please,” Ivy said.

“And for the cute pup?”

She set the puppy on the ground, securing his leash to the table leg. “We’d better not. He’s too young. He’s only eating puppy food.”

Mr. McKinley pivoted to Blake. “What will you have, sir?”

“Maple walnut ice cream. Two scoops in a dish,” Blake replied.

When Mr. McKinley returned with their orders, he peered at Ivy over his spectacles. “Now don’t you worry ’bout that fancy flower shop moving in on Central Avenue. Your Wishing Blooms are a town treasure.”

Ivy managed a faint smile. “Thank you. You’re very thoughtful.”

“We small businesses must stick together.” McKinley leaned in conspiratorially. “Though I hear the author of that nasty article, that Britney Knox, has reason to want your shop gone. Seems her boyfriend owns the new Garden Elegance place. He bought the franchise.” He tapped his nose. “Mark my words, that’s why she wrote such lies about you in the *Gazette*.”

Ivy’s lips slightly parted. “Do you really think so?”

“I surely do,” Mr. McKinley said.

“We won’t let her succeed.” Blake set down his spoon. His fingers drummed a steady rhythm on the table, in sync with his resolve. “Your flower shop is too important to this community.”

“You tell her, son,” Mr. McKinley said, then turned to Ivy. “I gave you an extra scoop of pistachio because you’re one of my favorite customers. You’ve been coming here a long time.”

Glistening tears gathered in her eyes. “Many, many thanks.”

After Mr. McKinley stepped back inside, Ivy stopped talking for several minutes, vigorously stirring her ice cream to soften it.

Blake cherished their friendship. He cherished their companionship. Her quirky humor, compassion and gigantic fortitude proved extraordinary. He wanted to preserve their connection. That much was clear to him.

His relationship with Ivy was taking on a deeper significance, something that resonated on a level he hadn’t anticipated. He couldn’t deny the way his heart quickened whenever she looked at him.

“Ivy?” he asked.

“What is it?” Her hazel-colored eyes held a straightforward honesty.

“Am I forgiven?” His inquiry was soft, almost a whisper.

“Absolutely.” Her expression radiated forgiveness, a clean slate awaiting new beginnings. “However successful you are, you’re still the same thoughtful man who walked me and

Cocoa home that first night. I've seen your photos, and your photography reflects your beautiful heart.”

Blake let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

Guided by an irresistible impulse, he leaned across the table, and his fingers gently lifted her chin. Their breaths mingled in the crisp, cold air. And then he kissed her.

Everything around them faded in the exquisite touch of their lips. The touch was electric, a silent confirmation of their attraction to each other. He felt the breath of her exhale, a shared moment suspended.

“Ivy,” he murmured, his voice husky as he deepened the kiss.

A plump squirrel bolted down the sidewalk, just out of Cocoa's reach. The pup instinctively lunged after it, slipping out of his collar.

Their kiss was abruptly hijacked.

“No, Cocoa!” Ivy jumped to her feet. At his tiny size, the little dog was in grave danger against the snowy streets and traffic.

Blake threw some bills on the table and pushed back the bench.

In unspoken unity, Blake and Ivy rushed out into the falling dusk, frantically scanning for any sign of the runaway pup, who had quickly disappeared.

CHAPTER 6



Fear clutched Blake's heart. They had to find tiny Cocoa before the puppy strayed into traffic. And he was committed to setting things straight with Ivy. Their relationship was too important.

His breath came in panicked gasps as he sprinted down the sidewalk after Cocoa. The tiny pup was a blur of red knit disappearing into the snowy dusk.

"Cocoa!" Blake shouted, his voice bouncing off the deserted street. He cast a quick glance over his shoulder. Ivy was close behind him, her eyes widening in terror, mirroring his own apprehension.

Blake's protective instincts surged—for both the puppy and Ivy. He understood how devastated she would be if something happened to the puppy.

"That way!" Ivy cried, pointing as Cocoa's bright red sweater flashed under a streetlamp half a block away. Blake raced after her, his boots skidding on the frozen ground, momentarily throwing him off balance. As they drew closer, Cocoa stopped to sniff a snowbank, oblivious to the chaos he'd caused.

Blake slowed his pace and clicked his tongue, crouching down to appear less threatening. "Here boy," he cooed

affectionately. “Come on back.”

Cocoa’s ears perked up. He bounded over to Blake, his tail in motion and his body ready to play. Blake swept him into his arms, both relieved and amazed that the wandering pup had made it this far without incident.

Ivy hurried over, breathless. “Oh, thank goodness! Don’t you ever run off again, you silly pup,” she scolded, grabbing Cocoa from Blake. The dog licked her nose affectionately.

Blake tousled Cocoa’s fur, adrenaline fading as his heartbeat steadied. “He is definitely a pro at finding an adventure.”

“He’s going to be the death of me,” Ivy said with a shaky laugh. “Blake, is it convenient for you to walk me home? It’s not far from here.”

“I know where you live, remember?” he joked.

Yet an undercurrent of awkwardness remained, the delightful memory of their kiss coloring the moment.

Blake was uncertain about what to say, so he opted for practical matters.

“Is the holiday toy drive scheduled to take place soon?” he asked.

The worry that had clouded her features lifted, replaced by an animated expression. “Oh yes! My flower shop is contributing a portion of our earnings from every sale. In addition, we’re donating four large arrangements for the silent auction. The goal this year is to raise five thousand dollars. The kids adore picking out brand-new toys.”

He smiled, picturing Ivy designing the flower displays. “Want me to go with you? I’m more than willing to lend a

hand.”

“Certainly,” she said, meeting his gaze. “An extra set of hands is always welcome.”

“I can provide professional portraits, a keepsake for the families after the children receive their toys.”

“Excellent idea. I’m sure your skills will be well received.”

He also decided to contribute a substantial sum of money to the event.

He hoped spending more time together would help smooth over any lingering unease.

Not to mention that interrupted kiss.

Which he was absolutely not thinking about right now.

They strolled at an easy pace, Cocoa on his leash, a cheerful link between them. Snowflakes drifted down lazily, providing a touch of winter enchantment. Shop windows illuminated the street, presenting an attractive backdrop to the darkening sky.

Cocoa kept stealing glances at Blake, his tail swaying in rhythm with his excitement.

“I think you have a secret admirer,” Ivy teased as she nodded toward Cocoa, then back at Blake.

“What can I say?” He loved that they could tease each other in this way. “I have a gift for impressing women...like yourself.”

Ivy raised a delicate eyebrow. “Oh, really? Is that so?”

Cocoa tried to wedge between them, and Blake laughed. “Although I might have some competition here.” He stooped down to give the puppy an affectionate pat.

Cocoa was great, but Ivy was the one who truly held Blake's undivided attention.

They arrived at her Cape Cod-style house and stood on her front doorstep. She lifted the wriggling puppy, her cheeks pink from the chilly weather. She was gorgeous inside and out, and Blake counted himself lucky to have met her.

She shivered. "Would you care to come in for a bit? I can make us some hot chocolate."

He beamed at her invitation. "I'd love to."

Ivy shifted Cocoa to one arm as she unlocked the door. "You're welcome to make yourself comfortable," she said, stepping aside so Blake could enter.

He helped her off with her coat and scarf and stepped into the snug warmth of her home. After stamping off his boots on the doormat and sliding them off, he hung his jacket on a coat rack. The scent of vanilla and cloves welcomed him as he surveyed the living room.

Ivy placed Cocoa on the floor, and the puppy bounded over to sniff Blake's boots.

Blake chuckled. "Someone's curious about your unfamiliar guest."

"Cocoa definitely loves people," she replied. "You, particularly."

She removed her boots and slipped on a pair of snug slippers. She was so small, so petite. So lovely.

Positioned against the backdrop of her comfortable living room, her dainty frame brought a private glimpse into her world. He admired the charming decor—the couch's classic plaid pattern and fluffy earth-toned pillows. She'd decorated

the room with merry touches of Christmas, from the pinecones scattered on the mantel to the two stockings hanging above the fireplace. One stocking had an elegant, traditional design with intricate patterns and shimmering gold accents. The other, slightly smaller, featured paw prints and a cute bone motif.

“One for me, and one for Cocoa,” she explained before Blake could ask.

“Thank you for inviting me to come inside,” he said again.

Her smile revealed a charming dimple. “I’m glad you accepted my invitation.”

“Being with you feels...right.” He tenderly brushed a wisp of hair from her face.

Her eyes flickered with a hint of surprise, and her lips curled into a faint, appreciative smile. “Would you mind lighting a fire in the fireplace while I tend to the dog?” she asked. “I love a fire on a freezing night, and everything you need should be there.”

“Happily.” He stepped to the hearth, surveying the firewood. He rolled a newspaper and ignited a fire starter among the kindling, and soon, the smoky fragrance spread through the air. Flames leapt to life, and the logs found their place, crackling with a warm radiance.

“Here, Cocoa,” she called from the kitchen, offering him a miniature bowl of carefully portioned puppy food. “You must be starving after scaring us half to death.”

Cocoa darted over, sniffing at the food before hungrily digging in.

Ivy sat on the floor next to him, tenderly running her fingers through his fur.

Blake stood by the doorway, absorbing it all and admiring her thoughtfulness.

“By the way, how is his potty training coming along?” he asked. “Good, I hope?”

“You’re kidding, right? I’m trying to establish a routine with him and use positive reinforcement. As you might imagine, I’m not having much luck yet.”

“Watch for signs,” Blake said, as the puppy sniffed and circled the kitchen.

She glanced down at the puppy. “Like that, for instance?”

“I’ll take him outside.” Blake scooped up Cocoa. “Where is his leash?”

“On the counter. You’re welcome to use the back door that leads to my fenced-in backyard.” She motioned to a door in the kitchen. “My routine is leading him to the same spot by the oak tree. And hoping.”

Blake laughed. When he returned a short while later, he declared the outing a success.

“Alright, since you’ve eaten and gone outside, how about some playtime?” Blake posed the question to the dog. He grabbed a rubber toy lying on the throw rug near the sink—a cherry-red squeaky ball decorated with green holly leaves. “Christmas-themed, and especially for you, courtesy of Amelia!”

Blake sent the toy sailing across the kitchen. The puppy darted after it, his fluffy tail a blur of excitement. Over the symphony of squeaks, Ivy’s laughter joined in.

“Time to wind down, Cocoa.” Her breathing steadied as she caught her breath. “A nap is certainly in order.”

Cocoa trotted over, dropping the toy at her feet before curling up on the throw rug by the sink. His bright eyes half-closed, and a soft, relaxed breath escaped through his button-like nose.

“Odds are that you could use a nap, too,” Blake teased her.

“I definitely could,” she confirmed, “though I’m fine for now. Care for that mug of hot chocolate?”

“I’d never say no. Is there anything you need help with?”

“I’m set. This will only take a few minutes.”

Blake sank into her plaid couch in the living room while Ivy prepared two mugs of rich hot chocolate, using milk steamed on the stove. Her method was simple, tablespoons of cocoa powder, sugar, and a pinch of salt and cinnamon, stirring the cocoa blend into the milk until it was creamy. She mixed in vanilla, and soon a delectable, chocolatey aroma saturated the little home.

Curiosity guiding his actions, Blake strode over to a side shelf to check out her various frames. One was an award she’d received for Florist of the Year. Another was an inspirational quote, followed by a candid shot of Ivy and Amelia, along with some seashells and trinkets.

His hands momentarily paused before he picked up another photo. A framed photo of Ivy with a guy.

“Who is he?” he asked, his tone measured as Ivy approached him, carrying two mugs of cocoa whimsically topped with whipped cream and sprinkles.

“That’s Will,” she replied, setting the mugs on a side table.

“Will,” Blake repeated, his gaze briefly assessing the man. He couldn’t overlook the distinct indifference in the man’s

posture, as though he always held the upper hand. “And who is he to you?”

Frustration tinged her hazel eyes, a brief glint of exasperation making its presence known. “He’s an old friend, Blake. There’s nothing more to explain.”

He tilted his head. “Seems like there’s a lot more history behind that photo.”

“Our relationship has its own story, but it’s in the past,” she replied, her voice carrying a weight that spoke of closure. “We broke up.”

“How old is this picture?”

“Over a year.”

“And this guy’s photo is still in your living room?” Blake’s eyebrows drew together as his gaze lingered on the image. Will’s sleek black hair was styled with calculated precision, and his smug expression exuded a self-assured arrogance that Blake found hard to ignore.

“Ours was a complicated split, but it’s been a season of growth and learning for me.”

“What did you learn?” Blake asked.

She released a contemplative breath. “I learned that guarding my heart is essential. People enter, people exit my life. I learned it’s wiser not to get too attached.”

He digested her words, touched by the melancholy that had slipped into the conversation.

“I’m not going anywhere,” he said softly.

She shrugged. “Maybe. Maybe not.”

“I’m having a hard time understanding why you’d choose to keep this photo.”

“This is a memory, Blake.” Her fingers traced the edges of the frame. “A part of my journey that has led me to this current moment with you.”

He smiled. The heaviness that had settled on his chest lifted. “Can you describe this current moment?”

“I can. Like this.” She stood on her tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek. “We all have our pasts, but our present is what truly matters.”

He bent and kissed her, their breaths mingling.

“I’m sorry for overreacting,” he said.

“Apology accepted. If anything, it’s a bit of a compliment.” She lifted the mugs from the table. “Now, can we enjoy our hot chocolate before it gets cold?”

A few moments later, they sat on the couch, her legs tucked beneath her. The fire blazed steadily, its heat gradually seeping into Blake’s bones.

He draped his arm around her shoulders. “This hits the spot, thanks,” he said after a few relaxing sips. “I thought they only sold hot chocolate in powdery packets at the grocery store. That’s how I’ve always made it. Add some boiling water, and you’re all set.”

“Congratulations! You learned something new today. Homemade doesn’t always require lots of extra time.”

He pulled a crochet blanket over their laps. “Still concerned about the chain store?” he asked.

“More than I care to admit. I can’t shake the feeling that it’ll be impossible for Ivy’s Blooms to compete. What if we

lose all our customers? What if we're forced to close?"

He pressed a kiss on her hair, breathing in the floral scent of freshly bloomed roses. "That won't happen."

"I'm inclined to believe you're biased, despite my appreciation for your support."

"Admittedly, yes, I am." He set down his mug and gently tilted her chin up. He leaned in slowly, giving her time to pull away if she wanted.

But she didn't.

"And I don't regret it at all," he said.

Their lips met again in a gentle kiss that deepened naturally. Blake lost himself in the sweetness of her lips, the closeness of her body. This felt different from their impulsive kiss earlier today. This kiss was deeper, more intimate, with no reservations.

Time stood still as the flames of the fireplace flickered, casting a play of shadows on the walls. He couldn't imagine being anywhere else except here with Ivy, sharing this perfect unhurried moment. This was more than merely an attraction between them.

When the kiss ended, he caressed her cheek, deciding not to voice the words he was thinking.

She sat back. "I wish there was a surefire method to keep Ivy's Blooms afloat."

"Maybe, just maybe, there is."

She turned to face him. "What do you have in mind?"

"Your floral designs are outstanding." He tapped his fingers on his chin. "People need to see them, to be reminded

of the elegance and artistry that your business brings to Evergreen Valley.”

A blush crept up Ivy’s cheeks as she took in his words. “How can I extend my reach? My advertising budget is non-existent.”

“Social media,” he stated simply.

“I do social media.”

“What do you do?”

She shrugged. “I post photos of my designs on Facebook and Instagram.”

“That’s not enough to compete nowadays,” he replied. “I’ll help showcase your designs on various platforms. We’ll use hashtags and partner with influencers. We’ll also include details about your Wishing Blooms to generate interest and curiosity. People are drawn to enchanting tales.”

“Wishing Blooms are a lot more than enchanting tales,” she said.

“The blooms have a special significance for those who believe in hope,” he countered. “I’ll give you that.”

A subtle crease formed between her eyebrows. His statement had clearly touched a sensitive chord.

However, she listened intently, posing questions at the possibilities Blake presented.

“I’ve never considered social media seriously. I assumed it wouldn’t make much of a difference in my type of small-town business. However, with your know-how and enthusiasm, it seems a viable option.”

“It is possible. Very possible. Do you have a website?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“A simple website is easy to set up.”

“Can you help? You’re busy enough with your own work.”

“Of course,” he responded immediately. “For the record, I’m not busy at the moment. I left everything behind in Seattle.”

Almost everything.

On the outside, he represented success. The luxury high-rise apartment with sweeping city views, the platinum watch, the extravagant meals, had all the trappings of a man who had made it.

Inside, an insatiable voice demanded more. No matter how many high-profile events he covered, that voice was never satisfied. He was successful, yes, but it wasn’t enough. He always wanted to strive higher.

Months ago, he’d submitted photographs to the Catherine Eden Gallery in New York City for an upcoming multi-artist exhibition. He’d briefly mentioned it to Ivy.

This particular exhibition would be mounted before Christmas and run into January. Exhibitions often attracted the attention of art critics, journalists, and bloggers, as well as reviews in the press. Upon a successful exhibition, the gallery often agreed to represent and promote the photographer on an ongoing basis. It might also lead to a full-blown show for him.

Owned by a renowned art curator, Catherine’s gallery was one of the most prestigious in the country. Blake had long dreamed of having his work displayed there.

The submission process for the gallery had been a deeply invested pursuit. First, he’d meticulously curated twenty of his

most captivating photos, each a poignant message in its own right. Among them was a photograph that spoke of the urgency in protecting forests and preserving biodiversity: a lone tree stump defiantly standing alone in a cleared forest, its presence a powerful plea.

Then, there was his “Pollution Awareness” snapshot, a heart-wrenching capture of a seagull struggling to soar through a thick industrial haze—a stark reminder of the toll human activities took on precious air quality.

Titled “Urban Nature Resilience,” another of his photographs showcased vibrant wildflowers and lush greenery thriving amid the concrete jungle of city life—a testament to the possibility of harmonious coexistence between nature and urbanity.

Then came hours of preparation—editing, framing, writing detailed captions. Finally, he’d packaged up the portfolio and sent it off to the gallery’s review committee.

For weeks, he’d anxiously awaited their response. Catherine Eden was notoriously selective about the artists she showcased. Her gallery’s standards were impossibly high. Still, he hoped his unique perspective might catch her discerning eye.

Eventually, the day came when all his colleagues mentioned that their submissions had been replied to. But no reply ever arrived for Blake. His couple of follow-up messages went unanswered.

It was a crushing blow, confirming his suspicion that his work wasn’t good enough for the highest echelons of the art world. The photography industry could be viciously competitive. Talented artists were rejected. Others were chosen based on their connections or educational background

and not on the quality of their work. Blake found it all increasingly demoralizing.

This was another reason he hoped a change of scenery would re-inspire his creativity. Nonetheless, the sting of rejection still persisted under the surface, fueling his doubts.

“Blake?” Ivy stared at him, pulling him out of his musings.

He blinked at her, then smiled. “I have faith in your abilities, and I want your business to thrive,” he continued. “Besides, ’tis the season of generosity. Together, we’ll help people rediscover the magic of Ivy’s Blooms.”

“I am grateful. Truly,” Ivy began. “Though I admit, I’m concerned about the expenses of promoting on social media, and whether it’ll truly be effective.”

As they sat together on the sofa, Blake met her mesmerizing gaze. Her eyes were a stunning hazel, flecked with shades of emerald green and honey brown.

The fire in the fireplace popped, infusing the room with the earthy aroma of oak wood.

She angled her body toward him. The firelight played over her delicate features—her pixie nose, her rosy cheeks flushed from the heat. In this intimate moment, with the winter darkness held at bay outside, she was radiant.

How natural it was to be here with her. No pretense or false impressions, only her exceptional beauty shining through.

He gave silent thanks for whatever stroke of fate had brought this remarkable woman into his life. And he knew, as surely as the logs burned in the hearth, that his heart already belonged to her.

“Trust me, I understand your concerns,” he replied. “Social media is cheaper than traditional advertising, especially if we create our own content. And it can be really powerful for small businesses such as yours.”

Ivy chewed her bottom lip. “Do you honestly think so?”

“Without a doubt. Many bakeries, artists, and florists have found success and reached thousands of people. Plus, they build a loyal following. Your impressive arrangements deserve the same level of exposure.”

“I’ve always taken pride in my designs,” she whispered, half to herself. “Is social media actually capable of keeping my dream alive?”

“I have the photography equipment, so no extra expense on that front. And I’m more than happy to help as a friend.” His lips found hers once more, the kiss a gentle affirmation of his feelings and commitment. As their lips parted, he murmured, “Though I’m thinking that I’m definitely more than a friend.”

“You are.” She smiled, sat back, and folded her hands. “Alright, shall we give social media a try? There’s no doubt in my mind that Amelia will be on board.”

