



# SUSAN HATLER

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*The Christmas Competition*

A CHRISTMAS MOUNTAIN NOVEL

# THE CHRISTMAS COMPETITION

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SUSAN HATLER

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## *The Christmas Competition*

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# **THE CHRISTMAS COMPETITION**

**Susan Hatler**

# CHAPTER ONE

My belly buzzed with anticipation as I stood amongst the crowd gathered outside the empty building located behind the Sleigh Café in downtown Christmas Mountain. A more audible buzz vibrated in my coat pocket, so I pulled my cell phone out and glanced at the screen.

After skimming the name, I promptly hit IGNORE.

Eliza again. My new manager had called twice already to ask questions that were explained in detail in the written instructions I had left for her. Plus, I'd only been gone ten minutes. Sigh. I blamed my former manager, who had quit for the second time in under a year. At least this time he was getting married for real, after giving his long distance love a second chance. Yay, them!

My phone buzzed and I glanced at the screen to find a text from Eliza: *Ruby, call me when you can. Need clarification on a pressing matter from page two of instructions, paragraph four, the highlighted line in yellow, not pink. Thx.*

I shook my head. Where to stock the dog treats was not a “pressing matter” and could wait until I got back. I sighed, putting my phone away.

My new manager was a smart woman, but independence was not proving to be her strong suit. She had been working for me for two months and still asked questions about nearly everything. And, of course, firing her was out of the question. My business, Divine Doggie Spa and Training, was absolutely

booming with clients and ironically success had become a problem.

In fact, we had been so busy lately, I had to hire two more employees. Even with four on staff—myself included—the workload still seemed too big since we were constantly booked full. And I couldn't bring in another employee, because we only had so many tables and doggie suites to house our furry clients after they'd been groomed.

So, unless I wanted to set up some tables behind the building in the snow, I didn't have any choice but to coax my team into pushing through the chaos and to cut Eliza a lot of slack. Besides, it was one month until Christmas. What kind of grouch would fire someone right before Christmas?

Yeah, not an option.

A cold breeze blew hard and I tightened the blue scarf around my neck as I waited for the big announcement. This building was so close to my business, Divine Doggie Spa and Training that I had walked here in under ten minutes. Glancing around me, I'd venture to guess that every business owner in town had come for the big announcement that we "don't want to miss," about something called The Christmas Competition that would be held this year.

What did that mean? Not exactly sure, but it had to do with the renovated building.

I searched the crowd for my best friend, Morgan Reed. I pursed my lips when I didn't see her and began to walk through the small groups of people congregating in the otherwise empty parking lot. Morgan had to be here *somewhere*. The notice had gone to everyone that owned a business in town and she owned the C.M. Salon on Main Street. We had literally just been texting that morning and confirmed we'd both be at this meeting. Where was—

"Agh!" A yelp of surprise shot out of my mouth as my right foot flew out from beneath me. I had stepped on a patch of ice—yikes!

My whole life flashed before my eyes: drinking tea in my townhome on Mistletoe Lane, hanging with my wonderful parents and brother (aka: the golden child) at the Sugar Plum Inn, my book club friends, and doggies, lots and lots of doggies from my business Divine Doggie Spa and Training.

I felt my knit cap slip from my head as I fell backwards, my matching scarf flying up into my face. Just as I had accepted my seemingly inevitable demise, a pair of arms wrapped around me, catching me right before my tooshy met the icy concrete. My heart pounded in my chest. Whew!

“Whoa, are you okay?” came a familiar male voice from behind me as strong hands gripped my arms and gently lifted me into an upright position.

“I’m good,” I said, a little too quickly and breathlessly to be believable.

“Gotta be careful, Rudolph,” Connor said, with a chuckle.

Connor Reed was Morgan’s older brother and I’d known him since we were toddlers. I craned my neck to look up at him since he stood nearly a foot taller than me. It had been a while since I’d last seen him because Eliza had been doing the bank deposits for me since I hired her. Connor looked as handsome as ever, though. Jet black hair, hanging down just far enough to brush across his forehead and dark green eyes that reminded me of needles on a pine tree. He smiled down at me, showing off dimples right below his cheeks, which were turning light pink from the cold. Yes, Connor was the epitome of “tall, dark, and handsome” and he always had been. Well, at least since he hit his growth spurt in eighth grade.

Connor’s parents owned Reed Bank, which was actually where Connor and I first met when we were toddlers and Morgan was only a baby. My parents went into the bank for a loan to buy their first house. Rumor had it that Mr. Reed had brought Connor into the office that day to show him the ropes. Instead of learning the banking biz at barely three years old, Connor and I teamed up to sneak a bowl of lollipops off the teller’s counter while our parents were busy talking. I wanted to smile at the memory, but found myself frowning instead.

“My name is not Rudolph,” I said, even as he was still holding me. “How many times do I have to tell you that, Connor?”

Was I letting my embarrassment turn into malice? Maybe a little. But it was Morgan’s brother, and I’d known him too long for him to be phased by my attitude.

“Come on, don’t be like that,” he said, with a chuckle. “I’ve always called you Rudolph.”

“And why is that? My nose doesn’t even get *that* red in the cold anymore.”

“I beg to differ,” came a female voice from behind me. I glanced over to see Morgan, looking amused. “Nice save, bro. I saw it from across the parking lot.”

“Not that I’ve received any thanks for my quick reflexes,” he said, releasing me.

“Thank you for your quick reflexes.” I wrinkled my nose at him and then turned to my friend. “It’s about time you showed up, Morgan.”

She smiled. “I was on my way over when I saw that spill you almost took.”

“Yeah, not my finest moment,” I said, my mood already lifting. “Thank goodness Connor swooped in to the rescue.”

“Doesn’t he always?” she asked.

My eyebrows furrowed. “He doesn’t *always* rescue me.”

“What about that time when we were eleven and your sled almost went into traffic? Connor sledded down ahead of you and cut you off just in time,” she said.

“How quickly she forgets,” Connor said, exchanging a look with Morgan before turning back to me. “Also, remember when you were thirteen and trying to make that snow fort that collapsed on you? Who dug you out? That would be me. You should have a medal made in my honor ‘Connor Reed saves Ruby Curtis from herself.’”

I snorted. “I don’t think so. Isolated incidents.”

“Ummm,” Morgan said, with way too much glee in my opinion. “What about when you were seventeen and borrowed your parents’ car without asking and got it stuck in the snow. Connor pulled you out with his truck so your parents didn’t catch you.”

“Okay, fine, when I was a kid he was helpful,” I said, finally getting a word in during the sibling gang-up, while feeling acutely aware of how hot my cheeks had become. If my nose hadn’t been red before it absolutely was now. “But Connor hasn’t had to rescue me *lately*.”

There was only a beat of silence before Morgan gave me a look. “He literally just—”

“Hey, look, someone’s coming,” I said, thankful for the distraction as I gestured at a man in a suit and wool coat, who was crossing the parking lot toward a podium with a big wreath across the front made of pine branches and decorated with red and silver bows.

The man wore a newsy cap settled over his thinning brown hair and a gray peacoat wrapped around him. He wore leather gloves to protect his hands from the cold and the falling snow.

“Welcome, everyone! I’m Gerald Miller,” he said, in a voice that was just barely loud enough to reach the dozens of people who were gathered in front of the empty building. “Thank you so much for coming. I’m sure you have a busy schedule, so I promise to keep this brief.”

“Brief is good,” Morgan said, quietly. “I have a cut and color to do in twenty minutes.”

“Shh!” Connor said, nudging her arm.

“You *shh*,” she said, nudging him back.

I rolled my eyes and smiled at the two of them. Their banter hadn’t changed since elementary school, which was one of the things I loved most about them.

“I’m the attorney for Anita Rivera. You probably know that a few months ago Ms. Rivera passed away. She was a beloved member of the community, who taught P.E. at Christmas Mountain High School for decades. Those who

knew her well knew she loved friendly competitions. She felt like it brings out the best in people, brings communities together and she also loved Christmas.”

“So true,” I said, turning to Morgan. “Remember all of those festive sweaters she used to wear?”

“Like the sweater with all of the Christmas lights? I’ll never forget it ...”

“She bought this building when it was falling apart,” Mr. Miller said, gesturing to the building behind him. “She had it renovated to improve the town, but never got a chance to do anything with it because she fell ill.”

A murmur went through the crowd, making it obvious this was news to some people but not to others.

“Per Ms. Rivera’s last request, The Christmas Competition will determine who will inherit this expensive building in this very prime location.”

I blinked. She didn’t leave the building to a relative?

“As you know, Ms. Rivera was not married nor did she have children,” Mr. Miller said, his voice pausing for a moment as if he’d become choked up. “This community was her family and it’s her last wish to donate the building to a local business who is felt to bring joy to the people of Christmas Mountain.”

My throat tightened and my eyes became misty. How very kind of Ms. Rivera.

“How are we going to decide who the lucky business owner is who inherits the building?” Mr. Miller asked, as if reading the giant question on everyone’s mind. “We will hold a vote! Every town resident will get to vote on which business they think showed the most Christmas spirit this year. On Christmas Eve, at the town square, we’ll announce the top four businesses with the most votes and then we’ll announce the winner.”

“What’s the catch?” Miles Wilson called out, which surprised no one that the owner of the feed store would be skeptical as usual.



“No catch!” Mr. Miller responded. “If you’re a business who would like to inherit this renovated building then spread holiday cheer, be the best you can be for your customers, and show us what Christmas Mountain spirit is all about. Then we’ll vote!”

A series of cheers and applause echoed through the air as Mr. Miller announced he would be fielding any questions. I spun around to face my best friend. My eyes were wide and my lips slightly parted in awe over this unexpected news.

“This building is *ginormous*,” I said, knowing that their front desk was huge and the building had two floors. If my business inherited this building from Ms. Rivera, may she rest in peace, then I would have the room to hire more groomers and install more kennels. This was exactly what I needed. “And she’s giving it away for free,” I said, still trying to process everything.

“This is just what the bank needs,” Connor said, looking at Morgan and me with sheer delight in his eyes.

I shook my head. “What bank?”

“Reed Bank, of course,” Connor said, giving me a weird look. “Mom and Dad couldn’t make it today, so I’m here representing the bank to see what this contest was all about. They’re going to be so excited. Oh, man, if I can win this competition then maybe Dad will finally trust me to run things on my own without micromanaging.”

“Good luck with that,” Morgan said, snorting.

“This is going to be a game changer, big time,” Connor said, seeming to ignore her pessimism.

“Why would the bank need *that* much space?” I asked, unable to believe he wanted that space for the bank when it was so clearly perfect for the Divine Doggie Spa and Training.

“More safety deposit boxes,” Connor said, holding his index finger to count off the first reason. “Expanded welcome area for our customers. All of our managers and loan agents could have their own offices. It’s perfect. I’ve got this competition in the bag.”

“Not if *I* have anything to say about it,” I said, standing up straight. “Do you realize that Divine Doggie Spa and Training has been booked solid for weeks. Double booked when communication goes awry with my new manager. But with this building donated to me by sweet Ms. Rivera, who always treated me as a teacher’s pet, by the way, I could hire more help and never have to turn away another customer again. I have this contest *in the bag*.”

“Teacher’s pet?” Connor asked, taking a step back and thrusting his hand to his chest as if I’d threatened him physically. “Ms. Rivera only asked her favorite student to collect all of the balls at the end of P.E. class. And who did she ask? That would be me.”

“She wouldn’t ask her favorite student to pick up balls,” I said, crossing my arms, unable to believe he’d asserted such a ridiculous statement. “She made me team captain too many times to count.”

“You two have fun battling this out,” Morgan said, laughing at the competitive edge in the air that cropped up between Connor and me. “I’m going to figure out how to get my name off the ballot. I don’t even know what I’d do with that much space. Plus, I love working next door to Dallas. It’s convenient for romantic lunches.”

“Thanks for that image. Not,” Connor said, wrinkling his nose.

Morgan shrugged. “I’m pulling out of the race. I wonder where I go for that ...”

“This puts me one step closer to winning,” I noted, turning back to face Connor. “I’m sorry, but I *need* that building and I will *win* that building. Get ready, Connor, because I’m going to have so much Christmas spirit you won’t know what hit you.”

“Not a chance, Rudolph,” he said, leaning close and tugging on the tassels of my scarf before I swatted his hand away. “I’m going to holly everyone’s jolly so much you’ll wish you never tried to compete with me. That building is mine.”

“Well, I’m going to ... mistle your toe!” I said, struggling to form a good retort but failing miserably (obviously).

A smug little smirk broke out across Connor’s face and he bent down until he was eye level with me. “If you want to kiss me, Rudolph, you don’t need to resort to mistletoe.”

My heart rate spiked at the thought of kissing him and I mentally scolded myself for having that kind of reaction. Okay, yes, he was hot. I mean, I have eyes. But we were talking about Connor Reed, Morgan’s *brother*. The guy used to put snowballs down my back. And, sure, the girls in high school had always swooned over that smirk of his, but not *me*. I would never give him the satisfaction of knowing I found him attractive.

“In your dreams, Connor,” I said, raising an eyebrow even as my face heated. I so hoped he’d assume my pink cheeks were from the cold and not from the thought of him kissing me. I rolled my eyes, trying to play it off. “Anyway, I’ve got to get back to work. I’ll see you from the winner’s circle, Connor.”

“Later, Rudolph,” he said.

With a roll of my eyes, I turned on my heel and was careful not to step on anymore ice patches as I strode away with my head held high.

“Wait, Ruby!” Morgan called after me, shattering my movie-perfect-moment since I had to turn around and see what she wanted. “My parents are having a dinner thing on Saturday. You’re invited so don’t make other plans. Connor will be there, sorry.”

I skidded to a stop, briefly sliding on some ice before regaining my balance. Yikes!

“Okay, I’ll be at dinner on Saturday,” I said, nodding at Morgan before turning over my shoulder to give Connor a meaningful look. “But after that ... I’ll only be seeing you from the winner’s circle,” I said, feeling so lame at the retort I wanted to facepalm myself.

“Loud and clear, Rudolph,” Connor said, the corner of his mouth curving upward.

A little zing zapped my belly. What the ...? I didn't take the time to correct him this time. I just needed to get out of there. Why was my body reacting to Connor this way? Clearly, it had been too long since I'd gone on a date. That had to be it.

Needing to get back to Eliza, I marched across the parking lot in the direction of the doggie spa. As I passed Ms. Rivera's renovated building, I imagined my business name on a sign above the front door. It felt right. This building was the answer to all of my problems. I had to win this contest no matter what. I was going to be so merry that Connor wouldn't know what hit him.

## CHAPTER TWO

The line of customers waiting to pick up their fur babies from Divine Doggie Spa and Training was so long this evening that it went outside and the front door had to be held open by a box full of doggie shampoo bottles. Thick snowflakes drifted inside, clinging to the red and white snowflake runner that guided customers from the entrance to the front desk.

“Thanks for your patience, Mr. Brantley,” I said, smiling at him from behind the desk even as my shoulders tightened with tension at the long line and impatient sighs. “We look forward to seeing Lulu again next time.”

“Hope you have Merry Christmas, Ruby,” he said, tipping his hat before squeezing past everyone and heading out the door with his very clean boxer mix in tow.

The line moved forward and I shivered as a cold breeze wafted in through the open door. On the bright side, the cold air might be making the lobby’s North Pole theme feel genuine. I had upped my game on decorating this year in the name of holiday spirit and garnering votes for The Christmas Competition.

Last night, I strung icicle lights across the ceiling of the lobby and spent hours cutting out paper snowflakes to hang from a fishing line to make it appear as if they were floating in midair. In the corner of the room, a sign saying “North Pole” clung to a red and white striped pole that stuck out of a “mound of snow” that was really cotton balls glued to a cardboard box.

On the front counter, I taped a thick layer of white felt as makeshift snow. On the snow sat an open gift box with no lid with a sign saying “Santa’s Treats,” containing doggie cookies made by Cupid’s Cupcakes and Cookies. And to top off Divine Doggie Spa and Training’s holiday cheer, a jazz singer crooned “White Christmas” from a hidden speaker.

Forget Connor, I had The Christmas Competition in the bag.

My evening, however, was not very merry or bright right now. Jared had called in sick, which left things chaotic for Eliza, Kimberly and me. Still, I kept a smile plastered on my face as Eliza and I sat behind the desk to check people out.

“Excuse me, is Noodles ready yet?” Ms. Lane said, from where she’d been standing off to the side as she waited for Kimberly to bring her dog up front since she’d already paid ten minutes ago.

I nodded. “Yes, Ms. Lane. Just give me a moment to finish here and then I’ll run back and see what’s taking so long to get him.”

Quickly, I cashed out a customer whose dog “Muffin” had been groomed and on cue Kimberly emerged from the back room with Muffin.

Uh-oh. Out of order. Where was Noodles?

“Don’t forget to vote for Divine Doggie Spa and Training in The Christmas Competition!” Eliza said to Muffin’s owner cheerfully.

Ms. Lane’s frown deepened. The chance of getting her vote seemed slim. Ugh.

“I’ll return in a quick minute, Ms. Lane,” I said, and then hurried back to check on her red dachshund mix. I entered into Groom Room A and nearly crashed into Kimberly. I put a hand to my chest. “There you are, I was getting worried.”

Her face paled and her eyes widened. “I c-can’t find Noodles,” she said.

“Um, what?” I said, somehow managing to keep control of my volume because on the inside I felt like a fourth of July firework ready to explode.

“I’m sorry, Ruby, but I’ve looked in every single kennel and in Groom Room B. I can’t find him anywhere,” she said, looking close to tears.

My own terror immediately dissipated. “Noodles is in Groom Room C. Eliza was supposed to tell you that.”

Kimberly let out a long sigh. “Oh, thank goodness. For a moment, I thought he escaped. The open door up front is freaking me out.”

“I’ll get Noodles. You help Eliza with the next dog in line,” I said, hurrying down the hall to the Groom Room with a paper snowman on the door that had the letter “C” on its chest.

I pushed open the door. Along the far wall were a row of suites where we kept groomed dogs so they could dry without getting themselves dirty again. I was immediately able to find the door with the name tag reading “Noodles” and soon had him in his harness and leash and ready to go. I rushed back up front with the small wiener dog prancing ahead of me.

“Finally,” Ms. Lane said, sighing loudly.

“I’m sorry about the delay. Here he is clean and perfect,” I said, handing his leash to her. “Took me a bit to get him in his harness. He wiggled like he was excited to be going home.”

All of a sudden, she cracked a smile and leaned down to scoop Noodles into her arms. “Aw, were you excited to see Mama, honey? Did you know Mama was here to get you? Oh, you smell so good,” Ms. Lane said, her mood shifting completely as she looked at me with a smile. “Thank you so much, Ruby. He looks and smells wonderful. You always do the best job.”

“Thank you so much, Ms. Lane. He’s a special boy. We’re always happy to have him here with us. And don’t forget to vote for Divine Doggie Spa and Training in The Christmas Competition,” I said, hoping I wasn’t pushing my luck.

“If it will get you out of this tiny space, then you’ve got my vote, Ruby,” Ms. Lane said, with a nod and then headed for the exit.

With great relief, I noticed that while I was getting Noodles, Eliza and Kimberly had managed to get the line down to only two people. With a smile plastered on my face, I returned to the front desk.

“You two are rock stars,” I said, to my manager and assistant as they finished checking out the last customers of the day. As soon as they finished, I said, “Just one thing ...”

“Oh, no,” Eliza said, her eyes bulging. “What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, Eliza. It’s more of what I *need* you to do,” I said, sliding back behind the desktop computer and bringing up the photoshop program I had used to design a new poster. Pointing to the image, I said, “The Divine Doggie Spa and Training Snowwoman Contest is really important.”

“That’s a mouthful,” Kimberly said, with a smirk.

“Yes, but it’s huge,” I said, giving her an encouraging smile. “We have to show the most holiday spirit to win The Christmas Competition. Winning that renovated building will make all of our lives easier. Kimberly, you could go back to part-time if you want to, although I really appreciate the extra hours you’ve been giving me. Eliza, I would hire more help for you so you would have less stress.”

Her eyes widened. “Less stress would be good.”

I nodded. “So, I really need both of you to step up encouraging people to vote for us. You give *such* good service and the customers love you both. I need you two to use your charm to help us win.”

Eliza sighed. “But, it’s been *so* busy around here. I didn’t know it would be like this, Ruby. How can I do all of my duties and have time to advertise?”

“You’re *great* at multitasking, Eliza,” I said, hoping the white lie would give her the push she needed to step it up a notch. “You can absolutely do both.”



“I just feel overwhelmed,” Eliza said.

“Me, too,” Kimberly said.

“I hear you both,” I said, wishing I could add that I felt overwhelmed, too. “With Jared gone today, it was extra stressful. A bigger building would mean more space *and* more employees so everyone would be less overwhelmed.”

“Would we be able to get an actual receptionist?” Kimberly asked, suddenly perking up. “It’s so hard to answer the phone when I’m in the middle of a wash.”

“The *first* thing I’ll do is hire a receptionist,” I said, nodding at the young woman. “I just need a place to put the receptionist then we can hire one.”

Kimberly squealed with excitement, bouncing on the balls of her feet and clapping her hands. “I am *so* going to get us votes.”

Eliza stood up. “I’m going to get us more votes, too,” she said, as if not wanting to be left out.

“That’s the spirit,” I said, watching my happy helpers walk off, chatting enthusiastically about their ideas for getting the spa votes in the competition. After such a trying day, I felt relieved that I’d sparked some life in them and that they weren’t totally burned out. “Now if only I weren’t totally burned out ...”

I turned back to the computer and let out a sigh as I got back to work on my flyer. So far, I had the words “DIVINE DOGGIE SPA AND TRAINING” and “VOTE FOR US” but that wasn’t exactly showing Christmas Mountain holiday spirit. I needed something more. Something that would stand out. I needed an idea that would *pop*. It needed to be *engaging*. It needed to get me *votes*.

The bell over the front door jingled and drew my attention from the screen. One of my regulars came through the door and even though I couldn’t see her dog from my seat at the desk, I could see the way that her arm was extended, as if he were on the leash and pulling her forward. I smiled at the woman, since her pooch was normally so well behaved.

“Good evening, Ms. Scott. How are you?” I said, standing up and coming around the front counter. “Is Tabby boarding with us again? I must have missed your reservation while I was going over everything this morning.”

I rounded the desk just as Ms. Scott reached out and handed me the leash, and it wasn't until then that I first looked down at the pooch below me. *Her* dog was a goldendoodle. The dog in front of me looked to be some sort of retriever mix, with golden fur on all of her body except for a patch of white on her chest that stretched down to her belly. “Oh, wait. This ... is not Tabby.”

“No, it's not,” Ms. Scott confirmed, sounding a little flustered. “My husband, you know, drives a plow in town. And he was out working this evening and he nearly buried this one in a pile of snow. She didn't have so much as a collar when he found her. I had to put one of Tabby's extras on her. She's a stray. I thought that you could board her here.”

I tried to keep my eyebrows from furrowing too much, because Ms. Scott meant well, but the idea that I had room here for a stray was crazy. To hide my expression a little, I knelt down for a closer look at the dog. She was very pretty, with floppy ears and a tongue that hung down out of the side of her mouth as she panted.

Fighting to keep my professional composure, I said, “I'm sorry, Ms. Scott, but we don't take in strays here. But there's a shelter in town—”

“I tried the shelter. They're completely full, and turned me away. Heartless.”

My lips formed a pout as I looked at the dog, starting to scratch behind her ears. It was like pressing a secret button and the dog immediately collapsed to the floor, rolled onto her back, and showed me her belly, begging for a belly rub.

“They didn't have *any* room for her?” I asked, with disbelief.

“None.”

“They couldn't keep her in ... an office?”

“No.”

“Break room?”

“Nope.”

“A bathroom?”

“Ruby,” Ms. Scott said, shaking her head at me. “You know how pushy I can be. I tried my hardest. They’re full.”

“But I’m full, too. Everyone is traveling for the holiday season. I don’t have a single empty kennel left. Couldn’t you keep her for a few days until the shelter gets more room?”

Ms. Scott shook her head. “You know how trying Tabby can be. Watching her is a full-time job. I could never handle another dog *and* her.”

That was reasonable. Tabby was my most energetic client. A gorgeous goldendoodle with an unlimited amount of excitement and love to give out. But she did need a lot of attention and walks, lots and lots of walks.

I looked back at the retriever mix in front of me, my hand coming to a halt where I had been scratching her stomach. She must’ve been thinking I was done spoiling her, because she quickly flipped back over and attempted to stand, but then slipped on the tile floor, and resigned to laying there, staring up at me. My heart tugged, since she was absolutely precious. I didn’t want to upset Ms. Scott by being the second person to turn a homeless dog away. So, even though I had absolutely no place to keep her, I heaved a sigh and nodded.

“Okay.” I rose from my kneeling position and stood. “I’ll find somewhere for her to stay for a little while. At least until there’s room in the shelter.”

“You’re an angel, Ruby,” she said, relief visibly washing over her face as she lunged forward to wrap her arms around me. “An absolute angel.”

“Isn’t she though?” Connor said, coming down the red mat.

My heart kicked up a notch. “I didn’t hear the bell ring.”

“This bell,” he said, holding up a small gold bell. “Found it on the sidewalk outside.”

“That doesn’t even surprise me today,” I said, noting that Connor wore a to-die-for grin and held a brown paper bag in his hand.

“I really have to get home,” Ms. Scott said, starting toward the door. “But I can’t tell you how much I appreciate this. You are really wonderful, Ruby.”

“Anytime. Oh! And don’t forget to vote for—” My mouth stayed open but Ms. Scott had slipped out the door before I could finish the sentence, as if she worried that I might change my mind.

“Why are you an angel?” Connor asked, looking down at the dog who was still on the floor, smiling and panting up at us. He leaned down to scratch her ears and she scrambled to her feet, leaning forward to leave a big, wet kiss on the side of his face. “Who is this?”

“The town’s shelter is full, and Ms. Scott’s husband found a stray.” I nodded at the retriever that was trying to lick Connor’s face again. Still laughing, he rose back to his feet. He kept one hand on her head, petting her, and with his other hand set the brown paper bag on the desk. “I’m an angel for agreeing to take her in.”

His expression tightened. “But I thought you said you don’t have room for any dogs and that you’re turning dogs away. Where are you going to keep her?”