Blake grinned. “Give it time and you’ll see—the enchantment of your designs will win over Evergreen Valley and beyond.”

“How can I ever repay you?”

“No repayment necessary,” Blake said softly, his hand providing a consoling weight on her shoulder.

A while later, Blake walked down Ivy’s front steps, zipping his jacket against the chill of the night air. He glanced back at the comforting sight of her well-lit house. The living

room window framed Ivy's silhouette, moving with grace as she tidied up. She appeared deeply absorbed, her actions deliberate and pensive.

What was occupying her attention tonight? Was she pondering the hard path that lay ahead for her flower shop with the new competition in town? Or was her contemplation focused on the two of them and the potential that their budding relationship held?

Her silhouette faded as she ventured into another room. Reluctantly, Blake shifted his gaze and resumed his journey down the lamplit street, heading home. Yet his thoughts remained on her.

He drafted a social media post in his head about Ivy's shop and her amazing floral arrangements. First up, he'd set up a website for her.

Once he was back at his grandfather's house, Blake opened his laptop. He chose a domain name—IvysBlooms.com—selected and purchased a website hosting platform and picked a template. He customized a homepage, shared her services and products, and provided the shop's contact information—an email and business phone number for online orders.

Then his fingers flew across the keys as he composed a glowing review of Ivy's Blooms on Facebook and Instagram. He included a few photos of the Wishing Blooms ceremony for extra visual impact.

A definitive click marked the second his post went live. With a soft exhale, Blake eased back, his palms tapping lightly on the armrest of his chair. The screen's glow held the promise of unveiling Ivy's talent to the world, and he couldn't wait to see how people reacted. This beginning would breathe fresh life into her business, step by step, post by post.

Eventually, he surrendered into a restless sleep.

Tomorrow's conversation brewed in his mind. His purpose was steadfast, a silent vow to walk beside her on the path to success. The success she deserved. The kind that would light up her eyes, her qualms forgotten.

CHAPTER 7



Nutmeg, cloves, and narcissus scented the air inside Ivy's Blooms the following day as Blake and Ivy set to work preparing for Ivy's social media debut. Blake arranged his camera equipment and Ivy chose her finest bouquets.

He began by focusing his lens on her favorite Christmas arrangement—a vase overflowing with hypericum berries and frosted eucalyptus.

Meanwhile, Ivy arranged an assortment of seasonal flowers—fragrant gardenias, vibrant velvety-red poinsettias, and deep crimson amaryllis—inspecting each petal and leaf until perfect.

In the back room, Cocoa nibbled on a squeaky chew toy shaped like a gingerbread man, his tiny teeth biting on the red and green silicone.

Amelia prepared a Christmas centerpiece—fresh white lilies and artfully curled ribbons—while monitoring the energetic pet.

“Now I'll shoot your signature designs,” Blake said to Ivy. “We'll showcase what sets Ivy's Blooms apart from any chain store.”

While Blake worked the camera, Ivy caught the intensity in his blue eyes. They held a quiet fervor, a deep connection to the scenes he was capturing. His gaze lingered on each detail, revealing a genuine affection for the beauty of the flowers.

He reminded her of her own enthusiasm for creating stunning floral displays, and another reason for her renewed hope.

Despite her doubts, the idea of collaborating with Blake seemed akin to an unexpected Christmas miracle. In the hush of a winter morning, she allowed herself to imagine her carefully crafted bouquets reaching people far and wide.

Her respect for Blake's support intensified as they delved deeper into his strategy. Her heart resonated with an unspoken gratitude for his constant presence by her side.

As she readied a bouquet of red and pink roses, thoughts of the future swirled like snowflakes. Certainty eluded her, but this season's gifts were clear. Blake's friendship kindled a spark inside her, thawing her doubts. His compassion nourished her creativity to blossom. And perhaps something more between them was blossoming, too.

Her gaze remained on him as he photographed the shop's festive interior. His wavy hair peeked out from under a navy beanie that matched his sweater. Relaxed in jeans, he peered through the camera lens with an artist's eye, seeing splendor in every corner. A week ago, he was a stranger. Now, her happiness surged like a fountain at the sight of his smile.

Of course, it was too soon for love. Wasn't it?

She tucked a red poinsettia blossom behind her ear and grinned at him. He grinned back.

“Okay, grab your jacket,” he said. “Your arrangements will look stunning against the backdrop of our Norman Rockwell town.”

She bundled the flowers in her arms, and Blake opened the shop door, letting in a swirl of frost-nipped air.

His fingers traced the curve of her cheek. “The poinsettia is a perfect accent for you, love,” he said.

Love. Ivy’s heart skipped a beat at the affectionate name. When had he started calling her that? She couldn’t recall. A few days ago, the endearment would have surprised her. Now it seemed natural.

“Let’s take a selfie,” he said.

“With your expensive camera?”

“Nope. I’ll use this.” He pulled his cellphone from his pocket, extending it at the perfect distance from their faces. “Say Wishing Blooms!” With a mischievous grin, he leaned in for an unexpected kiss, capturing her delightful surprise in a spontaneous photo.

“Now let’s try this again,” he said.

“Another selfie?”

He tucked his cellphone back in his pocket. “Something much better,” Blake replied, his eyes holding a special gleam as he slowly lifted her chin. When his lips tenderly met hers, she melted into his kiss, overcome by the moment, drawn in by his warmth. As she returned his kiss, Ivy melted into his embrace. His woody scent, his fingers threading through her hair... Her heart opened to him in a way she’d never experienced.

Her doubts washed away. She cared for him, and knew those feelings were reciprocated. They parted breathless, foreheads touching.

A few minutes later, they reentered her shop to view the photos.

“Great job, Ivy, and you look gorgeous.” Blake shared a sneak preview. “I’ll print all the photos, including the selfie, so we both have copies.” Some featured her in her red quilted coat and poinsettia bloom behind her ear. “I’ll post these on Instagram and Facebook. I’ll use some popular hashtags like #ChristmasFlowers, #WinterBlooms, and #EvergreenValley to increase your visibility.”

The evening before, he’d set up a website for her shop, which had brought in a couple of inquiries and an online order. A response, albeit a small one, but still, in a single day. Social media was truly amazing.

A woman who had previously walked past Ivy’s Blooms without a second glance stopped to peer through the window.

“I saw your arrangements on Instagram and came to look in person,” the woman said. “They’re stunning.”

“Thank you so much,” Ivy replied.

“Are you the artist behind this ornament?” a pair of visitors inquired, their hands linked as they admired a display near the entrance. Ivy had arranged dried lavender, crimson rose petals, and fragrant eucalyptus leaves to a tiny, rustic sled. “We’re interested in purchasing it to hang on our Christmas tree.”

Ivy assisted, chatting about holiday traditions and the pleasure of sharing this special season with loved ones. Moments like these reminded her why she had opened her

shop in the first place—to create exceptional, meaningful connections through the art of floral design.

“Sales have increased a little, and it’s not even the second week of December,” she informed Blake over steaming mugs of eggnog latte later that day. They sat tucked in a corner café, away from the bustle of holiday shoppers, and sharing a slice of warm apple pie.

Normally, the café wasn’t open later in the day and into the evening but varied their hours in December to accommodate shoppers during the holiday season.

“We’ll continue to tweak your website and check content. A social media presence takes time.” Blake tapped his phone, accessed his photos, and scrolled to a specific image. “I added one of my photos to the homepage banner of your website. I hope it’s okay.”

Her breath stilled. The photo captured a serene, sunlit meadow in full bloom. He’d framed the shot, showcasing a riot of colorful wildflowers, daisies, and tall stalks of lavender.

“Blake, this photo is beautiful.” She took a bite of her pie; the sweet taste of cinnamon and sugar filled her mouth. “And it’s more than okay. Your photo is exquisite.”

“Thank you. At the end of the day, nature is my thing, you know?”

She nodded. She knew.

“I also meant to ask about the vacant retail space next to your shop,” he continued.

“Eleanor Thornton was a long-time resident here and owned a toy shop for many years. Her health declined, and she retired and moved to the coast.”

He folded his hands together. “Ivy, have you ever considered combining our talents?”

“How?” She set down her fork and cradled her latte mug in her hands. “I’ve thought about the empty storefront countless times.”

“We could rent the space and open a joint gallery showcasing your floral designs and my nature photography.”

“That takes more money and resources than I currently have.”

He leaned in. “Fortunately, I have both.”

“I’ll run this past Amelia, though I’m sure she won’t mind. She likes to travel to Indiana to see her folks and the dog every chance she gets, and another venture would only add more to her plate.”

He smiled. “Got it.”

She admired his windswept hair and the ever-present rough stubble on his chin. His gaze was attentive as she shared her vision and goals for the vacant store, nodding along in encouragement.

“What about the name Nature’s Palette?” she asked. “That way my flowers and your photos will coexist.”

“My lens is the palette.” He grinned. “I like it. Nature’s Palette it is. I’ll see if I can contact the landlord, and we’ll go from there.”

He was becoming more special by the day; no longer relegated to the niche of a helpful new friend. He was becoming a business partner, too.

And the stars were aligning.

Cocoa sat on the floor of the café, secure on his leash. The café was dog-friendly, and the owners supplied the puppy with a bowl of water and a doggy biscuit.

“Once people witness your incredible talent, they won’t be able to resist coming to Evergreen Valley to see for themselves or ordering online,” Blake said.

“Britney’s article in the *Gazette* doesn’t seem to have affected business so far,” Ivy replied, though unease tinged her voice. “But there’s Garden Elegance...”

She studied Blake’s face, trying to discern his reaction. His brows furrowed for a split-second before he smoothed them.

“I wouldn’t worry,” he said, though he looked worried to her. His fingers tapped his mug in restless beats. “I understand your concern, but your passion and artistry are miles ahead of a franchisor. Customers will see that.”

“Will they? Clients who are loyal often switch to something flashier and newer.”

“Maybe some,” Blake conceded. “Though your devoted regulars know the care you put into every bouquet. Nothing can replicate that personal touch.”

Ivy nodded slowly, letting his reassuring words sink in. He made a fair point—she had a dependable following who appreciated the human element. “You’re right. I shouldn’t assume the worst.”

“Exactly. Focus on sharing your talent and connecting with customers, old and new. The numbers and reviews will speak for themselves.”

He certainly had a level-headed perspective, and her anxiety subsided. Still, her mind spun scenarios...

She wished she could read his thoughts. Had he heard rumors she hadn't and simply wanted to reassure her? She itched to press for more but held back. The holidays were stressful enough without borrowing trouble.

She reached for her latte, the sweet marshmallow foam suddenly cloying. No use speculating yet. For now, she would stay the course and focus on spreading seasonal cheer.

As she sipped, Blake grinned and gestured to her mouth. "You've got a little something... A dab of...eggnog."

"Oh!" Ivy grabbed a napkin, her cheeks growing warmer as she patted the foam.

"Allow me." He leaned across the table and gently wiped the corner of her mouth with his thumb. His touch lingered a moment longer, meeting her gaze.

Her blush deepened at his tenderness and the way his eyes, as blue as a sunlit ocean, seemed to see into her soul. "Thank you," she managed, her heart accelerating.

"Anytime, love," Blake replied with a wink that made Ivy weak in the knees. She playfully tossed her crumpled napkin at him, but his flirtatious glance hinted at their mutual attraction.

SEVERAL MORE DAYS PASSED, the middle of December arrived, and Ivy adapted to the challenges that came with caring for a puppy. She developed a routine that allowed her to balance her work at the flower shop and her time with Cocoa.

"Certainly, house training isn't as difficult as I feared," she admitted one evening to Cocoa. She'd gotten in the habit of talking with him.

She clasped a scalding mug of peppermint tea as she gazed out the window at the mesmerizing dance of snowflakes. “And I must say, you’re quite the little gentleman now.”

In response, his ears perked, and he tilted his head.

After the pup had eaten, he circled the kitchen, and she immediately stood at the ready, leash in hand. “Ready for a walk? It’s time for more house training.”

Once back inside, she realized that he’d tracked muddy footprints through the living room. Exhaling, she cleaned up after him. Yet another task added to her ever-growing list of responsibilities.

The reality of her business demands loomed large, and her heart ached with the realization that she couldn’t keep him forever. She needed to find him a permanent home where he could grow and thrive.

She was making an altruistic decision, and one that held Cocoa’s best interests at its center, she told herself.

That is, when she didn’t glance down at his trusting eyes and wagging tail.

Or his unwavering devotion. Or their shared moments of joy.

Tears escaped as she crafted a social media ad and posted online: Give the Gift of Unconditional Devotion: Adopt an Abandoned Puppy this Christmas. Cocoa is a playful, loving, and intelligent four-month-old Pomeranian who deserves unconditional love. She added an adorable photo of him and her email for people to contact her directly.

“Remember, we’re searching for a family who will care for you just like I do,” she whispered to Cocoa the next day while

scrolling through the responses on her phone. “You deserve nothing less.”

Ivy returned home the following evening to find several promising messages from potential adopters. As she read them, she pictured Cocoa snuggled up with each household, romping through their yards, and showered with affection.

“Look, Cocoa, this family has two kids who would adore you. And this couple lives on a farm with lots of room to explore!” She shared the details of the prospective homes with him. “Nothing is definite, though. They’re just inquiring.”

As the evening wore on, Ivy contacted all the potential adopters, asking questions and discussing their plans for Cocoa. With each conversation, a tug-of-war between hope and heartache played out, a bittersweet reminder that soon, Cocoa would no longer be in her life.

“How about another cuddle?” She carefully enfolded the puppy in her arms and settled onto the couch. The living room glowed with strands of mini white lights draped over her compact Christmas tree and the red and gold ornaments shimmered. The miniature snowman, decorated in garland, was stationed in soundless merriment.

She hadn’t bothered to light the fireplace, and it stood as a silent sentinel, waiting to enhance the room again with heat.

Her phone buzzed with a text message from Blake. He’d spent the past several days with his grandfather, looking through old family albums and reminiscing. They’d also tackled jigsaw puzzles, starting with an easy five-hundred-piece puzzle called “Colorful World Map,” then moved on to a more challenging, one-thousand-piece puzzle, called “Venetian Canal Reflections.”

Hi, love, Blake's text read, and her pulse sped up. Since my grandfather and I share a passion for photography, we changed things up today. We watched a black and white 1929 silent film called "Man with a Movie Camera." Have you heard of it?

No, can't say that I have, she typed back.

It's interesting to see how experimental and creative they were back then. Yesterday we saw "The Photographers," a National Geographic documentary that follows journalists on assignments worldwide.

She smiled as she read his informative texts. She was happy that he was having an incredible time with his grandfather, though she couldn't help missing him. Only a few days had slipped past, and her house seemed to sigh with loneliness. Vividly, she remembered his smile, and how his blue eyes crinkled when he laughed.

Enjoy every precious minute, she wrote.

Thanks. I miss you. A lot.

"I miss you, too," she whispered to the empty room, then typed her words to Blake.

Anyone respond to your online ad to adopt Cocoa? he asked. She'd told him and Amelia that she was placing the ad.

Several people have emailed me. I'm meeting with a couple of families tomorrow. They seem interested, though you never know.

You love Cocoa. Finding him a suitable home is selfless and brave, Blake continued. *And you can probably schedule puppy play dates, so it's not goodbye forever.*

Once more, his encouraging texts reminded her she wasn't alone.

Her phone buzzed with another incoming text from him: *What do you call an elf who just graduated from medical school?*

Ivy shook her head. Another one of his silly jokes, no doubt, designed to cheer her up. She texted back: *Alright, I'll bite. What DO you call an elf who just graduated from medical school?*

His reply came quick: *A DOC-tor! Get it?! Doc like doctor and doc like one of Santa's elves?!*

You mean "Doc" from Snow White?

Exactly. Doc, Grumpy, Happy, Sleepy, Bashful, Dopey and Sneezy.

I understand. She rolled her eyes and couldn't help laughing out loud. She typed: *Wow, that was truly awful. I think you're spending a little too much time with your grandfather's joke book.*

Blake responded: *And yet I still got you to smile, didn't I? Admit it, you miss my witty sense of humor.*

She tried not to grin. *You just keep telling yourself that. Cocoa is here and he keeps me smiling.*

Speaking of Cocoa, want to hear a funny story about a peanut? Blake texted next.

His unrelenting corniness made her groan out loud. She bantered back: *Do I have a choice? Lay it on me...*

After a few more quips, Ivy typed: *You always know exactly how to brighten my day.*

“And you make me happy, too,” she told the puppy.

Cocoa licked Ivy’s cheek, as if to say he understood and appreciated everything she had done for him. She cuddled with the sweet dog who had captured her heart, comforted by his love and warmth.

Thank you, Blake, she texted. *You’ve helped me be stronger and more optimistic.*

Hey, that’s what I’m here for. And Ivy?

Yes?

I miss seeing your smile in person.

Blake, it’s only been a few days. I miss your smile, too, and having someone like you around is truly a blessing. Grinning, she hit the send button.

I care about you. A lot. These days apart made me realize how much I appreciate you, he texted. *Pleasant dreams, love. I’ll see you soon.*

Love. Pleasant dreams. Love.

They disconnected, and she hugged her knees to her chest. The anticipation of seeing him again held a new and deeper meaning.

She cared for Blake, that much was clear, though so many competing thoughts and emotions wrestled within her. The possibility of giving up Cocoa already shattered her heart. Could she handle another heartbreak if things didn’t work out with Blake? And the genuine threat of losing her flower shop loomed large, even with their social media efforts.

Was now really the best time to explore a new romance? Her logical side hesitated. But when she reread Blake’s texts, her heart fluttered with hope. She dreamed of snowy walks,

cozy fireside nights, and exchanging gifts on Christmas morning.

A life with Blake seemed full of possibilities. Though it was also risky. If she shared her feelings, she feared they would be wounded like a delicate bird if things went wrong.

She stroked Cocoa's fur, taking consolation in his solid presence. For now, her focus had to remain on her business and doing right by Cocoa. Romance could wait...or could it? The resolution of the conflict between her heart and her head hinged solely on her decision.

She picked up her cup of tea and allowed the minty flavor to soothe her. She glanced around, the emptiness without Blake evident in her surroundings. She missed his presence—from his boots by the door to the empty spot beside her on the couch.

To cheer herself up, she decided to enjoy some girl time with the puppy. She snuggled next to Cocoa and flipped through the TV channels, settling on a holiday-themed Hallmark movie called *Mistletoe Magic*.

She perked up and took a silly selfie of her and the puppy curled up on the blankets. She sent it to Blake with the caption: *Someone looks pretty cozy without you here!* Adding a winky face emoji, she hit send, anticipating his reaction.

Blake's text response was immediate. *I've been replaced!* with a shocked emoji.

I wouldn't dream of it, she responded with a laugh.

After setting her phone down, she leaned back against the couch cushions, replaying her conversations with Blake in her mind. She cherished his easy-going wit and the way he could still make her blush, even from a distance.

Ivy closed her eyes, imagining his handsome face beaming down at her, remembering the feeling of his palm against her cheek, the sparkle in his crystal blue eyes when he gazed at her.

Though they had only known each other a short time, he already understood her in a way no one else did.

She shook her head. Much too soon for such romantic thoughts. Or was it? The line between friendship and romance felt blurred, and his absence left a distinct space in her heart.

In these reflective moments, Ivy also understood that taking care of Cocoa was more than a responsibility—it was a privilege. Despite the sleepless nights and endless cleanups, his unwavering love brought her true happiness.

Cocoa curled up in her lap. His compact body seemed to melt into the embrace of her wool sweater. She closed her eyes and breathed in. His sweet puppy scent mingled with the lingering taste of peppermint tea.

However, her fear of losing her business preyed at her, and a persistent doubt whispered that Garden Elegance would be the iceberg to sink her Titanic.

For several minutes, she kept her eyes closed and tried to rest, the drone of the television playing in the background.

A loud rapping at the front door snapped her to full alertness.

Her muscles tensed. Who in the heavens would stop by unannounced at this hour?

She lifted Cocoa from her lap and stood with him in her arms.

The knock came again, more insistent.

With unease coiling in the pit of her stomach, Ivy slowly approached the door. She peered through the peephole, though it was too dark outside to make out the visitor. Was it Blake deciding to visit her after all? Her pulse quickened as she unlocked the door.

Ivy shifted Cocoa's weight so she could grip the doorknob with her free hand.

When the door swung open, she stumbled back in shock. Standing on her porch was the last person she expected or wanted to see.

"Britney Knox," Ivy managed. "What are you doing here?"

CHAPTER 8



Britney stood outside, the wind lifting her ebony-black hair. She was dressed impeccably in a sleek royal-blue designer coat with shiny silver buttons and black stiletto boots. Behind her, pine trees creaked as an icy winter blast whipped through the snow-dusted branches. Frost clung to the ends of sagging boughs, sending pine needles skittering across the porch.

Ivy cuddled Cocoa in her arms. His small body quivered—whether from the cold or sensing her own unease, she wasn't sure. His big brown eyes peered up at Britney curiously.

Ivy inhaled and squared her shoulders. “Britney, what do you want?” she asked.

Britney's venomous article branding Ivy's flowers subpar still stung. Yet here she was, randomly showing up on Ivy's doorstep late at night.

How did she discover where I lived? Ivy wondered uneasily. She had never given Britney her home address.

Britney lifted her chin. “I presumed you'd want to know that Garden Elegance is opening early. Like, the first week of January early.”

Ivy's stomach dropped. That was less than a month away!

“What? I thought sometime in February...” Secretly Ivy had hoped that the store would miss their deadline and not launch until after Valentine’s Day.

“Change of plans,” Britney replied. “Andrew—he’s my boyfriend and the owner—decided it made more sense to open at the beginning of a fresh year. Take advantage of all those New Year’s resolutions to buy flowers more often.”

Ivy’s thoughts surged with lightning speed. She had been counting on many more days to boost her own business first.

Britney continued, “The holidays are one of your busiest seasons, so I’m giving you a heads-up. Consider it an early Christmas gift.”

Gift? This “gift” could ruin everything.

“About your piece in the *Gazette*...” Ivy kept her expression neutral. “You never returned my phone call. My purpose was to discuss the article with you and your editor.”

Britney waved her hand dismissively. “Ancient history. I’m over it.”

“I’m not,” Ivy replied. “And I received some strange texts one night. Was that you?”

“There’s nothing wrong with wishing someone sweet dreams.” Britney adjusted her stance, her boots making a firm impression on the snowy porch.

Ivy clutched Cocoa a little closer. “How did you know where to find me?”

“Since you didn’t pick up when I called the shop, I asked around and got your home address.”

“My shop is closed in the evening,” Ivy said. The way Britney helped herself to Ivy’s personal information irritated

her. “For the record, I assure you that any insinuation about poor quality in my floral arrangements is untrue. My customers know better.”

“Sure, sure. And those Wishing Blooms. Please.” Britney shook her head. “Anyway, as I was saying...”

Britney launched back into delivering the “gift” of Garden Elegance’s early opening.

“How thoughtful of you,” Ivy replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll get back to work planning my own January promotions.”

She started to close the door, but Britney wedged her foot inside. “Aren’t you worried?” Britney glanced at the puppy curled in Ivy’s arms. “Cute pup, by the way. What’s his name?”

Ivy’s defenses went up a notch. She bristled slightly, not particularly appreciating Britney’s interest. “Cocoa,” she said steadily.

Britney’s lips curled into a sly smirk; her eyebrows arched a little too thin in amusement. “Precious.”

Ivy met Britney’s gaze head-on. “Happy holidays, Britney.”

Britney’s response was terse, a curt nod accompanied by a brief, forced smile. “You, too.”

As Britney cautiously tiptoed down the frost-covered steps in her high-heeled boots, Ivy stifled a grin, finding a touch of irony in Britney’s choice of footwear for a snowy evening.

She extended a hand. “Careful there, those steps can be quite slippery.”

Britney, with a flippant laugh and a hint of condescension, retorted, “Ivy, it’s adorable how you fuss over such little things. Snow or no snow, I always manage just fine.”

“Alright.” Ivy gently but firmly closed the door, unwilling to allow Britney’s manipulative games to unravel her.

THE MORNING after Britney’s unexpected visit, Ivy scheduled two interviews back-to-back with potential adopters interested in Cocoa. The first couple was Katie and Caleb, and the second was a woman named Janelle.

As Ivy tidied her home, she came across the old photo of her and Will, their smiling faces frozen in happier times. She paused, heart clenching.

They had history, yes. He’d been the first man she’d ever considered sharing a future with. But that naive dream died the day he broke her trust.

She gathered a deep, centering breath. That chapter was over. She was stronger and wiser, with her sights set on better dreams.

Blinking back sentimental tears, Ivy placed the photo in the trash. She had discovered something real with Blake, and it was time to close the door on the past. As she did, a symbolic weight lifted from her shoulders.

Wiping her eyes, Ivy continued straightening with a lighter heart, ready to embrace whatever lay ahead.

She’d already puppy-proofed the living room but blocked off access in case Cocoa decided to sneak behind the sofa. She also closed doors to the kitchen and hallway, so he could play safely during the meetings and not wander off unattended.

Meanwhile, Amelia watched the flower shop so Ivy could stay home. Unintentionally, Ivy had burdened her friend with the morning rush, but it was crucial to create a welcoming environment for Cocoa's potential adopters, plus a comfortable setting for Cocoa.

"Today you get to meet families who will love you as much as I do," she told him, scratching behind his velvety ears. Cocoa's rough tongue brushed against her hand in an enthusiastic, slobbery acknowledgment.

At 9:45 am, Ivy assembled a tray of sugar-dusted, snowflake-shaped Christmas cookies and set a pot of fragrant spiced tea to steep on the stove. The first meeting was at ten o'clock with a youthful couple, Katie and Caleb, hailing from a neighboring town. Their enthusiasm had shown through during their phone conversation. But 10 o'clock passed without them showing up.

Ivy phoned, but her message went straight to voicemail. "Hi Katie, it's Ivy. Are you and Caleb planning to come and meet Cocoa today? Please give me a call when you can."

She hated the nervous edge in her own voice. Still, she held out hope that they were running late.

While waiting, Ivy phoned the flower shop. "Amelia, I'm so sorry, but the ten o'clock appointment didn't show. I'll hurry over after the second interview. How is it going there?"

"We're doing great!" Amelia assured. "This morning is quiet, and our part-time college students are readying our floral arrangements for the fire station's toy drive and auction tomorrow. And you had asked Mrs. Thompson to volunteer at the shop for a few hours a week."

“I hoped it would get her out of the house, and she could engage with customers.”

“Good idea. She’s assisting a customer as we speak, so we’ve got it covered. You focus on finding a good match for our little Cocoa. Take as long as you’d like. In fact, if you don’t come into the store until later or even tonight, we’ll be fine.”

Ivy thanked Amelia profusely and hung up the phone.

She checked her watch, settled into a seat, and waited. Nearby, Cocoa wrestled with a squeaky plush reindeer, unaware of Ivy’s mounting disappointment.

Next was Janelle, a single woman, scheduled for eleven o’clock.

By 11:30, after multiple calls to Janelle yielded no response, Ivy came to the realization that no one was coming today. It simply wasn’t in the cards.

Cocoa nestled his head in her lap, gazing up at her with comforting eyes.

“No problem, we’ll keep trying,” Ivy assured him half-heartedly. She noted the calendar. “After all, it’s only December sixteenth.”

Why hadn’t anyone shown up? Was it a sign she should keep Cocoa as her own? Yet deep down, she understood that her hectic schedule wouldn’t be fair to him.

DOWNTRODDEN AFTER THE NO-SHOWS, Ivy bundled Cocoa in a stylish deep-purple sweater, featuring a whimsical holly leaf design and headed downtown to the Christmas market. She

loved that just about everything in town was within walking distance.

Robust fires crackled in iron grates, welcoming visitors. A medley of classic holiday tunes, “Jingle Bells” followed by “Frosty the Snowman,” played through the overhead speakers. The air was tinged with the enticing scents of roasted chestnuts and the soothing hug of spiced apple cider.

The fragrance of fresh pine grew stronger as she approached, blending with the nutty aroma of gingerbread. In the distance, the faint jingle of bells chimed from horse-drawn wagons offering market-goers sleigh rides.

Cocoa’s nose twitched, picking up each tempting whiff. His paws pressed through patches of snow, investigating the enticing traces of flavored treats, occasionally stopping to greet friendly strangers with a delighted and wiggling behind.

She cinched her oversized cable knit scarf snugly around her neck as the chill in the air deepened. She rubbed her mittens together. If only she had tucked hand warmers into her coat pockets.

Up ahead, the town’s evergreen displayed golden lights. She wandered through the crowded stalls, taking in all the scents—the subtle sweetness of woody pine wreaths, cinnamon and sugar from the baked goods stand, and the spiced fragrance of mulled cider simmering in slow cookers.

Ropes of lights, artistically draped around each stall, threw a rainbow gleam that became more enchanting as dusk fell.

“Ivy! Over here!” a familiar man’s voice called out.

She spotted Blake waving to her from a booth stocked with handcrafted ornaments. Beside him, his grandfather, Everett

Shepherd, sat on a bench, bundled in a rustic brown plaid scarf that mirrored Blake's.

Ivy's mood lifted at the sight of Blake's smile, and she grinned. His smile was as infectious as ever. When she neared him, her burdens eased.

"Bailing out on the flower shop to hang out with me?" he asked good-naturedly, enveloping her in a hug.

"Amelia assured me that the shop is in good hands." Ivy laughed. "And I can't pass up quality time with my favorite guy."

Everett's gaze fixed on them, shining with affection. A flush crept up her neck, keenly aware of the public setting.

Sensing her self-consciousness, Blake met her eyes, his own glinting with humor. "No need to be shy on me now, love," he teased. "Any guy would be blessed to receive your megawatt smile."

Everett grinned fondly at the pair. "Don't you two make a fine sight." Getting up from the bench, he shuffled over, gray mittens outstretched for Cocoa to sniff. The puppy's little nose twitched as he stretched to lick at the fuzzy fabric, then spun in an exuberant circle.

"This must be wee Cocoa." Everett chuckled. "He's a cute rascal, and from what I hear, he's full of the holiday spirit."

"That he is," Ivy and Blake responded in unison.

"Good to see you again," Everett welcomed Ivy. "This shutterbug here never stops talking about you."

Ivy turned to Blake, a suppressed laugh in her voice. "Shutterbug?"

“What can I say?” Blake scratched his stubbled chin, mirth crinkling the corners of his deep-set eyes.

“That’s my nickname for him since he was a little boy obsessed with his camera,” Everett said. “Isn’t that right, Blake?”

Blake cleared his throat, evading Ivy’s questioning look. “Hot cider?” he asked, guiding her and Cocoa toward a nearby booth.

Ivy allowed herself to be led but slanted him an amused gaze. “You never answered your grandfather’s remark.”

“No comment,” he replied.

She slid into the booth. “I think it’s a charming nickname and perfectly suited to you.”

“Can’t argue with that logic.” Blake signaled to a server for two piping mugs of cider. When Everett joined them, he opted for hot chocolate with a peppermint stick.

Hand in hand, Ivy and Blake continued through the market, sipping their drinks and weaving through the crowd. Ivy insisted on pausing to savor a slice of maple fudge, before treating herself to a scrumptious piece of cranberry bread.

“I love any dessert with cranberries!” she declared.

Cocoa bounded ahead, his leash pulling taut as he sniffed the toe of an interesting boot or a tantalizing scent of roasting nuts. Blake tightened his grip on the puppy’s lead, guiding the pup back to heel.

Blake’s grandfather walked behind them, occasionally stopping to chat with a neighbor or a friend.

Cocoa’s leash strained again as he caught a whiff of sugar-dusted dog biscuits shaped like reindeer and Christmas trees.

Ivy took the leash and steadied the eager pup while stealing a glance at Blake. “How are you enjoying your stay with your grandfather so far?”

“Every minute has been amazing,” Blake said. “We’ve been reminiscing about holidays past. Snowball fights, chestnut roasting, caroling... Although I’m not a great singer, unless you count being selected to sing a bass solo in the high school chorus.”

“Congratulations.”

“Believe me, the chorus teacher was desperate for guy singers. I liked it, though.” His eyes assumed a faraway look, as if he glimpsed a special memory.

Ivy’s heart expanded, seeing the contentment etched on his handsome face. She realized how deeply Blake valued family traditions, especially at this sentimental time of year.

After a moment, his expression transformed, and he held her hand firmly. “In fact, it’s got me thinking. I’m planning to buy a house of my own.”

“Oh? And where might this house be?”

“Wherever you are.”

Speech momentarily eluded her. As she read the sincerity in his gaze, her pulse skipped. No matter how often his romantic declarations caught her off guard, they never failed to make her feel cherished beyond measure.

As they continued browsing, one booth in particular beckoned. Garlands of pine boughs framed a display of antique Christmas ornaments. Each was a distinctive treasure, and Ivy stepped closer, imagining the stories behind each timeless heirloom.

“Aren’t they beautiful?” she murmured, her fingers grazing a particularly lovely crystal bauble.

Blake nodded, admiring the wooden soldiers, carved reindeers, and tiny angels painted in nostalgic Victorian hues. His grandfather, who had caught up to them, let out a low whistle and commented on the craftsmanship.

Blake lifted a glass blown angel. “This would make a perfect tree topper now that your old metal star is broken, Grandpa.”

Beside him, Everett’s eyes roved over the glittering array of ornaments. His weathered fingers came to rest on a humble carved wooden star. He cradled it in his palm, tracing the nicks and cracks in the faded paint.

“This takes me back,” he murmured. “Looks just like the star my father placed atop our tree when I was a boy.” He smiled. “We always waited for him to put it on last, as the final Christmas touch.”

Blake gave his grandfather’s shoulder a firm pat. “Then it’s decided. This year, that honor will be yours.”

Everett’s eyes misted over. He held the wooden star over his heart and gave a small nod. “I’d like that very much.”

As they continued, Ivy admired several cozy hand knit woolens, picturing how a certain deep blue scarf would complement Blake’s eyes perfectly. Besides, she owed him a scarf, as he had given up his tartan scarf for Cocoa.

She made a mental note to return and secretly select it as a gift for him.

She turned to Blake and inquired, just in case. “Will you still be in town come Christmas?”

He drew her close. “Where else would I go when everything I want is right here? We have a joint gallery to open. Remember?”

“You haven’t mentioned anything since our discussion in the café.”

“Doesn’t mean I wasn’t thinking about it.”

“If we were to open a gallery, how could it be profitable?”

“We’ll charge admission fees.” He lifted five fingers to emphasize the amount, then gestured to a souvenir stand. “We can also sell merchandise. Plus, consider renting the facility for private events—weddings, corporate gatherings, you name it.”

“I’m impressed with you, Blake Shepherd. You are a visionary.”

“Thank you. I’m impressed with you, Ivy Bennett. You are my inspiration.” He punctuated his words with a kiss. “Now, I believe we were discussing Christmas. What are your plans?”

“On Christmas morning, I attend the service at Evergreen Chapel.” Ivy hesitated. “Then I volunteer at a soup kitchen the church organizes. Would you like to join me?”

“I’d love to.” His voice dropped to a teasing whisper. “As long as you’ll do me the honor of coming back to my grandfather’s house afterward for a proper dinner.”

“Hmm. What’s on the menu for this proper dinner?”

“Maple glazed ham, mashed potatoes, stuffing—the full spread,” Blake said. “My grandfather is an excellent cook and Christmas dinner is a family tradition.”

“What can I bring?”

“Whatever you want.”

Ivy paused, her finger coming to rest at the corner of her mouth. “My orange-cranberry sauce is legendary. However, in exchange, I expect at least one slice of pie.”

“What kind?”

“I love pumpkin pie.”

“Store bought or homemade?”

“Either.”

“Store bought it is.” Blake laughed and drew her into a hug. “I’ll reserve the entire pie just for you.”

She grinned and nestled closer, beyond touched at being included in his family tradition.

Up ahead, a booth brimmed with poinsettias in every size and hue—classic red, pure white, and dusky pink.

Ivy glided her hands over the velvety petals, approving of their perfection. As she leaned in to inhale their faint peppery scent, she sensed Blake behind her, his warmth tingling against her back.

“They’re gorgeous, aren’t they?” she murmured.

“Not as gorgeous as you, love,” he replied, his breath stirring her hair. A pleasurable shiver rippled through her at his closeness.

Turning, she said, “That reminds me—Amelia bought a miniature tree for the flower shop that desperately needs decorating.”

“Say no more. I offer my services.” Blake gave a slight bow, and Ivy felt herself falling deeper under the spell of the

season...and of the man before her. Their first Christmas together would surely be like a fairy tale come to life.

Close by, Cocoa sniffed the base of an enormous evergreen tree. Clearly, he had detected an interesting scent and was trying to locate the source. The puppy let out a sharp “yip” as he discovered a dropped gingerbread cookie near the tree skirt. Before Ivy could stop him, he gobbled up the treat in a single bite.

“Uh-oh, busted!” Blake chuckled as they hurried over. “Good thing it wasn’t chocolate.” He scratched the satisfied pup behind the ears.

“I need to watch this little troublemaker even more closely.” She took note to carry safe treats to distract Cocoa from any unsafe holiday snacks.

The marketplace quieted as closing time neared. Arms laden with gifts, Ivy, Blake, and Everett advanced toward Blake’s Jeep, Cocoa trotting happily alongside them. After delivering Everett safely home, they headed to Ivy’s Blooms to begin decorating.

When they arrived, the shop was dark and empty, Amelia having already closed up. Blake flicked on the lights while Ivy unearthed boxes of ornaments from the back room. Cocoa plopped down by the door, busily chewing on a puppy-safe gingerbread cookie from the market.

Together, Ivy and Blake set up the petite tree in the front window so its colorful lights would shine out onto the street. As they decorated, Ivy switched on the vintage radio, and the nostalgic notes of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas” enveloped the shop, prompting her to hum along.

As she hung hand-painted glass bulbs on the tree branches, she said, “The strangest thing happened last night. Britney Knox showed up at my door out of nowhere.”

Blake’s brows tightened. “Britney Knox? What did she want?”

“She came to oh-so-sweetly inform me that the Garden Elegance grand opening got moved up to early January. So now I have even less time than ever before they become direct competitors.”

“I don’t appreciate that woman ambushing you at home and delivering news meant to intimidate you,” he replied.

“You and me both,” Ivy agreed. “She caught me completely off guard.”

Blake turned Ivy to face him, his hands resting on her shoulders. “Try not to let Britney ruin things for you. She wants to get under your skin, but you’re stronger than her petty games.”

Ivy allowed Blake to draw her into his solid embrace. She focused on the strength of his arms and refused to give Britney’s surprise visit any more thought. This moment belonged to her and Blake alone.

He stepped back. “Have you seen any more uptick in sales since we launched your website?”

“The orders are coming in slow but steady. I’ve seen a few new reviews, some custom arrangements, and more Instagram followers daily.”

“Focus on that progress. You’ve laid a solid foundation with loyal customers over the years. Consider this a fresh chapter.”

As if on cue, the shop's phone rang. Ivy answered, taking down an order for a holiday centerpiece from an out-of-town customer. When she disconnected, Blake gave her a thumbs up. "See? The online community will soon realize the value you provide, while I continue to tweak your social media."

"Something else happened." She knelt to scratch the puppy behind his silky ears as he snoozed under the tree.

"Good or bad?"

"Disappointing. None of the people interested in adopting Cocoa showed up."

Blake crouched beside her. "I'm sorry. I intended to ask earlier how it went but got distracted at the market."

"Understandable." She managed a wan smile. "I'll repost the ad and keep trying. Except part of me wonders..." Her gaze shifted to Cocoa. "Part of me wonders if fate intended for me to keep Cocoa after all."

Tilting her chin up, Blake searched her eyes. "You have a sympathetic heart, Ivy. I know you'll do what's best for him."

As she met his stare, she found only kindness and support in their blue depths. He didn't judge, only seeking to understand her perspective.

Her smile eased. With Blake by her side, she could handle whatever came next, be it adoption or puppy parenthood. His unwavering presence gave her the strength to face each unfamiliar challenge.

After decorating the tree, Blake stepped to the café and brought back two mugs of caramel vanilla steamers. A café specialty. The steamers were made with steamed milk, caramel syrup, vanilla extract, and whipped cream.

As they sat in the back room, Ivy showed him a flyer for the toy drive and auction event at the local fire station.

He gave the pup's belly a rub. "I bet your floral arrangements will be a big hit."

She folded the flyer and set it down. "And your photo-op idea is—" Her train of thought was interrupted by her phone dinging with a new email. She picked it up, her gaze fixed on the screen as she scanned the message.

"That's strange," she murmured. "This email is from someone named Tonya Mills claiming that Cocoa is actually her dog who went missing over a month ago."

Blake leaned in close, peering over Ivy's shoulder. As he read, a crease formed on his forehead in a frown.

"Cocoa wasn't wearing a collar when I found him, and Dr. Michell confirmed that he didn't have a microchip," Ivy said. "He was in rough shape, and it seemed as if he'd been a stray for a while. You remember?"

"Of course." Blake nodded.