“I have no idea,” I said, blowing out a breath. “I guess I’ll just have to take her home with me until there’s room at the shelter. Ugh. What a mess. My townhome is not big enough for a dog, but I couldn’t bear to tell her no. This poor girl has nowhere to go.”

“Well, at least there’s a bright side.”

I tilted my head. “What’s that?”

“Morgan mentioned you were working late, so I brought dinner,” he said, the corner of his mouth curving upward. “It

was the least I could do considering I'll be winning that building instead of you."

"I don't think so," I said, shaking my head. "So, what did you bring?"

"A burger and fries for each of us," he said.

My stomach growled. "Looks like you're an angel, too. Thanks."

There was a sudden rustling sound behind us. Connor and I looked over and saw that the retriever had gone up on her hind legs and reached the brown paper bag Connor had set on the desk. Before either of us could move toward her, she had dragged out one of the burgers by the wrapper, swallowing it in two bites. The wrapper fell to the floor, empty.

"Correction," Connor said as he snatched the bag up to keep it out of the dog's reach. "There is one burger for us to share."

I wanted to decline the food he had brought and get back to work, but I'd skipped lunch and, in all honesty, that burger smelled too good to pass up.

"Let's eat it, before she strikes again," I said, exchanging a smile with Connor that warmed my belly. Wait, what was that? Nothing, had to be nothing.

There was only a matter of weeks until the first vote for The Christmas Competition that would narrow the contestants down to four. Maybe I'd finish my flyer while I ate. Just because Connor brought me food and had a nice smile, didn't mean I wouldn't do everything in my power to win that building I needed desperately.

## CHAPTER THREE

After putting the stray dog in my office with a dog bed, food, and water—I so hoped she didn't chew up anything—I returned to the front desk where Connor was arranging our dinner. "Here Comes Santa Claus" played through the speakers in the lobby and I noted the growing darkness outside, making the lights on the ceiling seem to shine brighter, reflecting off the paper snowflakes hanging there.

It was a cozy setting, if only I didn't have so much work to get done.

Connor set two paper plates on my desk below the counter and served us the remaining burger and fries. Two bottles of strawberry flavored sparkling water sat on the desk, making the corner of my mouth curve upward. Strawberry flavored sparkling water had been my favorite drink since I was a teenager, and it was sweet that he remembered.

"Eat quickly because there's ice cream in the bag and it's going to melt if we don't get to it soon," he said, taking a big bite of the burger.

I narrowed my eyes at him suspiciously. "You're trying to put me in a food coma, aren't you? So I won't be able to finish my poster for the competition."

"Me?" Connor said, wearing that mischievous smirk. "I'd never do such a thing. Now, forget about the poster and eat."

I chuckled, since he was clearly toying with me. "Nice try, but bringing me delicious food and my favorite drink won't stop me from getting this done."

With that said, I sat down in front of the computer, grabbed a fry off my plate, and got to work on finding a more appealing text for the poster. A minute later, I took a bite from my half of the burger. So yummy. Connor really outdid himself bringing me dinner. Still, though, I couldn't let it distract me. I needed to think of something unique for the poster that would really show my Christmas Mountain holiday spirit.

"Your fries are getting cold," he said, finishing the last of his fries.

I looked over at him. "Fries are still edible when they're cold."

"Yeah, but you hate cold fries. I don't want to have to leave to get you fresh fries. I know how you are ..."

I swatted his arm playfully. "I only asked you to do that for me once when I was a picky teenager."

"Ruby, you asked last month."

"Oh, right," I said, remembering that was true and then sighing. "It was sweet of you to bring me dinner, but I have to get this done, Connor. I'm sorry, I'm being a terrible host, but work comes first."

"Okay, let me help then," he said, wiping his hands on a napkin. "What do you have left?"

I finalized an appealing text and then leaned back in my chair. "After I print it then I'll color everything in and maybe add some drawings."

"Why don't you just find graphics on the internet?"

"Because that isn't very personal," I said, widening my eyes as if I were horrified by the suggestion. "Wow, someone is lacking in Christmas spirit, aren't they?" I teased.

"I have plenty of Christmas spirit," he said, then a smirk graced his lips. "So much spirit that you should give up on your poster now. I've already got this competition in the bag."

I scoffed. "As if. I'm going to get the vote of every single dog owner in town, plus I'll get my entire book club to vote

for my business.”

“Not your whole book club,” Connor said, looking as if he had a secret. “Nina is going on a date with one of my buddies. If they hit it off, I’ll nab her vote for sure.”

“No way,” I said, shaking my head and wondering why Connor had set Nina up with his friend instead of me. I mean, I was single, too. “Romance before bromance. Nina’s going to have my back.”

“We’ll see about that,” he said, leaning back in the chair with his knee bouncing up and down as I pulled the poster from the printer and took out some colored markers. “What are you drawing?” he asked.

“A reindeer and a snowman.”

“Very original.”

“Classic,” I said, although he did have a small point.

I pressed the key to print another flyer and then the sound of Connor’s chair rolling against the floor hit my ears before I could make a move and he snatched my flyer from the printer and returned to his seat at the desk. He set down the flyer, and picked up a marker.

“Lucky for you I’m an expert at reindeer art,” he said, squeezing an eye shut as he drew as if he were concentrating hard. “I assume you want the reindeer to be Rudolph?”

My eyes narrowed at him. “Connor ...”

“What?” His eyes widened and he tilted his head to the right, shooting me an innocent look. “It has nothing to do with you. He’s just the most well-known.”

“Right.”

“He’s the only one with a song about him,” he said, gesturing with a red marker. “I really thought you might want some recognition on here.”

“I see,” I said, surprised at his genuine tone. Maybe I was just paranoid. “Well, fine then. Rudolph is probably the best bet.”



“As you wish, Rudolph.” He threw me a grin that let me know he’d been toying with me all along. “I mean ... Ruby.”

My gaze fell to that grin and my heart rate kicked up a notch, surprising me.

“You’re hilarious,” I said, focusing on my fries and the rest of my burger until my heart rate had returned to normal. Then I snuck a peek at Connor and saw that he’d finished drawing Rudolph’s entire body, and it actually looked pretty good.

Mariah Carey’s “All I Want for Christmas” came through the speaker, causing all kinds of inappropriate thoughts about Connor to go through my mind. What was with me today? Work stress. Totally had to be work stress.

I picked up a marker and then slid toward the drawing, my knee brushing against Connor’s causing a little zing to zip through my belly. Ignoring this, I leaned down and started drawing a snowman on the opposite side of the poster. This was my business and my flyer, and I would not let my body’s ridiculous reactions stop me from working on this poster.

“You don’t have to help me, you know,” I said, feeling annoyed that sitting next to Connor had put me on edge. “Aren’t we competing with each other? You’re basically assisting your enemy.”

He shrugged. “What shows more Christmas spirit than selflessly helping the competition?”

I laughed. “Kind of counter-intuitive, isn’t it? Although I still don’t get why you need the building. The bank has plenty of space.”

He heaved a sigh. “It would be nice to do something to make my dad believe in me.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked, my eyebrows coming together. “You practically run the bank yourself. How could he give you that much responsibility and not believe in you?”

“He micromanages me,” he said, keeping his eyes focused on his drawing. “He doesn’t trust me not to mess everything

up. If I accomplish something on my own then maybe he'll finally be proud of me, you know?"

"Not ... really," I said, surprised to hear this. Sure, his parents were a bit uptight—to put it nicely—but Ivy was the scarier one. Mr. Reed seemed a little more chill. Or maybe that was just around Morgan, huh.

Connor set down his marker, and turned to me. "Last month? I hit a record number of home loans in a quarter, and I didn't get so much as a handshake. He just immediately started talking about how I could've landed more if I'd done things differently."

"That's just how your dad is, Connor," I said, in an attempt to comfort him. "He's a perfectionist, which has nothing to do with you. His issues. It doesn't mean you aren't doing a good job."

"Just once, I'd like him to say I did something well," he said, sounding vulnerable and like a young boy trying to please his father instead of a successful thirty-year-old. "If I win this building there's nothing he could counter with. He'd have to congratulate me."

A solemn silence fell between us as I laid down my marker and tried to think of a proper response. Right now, he didn't look like the big, strong, confident man that often drove me nuts. He looked sad, and it tugged at my heart.

Before I could decide how to respond, he cleared his throat and his demeanor shifted. "Why do you think Ms. Rivera decided to do a competition instead of just giving the building to a business she liked?"

"I don't know, she was a gym teacher. Maybe after all those years of sports, she just loved a good competition," I said, trying to think back to my high school days.

"Yeah, I remember walking by the gymnasium one time, while she had your class doing running exercises. I think that is the absolute reddest I've ever seen your face."

"Stop teasing me," I said, glaring at him, even as I laughed a little. "But really, that's a good question. Maybe it's to build

camaraderie somehow?”

“Maybe, but you were a lot more reluctant to accept my help on this than you usually are with things, so maybe that’s not it.”

“To build friendships?”

“Nope again.” He shook his head. “I’m already friends with you.”

“What else would it build ...?” My gaze dropped down to the paper in front of me where I’d drawn the three circles for a snowman and suddenly the piece of the puzzle I had been struggling with all night clicked into place. “No, a *snowwoman*,” I said, throwing my arms into the air like I’d just crossed the finish line.

In my enthusiasm, I threw my arms up with too much force, though, and the front of my chair slipped up off the ground. Falling backward, I closed my eyes and braced for impact, only to feel my chair stop before I hit the ground.

I opened my eyes and saw that Connor had jumped into action, grabbing the arms of my chair and yanking it back down to a stable position. He looked at me with concern in his eyes—concern that was really easy to see because his eyes were only a few inches from mine. He’d leaned forward onto my chair to stop my fall and then placed his face *very* close to mine. Gulp.

I felt breathless from my almost-accident, and also from the warmth of his breath brushing against my lips. From the way his eyes were burning into mine so intensely that I couldn’t look away. From the way my heart pounded in my chest.

Yes, there were a lot of reasons for me to be breathless. But Connor didn’t give me a ton of time to dwell on them.

Instead, he smirked. “Saved you again.”

“I-I’m pretty sure I fell due to your teasing,” I said, letting out a slow and unsteady breath. “And, also, thank you. That would have been a nasty fall.”

“Any time, Rudolph.”

“Ugh. Don’t call me that.”

“Okay, Ruby,” he said, sitting back in his own chair again. “What has you so riled up about snowmen?”

“I like a snowman as much as the next person. But like you said, it’s unoriginal. And I just figured out how I’m totally going to beat you in this contest.”

“By going to sleep and dreaming it, because that’s the only way it’s going to happen?”

“Nope,” I said, grinning at him smugly. “I’m going to host a Divine Doggie Spa and Training Snowwoman Contest. It shows Christmas spirit, it’s fun and it’s original.”

Connor’s eyebrows rose without any kind of retort, which told me that this snowwoman contest was, in fact, a brilliant idea. Yay, me!

## CHAPTER FOUR

The cold wind rushed at me, as if it were trying to push me backwards. As if the universe knew I was running late and thought it would be funny to make me later. But I would not be deterred. The Mistletoe Book Club meeting was my treasured treat each week and nothing could keep me away, not even the pile of posters and markers that were threatening to topple out of my arms as I hugged them to my chest.

I twisted my wrist so I could check the time on my phone as I hurried down the sidewalk on Main Street. So, so late. Again. Finally, the front door of Rudolph's Reads came into view. I was fifteen minutes late, but it was okay. I was kind of, sort of, totally, always late for book club. By now, my friends would expect nothing less out of me. Right?

I opened the front door of the bookstore and let it swing closed behind me, cutting off the sound of the winter wind. Hemi (short for Hemingway), the shop owner Carol Bennett's black-striped tabby cat, strutted by swishing his tail and turning his nose up at me.

"Hello to you, too, Hemi!" I said, the smell of books flooding my senses as I wove my way through stacks of books from every genre. I noticed a woman dressed as Mrs. Claus in a nook off to the side of the room, reading *The Grinch* to a group of children. So sweet!

Finally, I hurried to the backroom. "I'm here. What did I miss?"

“Well, well, well, look who it is,” Carol said, whispering to me as I slipped in quietly.

“Sorry, I got stuck on the phone,” I said, in a hushed tone.

“Work again?” Carol asked.

I shook my head. “My cousin, Katie.”

“Katie Ellis? The cousin who is moving here from Sacramento?” she asked.

“Yes, she was just confirming her flight and I wrote it down here ... somewhere,” I said, glancing through my papers before giving up for now. “By the way, who is the woman reading *The Grinch*?” I asked.

“A volunteer,” Carol said, with a smile. “The kids love her.”

I shut the door behind me. “Such a cute idea.”

“Thanks,” she said, her face lighting up with pride. “It’s an idea I had after they announced Ms. Rivera’s competition for the newly renovated building. I don’t think I have much of a shot, or that I could handle a much bigger space right now, but I still think it’s a good idea to spread Christmas cheer. So, I decided to introduce Mrs. Claus’s Corner. She reads to the kids in the late afternoon, and, on Sunday mornings, we do back-to-back stories with hot cocoa for everyone.”

“Great idea, Carol,” I said, genuinely touched by the wholesome idea.

“Thanks,” Carol said with pretend-narcissism before motioning for me to follow her. “Now, sit. We’re discussing *Walking in a Winter Wonder Romance*. You read it?”

“Yep,” I said, loving my evening reads before bed.

Giselle gave me a wave and then tapped on the book in her lap. “If you look at page twenty-two, right before the heroine met Armando, she described the lake as ‘shining like a diamond’. It was so obvious he was going to propose to her there in the end,” she said, adjusting her glasses.

Giselle's mousy brown hair was pulled up into a messy bun and she looked so confident that even though I was dropping in on the middle of a conversation I totally believed her analysis. It also helped that she was a writer, and always added insightful observations of the books we read.

"It could have been symbolism for Jacqueline's ex-fiancé," Nina said, flipping through the pages of the book and stopping on the page number Giselle had cited. "She saw him skating with that lady Ellen right before she broke things off, remember?"

"If I saw *my* fiancé skating with some woman named Ellen, I would give Ellen a piece of my mind," Macy said, in a matter-of-fact tone. "Just saying."

"I disagree, Macy," Nina said, shaking her head. "Ellen has to live with what she did, but Armando is the one who was committed to Jacqueline, so he's the bigger dog."

"Brutus would never do that to Jacqueline, which is why I adore him," Giselle said, hugging the book to her chest. "Brutus just showed up wanting to help her when he saw her fall on the ice, no questions asked. He's so chivalrous."

"Agreed," Harmony said, with a wistful sigh. "I love all the little things he does for her throughout the book. He really is a hero. A knight in shining armor she doesn't even realize is there. He just waited until she was ready for him. So romantic."

"Hey, gals," I said, taking a seat. "Sorry I'm late, I got—"

"Held up at work," the entire book club said in unison, doing their best Ruby impressions before everyone burst into a fit of giggles.

My cheeks heated up immediately. Did I really always say that? Regardless, their laughter was infectious and I quickly found myself joining them.

"Have I really gotten that predictable?" I said, dramatically hanging my head in shame.

"It's okay, we're just teasing," Amanda said, in her soothing massage-therapist-voice. "You're killing it and we're

proud of you, we know you're busy. If you need to vent again then we've totally got your back."

Amanda was an absolute angel. As a massage therapist, zen and relaxation was her thing, and she knew how to pick up on signals of stress and immediately subdue them.

"Actually," I said, with a smile, "I wasn't late due to work this time. My cousin called from California and I had to take it since she's moving up here and will be staying with me."

"You mentioned her last week," Amanda said, the corners of her mouth turning downward. "So sad about her husband passing away."

"It's been a few years now, but, yes, very sad," I said, remembering what a perfect couple Katie and Ken had been. So awful. I didn't want to think of that sad time right now, though. I had a project for my friends. "Ladies, I need your help."

"With what?" Nina asked, taking a sip of hot tea.

"I need help making posters," I said, giving her a look. "So I can beat your boyfriend's bestie in The Christmas Competition."

Nina's cheeks turned pink. "I don't have a boyfriend. Connor keeps trying to set me up with his friend, but I'm too busy looking after my grandpa. I don't have time for dating."

"He made it sound like you were interested," I said, thinking that was one more vote for me from Nina instead of for Connor. Ha!

"What do you need help with?" Lacey asked, popping an olive into her mouth.

"In the spirit of the season, I'm going to host a Divine Doggie Spa and Training Snowwoman Contest," I said, holding up the papers I'd printed out earlier. "These are the posters announcing the contest and they need handmade drawings to make them more personal. Who wants to help?"

The gals all stood immediately and came to take poster paper and markers from me, asking what I wanted on the



posters. I filled them in on the details as the load in my arms lightened, until I was left with only a few pieces of poster paper and my own markers. Thank goodness for my friends.

Unanimously, we decided to trade in our folding chairs for seats on the floor, so there would be room to lay out the paper in front of us. Like me, some of the women decided to lay on their bellies on the floor, while others opted to sit cross-legged and lean forward over their creations. Relief flooded my brain now that I had help. The feeling from their support was indescribable.

“You’re really taking this competition seriously, huh?” Nina said.

“Of course,” I said, putting the finishing touches on a snowwoman doctor, with her white coat and stethoscope. “My business is growing but it can’t grow because I don’t have enough space. I need this renovated building. Plus, Connor is directly competing with me, so I need to blow him out of the water.”

Giselle threw me a smirk. “It’s winter, all the water is ice now.”

“I think that makes it snow,” Harmony said, giggling as she pulled her blonde hair back into the hair tie that had been wrapped around her wrist.

“Fine, then I have to blow him out of the snow,” I said, raising my fist above my head.

My declaration was met with a series of whoops and applause from my book club members and I gleamed at the cheering and then laughed. I settled down into my spot and began to draw a snowwoman mom, who was taking her children to school.

“What’s Connor been up to?” Harmony asked.

I looked up from my paper and shrugged. “The usual. Working. He took a break and brought me dinner last night, though, which was really nice of him.”

“Ooooh,” Macy said, letting out a whistle. “A romantic candle lit dinner?”

“Hardly.” I blew out a breath. “More like a platonic, florescent-bulb lit dinner while I worked on these ‘Vote for Me’ posters. That’s actually how I came up with this idea.”

“Helping you, as always,” Macy said, which made my ears perk up.

“He’s ... pretty helpful. I will admit that. But this is my idea,” I said.

“I know. But Cal mentioned the other day how every time he hangs out with Connor, it’s ‘I saw Ruby the other day, I think I’ll do this for her’, or ‘Ruby mentioned this the other day, I think she could use that’. It’s cute how he’s always looking out for you.”

I sighed, trying to hide how flustered her words made me feel. The fact that I seemed on his mind made me want to smile. I mean, sure, Connor and I had been spending more time together lately. But that didn’t mean anything, right?

“Well, I’ve been best friends with Connor’s sister since we were kids,” I said, as if that explained everything. It makes sense he’d feel kind of big brotherly toward me, I guess.”

“Oh, come on,” Harmony said, throwing me a look. “He didn’t bring dinner to his sister that night, he brought dinner to you. Just tell us when the first date is and we’ll get the details later.”

I hunched over my poster, hoping to hide how red my cheeks surely were. A date? With Connor? The idea was ridiculous. We were friends, and nothing more, and no matter how hard my heart had hammered the other night when he saved me from flipping backwards in my chair nothing would ever be different. I reminded myself of that as I formulated a response.

“You’re talking crazy,” I said, rolling my eyes. “He’s a great friend. Seriously, thinking back he’s been there for me so many times when I’ve needed him that I don’t know how I’ll ever repay him. But this isn’t one of our books, ladies. Caring about someone doesn’t make them your soulmate. So, stop your gossip and help me get these posters done.”

“You guys have *never* been more than friends?” Giselle asked, using a suspicious tone. “Every time I see you two together, I seriously want to write my own romance novel. It’s so cute how he dotes on you.”

“He doesn’t dote on me,” I said, scoffing at the thought. “Sure, he shows up sometimes when I need him but that’s just because ...” My voice trailed off as I wondered why Connor did pay so much attention to me. And he’d confided in me the other night about his dad, that was certainly new. “Look, I have a business to run. Let’s draw, people.”

A moment of silence settled over all of us. A moment where my brain took its chance to remember my grand opening of my doggie spa where my main computer system stopped working two hours in, and Connor had been there and helped me keep track of all the check-ins and check-outs by hand. If nothing else, he was very supportive. I could admit that.

“That snowwoman is so adorable,” Carol said, with a sigh.

“This is a great idea, Ruby,” Nina said. “You’re going to get so many votes after this contest.”

“I hope so,” I said, giving my fashion designer snowwoman long, dramatic eyelashes.

“Will you need help hanging these around town?” Giselle asked.

“If you have time, I would love the help,” I said, knowing the spa kept me so busy and it would take a lot of time to hang the posters up.

Suddenly, my cellphone vibrated in my pocket and I pulled it out, noting a text from Connor: *How is the poster-making going? Need help getting them up around town?*

I did my best to hide my smile as I replied to him that I had it covered, but thanked him for the offer. He really did look out for me, like catching me before I fell, making sure I ate meals when I was busy at work, helping me when my computer had failed.

Connor Reed really was a good guy. A hero, even.

Maybe even ... my hero?

I quickly brushed the thought away. After all, he was my best friend's brother, and didn't think of me that way. The guy nicknamed me after a reindeer. That didn't exactly show that he was interested in me. Right?

## CHAPTER FIVE

I jammed my hands deep into my pockets, my bag filled with at least fifty of the little posters we'd made announcing the Divine Doggie Spa and Training Snowwoman Contest. It was freezing out, or below freezing as the case may be, but this was the last thing that I had to do today. Then I could head home and curl up with the new book we were reading for The Mistletoe Book Club, and try to forget how desperately I needed to win The Christmas Competition.

"How much longer are we going to be out here?" Harmony said, with a shudder. She had offered to come with me and hang up the posters, just to get out of the house.

"Just until we hang all of these," I said, holding up the stack.

"Great, we should be nice and frozen by then," she said, her normally perky voice sounding grumpy. She narrowed her eyes to survey the street ahead of us.

"Let's hope not," I said, adjusting my grip on the leash holding the sweet retriever mix who needed a home. She bounced along next to me as though she were having the time of her life, and I was glad to be able to get her out of my office for a while.

So far, she seemed happy to have somewhere to stay that was out of the cold, but I knew she needed plenty of exercise to keep her healthy and happy. I had squeezed in the time to give her a shampoo, and her fur was looking much better.

She needed a real home. I was going to have to find her one sooner rather than later, since the animal shelter still didn't have any room. The problem was that I had no idea where to start with finding her a home. I couldn't adopt her, my townhome was way too small and I worked too many hours. She was a sweet thing, but she wasn't exactly a designer breed, and that's what a lot of people around here were looking for these days.

She glanced up at me, her tongue lolling out of her mouth, and I reached down to pet her. It was nice to have a little company right now, especially since the human company around me seemed more than a little crabby. So unlike her.

"So, what's up with you?" I said, stopping on the sidewalk and reaching into my bag to pull out a poster.

Harmony turned away from me as if she found the building post fascinating.

"Harm?" I said, nudging her arm.

"Dave and I split up," she blurted, before she let out a sigh. "Don't tell anyone. I'm having a hard time adjusting and I don't want to have to talk about it."

"I won't, and I'm sorry," I said, patting her arm.

"Thanks." She shook her head, tears filling her eyes. "We've been together so long, it feels strange that we're broken up. It's like something is missing now. But I'm sure it's for the best."

"You think so?" I said, not wanting to ask too many questions.

"Yeah," she said, tacking up one of the posters next to an even thicker poster that was already there advertising "Christmas cheer" from the local hardware store to anyone who wanted it. Probably as long as they delivered a vote in their favor for the business.

Competition was getting tough.

Their flyer looked a lot more expensive than mine, I couldn't help but notice. I wondered if people would see my

poster, and think a kid had made it. Maybe the charm would appeal to them, over this glossy piece of perfection?

“Anyway, I don’t want to talk about Dave,” Harmony said, as she pinned up another poster. “Tell me about you and Connor.”

Ugh. I couldn’t stop thinking about the conversation from the book club we’d had the night before, where everyone had been not-so-subtly nudging me in the direction of asking Connor out. Which was crazy, right? There was no way that I could date Connor. Yeah, he was a sweetie, and yeah, we got along well, but there was way too much history there to even think about inviting him out for a drink. Even if I did, it would take a Herculean effort to get him to understand that it was actually romantic and not just the two of us hanging out as friends.

Besides, I knew Morgan would *freak* if she thought I was interested in her brother. The two of us had been friends forever, and I would never want to mess up our relationship. Plus, there were plenty of great guys that could interest me. Not that I’d found one. Sigh.

“I’m in direct competition with Connor and the bank right now,” I said, pointing out the obvious to her. “He’s going to fight as hard for that building as I am, and I need to make sure I don’t let anything get in the way of my focus. Especially not him.”

“Hmm, not sure if I believe that you wouldn’t enjoy being distracted by him,” Harmony said, teasing and sounding a little better now that she’d confessed to the breakup. “You sure that you don’t want him to come sweep you off your feet?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be focused on posters right now, so you can get out of the cold?”

“Point taken,” she laughed, rolling her eyes at me, but I knew she wasn’t mad. Whatever had happened between her and Dave, it had been coming for a while.

My little canine buddy nudged the backs of my legs as I stapled up one of the posters onto a lamp-post, and I looked

down at her and grinned. With the new building, I would make more room for random strays like her, too. That would be guaranteed.

“We’ll find you a home, sweetie. Don’t worry,” I said, dropping down on my knees to pet her. She nuzzled into me, clearly loving the attention.

Her nose was cold, and it made me think of the little nickname that Connor had given to me all those years ago: Rudolph. He’d always thought of me as his kid sister’s friend, which I suppose was fine back then. But I was a grown woman. Didn’t I deserve to be called by my real name by now? Why didn’t he see me that way?

“Does your furry friend have a name?” Harmony asked.

I glanced at her, for a moment worrying she’d been reading my mind. Then I shook my head. “When we find her a new family they’ll name her.”

“Why don’t you adopt her?” she asked, casually.

“I’m not in a position to adopt a dog,” I said, which was so true. “My townhome is too small. This sweetheart needs a bigger home with a yard. We could give her a temporary name though. She’s so sweet, maybe I’ll just call her Sweetie. That works, doesn’t it?”