"She's insisting that Cocoa—she's calling him Luna—escaped from her backyard right before Thanksgiving during a bad storm. She included some photos." Ivy studied the pictures. "Blake, the puppy looks just like Cocoa."

"Something seems off, and Pomeranians are a popular breed. Why did she wait so long to contact you? Your flyers and online ad are everywhere." His gaze shifted between the photos and Ivy, doubt flickering in his eyes. "Maybe it's a mix-up?"

Or maybe not. Perhaps Tonya was Cocoa's true owner.

Ivy picked up the puppy and held him close to her chest. Cocoa peered up at her with guileless brown eyes, blissfully oblivious to her escalating concerns.

If this Tonya truly was Cocoa's original owner, the right thing would be to return him. Though Ivy's heart clenched at the thought of losing the puppy she was growing so attached to.

"I'll reply and ask for more details," she determined, even though doubts spun.

"My instincts say to be extremely cautious," Blake said. "Don't accept any claims at face value."

Ivy had a disturbing sense this sudden email heralded trouble. Doubt and confusion crowded her mind.

She tried to stay hopeful and grasped Blake's hand for support. Surely, there was a reasonable explanation for the delay in Tonya's response to contact Ivy.

"Is this an occasion for one of your famous Wishing Blooms?" he asked. "I don't believe, but you do."

Regardless, he was aware of her conviction. She trusted in the potential of the blooms to spread happiness and hope.

"If only." Ivy gave a small, grateful smile, knowing that although Blake didn't put much stock in the bloom's powers, he always knew how to comfort her. "But I have a tradition."

"Which is?"

"Every year I save one of them. Just one."

"Why?" he asked. "Everyone seems to love them."

"It's a way for me to remember all the happiness the blooms have shared in our little town. And a reminder that

even in the busiest or hardest times, there's still hope and happiness."

"Where do you keep the flower?"

"In a special place, in my home. I fertilize and water it, just like all the flowers in my shop."

"I know just the thing instead." He disappeared into the storage room and returned with a single vibrant red rose from the flower cooler. He trimmed the stem with care, then handed it to her.

"We'll share this one, love," he said softly. "A wish for faith that things will work out as they should."

Ivy accepted the rose, touched by his gesture. She inhaled the sweet perfume scent, then met Blake's optimistic gaze.

"Thank you," she whispered.

In any event, she expected to untangle the truth of Cocoa's past.

Until then, she cuddled the puppy, cherishing every second with him and Blake.

CHAPTER 9



The following morning, Ivy walked to a coffee shop on the edge of town. Through the window, she noticed an auburn-haired woman sitting alone and clutching a to-go cup. This woman had to be Tonya Mills.

After a tense email exchange, Ivy had reluctantly agreed to meet with Tonya to discuss Tonya's claims that Cocoa was her missing dog. Blake had offered to accompany her, but Ivy decided to handle the matter by herself.

The woman glanced up as Ivy entered, with Cocoa in tow. She immediately zeroed in on the puppy.

You must be Ivy," she trilled, though her smile didn't stretch to her watchful eyes. "And my precious Luna!"

Ivy tensed, brushing her fingers along Cocoa's back to soothe him as she sat across from the woman. Internally, she bristled at the name *Luna* rolling off Tonya's tongue.

She told herself to maintain a pleasant expression, to avoid any escalating tensions.

The woman leaned forward, her gold jewelry jangling on the table. "My adorable puppy," she fussed.

Cocoa recoiled, a low whine in his throat.

“Ivy, thanks to you, I’m so relieved.” Tonya clasped her hands, focusing on tracking the puppy’s movements. Her foot tapped a staccato beat on the wood floor.

Ivy distrusted the almost manic glint in Tonya’s eyes. The name Luna didn’t even cause Cocoa’s ears to perk up in recognition.

“Cocoa was in poor shape when I rescued him. No collar, no microchip,” Ivy said. “Please understand that I can’t release him without substantial evidence.”

“The storm probably ripped his collar off. However, it’s definitely him!” She extended her arm to pat Cocoa, but Ivy subtly shifted. She tried to remain polite but firm.

“If he’s your dog, provide something beyond the photos you texted me.” Ivy studied Tonya’s face for any sign of deception. “Do you have veterinary records, licensing paperwork, anything?”

“I’m way too disorganized for all that. But a mother knows her child.” Tonya’s gaze darted for a second before she reached into her bag. “See? Here’s his favorite toy.” She held up a battered stuffed bear, one that any puppy might have frolicked with.

Ivy held back her words. Every instinct screamed that things were off. Tonya seemed far more interested in Cocoa than discussing the proof he was hers.

“Where did...Luna come from?” Ivy asked.

“A shelter near where I live.”

Ivy’s guard went up even more. Why was Tonya so resistant to confirm Cocoa’s identity? Could there be some ulterior purpose behind her reluctance?

Testing a theory, Ivy said, “I assume you spent a fortune on vet bills and supplies for little Luna in those initial months. Puppies are frequently accompanied by a significant expense.”

“Expensive. No doubt about it.” Tonya’s fingers clenched her cup as she redirected her attention to a sugar packet on the table.

“I want to make certain we’re doing everything we can to authenticate this,” Ivy said. “Can you give me specifics on when and where you got Luna?”

Tonya’s gaze drifted, as if she were sifting through her thoughts. “About six weeks ago, I found him at a shelter in Waverly Falls.”

“What about his medical history? Vet visits, vaccinations, anything like that?”

Tonya paused, tracing the rim of her unopened cup with her fingertips. “Buddy has been perfectly healthy. Never had any issues.”

“I thought you said his name was Luna?”

Tonya blinked several times. “Luna, yes, that’s what I meant.”

“And the shelter where you found him?”

“I can’t recall the name, though it was in Waverly Falls.”

Ivy’s eyes narrowed. Tonya spoke generally, not referencing any specific experiences one might expect from a dog owner. And the timeline didn’t match. If Cocoa had truly been missing for over a month, as she claimed, shouldn’t Tonya have been teeming with anxiety and desperation? Yet, her demeanor stayed strangely untroubled.

“You never came across my online ads and flyers posted in Evergreen Valley?” Ivy probed.

“No.” Tonya adjusted the napkin next to her cup. “I don’t mingle with folks often, and I rarely drive here. I live in a house the next town over.”

“What’s your address?” Ivy inquired. “You haven’t given me that information.”

Tonya’s gaze flickered down to Cocoa, curled at their feet. “112 Elmwood Lane, Waverly Falls,” she replied.

“Thank you.” Ivy was courteous, although doubt bubbled. “I’ll bring him to the vet to scan for a microchip, even though it failed initially.”

Tonya’s smile faltered. “Naturally, whatever you require. I’m looking forward to bringing my sweet Luna home to spend the holidays with me.”

Ivy lifted Cocoa and rose. “I’ll connect with you later,” she said. She exited before Tonya could object. Her heart pounded, feeling the woman’s eyes boring into her back as she hurried to the door.

This was far from over. She didn’t believe Tonya’s stories for half a minute. There were too many discrepancies, too many odd behaviors.

Ivy stepped out into the frosty air. Somehow, she would need to sort this out.

AFTER THE MEETING WITH TONYA, Ivy stopped at the veterinarian’s office. Another examination uncovered no microchip associated with Luna under Tonya’s name. The

puppy had no previous connection with Tonya, confirmed Dr. Mitchell.

Ivy then contacted the county clerk's office in Waverly Falls, where she found no documentation that Tonya owned the house at the address she had listed.

Exhausted from a long session of phone calls, Ivy arrived at her flower shop midafternoon with Cocoa in her arms. Blake and Amelia peered up from organizing last-minute details for the fire station's auction that evening. The part-time college students waved from behind the counter.

"I couldn't find any proof to corroborate Tonya's claims," Ivy reported to Blake and Amelia. "As far as I can tell, her stories don't add up."

Blake switched on his cellphone, typed into his search engine, then swiveled the screen to Ivy. "Exactly as I suspected," he said. "Tonya has attempted this pet adoption scam before."

Ivy scanned his research, anger and relief rising in her chest. This manipulative woman had tried, but fortunately, she had failed.

"You listened to your intuition, love." Blake drew Ivy close, and she relaxed into his embrace, the tension of the morning easing from her muscles. "Cocoa is here in the place he belongs."

Amelia clicked her tongue. "This Tonya woman is a horrible person. At last, we can stop worrying and concentrate on giving Cocoa his true forever home."

"Which is where?" Ivy asked, smiling over Cocoa's exuberant, unconcerned puppy kisses.

Blake and Amelia smirked in accord. “With you, of course!”

Armed with evidence, Ivy texted Tonya, stating that she knew her story was all lies and threatened to report her to the authorities. Tonya hurriedly dropped the act and blocked Ivy from texting her again.

With the Tonya drama behind her, Ivy refocused on the upcoming fire station benefit. She packed a bulky vase display that she and Amelia had created, which included evergreen branches and forested stems. Plus, four larger pieces—two Christmas themes and two winter mixes.

She also provided a certificate for a specially crafted bouquet to be auctioned off. In addition, she donated her services for any memorable occasion the recipient chose.

Blake loaded the arrangements, as well as his camera equipment, into his Jeep.

“Thank you, Blake,” she said, handing him an extra vase, just in case one shattered during transport. “You’re a great help.”

“What can I say?” He beamed. “We’re a team, Ivy.”

She smiled. “Yes, we’re a team.”

“I’m so proud of you for how you handled Tonya.”

Ivy fixed her gaze on the ground. “I can’t understand why anybody would do such a terrible thing.”

“Tonya saw the puppy as an asset and exploited your emotional attachment. I suspect that eventually, she might’ve suggested that you pay her to keep the puppy. That’s how these cruel scams operate, taking advantage of people’s care for lost pets.”

Ivy shook her head, still struggling to comprehend such manipulation. “I find it hard to believe there are such callous people in this world.”

Blake rested a comforting hand on her back. “The absence of brightness occurs even during the holidays. Nevertheless, knowing where to look can unveil far more light than darkness.” He smiled tenderly. “And I know where to look, love.”

A shadow lifted from Ivy’s heart at his words. She nestled into his solid frame, allowing his strength to shore up her shaken faith.

Blake continued. “Are you bringing Cocoa to the auction tonight?”

“Never.” She laughed. “He’s far too energetic and might tear up all the gifts. Fortunately, one of my part-timers volunteered to watch him.”

“A perfect plan.” Blake smiled. “So, let’s spread some holiday cheer. I’ll drop you off at your place and pick you up in a couple of hours.”

BACK AT HER HOUSE, Ivy twisted and pirouetted in front of the mirror, holding up an array of outfit options. Cocoa sat on the bedroom floor, gazing up at her while chewing on his current favorite, a rope toy.

Eventually, Ivy decided on a striking emerald-green cocktail dress that brought out the flecks of green in her hazel eyes. She smoothed the satin fabric over her hips, admiring the elegant drape.

Next, she perched at her vanity and artfully pinned back her long blond waves, leaving a few wavy tendrils to frame

her face. A touch of mascara accentuated her black lashes, and she swiped on petal-pink lipstick.

Her employee turned pet-sitter arrived and leashed Cocoa for a walk.

Meanwhile, Ivy's stomach fluttered with eager anticipation as she spritzed on a hint of floral perfume. She did a final spin, breathing deep to settle the butterflies. An instant later, the doorbell rang, announcing Blake's arrival.

Her pulse quickened. It was time.

STRINGS OF LIGHTS bathed the firehouse hall, offset by oversized burlap wreaths accented with festive white bows. A majestic fir tree dominated the center of the hall, decorated with a carved wooden angel and popcorn garland.

The firefighters had stored their gear and trucks in apparatus bays at the rear of the station, allowing a wide, clear area for the event.

Toddlers sprinted about in oversized plastic helmets, cheeks flushed from exertion and sugary treats. Mothers and fathers chatted amiably, appreciating the brief respite.

A baby in his mother's arms stared curiously at the lights, chubby fingers reaching out to grasp at the shimmering colors. Close to the towering evergreen, a preschooler proudly displayed a candy cane with cherubic innocence.

Other children entertained themselves on the concrete floor, showing off their newfound treasures. A group of boys huddled together, intent on a remote-controlled race car's headlight as it zoomed past. A little chef-to-be brandished her play kitchen set, complete with pots, pans, and utensils.

Firefighters stood close by. Although several were young men with athletic builds, a few had graying hair and mustaches indicating their veteran experience. They sported standard T-shirts and bunker pants, and their welcoming smiles made them seem like father figures. The women wore station uniforms with the department's insignia, and several wore baseball caps with the fire station's logo.

A boy of about eight twirled a bright-colored pinwheel in his small hands, while his little sister hugged a fuzzy teddy bear nearly as big as herself. Two preteen girls marveled over a colossal Legos castle, exchanging ideas on what to build next—turrets or drawbridges.

On Blake's sturdy arm, Ivy smoothed the sumptuous fabric of her dress. She wanted to impress him with her appearance tonight.

Blake cut a dashing figure in a navy suit; his smile overflowed with tenderness as he squeezed her hand.

"The bidding is really heating up!" Amelia informed Ivy. Amelia dazzled in a bold sequined evening gown, working the crowd with a natural charisma. "All those besotted suiters are vying for your attention."

Ivy laughed. "Yes, I'm fending off admirers left and right for flower arrangements."

"Can't say I blame them." Blake slid an arm around her waist. "Regrettably for those gentlemen, your dance card is completely full."

"You two are beyond precious," Amelia chuckled. "Quit sending heart eyes to each other and let's drum up more bids. I'll swing by the shop to notify the winners after the auction is over."

Blake and Ivy exchanged a smile at Amelia's good-natured teasing.

Weaving through the animated crowd, Ivy inspected the silent auction. Bids were indeed rolling in, and pride swelled inside her.

She noticed Blake had paused, his gaze focusing on a young girl in pigtails eyeing a shiny red bike that had been donated. The harried mother came over and pulled the girl away, saying the bike had already been claimed, and they couldn't afford the bid, anyway. The girl's smile faded as she cast one last, longing look at the bike before following her mother.

He immediately stepped over to a firefighter and spoke discreetly with him. He had a certain twinkle in his eye and a hint of a smile.

Soon afterward, Blake came up behind Ivy and brushed her hair lovingly behind her shoulders.

"Got any big plans for tonight?" she asked, suspecting he was up to something heartwarming.

"Just spreading some holiday cheer." He winked.

Ivy smiled, fairly sure she knew what that wink meant. He was too humble to make a show of his good deeds, but she sensed he had something special in store for that little girl.

"Have I mentioned how utterly stunning you are tonight, love?" He breathed into her ear and sent delightful shivers up her spine.

Ivy beamed at him. "Only a handful of times so far, but who's keeping score?"

“In that case, I better raise the bar.” He chuckled. “That dress is exquisite on you. I’d compare you to an emerald suited for royalty.”

“I must say, Mr. Shepherd, you are quite charming,” Ivy said. “Careful, or I might get spoiled by all this flattery.”

“I certainly hope so. Do you know why I call you *love*?”

She held her breath. “No, why?”

He kissed her, right there for all of Evergreen Valley to witness. “Because I am falling in love with you, Ivy Bennett.”

He gazed at her as if she was the only woman in the hall, and the most beautiful version of herself.

Her heart hammered as he watched her. She ached to tell him how she felt, that she was falling for him, too, though a nagging inner voice warned her to be careful, to protect herself.

Was it too fast to feel this way about him? Her practical side said yes, but her heart pounded every time she looked at him.

Blake posed an understanding smile. He seemed to sense her hesitation, her inner conflict. Nonetheless, the cold fear of past heartbreak held her back.

Ivy closed her eyes briefly, willing herself to say it. *I love you*. It wasn’t hard.

But the words froze on her lips. Not here, not now. Instead, she nestled closer to him as the children played. For tonight, this would have to do.

At the punch bowl table, a number of firefighters chatted with attendees while monitoring the children. The hall was

transformed into a magical wonderland because of these selfless heroes and the generous community.

Within earshot, Blake's grandfather, Everett, engaged in a lively conversation with Mrs. Harriet Thompson. The gracefully aging woman exuded timeless elegance. Her dress, a delicate shade of blush pink, beautifully complemented her striking gray eyes and the shimmering silver waves of her hair.

In his well-chosen attire, Everett looked debonair. He'd chosen a tasteful deep-plum cardigan over a collared shirt and smartly tied necktie. His lady friend laughed at a humorous joke he made, and a twinkle of glee flickered in his eyes.

He beckoned Ivy and Blake over, extending a gracious hand of introduction, even though Ivy had shared many years of acquaintance with Mrs. Thompson.

Shortly afterward, Blake positioned his camera beside the Christmas village's Santa—a firefighter dressed in a complete set of gear, his helmet crowned by a bright red hat with a white pompom on the tip.

His hearty "Ho ho ho!" brought delight to everyone. Blake clicked away, capturing the pure elation sparkling in each child's eyes as they sat on Santa's lap and received their gifts. Ivy remained near, admiring Blake's skill and compassion.

She inhaled the sugary scent of gingerbread, allowing the familiar aroma of the season to wash over her. She stepped away and ladled two mugs with steaming cider and presented one to Blake, who smiled gratefully.

Parents whispered silly jokes, igniting giggles from their children exactly when the camera flashed.

"This is the best benefit auction ever," she said. "It's such fun to spread Christmas magic."

“All thanks to big-hearted folks like you.” Blake gave her waist an affectionate squeeze. “Speaking of magic, want to assist Santa’s photographer? I could use an elf helper.”

Ivy nodded, donning a green elf hat with a jingling bell over her blond waves. She assisted in positioning enthusiastic children and families in front of the firefighter Santa, arranging their arms just so.

“Say pepperoni pizza!” she encouraged, eliciting a chorus of hilarity from the kids.

One sandy-haired boy stood for a photo with a plastic firefighter’s axe, pretending to chop down an imaginary Christmas tree. “Timber!” he yelled.

“Careful where that tree lands!” she played along.

A cherubic six-year-old girl cradled her pristine teddy bear, its plush warm-brown fur inviting cuddles. “Teddy wants to be an elf just like you!” she declared.

Ivy gave the bear a high five. “We’re glad to have you on our team, Teddy!”

Laughter rang out as she shared witty remarks and acted out humorous scenes with the children, putting everyone at ease.

In the meantime, Blake’s camera whirred, snapping shot after shot of heartening smiles. He slipped a gift card to McKinley’s Ice Cream Shop and a candy cane to each child after their photo, though he never mentioned the gesture to anyone.

When a shy child around five years old seemed unsure about sitting on Santa’s lap, Blake gently encouraged her and knelt down to her level.

“I was scared to talk to Santa at your age, too,” he said. “But you know what? He’s actually really nice! Here, want to sit with him together?”

The girl nodded bravely. Blake held her hand, helping her whisper her Christmas list, as they sat side-by-side on Santa’s lap.

“Looks like I have two special helpers this year,” the Santa firefighter bellowed in good-natured humor. He jokingly pretended to strain under their combined weight, producing chortles from the little girl.

Blake smiled and gave them both a thumbs up.

Ivy’s affection for Blake deepened, observing him with the children. Although his actions were understated, his generous spirit shone through. And it was in these quiet moments that she began to fall for him more and more.

After the auction wound down, Ivy bid Blake goodnight. He wasn’t quite finished, because he had volunteered to stay late and help clean up the trash and decorations.

She decided to head home because she was anxious to see Cocoa. As she walked, her boots left soft imprints on the pristine snow beneath her feet.

When she reached Central Avenue, a particular empty storefront caught her eye—the future site of Garden Elegance. The shapes of construction workers remodeling the space were distinguishable through the window.

The impending rival florist about to open in her small town twisted her stomach and dampened her holiday cheer.

The store’s front door swung open with a creak, and Ivy stepped back, hoping whoever it was wouldn’t notice her.

The figure emerged, and Ivy was quick to identify the woman with ebony-black hair swept into a stylish updo, winter coat cinched at the waist, and tall black boots clicking on the pavement.

Britney.

Ivy's unease curdled into irritation. Naturally, Britney would personally oversee the store's construction with her boyfriend, both keen to usurp Ivy's customers.

Ivy willed herself to stay optimistic. She would not allow Britney or Garden Elegance to ruin this special season.

She pulled her scarf tighter and strode briskly down the street. Despite the competition, she resolved to promote her shop with renewed dedication. With her loved ones' support, Ivy's Blooms would continue thriving.

After arriving home, Ivy's priority was to care for her beloved Cocoa after the pet-sitter left. The tiny furball had been impatiently awaiting her return, tail wagging and eyes brimming with elation. She knelt and was given an earnest reception as he nuzzled her.

"You're my little Cocoa Christmas love, you know that?" she whispered.

She tended to his needs and then focused on the business side by phoning Amelia to review the shop's bids post-auction. Tucked at her feet, Cocoa dozed.

"Good news first," Amelia said. "All those who won were notified, and balances paid. Plus, the event exceeded the five-thousand-dollar benchmark by an extra five thousand dollars. So, ten thousand dollars, total, was raised. The rumor is that an anonymous donor contributed a substantial sum of money."

"Any idea who it was?" Ivy asked.

“Blake Shepherd.”

Blake? He'd never mentioned a word to her. He was generous, and humble, and considerate.

Another reason why she was falling in love with him, and there was no hope for it.

“On the flip side, a few red poinsettias are missing from our updated inventory,” Amelia continued. “Only three or four, but they are definitely gone.”

Ivy experienced a sudden plummeting sensation in her gut. “Are you certain, Amelia?” This was a setback the shop couldn't afford. “Perhaps the flowers were miscounted during delivery?”

“I suppose anything is possible,” Amelia replied slowly. “I'll double check tomorrow morning when I open the shop.”

“Please do,” Ivy replied, her voice tight.

Something was amiss.

Britney appeared wherever Ivy turned, and now the possibility of missing inventory? An invisible storm seemed to be gathering, steadily intensifying in the quiet confines of her living room.

After disconnecting with Amelia, Ivy stood stock-still before her little Christmas tree, its mini white lights casting a muted glow. She fingered the garland on the tiny snowman, lost in troubled thought.

If the absent flowers weren't a counting mistake, then someone had intentionally removed them. Who, though? And why target her small shop?

She switched off the tree lights, then filled Cocoa's food and water bowls, ensuring his plush doggy bed was ready for a

cozy night.

With Cocoa settled, she headed to bed.

Garden Elegance was on the horizon, and she had to consider everything carefully.

She was determined not to give up. It simply wasn't part of her story.

CHAPTER 10



*B*lake couldn't escape the shadow of worry that loomed in Ivy's eyes. She attempted to conceal her concerns with a placid smile, but he detected the uneasiness that simmered beneath her brave front.

To boost her morale, he suggested dining at his preferred Italian restaurant, Nonna's Bistro. At first, she refused. However, after some coaxing, and Amelia's volunteering to watch Cocoa, Ivy consented. In fact, Amelia agreed to the puppy sleeping overnight at her house.

"His first sleepover!" she had declared.

Blake picked Ivy up in his Jeep, and they arrived at the restaurant at seven o'clock.

At the entrance, a grand, sparkling snowflake-shaped chandelier hung from the ceiling, catching the light, and casting elaborate patterns on the walls. The dining tables were dressed in crimson tablecloths, each one featuring a centerpiece of evergreen boughs and pinecones. Tall, slender candles in antique brass holders added a flickering glow to the room.

As Blake and Ivy stepped inside, the mingling scents of garlic, tomatoes, and fresh basil beckoned. The kitchen was

noisy with dishes sizzling and silverware clattering, while a violinist's poignant notes floated above it all.

“*Buona sera!*” the host, wearing formal black attire, a crisp white shirt and plum-colored bowtie, welcomed them. They handed their coats to the attendant and proceeded to a small table near the back of the restaurant.

Flames leaped in a rustic stone fireplace, carrying a smoky-rich scent.

The host pulled out their chairs and seated them. A violinist perched on a vintage wooden chair played “White Christmas” with elegant precision. Her eyes were closed, absorbed in the music.

Ivy had chosen a midnight blue dress that hugged her slim curves and reflected the candlelight's subtle shimmer. She accessorized with a delicate silver necklace that accentuated her graceful neck.

Blake's breath stilled at the sight of her. Despite admiring her beauty many times, she never failed to move him.

“Ivy Bennett, you are absolutely stunning,” he said, taking her hand and brushing a tender kiss on her knuckles.

Ivy smiled, a pretty blush enhancing her cheeks. “Why, thank you, kind sir. You clean up quite nicely yourself.” She adjusted his silvery tie, an affectionate sparkle in her eyes.

Blake had chosen a charcoal-gray suit and lavender shirt, hoping to project sophistication. But standing beside Ivy, he was awestruck. Her inner radiance far outshone any of his outward elegance.

His gaze never shifted from her face. Her porcelain skin glowed in the soft, dancing light. The violinist launched into

“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear,” wrapping the restaurant in a warmhearted, intimate atmosphere.

“Have I mentioned how thrilled I am to share this night with you?” he asked.

“I’m truly delighted to be here. I feel the same way.” Ivy’s cheeks dimpled with a smile as she perused the menu. “And this is considerably better than another frozen pizza at home.”

While they discussed the successful firehouse auction, their server arrived. Wearing a smart black vest and white dress shirt, he demonstrated an impressive memory of the evening’s selections.

“May I interest you in our wine list?” he inquired, filling their water glasses with ice and a slice of lemon. “We have an exceptional selection to complement our menu.”

Both Ivy and Blake refused with polite smiles.

“Appetizers?” the server inquired.

“No, we’ll stick with the main course,” Blake said.

“Certainly not a problem. If you change your mind, please don’t hesitate to ask. I’ll give you a few minutes to select your entrees.”

When the server swerved to another table, Ivy leaned forward. “Blake, are you aware that the auction surpassed its goal by double the amount?” As she squeezed the lemon slice into her water, the scent of citrus mingled with the savory aromas around them. “Over ten thousand dollars was raised.”

“That’s incredible!” Blake grinned.

“A tiny bird told me that a certain mystery donor contributed five thousand dollars.”

“Oh?” Blake feigned ignorance and added some lemon to his own water. “And who might this tiny gabby bird be?”

“A little Amelia bird,” Ivy replied. “Did you think your donation would stay anonymous in a town this small?”

“I must confess, it was me. I didn’t anticipate anyone finding out.” Blake laughed and drank a refreshing sip of water.

“The toy drive reminded me of the power of teamwork,” she continued. “The community joined forces, and it’s remarkable what we accomplished together.”

He recalled her jotting down her ideas for the flower arrangements she donated, her elegant cursive handwriting adding a touch of grace.

The server returned, producing a pocket-sized notebook and a pen. “What can I get the lovely signorina this evening?” he asked Ivy.

“I’ll order the chicken marsala, and a green salad with olive oil and vinegar dressing,” she replied.

“Excellent choice.” The server turned to Blake. “And for you, signore?”

Blake said, “Fettuccine Alfredo please. Been craving it!”

“Very good. *Molto bene.*” The waiter whisked up their menus and proceeded to the kitchen to place their orders.

“I can’t wait to hear your thoughts on the marsala sauce,” Blake said. His fingers laced with hers, forging a delicate link between them. “Now, please update me on what else is happening. You seem upset.”

Ivy hesitated, then revealed her worries about the missing poinsettias. Blake listened, allowing her to vent her

frustrations.

Their server approached with a basket of warm, crusty bread and placed it between them. Aromatic steam rose from the bread, along with faint whiffs of cedar from the fire.

“Ivy, I have great news for you,” Blake said, offering the breadbasket to her first, then absently tearing off a small piece of bread for himself.

Her gaze fixed on him as she nibbled on the bread. “What is it?”

“Amelia sent me a text today. She couldn’t solve what had happened with the poinsettias and was concerned. So, I investigated. Discreetly.”

“And?” Ivy inquired. Their fingers brushed as they both reached for more bread.

“One of your suppliers inadvertently shipped a portion of your red poinsettias to a different town’s flower shop.” He gestured in the direction of the neighboring town with a nod. “They mistakenly took yours, but acknowledged the error and should be sending the flowers back to your shop soon.”

Ivy lifted her water glass as a toast to him. “Fantastic. Thank you, Blake. When I spoke with Amelia, she said she was still working on the problem.”

“Issue resolved. Amelia will text me when the poinsettias are delivered to your shop.” He flashed Ivy a reassuring smile before placing his phone face down on the table. “So, let’s enjoy tonight.”

Regardless of the challenges, he wanted to keep the holiday bright for her. She deserved nothing less.

After concluding their meal, they selected a pot of chamomile tea to round off the meal.

Blake sank back into his chair with a contented sigh. “You know, I’m thinking of complimenting the chef on the excellent food.”

“Right now?”

“Why not?” He laid his napkin on the table and stood. “I’ll be back in a few minutes.”

He had secretly asked for a decadent cranberry cheesecake for her, embellished with a cranberry drizzle, because she had expressed her fondness for any dessert with cranberries. He’d requested a romantic message on the side of the plate, scripted in rich chocolate sauce: “For Ivy, the woman I love.”

He intended to double-check on his order to ensure the server hadn’t forgotten.

Ivy regarded him with a curious smile as Blake excused himself and disappeared into the kitchen. She tried to imagine what he had planned for her, because she’d detected an impish glimmer in his eyes.

The server arrived with an attractively organized silver tea tray. With a masterful touch, he arranged the dainty porcelain teacups and saucers, each accompanied by a gleaming silver spoon. The teapot, ornamented in sophisticated patterns, released a fragrant blend of jasmine and chamomile as he expertly poured her a cup of tea.

As Ivy savored her tea, Blake’s cellphone chimed with a text.

“Blake?” She scanned the restaurant, though she didn’t see him. “Blake? You got a text.”

Assuming he wasn't within hearing distance, Ivy set down her teacup. The text was most likely from Amelia, relaying that the poinsettias had been delivered.

Hmm.

Ivy grappled with a momentary dilemma, debating the ethical implications. This was Blake's cellphone and reading his messages was an intrusion. On the other hand, her concern for Cocoa tugged at her heartstrings, and she would ask Amelia for reassurance that he was okay.

She clicked on the text, and a shiver ran down her spine as she read the first line: *Waiting for a reply regarding last week's email. Photography opportunity in New York City.*

Her breath hitched as she scanned the contents. Blake had received an offer to showcase his work in the Catherine Eden Art Gallery. This must be the well-known gallery he'd mentioned to her early on.

Her belly twisted. Why hadn't he shared this exciting news? How could he keep something so important from her?

She stared at the text again—such an incredible opportunity. She wanted to be happy for him, but somehow, all she felt was hurt.

Blinking back tears, she set his phone down with quivering fingers.

When Blake returned to the table, Ivy looked up with a start.

"You started to drink your tea without me," he teased, his voice light. He failed to notice the storm raging behind her eyes. "Sorry I took slightly longer than I expected. I couldn't find the chef." His voice sounded muffled, drowned out by the blood pulsing in her ears.

“Hey, Ivy, did you hear me?” Concern etched his brows. “What’s wrong?”

His loving gaze had lost its ability to comfort her. The yawning space of the table between them was a vast, lonely chasm.

“Blake,” she said, her voice quiet. “Why didn’t you tell me about New York?”

“How did you know?” His reaction was immediate, a split-second falter in composure.

“I saw the text on your phone. I didn’t mean to. I thought it was from Amelia.”

He shifted. “Ivy, right, I should explain.”

Her heart twinged, disappointment overshadowing all else. Transparency was obviously not in his vocabulary. Why would he conceal something of such significance?

“Look, I had no intention of upsetting you,” Blake began, his tone careful and measured. He briefly averted his gaze before locking eyes with her once more. “Now that you’re aware, it’s important to know that I haven’t decided if I will accept the invitation.”

She tightly gripped her teacup. “What reason could you possibly have to assume that sharing this news would upset me?”

She wrestled with her disloyalty and chided herself, struggling to reconcile the pain in her heart with the happiness she should feel for him.

Light snowflakes drifted outside the window. The murmurs of conversation and the clinking of cutlery provided a familiar backdrop, while the melancholic strains of the

violinist's opening of "Silver Bells" added to Ivy's emotional battle.

Your photos capture the urgency of our environmental crisis like no other artist I've seen, the text to Blake had read, written by Catherine Eden herself.

"Don't you trust me enough to share big news?" Ivy asked.

He rubbed his temple. "Of course, I trust you. It's... complicated."

"What's so complicated?"

"This might lift my career to a whole new level."

Her fingertips tapped restlessly against her teacup. "You planned on making a choice without discussing it with me? Were you intending to say goodbye, or just leave town?"

He attempted to grab her hand, and she pulled away. "I was trying to figure out the best way to bring it up. It's important we hold on to this. Hold on to us."

"Important to who?" Her voice quivered, revealing the layers of hurt and confusion.

"To me. And to you, too, I hope."

"When is the exhibition?" she asked.

"A few days before Christmas."

"Will you be back here in time for Christmas?"

He lifted his shoulders. "I should be."

He'd invited her to his house to dine with him and his grandfather on Christmas Day. They were slated to serve at the soup kitchen in the morning. And she assumed he'd attend the church service with her.

She recalled their conversation at the Christmas market. She could recite it word for word.

“In fact, it’s got me thinking,” he said. “I’m planning to buy a house of my own.”

“Oh?” she asked. “And where might this house be?”

“Wherever you are.”

Well, she was right here in Evergreen Valley.

He seemed to struggle with his next words. “I didn’t want to burden you, but the exhibition could lead to a full-time art grant and residency.”

“In New York City?”

“Yes.”

Her frustration mounted, her heart pounding against her ribs like a caged bird desperate for freedom. Why would he withhold such life-changing news from her?

“What about...what about the joint gallery we discussed opening?”

“Ivy, I’ve been looking into it. The space is unavailable because the owner is reviewing applications from multiple businesses.”

“Oh.” She frowned, disappointed. “What type of businesses?”

“The main contender is a pawn shop. They’re willing to pay top dollar for the storefront.”

A pawn shop, next door to her flower shop.

She dug her nails into her palms to distract from the tightness in her chest. She barely tasted her tea now, managing to force small sips while navigating her spinning emotions.

“If we intend to build a future together, Blake, we must be honest with each other.” She attempted to conceal her inner turmoil with a weak smile, though her mind reeled. What else was he keeping from her? Their foundation of trust had been shattered, along with her dreams.

“Doesn’t that include giving each other space to figure things out?” he shot back. “I needed time to wrap my head around things before discussing everything with you.”

“Time?” Her voice rose. “The text stated that the offer was sent last week, and you never brought it up? What does that say about us?”

“I didn’t want you to think I was choosing my career over a life in Evergreen Valley with you.” He averted his gaze, tugging at his shirt sleeve, wrinkling the fabric between his restless fingers.

“You spoke of buying a home here. Opening a gallery with me.” She shook her head, her lips pursed. “By your silence, you lied by omission. That’s not how a relationship works.”

“Maybe I was afraid.” He ran an anxious hand through his hair. “Afraid you might not understand or that you’d try to control how I handled the invitation.”

That hurt. A sharp pang surged through her.

“Don’t I deserve to be part of major decisions? Or am I merely an afterthought?” She gestured between them. “And when were you planning to tell me the news about our joint gallery?”

“Soon.” He rubbed his jawline. “I just found out. I was waiting for an answer from the landlord.”

“Soon.” Ivy leaned back, letting out a long exhale as she stared up at the exquisitely ornate ceiling. Her pride was

wounded, though there was more. He'd let her down, the man she trusted. The man she loved.

"Of course, you're not an afterthought," he insisted. But she detected the flicker of doubt in his eyes.

"Does your grandfather know?"

"Nope. No one until now."

"When would you leave?" A wave of nausea swept through her at the contemplation. "Christmas is in less than a week."

"I should've responded to the invitation already," he said. "If I accepted, I'd leave in a day or so. Maybe sooner."

A weighty hush settled over them like a thick blanket of snow on Evergreen Valley's rooftops. They remained sitting, their tea growing cold, neither one willing to make eye contact.

The once enchanting snowflake chandelier and the cheerful violinist failed to bring peace. Instead, the entire restaurant mocked the happiness that had slipped through Ivy's fingers, replaced by the bitter taste of unresolved conflict.

Ivy regarded the dancing flames in the fireplace, her thoughts a jumbled mess of sorrow and confusion. How had they reached this point? Where did they go from here? A single tear escaped and slid down her cheek, unnoticed by Blake, who seemed lost in his own musings. She imagined him reveling in this secret success, not considering how it would affect her.

I thought he loved me...

"Maybe we need some time apart," Ivy whispered.

"Maybe," Blake agreed.

The server bustled over, grinning widely. “A special dessert for the lovely lady from the handsome gentleman!” He positioned a creamy cranberry cheesecake in front of Ivy. Scripted in thick chocolate sauce, a note read: “For Ivy, the woman I love.”

She stared at the plate, then back at Blake, an unspoken ache for clarity she couldn't express.

“I had requested this dessert before...everything.” Blake couldn't seem to find a comfortable position in his seat. “The plan was for the cheesecake to be a surprise.”

The server glanced between them, apparently realizing his interruption had been poorly timed. “I'll just give you two a moment,” he said, backing away.

“Thank you, Blake, but I can't do this now.” Her voice strained. Grabbing her purse, she rushed to retrieve her coat and exited the restaurant. The grinning server and extravagant dessert faded far into the background.

Winter air stung her tear-soaked cheeks as she hurried down a shoveled path. Blake's thoughtful gesture had only made things more complicated. Distance was necessary to steady her shaken heart. Distance was her lifeline, a desperate escape from the turmoil inside her.

As she crossed the street, her phone buzzed. It was Blake. She hesitated but didn't answer. The seconds ticked by, and she grappled with the unspoken truth. Only time alone could save her.

Suddenly, strong hands grasped her arms, stopping her, turning her to face him.

“Let me drive you home,” Blake said, his breath turning to mist in the chilly night air, “We can talk, sort this out.”

She didn't respond.

The dimly lit streets, cloaked in the silence of the late hour, were hauntingly empty. The storefronts were veiled in darkness, their usual daytime charm hidden under the obscurity of nightfall. Across the way, the restaurant's exterior, with its ivy-covered walls and the mellow glow of candlelight flickering from windows, stood in stark contrast to her turbulence.

"Ivy, please. I made a mistake, but it changes nothing between us. You're still the most important person in my life."

Shivering, she held her arms close to her body. "I wish I believed that."

"We can make this right." He tried to bring her nearer. She stiffened. "I love you. We'll get through this."

She met his gaze steadily. "No, I need to walk home. Without you."

"Give me a chance to fix everything."

Her lips trembled. "Allow me some time alone." She turned and started walking again.

Her fragmented heart pleaded: turn around, quick, turn around.

Her feet carried her forward. She heard his defeated sigh, though she didn't allow herself to look back.

She wandered aimlessly, allowing tears to escape freely down her cheeks. She advanced one step at a time, praying that the night air would clear the fog of bewilderment and hurt.

CHAPTER 11



Standing on Ivy's doorstep the following day, Blake drew in a bracing breath and knocked. Her eyes were red-rimmed and guarded as she opened the door. The evidence of a long sleepless night. He recognized it. Her struggle mirrored his own.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning."

"May I come in?" He motioned toward her open doorway, a wordless suggestion that he shouldn't stand outside in the brisk air.

She faltered for a second but relented, the unresolved tension from their argument hovering between them.

"Only for a minute. I'll be leaving for work soon." She ushered him into the hallway.

Her blond hair nested on her head in a disheveled bun. Despite her pale complexion, her finely sculpted features and high cheekbones, her delicate loveliness, was undeniable.

"This won't take long." Blake studied her, knowing he had caused this rift between them. He shoved his hands into the pockets of his well-worn leather jacket, which was unnecessary, because they were now indoors.

He peered around the living room. “Where’s the puppy?”

“He had a sleepover at Amelia’s, remember? She’s bringing him straight from her place to the flower shop. She bragged about how he was the best boy.” Ivy shrugged. “Whatever that means.”

“It means that he refrained from chewing every pair of shoes she owns.”

Ivy gave a brief smile. “I didn’t expect to see you again.”

“I texted you several times last night. I called, too.”

She nodded. “I know.”

“You never answered, you never responded.”

“I know.”

He placed a hand on her arm. For the first time since they’d met, he wasn’t sure how to begin. Ultimately, he led with an apology.

What he really wanted to say was, “Marry me before I leave for New York.”

He gazed down at her bent head and uttered the only words that truly mattered. “I love you.”

She went rigid, then lifted her head.

“I’m not the least bit surprised,” she said, her tone airy. “Everyone wants my flowers this season, especially tall men.” She tilted her head thoughtfully. “I suppose my petite stature has them bending over—”

“What?” He tried to steer the conversation back to his original purpose. “I came here for...” He trailed off, unable to find the appropriate words.

He gazed at her strained expression and wondered how his talk about love had turned into a discussion of flowers and height.

She glanced at her watch. “Don’t stop now, Blake.”

He stepped closer, arms partially outstretched. “I’ve been mentally kicking myself. You expect truthfulness and I respect that. I’ve undermined your trust.”

Her arms tightened around herself like a shield. “I don’t even know what trust means anymore.”

He winced at the pain in her voice and cleared his throat. He might as well get on with it. “I wanted to give you advance notice. I accepted the invitation from Catherine Eden and will fly to New York City.”

“When?”

“Soon.”