The dog danced back and forth, as though she could understand what I was saying and was happy to have a name. I laughed, rubbed her head.

“It’s a little ... generic,” Harmony said. “I’m not sure she looks like a Sweetie.”

“It’s temporary, Harmony,” I said, letting out a sigh. “Do you have a better idea?”

“Men suck?” she said, blinking at me.

“That’s definitely not a good name.” I twisted my lips to the side. “I’ll call her Sweetie-for-now. That’s not generic, right? Nobody else will have that name. One day soon she’ll get a forever home and then she can have a forever name.



Come on, let's get the rest of these hung up, huh?" I said, standing up and wiping my hands.

"Good idea," she said, rubbing her hands on her arms. "It's freezing out here. You want me to start taking down other people's posters? Like sabotage the competition? I'd totally do that for you," she joked.

I laughed. "Maybe not the best way to win a 'holiday spirit' competition."

We giggled and then headed off to finish my rounds. Maybe I should have given this to Eliza or Kimberly to handle, but truly, things were so busy at the spa that they didn't have extra time. I glanced around, trying to see if there was a single post that we hadn't already covered with one of my posters. I wanted to make sure that nobody in this town would be able to do anything without tripping over a reminder of the snowwoman contest.

I needed as much support on my side as I could. Especially since Reed Bank was more likely to have connections in this town than I would. I mean, people who needed money outnumbered people who owned dogs, after all. Plus, their business had been around longer than mine.

A few minutes later, we finished tacking up the last of the posters and I hugged Harmony before we parted ways. With Sweetie-for-now by my side, I started my walk back to my car. When she looked up at me again, I reached down to pet her.

"You don't think there's anything going on between Connor and me, do you?" I said, glancing around to make sure nobody had heard me or they might think I was losing my mind. After all, it wasn't as though anyone was going to hand over the reins of the prime business spot in town to a person who had in-depth chats with a lost doggie.

Sweetie-for-now just gazed up at me happily, though, and I rubbed a hand over her soft, gold-streaked fur. She didn't have anything smart to say about Connor, because she knew that I had bigger things to focus on, if only I could get my mind off of him.

## CHAPTER SIX

As I lay back in my bubble bath, I reached for my book and set it on the edge of the tub, letting out a happy little sigh. Okay, time to relax. Harmony and I had gone out this morning to hang up more posters I'd made last night. Obsessed much? Maybe a little...

Time to *relax*.

I wasn't going to think about work right now. I was taking a bath, reading my book, and actually having some much needed *relaxing* time.

I grabbed the novel from the edge of the bath, which was the book that the girls at The Mistletoe Book Club had picked out—a little vacation-themed romance about a woman finding the love of her life on a cruise ship.

I had flicked through the book a little already, but hadn't been able to get into it with so much else going on in my mind. Besides, given that I didn't exactly have some great romance in my life at this moment in time, it felt a little cruel to remind myself of what I was missing out on. Why had romance novels never bothered me before? I mean, come on. A big, sweeping hero coming in to make everything better, a kiss that swept me off my feet, a man who I could just look into the eyes of and *know* he was the person for me...

*Ding-dong, ding-dong.*

"Ugh!" I said, wondering who could be at my door. I should ignore it, but what if it turned out to be someone who

needed help with their dog? I would never forgive myself if my selfish need for a hot bath made a furry little friend suffer.

Sweetie-for-now, who had been waiting politely for me outside the bathroom, came bounding down the stairs behind me. I tied the robe around my waist, made sure that I wasn't going to be flashing the person on the other side anything too explicit, and then opened the door.

Connor was waiting on the other side. His green eyes peered at me over a navy blue parka.

"What are you doing here?" I said, my belly doing a flip at the sight of him.

"Delivery," he said, holding out a couple of paper bags that offered a delicious savory scent that was making my mouth water. I'd been planning on cooking a nice, healthy dinner when I was out of the bath, but I'm pretty sure those plans were off.

"I don't remember ordering anything," I teased, tilting my head.

"We're not going to let the dog eat any this time," he said, handing me the bags as he leaned down to greet Sweetie-for-now. "Hey, how's my little buddy?"

"She's still homeless," I said, finding it hard not to grin watching the two of them together. He had always loved animals, and Sweetie-for-now seemed to go doe-eyed crazy for him.

"I saw you and Harmony out in the cold last night, trooping around and putting up posters," he said, wiping his feet on the porch mat. "Figured that you wouldn't have much time to cook dinner, given how much you've been doing for this competition."

"And what were you doing, creeping around downtown watching me?" I asked.

He grinned. "Putting up posters, too. That's how I know that the perfect post-postering meal is a burger and fries. You going to let me in?"

“Yes, sorry. Let me get dressed,” I said, handing him the bags and gesturing to the kitchen. “You go serve up. And don’t let Sweetie-for-now steal anything. You know how she is ...”

I put on a pair of leggings and a sweater, ran a brush through my hair, and stared at the mirror wishing I hadn’t taken all of my makeup off. I pinched my cheeks to make them a little more pink and then decided I was being ridiculous. This was not a date, this was *Connor*.

Shaking my head, I skipped down the stairs and went to the kitchen. Connor had put the skinny fries and beef burgers on plates.

“This looks so good,” I said, inhaling the delicious sent and noticing he’d brought more strawberry flavored sparkling water. “Thanks for bringing dinner. You didn’t have to do that.

“No big deal,” he said, with a shrug.

My stomach tightened. His comment reassured me this was nothing more than a quickie meal for a friend. A date would never say “no big deal” and shrug. For some reason, this didn’t make me feel better, though.

“So, you named her?” he said, nodding down to Sweetie-for-now, who was resting at his feet and looking up hopefully at our plates.

“Yeah, figured that somebody had to,” I said, snatching a fry and popping it into my mouth as I went to grab some ketchup from the refrigerator. “It’s just temporary, though.”

“How did you come up with Sweetie-for-now?”

“She’s sweet, but Harmony said “Sweetie” is too generic. I think Sweetie-for-now works for a temporary name,” I said, taking a seat at the table. “By the way, Nina isn’t going to date your friend, so forget about getting her vote.”

“Yeah, she told me,” he said, taking a seat across from me and giving me a look I couldn’t quite read. “She ... suggested I set him up with you.”

“Very funny,” I said, and then realized he was serious. “She really said that?”

“You’re not looking for someone?” he said, a line forming between his eyebrows.

“I don’t have time for anything like that right now,” I said, letting out a groan to show my disgust at the mere thought. “I’m focused on the competition, and work.”

His expression relaxed. “So, *this* is your sweetie?”

“For now,” I said, handing him a napkin.

“Thanks,” he said. He reached out to take the napkin from me and our fingers brushed, sending skitters across my skin.

My gaze flicked up to his and he was staring at me, making me wonder if he’d felt it, too. My mouth went dry and my brain searched for anything to say.

“You know how you always call me Rudolph?” I said.

“Your name, yes,” he said, straight-faced.

“Not my name, but anyway,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I thought maybe you can find a name for her. Something other than Sweetie-for-now.”

“How about Rudolph?” he said, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“Try again,” I said, shaking my head.

“You ask my opinion and then you reject my suggestion,” he said, reaching under the table to pet her again. “Why do you want me to think of another name?”

I dipped a fry into ketchup. “Just seeing if you had ideas. What do you think?”

He shrugged. “Not sure.”

“That’s very helpful,” I said, letting out a sigh.

“You going to keep her?” he asked.

“No.” I peered at him over the table as I dumped some more ketchup onto my plate. “Why, do you want her for yourself?”

“Right, like I have the time to deal with a dog on top of everything else,” he said, laughing. His smile didn’t quite

reach his eyes, though. I had known Morgan's family, including Connor, for so long, but sometimes, I didn't understand their family dynamics at all.

"A lot going on with your family?" I asked.

He didn't reply for a moment, his eyes focused on Sweetie-for-now. For a second, I thought that he hadn't heard me, but then, he nodded.

"Yeah, there is," he said.

"What's up?" I said, pushing for information. He looked so exhausted, I wondered if I could help him.

"I told my dad I entered the competition," he said, reaching for his glass of sparkling water and took a sip.

I swallowed my bite. "How did that go?"

"He seemed interested, borderline impressed," he said, glancing up at me.

"Isn't that a good thing?"

He leaned back in the chair and raked a hand through his hair. "I just don't know how my dad's going to take it if someone else wins this thing instead of me."

"It's not like entering is a guaranteed win," I said, logically.

"He's acting like I'd better get it and if someone else wins then it's going to be my fault."

"Really?" I said, furrowing my brow. "But so many people are going for it, it's not like there isn't going to be a bunch of competition ..."

"I know," he said, blowing out a breath. "But he thinks that we deserve it most, for whatever reason. I know he's been working in this town forever, but that doesn't mean he gets his pick of anything he wants here ..."

I bit my lip, feeling so badly for him.

He shook his head. "Sorry, I shouldn't be talking about this with you."

“Why not? Worried I’m going to use it against you?” I said, joking.

“I think my dad would be worried about that,” he said.

“That’s ridiculous,” I said, my heart sinking for him. I knew how much pressure I was putting on *myself* with this competition, I couldn’t imagine how much harder it would have been with a parent lurking over your shoulder, pushing for you to win.

“If you win the building, what are your plans?” he asked.

I grinned. “I’ve promised my staff that I’ll hire a receptionist first.”

“Fair enough,” he said, smiling, the mood lightening a little. “And second?”

“I’d like to put in some space for rescue pups, like Sweetie-for-now,” I said, looking down at her. “If I had more room, we could be like a foster care for the strays while they waited for a home. With the shelter full, I don’t want any of them to be stuck in the cold when I could give them a warm home for a while.”

“See, now that makes me want to win even less,” he said, a big smile spreading across his face. “How could I take away space from a sweet little girl like this one?”

Sweetie-for-now seemed to sense that we were talking about her and sprang to her feet, looking hopefully at my empty plate.

“Too late,” I said, laughing at her. “Nothing left.”

As if she understood what I’d said, she lay back down, putting her chin on her front paws. Connor reached down and scratched behind her ears.

“I’d better clean up,” I said, picking up our plates. “I have more work to do and it’s getting late.”

“Thanks, Ruby,” Connor said, his tone serious.

I turned to him and the look in his eyes told me he wasn’t thanking me for clearing his plate. Maybe that was why he’d

come over tonight, because he was having a tough time with his dad and needed a friend.

“You’re welcome,” I said, touching his shoulder for a moment before I took our dishes to the kitchen.

I turned on the faucet to rinse the plates before putting them in the dishwasher, and when I looked back he staring down at Sweetie-for-now. I could see a little mistiness in his eyes, which broke my heart, and for the first time I almost wanted him to win the competition, if only to make him look like himself again.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

When Morgan invited me to her parents' house for dinner, I thought it was just going to be a fun evening to blow off some steam, hang out with friends, nothing serious and certainly nothing that would have to do with work. But, as I pulled my car to a halt outside the Reeds' ginormous house, it dawned on me that this might not be the evening I had expected.

I peered out of my slightly streaky windows to find cars lined up around the circular driveway. I winced. Looked like I was not the only one invited for dinner. I maneuvered my small SUV carefully to park it amongst the fancy vehicles. My vehicle stood out in the worst way possible. Whatever. It worked for transporting dogs and that's all I cared about.

Who else had been invited tonight? I ran through the possibilities as I checked my lipstick in the mirror, making sure it hadn't gotten too smudged from the coffee I had slurped down on the way here to take the edge off my fatigue.

I already felt like I stood out like a sore thumb whenever I visited the Reeds. They had a ridiculously huge cabin, custom-built, of course, with views of the Rockies on a clear day. Their house looked like something that would fit on the front page of an architectural magazine instead of a casual dinner venue for the night. That was what running multiple banks got you, I supposed—a home most people wouldn't be able to afford.

I climbed out of the car and headed to the door, taking a second to peek at the cars around me. I didn't recognize them,

so whoever they belonged to certainly didn't come down my way much. No dogs? Probably not my kind of people...

I didn't even get a hand on the doorknob before it flew open, and I was met by a slightly frazzled-looking Morgan.

"What's going on?" I asked, gesturing to the cars behind me. "I thought this was just a family dinner thing."

"So did I," she said, latching onto my arm and pulling me inside. "Turns out my parents are trying to scope out the competition for that building."

"The building?" I said, feeling my heart sink. I wanted a moment to forget about all of that, but it seemed like I wasn't going to be so lucky.

"Yeah, Mr. Miller is my parents' attorney. Apparently they caught wind of the competition before the announcement. Once Connor told Dad he entered Reed Bank, Mom and Dad decided to invite the top candidates here so they can see who they're dealing with. So competitive."

My eyebrows shot up. I looked down at the casual tee and jeans I had thrown on before coming over. Not exactly business-meeting material. But not like I knew they would spring a business dinner thing on me. Ugh. They clearly don't see *my* business as competition or I would've had a formal invitation. I glanced back at my car and considered dashing into the driver's seat and heading back home for the evening. But Morgan had a strong hold on my arm that told me she wasn't going to deal with this all by herself.

"Please don't go," she said, giving me a pleading look. "I can't handle this many boring people on my own. I had a long day at the salon and need my comfort buddy."

"Well, when you put it like that," I said, laughing a little. "But you have to say at *least* five nice things about my doggie spa tonight. Make it seem like I have a chance with this."

"I will," she said, crossing her heart. "Come on, they're schmoozing in the living room."

She led me through the foyer and towards the main living space, where a dozen or so people were gathered, sipping on

drinks, and dressed like they were going to the opera. I picked a tuft of dog hair off my knee, and hoped nobody noticed.

Scanning the room for Connor, I spotted him over by the fireplace, holding a beer and the attention of a gorgeous woman. She was smiling up at him, her sleek blonde hair pulled back into a bun, and she wore a simple black dress that hugged her curves. Did I mention she seemed utterly enthralled with everything that was coming out of his mouth?

My stomach tightened and I glanced away from their flirtation, deciding I needed a drink, pronto. I spotted the bar, and headed over to pour myself something. Or, maybe two somethings. I could already feel my stomach bubbling with nerves, but knew that couldn't have anything to do with the woman clearly coming on to Connor. No, that shouldn't matter to me. My annoyance probably had to do with not being prepared for a *business* meeting—especially one where everyone would be judging me on how I ranked in the competition.

But, I mean, did that woman really have to keep blinking up at him like that? So obvious!

“Morgan, I don't think I can do this,” I said, but before I could protest further, her boyfriend, Dallas appeared by her side, sliding his arm around her waist.

“Hey, angel,” he said, a smile spreading across his handsome face. “Can I borrow you?”

“Sure,” she said, and gave me an apologetic look before leaving me to fend for myself. I made myself a vodka-cranberry, and promised that I wasn't going to drink more than two.

Before I could take so much as a sip, though, Morgan's mom—the one and only Ivy Reed, who could seriously cause a scarecrow fright—strode toward me. I had always been a little intimidated by her, since her attitude told everyone she didn't take garbage from a single person and she didn't care who knew it. A goal that could benefit me right now, but instead I stayed focused on not spilling the pink drink down my front.

“Ruby, so glad you could make it tonight,” Ivy said, as she pulled me into a gentle hug. Then her gaze rested on my outfit and her eyes moved very slowly as she took it all in, and a long pause followed that told me she did *not* approve. “This will be an excellent chance for all of us in the competition to break the ice, don’t you think?”

“Uh, yeah, sure,” I said, feeling the strong urge to run to Morgan’s closet and upgrade my outfit. “I, um, didn’t know other people were going to be here tonight.”

“Hmm... Well, the more, the merrier,” she said, tilting her head so that I could see over her shoulder where that gorgeous woman was still chatting with Connor and tossing her head back and laughing at something he said.

I felt a little twist in my gut, and tried to ignore it.

“So, have you met everyone?” Ivy asked.

I shook my head. “I just got here.”

“Oh, I see,” she said, eyeing the drink in my hand. Oh, right, I’d had time to pour myself a drink. Forgot that little fact. I was so not making a good impression here, turning up in casual clothes and beelining straight for the booze.

“Well, let me introduce you to a couple of people,” she said, taking my arm and steering me toward some guests I didn’t recognize. I took a long sip of my drink and braced myself for what was to come next.

“Ruby, this is Bob,” she said, gesturing to an older man with a toupee that was so obvious I had to fight not to stare directly at it. Maybe it was tilted wrong ...?

“He owns the gym just outside town, and he’s been running it for a few years,” she continued, and I extended a hand to the man and smiled politely.

“Lovely to meet you,” he said, giving a second glance at my shirt. “And what do you do?”

“I run a dog grooming spa that offers training and boarding,” I said, hoping that explained the casual outfit and dog hair to boot.

“Oh, that must be ... fun,” he said, barely concealing the amusement in his voice. He didn’t take my job seriously, that much was obvious.

“It’s a very successful business,” I said, feeling my forehead wrinkle. “I have so many clients that I’ve outgrown the space.”

“You don’t say,” he said, looking bored with our conversation.

Did he have a superiority complex because his business happened to deal with *human* customers? Well, dogs were super fun, so whatever.

“Yeah,” I said, taking a long sip of my drink.

“Ruby, this is Marty,” Ivy said, nodding to a man who was chatting with Ivy’s husband, William. The two of them guffawed at some joke I didn’t quite catch, and I tried to put on a smile to make it seem like I was in on everything, too. Marty, a man with a tailor-made suit, looked over at me, frowning.

“Uh, nice to ...” I began, but he turned away. Strike two.

Nobody seemed to want to hear from me, which deflated my ego to say the least. I had no idea what it was going to take to get it through to them that I was a serious contender.

“Excuse me a moment, I’m going to check on dinner,” Ivy said, touching my arm before she left me by myself. I stood there, afloat in the middle of the room, wishing I could just vanish. I wanted to get out of there and contemplated if anyone would notice if I made a run for it.

Morgan and Dallas were embroiled in some intense conversation near the door to the terrace outside, and they didn’t look like they wanted to be interrupted, and Connor was still chatting to that woman—they were conversing rather intimately, like old friends, and I wondered if they had met before. Rationally, I knew I should be able to go over and join them, but it felt like I would be breaking up a private conversation or something. Mr. Reed, I noticed, was hovering

not far away, keeping an eye on things and micro-managing, just like Connor had said.

And so, I just stood there, looking around, feeling out of place. It felt like an eternity before Ivy announced dinner. On my second drink, I jumped at the chance to do something other than hover awkwardly all alone. I tried to grab a seat next to Connor, knowing he would find it funny that I had thought we were just doing a casual family-and-friends thing and he'd probably make a joke that would cheer me up. But that woman was still hanging off his arm, gazing up at him like he was the most fascinating man on the planet.

Not that she had terrible taste. Sigh.

So, I sat across the table from the two of them, fiddling with my soup spoon, and finally realized what was bugging me. Really bugging me, actually, even though I should have known better than to let it. Connor and Blondie were just talking, right? Same as everyone else here.

“Are you competing for the building, too? With that ... dog salon?” Marty asked, turning to me once nobody else at the table seemed interested in listening to him.

I nodded. “Yes, I am...”

“Good luck with that,” he said, seeming to hold back a smirk. He clearly didn't think that I was any threat. But I was a business owner and deserved a spot at this table...

I took another sip of my drink, my eyes darting to Connor and that woman. Connor had never mentioned her before. Why wouldn't he have mentioned her?

“What would you use that building for?” Marty asked.

“My doggie spa has run out of room and we're turning away business,” I said, tearing my eyes away from Connor and Blondie.

“There's that much demand here, huh?” he asked, wrinkling his nose.

“You'd be surprised,” I said, keeping my voice as upbeat as possible.

“Interesting,” he said, reaching for his wine glass and turning his attention to Ivy, who was sitting on the other side of him.

“Sorry, excuse me,” I said, knowing the drinks were affecting me since I was leaning toward intimidating Ivy, who had to know everyone in the room. “Who’s that woman talking with Connor?”

“Andrea?” Ivy asked, glancing over at the woman, who had obviously been some kind of supermodel in a former life. “You haven’t met Andrea?”

“Not yet.”

“She’s an old girlfriend of Connor’s,” she said, waving her hand.

“An old girlfriend?” I asked, my stomach twisting into a knot. I shifted a little closer, trying to make sure that I had heard her right. But before I could get another word out, I managed to knock over Marty’s wine glass, which promptly spilled onto my shirt.

“Agh!” I exclaimed, loud enough that the entire room turned to look at me. With their eyes on me, I felt more out-of-place than I had the whole night, and that was seriously saying something. I couldn’t stay here. I couldn’t just sit there in my casual clothes and pretend that I was the same as everyone else.

At least with half a glass of wine dripping down my front, I didn’t have any reason to stay.

“Excuse me,” I said, jumping to my feet, and making a break for the terrace.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

The cool air hit me hard as I ran out onto the terrace, but not hard enough to wash away the shock of everything that had just happened. I couldn't believe I'd knocked the wine over. So embarrassing. If I hadn't felt like enough of an outsider that put the nail in the coffin, for sure.

I inhaled deeply. That woman was Connor's ex? Andrea? How did I not know her? It looked like the breakup had been pretty friendly if you asked me. She had been hanging off his every word, but how did he feel about her? Maybe I was too blind to see it.

Why should this bother me, though? My bestie's brother has an ex I had never met before? Was it that big of a deal? But if the knot in my stomach was any indication it did bother me. She wasn't just an ex, she was here *now*, with him and—

“Rudolph?”

I jumped, spinning around to find Connor through the doorway, eyeing me with a look of concern. I put a hand to my heart. “What are you doing here?”

“Are you okay?” he asked as he pushed the door shut behind him.

I nodded, even though I knew that I must look like a total wreck. But I didn't want to make it his problem. I was sure that he was more interested in getting back to the fun evening that he was having with his ex than coming out here and checking on me.



“Yeah, I’m fine,” I said, but my voice wobbled, giving me away. Ugh, what was wrong with me? As soon as I had realized that he was talking to an ex, my brain had scrambled. His attention was usually on me and I didn’t like that it had changed, which was unnerving.

“You sure?” he asked, stepping toward me and stopping a foot away. “You don’t seem fine. What happened?”

“Nothing, I just knocked some wine over and felt stupid,” I said, turning around to look off into the woods.

“You were talking to my mom,” he said.

“Yeah, she was telling me about Andrea,” I said, shooting him a look over my shoulder, checking to see how he would react when I said her name. He hardly blinked. “Someone I don’t know.”

“Oh, okay,” he said, a line forming between his eyebrows. “I thought you’d have run into her by now. She’s been running a clothing store an hour away and moved here, wanting to expand with a store in Christmas Mountain, that’s why she’s going for the building like the rest of us.”

“She’s not here as your date?” I asked.

“No, what gave you that idea?” he said, shaking his head. “Don’t get me wrong, it’s not like we hate each other or anything.”

“I didn’t even know you two were together,” I said, turning to face him. It was just the two of us out there on that terrace and I was suddenly distinctly aware of that fact.

“It’s not like I know everyone you date, Ruby,” he said, a smile quirking up the corners of his mouth. “We went out for a few months, but that was awhile ago.”

“Why did you break up?” I blurted.

He shrugged. “She’s nice and all, but she’s a little too ... obsessive for my liking.”

“Like how?” I asked, feeling some of the stress drain out of me.

“She can fixate on things and not let them go,” he said, with a little chuckle. “That was me for a while, but it was too intense. Not comfortable, you know? A relationship that’s right should be easy. Anyway, she’s moved on so that’s the end of it.”

“That’s not how she’s acting tonight,” I said, crossing my arms. “She’s been all over you since I got here.”

“She’s trying to sweet-talk her way into getting Reed Bank to back out of the competition so she has a better chance,” he said, raising an eyebrow at me in amusement. “That’s all it is, Ruby. Why? You’re not jealous that I’ve been getting attention, are you?”

“Of course not,” I said, tripping over my own voice. I wasn’t jealous of her, or him, or anything that they’d had. I was just ... disappointed that I didn’t have anyone to hang out with at this dinner party. I wasn’t jealous that he was talking to a woman that he used to have a thing with, because if I was, then that would mean...

“You sure about that?” he said, taking a step closer.

“I’m sure,” I said, but I found myself moving forward, closing the distance between us. “Why? Do you want me to be jealous of her?”

“Could be nice,” he said, keeping his gaze on mine.

“Okay, now you’re just being full of yourself,” I said, but I couldn’t deny that pull in my center, tugging me toward him. I wished that I could ignore it, deny it, but each time I tried, it just grew more insistent. I inched toward him, even as I tried my best to pretend that I couldn’t feel the palpable tension that was building between us.

“Am I?” he asked. There was that cocky edge to his voice, but underneath it, I knew that he could feel it, too, whatever it was happening between us here on this balcony. I had come out here to escape, but he had found me. “Do you like a guy to be full of himself?”

“Yes. I mean, no, of course not,” I said, my heart rate kicking up.

We were standing so close now that I was sure I couldn't hide from my feelings any longer, no matter how much I might have wanted to. I could feel the heat from his body, his warmth against the cold, and the contrast was making my body burn.

He reached for me, his fingers brushing over my cheek as he tucked a few strands of blonde hair behind my ear. His touch was sure, confident, and irresistible.

Something inside me melted, giving way to whatever magnetic pull had us mere centimeters apart now. His lips were close to mine, so close I could just tilt my head up and be kissing him. But we were still in that place of plausible deniability, before anything between us had actually happened. We could still laugh it off, pretend that the two of us were goofing around.

But instead, I found my eyes drifting shut and he lifted my chin until I knew I had to do this, had to get it out of my system—

“Connor?” a woman called from inside.

I sprang back so fast that I almost tripped over my own feet. My eyes flew open, and I turned to see Andrea coming outside, the woman who used to have Connor all to herself. She stood just outside the door, staring at the two of us as if assessing.

“Andrea, what's up?” Connor asked, sounding annoyed. I knew that tone, he'd used it many times when we were kids and it never meant anything good.

“I wanted to see where you were,” she said, and her eyes darted over to me. “Didn't realize you were busy. Are you coming back inside?”

He turned to me, giving me a questioning glance.

“You're clearly wanted,” I said, still aching to feel the warmth of his lips on mine. But I shrugged and willed the heat in my cheeks to dissipate. “You should go.”