Ivy inhaled a sharp gulp of air. Her hands trembled before she clasped them together.

“This is an exhibition, only an exhibition.” He rushed to clarify, his gestures mirroring his haste. “I’ll arrive for the grand opening gala, so I can meet the attendees and they can meet me.”

“How long is the exhibition running for?”

His fingers tapped nervously on his leg. “Through the holidays and into January.”

“I assume this will open many, many doors for your career.”

He tried to catch her down-turned eyes. “If my work aligns with the theme and style Catherine is looking for, I might

receive a proposal for commissioned assignments and projects.”

Ivy mustered a smile, though it stayed just shy of her lips. “In New York City?”

“Yes.” He rubbed his unshaven jaw. “They assured me I’ll be back here in time for Christmas.” As he spoke, he drew an imaginary calendar in the air, marking the days until their reunion.

Ivy stood silent, processing.

He shifted his weight, eager to comfort her, although unsure if she’d accept it.

This opportunity held the promise of an extraordinary future far beyond anything he had ever imagined. Except he couldn’t shake the persistent question. What sacrifices would it demand if this truly came to pass? And what about the gallery he and Ivy planned to open?

He imagined the festive days leading up to Christmas without Ivy. Her smile lighting up a room, her kindheartedness and sweet personality. Evergreen Valley was home to him, not some bustling metropolis.

He took her hands, ignoring her flinch. “Please, if this is too much, just say the word. I’ll decline and stay.” He searched her face, deciding to lay his feelings outright. “You’re what matters most to me. The rest is nothing more than background noise.”

Tears shimmered in her magnificent hazel eyes. With a wavering breath, she whispered, “Go. Enjoy New York. I’ll never stop you from your dream.”

“You don’t think I’m coming back?”

“Are you?”

“Absolutely.” Blake drew her near, relief and sorrow mingling. Regardless of where this opportunity led, he wouldn’t lose sight of what actually made his life worth living. Ivy was his compass, his guide.

“You realize this might change everything between us?” Her fingers twisted the silver necklace she still wore around her neck. She stood barefoot, dressed in her trademark work clothes, a taupe-colored blouse and khaki pants. Wrinkles were visible down the legs of her normally crisp pants, and she had unevenly pushed up her sleeves.

Blake glanced down at himself. Rumpled jeans and a wool sweater stained with coffee. Remnants of snow clinging to his boots.

“I told you. This separation won’t change anything.” He rubbed his thumb over her knuckles reassuringly. “We may not be physically close, but we’ll still be together.”

She pulled her hand back and crossed her arms. “You’re talking as if you’ve already accepted a permanent residency.”

“I never said that.” He tried to meet her gaze, though she refused to look up. “I haven’t received any type of long-term offer yet.”

“Long-distance relationships are hard, Blake. What if we grow distant or you realize you prefer a glamorous life without me?”

“Ivy, I’m right here, standing in front of you. You’re speculating about a future that hasn’t even happened.” Using a single finger, he tilted her face toward his. “I believe in us, and I need you to believe, too. We can make anything work, no matter how far apart we are.”

He wrapped his arms around her, stroking her hair. “Please trust me. Have faith.”

She stepped back, putting distance between them. Her gaze locked on the flicker of a vanilla-scented candle on her end table, avoiding his eyes. “I’ll miss the gala opening. I would’ve liked to see it.”

“I would love for you to attend,” he replied. “Maybe you could get your part-timers to cover the shop for a couple of days.”

Her eyes were still focused on the candle’s flame. “December is one of the busiest seasons for a florist. Plus, with the additional online orders, there’s no way I could take off all that time.”

“Then this will have to do for now.” He opened his phone and showed her photos of the gallery. The large glass windows displayed a curated collection of paintings and sculptures, each piece more captivating than the last. A small plaque beside the entrance read: “Catherine Eden Gallery: Showcasing Exceptional Talent Since 1985.”

“I’ll video chat with you during the event,” he said. “How’s that? I’ll give you a virtual tour, introduce you to people. It’ll be like you’re right there with me.”

She nodded slowly, her gaze finally meeting his.

“Can you imagine?” He tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “My photographs are displayed there, with some of the most talented artists of our time.”

Her lips turned up into a soft, bittersweet smile. “I’m so proud of you, Blake. I realize how hard you must’ve prepared for this.”

He held her close, breathing in her floral scent. After a few moments, he pulled back reluctantly. “I should go so I can pack. I’ll probably leave tonight. We’ll make this work, Ivy. I promise.”

“I want to believe you.”

“I’ll phone you when I arrive. I’m driving to the airport in Roanoke, Virginia, parking my Jeep there, then catching a flight to New York City. I could drive the entire way, but it would take ten hours. Considering the Blue Ridge Mountains and some of those hairpin turns, I’m better off flying much of the route.” His thumb wiped away a tear that had escaped and was running down her cheek. His fingers lingered on her soft skin. “I’m booked at the Astoria Royale.”

“Sounds posh.”

“Definitely from the photos. A grand old hotel, though not nearly as charming as the woman before me.” He gave her hands a final, affectionate squeeze. “We’ll talk every day.”

“Okay. I’m holding you to that.”

With one last kiss, Blake withdrew. “I’ll be back on Christmas Eve, love.”

She soldiered onto the porch and waved as he walked down the steps to his Jeep. As he climbed inside and cranked the engine, his cellphone rang. He glanced at the screen in surprise—it was his friend Rob.

“Hey Rob, what’s up?” Blake answered. In the rearview mirror, he glimpsed Ivy standing small and alone. He gave her one last smile before shifting the Jeep into drive, and she soon disappeared from his view.

“Blake, my man!” Rob’s enthusiastic voice came through the speaker. “I saw you got invited to the Catherine Eden

exhibition, too. Congrats!”

“Thanks.”

“Where are you staying in New York City? They put me up at the Astoria Royale. Plush carpets, velvet draperies...I’m in.”

“That’s where I’m staying,” Blake replied, his fingers drumming lightly on the steering wheel as he put more distance between Ivy’s house. “Congratulations to you, too.”

“Are you in Seattle?” Rob asked.

“Evergreen Falls,” Blake replied, his voice conveying a touch of pride.

A momentary pause was punctuated by the hum of the engine.

“Where in the blazes is that?” Rob asked.

“My hometown in the Carolinas, near the Blue Ridge Mountains,” Blake began, glancing briefly out the window. “I met a woman here.”

“Women get in the way,” Rob responded casually.

“Not this woman,” he replied firmly.

Rob laughed. “Don’t let some small town chick distract you from making it big.”

Blake shook his head even though Rob couldn’t see him. “It’s not like that. Ivy is... She’s everything I never knew I needed. My priorities have changed since meeting her.”

Rob scoffed. “Have they? We’re both competing for the same residency.”

Good old Rob, Blake thought, always ready with a verbal jab.

But was Rob right? Did Blake's hunger for success still eclipse all else?

"I titled my photographs Ethereal Dreamscape," Rob continued, a smug tone seeping into his voice. "Abstract photography, an otherworldly realm where imagination and reality blur."

"Sounds interesting," Blake said neutrally.

"Sure hope Catherine Eden thinks so. What did you submit?" Rob asked.

"My photographs reflect environmental concerns."

"Uh-huh," Rob said, clearly not impressed. "Just don't lose focus, alright? This is our big shot. Or I should say, please lose focus, so I can win because my photos are fabulous."

"I won't lose," Blake assured. He tuned out Rob's bragging. Part of him thrilled at the chance to compete with his old rival again. To beat out Rob and prove he was the superior photographer. That hungry ambition still hummed inside him.

But ambition warred with different desires now—of shared holidays and home-cooked dinners with Ivy, long walks with her and Cocoa through sleepy Evergreen Falls, a future built together.

He switched the phone to mute, staring pensively out the windshield as Rob droned on.

His gaze drifted to the envelope containing his prints resting on the passenger seat, IVY written across the front in his bold script. Each photograph captured her essence—her almond-shaped hazel eyes, her sweet smile, the way the sunlight caught the blond highlights in her hair. She was his

inspiration, not national acclaim, and he planned to bring the photos with him to keep him rooted.

He'd captured the images outside her shop to help boost her social media presence. She'd sported a whimsical flower tucked behind one ear.

He had also photographed her unique Wishing Blooms ceremony. Much as he had been hesitant to admit it, the beauty and symbolism moved him. As he observed her gifting free flowers during the Christmas season, he couldn't help but recognize her extraordinary kindness.

Blake ran his fingers over the envelope, over her name, as he drove farther away from her. The physical distance didn't matter. She traveled with him in spirit and through his photos of her.

She was the purpose behind his creative renewal. His muse, his inspiration, and his driving force. If the vacant storefront wasn't available, there would be others. They had time.

Yet when he least expected, he could practically taste the heady cocktail of fame and prestige that New York promised.

He switched his phone off mute as Rob launched into speculation about the other exhibiting artists. Blake half listened, his thoughts returning to the woman who had stolen his heart.

As he turned onto the road leading to his grandfather's house, only a few stray snowflakes lazily swirled around the tall pines. Most melted instantly when they landed on the still-warm asphalt bathed in sunlight.

He flipped on the radio, catching the weather report. "Winter storm warning in effect starting Thursday," the

meteorologist announced. “Expect heavy snowfall accumulating up to a foot in the higher elevations.”

Blake frowned slightly. The flakes were sparse now. Just a whisper of the storm brewing ahead.

CHAPTER 12



On December 22, Ivy took a bite of her sandwich, the closest she could come to a lunch break between fulfilling orders. Then, she said goodbye to Amelia, who was flying to Indiana for the holiday.

Cocoa snuggled on Blake's scarf on the floor behind the counter. Cocoa preferred staying near Ivy, and she had relented. The customers didn't seem to mind.

She sniffed the intoxicating scents of blossoms and greenery as she worked on the afternoon's deliveries, but thoughts of Blake kept tugging at her focus. Since he'd left, she'd kept the shop open until late, and started early each morning, so that she and her employees could keep up with customers' last-minute demands.

When her cellphone rang, her heart leaped. Blake was phoning. She missed him desperately and had hardly heard from him. Once, when he arrived in New York, and then intermittently.

He'd promised to video chat and show her his exhibit while mingling with attendees. However, she was too busy with rushed flower orders and couldn't answer when he called. Later, she'd sent him an apologetic text, only to receive a disheartened emoji in response.

“Hey, you,” she answered, unable to hide her elation.

“Ivy, love, I apologize for not connecting sooner. Life is nonstop here, and I keep losing track of time. Sometimes I look at my watch and realize I’ve stayed longer at an event than I intended.”

“You must have such a hectic schedule. I hope you’re not too overwhelmed.” She tracked her finger along a floral order pad, wishing he was with her instead of miles away. Freezing rain pattered against the window, mirroring the storm of emotions inside her.

She glanced at her shop’s walls, one side decked out with the photographs he had captured for her website. A few featured her sporting a bright red poinsettia nestled charmingly behind her ear.

Her absolute favorite photograph was the candid selfie of the two of them. Her spontaneous reaction, frozen by his unexpected kiss, was forever celebrated with a joyful, ever-present smile on her face.

He had created three sets of prints, ensuring she had duplicates for her shop and home, while keeping an additional copy for himself.

“The gala was quite formal,” he said. “Luckily, I was able to rent a tuxedo.”

“Wow, fancy you!” she chided.

“Catherine Eden wanted to chat with you.” His voice had a slightly lower tone than usual, somewhat deflated. “Regretfully, you missed her.”

“Sorry.” Ivy absently adjusted a cluster of holly branches as she absorbed the news.

“Some celebrities and models attended, too. I bet if I told you their names, you’d recognize them.”

“I bet I would.” She tried to keep her tone friendly but expressed no further interest. Deep down, uncertainty flickered. Would the allure of New York and its glamorous scene change him, drawing him away from her?

“How’s the weather there?” he asked.

“Freezing temperatures. We expected a snowstorm, but thankfully, it bypassed us. You?”

“Blizzard conditions, but it’s not supposed to hit until Christmas Day, and I’ll be gone by then.”

“I hope so. Holiday travels can be a nightmare.”

“Not for me, love. I’m booked and ready to fly.”

She smiled. Her heart lightened. “How was the exhibition?”

As he described the opening, his words quickened, conveying an infectious energy that painted vivid images. She was proud of him and told him so.

“Thank you,” he said. “That means a lot.”

The phone fell silent for a beat.

“Ivy...they offered me the residency. I won first place,” Blake said. “I wanted you to be the first to know.” Presumably, he was holding his acceptance letter, as paper rustled on his end.

“Oh.” In an effort to calm her racing heart, she pressed a hand to her chest. Adrenaline flooded her veins, causing her limbs to shake. “Are you intending to say yes?”

He released a heavy sigh. “The entire program is an incredible opportunity. However, it means being apart from you. Not permanently. A short period of months.”

“Definitely, you should accept,” she said.

“Are you certain? I don’t want to lose you.”

His tenderness calmed her. The image of his earnest blue eyes and dark, furrowed eyebrows blurred everything else.

“You won’t lose me,” she whispered.

“I’m grateful for you. I’m grateful for your understanding.” His tone took on a respectful, reverent quality. “This is a major step for my career.”

“I know. I know. So, you’ll be living in New York?” She knew how significant this honor was and aimed to be supportive.

Still, the concept of all that distance between them burdened her heart.

“Yes,” he replied. “I booked an afternoon flight on Christmas Eve, so I’ll see you by nightfall. We’ll have time to discuss things.”

She clutched the phone tighter, wishing she could feel his embrace. “The church service at Evergreen Chapel is at nine o’clock on Christmas morning.”

“I remember. I’ll be there. I received an invitation from Catherine to a formal holiday luncheon on the Eve, but the flight is only two hours from New York, then an hour’s drive from there, barring bad weather. Don’t forget, my grandfather is planning a Christmas dinner, and of course, you’ll bring Cocoa. Plus, I have a special surprise.”

“What kind of surprise?”

“It wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you, now, would it?”

She laughed. “I’m looking forward to a wonderful holiday. I bought the ingredients for my orange-cranberry sauce.”

“Legendary, right?”

“Definitely.” She grinned. “Sounds like you’ve mapped everything out.”

“I try. Once I’ve officially moved to New York, I’ll fly to Evergreen Valley at least once a month. More often if my calendar allows.”

“How many months will you be away?” she asked.

“Six, although there’s talk of an extensive project which might detain me a little longer. Some type of collaboration, so they may prolong my stay.”

Collaboration. Nature’s Palette, the vacant store, was supposed to be a collaboration. Had he forgotten everything they had planned together?

Her thoughts ran rampant, her lip caught in a tight grip. She imagined attending Amelia’s birthday party in January by herself, and small-town gatherings without Blake accompanying her. She visualized countless lonely nights, memories of him everywhere, missing his warmth in the lengthy, cold months ahead.

“What if we drift apart?” she asked, expressing her deepest fear aloud. “What if we suddenly wake up and discover we’ve become strangers?”

“We can exchange photos, videos, messages. When I’m in town, we’ll discuss the logistics.”

“Will you be here long?” she inquired.

“Unfortunately, only a handful of days. Catherine wants me back in New York for a New Year’s Eve gala.”

Ivy briefly shut her eyes, imagining their new reality: the physical space separating them, the sporadic phone calls, the bittersweet reunions. It was a far cry from the few weeks they had shared but love sometimes demanded change and compromise.

The celebration of his achievements became a painful reminder of their once unbreakable bond.

“How is our little Cocoa?” Blake asked.

“He’s fine, and up to his usual mischief.” She stepped over to a bouquet of white roses in a porcelain vase, distractedly pruning the flowers as she spoke.

“Nobody else has surfaced to claim him?”

“No.” Ivy set down the pruning shears and brushed her hands on her apron.

“Has your shop been busy?”

Her gaze swept across the stack of orders resting on a shelf. “We’ve been swamped, even with the college students pulling extra hours. My online presence is having a real impact.”

“Mark my words. Garden Elegance won’t take an iota of business away from you.”

“I’m starting to believe you’re right.” She nodded before realizing he couldn’t see her.

She stole a quick peek at the Christmas tree. She and Blake had spent a lively evening decorating it together, the hours overflowing with laughter and stolen kisses. Currently, its beauty only magnified his absence.

“Blake.” A woman shouted his name from the background. “Reservations are in fifteen minutes at The Crystal Chateau. We’ll be late if we don’t leave now.” Her tone was commanding and bore a flirtatious undercurrent.

He muffled the phone. “I’m coming.”

“Who is that?” Ivy asked.

“Catherine Eden. She arranged for several of the photographers to dine at some ultra-exclusive restaurant. My buddy Rob is joining us.”

“Who is Rob?”

“He’s a photographer friend from Seattle. The guy snagged the runner-up position, and he’s clinging to Catherine like she’s the winning lottery ticket.” Blake laughed. “I swear, he’s probably praying for me to disappear so he can swoop into first place.”

“Blake?” the woman called out again.

“I’m coming,” he repeated.

“Where are you?” While handling a rose, Ivy accidentally pricked herself on a thorn. As a tiny drop of blood welled up, she continued conversing while grabbing a tissue.

“I’m leaning against a stately column in the lobby of the Astoria Royale. It’s quite a tall sight that rises from the floor to the ceiling.” His resonant voice flowed, causing Ivy to dig deeper into her emotions—longing, doubt, and a touch of insecurity. She clenched the phone, trying to anchor herself to the conversation.

“A bunch of exhibitors are staying here,” he continued. “You would enjoy it. Maybe someday, right?”

“Yeah, sure.” Her attention wandered before fixing again on the pristine white roses in the vase. “Maybe someday.”

“Ivy, never forget.” He spoke more gently, as if he detected the vulnerability in her voice. “I love you.”

She closed her eyes for a brief second, finding her equilibrium as she reined in her emotions. Hints of honey and spice, the delicate fragrance of roses, surrounded her. “I...I love you, too,” she murmured.

She clicked off, already missing his voice. Until then, she’d measure the hours until she saw him again. Two days. Surely, nothing could happen in two days.

She peered out the window at the dreary weather. Somehow, she would find the courage to endure this season of separation.

Prior to shutting the shop down for the night, Ivy phoned the vet’s office to set up an appointment for Cocoa’s follow-up exam and booster shot. The receptionist informed her that Dr. Mitchell had an available appointment the next morning. Ivy confirmed before hanging up.

“Cocoa, you’re all set for your visit tomorrow.” Ivy settled into a chair in the back room, and the puppy curled contentedly in her lap. Affectionately scratching behind his ears, she pushed aside any concerns about Blake.

He loved her. He’d told her as much. And she loved him.

For now, her top priority was to complete Cocoa’s records.

IVY ARRIVED at the veterinarian’s office with time to spare. She’d escalated her part-time workers to full-time, and they arrived at her shop early to begin fulfilling orders for the day.

The vet's waiting room was hushed, with the mild hum of fluorescent lights overhead and the subtle odor of antiseptic in the air.

As she sat down, Dr. Mitchell entered, bearing Cocoa's medical file. "As I discussed with you, Cocoa is probably a purebred Pomeranian, based on his physical characteristics and temperament." She pointed to the fluffy, energetic puppy on Ivy's lap.

"You suspected as much," Ivy replied, caressing Cocoa's fur. "Now I'd like to learn how he came to be abandoned."

"The number of Pomeranian breeders in the area is quite limited in this region, but I can give you contacts for a few of them." Dr. Mitchell jotted down a list of names and numbers and handed the information to Ivy.

"Thank you." Ivy accepted the paper, tucking it carefully inside her handbag. "I'm committed to finding out the truth about how he came to be shivering behind a trash can on a cold night."

Within an hour, after several phone calls and digging through online resources, she unearthed a disturbing story. Cocoa was from a notorious pet store that acquired puppies illegally before they were old enough to leave their mothers. The store was in a semirural area, outside the immediate vicinity of Evergreen Falls.

Instead of bearing the costs for veterinary expenses, the pet store had abandoned Cocoa when he fell ill. The discovery left her both saddened and more determined than ever to provide the finest possible care for him.

She should've investigated his background earlier, although her initial goal when she first found him was to

reunite him with his previous owners. Then she had focused on finding him a nurturing household.

When she returned to the vet to go over the information, Dr. Mitchell assured her that Ivy could assume ownership, and there was no need for a formal adoption. She provided Ivy a collar and a tag for Cocoa and suggested implanting a microchip when the puppy was neutered.

“Congratulations!” Dr. Mitchell said. “What can be better than adopting a sweet puppy during the holidays? I hope that Cocoa is your Christmas love.”

COCOA IN TOW, Ivy walked through the front door of her home and set her key on the kitchen table. The place felt too tidy, too hushed without Blake. She studied the solitary mug sitting neatly in the drying rack—her morning coffee had been a solo affair.