“All right,” he said, putting a hand at the small of my back. “Let's go back inside ...”

“I’ll be in shortly,” I said, feeling annoyed that she’d interrupted us. “I just need a minute to myself.”

He looked at me a moment longer before he nodded. Then he slipped back into the house and I was left trying to work out what had just happened—if I had really just come close to kissing Connor Reed. And if so, what did that mean for us next?

## CHAPTER NINE

“You’re kidding me,” I said, across the booth from Harmony in the Sleigh Café, as she filled me in on her first-date disaster from the night before with Connor’s friend.

“No, he actually got into an argument with the server about why he shouldn’t have to leave a tip,” she said, covering her face with her hands, as though just thinking about it was enough to make her want to curl up into a ball.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“I left the tip myself,” she said, shrugging. “He gave us good service, so I added it to the bill. Just to get out of there, really. One and done.”

I cringed. “I can’t believe Connor knows someone who is that cheap. Sorry your first date back on the scene wasn’t a good one.”

“Me, too,” she said, reaching for her whipped-cream-topped gingerbread latte. As soon as I saw that decadent drink on the table when I arrived, I knew her first date hadn’t gone well.

“I can’t believe I have to go through all this dating nonsense again,” she said, with a sigh. “All because Dave turned into a jerk.”

“You deserve better,” I said, taking a sip of my latte.

“I know,” she said, looking slightly defeated. “I’m not saying I thought that I would meet the man of my dreams on

my first real date out of a relationship, but it's still disappointing."

"Think of it as a warm-up," I said, trying my best to put a positive spin on it. "Think of it as getting all stretched-out and ready to get back into the dating world before the right guy comes along."

"I hope so," she said, shaking her head. "I don't know how you handle being single."

"Well, I don't bother dating, so that helps," I joked.

"Oh, yeah?" She shot back, tipping her head to the side. "So what exactly is going on between you and Connor then?"

A day ago, I would have brushed her off and told her that she needed to drop this weird fantasy she had of something happening between Connor and me. But, after last night, I couldn't deny my feelings anymore..

"I actually saw him last night," I said.

She raised her eyebrows and then leaned forward with interest. "Please tell me that you had a better time with him than I did with my date."

I glanced around the café, which was one of the most popular spots in town, and I didn't know if I wanted to confess what had almost happened right here with so many people around. What if someone heard me? Realized I was talking about Connor?

"Last night was weird," I said, shaking my head. "Morgan invited me to this dinner thing at her parents' house and it turned out to be some calculated business dinner, so the Reeds could check out their competition for Ms. Rivera's building. Connor was there, talking to this blonde woman all night, and I eventually found out from his mom that she was his ex."

"No way!" she said, gasping. "Why were they talking all night if they are actually broken up? Did he bring her as his date?"

"No, he says that they're over," I said, feeling uneasy about it. "That it didn't work out between them and he can't

see that changing.”

“He told you about his relationship with his ex?” she asked, her eyebrows lifting.

“I kind of asked him about it,” I said, cringing.

She nodded, looking triumphant. “That’s what I thought. And why exactly would you want to know about that if you didn’t have feelings for him?”

“You’re determined to get me together with Connor, aren’t you?” I said, playfully.

She shrugged. “I know chemistry when I see it, and you two have serious chemistry.”

I shook my head. “How could I ever date Morgan’s brother? Wouldn’t that be too weird? And what about his family? I’m in direct competition with them right now.”

She rubbed her hands together. “Very Montague and Capulet ...”

“Much more trouble than I can deal with right now,” I said, firmly and meant it. At least, I did until I remembered how good he had felt with his lips so close...

“Ruby, you must embrace your connection,” she said, taking a long sip of her sugary drink. “Who cares if it’s not convenient right now? That’s not what love is about.”

“I’m not in love with him,” I said, quickly.

“But you like him, don’t you?”

Suddenly, I was hit by a wave of exhaustion. I did like him, honestly, but I couldn’t deal with whatever I felt. Not now, not with everything else that was going on with my business. But that almost-kiss, the kiss that had so nearly been, kept replaying in my brain. I wasn’t going to be able to get that moment out of my head until I had seen it through.

The door to the café dinged as it opened and I glanced up. My stomach dropped when I saw who walked in: Andrea.

“Oh, no. It’s *her*,” I said, whispering to Harmony. “Don’t look.”

Harmony immediately craned her neck around. “Who? Who are you talking about?” she asked, peering at the entrance into the coffee shop.

“Connor’s ex,” I said, through gritted teeth. “Stop staring at her before she—”

But before I could finish what I was saying, Andrea noticed us staring at her. She lifted a hand, smiled and then headed over in our direction.

“This isn’t happening,” I said, prepping for a run-in with Connor’s ex.

“Ruby, right?” Andrea said, smiling sweetly.

I lifted my head and smiled back, my cheeks tight. “Yes, hello.”

“Good to see you again,” she said, and her gaze darted over to Harmony, who was looking up at her with a barely-disguised curiosity.

“You, too,” I said, hoping this was going to be over with quickly. I kicked Harmony under the table, trying to get her to act normal, but she just kicked me right back.

“I’ll tell Connor that I ran into you,” she said, tilting her head and squinting her eyes. “We’re going out to dinner tonight.”

“Oh, that’s ... nice.”

“We’ve got a lot to talk about,” she said, checking her watch. “Anyway. I’ll leave you ladies to it.”

And with that, she turned and walked to the counter. I watched as she went and picked up a to-go coffee. Then I turned to Harmony, whose eyebrows had pretty much vanished into her hairline. And I knew that I wasn’t the only one who had noticed Andrea had come over to stake her claim to Connor after she had seen our almost-kiss the night before.

And all at once, my feelings for him became a lot clearer. Because there was no way I was going to let her walk all over me without a fight.



## CHAPTER TEN

“Come on, Sweetie-for-now,” I said, glancing at the sweet dog who was gazing up at me with a hopeful expression on her adorable face. I clipped a leash to her collar and headed to the door. “Let’s find you a home, huh?”

As much as I wanted to keep her here at the doggie spa, there wasn’t space for her since we were at full capacity. I needed to find her a home. Sometimes I thought it would be nice to have a dog of my own, but I worked long hours at the doggie spa and without room for her there she would be neglected at my townhome, which didn’t have a yard. Right now, I could hardly manage to keep myself clean and fed, let alone rescue a dog.

I decided that hitting the streets would give us a better chance of finding her a new home. My heart ached at the mere thought of giving her up, but I knew it was in her best interest. She trotted along beside me, clearly not guessing what was really going on. How should I find her a home? Go door-to-door and hope someone would take one look at her and adopt her? Well, that was pretty much my only option at this point.

As I pondered which direction to go, I spotted Connor’s car pulling into a parking space down the street, and then he climbed out. His shoulders were hunched up toward his ears and his lips were turned down into a frown. Before I could think better of it, I hurried over to see what was wrong. If nothing else, maybe the sight of Sweetie-for-now would cheer him up.

“Hey, Connor!” I called, as I hurried over to him. As soon as he glanced up, the corners of his mouth curved upward.

“Hey, Rudolph,” he said, tucking his key fob into his pocket. “What’s up?”

“Everything all right?” I asked, and the carefully-cultivated smile on his face flickered for a moment, as though he was considering letting it drop.

“I’m fine,” he said, as he crouched down to greet Sweetie-for-now. “How’s my little buddy?”

“Ugh, not great,” I said, with a long sigh. “We are off to find her a home. My last kennel got booked, so I can’t keep taking care of her. She’s so active and I don’t have a yard for her.”

“Oh, no,” he said, as he rose back up to his feet. “Are you having any luck?”

“No, I have no idea where to start looking for a possible owner,” I said, shaking my head. “I worry people won’t want an adult dog who isn’t a pedigree, you know?”

“Well, they would be missing out,” he said, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “I’ll give you a hand with your search. Want to get a hot chocolate first? That should warm us up.”

“Yeah, that sounds nice,” I said, my heart fluttering a little. How sweet of him to offer to walk around with me. Spending time alone with him felt dangerous in the very best way possible. Still, I wondered what had him in such a mood before. Maybe something to do with Andrea? But there was no way I would bring that up.

We headed down the street to Jingle Bells Bakery, and he ordered us a couple of hot chocolates to go while Sweetie-for-now and I took a booth next to the door. Almost as soon as we sat down, a little old lady floated over to come give Sweetie-for-now a light pat on the head.

“She is the loveliest thing!” the woman cooed.

“You think? She’s actually looking for a home right now,” I said, my heart lifting. The woman looked kind and friendly.

“If you’d like a dog—”

“No, not for me. I’ve got medical appointments and my arthritis won’t allow me to walk a dog,” she said, backing off quickly as though I was going to foist the animal onto her before she had a chance to run.

“Okay, bye,” I said, slumping down in my seat.

Connor returned with the hot chocolates, both of the cups towering with whipped cream, and he set one down in front of me.

“Any luck?” he asked.

I shook my head. “I thought I had a lead, but ... nope.”

“Don’t lose heart, Rudolph,” he said, as Sweetie-for-now tried to climb onto his lap to steal some of his whipped cream. I smiled as he gently eased her back down again. He was so good with her, so careful and caring.

“I think I’m going to need a little more in the way of marketing if I’m going to convince someone that she’s the dog for them,” I said, lifting my cup and taking a sip of the sugary sweet drink.

“Shouldn’t be hard for someone as sweet as her,” he said.

The liquid warmed my insides. “Thanks for the hot chocolate.”

“Thanks for giving me an excuse to do something else,” he said, a line forming between his eyebrows. “I’d much rather be here with you two than ...”

I tilted my head. “Than what?”

“Not important.” He shook his head, before flashing me a smile. Wow, when he hit me with that smile, everything dropped from my mind.

Before I could say anything else, a man stopped beside our table. His face creased and his eyes narrowed as he peered down at Sweetie-for-now.

“Did I hear you’re looking to get rid of that dog?” he asked, curtly.

“I’m looking to rehome her, yes ...”

He nodded. “I’ll take her.”

My eyes widened in surprise. “You will?”

“Need a guard dog to keep an eye on my place while I’m out of town,” he said, sounding annoyed that he had to explain. “She’ll do.”

“Um, I don’t think ...” I felt a sudden surge of protectiveness, hearing him speak about her like that. Was he leaving her home alone? For how many days? I wanted someone who would spend time with her and love her the way she deserved.

“I’ll take her now, give me the leash.” He held his hand out, but there was no way that I was going to give her to someone who wasn’t a hundred percent right.

“I actually have another home in mind for her,” I said, thinking any other home would do over this guy. “I’ll let you know if that changes, okay?”

“Whatever.” He glowered at me for a moment, and then stalked off, muttering something.

“Good call not giving Sweetie-for-now to that cranky man,” Connor said, as soon as the guy was out of earshot. “You don’t want her going to a home like that.”

“It’s not like I’m trying to be picky, but—”

“You’re talking about the rest of her life,” he said, his warm gaze holding mine as if he understood. “The least you can do is make sure that it’s with someone you trust, right?”

“Right,” I said, swirling my spoon through the velvety hot chocolate. “But, still, I’m running out of time. We should get moving before it gets dark.”

We finished our drinks and headed out to the sidewalk. Sweetie-for-now was getting a little restless, and I wanted to make sure she slept well that evening.

“Maybe that guy was just having a bad moment,” I said, as we made our way up towards the Falls. The cold weather felt

less chilly with Connor beside me, and I wondered if he felt it too.

“No, you made the right decision,” he said, firmly. “You want to make sure she’s with someone who knows how special she is.”

“Thanks, you’re right,” I said, my throat tightening a little. “I just don’t know how many more offers I’m going to get, that’s all.”

“Don’t give up hope,” he said, reaching out to touch my arm, causing electricity to race across my skin. Could he feel the chemistry, too? The remnants of that almost-kiss from the party the other night?

We hiked the steps and then saw the sparkling lights from The Sharing Tree, where people would hang ornaments in honor of someone or as a wish for something. It was a well-loved tradition in Christmas Mountain.

“Do you remember when we used to come up here as kids?” I asked, as he walked beside me, Sweetie-for-now trotting happily along with us.

“Of course I do,” he said, giving me a side-glance. “I remember wishing for a very specific bike I wanted, the exact model and everything, just to make sure Santa would know what kind to bring me.”

I giggled, eyeing the hundreds of wishes on the tree in front of us right now. All these people’s desires, their deepest wants, wrapped around branches in the hopes of being heard.

“What would you wish for now?” I asked, wondering how expensive the bike would be.

“To make my dad proud,” he said, without stopping to think about it. “I’ve been wishing for that for a while, actually. What about you?”

“To find Sweetie-for-now a good home,” I said, my heart aching a little. “She’s such a sweet dog, and I want to be certain she’ll spend her life with someone who really cares about her, someone that I could trust. Yes, that’s my wish.”

A spell of silence washed over us as we studied the tree.

“What if she came to live with me?” he asked, his tone serious.

I turned to him, eyes wide. “Are you saying ...? Wait, what do you mean?”

“I have a yard to keep her exercised and entertained,” he said, kneeling down to rub each side of her face, as Sweetie-for-now nuzzled his hand happily. “And we get along great, right?”

I raised my eyebrows. “You think you could handle a dog?”

“Well, you’ll still be around if I need a little help, right?” he asked, the corner of his mouth curving upward. “I can always ask you if I need advice. Plus, free grooming for life, surely?”

“Um, *yes*,” I said, as I ran through the reality of what he was saying to me. I didn’t want to give Sweetie-for-now away to just anyone, and Connor would be a perfect choice. “It’s a lot to ask you to take on, though. I don’t want you to offer because you feel like you have to. I mean, I don’t want to guilt you into being a doggie dad.”

“It’s something I want to do, Ruby,” he said, as he stood again, his eyes were blazing with such sincerity that I knew I shouldn’t argue with him.

“But—”

“Please,” he said, clasping my face in his hands. “Let me make your wish come true ...”

And before I could say another word, he leaned forward slowly, closed the distance between us and kissed me. Butterflies danced in my belly at the feel of his mouth against mine. For a moment, the world stopped and I felt like everything in the world was as it should be.

His hands slipped around me and he pulled me against him, kissing me like I was the only thing that mattered to him. I wound my arms around his neck and kissed him right back.

All of the feelings I had pushed down burst free and wrapped around us like a warm bubble of joy.

And as we kissed, right here by The Sharing Tree, I hoped this bubble would never pop.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

I glanced down at the cover of our latest Mistletoe Book Club novel, and grinned. The dashing romantic hero on the front cover might have been cute, but he had nothing on the man who had kissed me last night. *Wowzers*.

I hadn't been able to stop thinking about that kiss with Connor by The Sharing Tree. Even now, waiting for the rest of the book club to arrive—yes, I was on time for once—it was all I could think about and I wondered if my thoughts were written all over my face. Everyone would be able to tell something had changed inside me, I was sure of it, but all I felt was extreme bliss.

“Hey, Rubes!” Harmony said, as she swept through the door, waving her copy of the book.

I waved back. “Hey!”

“You're early,” she said, seeming surprised.

I shrugged. “Just lucky today, I guess.”

“You read this one?” she asked, gesturing at the book, which was called *Chelsea's Check-up*, a story about this hot, sexy dentist and the assistant that he fell in love with. It was totally cheesy and utterly ridiculous, but I'd enjoyed it. Maybe because I was indulging in my own romance for the first time in way too long.

“Yep, I read it,” I said, as everyone in The Mistletoe Book Club filed in and took a seat. I was looking forward to losing myself in the book club for an hour or two, partly to escape



from the complications inside my head right now. Ever since Connor and I shared that kiss, and that sweet little hand-in-hand walk back to our cars afterward, I'd been trying to figure out what was going to happen next between us.

“So!” Nina announced brightly, as she took her seat in the circle. “What did we all think of this read?”

“I loved how scandalous it was,” Giselle said, tossing her hair over one shoulder as her eyes gleamed with excitement. “I couldn't believe someone would get involved with their boss. I mean, that could lead to a very sticky situation.”

“And if it had gone badly, she may have been forced to change jobs,” Amanda said, shaking her head. “But he was a nice guy and made a really nice living.”

“He took her on that trip to Hawaii,” Macy said, seeming to swoon over that fact.

“That was a work conference, but okay,” Amanda said, rolling her eyes playfully, and soon the gals were arguing about whether or not this was the hottest romance of the century.

“You're quiet, Ruby,” Nina said, glancing over at me.

I was sure that I could see a glimmer of amusement in her eyes, and wondered if there was something she knew that she wasn't telling me.

“I thought it was a pretty hot romance,” I said, hoping she wouldn't notice my mind had been elsewhere, on Connor's kiss, yum.

“Speaking of forbidden romance,” Giselle said, raising her eyebrows. “I heard a little somethin' somethin' about you and Connor Reed by The Sharing Tree last night.”

“What?” I blurted, feeling a rush of heat to my cheeks.

“I heard about that too,” Lacey said, and, a second later, I was under the laser-gaze of each of my friends in the book club.

“Did something happen?” Harmony asked, leaning forward with interest.

“I, um, guess it did,” I said, feeling like my cheeks were on fire.

Squeals sounded around the room and I guessed any conversation we might have about the book had officially gone out the window.

“What exactly happened?” Lacey said, beaming so much it looked as though she had won a bet. “Tell us *everything*.”

“Well, Connor and I were going for a walk with the stray dog I’ve been watching,” I said, biting my bottom lip for a moment. “And next thing I knew we were at The Sharing Tree.”

“And then?” Nina prodded.

“Connor asked what I would wish for,” I said, remembering back to the sweetness of that moment. “I told him I wanted the dog to go to a good home. I mean, she doesn’t even have a proper name. Next thing I knew, he told me that he would adopt her and then ...”

A goofy smile spread across my face as the memories flooded back through my mind. I couldn’t believe I was actually telling my friends about Connor and me, but I couldn’t deny my feelings any longer.

“Finally,” Amanda said, taking a sip of her hot tea. “You two have been on the cusp of something for the last, what, couple of years ... ?”

“No, we’ve just been friends. It’s not like we planned this,” I said, blinking.

“You were oblivious to your feelings for him,” Carol said. “We’ve been waiting for one of you to make the move. Seemed like only a matter of time.”

“I still can’t believe it’s actually happened,” Harmony gushed, reaching over to give my hand a squeeze. “What’s your status now? Are you guys together?”

“It was one kiss,” I said, surprised that no one seemed surprised. “I-I’m not sure what it means. We don’t have to have a label after one kiss, do we?”

“No, but it’s not just one kiss,” Giselle said, pointedly. “You’ve been on the verge of something for a long time. It seemed obvious to the rest of us.”

The girls chatted about this new relationship that I apparently now had with Connor, and honestly, I was more than happy to just let them talk. I didn’t want to think too hard about what that one kiss had meant, because what if it didn’t mean as much to him?

As everyone discussed the pros and cons of my defining a relationship with Connor, Harmony leaned over to me, wearing a concerned expression. “How was the kiss?”

“Amazing,” I said, honestly.

“What about that whole thing with Andrea? His ex, I mean?”

“I have no idea,” I said, biting my bottom lip.

“You should ask him about it,” Harmony said, her tone sounding like a warning.

“I’m going to,” I said, but I didn’t know how to begin.

And I knew that it would be impossible to think about anything else when the feel of his lips on mine was a fresh and delicious memory replaying in my head again and again.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

On Monday, The Divine Doggie Spa and Training had so many disasters that I thought there couldn't possibly be any more coming, and then I started to bathe a frisky little Pekinese, who jumped up and knocked the nozzle from my grip.

“Oof!” I gasped as the nozzle flew out of my hand and skittered across the floor, and the latch didn't click off so the water kept spraying. I cringed, remembering that latch was broken. I'd been meaning to order a new one but hadn't had the opportunity yet.

The little Pekinese I had been washing in the tub started barking as I made several attempts to step on the hose of the still-spraying nozzle to cut off the water supply. Unfortunately, my foot nudge inadvertently changed the direction of the nozzle so that the water was now facing me.

“Agh!” I said, as the water sprayed me in the face before the nozzle turned and started soaking my leg. “You will not win!” I said, determined to get a hold of the nozzle.

After several more attempts, I managed to grab the nozzle and click the latch to stop the water, but by that time the room was drenched. I surveyed the mess in horror. This grooming room needed to be mopped up, but I also needed to get home and change before anyone saw me like this. Jared was doing a dog lesson in the back room and Kimberly was grooming a Pomeranian, leaving me no other choice but to clean this up myself. Ugh.

“Excuse me, Ruby?” Addie Wilcox, who, unfortunately, was more commonly known as the town gossip, peeked her head through the doorway as water dripped down the side of my face.

“Can I help you?” I said, wishing this workday was over.

“I’ve been waiting up front for fifteen minutes to pick up Muffy,” she said, in an accusatory tone. “I have places to be, you know. Paul Abbott is taking me to dinner at The Chop House. It’s not a quick process for a woman of my age to get ready for a date.”

“Nobody is at the front desk?” I said, watching her shake her head disdainfully. Where had my manager disappeared to when she was supposed to be manning the front desk? “I’m sorry. Eliza must’ve had an emergency. I’d be happy to help you.”

“You seem to have your hands full here,” she said, gaping at the mess. “If you think I’m going to continue bringing my business here after this *horrible* wait ...”

“Let me check on Muffy for you.” I picked up the Pekinese, who was dripping with soap and water, and held him against me. “As an apology, we’ll book your next appointment free of charge. Okay?”

“Seems reasonable,” she said, looking more than a little mollified. Addie Wilcox always loved a good deal.

“I’ll meet you up front shortly,” I said, hoping Kimberly had finished grooming her Pom.

I hurried down the hall and stopped at the Groom Room with a paper elf on the door that had the letter “B” on his chest. I opened the door to find Kimberly putting the leash on Addie’s freshly groomed dog.

I let out a relieved sigh. “Thank goodness!”

Kimberly’s eyes widened, her gaze going down to my wet socks. “Uh, what happened to you?”

“I got in a disagreement with that nozzle in Groom Room A and lost,” I said, setting the little Pekinese in the clean tub.

“What happened to Eliza?”

“She’s not up front?” she asked.

I shook my head. “But Addie Wilcox is and she’s been waiting fifteen minutes for her Pomeranian. She’s not a happy camper. She has a date and apparently it takes her a *long* time to make herself presentable.”

“Why is she upset?” Kimberly glanced at the clock on the wall and then scoffed. “I told her Muffy would be ready at four o’clock and it’s ten minutes until four now.”

“Addie came early?” I said, wrinkling my nose and snapping my finger. “That’s why she was so happy when I told her the next grooming was free.”

“Sneaky,” Kimberly said, heading for the door. “That’s Addie.”

“It’s fine,” I said, grabbing the shampoo bottle. “Eliza really should’ve been at the front desk, whether Addie arrived early or not.”

“I’ll look for Eliza after I give Addie her pooch,” Kimberly said, backing out the door.

“Thanks,” I said, spraying down the little Pekinese for the second time.

This latest debacle just demonstrated further why I needed more room—at an affordable price—so I could hire more help, including a receptionist. I needed that extra space so badly, but the way things were going I wasn’t sure my clients were going to vote that I deserved the renovated building.

“Come on, little guy,” I said, as I washed the confused-looking Peke, getting him cleaned so his owner would be happy.

After I’d delivered the Pekinese to his owner, I poured myself a coffee, grabbed my coat, and stepped outside to catch a breath of fresh air. Due to the growing darkness, I could see my breath coming out in little puffs of hot air. It had already been a crazy day, and we found out by a tiny sticky note that Eliza left her duties for a hair appointment at the C.M. Salon.

“You okay?” Kimberly said, coming outside and slipping her purse strap over her shoulder.

“Yeah, I’m going to be fine,” I said, hoping it was true. “It’s just been one of those days, that’s all.”

“It’s been one of those weeks, I think,” she said, giving me a sympathetic smile.

I did my best to muster a smile back, but I couldn’t come up with much more than a flicker of a grin. I was so exhausted from the chaos of the day.

I’d managed to get Groom Room A cleaned up and my clothes had eventually dried. I felt ready to get home, pour myself a big cup of hot tea and try to forget about everything that had happened today. Oh, and put these pants in the wash, and hope the smell of doggie shampoo didn’t stay in them.

I was just pulling the blinds down on the spa window and making sure that the place was secured for the night when I heard a familiar voice outside that caught my attention. The same voice that had been replaying inside my head since I’d woken up this morning.

I peeked outside and saw Connor emerge from The Chop House and walk to the other side of the street. I bit my lip, smiling, ready to raise my hand and call out to him ... until I realized he wasn’t alone.

A moment later, Andrea caught up with him and the two of them were chatting. As he talked, she gazed up at him like he was the most fascinating thing in the world. I froze on the spot, the words I had planned to say sticking in my throat as my stomach knotted.

Maybe it was better to leave now and put this day behind me. Unfortunately, the image of Connor and Andrea stayed with me all the way home.

\* \* \*

With a mug of hot tea in my hand to help facilitate my relaxation, I sat at the dining table and glued a piece of cotton

to the poster to turn my sketch into a three-dimensional snowwoman. With the Divine Doggie Spa and Training Snowwoman Contest coming up soon, I wanted to make sure I had poster advertisements that attracted people to enter.

And crafts were a good way to de-stress, right?

Hopefully, they were a good way for me to forget that I had seen Connor with Andrea just an hour or so ago. I knew that they were still friends, but seeing them together and the way she had been looking at him didn't exactly give me the warm fuzzies.

Plus, Connor and I had texted quite a bit since that night at The Sharing Tree, but it was mostly about his pup and how she was doing and ideas of what he should name her. Not once had we mentioned our kiss.

As I glued on another piece of cotton, my phone buzzed and Connor's name appeared across my cell screen. My stomach did a somersault, which I willed to calm down before I answered.

"Hello?" I said, hoping to sound casual.

"Hey, Rudolph."

My tummy warmed at the sound of Connor's smooth voice. I grinned and leaned back in my seat, the first real smile of the day.

"What's up?" I asked, trying to keep my voice as neutral as possible. I didn't want to give away how much seeing him with that woman had bothered me.

"Just wanted to check on you," he replied. "Sweetie-for-now is settling in well here, but she wants a permanent name. And I think she misses you."

"I'm going to have to visit sometime," I said, wondering if he'd suggest that I come over now. "You know, someday when I'm not busy making posters," I said, sabotaging any chance of an invitation tonight. Nice one, Ruby.

"Anyway, how are you?"



“Ugh, not great,” I said, with a sigh. “It’s been a difficult day. Two dogs got mixed up in our schedule, the nozzle I’ve been meaning to fix went berserk on me, and one of my clients tricked me into giving her a free grooming.”

“I’m sorry,” he said, but he sounded like he was struggling to hold back a laugh.

“I can hear the laughter in your voice, Connor,” I said, and for some reason that lifted the darkness of the day from my shoulders.

“I’m just trying to figure out how a nozzle goes berserk,” he said.

I had to hold back a laugh. “It involves a whole lot of water, I’ll tell you that much.”

“You sound a little better,” he said.

I smiled. Talking to Connor always made me feel better. “I’m just tired, that’s all. It’s been a tough start to the week. I’m working on more posters for the snowwoman contest. On top of work, this just feels like a lot, you know?”

“Yeah, I get that,” he said, sounding sympathetic. “Anything I can do to help?”

“Get Reed Bank to pull out of the competition,” I said, only half-joking.

“Trust me, I would if I could,” he said, laughing again. “Turns out this challenge to impress my dad might just be the one thing that ruins me in his eyes.”

“I doubt that,” I said, wondering how anyone could be disappointed with Connor.

“Maybe I could take you out for dinner tomorrow? Give you a little break?”

“That sounds great,” I said, immediately excited until I remembered something. “But I actually have dinner with my family at the Sugar Plum Inn tomorrow evening ...”

“No problem. Another time,” he said, sounding disappointed.

“Maybe you could come with me?” I blurted.

“I wouldn’t be intruding?” he said.

“Of course not, my family has known you since we were kids,” I said, which was true.

“Count me in then,” he said, and I could hear the smile in his voice.

The thought of those dimples made my toes curl in the woolly socks I’d put on when I’d gotten home. Even though I’d barely had a few sips of the tea, I could feel the warmth in my belly, or maybe that was from talking to Connor.

One thing nagged at me, though, and I considered asking him about Andrea. But I didn’t want to sound like I didn’t trust him. I knew he wasn’t the kind of guy to play around, but, then again, it’s not like we’d discussed being in a relationship let alone an exclusive one.

“What kind of posters are you working on for the contest?” he said.

I looked down at the cotton snowwoman and realized I’d been continuing to glue on cotton balls while we were talking and now she had four too many. Whoops, I supposed that was what talking to a sweet and funny and handsome guy could do to me.

“I’m making a snowwoman, but it’s not coming together the way that I thought it would. She’s looking part snowwoman and part centipede. To be honest, talking to you is a little distracting,” I said, biting my lip.

“Maybe that was my intention,” he said, his low tone sending shivers up my back.

“I knew I shouldn’t trust you with this competition,” I shot back playfully.

“You trusted me with Sweetie-for-now, right?” he said.

“Yes,” I said, a warm feeling washing over me. Of course Connor was completely trustworthy. “I trust you, Connor.”

I bit my lip and decided to assume it had been an innocent dinner between Connor and Andrea until anything proved otherwise.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“About time you got here,” Jacob said, teasing me as a big brother feels the need to do, before pulling me into a hug.

“I’m *almost* on time,” I said, releasing him. “Please don’t tell me I’m the last one to arrive.”

“You always are,” he teased. “Come on, Mom and Dad are waiting.”

It didn’t sound like Connor was here yet, which was good. I’d texted my mom that I’d invited him for dinner, but that was all. Connor and I agreed to meet at the Sugar Plum Inn since I was running late from an overloaded workday, but I didn’t want to leave him alone with my family in case they had heard about our kiss at The Sharing Tree. News traveled fast in small towns and Christmas Mountain was no exception.

I followed Jacob into the dining room, inhaling the scent of the savory food already sitting on the large wooden table in the center of the room. I noted that the window frames were decorated with tinsel, with sprigs of mistletoe dangling from each corner. Very festive.

Jacob took a seat next to Lacey—my friend from the book club and also my brother’s girlfriend—and he slipped an arm around her shoulder. The two of them had been together long enough now that they’d become a regular fixture. My parents were seated across from them, and Mom sprang up to greet me with a kiss on the cheek.

“It’s so good to see you, honey,” she said, grabbing my hand and pulling me into the seat beside her. “Are you

hungry? Do you need something to drink?"

"Sure," I said, for the first time noticing Connor sitting beside Lacey. "Sorry I'm late."

Connor wore a playful smile as if he expected nothing less from me.

As everyone began serving up their plates, the conversation seemed to pick up where it had left off when I had arrived, with Jacob telling some story about a hand-made sled he'd sold to a woman, who turned out to be an ex-girlfriend's mom. Lacey laughed throughout the story, seeming very secure in their relationship.

Connor and I exchanged a look and I couldn't help thinking about *his* ex-girlfriend and wishing I felt secure about them spending time together. I mean, her obvious flirting with him didn't exactly make it easy on me.

"You okay?" Connor said, quietly, seeming to notice I was being a little reticent.

"Yes, I'm fine," I said, nodding at him. I could feel my mom watching the two of us, and I was sure she was suspicious of my inviting him.

"So, you two have been working on the competition, right?" Mom said, as soon as he and I stopped talking. "How is that going?"

"Awesome, since I'm going to win," I said, flashing a playful smile.

"Don't be sure about that," he said, laughing. "I hear your snowwoman looks more like a centipede ..."

My jaw dropped open. "I can't believe you brought that up."

"You've been working on the competition together?" Mom said, as she slid her fork into a bite of pot roast.

"A bit," I said, tilting my head. "It's a friendly competition until I win."

"Keep dreaming, Rudolph," Connor added.

Lacey parted her lips in surprise. “Rudolph?”

“It’s her nickname,” Connor said.

I rolled my eyes. “He’s called me that since we were kids and can’t seem to let it go.”

“Why Rudolph?” Lacey asked.

“Her nose turns pink in the cutest way,” Connor said, the corner of his mouth twitching.

“That’s a sweet thing to say,” Mom said, her face beaming like a Christmas tree

Jacob and Lacey exchanged a look, but my dad just continued to eat his pot roast.

I held a finger up. “Keep in mind that Connor wants to name his dog, Rudolph. Does Sweetie-for-now-for-now have a cute pink nose, too?”

“Isn’t Sweetie-for-now the dog you were rehoming, Ruby?” Dad asked, finally joining in the conversation.

I nodded. “Connor adopted her. She adores him,” I said, resisting the urge to add that I pretty much adored him, as well.

“How’s she settling in, Connor?” Mom asked, turning to him with an interested expression.

“She’s still sniffing around the house getting used to things, but she seems to be settling in,” he said, with a smile that had my mom smiling right back.

“You’re very generous to give that dog a home,” Mom said, looking impressed.

“I feel fortunate to have her,” he said, a calm expression settling over his handsome features. “She hasn’t been living with me long and I already can’t imagine living without her,” he said, his green eyes meeting mine, as if his words held a double meaning.

“Owning a dog is a big responsibility,” Jacob said, his tone serious as if he were taking up the protective-big-brother role.

I wanted to kick him under the table to tell him I didn't need protecting from Connor, but he wouldn't have paid any attention to me.

"What are you talking about, Jacob?" Dad said, setting down his fork.

"Nothing, he doesn't mean anything," I said, quickly.

"Connor and Ruby are *working* together, Randall," Mom said, raising her eyebrows pointedly at my dad.

"Oh," he said, and then his eyes widened. "*Oh*. Yes, I understand."

"You know we're sitting right here, don't you?" I said.

"We're just talking, Ruby," Jacob said. "Figuring things out."

Connor and I exchanged a look, and the soft, amused smile on his face stripped away some of the embarrassment I was feeling at my family's very obvious comments about us.

I managed to turn the focus onto the delicious meal my parents' had made, and thankfully people seemed to lose interest in what was going on with Connor and me. Besides, I wasn't even sure what was going on between us and I didn't want to jinx anything.

By the time I finished dinner, the tension had lifted.

"Dinner was amazing," I said, drinking the last sip of my sparkling water as I glanced around the table.

"Worth taking a break from your snowwoman-ing for?" Connor asked, playfully.

"Hey, you've been taking time off from your stuff, too," I said, noticing my mom watching the two of us, as we teased each other.

I looked around the table and warmth spread across my chest at the sight of my family, my friend, and Connor. By the look on my mom's face, I felt certain she was already planning the wedding, too. She loved Morgan and she'd always been fond of Connor.

We finished up as the sky turned to blackness outside, sprinkling glittering stars across the darkness. I put on my coat as Mom chatted with me about what she thought I should do for the snowwoman contest.

“I’ve nearly pulled it all together,” I said, glad that she was proud of my idea. “But I’ll let you know if I need help with anything, okay?”

“You do that, honey,” she said pulling me into a hug. “And if there’s anything else you’d like to talk about ...”

“Sure thing, Mom,” I said, even though she’d let her sentence hang pointedly. I decided it was okay to play dumb for a little while longer.

“Thank you for dinner, Betty,” Connor said, giving my mom a hug.

“Come back anytime,” Mom said, stepping back to let Dad shake Connor’s hand.

We said goodnight to Jacob and Lacey, and then Connor and I headed out the front door of the inn, just as a breeze had rolled over us. I pulled my coat tighter around me and slipped my fingers into my gloves.

“Dinner was nice,” Connor said, coming up beside me.

I turned to him, twisting my mouth to the side. “I’m sorry for the way my family was acting. They are way too nosy for their own good.”

“It’s okay,” he said, chuckling. “I love your family, always have.”

I smiled. He fit in easily with my family, as if he’d been there all along. It had been the same way with Lacey and that knowledge couldn’t be denied. The dinner tonight felt like a step forward, as if sharing what was happening between us had brought us closer together.

Connor walked me to my car, just as the snow started to flurry down from the sky above us. It felt cold on my skin, but his closeness kept me warm somehow.



“Thanks for coming tonight,” I said, lingering outside my car.

“I’m glad you invited me,” he said, slipping his hands around mine. “You okay?”

I looked down at our hands and nodded. “Better than okay,” I whispered.

I wasn’t sure who leaned in first, but our lips came together into a kiss that was soft and sweet. Then our mouths opened and his tongue brushed mine, melting the kiss into something deeper and making my belly do a little dance. My heart fluttered as we explored each other, making me feel like a missing piece of my life had clicked into place

The warmth of his mouth, his hands holding mine and the cold air around us all seemed to blend—like a combination of opposites that only made sense when they were together.

Just like the two of us.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I drove up the long winding road toward a private community in the outskirts of Christmas Mountain and toward the address Connor had given me. I'd never been to his house before. As his sister's best friend there had never been a need for me to go to *his* house. But he'd asked if I'd help him with his promotion for The Christmas Competition, so I'd said yes, of course.

Connor inviting me to his house felt different ... personal. What did our kisses mean? To him and to me? My nerves were on edge, but I couldn't deny that Connor occupied my thoughts all the time now. And the way his lips had felt against mine ... *shiver*.

A large iron gate appeared in front of me. I pulled my car to a stop and punched in the code he'd given me, then waited as the gate opened. Taking a deep breath, I zoomed forward, wondering if he'd kiss me tonight. I wanted him to. But would whatever we were doing ruin a twenty-plus-year friendship? My heart squeezed at the thought.

Connor obviously made a good living at the bank, but the houses I passed on the way to his address were ginormous, akin to where his parents lived. I drove up the long, private driveway leading to Connor's place and gawked at the rustic two-story mountain house ahead of me. The home was green and brown and nestled against an array of trees sprinkled with white.

The garage door was open to reveal Connor's shiny BMW. It had stopped snowing and the sun shined down on me as I walked up the front path and rang the bell. From somewhere inside the house, I heard a faint but insistent barking. My lips curved into a smile.

A few moments later, the door opened to reveal Connor. His dark hair was tousled, hanging across his forehead and his green eyes brightened as he stepped out to greet me. "Here comes my arch nemesis, my greatest foe, my fiercest competitor," he said.

I rolled my eyes. "It's hardly a fierce competition when I'm going to win. You know it."

He grinned. "You came."

"Of course," I said, my heartbeat quickening at the sight of his handsome face. "But I'm not just here to see *you*."

A flash of golden fur whizzed by before Sweetie-for-now nuzzled my leg. I patted her head which seemed to spur her on. "Did you miss me?"

In answer, she licked my face, neck, and any bare skin she could find. And when she wasn't satisfied, she resorted to tugging at the jacket I was wearing.

"Clarice, down," Connor said, but the excited pooch was beyond listening to any commands at the moment.

My gaze darted to Connor. "Wait? You named her?"

He nodded. "I considered Rudolph, but that seemed a little too *on the nose*."

I groaned at his joke, before I smiled. His jokes were a quintessential part of him, though, and I loved them just as much as I loved the rest of him.

"You really settled on a name, though?"

"Yep, Clarice," Connor said, crouching down and opening up his arms to his new furry best friend. She snuggled up against him, her tail wagging so fast it was almost a blur. "You wouldn't let me name her Rudolph. Clarice is Rudolph's girlfriend, so it seemed fitting."

“That’s adorable, Connor. I love it,” I said, scratching behind Clarice’s ears. “You love your permanent name, don’t you? I missed you, too.”

Clarice tried to hug me with her big paws.

I stepped back, laughing. “Oof!”

“Clarice, come on girl, don’t embarrass me in front of my guest.”

“It’s fine,” I said, scratching under her jaw. I sat on my heels so I could pet her better. Clarice flopped over on her back and let me scratch her belly as her tongue lolled out.

“Training isn’t going too well, I assume?” I teased.

Connor shook his head. “Nothing could’ve prepared me for a dog like Clarice. And I’ve had to deal with my share of demanding customers at the bank. It’s like her mind races a mile a minute, and her legs follow without thinking twice.”

My heart sank. “You aren’t thinking of giving her away, are you?”

Connor’s eyes widened. “Not a chance. She’s my forever girl.”

I sighed in relief, thinking of how nice it would feel to be Connor’s forever girl. I lifted my lashes, feeling swoony as I looked up at him. The man had adopted Clarice and had given her a loving home. And he had also helped me make my flyers for the snowwoman contest.

I stood up slowly. “I’m glad Clarice has you.”

“Come in already.” He gestured for me to follow him into the house, and he took my coat and put it in the closet in the foyer. Then he led me to the back of the house to the living room, which had floor-to-ceiling windows. A tall Christmas tree sat by a stone fireplace and tiny fairy lights were strung across the mantel.

“Looks like Christmas came early here,” I said, a little surprised.

“Mom’s help. She’s over-enthusiastic.”

“I think it looks beautiful,” I said, watching Clarice pad over to the tree and pull a shiny red ball off a low branch.

“Clarice, no,” Connor warned.

She ignored him, trotted up to me and deposited the ball at my feet.

I ruffled her head affectionately. “That’s breakable, honey.”

Connor picked up the ball and put it back on the tree. “Leave it here. Okay, Clarice?”

Clarice yapped loudly in reply, her tail wagging.

“Why don’t I think she’s going to listen?” Connor sighed before sitting down on the couch next to me. He picked up a notebook. “I’d like to run my holiday cheer ideas by you.”

I turned to face him. “Sure, let’s hear them.”

He wrinkled his nose. “Reed Bank, where we listen to your needs.”

“Try again,” I said gently.

“Reed Bank, we are here for you. Reed Bank, where we make the impossible come true.”

I shook my head. “Too ... uninventive.”

He frowned, watching Clarice lay down on the floor between us.

“If that’s your best shot, I’ll have no problem beating you at the Christmas Competition,” I said, nudging his arm.

“I thought you were here to help me, not harass me.”

“I can do both,” I said.

His eyes lowered. “If I lose, I hope it’s to you.”

His words made my heart skip a beat. “You’re sweet.”

He shrugged. “Maybe I just don’t want any smelly canines running around.”

“And the moment is gone,” I joked, picking up his notebook, my fingers brushing against his as I lifted it. My

belly fluttered, but I tried not to let it show as I scribbled my ideas. “When people think of a bank, what’s the first thing that comes to their mind?”

“Money?” he guessed.

“Yeah, but there’s a negative connotation to it,” I said, thinking of the times that I’ve been to the bank. “We think of loans, and owing money, which isn’t fun.”

He frowned. “There’s more to a bank.”

“Of course,” I said, tapping the pen against the pad. “But nobody will think of a bank when someone asks them to name their favorite place.”

He smiled wryly. “Good point.”

“We need to establish the interpersonal relationship the bank has with the locals,” I said, taking a breath and smelling his fresh, clean scent. Yum.

“What do you mean?” he said, his brows coming together. He looked so cute when he was trying to concentrate on something.

“I’m sure Reed Bank has helped a few locals get what they want, right?” I said, writing down this question. “For example, you helped Macy and Cara get their loan last year, right?”

“I can’t talk about a private business,” he said.

“Well, I know you did because Macy told me at book club,” I said, jotting down the example. “What’s another positive thing about the bank.”

“We have a plan where parents can save up for their child’s college education,” Connor said, slipping his arm along the back of the couch behind me. “We offer investment management, retirement accounts...”

I looked up when he paused and found him staring down at me. “Is there something on my face?”

He reached out and picked something off my cheek. “A stray lash.”

“Oh,” I said, feeling tingles across my skin where his finger had touched me. I bit my bottom lip and stared up into those mesmerizing green eyes.

He held my gaze and then ever so slowly leaned toward me...

Just then, a big, wet nose pushed itself between us, and she licked my jaw.

“Clarice, down,” Connor said.

I pressed my hand to my chest, laughing. “Don’t be too hard on her. She means well.”

She whined mournfully, dropping a small wooden angel on the couch before retreating.

“Great, another ornament,” he said, lifting the angel.

“How many times do you think you’ll have to say it before she understands not to take ornaments?” I said, wishing so badly that the dog hadn’t interrupted us.

“She understands,” he said, shaking his head. “You just need to listen, girl.”

I snapped my fingers. “I read somewhere that a dog adopts its owner’s personality.”

“Is that so?” He turned to face me, folding his arms over his chest. “You’re saying she learned the stubbornness from me?”

I laughed, nodding. “Could be. She’s your first dog.”

“You know Clarice isn’t my first dog, well, technically. When I was a kid, maybe seven or eight, I found a stray at the back of our house and brought him in. He had a tag and everything, poor thing was just lost and on Christmas Eve, too.”

“Poor dear,” I said.

“I spent the next morning making handmade posters and distributing them. We found his owner by the evening. My mother called it a Christmas miracle.”

I smiled. “Aww, that’s so sweet, Connor.”

“I was happy for the little guy but honestly a little sad to see him go. I always wanted a dog but my mom thought they were too much trouble,” he said, looking a little wistful. “That’s one of the reasons I decided to adopt Clarice.”

“What’s the other reason?” I asked.

The corner of his mouth lifted. “You.”

“You’re sweet ...” My heart melted and I had the urge to lean toward him again, but right then a light bulb went off in my head. “You know what would be great holiday spirit? If people could learn about someone from the bank itself. To give the bank some personality and Christmas cheer. Someone who could be the face of the bank.”

“Who?” he said.

I looked at him pointedly. “You!”

He shook his head. “No way.”

“Come on, it’ll be fun,” I said. “You can show how Reed Bank touches people’s lives, starting with one of its owners. You can tell them about your Christmas miracle story.”

He shook his head. “I don’t think anybody will be interested.”

I raised an eyebrow. “You want to bet on it? Come on, give it a shot.”

I took out my laptop and showed him a few sample images of poster templates. I pointed at the screen. “All right, so we can have personal stories set on the side here, a photograph, and a few more photos here. People will love it.”

“Right,” Connor said, sounding distracted.

I looked up to find him staring at me. There was something about the look in his eyes that made my heartrate kick up a notch.

He didn’t look away. “Ruby ...”

I bit my bottom lip. “Yes?”



At first, I wasn't sure he heard me but then he leaned toward me until his lips brushed mine, once, twice, three times. My belly did a flip and I slipped my hand through the back of his hair, which was so soft against my fingertips.

"Ruby," he whispered, pulling back and brushing his nose against mine. "You want to know something about this guy from the bank?"

I pulled back, thinking this was an odd time to strategize. "Um, sure ..."

His lips pressed against mine again before pulling away. "I've fallen in love with you."

My heart fluttered. I lifted my lashes to find his green eyes looking down at me, wide and vulnerable. The corner of my mouth curved upward. "I love you, too, Connor."

He let out a little sigh and then dropped his forehead to mine. We remained that way for several minutes, just looking into each other's eyes as I played with the back of his hair, the colored lights from his Christmas tree flickering all around us.

Then Clarice pushed her head between us and began licking us both, as if she didn't want to be left out of this love fest. After a moment of stunned silence, I burst out in a giggle at the same time Connor chuckled. Everything was just perfect.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The little bell above the shop tinkled as I entered Rudolph's Reads, brushing the snow off my shoulders before I came all the way inside. It hadn't stopped snowing since this morning, which made driving slower so I was running late.

A soft, Christmas carol song was playing in the background as a few customers milled about. I inhaled the smell of books, which was always deeply comforting to me. I made my way to the very back of the store and opened the door to the back room.

Nina hurried over to me, her arms folded over her chest. "There you are, Ruby."

"I know I'm late, but in my defense, I just trudged through the snow to get here," I said, raising my arms in a helpless gesture of defeat. "If anything, it just proves how dedicated I am to The Mistletoe Book Club. That should earn me some brownie points."

"I don't have brownies but Macy brought cookies," Nina said, letting out a little laugh. "Don't worry, I was late, too. My grandpa hurt himself ice-skating and I had to take him to the emergency room."

"I hope he's okay," I said, grabbing her forearm. Her grandpa was so sweet, but ever since her grandma died, a year or so ago, he'd been acting like he was in his twenties again.

"Thankfully, he just has a bruised hip," she said.

“Oh, good. I remember when he broke his leg skiing,” I said, flaring my eyes.

“He just keeps pushing it. I don’t know what to do with him.” She lifted the plate of chocolate chip cookies she had brought over.

I took one from the plate and bit into it, sighing as the gooey chocolate filled my mouth. “Just what I needed.”

“I’m not mad because you’re late,” Giselle said, pushing her glasses further up on her nose. “But you are in trouble. It’s an ugly Christmas sweater meeting remember?”

My gaze drifted down to her olive-green sweater which sported a portly man which I assumed was Santa Claus but looked nothing like him. “Oops, I totally forgot to change,” I said, thinking I had Connor on-the-brain again, especially after going to his house the other evening.

“Don’t expect me to take any pictures in my sweater,” Lacey said, gesturing to her Christmas Tree sweater that looked like a kindergartener had drawn it.

Giselle pouted, but the others waved at me. We couldn’t be more different from each other but our love for books had brought us together and their friendships were very important to me. All of them were dressed in sweaters in various stages of loud colors and ugly designs.

“There was this situation at the doggie spa,” I said, biting my bottom lip, which was very true and had definitely impacted my focus.

“Wait, what happened?” Lacey asked.

“This woman brought in her spritely husky, who proved to be too much for her. The dog decided to run around from one end of the lobby to the other, dragging his owner with it. It was too much for the poor woman. I had to bring in ice for her head.”

Macy clucked her tongue. “Oh, no.”

“Maybe she should have chosen a cat,” Carol said, since she loved her cat.

“Or she could have gotten a senior dog,” Amanda said, taking a small bite of a cookie. “We know there’s always a senior dog needing some love and affection.”

“A young husky is beautiful but can be a lot of work,” Harmony said, brushing her blonde hair over her shoulder.

“My grandfather has been taking on more than he can handle lately,” Nina said, shaking her head. The maroon sweater she wore looked great with her latte skin. If anything, she actually made the sweater appear less ugly. “He’s pushing eighty but is convinced that he’s secretly twenty! Just the other day he went up on the balcony to help with the Christmas decorations *and* help me fix the wi-fi. Can you believe that?”

“Your grandpa is young at heart, Nina,” Amanda said, laughing in her soothing way. “He was chatting with me just the other day, and he’s such a sweetheart.”

“He is a sweetie,” Nina said, her face softening. “He’s been very lonely since my grandmother passed. I’m worried about him. Do all of them get difficult with age?”

“Well in the woman’s defense with the husky situation, she said it was a gift for her grandson,” I said, thinking over my long day. “She was just taking care of the dog until he and his parents came home from vacation. She wanted the grooming to be a surprise.”

We had sent the woman home half an hour later. By that time, we were running late for two more appointments. Both of the clients had made it clear that the next time they would be taking their business elsewhere. Definitely not a good day.

Nina nodded. “I’m just really worried about him.”

“I understand, Nina,” I said, squeezing her arm.

Lacey set down her hot cocoa. “Nina, your grandpa is going to be fine. Ruby, your doggie spa is doing the best it can. If people can’t be a little patient, then that’s their loss. I’ve only heard people say nice things about your business.”

“Thanks, Lacey,” I said, giving her a smile. I treasured the book club and the support of my friends.

Giselle clapped her hands together. “Let’s start the meeting. Everybody finish the book?”

A chorus of affirmatives went around. Giselle’s face split into a grin. She was always enthusiastic about all things bookish.

She pointed at me. “Ruby. Sweater.”

“Oops, thanks again for the reminder,” I said, pulling the sweater out of my bag. I took off my coat and hung it on my chair. Then I took off the dog-hair-covered sweatshirt, and slipped the sweater over my tee shirt. My ugly sweater had Rudolph, and his nose was humongous compared to the rest of his body. It reminded me of something Connor always teased me about—how my nose turned especially red in the cold.

I quickly pulled out my phone and took a selfie of the sweater, making sure the big red nose was visible in the picture. Then I sent a text to Connor: *Guess who?*

It was pretty silly, but I felt sure it would make Connor laugh. I kept my phone out and took my seat at the table. Macy, who had disappeared a few moments before, reappeared with a tray full of steaming mugs of cocoa with a hint of cinnamon in it.

“So, what did you all think of *All I want for Christmas is an Extraterrestrial?*” Giselle said, practically bursting with excitement. It was a miracle she kept a straight face with that title.

I giggled under my breath and I saw Amanda and Macy chuckle, too. The book’s plot was straightforward and exactly what it sounded like. It was the story of a woman who wakes up on Christmas Eve to find a crashed UFO and a handsome man at her front door, who was most definitely not from Earth. The rest of the story follows the unlikely duo as they fell in love.