Her miniature Christmas tree sparkled merrily, its lights contrasting her nostalgic state. The bright bulbs strung over her mantel enlivened the living room, though not enough.

Shaking off her loneliness, she immediately phoned Blake.

“I have fantastic news,” she said. But his phone directed her to voicemail, and she didn’t leave a message.

She disconnected, her excitement fading. She had hoped to share Cocoa’s origins with him. Nonetheless, she understood he was busy with gallery events.

She took a quick look around her home and blinked back the onset of tears. The only sound was the soft clacking of puppy paws on the floor as he darted over to her, his plumed tail swaying with excitement.

“Hey there, little guy.” Ivy bent down to stroke behind his velvety ears. “Looks like you’re 100 percent Pomeranian, after all. We figured out where you came from.”

Cocoa yipped and licked her hand.

“How about some dinner?” she asked, heading to the pantry. Cocoa followed closely at her heels, nuzzling her leg. At least she had some company.

Ivy loaded his bowl and watched as he noisily crunched his food. She prepared herself an egg salad sandwich, but the creamy flavors of the eggs and whole-grain bread tasted bland. Her eyes stung as she thought about sharing her recent update over a celebratory supper with Blake tonight—if only he were here.

She peered through the frosted window above the sink. Night had fallen, cloaking the backyard in inky darkness. The tree’s bare branches swayed in the biting wind and rattled the panes. The previous flurries and ice had coated the ground in a dusting of shiny, powdery white.

They’d only been separated a few days. Imagine when they were apart for months. She missed his tender hugs and the impact of his smile. Her home was hollow without him.

She reached up to a shelf above a cabinet, where she had placed Blake’s Christmas gift for safekeeping. The woolen scarf, in a deep blue, matched his eyes. She’d hurried to the market during a lunch break, anticipating he’d be pleased with her choice.

She phoned him again. As before, the call went straight to voicemail.

Uncertainty crept in. Was he avoiding her? Caught up with his dynamic new life in the glittering “Big Apple”?

Her eyes darted to her silent phone, willing him to call her.

Cocoa pattered over, his tiny frame quivering with boundless enthusiasm. He stared up at her, expecting her undivided focus.

While brewing a cup of chamomile tea before bed, she switched on the radio. Reports blared of an impending blizzard sweeping the coast and heading for New York City.

Her breath hitched, fears spiraling.

Snowed in. Power out. Blake unreachable. He needed to get out of New York sooner rather than later.

She tried once more to contact him, worry rising when she couldn't reach him.

Leaving another voicemail, Ivy speculated—was his schedule truly that hectic? Or was there a different reason he was unavailable? Cocoa's wet nose nudged her leg, jolting her from her anxious thoughts.

She contemplated calling his grandfather to find out if Everett had received any word from Blake but decided not to alarm him.

Her mind flashed to Catherine Eden, recalling how Blake had muffled the phone when she'd spoken. Ivy shook her head, struggling to shake off her suspicions.

"You're overreacting," she scolded herself.

Her mind conjured up an image of him in her comfortable living room, both sipping hot cocoa after he'd shoveled her front walk. Yet all that surrounded her was the mournful sounds of the chilling wind.

She peeked out her front window. The freezing rain had subsided, leaving trees heavy with frost and a shrouded, frozen

landscape.

She blinked and turned away. Some things remained elusive on this never-ending frigid night. Blake's disappearance was one of them.

CHAPTER 13



On Christmas morning at nine o'clock, Ivy sat in Evergreen Chapel. Alone.

Today was a special day. Today was Christmas.

She'd chosen a knee-length sweater dress in a deep, jewel-toned orchid, and a pair of silver stud earrings. She'd combed her hair slightly off center and left it loose, securing it with a whimsical poinsettia hairpin to keep it out of her face. A hint of blush and a classic red lipstick completed her outfit, along with a white woolen coat she reserved for church and special occasions.

She'd left Cocoa at home, his first time unattended, assuring him she wouldn't be gone for more than a couple of hours. She limited his reach to any dangerous items and made sure he had access to food, water, and his favorite toys.

"Happy Holidays," she said, and gave him his plush raccoon toy. A bonus, it squeaked, which made the toy even more exciting.

Hollowness swelled within her as the service began. Blake promised he'd be home for Christmas, yet his place on the hard wooden pew beside her remained empty. She shifted, her shoulders slumping. The brief, vague text from him the evening before, that he was stuck on the airport tarmac on the

last flight out of New York City, only heightened her unease. The chill from the frosty morning seeped through the fabric of her dress, and she pulled her wool coat tighter.

The choir's harmonized hymns resonated, though to Ivy, the joyous notes sounded muffled and distant. She could hardly focus on the lyrics, promising solace when her thoughts remained fixed on Blake's empty seat beside her.

Where was he? She held back tears and avoided the sympathetic glances from nearby neighbors and friends who were celebrating Christmas with their happy families. Today was supposed to be special, even enchanting, but she had never felt more alone.

She peered around. Members of the congregation had fashioned evergreen wreaths for every window using pinecones, red ribbons, and holly leaves.

The wooden beams that crisscrossed the ceiling, showing signs of age and history, enhanced the church's character. She'd sat in this church for decades, bearing witness to countless Sunday sermons, weddings, and baptisms.

The choir of townsfolk—men and women dressed in simple robes—stood with their hymnbooks in hand. A member played an old upright piano, her fingers gliding over the keys with practiced ease, accompanying their voices.

The choir sang a harmonized rendition of "O Come, All Ye Faithful," inviting all believers to adore the newborn King. Friends shared heartfelt greetings with radiant smiles. Sitting alone, Ivy couldn't escape the overwhelming void of Blake's absence.

In her mind she saw him, charming the crowd at the luncheon, devastatingly handsome in a black tuxedo, mingling

with celebrities and models. He'd mentioned he often lost track of time at events, staying later than intended.

Ivy fought to restrain her tears as the pastor began his sermon, his deep voice booming through the chapel. He spoke of nurturing relationships, showing love to one another, and coming together during the Christmas season. She turned more than once to the back of the church but saw only families seated in solidarity.

Where was Blake?

She longed to have him by her side, to embrace him on this holy day.

Doubts crept in. Was he truly committed to their relationship? She had cleared her schedule and she and her assistants had delivered all the flower orders. Her shop was closed for the following few days, and she'd anticipated spending every waking minute with him.

Meanwhile, he'd chosen a fancy luncheon over her. The blizzard seemed like a convenient excuse for his delayed arrival.

At the end of the sermon, Ivy bowed her head and prayed. She wanted to believe the best in Blake, yet these past couple of days were difficult to ignore. The pastor's message about love inspired her to talk openly with Blake about their relationship when she saw him again.

If she saw him again.

Ivy stepped outside the church after the final hymn faded. She peered up the path, hoping to see Blake rushing toward her, full of apologies and explanations for why he hadn't contacted her. But he wasn't there.

With a resigned exhale, she walked home to retrieve Cocoa before volunteering at the soup kitchen in the church's fellowship hall.

An hour later, as she plated roast turkey, gravy, and green beans to the grateful patrons, she continued thinking about Blake. Where was he? Her initial frustration at not hearing from him had shifted to real concern.

She anxiously checked her phone, but only received a message from Amelia wishing her a Merry Christmas and a cute photo of her golden retriever.

Blake's text had stated he was aboard the last flight before the blizzard completely battered the Northeast.

That text was over twelve hours ago. If the airline canceled, why hadn't he called? Was he stranded alone on Christmas Day? She steadied herself, her cheerful façade masking the turmoil within.

He was supposed to be here with her right now.

She surveyed the hall, decorated with red and green tablecloths by the congregation volunteers also serving the holiday meal.

Cocoa darted between people's legs, creating a comical dance as they tried to avoid stepping on him. His frisky antics helped lift her mood, at least temporarily.

Shortly afterward, Ivy returned home and phoned Everett, confirming their dinner plans. "Have you heard from Blake?" she asked hopefully. "I texted him several times, and called, too. All my messages went to voicemail."

Everett's silence gave her the answer.

Ivy secured Cocoa in his crate with a seat belt in the back seat of her hatchback and drove to Everett's house. She had wrapped the hand-knit blue scarf as a gift for Blake, hoping, somehow, that he would arrive to open it.

She also brought something else. Something special. Her last Wishing Bloom.

Inside Everett's home, the kitchen table overflowed with slices of maple glazed ham, mashed potatoes, stuffing, and a pumpkin pie for dessert. Ivy had prepared an orange-cranberry sauce per their plans.

"Merry Christmas," she said, handing Everett the Wishing Bloom in a slender green vase.

Her precious bloom, the symbol of hope. The petals quivered, displaying a translucent quality with shades of lavender that seemed to shimmer.

"Thank you." The meaning wasn't lost on him. In his aged blue eyes, she glimpsed a reflection of the endless skies that had watched over his many years. "I didn't get you anything, Ivy, and this is—"

"Precious. We need hope now, like we've never needed it before," she said. "We're here, together. Celebrating Christmas, and that's a blessing."

He centered the bloom on the table. "You are my grandson's true blessing. Meeting you is the best thing that ever happened to him."

Ivy followed Everett into the living room. Under the Christmas tree, she set Blake's wrapped gift and placed a wriggling Cocoa on the floor.

"I baked a tasty reward for our puppy here." Everett dipped his hand into a jar on a bookshelf, retrieving a cookie.

“Is it safe for Cocoa?” she asked.

“Totally. I shaped it like a dog bone.” Everett presented the treat to Cocoa, who snatched it with gleaming eyes. He scampered off with the cookie in his mouth and settled between the brightly wrapped gifts under the tree.

She stepped back to admire the hand-carved tree-topper. “Blake told me he didn’t want you standing on a ladder, so he placed the star up there for you. It’s beautiful.”

“I agree.” Everett sank into an armchair and gestured for Ivy to sit across from him.

“My grandson is a special guy.” A genuine fondness colored Everett’s tone. “Even from when he was a boy, he had a huge, generous heart.” Everett squinted, as though he viewed the world through a gentle, nostalgic filter. “His parents passed when he was a child, but he persevered bravely.”

Ivy clasped her hands in her lap. “Please tell me a little about his childhood. He mentioned you and your wife raised him from an early age.”

“Oh, I have lots of tales.” Everett chuckled. “Here’s a favorite. One Christmas when Blake was eight years old, a few months after losing his parents, he asked me if we could leave an extra plate of sugar cookies out for Santa accompanied by a note saying that people cared about Santa, too. When I asked why, he said it must get lonely traveling all over the world with nobody to keep you company. He wanted Santa to know there were folks thinking of him too.”

Ivy pictured a young, innocent Blake, striking blue eyes, brown hair soft and tousled. She empathized with the burdens he had carried because of his losses.

Everett paused, taking a shaky breath as he dabbed at the corner of his eyes with a handkerchief. “When I pressed for more, Blake said...” Everett grew quiet for a moment. “He said, ‘Because I don’t want anyone to feel as lonely as I do without Mom and Dad.’ That made me cry. That’s just the thoughtful guy he is. My Shutterbug.”

Ivy wiped the tears from her own eyes and reached out to squeeze his hand. “Blake was on that last flight. I checked, and it never took off. However, he hasn’t contacted either of us since. Should we alert the authorities?” She hesitated, almost afraid to ask the haunting question. “Where is he?”

“He’ll find his way back home,” Everett looked down at his hands, his voice cracking. “I reckon all we can do is wait and pray. I’m certain he’s safe. I feel it in my bones.”

Ivy’s thoughts drifted to Catherine Eden, a name that intruded on her mind uninvited. Jealousy surfaced, an unexpected emotion that threatened to overshadow her concern for Blake.

No. Impossible. Not Blake. Ivy silently protested the idea that he might be safe with someone else, but she couldn’t ignore the flood of resentment.

Hearing a car pull up, her pulse quickened. But it was Mrs. Harriet Thompson, wearing her bright canary-yellow coat. She stood at the door with a delightful assortment of buttery shortbread cookies in hand. As Everett greeted her, inquiring about her plans for dinner, she grinned and graciously accepted his invitation to join them.

BLAKE MISSED the Christmas Eve flight he’d booked from New York City to Roanoke, Virginia, by mere minutes.

Frantically, he dashed to the airline counter, desperate to exchange his ticket for the final departure of the evening. After receiving a lecture from the attendant that it wasn't easy to change a flight on a holiday, she found a cancellation and issued him a ticket.

Thirty minutes later, he stepped aboard the plane, and breathed a faint sigh of relief.

As the snowstorm loomed, the plane sat on the tarmac. Inside the cabin, Blake grappled with spotty cellphone service, each attempt to phone Ivy tense with frustration. He left a message, though he feared the transmission was uncertain.

Eventually, even that flight was cancelled, with no seats available until Christmas Day. His luggage had vanished into the holiday abyss.

Blake declined the airline's voucher for a free hotel room and meal and decided to wait at the airport for the first flight to Roanoke in the morning.

There, he questioned his choices.

Why did he dawdle at Catherine's lavish luncheon, chatting with influential photographers and critics? He justified it as the pursuit of career advancement, the belief that networking was the key to success.

As the terminal lights dimmed and the snowstorm raged on, his patience wore thin. He stared outside, hostage to the whims of the unforgiving weather. He checked his cellphone, noticing the battery nearly drained. In his haste, he'd forgotten to stow a charger in his carry-on bag.

With an irritated grimace at his oversight, he decided that staying cooped up in the departure lounge was no longer viable.

He approached the customer service desk just in case there had been a change. The agent, trying to manage the chaos caused by the weather, provided him with somber news—there was nothing available now until well after Christmas.

Okay, that settled it. He had no other option but to take matters into his own hands. He requested a refund for his canceled flight, which was promised at a later time, and made his way to the only rental car counter that remained open.

There, Blake exchanged words with the attendant. He intended to drive the SUV to Roanoke, and then take his Jeep on to Evergreen Valley.

The attendant handed Blake the keys to the last vehicle available, an SUV, instructing Blake to take an airport bus to the parking lot that had the rental cars.

Blake stepped from the bus a few minutes later and eyed the vehicle skeptically. Its tired tires bore the marks of wear and tear, looking ill-prepared for the persistent snowfall.

Taking a calming breath, he settled into the driver's seat, the rusty frame and faint sputtering of the engine increasing his unease. The clock on the dashboard displayed a time that taunted him, ticking away the precious minutes leading into Christmas Day.

As he merged onto the snow-covered highway, the city lights slowly receded in his rearview mirror. Flakes the size of cotton balls swirled in the headlights' feeble glow, creating an eerie, otherworldly landscape beyond the windshield. The wipers struggled to keep pace, their erratic thumping echoing the fitful beat of his heart.

His breath formed frosty patterns on the windows, a testament to the bitter cold that seeped into the SUV, despite

the feeble attempts of the heater.

The snowfall intensified.

His hands clenched the cold steering wheel. Arctic air sank into his bones, fueling his desperation. The radio, his sole companion, crackled intermittently with static, and the soothing tunes of Christmas carols were drowned out by the wind.

Once he arrived at the Roanoke Airport, he left the SUV behind at the designated rental car return area and released the keys in the company's drop box. After locating his Jeep, he tried the ignition. A few tense moments, and the engine roared to life.

Navigating through the treacherous mountains was daunting, causing him to fear that he wasn't up to the task. His gaze darted between the dimly lit road and the GPS screen, where the estimated arrival to Evergreen Valley seemed to recede like a mirage.

He glanced at the photographs of Ivy he had set on the seat beside him. He always carried them with him. She was the reason he was determined to make this journey, to overcome the odds stacked against him.

Mile after endless mile, hazy headlights approached through the storm before disappearing. Blake squinted into the sea of white, every muscle tense.

Only a few hours. Please let my trusty Jeep make it.

His mind wandered to his recent conversation with Rob at the luncheon. They had discussed their achievements, laughingly trying to one-up each other.

Rob had nursed a tumbler of whiskey, its amber hue catching the light as he swirled it. Blake held a flute of

sparkling water, the condensation chilling his fingers. As the discussion progressed, Rob became increasingly vocal, his gestures interspersed by the clink of ice in his glass.

As Blake replayed their chat, he recalled Rob's words, which had initially sounded like humorous banter. Rob had chuckled and said, "You got me today, Blake, but next time, I'll take that top spot."

Rob's competitive spirit was unwavering and pursuing victory was ingrained in his nature.

In a moment of reflection, Blake paused.

Rob's words, though couched in rivalry, helped him understand the stark contrast in their priorities. While Blake strived for recognition, Rob's commitment to competition served as a reminder that success, although satisfying, was not the most important thing in life.

While fulfilling, winning wasn't as meaningful as the love Blake shared with Ivy. He imagined her alone by the fireplace with an expectant yet troubled look in her eyes.

His phone, still clutching to the faintest glimmer of a signal, allowed him a brief call. The spotty connection was a link, a fragile thread connecting their hearts across the miles.

"Ivy." He spoke her name softly. "I'm on my way. I promise I'll make it up to you."

He only hoped that his message had gone through.

With those words, the road stretched before him. Every mile drew him closer to Ivy, to Cocoa, and to their shared love.

In Everett's homey kitchen, Ivy picked at her slice of pumpkin pie with her fork. Even the taste of Mrs. Thompson's

butter cookies dusted with powdered sugar, so delicious that they crumbled in her mouth, failed to stir her appetite.

Laughter echoed around the table as Everett and Mrs. Thompson shared stories and inside jokes, then walked into the living room to sit by the fire with Cocoa close behind. Ivy managed a wan smile and cleared the dishes, while her thoughts stayed anchored on Blake.

She checked her watch. Almost four o'clock and still no word from him.

She shut her eyes against the sting of tears, and a cold nose nudged her feet under the table. Ivy glanced down to see Cocoa.

“Don't worry, boy, I'm sure he's trying,” Ivy whispered to the puppy, wishing she believed it, before Cocoa bounded back to the living room.

The rumble of a familiar Jeep's engine jolted her heart. She rushed to the front window, pulse racing. Could it be...?

There, in the waning light of late afternoon, Blake climbed out of his snow-covered Jeep and reached into the back seat for his carry-on bag. His height and strong build were commanding. His tousled brown hair and the shadow of a dark beard gave an appealing touch of ruggedness that nearly brought her to her knees.

As she continued to stare out the window, an undeniable warmth spread through her, a moment that seemed suspended in time.

“He's here!” Slipping into her boots, Ivy burst out the front door into the biting December wind.

He was here, he was really here.

“Blake!” She blurted out his name. In seconds she was flying down the steps, the frozen air burning her throat.

He swiveled, his face breaking into a relieved grin. He opened his arms just as Ivy crashed into his chest.

“Ivy, I’m so sorr—”

“I was beyond worried. Are you alright?” Her words tumbled out in a rush.

“Nothing could have kept me from you, love.”

Her happiness became tears of elation as they held each other close. Blake’s jacket was cold against her flushed cheeks, but his embrace was reassuring and steadfast. Ivy breathed him in, the familiar leather and pine scent.

Overwhelmed, Ivy sought his lips in a kiss that radiated longing, forgiveness, and the simple bliss of reunion. The world around them faded away. In this perfect moment, there was only Blake and Ivy united at last.

“Even a blizzard couldn’t stop me,” he murmured, his warm breath tickling her ear. He cradled her face in his gloved hands and kissed her again. “Especially on our first Christmas as a couple.”

He deepened the kiss, releasing every ounce of her longing.

Finally, they drew apart, breathless. Blake rested his forehead against hers, his thumb caressing her cheek.

“The airline cancelled all the flights because of the blizzard, so I drove over ten straight hours.” His breath clouded the crisp air. He described the wait in the airport, on the tarmac, and the hazardous conditions.

Ivy searched his face, seeing only earnest love in his exhausted blue eyes. Slowly she smiled, the hollowness within her beginning to thaw.

They entered the house, stamping snow from their boots, then removing them. Blake set his jacket and gloves by the entryway.

In the snug kitchen, the lone Wishing Bloom sat in the center of the table, its delicate petals glowing under the lights.

Blake stared at it and grinned. “Isn’t this bloom your last one?” he asked.

“Yes. While you were gone, we needed a little hope to wish on. What would be better than a Wishing Bloom?”

“Nothing at all.” Blake’s grin widened as Everett and Mrs. Thompson peered at him from the doorway of the living room. Mrs. Thompson held Cocoa in her arms.

“Welcome home, Shutterbug,” Everett said.

“Thanks, Grandpa.” Blake stepped forward and hugged his grandfather. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

“No need for apologies. We hold each other up in the hard times and celebrate in the good times. That’s what brings us together and keeps us strong.” Everett returned Blake’s hug with a heartfelt squeeze. “So, how did you find the big city experience? Again.”

Blake’s gaze drifted away momentarily, taking in the humble kitchen. “Stressful. I’m done with it—all of it. I feared I wouldn’t have another chance—to make things right with Ivy.” He took her hand in his.