“Ruby why don’t you share your thoughts first?” Giselle said.

“Me?” I said, as the seven ladies turned to me expectantly.

I cleared my throat. “I really liked how the two characters didn’t get together until the very end. To me, it upped the emotional pay off. I especially loved that part where she takes him shopping—”

“And he mistakes the mall Santa for a friend from his planet. That was epic,” Carol said, turning to that page in the book.

“It had me howling,” Macy said. “And I rarely laugh aloud while reading.”

“My favorite part was how sweet the hero was to the heroine. And that part where she was struggling with her flower shop and he did everything to make it a gigantic success just to bring a smile on her face?” Nina said.

The mention of the flower shop reminded me that my cousin Katie would be arriving soon. Had I put that on the calendar yet? I needed to go through my texts to remind myself which day her plane would land.

“The hero was so sweet,” Giselle said, dreamily. “I’d love to meet a man like that.”

“And he was so helpful to the townspeople even though he understood nothing about humans,” Amanda said, nodding.

Giselle got tears in her eyes. “He was always there when she needed him.”

Immediately, a handsome face popped into my mind. Gorgeous dark hair, beautiful green eyes, a smile always tugging on his lips, someone who was always there when I needed him, even stepped up to rescue a dog. Connor was definitely hero worthy. I just wished his father recognized his efforts, too.

“And when his dad and the other aliens come in and threaten the community but the hero stands his ground anyway to save the heroine? Swoony,” Lacey said in a sing-song voice.

By the end of the book, the hero’s alien father had made peace with his son. I just wished things between Connor and his father would resolve as easily, and he wouldn’t feel like he had to fight to win his approval. That was the reason he

entered The Christmas Competition in the first place—to prove his worth in front of his father’s eyes. It tugged at my heart.

Things were busy at the doggie spa and I needed the bigger space at an affordable price, but I hated that my winning would be at the cost of Connor losing.

Harmony had been strangely quiet and now fidgeted in her seat.

I turned to face her. “Did you like the hero?”

“An alien boyfriend is definitely better than a human one,” Harmony said, her lips wobbling. We exchanged glances and then, to my surprise, Harmony broke down, crying. “H-He broke up with me.”

“What are you talking about, Harmony?” Carol said.

“Dave met someone on a business trip,” she said, through her tears.

Nina got up from her chair and went to comfort her. “I’m so sorry,” Nina said.

My heart sank. I was glad she was finally talking about it with her friends, who could give her support. Hopefully talking about it would help her process the pain and let it all out.

“He said he met someone on a business trip,” she said. “I can’t believe it. After so many years together he says he doesn’t love me anymore. How can he do that?”

My thoughts drifted to Connor. He would never cheat on anybody. He was sweet and kind. I knew I could trust him. But then I looked down at my phone. He hadn’t texted me back yet. My message sat undelivered and my stomach twisted into a knot.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

After the book club meeting, I felt kind of down. Between Harmony's breakup and Connor ignoring my text, I wasn't feeling very lovey-dovey, despite having just discussed a romance novel. Maybe I needed to stop checking my phone every five minutes.

I decided to distract myself with some errands. I was running low on groceries, and the supermarket lines would only get crazier as Christmas approached, so it was best to go sooner rather than later.

I made the brisk walk down Main Street toward the supermarket, the chill wind nipping at my cheeks. My nose was sure to be as red as a strawberry, and I couldn't help but think of Connor's nickname for me: *Rudolph*.

The nickname was so silly, childish even, but thinking about it made a warm feeling spread across my chest. The fact that he had a special name for me felt like evidence that we had history, that our relationship had been built on the solid bedrock of friendship. Or at least, it had seemed that way. Now, I couldn't get him to return a text.

"Relax, Ruby," I said, selecting a shopping cart and entering through the sliding doors into the crowded supermarket. "It's only been a few hours."

I breezed through the supermarket, filling up my cart with fresh veggies and pot roast and, of course, pizza pockets and peppermint ice cream. I reached for the last can of cream of



mushroom soup at the exact same time as someone else, bumping against someone with glossy red nails.

“Sorry,” I said, glancing up to find myself face to face with Andrea.

Every nerve in my body tightened. The woman was even prettier up close, with big blue eyes and softly curled blonde hair. She looked like the kind of woman who spent an hour in the morning preening and primping. Quite the opposite of someone who wrangled huskies and shampooed poodles all day long.

“Ruby!” she said, as though she were genuinely happy to see me.

I had no idea why that might be, but I smiled back at her all the same. I was trapped between my shopping cart and the wall of soup, with nowhere to run. My best bet was to play nice and hope that the conversation was short.

“Hi, Andrea,” I said, taking a deep breath. “Nice to see you again.”

“It is nice, isn’t it? Connor and I were just talking about you over dinner last night,” she said, with a little smile that made me feel like she knew something I didn’t. Did she? I hoped not. “I’m just doing some last-minute holiday shopping right now. I’ve got family coming in from out of town and we always do a big Christmas dinner. Cranberry sauce, stuffing, ham, the works.”

“Sounds like fun,” I said, confused as to why she was telling me this. She was talking to me like I was a friend, instead of direct competition for her former flame.

Not that Connor was currently answering my texts. I couldn’t help wondering what he was doing that he hadn’t answered me. Usually, he wrote back so quickly.

“How was your dinner?” I asked, unable to resist fishing for information about the man who had captured my waking thoughts, and a couple of my dreams, too. “With Connor?”

“Oh, great! We went to one of our favorite spots and just talked for hours.”

“About his pitch for the competition?” I asked, trying to keep my voice even. Maybe I had read this whole situation wrong and they had just gone out to dinner to talk business. Then again, maybe Connor was keeping his options open, wining and dining Andrea while keeping me on his hook. It didn’t seem like him, though. Connor was no player. But, still, Harmony’s story hadn’t exactly left me with a feeling of security.

“Nope, we talked about life and stuff. Family. Dating. That kind of thing.”

*Dating.* My heart sank.

So, Connor *was* interested in dating Andrea, which must mean that he wasn’t interested in me after all. But we’d had an amazing time only days ago. Had she changed his mind?

Apparently put-together Andrea was a better match for him and his aspirations.

“Oh, okay, I wish you both the best,” I said, and despite my best effort to keep it together, my voice cracked. I gripped the shopping cart tight and turned to go, but Andrea reached out and touched my elbow.

“No, it isn’t like *that*,” she said, concern shining in her blue eyes. “Connor and I ... well, we weren’t the best match.”

I tucked my chin. “You weren’t?”

“I got it into my head that we were destined to be together because our parents set us up, but his heart was never in it.” She glanced away a moment, before turning back to me and putting a hand on my forearm. “I won’t pretend like I haven’t been trying to get close to him again this winter. But, at dinner, he told me he’s not interested in rekindling anything between us. And he told me a little bit about you, and how much you mean to him.”

My jaw nearly popped open. “He said that?”

She nodded. “You seem like a decent person, Ruby. And Connor certainly seems smitten with you. I don’t want to stand in the way of that.”

I blinked a few times. “Wow. I don’t know what to say.”

She let out a giggle. Girlish, not too loud, practically perfect. The complete opposite of my belly laughs. But maybe Connor preferred belly laughs after all.

“Just say you’ll give things a shot with him,” she said, pulling her hand away and brushing a lock of silky hair over her shoulder. “At the end of the day, I just want Connor to be happy. And by the sound of it, you make him very happy. Cheers.”

And with that, she left me standing in the soup aisle with a can of cream of mushroom in my hand, and my heart racing in my chest.

Smitten. Connor was *smitten* with me.

So why wasn’t he answering my text?

Chewing on the inside of my mouth, I retrieved my phone from the back pocket of my jeans. My heart leapt when I saw the notification on my screen.

It was Connor: *Sorry about going AWOL. It’s been a crazy day at the bank. Been putting out fires since I got to the office.*

My fingers began flying over my keyboard with a reply. No point in trying to play it cool now. I was in all the way for this guy. I typed: *No worries. I hope everything’s okay at the bank?*

He responded immediately: *Fine now. Thx.*

Whew, that was good news. For a moment, I thought our conversation was over. But just as I was about to put my phone back into my pocket, his name lit up my screen. It said: *You look very cute in your sweater, Rudolph.*

Warmth spread through me, from the crown of my head all the way down to my toes and yes, to the tip of my nose. I must’ve looked ridiculous, standing in the middle of the supermarket grinning down at my phone like a schoolgirl with a crush, but I didn’t care. Connor thought I was cute. And he hadn’t been weirded out by my goofy sweater.

Feeling bold, I typed back: *You’re not so bad yourself.*

My stomach knotted up the moment I sent it. Maybe that was too much. Maybe Connor had meant cute in a casual way, or maybe he was just being nice. Or maybe I was being totally ridiculous and looking for ways to question a gorgeous, good-hearted guy telling me that he loved me.

He responded back with a smug-looking emoji smiley face. A little cheeky, a little flirty. I liked it. Three dots popped up in the chat log as he kept typing, then a message appeared on the screen: *Can I see you tonight? Maybe we could go for a walk and look at the lights. Hot cocoa on me?*

My heart swelled, and I almost did a little happy dance right there in the soup aisle.

I texted back: *I'd love that. Eight o'clock? We can meet in front of The Sharing Tree.*

He texted back immediately: *See you then! In the meanwhile, try not to scare the townspeople with that sweater. ;)*

I rolled my eyes at his dig but couldn't help the smile that spread across my face. It wouldn't be Connor and me if there wasn't a little teasing involved, which was just the way I liked it.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Connor was waiting for me when I arrived at The Sharing Tree that night, and he was holding two steaming to-go cups. Aww, so thoughtful! I took a moment to appreciate the scene as I approached: how handsome he looked in his green scarf, the way the lights on The Sharing Tree made his eyes sparkle, and the impression of his dimples in his cheeks as he smiled at me.

He looked happy to see me.

He looked like I was his favorite person in the whole entire world.

He looked, I realized with a stutter in my heart, in love.

“Hi,” I said, a little out of breath because of the brisk walk, and from my heart racing.

“Hi,” he said, his smile deepening as he handed me a cup.

Warmth spread through my palms from the touch of the paper cup. The rim of the cup was crammed with extra-large marshmallows. “Hot cocoa? With extra-large marshmallows.”

“Just how you like it,” he said, the corner of his mouth hitching up further. “You think I wouldn’t remember that fuss you made in middle school when we were at my parents’ cabin?”

“Hey, it’s criminal to serve cocoa without marshmallows,” I said, lifting my cup to make my point. “It wasn’t my fault your mom didn’t know that.”

He chuckled, that deep, grounding sound that always made me feel at home. How could I have gone so long without noticing that *of course* I had feelings for Connor? It seemed impossible now *not* to have feelings for him.

I had told him I loved him, after all. And I had meant it. That was exhilarating, and a little bit terrifying, too.

Were we really doing this? Moving from friendship to something more? A sense of unease crept over my shoulders. Were we being foolish? What would happen to us and to our friends and family if things didn't work out between us?

As if answering my worries, Connor leaned forward and brushed his lips against mine. It was a light, gentle kiss, almost teasing, but it still curled my toes. Forget my worries, I would push forward with us full speed with kisses like that. Wow.

“Shall we?” he asked, extending his arm to me.

I slipped my hand through the crook of his arm, squeezing gently on his quilted jacket.

We descended the stairs and then started at one end of Main Street and ambled toward the other end, passing the Sleigh Café, the bookstore, Moxie, and more. We'd walked down this sidewalk countless times in our lives, but never like *this*. Connor was warm and solid beside me, and I felt protected by his presence. We took our time and sipped our hot chocolate.

By this time of night, most of the shops were closed, and most of the townspeople were home with their families, so we had the street almost entirely to ourselves. The snow crunched underfoot as we craned our necks to look at the string lights decorating awnings, twinkling wreaths hanging merrily on doors, and colored bulbs flashing over establishment signs.

I had been working so hard all month that I hadn't stopped to smell the roses this season, or rather slowed to admire the Christmas lights. Now, I was absolutely enchanted by every new blow-up Santa Claus Connor pointed out, delighted by each tree shining in a store window. This was the most fun I'd

had in a long time, and we weren't even doing anything special. We were just taking a walk and enjoying the lights.

Enjoying each other.

"How are things at the bank?" I asked, after the cocoa had been drained.

"Same old same old," he said, letting out a sigh, the breath flapping his lips as if he were exhausted by it all. "We had someone come in to complain about the terms of their loan, the loan officer didn't handle it very tactfully, so I tried to step in and arbitrate. We got it all figured out, but Dad still blew a gasket. It's like he doesn't trust me with anything, even though I know exactly what I'm doing."

He halfheartedly kicked a chunk of ice across the street, and I squeezed his arm reassuringly. I could tell he was stressed out, but I didn't quite know how to soothe him. When we were kids, I would make dumb jokes until he smiled, or do something so irritating that he would forget all about whatever was bothering him. Things were different now, and I wanted to be there for him in a different way.

"You're good at your job, Connor. Your dad has to see that."

"All he sees are my mistakes."

"Has it always been like this? With him?"

Connor pressed his lips together, his eyes clouding over. "Ever since I was a kid, nothing was ever good enough for him. When my little league team won a game, he had pointers on how I could've played better. When I was in high school, he made sure I knew that an A wasn't as good as an A-plus. He isn't a monster, and I know he loves me. He just has trouble showing it. It's just the kind of person he is."

"That doesn't seem very fair."

He barked out a laugh. "One of my dad's favorite phrases is 'life's not fair,' so I guess you're right about that."

We walked in silence, and I laced our fingers together, squeezing through our gloves.

After a little while, he said, “That’s why The Christmas Competition is so important. If I can win that building and expand Reed Bank, then my father will finally see that I’m worth something.”

“Hey,” I said, stopping so that he had to turn to face me. “You’re more than worth something. You’re fantastic.”

He shrugged one shoulder. “Not according to my dad.”

“Stop. You’re *amazing*, Connor. I’m serious.”

“Have you always thought that?” he asked, looking down at me.

I took a step back. “I-I’m not sure ...”

“Didn’t mean to put you on the spot,” he said, squeezing my hand and pulling me forward again, a small smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Unable to help myself, I pushed up on my toes and kissed that dimpled corner.

“Don’t think I’m going to go easy on you just because you’re being sweet to me,” he said, his smile deepening. “I love a little friendly competition.”

“Oh, I know,” I said, bumping my hip into him. “Remember in high school when you insisted on settling every argument with the world’s most intense game of rock paper scissors?”

“You bet I do. You always chose rock. Easy to beat.”

“Well,” I said, arching an eyebrow. “I won’t be easy to beat this time. Divine Doggie Spa and Training isn’t going down without a fight.”

He nudged his shoulder into mine gently, just the way he used to do when we were kids. “And neither is Reed Bank.”

I took a deep breath of icy air, snuggling close to Connor as we continued our walk down the street. “I need the bigger place. We’ve practically got dogs spilling out onto the street over at the doggie spa. Being the only groomer in town is great for cornering the market on business, but not so great when



every kennel is full and I have to turn clients away. Do you know we're booked out six weeks in advance? We can barely squeeze in emergency visits."

"Sounds like more space is just what you need," he said, looking suddenly thoughtful. I almost asked him what he was daydreaming about, but I didn't want to pry.

"You can say that again," I said, feeling swept up in a vision of the empty building with those high ceilings, that gigantic reception desk, the two floors of space we could use for kennels, or washing tubs, or maybe even an indoor grassy patch for playtime or pottytime. "We could help so many more pups, not to mention double our income. I could hire more staff, even get a dog trainer on the payroll to offer classes."

"Sounds like a beautiful idea," Connor said, leaning down to kiss me on the tip of my nose, which was surely glowing red by this point in the walk, and then he kissed me sweetly on the mouth. "May the merriest win."

I couldn't help but smile against his kiss, but I felt a little trepidatious. What would happen to us if Connor won the building and I lost, or the other way around? Connor had always been a good sportsman, and I didn't consider myself a sore loser, but there was no telling how we might react to one another when there was so much money on the line.

I cared about Connor immensely, loved him even, but he had been raised pretty well-off. I wondered if he could really wrap his head around how life-changing winning that building would be for me, or how unlikely I was to be able to afford a space like it in my lifetime. In the same breath, I probably couldn't understand what winning that building would do for his fragile relationship with his father, and that was important, too.

I caught myself before I spiraled into worry. Right now, everything was perfect, and I was sure we would be able to cross whatever bridge the future gave us.

We reached the end of Main Street, lingering in front of the feed store, whose windows had been painted with a cheery scene of Santa's reindeer munching away at bags of feed.

“Want to take another trip around the block?” I asked, not ready for the night to end yet.

“I could spend all night walking around with you,” he said, squeezing my hand. “Although we might turn into popsicles if we stay out too late.”

We began to mosey back up the street, hand in hand. It felt so good to be held by him, so good to be out in the world together, as a couple. I didn’t realize how badly I wanted this until I had him, and now I had no intention of letting go.

“Your big snowwoman contest is tomorrow,” Connor said. “How are you feeling about it?”

“Nervous,” I said, biting my bottom lip. “What if nobody shows up to compete? What if it’s a weirdly hot day and all of the snowwomen melt? What if—”

“Enough, Rudolph,” he said, pressing a gloved finger to my lips. “The contest is going to be awesome. I promise.”

I froze in place, suddenly feeling fluttery at his touch. I couldn’t remember another man ever having this effect on me. Connor really had me in the palm of his hand.

“A snowwoman contest is a unique idea,” he said. “People love contests, and they love spreading holiday cheer. Who knows, it might even become a yearly tradition.”

“I love how much faith you have in me,” I said, tilting my head as he caressed my cheek. The leather of his glove was soft against my skin.

“And I love *you*, Ruby.”

I smiled. “I love you too, Connor.”

We kissed again, under the Christmas lights and the glow of the moon.

At this moment, it felt like we were the only two people in the world. I wanted to live inside this moment with Connor forever. As our lips melted together, I slid my arms around his neck and pulled him into a hug, deciding that forever sounded just right.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

I woke up on the day of the snowwoman contest in a tizzy. From the moment my eyes opened, I was a ball of energy. I mentally ran through my checklist as I brushed my teeth, yanked a brush through my hair, and wiggled into my jeans. I had plastered the town with posters, posted about the event about ten times on social media, and told everyone I knew that it was happening. I had even cleared the contest with the mayor's office, ensuring that we could use the entirety of the town square as a snowwomen construction area.

Now, I just had to hope that people actually showed up.

I tossed an old gardening trowel and miniature shovel into a canvas bag before heading out for the day. If there weren't enough participants for a proper contest, I could always build my own snowwoman, or two, or ten. I was willing to do whatever it took to ensure that this contest was a success, for my own sanity and for the sake of all the pooches and pet parents who came into the doggie spa.

Without so much as stopping to wolf down a bagel, I left my townhouse and made my way towards Main Street, parking as close as I could to the town square. I got out of the car and turned down the street that led to the town square and ran smack into Giselle, who let out a little squeak. We both nearly tumbled down into the snow.

Giselle straightened her glasses and tightened her ponytail as she righted herself. "Where's the fire, Ruby?"

“It’s more like where’s the snow and ice,” I said, grateful that I hadn’t been carrying one of those luscious lattes from Prancer’s Pancake House, as I was sure I would be wearing it right about now. “I’m walking to the snowwoman contest.”

“Running is more like it.”

“Where are you headed?” I asked, trying to be polite even though I was itching to get into the square and see if anyone had arrived. Technically, the event didn’t start for another fifteen minutes, but I wasn’t about to sit around at home bouncing off the walls with my nerves.

Giselle’s eyes twinkled at me like she was in on some kind of joke.

“To the town square, of course. Those snowwomen aren’t going to build themselves.”

“You’re coming?” I asked, my heart soaring.

“Of course, I’m coming,” she said, using a tone that said the question was ridiculous. “We’re *all* coming!”

I blinked. “Who’s we?”

At that moment, Nina hustled up to us. She was wrapped up in a maroon coat and wore her dark hair pulled up into a ponytail. Mulberry lipstick made the entire ensemble pop.

“Who’s ready to build a snowwoman?” she asked, with a grin.

“Nina, you’re kidding,” I said, pressing my hand to my heart.

“I’m serious as a heart attack,” she said, patting my arm. “Carol, Macy, and Harmony are on their way. They just stopped to get sticky buns. Lacey and Amanda are already there.”

“The whole book club is coming?” I asked, unable to fathom the kindness of my friends, who surely had other things they needed to be doing on a Saturday.

“That’s right,” Nina said, rubbing her hands together as if for warmth. “We couldn’t let you freeze your fingers off out

here all by yourself.”

I could have cried with joy. Instead, I yanked them both into a bear hug. Giselle let out another squeak of surprise and Nina laughed heartily, rubbing a little circle into my back.

“I knew you would get yourself wound way too tight about this,” Nina said, in a knowing tone. “But spreading Christmas cheer is supposed to be fun, remember?”

“You’re totally right,” I said, feeling suddenly lighter.

“Let’s go scope out the digs and get the best patch of snow before everyone else arrives,” Giselle said, starting to scooch our little group hug lovefest towards the square.

When we turned the corner and stepped into the square, I gasped. There were more than a dozen families already set up on the snow, chatting with each other and sipping hot drinks from thermoses and from to-go cups. The smaller kids gathered sticks and rocks while the bigger kids rolled the largest snowballs they could manage. A few children had brought scarves, hats, and costume pieces from home to help decorate their creations. Some residents of Christmas Mountain had even brought lawn chairs and blankets so they could stay cozy while spectating. I counted close to fifty people altogether.

The event had barely begun, and already, it was a success.

I got a little misty-eyed, watching all that joy in front of me. This was exactly what I had envisioned, come to life. A community event that brought people together and encouraged them to meet each other and make new connections.

Giselle picked out a patch of snow by Lacey and Amanda, and then got to work. True to Nina’s word, Carol, Macy, and Harmony arrived a few minutes later carrying a steaming box of delectable sticky buns. The only member of the Mistletoe Book Club who wasn’t in attendance was Hemi, the cat.

I resisted the urge to help Giselle, Lacey and Amanda with their snowwomen, because it didn’t seem fair for the event organizer to participate. Instead, I provided moral support as I ate half my weight in sticky buns.

“Looking good, Giselle,” I said.

She took a step back, breathing hard from all the exertion, and her glasses were fogged from little puffs of breath.

“You think so?” she said, scratching her head. “You don’t think she’s crooked?”

“Crooked gives originality,” I said, throwing my fists in the air. “Keep going!”

“You make a pretty good cheerleader,” a smooth masculine voice said, from behind me.

I turned to face Connor, who was bundled up in a thick peacoat and double-looped scarf.

“You should see me on game day,” I said, and walked into his open arms. He smelled like cedar and shampoo as I breathed in the scent of him and then he leaned down to kiss me.

Harmony whistled and then waggled her eyebrows at Nina, who bit back laughter. That was fine with me. Let them gossip and giggle. I had won the relationship lottery, and I didn’t care if the whole world knew.

“What are you up to?” I asked, when we pulled back.

Connor smoothed a flyaway hair from my face, tucking it behind my ear. “I came to support you, of course. And I wanted to see these snowwomen for myself. Gotta keep a close eye on the competition, right?”

“Sure,” I said, sarcastically. “Can’t forget that part.”

He smirked at me and extended his arm. “Want to take a stroll and check out what people are building?”

“Absolutely,” I said, happily accepting his offer.

We made our way through the footpaths that had sprung up between patches of snow. People had gotten seriously creative. There were your run-of-the-mill snowwomen with carrot noses and button eyes, but there was also a snowwoman baker holding a whisk, a snow doctor dressed in a white coat and

stethoscope, and a snowwoman astronaut wearing a helmet that had surely come from a child's Halloween costume.

“Look!” Connor said, pointing to my left.

I turned to see what he was looking at, and my heart grew three sizes.

Somehow, someone had gotten their hands on one of the aprons we all wore at Divine Doggie Spa and Training, and they had tied it around their snowwoman, who was holding a sculpted little snow dog. It could have been any of my employees, but I could tell from the way the yellow hair (made of yarn, of course) was arranged that it was supposed to be me.

“Do you think that's me?” I asked.

“I think so, Rudolph,” he said, sliding his arm around me. “Looks like someone wanted to show their appreciation to you for organizing this event. Oops, I forgot to add the red nose.”

“You did this?” I said, nearly at a loss for words. “Connor, that is so, so sweet.”

“I'm proud of you,” he said, planting a kiss on my cheek.

More and more snowwomen kept popping up as we walked the length of the square. I lost count of them all. After poking around for twenty minutes or so, we ran into Allen—the middle schooler I'd hired to organize the contest—who was visiting each and every snowwoman and taking notes on a clipboard. Allen had deep brown skin and coiled black hair cropped close to his head. He was wearing a tweed blazer over his snow gear, and a big ribboned button pinned to his chest that read “judge.”

Allen was twelve years old.

“Hi, Ms. Curtis,” he said, as polite as ever.

“Hi, Allen. How's the competition shaping up?”

“It's gonna be a close one,” he said, tapping his temple with a pencil. “But I've got a few frontrunners in mind.”

“Good to know,” I said, loving how seriously he was taking his role.

Once Allen left to examine the next snowwoman, Connor leaned down and asked, “You got a middle schooler to be the judge?”

“Who likes snow more than kids?” I said, shrugging. “He’s known as the snowman master on the playground, or so I hear.”

Connor burst out laughing. “That’s genius, Rudolph.”

“You like the way I spread Christmas spirit,” I said, deciding I could listen to that laugh all day and never get tired of it.

The rest of the afternoon passed by in a blur of smiles and snow. All the gals from the book club built their favorite romance heroines out of snow, which meant that there were Highland maidens draped in tartan and cowgirls wearing ten-gallon hats in the running for the best snowwoman. Allen did his job well, evaluating each creation for creativity, structural soundness, beauty, and of course, originality.

Connor was quickly conscripted into making hot cocoa and latte runs to keep everyone in sugar and caffeine as they worked. It was a bitterly cold day, but all of our spirits were high. I barely felt the cold, although my fingertips and toes eventually went numb. Even Harmony, who had been down in the dumps since her breakup, was seen laughing along with her friend Faith.

As the sun dipped low behind the buildings of Main Street, I started rounding up the participants for the big announcement. I ushered everyone towards where Allen stood beside a step ladder that had been brought out so he could be seen by the crowd.