“Sometimes life presents opportunities that only come around once.” Everett stroked the puppy’s ears and received an

enthusiastic lick to his gray-bearded chin as a reward. “If other opportunities arise, ones we mistakenly believe to be more significant than they truly are, it’s possible for second chances to slip right through our fingers.”

Ivy’s eyes filled with tears. She knew Everett was referring to her and Blake.

“You’re absolutely right, Grandpa, but not this time,” Blake replied. “I don’t intend to waste another chance.”

“Good. We should never assume or underestimate our blessings.” Everett placed a hand on Blake’s shoulder. “Now, let’s get you something to eat. We’ve got a Christmas dinner waiting.”

As Everett and Mrs. Thompson marched into the kitchen with Cocoa, Blake kissed Ivy again. “Well, Ivy Bennett, I guess your Wishing Blooms have some real magic after all. Maybe they do help wishes to come true.”

Ivy chuckled. “Indeed, Blake Shepherd. Seeing is believing, but sometimes believing is what makes you see.”

Later, after Blake had refreshed with a shower and donned a clean outfit, they all gathered while he enjoyed dessert. Ivy waited patiently, overflowing with anticipation. As he finished, she finally handed him her gift, and he carefully unwrapped it to reveal a deep-blue scarf that complemented the shade of his eyes.

“Thank you,” Blake murmured, kissing her. “I also have a holiday surprise for you.”

Intrigued, Ivy glanced around, but no physical gift was in sight.

“It’s not here,” he confirmed, taking her hand.

They bundled up against the winter chill, Cocoa prancing on his leash as they walked downtown.

Ivy gazed at Blake, searching for some clue in his expression, as he led her to the empty storefront neighboring her flower shop.

She looked up and drew in a small, sharp gasp. There, where the faded wooden sign for Eleanor's Toy Emporium had hung crookedly, was something else. A pristine sign declaring Nature's Palette in bold green lettering.

He hadn't forgotten. This thoughtful man—so often lost in his work—had remembered the quiet ambition they had shared. A fanciful notion that they might run a gallery together, filled with light and creativity.

He met her gaze, a hint of boyish shyness in his smile. Blake hadn't just remembered. Carefully, he had brought her wisp of a dream to life, crafting something real and lasting.

"You did this for us?" she managed to ask.

Blake traced a path along her cheek, his touch tender. "For you, love. Our new beginning. I texted Catherine Eden and declined the offer." He chuckled. "I'm sure I've made my friend Rob a very happy guy tonight."

Ivy threw her arms around his neck, laughing and crying all at once. Blake's embrace held a thousand unspoken promises. Of roots put down, of a shared future nourished by patience, compassion, and unwavering devotion.

The sign represented everything she loved in the handsome man before her—creativity, mindfulness, and an endless capacity for trust.

"But I thought you told me this place was rented," she said.

“It certainly was. While I was in New York, I phoned the owner and presented him with a proposal he simply couldn’t resist. The logistics of leasing this storefront and creating the sign has been a few trying days in the works.” Blake wrapped an arm around Ivy’s shoulders. “I want to live our life together, right here in Evergreen Valley. This is where I belong.”

“Then you’re staying?”

He nodded. “I’m staying.”

Ivy’s vision swam, tears gathering on her lashes. After their time apart, his gesture rooted their love firmly in this place, their home.

She turned to him, words escaping her. To create something permanent for their mutual dreams was the most thoughtful gift he could ever give.

“Nature’s Palette is the perfect next chapter for us.” Her voice was thick with giddy tears.

“Our planet’s beauty is fragile. I intend to share my environmental concerns through my photographs.” He pulled her closer. “We’ll inspire each other.”

Ivy looked up at the sign, a future hand-painted just for them.

Later, Ivy and Blake relaxed by the fireplace in Ivy’s home, mugs of hot cider in hand. Cocoa snoozed on Blake’s lap.

“To Cocoa,” Blake said. “The unexpected Christmas gift who brought us together.”

Ivy smiled at the slumbering dog. “Our tiny yuletide matchmaker.”

Cocoa blinked awake and snuggled deeper into Blake's lap, tail wagging.

Ivy chuckled. "Someone's getting extra belly rubs tonight!"

"Me?" Blake teased.

"No." She jokingly swatted his arm.

Cocoa rolled over, his little paws kicking in contentment.

Blake pulled Ivy to his chest and kissed her temple. "To imagine that you and I both lived in this same small town all along and never crossed paths."

"You're a couple of years my senior. Our lives might have intersected at some point. Who's to say what destiny had in mind?"

"To destiny," he proclaimed. "And to Cocoa, whose Christmas love story brought two lonely hearts together."

Ivy snuggled into his side. "To Cocoa's Christmas love. Who knew that a chance encounter in an alleyway would change our lives forever?"

Blake grinned, glancing down at the puppy. "If you hadn't found him shivering behind that trash can, I never would've met either of you. My two Christmas angels, bringing light into my lonely world."

Her heart brimmed with gratitude—both for Blake's love, and for the adorable homeless pup who had unexpectedly given them a treasure.

Blake leaned in for a tender kiss. Cocoa turned back on his stomach and dozed, oblivious to his role as the conductor of their holiday romance.

Thanks to one fateful December night, two strangers had found an unexpected gift.

Their own endearing tale of Cocoa's Christmas Love.



THE END

EVERETT'S HOMEMADE DOG-FRIENDLY GINGERBREAD COOKIES

These treats are not only festive but also safe and enjoyable for your furry friend. Here's a simple description of how to make them.



Ingredients:

2 cups whole wheat flour

1 cup oats

½ cup unsweetened applesauce

For the gingerbread flavor, include a pinch of ground cinnamon and a touch of powdered ginger. These spices will give the cookies that classic holiday aroma.

Roll out the dough on a floured surface and use cookie cutters to create holiday shapes like bones, stars, or Christmas trees. Remember to adjust the size and shape according to your dog's preference and size.

Place them on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper.

Bake the cookies at 350 degrees Fahrenheit, or 175 degrees Celsius, for 20-25 minutes or until they are golden brown and firm. After baking, allow them to cool completely before serving them to your pup.

Your dog will be overjoyed. Merry Christmas!

A NOTE FROM JOSIE

Dear Reader,

Thank you for reading my sweet holiday romance, *Cocoa's Christmas Love*. I hope you enjoyed this heartwarming story featuring Blake, Ivy, and an adorable puppy named Cocoa.

If you loved this story as much as I loved writing it, please help other people find it by posting your review.

Cocoa's Christmas Love is available in ebook, paperback, Large Print paperback, audiobook, and Hardcover.

I'd love to meet you in person someday, but in the meantime, all I can offer is a sincere and grateful thank you. Without your support, my books would not be possible.

As I write my next sweet or inspirational romance, remember this: Have you ever tried something you were afraid to try because it mattered so much to you? I did, when I started writing. Take the chance, and just do something you love.

With sincere appreciation,

Josie Riviera

Love music?

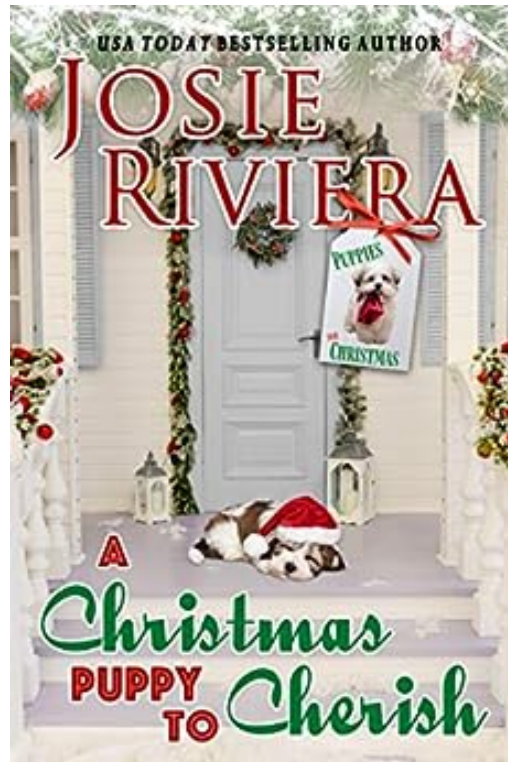
[My Spotify Playlist for Cocoa's Christmas Love is here.](#)



Looking for other Puppies For Christmas books?

Find them here:

A Christmas Puppy To Cherish



Christmas in the Air

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

**JOSIE
RIVIERA**

*Christmas
in the Air*



EXCERPT FOR CHRISTMAS IN THE AIR (A
PUPPIES FOR CHRISTMAS STORY)



PROLOGUE

Penelope Reid sat glued to her seat.

Breathe in. There's nothing to be nervous about. Flying in an airplane is routine for many businesspeople.

And she, unfortunately, was a businessperson.

She attempted to smile at the flight attendant who walked past, before resuming her pep talk to herself.

Virginia to Hilton Head Island is a short flight.

She considered texting her brother, Lincoln, with a ‘mission accomplished’ message, though he wouldn’t get the message until she had cell service again. He’d encouraged her to take the flight to secure a toy shop location. She’d complied, albeit reluctantly, though she’d been successful with the negotiations and closed on the deal. Nonetheless, when she finally arrived home, she intended to wring his neck. He knew how much she dreaded flying.

She cut a glance at her handsome seatmate’s profile. She’d admired the angle of his face—his sharp jawline and straight nose—throughout most of the flight. Framed by the afternoon sunlight streaming in the window, he seemed relaxed. Of course, he seemed relaxed because he was sleeping. In fact, he’d slept almost non-stop.

She coughed and nudged him with her elbow. She needed someone to talk to and take her mind off the flight. She’d already breezed through every magazine in the seat pocket.

“Hmm?” He took off his aviator sunglasses and turned toward her. His eyes were a deep shade of brown, warm and mesmerizing, rimmed with black eyelashes. His skin exuded a healthy golden glow. “Have we arrived?”

“Hardly.”

He peered out the window. “Cloudy day.”

“The weather forecaster called for rain.”

“He was probably right.”

“*She* was probably right,” Penelope corrected.

He grinned. “Touché.”

Penelope sat up straighter. “Before you fell asleep, we were discussing our jobs.”

“Were we?”

“We were about to.” Her seatbelt tightened as she leaned toward him. “I’ve managed a toy shop business ever since I was a teenager.”

“Sounds fun.”

“I hate it.”

His dark eyebrows curved upward. “Why?”

“Do you want the truth?”

“By all means.”

“I shouldn’t be telling you this, but I’ve never been good at deception.”

“Bravo.” He gave her a thumbs-up. “So, do tell.”

“I’d like to do something else.”

“Nothing wrong with that. I’ll keep your secret.” He flashed her a positively magnetic smile.

Her heart stilled. Here sat a good-looking man who had listened to her rattle on about her life whenever he opened his eyes. At least, she assumed he listened. She’d held him captive because he couldn’t escape. They were seated next to each other in first class. Still, she’d begun to assume they were friends, and he was an attentive guy.

At his assessing gaze, a flush warmed her cheeks. “I’m bored with my job. I want to create, not manage.”

“Create what?”

“I’m not cut out for left-brained, logical analysis anymore. Let’s call it a midlife crisis.”

“Let’s.” Another smile. “Do you have another job lined up?”

“No.”

“Is your job difficult?” His tone lowered. Thick, wavy hair fell across his forehead, and he pushed back the strands with his hand. His features were a bit weathered, his jawline and cheekbones prominent. A rugged man who apparently spent time outdoors if appearances were any indication.

The thump of attraction in her chest surprised her. She hadn’t felt an interest in any guy since her divorce.

“No, my job isn’t difficult,” she said. “Just repetitive.”

“Playing with toys can’t be all bad.”

She stiffened at his off-hand remark. If he was teasing, he wasn’t funny.

“I don’t play with toys and they’re not mine,” she clarified. “I *manage* the business and we sell toys.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “We?”

“My brother and I.”

“No husband?” He sounded as if he accused her of something—she wasn’t sure what—because of her marital status.

“No husband.”

“So, you’re in the family firm. Come on, mate. Toys are heaps of fun.”

Mate? Inwardly, she shook her head.

“Bloody tough, then?”

Bloody? Who used these terms?

“I’ve done the same job forever.” She gave herself a second to regroup. “Since I was a teen.”

“When you decide what you want in life, focus on it and let go of the old ways,” he replied. “Embrace your creativity.”

“At my age?”

“At any age.”

He scratched a finger along the shadowy bristles on his jaw. Wasn’t it time he shaved? Come to think of it, he looked as if he hadn’t slept soundly in a week. His jeans were clean, though his green cotton shirt was rumpled.

He paused to consider her—regarding her cream-colored crepe blouse, which she’d managed to spill coffee on that morning—and her stretchy brown slacks. She hadn’t had an extra minute to put on an ounce of makeup before rushing through the Richmond, Virginia, airport to catch the plane to Hilton Head Island. In her hotel room, she’d only showered and added a light spritz of her favorite lavender-scented perfume.

She hardly traveled anywhere anymore, and a commute to Virginia was a last-minute meeting she couldn’t avoid. She didn’t even like going to Virginia, because it reminded her of her old life and her ex.

To make matters worse, she’d overslept. The evening before, she’d overindulged in fried food and two glasses of celebratory wine.

Conversation was easy when her seatmate didn’t stare at her. But now that he was wide awake, she was unprepared for

his assessing gaze.

She brushed nonexistent lint from her slacks. “What should I do for a living? Any suggestions?”

Mr. Too Handsome for his own good, she added to herself.

“There are heaps of books on the subject. Whatever suits your skill level and interests.” He gave a short nod, turned back toward the window, and slipped on his sunglasses.

“I’m excellent at parenting, although my son disagrees,” she said. “I’m a single mother of a soon-to-be teenager and life isn’t easy.”

“No matter the age of the child, parenting calls for patience.”

“Do you speak from experience?” she asked.

“Nope.”

“Do you have kids?”

“Nope. Never will.”

Why? she wondered. She grabbed a candy bar from her purse and took a nibble, debating on whether to ask him to explain. However, he kept his face turned toward the window. In under two minutes, she detected soft breathing. Most likely, he was asleep again.

“I’m divorced and my ex has remarried,” she said. “His twenty-something wife was a coworker, and she is decades younger than me.” Penelope added another fact that continually gnawed at her. “They’re blissfully happy and expecting a baby.”

“Are congratulations in order?” her seatmate mumbled.

“Not on my end.” She tried to push down her snide comment and found she couldn’t. “I find it all a bit odd, considering my ex’s age.” Resentment boiled inside her when she least expected. “He’ll be in his seventies by the time their child graduates from college.”

“What’s your ex’s name?”

“Roy.”

“Mmm.”

She stopped speaking for a second to gain control of her voice. “He moved to another state, making our shared custody agreement for our son trickier than ever.”

Her seatmate nodded slightly.

“You know what else?”

He still faced the window. “Hmm?”

She bit off a piece of candy, chewed, and swallowed. “All the guys I’ve seen since my divorce are cads. I subscribed to an online dating website, but my first date proved an embarrassing bust.” She didn’t elaborate, and he didn’t ask. She’d also dated an art teacher at her son’s school until the man gave up. He was a pleasant guy, but her feelings for him had been absent. Plus, he’d acted as if her son didn’t exist.

She’d resolved herself to the fact that she wouldn’t commit to anyone ever again. Her heart couldn’t recover from another broken relationship. Living inside the cocoon of a quiet, safe environment was preferable and assured no one got hurt.

“In summary,” she finished, “I’ve decided to stop dating altogether.”

“An archaic term,” he replied.

“Dating?”

“Cad.”

She waved a dismissive hand. “I refuse to be forced into any more awkward conversations at the local pizza joint.”

“You don’t like pizza?”

“I like all food.”

“Then never say never.”

“What’s that supposed to—”

The plane jerked. Several shrieks from passengers rang throughout the plane.

Penelope joined in the shrieking, louder than the rest. Her half-eaten candy bar dropped to the floor.

Her seatmate swiveled to her and pocketed his sunglasses. “Are you all right?” His gaze darted about the plane’s cabin before landing on her.

“Didn’t you feel the plane?” she asked.

“It’s just a bump.”

“I’m afraid of heights.”

“You’re on a plane,” he reminded.

“I had no choice. I was forced to close on a business deal.” She hadn’t had a spare moment for anxiety to grab hold when her brother had booked the last-minute flight, and hindsight did little good. She’d assured herself there was nothing to fear.

Envision floating above pearly fluffy clouds while drinking a glass of sparkling water, she told herself.

What was it about reality that proved so different from your imaginings?

She indicated the window—they were flying above *gray* clouds, not pearly, and they weren't at all fluffy.

“To keep my mind off of the fact we're thirty-five thousand feet in the air, I've babbled constantly,” she said.

“You talked. You haven't babbled. Talk all you want.” He reached into his pocket and handed her a clean white handkerchief. Despite the plane's cold temperature, she was sweating. He'd noticed the sweat beads on her forehead before she had.

“You haven't told me anything about yourself,” she prompted.

“What would you like to know?”

She glanced at his left hand. No ring. He wasn't married, although the lack of a wedding ring didn't mean anything.

Regardless, she asked, “Are you married?”

“Absolutely not. Once was enough.”

“You're divorced?”

“Thankfully divorced. Marriage isn't for me.”

“Why not?”

He shrugged. “My career is important and all-consuming. Romance, women, and marriage got in the way.”

She took several seconds to digest his information.

Got in the way of what? she wanted to ask.

“Planes are remarkable if you stop to analyze the mechanics,” he said.

“Now is not the time to analyze how planes stay in the air.” She dabbed at her forehead with his handkerchief. Her hands

were clammy. “Never again,” she muttered.

“You won’t ever fly again?”

She twisted her wristwatch. “I’ll drive or take a bus or a train.”

“Have you always been afraid of flying?”

“No. Only the past few years.”

“Suppose you’re traveling overseas?” he asked.

“Are you kidding? I’ll never fly overseas.”

When the plane bounced from side to side, she grabbed hold of his arm. Her throat went dry. A fresh start of panic stunned her as the fasten seat belts sign flashed.

Flight attendants buzzed through the cabin, reminding the passengers to buckle up, before scurrying to their own seats. The captain came on the intercom and assured that the plane was flying outside of a thunderstorm, and the occurrence was brief and passing.

Penelope tugged at her seatbelt, ensuring she was secure. Her seatmate patted her shoulder, making no attempt to move away or disentangle his arm from her death grip.

He was tuned in to her fear.

Maybe he was attracted to her—despite the deepening lines around her mouth and the dark circles under her eyes. She didn’t need to peer at herself in a mirror to realize she looked a sight. She never seemed to get a sound night’s sleep anymore and blamed her restless, worried thoughts on her son for keeping her awake at two a.m.

She dropped her hand and passed him his handkerchief. “Is Hilton Head Island your final destination?”

“No. You?”

“I’m staying overnight on my brother’s houseboat, then driving on to Roses in North Carolina,” she said. “You may have heard of the town.”

Roses combined small-town charm with big-city conveniences. The tidy homes blended with the landscape of the scenic mountains. In the summer, the town was renowned for bubbling hot springs and comfortable mountain temperatures.

A look she couldn’t read flickered across his tanned face. “You’re staying on a houseboat?”

“Southern summers are intense, and the ocean breeze is a welcome respite, especially at night.”

“Houseboat living is ... different; I’ll grant you that. As for me, I’ll stay on land, thank you very much.”

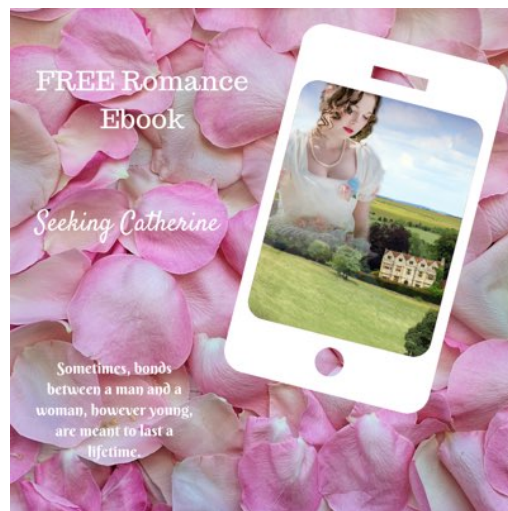
“Or in the air,” she reminded.

*** End of Excerpt Christmas in the Air by Josie Riviera ***

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Josie Riviera is a *USA TODAY* bestselling author of contemporary, inspirational, and historical sweet romances that read like Hallmark movies. She lives in the Charlotte, NC, area with her wonderfully supportive husband. They share their home with an adorable shih tzu, who constantly needs grooming, and live in an old house forever needing renovations.

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