He took his role very seriously as he climbed the stepladder, cleared his throat, and flipped through the papers on his clipboard. We all held our breath as he deliberated, and Giselle gripped one of my hands so hard in anticipation that I thought she might crush the bones. Connor held my other hand, rubbing little soothing circles into my palm with his thumb.



“Now that I have everyone’s attention,” Allen said, his boy’s tenor carrying through the crowd. “I’d like to announce the winner of the Divine Doggie Spa and Training Snowwoman Contest ...”

I held my breath, wondering who would win.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

Allen stood on the stepladder in town square, cleared his throat one more time—for dramatic effect, in my opinion—and then lifted his chin high. “The first-place prize goes to ... Josie Wheeler!”

A little girl of about ten with a blonde braid erupted into a victorious shriek. She clapped her hands together, and her father swung her up into his arms and planted a big kiss on her cheek. Then she ran up to Allen while doing a happy dance.

Connor chuckled beside me and I couldn’t help but smile, too.

Allen handed Josie a gift basket with vouchers to local businesses, and after he announced the runners-up, I thanked everyone for coming and wished everyone a Merry Christmas from Divine Doggie Spa and Training. Everyone applauded and I waved, before making my way back over to Connor and my friends as people started to leave.

“Great job, Rudolph,” Connor said, putting his arm around me and giving me a squeeze.

“Thanks,” I said, smiling at each of my friends. “I’m really happy with how the contest turned out. Thanks for all of your support, you guys.”

“You hungry, by any chance?” Connor said, watching me nod. Then the corner of his mouth hitched up as if he had a great idea. “How about breakfast for dinner?”

“That’s sounds go good right now!” Harmony chirped from beside us.

“Yeah,” Nina, said, putting a hand on her belly. “I could definitely eat after all of this work.”

“Group dinner,” Connor said, with a shrug. “Why not?”

We left our snowwomen scattered around the town square and decided to meet at Prancer’s Pancake House. Connor and I made a quick trip to his house to pick up his sweet pooch, who launched herself into my arms the moment I walked through the front door.

“She’s a bundle of energy,” I said, scratching behind her ears.

“She’s my little buddy, aren’t you, Clarice? Do you want a pancake? You’ve been good all week, so I think you deserve a pancake.”

“Sounds like it’s decided,” I said, giving her one more pat on her back. “Come on, we’d better get going before the ladies clean out the diner.”

“You’re forgetting something,” Connor said, standing and settling his hands on my hips.

I looked up at him and raised an eyebrow. “Oh yeah? What’s that?”

Without another word, he dipped his head and kissed me, long and slow. Once I had been thoroughly kissed, he pressed his forehead against mine and took a deep breath.

I smiled. “What was that for?”

“I wasted so much time not kissing you. I have to make up for it now.”

“Well, I certainly don’t mind,” I said, smiling before we headed out.

As I suspected, the book club gals were already elbow-deep into stacks of flapjacks by the time we arrived. I thought Connor would have to leave Clarice in the car, but the hostess winked at us and told us we could bring her inside, as long as

she behaved herself. True to her doggie promise, Clarice curled up beneath the table and waited patiently as Connor slipped her bites of bacon or blueberry pancake.

We were piled into the biggest booth, squeezing shoulder-to-shoulder. Connor and I were smushed together on the very end of the crescent moon booth, but I didn't care.

Christmas songs piped out and the waitstaff were wearing felt reindeer ears, which I found charming. It reminded me of the days with Morgan and Connor before Christmas break in grade school, when we had passed the hours stringing together popcorn garlands, watching *Home Alone*, and crafting glittery paper crowns.

"When did you two realize you had feelings for each other?" Giselle asked, after we had all been served our Belgian waffles and chocolate chip pancakes.

It was surprising hearing Giselle be so blunt, but the words burst out of her as though she had been holding them back all night, which she probably had been.

Heat crept into my cheeks and to the tips of my ears and nose, and I knew I was probably flushing bright red.

"You and your love stories, Giselle," Carol said, sipping hot cocoa that had a huge dollop of whipped cream balanced precariously on top. "You can't resist a romance, can you?"

"Sure can't," Giselle said, gesturing at me with her fork. "Come on, you two, I need inspiration for my next novel."

"You're always looking for inspiration," I said, with a laugh.

I was worried Connor would be embarrassed by my friend's cross-examination, but he seemed to be taking it in stride. That was a good sign, because I wanted to keep Connor around for just as long as I kept my friends, so they were probably going to be seeing a lot of each other.

"Art imitates life," Giselle said, in a sing-song voice.

"I'm curious, too," Macy said, her eyes big with anticipation. "Tell us your story."

“For me, it seemed natural, I guess. Like I ... realized what I had been missing out on,” I said, thinking about what Connor said earlier about making up for all the years we had spent not kissing each other. There was so much more to say about it, but I couldn’t quite find the words. My feelings felt too precious, too private to communicate all of it.

“For me, it was more complicated,” Connor said, squeezing my hand under the table. “I didn’t want to ruin our friendship, or the relationship between our families, so I didn’t say anything for the longest time. Once we got together, it was like two puzzle pieces slotting into place. Like we were custom built for each other.”

A tingling warmth spread through me. I knew Connor loved me, he had told me so himself, but to hear him share the story of that love with such beautiful words? It was almost too much.

“Aww, Ruby is blushing,” Nina teased.

“Am not,” I said, holding napkins to my cheeks to hide the redness that had to be there.

To my immense gratitude, Giselle stepped in to save me from Nina’s teasing.

“To love!” Giselle said, holding her mug of hot cocoa up high.

We all followed suit, clinking our mugs together and doing our best not to slosh whipped cream onto the table. Everyone laughed, loud enough to be heard over the music.

“To love,” I said, locking eyes with Connor.

“To love,” he said, and then took a long drink of his cocoa without looking away.

I didn’t know what I had done to get lucky enough to be with Connor Reed, but I didn’t ever want to let him go.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

The following days passed in a blur. Christmas was approaching like a freight train. It seemed like I blinked and suddenly the holiday was only a week away. Connor and I squeezed in phone calls and date nights whenever we could, but things at the doggie spa were getting hectic. Well, even more hectic than before.

“Will somebody please get that phone?” I called out to no one in particular as I did my best to wrangle the mastiff that had been dropped off moments before. Benny was seventy-five pounds of slobbery puppy love, and he didn’t take direction very well.

At present, he was trying to bolt for the front door.

The phone rang again and again, shrill and insistent.

“The phone!” I grunted, trying to yank Benny back from the door. My sneakers squeaked against the linoleum as Benny dragged me along. The dog was solid muscle, and he wasn’t taking no for an answer.

“Sorry, sorry!” Jared cried, all but sprinting over to the phone with a Yorkie tucked up under his arm. From the back, something crashed, and I heard the unmistakable sound of a tub full of water splashing against the floor.

“Perfect,” I said, looping Benny’s leash three times around my wrist to shorten his lead.

We had been open for five hours and I hadn’t even had time to pause and wolf down a microwaved burrito in the

break room.

My manager, Eliza, had abruptly quit that morning, calling me in a tearful frenzy and claiming that she just couldn't deal with the stress of the job anymore. In her interview, she'd seemed competent and kind, which is what I looked for in an employee, but she was fresh out of college and this was her first managerial position, which turned out to be too much for her. I had pleaded with her to come in for one last shift, but she wasn't having any of it.

And now we were having a beyond stressful time trying to cover for her loss.

I finally managed to hustle Benny into his kennel. He grinned a doggie grin at me, tongue lolling out as though he were proud of the trouble he had caused. Wiping my hands off on my already grimy T-Shirt, I strode over to the front desk. Jared was still holding the Yorkie as he hung up the phone, looking ashen. Even the Yorkie seemed shaken at whatever he'd heard.

"Ms. Lopez canceled her appointment," he said.

"Well, did you reschedule her?"

"No, Ruby, she *canceled* as in *canceled*. She said she's hiring a private groomer."

I groaned. Ms. Lopez owned three retired racing greyhounds, and I had always prided myself on being able to handle their nervous temperaments. I usually put them in kennels far from the other dogs, but we had been so slammed during their last appointment that Eliza had housed them in kennels surrounded by excitable, barking canines. They had been trembling when Ms. Lopez picked them up. I wasn't surprised she was canceling all future appointments with us.

"She was one of our biggest clients, and the biggest tipper," I said, my heart sinking. The phone rang again, and this time I was fast enough to snatch it up.

"Divine Doggie Spa and Training, this is Ruby speaking."

"Rubes! How are you, sweetie?" Katie asked, and some of the tension melted from my shoulders when I realized it was

my cousin and not a client needing something from me.

A bang echoed from the grooming room and I cringed. That did not sound good.

“Hi, Katie. I’m a little overwhelmed right now. But it’s good to hear from you.”

I’d missed my cousin Katie since she’d been living in Sacramento. I felt bad that despite the success of her florist business, the memory of her late husband had made Sacramento feel gloomy, so she was moving to Christmas Mountain to try and recapture some of that small town spirit from the childhood winters she had spent at the Sugar Plum Inn. I couldn’t wait for us to be together again, just like old times. But now was definitely *not* a good time.

“You’re not answering your private line, so I figured I would give the spa a call,” she said, her perky voice coming through the line loud and clear. “What’s going on over there? It sounds like you’re running a circus.”

“Not on purpose,” I said, with a slightly hysterical laugh.

“Listen, are we still on for a one o’clock pickup? I just landed.”

I smacked my forehead with the palm of my hand. Of course. I knew I had been forgetting something. Katie was getting in today, like *now*. I had promised to give her a ride from the airport back to my townhouse, where she would be crashing while she got back on her feet.

“I’m so sorry, Katie, it totally slipped my mind. My manager quit on the spot today and it’s been absolute chaos. I can be there in half an hour, okay?”

“Of course,” Katie said, as easygoing as ever. “I’ll hunt down a coffee and a magazine and sit tight. See you soon. Love you!”

“Love you, too,” I said, and hung up.

I took a second to drag a deep breath into my lungs. I was short staffed, stressed out, and I just lost one of my biggest clients. How was it that I was slammed with work but still



hemorrhaging money? I needed the cash to hire at least three more employees, the space to house a dozen more dogs, and the time to repair the frayed relationship I had with my existing clients.

“Bonkers,” I muttered to myself, rubbing my eyes with the heels of my hands. “Absolutely bonkers.”

As if on cue, the door to Groom Room A flew open, and a sudsy dachshund tore out of the room at the speed of light. Kimberly, who had been soaping the dog down, lunged to grab the animal, but she slipped on a puddle and came crashing to the ground instead.

“Catch that dog!” she yelled.

The doggie spa erupted into chaos.

Jared tried to steer the dachshund toward the grooming room, which meant that his Yorkie was left unattended to wander around the spa. As I went for the Yorkie, Kimberly managed to wrestle the dog into her arms, but he was so slippery that he wriggled right out and hit the ground running. The dachshund left a trail of water and bubbles behind him. I had no idea a creature with legs so short could move that fast.

Through it all, the speakers embedded in the walls played “Here Comes Santa Claus,” adding a jaunty soundtrack to the madness. A little girl waiting to pick up her puppy sang loudly along with Gene Autry, while her mother watched the proceedings with a pinched expression.

“I think we should come back later,” the mother said, hoisting the little girl up onto her hip before marching out the door.

Fifteen minutes later, the dachshund was captured and kenneled. The Yorkie was being washed in Groom Room B. The doggie spa was left in near-shambles, with water and paw prints everywhere. I stood in the midst of the catastrophe, on the brink of shrieking.

“I think I bruised my tailbone,” Kimberly said, since she’d taken the spill trying to catch the dachshund. Pain was written

in her furrowed brow. She massaged her lower back and winced. “Can I leave early to go to the emergency room?”

“Of course, Kimberly,” I said, worrying about her back now. “I hope your back is all right. Let me know how it goes. If you need to call in sick tomorrow, that’s okay, too.”

It most certainly was not okay for my business, but it was going to have to be. I needed to find a way to keep Divine Doggie Spa and Training afloat despite setbacks aplenty.

“I have to go pick up my cousin,” I said, after opening the door to find Jared singing along with the Christmas music. “Can you cover the front desk while I’m gone? It should only take an hour or so. Just ... no more appointments today, and absolutely no walk-ins.”

“Okay,” he said, giving me a thumbs up that didn’t match his nervous smile. “But I can’t be up there for fifteen minutes. Maybe put up a sign?”

“Yes, good idea,” I said, unable to believe I was down fifty percent of my staff. “Fine. It’s all going to be fine,” I mumbled, as I yanked on my coat and dashed out the door.

\* \* \*

“Ruby, it’s so good to see you,” Katie said, throwing her arms around me.

I gave her a long, tight hug, worried I was still damp from the Dachshund Incident and making her smell like wet dog right after she finished her flights.

Katie, however, smelled like the peach and vanilla body mist she had been wearing since we were in high school. It was quintessentially Katie: sweet and reliable.

“Ugh, it’s so good to see you,” I said. “It’s been a *day*.”

“Sounds like it. Never a dull day at the doggie spa, I’m sure.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said, and then filled her in on the Incident on the drive back to my townhouse.

Katie laughed so hard tears welled up in her eyes. “You have to admit it’s at least a little funny,” she said, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with a tissue.

“Yes, it’s going to be hilarious when I’m destitute and have to close the spa.”

“Come on, Rubes, don’t be like that. You’re just down on your luck is all. This is the joy of small business ownership: feast and famine. You’ll bounce back. You always do.”

“I hope so,” I said.

Katie angled her body towards me in the passenger seat, raising her brunette eyebrows. “So, how’s the guy?”

“You know his name, Katie,” I said, with a smile creeping in.

“Right, how’s Connor?” she said, dragging out the last syllable of his name into a taunting singsong.

I giggled so much I nearly swerved out of my lane. “He’s great. We’re great. It’s like a dream, honestly. Like we’ve been together for years. Just good. Easy.”

“That’s so wonderful. I’m happy for you, Ruby. You deserve someone who really cares about you. And six feet of tall, dark and handsome isn’t bad either.”

“You’re terrible.”

“But you love me.”

“That’s true,” I said, as I pulled into my garage. “Come on, let’s get you inside and situated.”

I kept my word to Jared and didn’t dawdle at home, promising Katie that I would return soon and hopefully without more doggie disaster stories. Luckily, there weren’t any more crises during the rest of the work day, even though Jared and I were barely able to cover the amount of work we had to get through. But by the end of the day, all the pooches had been clipped and washed and returned safely to their owners, and I trudged home to collapse on the couch.

Katie, who always seemed to know what I needed before I did, had ordered us a pizza with extra pepperoni and poured me a double helping of wine.

“Ugh,” I said, washing down my second slice of pizza with a gulp of wine. “I’m sorry I was such a mess today. I was all excited to roll out the red carpet for you when you landed, and here you are taking care of me.”

“Don’t worry about it, Rubes,” Katie said, scraping her brown waves up into a messy bun. “Family takes care of each other. You can pay me back by spilling. You mentioned on the phone there was some sort of big competition going on in Christmas Mountain? What’s that all about?”

“Oh, right,” I said, sitting up a little straighter. “Do you remember my old P.E. teacher, Ms. Rivera? When she passed away, she left this gorgeous renovated building up for grabs. It’s huge, Katie, and it would be perfect for expanding the spa. The whole town is going to vote on Christmas Eve, as to which business is the most deserving of the building. So, all the interested business owners have been scrambling to out-merry each other for weeks.”

“That’s so Christmas Mountain,” she said, fondly. “A whole contest just to bring the community together? Go Ms. Rivera.”

“Yes, well, not everyone’s been getting into the sporting spirit,” I said, thinking back on the dinner at Connor’s parents’ house, and how it had so transparently been a bid to scope out the competition.

It didn’t seem fair, boozing and schmoozing the competitors to try to get intel. But then again, maybe that was just how they did things in his family. Though I had grown up sledding with the Reed children and attending dinners at the Reed household, I still felt a little bit on the outs with them sometimes. They came from a different world than me, a glamorous world of monied ease, and I was never quite able to wrap my head all the way around it.

“Are the Reeds competing?” Katie asked, as though she could read my mind.

I nodded. “Connor is dead set on using the building to expand the bank and impress his dad.”

A shadow passed over Katie’s face. “Doesn’t that make things tense between you two?”

I tilted my head. “What do you mean?”

“You want the building. Connor wants the building... It sounds like something that could come between you two.”

“Our relationship isn’t like that,” I said, my brow wrinkling. “We help each other, tease each other all the time and we’re locked into some kind of friendly competition. No matter who wins, it won’t affect how we feel about each other. I’m sure of it.”

At least I thought I was. Was there space for bitterness to creep in and sour our relationship? I desperately hoped not, but now that Katie had planted the seed of worry in my mind, it was hard not to let it take root. If I won the building, would Connor’s family resent me?

“Ruby, are you still with me?” Katie asked, reaching over to tap me on the wrist.

I shook myself back into the present moment. “Yes, sorry. I’ve just got a lot on my mind.”

“Seems like it. You know what you need?”

“What?” I asked, even though I already knew what she was going to say.

“A movie night!”

A smile touched my lips. Thank goodness for Katie. She was always upbeat and optimistic, and I badly needed that kind of attitude in my life right now.

“All right, let’s do it, but nothing too long, and nothing sad or scary.”

“Never! Let’s stick to the classics.”

And that’s how we ended up snuggled under a blanket together watching *White Christmas* on my television, chatting through the movie until we started to doze. I woke up just

about the time the credits were starting to roll, and I nudged Katie awake, too. We both sleepily changed into our pajamas and piled into our beds, me in my bedroom and Katie in the guest room that would be her home base for the next few weeks.

I slept secure knowing she was close by, and knowing that my family would always be there for me, no matter how crazy life got.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The night after the Dachshund Incident, I had fitful dreams of emergencies at work, which eventually ended with all my staff quitting. In a panic, I ran to the town square and was trying to convince the snowwomen to come help me, but I couldn't figure out how to get them to the doggie spa without them melting and clients kept calling and calling—

I snapped awake, breathing hard, realizing it had been a nightmare. Kimberly and Jared still worked for me and hadn't abandoned me. I needed to send their Christmas bonuses pronto.

My phone beeped from the nightstand and I found a text from Connor: *You. Me. Sleigh Ride. Tonight?*

I sat up and texted Connor back, smiling so widely my cheeks hurt: *I like the way you think.*

And just like that, my bad dreams evaporated like morning dew.

When evening came, I took my time getting dressed for our date, opting for something different than the ratty old T-shirts I wore while working with the dogs. I still wore jeans, slightly nicer than my go-to pair, but selected one of my best-knit sweaters and a tartan lambswool scarf that my mother had found on a trip to Scotland and handed down to me. Brown riding boots and faux-diamond bow earrings completed the ensemble.

I was no fashionista, but I think I did pretty well for myself.

I met Connor at seven on the dot inside the lobby of Silver Bells Luxury Tours, and Harmony was there to greet us.

“It’s the happy couple!” she exclaimed, her Silver Bells nametag glinting on her chest as she smiled broadly and pulled up our reservation on her computer. “Looks like you’re heading to the Grotto tonight?”

“That’s right,” Connor said, giving my hand a squeeze.

“Wow,” I said, my belly doing a little dance in anticipation. “You’re really serving up the whole holiday experience tonight, aren’t you?”

“As a representative of Reed Bank,” he said in his best business voice. “It is in my best interest to spread as much Christmas cheer as possible.”

I bumped shoulders with him. “You’re such a ham. I’m sure there was no ulterior motive for bringing me out here besides winning that building.”

“None at all, Ms. Curtis. That wouldn’t be very sporting of me.” His voice was still perfectly professional, but his eyes shined with mischief.

I couldn’t help but press up onto my tiptoes and give him a quick kiss.

“You two are so cute,” Harmony said, her fingers flying across the keyboard. “You’re all checked in. You’ll be riding with Fruitcake and Molasses, two of our sweetest mares. Head around back and the driver will get you ready to ride.”

The sleigh was breathtaking. Handcrafted from maple and cherry wood, with gleaming silver trim, it looked like something out of a fairy tale. The two mares stamping and whinnying in the snow were jet black and dove white, with long manes braided with shiny red ribbons.

My mouth dropped open, and Connor slung an arm around my shoulder, pulling me in tight.

“Gorgeous, isn’t it?” he asked. “Come on, let’s get under the blankets.”



The driver helped us into the sleigh and tucked us in under heavy blankets, which kept our laps toasty as the sleigh ride began. I had bundled up in my thickest coat and a knit cap, but my nose still burned with cold.

Connor's eyes twinkled as he touched the tip of his index finger to my nose and started humming Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. I hid my face in his shoulder, unable to repress a smile.

The mares pulled us through the tree-lined lane that led to Santa's Grotto. One of Christmas Mountain's most scenic attractions, Santa's Grotto was an outdoor workshop in the woods against the mountain. Carolers dressed as elves serenaded us as we rode through the forest, and fairy lights sparkled in the trees.

Out-of-town friends always asked me if I got sick of Christmas after living in a town dedicated to it, but that just wasn't possible when attractions as magical as this existed. Beyond the sheer beauty of the Grotto, there was something touching about watching people from the community come together to create an immersive holiday experience.

We turned a corner, and the trees opened up on a small clearing lit by more string lights and a cheery bonfire. The scent of candy canes and woodsmoke filled the air. Cal Bradley was standing in front of the miniature workshop in his Santa Claus gear, handing out peppermint sticks to a gaggle of kindergarteners.

Once Cal spied us, he greeted us with a hearty, "Ho, ho, ho!" He really put his back into it, and one of the little boys cheered with sheer delight.

"It's the big man himself," Connor said, as our sleigh came to a temporary stop. We disembarked with the help of the driver, and Cal presented us both with candy.

"Merry Christmas," he said, warmly in his Santa Claus bass. And then, in a pitch a little closer to his normal voice, he added, "Congratulations on finally getting together, you two. Wifey told me all about it."

As if on cue, Macy appeared at his side, holding a plate of gingerbread cookies. She was in her Ms. Claus outfit, and looked every inch the part, down to her shiny black boots. Her red velvet cape swirled around her as she leaned in to give me a hug, hoisting the cookies expertly high so they wouldn't be disturbed.

"Hi, lovebirds!" she said. "Welcome to the workshop. Care for a cookie?"

We both helped ourselves to her famous gingerbread, which she sold by the pound at Cupid's Cupcakes and Cookies. Macy's business boomed year-round, and it felt like she never stopped working, but I knew Christmas was her busiest season. That's why it was doubly kind of her to volunteer as Ms. Claus again this year, just for the sake of bringing joy to the residents and visitors of Christmas Mountain.

"We won't keep you long," I said, eyeing the line of children eagerly waiting for their turn to whisper in Santa's ear. "We just had to say hello."

"Glad you did," Cal said, warmly.

Macy leaned over to fix his snowy fake beard, which had gone slightly askew to reveal dark stubble underneath. "Stay warm out there, and enjoy the sights."

Connor and I piled back into the sleigh, waving goodbye to Macy and Cal as the horses trotted down the lane. Soon, we were enveloped by the forest, with gleaming stars dotting the velvety black sky overhead. I sighed deeply and snuggled up against Connor, who wrapped an arm around my shoulder.

Everything was perfect.

For a while, we rode in silence, just taking in the scenery and breathing in the fragrant scent of pine. Then Connor said, "Grace would have loved a sleigh ride like this."

"Grace?" I said, lifting my head from his shoulder and looking into his face, trying to gauge his thoughts. I was surprised that he'd brought up his sister, who had passed away in a tragic accident when we were young. Grace had been the

oldest and had agreed to taking Connor, Morgan, Dallas, and I on an adventure walk that ended with her falling off a cliff.

Connor nodded, then swallowed and paused. Like he was debating whether or not to continue this conversation. He looked off into the forest, unable to meet my eyes.

“You don’t talk about her much,” I said, softly.

He shook his head, his expression tight, a line forming between his eyebrows. “Well, it’s painful. But there are good memories there, too. I don’t want to forget those.”

“Of course not,” I said, gently, treading into delicate territory, and I didn’t want to spook Connor or accidentally say something insensitive.

He pulled me closer, as if doing so could protect me from all the harm in the world. Our voices were low, quiet enough that we wouldn’t be heard by the driver.

“You’re right that Grace would’ve enjoyed this,” I said, leaning my head against him with a sigh. “Maybe we can close our eyes and pretend she’s sitting here with us.”

I glanced up at him and he nodded, before his eyes drifted closed. I closed my eyes and tried to imagine her sitting here with us. In my mind, she appeared as a young girl still, as if she hadn’t aged a day. I pictured her right here with us, the corners of her blue eyes crinkling.

“*Hehehe, hehehe ...*” A girl’s laughter rang out in the quiet woods.

I lifted my head to look up at Connor, wondering if I’d imagined the sound. But his green eyes met mine, widening a little, telling me he’d heard it, too. A lump formed in my throat and I sat up, looking all around the sleigh. Nobody here but us.

“Did you hear a giggle?” I said, quietly to Connor, who slowly nodded. My throat went dry and a chill ran down my spine. “Sir?” I said, calling to the driver. “Did you, um, hear anything?”

“Just a kid’s laughter,” he said, glancing out at the forest. “Probably a family going for a walk. They should be careful

being off the path this late at night, though.”

“Probably just a family,” I said, nodding at Connor, who looked down at me, and to my surprise, he was smiling.

“Probably ...” His voice trailed off, but he looked calm, and peaceful. “Sometimes, I think she’s here with us, especially during Christmastime.”

“I think you’re right,” I said, staring up at the stars and thinking of his angelic sister who had been taken too soon. “Thank you for sharing something so personal with me.”

He rubbed his nose against mine. “I want to share everything with you, Ruby.”

“I’m glad,” I said, feeling like the luckiest woman in the world. “I love you, Connor.”

“I love you too, Rudolph.”

We snuggled against each other, making a promise to take this sleigh ride every year.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After our sleigh ride, we headed over to Connor's parents' house for cocktail hour. This was the part of the night I was feeling the most uneasy about, and I shifted from foot to foot on the elaborate porch mat outside the Reed house, hanging on tightly to Connor's arm.

Despite the fact that I had grown up hanging out with Morgan in this very house, this was my first time appearing at the Reeds' house as Connor's girlfriend. I wasn't entirely sure how his parents were going to react. Connor had told me they were excited to see us together, but I still couldn't help but feel like this cocktail hour was some kind of test.

Connor rapped on the door, and his mom, Ivy Reed, appeared to open it. As always, she was impeccably put together, from her sleek bun to her gleaming pearl earrings to the glossy pumps on her feet. She had to lean down to give me a hug, since she was considerably taller than me in those shoes, and I couldn't help but feel loomed over.

"Ruby, Connor," she said. "It's so nice to see the both of you together. Please, come inside. The cider is hot and ready."

Thankfully, this time the house wasn't full of local business owners. It was just Mr. and Mrs. Reed, Connor, and me. Part of me wished that Morgan was here to fifth wheel and diffuse the tension a little bit, but I knew that this was one fire I had to walk through without her help.

Connor's dad was tossing an extra log into the roaring fireplace when we walked into the living room, and he

straightened to give us a broad smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. The tension was palpable. He stuck out his hand for Connor to shake, which struck me as overly formal for a father and son, but maybe that was just the dynamic between the two of them now.

"Ruby, you're looking well," Mr. Reed said, offering me his hand next.

"Thank you," I said, shaking his hand awkwardly. He'd never shaken my hand before, ever. "You look well, too."

Oh, *so* awkward.

William Reed straightened his cuffs, pinned perfectly with gold cufflinks. "May I pour you a glass of cider?" Mr. Reed said.

I swallowed, noticing how dry my throat had become. "Yes, please."

Connor and I sat down shoulder to shoulder on the loveseat and were served spiked apple cider in two steaming mugs. Connor took my hand in his, holding our laced fingers together in his lap, and I felt comforted.

"So," Mr. Reed began, gesturing at us vaguely with his mug. "How long has this been going on?"

"Almost a month," I said, because there was no point in lying. Ivy Reed winced a little behind her mug, and I wondered if I had said something wrong. Connor, knowing his parents' expectations better than I did, jumped in to save me.

"But it feels like we've been together for years. We've been friends since we were kids, so we already understand each other."

I couldn't help but notice that his manner of speaking was slightly stilted in front of his parents, more formal than usual, even though I personally believed it should be the other way around. Wasn't your family supposed to accept you no matter how you presented yourself? Shouldn't your parents be the kind of people you felt comfortable letting your guard down around? That's what my family was like, but now I was having

flashbacks to high school when Mrs. Reed dressed Morgan in headbands, plaid skirts, and cashmere sweaters.

Still, I followed Connor's lead.

"It's been nice getting to know each other in a new way," I said, taking a sip from my mug and noticing my hands were shaking a little. Get a grip, Ruby. "Connor and I have spent a lot of time together this Christmas season."

"We've noticed," Ivy said primly. I could clearly see through the courtesy to the disapproval underneath.

Was she upset that I had been monopolizing Connor's time? Did she want her son all to herself for the holidays? Or would she rather that he brought someone else home?

"You know, Andrea is around for Christmas," Mr. Reed said, as though that were related to the topic of Connor and me dating. "I'm sure she would love to spend more time with Ruby. You should invite her over for dinner, Connor."

"I think she has her hands full entertaining guests," Connor said, and he sounded so tired. How often did he have to play along with his father's designs for his life, even when he wasn't interested in them at all?

I was suddenly grateful that my parents had always encouraged me to march to the beat of my own drum. They had never tried to control me, and there had never been tense conversations like this over anyone I dated.

"You know Andrea," Ivy said. "She loves to entertain. Do you do much entertaining, Ruby?"

"Me?" I asked, feeling the panic start to rise within me. I wasn't sure that Ivy would count inviting the book club gals over for cheap wine and break-and-bake cookies as *entertaining*. "Um, sometimes."

"That's a good quality for a woman to have," she said, raising one eyebrow. "You know I went over to the neighbor's house for coffee last week and they didn't even have any finger sandwiches or cake? Hosting really is a dying art."

The conversation quickly turned to shop talk about the bank, punctuated with occasional bits of neighborhood gossip from Ivy, and I felt my spirits start to sag. They were acting like I wasn't even in the room, no matter how much Connor tried to loop me into the conversation. Every so often Connor would say "what do you think about that, Ruby?" or "can you believe it?" and he would turn to me expectantly, obviously trying to include me.

If anything, Connor's efforts just made me look worse. I had no idea about the details of a stock portfolio, even though I had a retirement account. I mean, I just had it deducted automatically from my doggie spa paycheck. Also, I had never even met half the people Ivy was airing her opinions about. I felt excluded to say the least and about two inches tall.

"Will you excuse me?" I asked, after many excruciating minutes of small talk. "I need to use the powder room."

"The downstairs is being remodeled. Try the one upstairs on your right," Ivy said.

I climbed the stairs to the guest bathroom, and patted cool water onto my temples and neck. This wasn't going well, that much was sure. The Reeds were a tough crowd, and I was floundering. But Connor was important to me, so I needed to do better.

"Come on, Ruby," I said, staring at my flushed reflection. "Get back in there and show them what you're made of. Can't quit now."

I made sure to straighten the expensive hand towels before I slipped back out into the hallway. No use coming off as messy as well as ignorant.

I started to make my way down the stairs, but I paused halfway between the landing and the ground floor, listening to the low, urgent voices floating up the stairs. It sounded distinctly like the kind of conversation between Connor and his mom that I shouldn't be eavesdropping on, but I couldn't help myself. I stayed on the stair around the corner from them and listened.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

As I stood on the stair, I could only hear Connor's voice and Ivy's, so I wasn't sure why his dad wasn't involved in this heated conversation. Had Connor's mother pulled him away from the living room to have a private word with him in the hall?

"Are you sure about this, Connor?" Ivy asked, her tone shrill. "I mean, really?"

"What do you mean, am I sure?" Connor said, his voice tight.

"Your father and I only want what's best for you—"

"Then why can't you let me be happy for once?"

"Watch your tone, young man," she said, snapping. "Just hear me out, please?"

There was a sigh, and then a few beats of silence. I stayed frozen on the stair, unsure whether or not to move. I couldn't make myself known *now*, not when it was apparent that I must have overheard part of their conversation.

There was the sound of clothes rustling and shoes shuffling, and I assumed Ivy was moving closer to her son. Maybe she was even hugging him.

"Ruby is a good girl, and she's a sweet friend for Morgan, but what is she really doing with her life, Connor? Washing dogs for a living isn't exactly a career. I've known her since she was in diapers, and you know I love her, but I really hoped you would end up with someone a little more established,

someone who fits your station in life. Ruby just ... she isn't a match, Connor."

A far-off tinny ringing sounded in my ears. Suddenly, I felt sick to my stomach. Of course, Ivy wouldn't think I was good enough for her son. I didn't know what else I expected to happen, showing up here holding Connor's hand and smiling like an idiot.

Connor and I didn't fit together, not for the long term. His family would never accept me, with my sloppy ponytails and messy job and lack of inherited wealth. We weren't a *match*.

Tears sprang to my eyes, and it took everything within me to hold back a shriek of humiliation. I didn't care about getting caught eavesdropping anymore, I just wanted to get out of this house as fast as I could.

"Mom ..." Connor began quietly.

I couldn't stand it. I worried he might tell her that I was just a relationship for now, nothing long-term, or admit that he made a mistake with me, or any other horrible truth that Ivy might draw out from him. Scrubbing at my teary face with the back of my hand, I stomped down the stairs and made a beeline for the front door. Just to add insult to injury, I had to pass Ivy and Connor on my way out. They were standing huddled together in the foyer.

"Ruby?" Connor said, sounding confused as I dared to glance over at him. An expression crossed his face telling me he knew I had overheard them. "Ruby, wait."

But I didn't care what Connor Reed had to say to me. Instead, I threw open the door and scurried out into the frozen night.

The wind lashed at my hair, and without a cozy sleigh blanket on my lap or Connor's warm arm around me, the Montana air seemed harsh instead of festive. I fought not to cry. I hated that choked-up feeling, and the way crying made your nose run and your eyes puff up for hours afterwards, but right now, I couldn't stop myself. I stood in the snow outside

the Reed house with no coat on unable to stop the sobs that came, and my whole body started shaking.

From the outside, the house looked so picture-perfect. Perfect Christmas lights on the house, perfectly decorated with miniature Christmas trees in every window. Connor's *life* was perfect. I was the only piece of the puzzle that didn't fit.

I didn't know how I had talked myself into thinking we might go the distance together. Clearly, I had been blinded by optimism and love.

*Love.*

Another shuddering sob tore through me. I really did love him with my whole heart, and that's what made this realization hurt so badly.

Behind me, the door flew open.

"Ruby!" Connor called out, yanking on his coat and nearly getting tangled in his scarf in his haste. "Wait a minute."

"Go back inside, Connor," I said, wrapping my arms around myself.

"What are you talking about?" he said, his voice panicked. "Please, will you just come inside? It's freezing out here. You don't even have a coat on!"

"Why should I come inside?" I shot back. I could hear the nastiness in my voice, but I was powerless to stop it. "So your mother can insult me some more?"

He took a deep breath and approached me slowly, the way I might approach a dog at the spa who had gotten spooked. He put a hand out, as though to steady me.

"Listen, I know my mother can be a bit much—"

"Is that what you call it? She said we weren't a match!" I said, knowing I'd never wanted to raise my voice at Connor but somehow in my embarrassment and anger it was happening. "She said I wasn't doing anything with my life, that I'm not good enough for you."

"She didn't mean it like that—"

“I can’t believe you’re making excuses for her,” I said, narrowing my eyes before I turned and started trudging through the snow in the direction of my townhouse, which was, strictly speaking, more than a walkable distance away. Maybe I’d be there in an hour or two? If I didn’t freeze along the way...

“Ruby, you can’t be serious right now. Will you at least let me give you a ride home? I know you’re upset, but I can explain.”

“What is there to explain, Connor?” I said, my teeth chattering, but my anger burning hot in my belly. “I heard what she said to you. You didn’t even defend me because deep down you must agree with her.”

A shadow passed over Connor’s face and his entire expression changed, making me realize he was angry now, too. I had only seen him angry a few times in my life, outside of the usual childhood frustration over lost baseball and board games, but he was there now. His brows knit together and his mouth pressed into a thin line.

It was an expression I recognized, as it looked almost exactly like Ivy’s disapproval.

“You didn’t stick around long enough to hear what I had to say, but it sounds like you don’t have faith in me,” he said, his voice tight. “You just assume the worst about me, that I’ll do whatever my mother tells me to do. Is that right?”

“I didn’t hear you countering her,” I said, and my voice broke on the last word. The sight of Connor so hurt was heart wrenching, and if this were any other night then I might have calmed down enough to comfort him, but the fight between us had already gained momentum. It was like a train barreling off the rails, and I was holding on for dear life. I thrust my hand to my chest. “I haven’t done anything wrong! You have no idea how it feels to hear her attack me and to realize you’re not going to deny her accusations that I’m not right for you. It’s not fair.”

“What isn’t fair is you assuming that I would bring you here only to decide that you aren’t good enough for me when

my mother goes on one of her rants,” Connor said, stamping his feet in the snow to keep warm, and reminding me of an irritated stallion. “How long is this lack of trust in me going to go on, Ruby? A year, or two years? Until we’re married?”

The world spun on its axis, and I felt a little dizzy. “You want to marry me?”

“I don’t know what I want anymore,” he said, and the words might as well have been sharp daggers piercing my heart all in a row.

“Well then what are we doing?” I said, my chest caving in and a fresh round of tears welled in my eyes. “Just killing time together? I’m just someone on the side to keep you warm through the winter, is that it?”

“Ruby, I didn’t say that,” he said, shaking his head and blowing out a breath. “You’re putting words in my mouth. Please don’t do this.”

He sounded exasperated, tired even, but he wasn’t reaching out to me anymore. His eyes were hard and guarded, and it was clear that he had put up a wall. The Reeds were famous for icing out anyone they deemed to be the “wrong kind of people,” and it felt like I had wound up on Connor’s blacklist.

I sniffled and wiped the tears off my face, trying to pull from that deep well of Curtis courage and stand tall in the face of this betrayal.

“Maybe your mother is right. Maybe we don’t fit together.”

“She said that, not me. Why are you punishing me for something out of my control?” he asked, raising his voice.

Panicking. He was panicking.

Still, it didn’t give him the right to shout at me.

I lifted my chin. “I would rather be alone than be with someone who’s going to judge me for making an honest living doing something that I love.”

The light went out of his eyes, confirming my words were the killing blow. His face crumpled, and for an instant I

thought he was going to cry. But when he spoke, his voice was flat and toneless.

“If that’s the way you feel, maybe we should take some time apart to figure out our priorities and determine whether or not we’re an advantageous match going forward.”

He sounded like a robot, like a *banker*, not like the man I had come to love.

“Yeah,” I said, my lip wobbling despite my best efforts to pull myself together. “Maybe we should.”

Connor stared at me for a long moment, long enough for the regret to rush into my chest. I wanted him to stride over to me and wrap me up in his arms. I wanted him to tell me it was all going to be okay. I wanted him to lead me back inside and settle me in front of the fire where it was warm, and above all I wanted him to tell his mother to back off. For a moment, I thought that was still the way our night could go, and the tiniest bit of hope crept in.

But then, Connor pulled out his phone and started scrolling through his contacts.

It rang three times before someone picked up.

“Katie,” Connor said. “It’s Connor Reed. Could you come pick Ruby up from my parents’ house, please? She’d like to go home, and I don’t think I should be the one to drive her.”

I stood in shivering silence as Katie said something on the other end.

“Thanks, Katie. I really appreciate it,” he said. After he hung up, he turned to me. “Please come wait for her inside, Ruby,” he said, his voice so quiet it was almost snatched away by the winter wind. “You’ll catch your death out here.”

I wanted to dig my heels into the snow and insist that I would be perfectly fine, thank you very much. But my coat and purse were still inside, and my fingers and toes had already gone numb. So, I nodded and followed him back through the front door.

We stood awkwardly in the foyer, not quite able to meet each other's eyes. Connor's parents conversed quietly in the living room, as if sensing we didn't want to be bothered.

I wanted to apologize. I wanted to smooth things over by any means necessary and return to the wintry fantasy world we had been living in mere hours before. But the sleigh ride was over, and reality had settled in. Connor and I had some serious issues to work through before we continued seeing each other.

*If* we continued seeing each other.

"I'm sorry things turned out like this," I managed to say.

"Yeah," he said, looking a hundred kinds of miserable. "Me, too."

He turned and opened the coat closet, and handed me my coat and purse. I was thankful for this small mercy, that he didn't make me face down his parents at all.

Before we had a chance to say anything else to each other, the glow of headlights illuminated the front yard. Katie to the rescue, driving my affordable and reliable car.

"I'll see you around, I guess," I said, shouldering my purse. The words felt like ice in my mouth.

"See you around," he said, weakly, and opened the door for me.

Pain sliced through my chest like a knife, as I trudged out through the snow to slide into the passenger seat and I didn't look behind me. Not even once.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

I wanted to spend the following days sulking in bed, but that wasn't an option. I still had to open up the doggie spa every day and do my job, still had to pay my bills and feed myself. I coped by coming directly home from work each day and holing up on the couch under a mountain of blankets, flipping through reruns I didn't care about on TV, and eating kettle corn until I was sick to my stomach.

Katie, to her credit, let me wallow for a few days. But on the third day, she sat down next to me and took the bowl of kettle corn out of my lap.

"I know you and Connor had an ugly fight," she said. His name felt like a stone in the pit of my stomach. I had told Katie all about the argument on the drive back to my house, and had ended up crying so hard she had to pull over so she could hug me. "But you can't hide away from the whole town indefinitely."

"What do you suggest I do instead?" I said, grumbling. I didn't want to be a pill to Katie, but I wasn't feeling much like myself. I wasn't feeling much of anything.

Katie popped a handful of kettle corn into her mouth.

"You need to shower and then take a walk. It will clear your head, and put some energy into you. Just a little walk, Ruby, do this for me. I'll even go with you if you want."

"No," I said, with a sigh. "I'll go by myself. I just want to be alone right now. No offense."



“None taken. I know better than most what grief feels like. It hollows you out.”

“I know you do,” I said softly, reaching over to squeeze her hand. “Thanks for kicking my booty into gear.”

“It’s my job,” she said, standing up and taking the popcorn with her. “Shower time, come on.”

The shower didn’t make losing Connor hurt any less, but it did make me feel a little bit more like a human being. I wiggled into my most broken-in jeans and my softest sweater for the walk, then tugged on my snow boots and hugged Katie goodbye. I set out toward Main Street, walking with my head down and my hands stuffed in my pockets. The sun had long ago set, and the moonlight added a silvery cast to the snow.

It was mere days before Christmas, my favorite time of the year, but I had a hard time summoning any holiday joy. Even the twinkling lights of Main Street, which had brought me so much happiness before, now served only to remind me of Connor. I blinked back tears as I continued my brisk walk, choosing to pretend that it was the stinging wind that was making my eyes water, not the memories.

I turned down the road that led to The Sharing Tree, retracing a mindless route I had walked a hundred times before. At this time of night, there was no one in the town square, except for a few of the snowwomen who were still holding up strong in the chill weather.

Well, almost no one.

There was a middle-aged woman standing at The Sharing Tree, cradling a Christmas ornament in her hands. It took a moment, but I realized I recognized her from somewhere, maybe from my childhood? As I walked up the path, I saw that she was crying.

“Excuse me,” I said softly, approaching her. I doubted she wanted to be disturbed, but I was worried she might be in some kind of trouble. “Are you okay?”

She looked up at me, tears shining in her dark brown eyes. Her curly hair was pulled up into a bright pink scrunchie, and

she was bundled up in a matching parka.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, wiping the tears off her face. “I didn’t realize anyone else was out here.”

“I think it’s just the two of us,” I said, feeling bad for her. “I’m sorry for interrupting. I just worried something might be wrong.”

“It’s all right,” she said with a small, watery smile. “I was thinking of someone I recently lost. You’re a sweetheart for asking, but I’ll be fine. Enjoy your night.”

“You, too,” I said, lamely, giving her a wave as she hung the ornament. With a nod, she turned from me and started toward the stairs that led to Main Street.

Curiosity got the best of me, and I couldn’t help but peer at the ornament she had placed on the tree in the tradition of leaving an ornament in honor of someone you lost. The ornament was a little frosted glass goldendoodle, complete with a big red bow around its neck.

Memories came rushing back, of laughter through tears and puppy kisses all over my face.

I *did* know this woman. She was Sylvia.

She was Anita Rivera’s sister.

She was in mourning, too.

“Sylvia!” I said, hurrying to where she stood on the first step. I felt propelled forward by a weird, irresistible urge to connect with her. I didn’t want her to feel alone tonight. I might be completely miserable, but I didn’t want anyone else to feel miserable if I could help it.

She stopped and turned to face me, surprise in her eyes. “I’m sorry, have we met?”

I jogged to catch up with her, my breath forming little puffs of clouds in the air.

“Not formally, but I knew your sister, Anita Rivera? She was my P.E. teacher in high school,” I said, trying to catch my breath.

“Oh, isn’t that something?” she said, her bottom lip quivering.

I nodded. “She really helped me when I needed it the most. That’s why you came to The Sharing Tree tonight, isn’t it? To put an ornament on the tree for Ms. Rivera?”

“In remembrance of my dear sister, yes,” she said.

“Will you let me honor her memory by sharing a story with you?” I asked.

She raised an eyebrow, looking a little hesitant, which was fair. I was a stranger, after all. But eventually, she took a step toward me and nodded. “I’d like to hear about Anita.”

I walked over to the railing and looked out at the Falls. The water fell rhythmically to the river below, and little blocks of ice hugged either side of the banks at the bottom. The sound was soothing, giving me the strength to relive in my mind that awful day so many years ago. Then I turned to Sylvia, took a deep breath, and launched into my story. No going back now.

“I recognized the dog from the ornament you left on the tree,” I said, my heart warming as his face popped into my head. “That was Ms. Rivera’s goldendoodle, wasn’t it? I remember him from school. What was his name? Teddy?”

“Toby,” Sylvia said.

“Yes, that’s right,” I said, as the memories became clearer. “As a kid, I was never very good at school. I liked doing science experiments, but I was lousy at math, and I didn’t have the patience to sit still and read back then.”

She blinked at me, listening to every word. “Go on, dear.”

“Well, P.E. was one of the only classes I was actually good at. Ms. Rivera always encouraged me and challenged me to do my best in every class,” I said, remembering how kind she had been to me. How she’d made me feel like I belonged, even though I’d felt like an outsider in my other classes. “What I’m trying to say is, college was never really in the cards for me. I didn’t have the grades.”

She put a hand on the railing as if for support, but never took her eyes from me.

I bit my bottom lip. “The day the school counselor told me that I wasn’t likely to get into any of the universities my friends were going to, my heart broke and I hid out in the gym and cried. Ms. Rivera found me there, sobbing.”

I had Sylvia’s full attention now, and she shuffled a little closer to me along the railing. I swallowed down my nerves and kept going.

“She had Toby with her. I don’t think she ever married or had kids of her own, is that right?”

“That’s right,” Sylvia said, wistfully. “She always said she was married to her work, and that her students were her kids. And she had Toby.”

“I could tell right away that there was something special about her dog,” I said, all of the feelings of that day rushing back. “We could never have dogs in the house growing up because my dad was allergic, but I was fascinated by them. Ms. Rivera sat down next to me and talked me through all my fears and anxieties about my future, my feelings of insecurity, and she let me toss a frisbee around the gym for Toby. She probably spent over an hour with me, just talking with me and letting me hang with her dog, because she saw that he brought me joy.”

Sylvia smiled, fresh tears welling up in her eyes. “That sounds like Anita. She was always patient, willing to drop everything to help her students.”

I took a risk, reaching out to offer my gloved hand to Sylvia. To my delight, she grasped my fingers, squeezing gently.

“What I wanted to tell you is that she helped me figure out my place in life,” I said, warmth filling my chest. “I’m in the line of work I am now because of Ms. Rivera. I fell in love with Toby that day, and I started volunteering at the local animal shelter. I learned everything there was to know about dogs, became a dog walker, then started grooming dogs, and

eventually I opened the Divine Doggie Spa and Training so I could spend my days working with sweet pups. In the end, it turned out that I didn't need to go to a four-year university. I took some business classes at the local community college, and I was all set."

Sylvia's face crumpled, and for a horrifying moment I worried that I had said something wrong. But then I realized that she was crying happy tears. She pressed my hands between her own, blinking up at the sky.

"I *do* know you," she said, laughter bubbling from her. "You're Ruby, aren't you?"

Chills rolled down my spine and my eyebrows flew up in surprise. "Yes, that's my name. How did you know?"

Sylvia wiped the tears off her face, a smile breaking through her sadness like the sun through clouds. "Anita told me about you."

I blinked. "She did?"

"You didn't know it, Ruby, but that day she spent letting you play with Toby? She had been in a pretty dark place herself," she said, squeezing my hands. "My sister struggled with depression her whole life, and Toby was one of her bright spots. She told me that watching you discover your love of dogs by playing with Toby reminded her about what was really important in this life." Sylvia clasped my shoulder, holding me tight. "Love, Ruby. In the end, it's all about love. Nothing else matters, but love."

Now it was my turn to tear up and my vision blurred. This woman had no idea that I was walking around heartbroken, but here she was telling me that the one thing in the world worth fighting for was love.

"I really made that much of an impression on her?" I asked.

"Most times, we don't know how much our actions help or hurt another person. That one hour she spent watching you play with Toby was enough to pull her back from the darkness.

She talked about those moments with you for years afterwards.”

“Wow,” I said, taking in a long, cold breath. We stood there for a minute in silence, holding on to each other by the glow of The Sharing Tree. Sylvia’s words echoed through my mind.

*Love, Ruby. In the end, it’s all about love.*

That’s when I realized I had messed up spectacularly.

But, maybe, if I wished for a thin sliver of a Christmas miracle, I could fix things.

“It was so nice to meet you,” I said, giving her a proper hug. “But I’ve got to go. There’s someone I need to call. I messed something up and I have to make it right.”

“This is the best time of year for that sort of thing, Ruby,” she said, with a happy chuckle. “Wait, here, take this with you.”

Sylvia retrieved the goldendoodle ornament from the tree and pressed it into my hands.

I shook my head rapidly. “No, Sylvia, I can’t take this. It’s for Anita.”

“She would’ve wanted you to have it, trust me on this. Consider it a gift from my sister, and take care of yourself, Ruby. Go fix whatever you broke.”

“Thank you,” I whispered, squeezing her hand one more time, before turning and starting down the steps toward Main Street and then home.

It wasn’t Christmas yet. There was still time.

Maybe, just maybe, it wasn’t too late to salvage things with Connor.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

After I left The Sharing Tree, I hurried home as fast as my legs could carry me. I burst through the door, trailing mud and ice into the hallway but I didn't even pause to kick off my snow boots. I just lunged for my cell phone, which I had left charging in the kitchen, and dialed Connor's number.

As I listened to the phone ring, Katie appeared in the doorway looking groggy from sleep. Her bed head stuck out in all directions.

She rubbed her eyes. "Who are you calling this late?"

"Connor," I said, too out of breath to explain further.

The phone rang two, three, four times. No answer.

Katie shuffled closer to me in her fuzzy slippers. She was wearing a matching pajama set featuring tiny embroidered holly leaves.

"What happened to you tonight? Something change your mind about him?"

"I ran into someone," I said, my mouth struggling to keep up with my brain.

My mind was racing. Was Connor deliberately ignoring my call? Or was he asleep, or busy? Or out on a date? That last thought might be out of panic, but I glanced at the clock. It was only ten o'clock. It was possible he was in the shower or something.

"What do you mean you ran into someone?" Katie asked.

The call went to voicemail, and my stomach knotted at the sound of Connor's voice.

*"This is Connor Reed. Leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."*

"Connor," I blurted, then sucked in a breath doing my best to pull myself together. I only had one shot at patching things up with him, and I didn't want to ruin my chance by acting desperate. I cleared my throat and did my best to speak slowly. "Hi, it's Ruby. I know it's late, and I know you might not feel like hearing from me right now, but I'd like to talk to you. I made a mistake, Connor. I want to apologize. I want ..."

My voice trailed off as I scrambled for the right words.

I want to try again.

I want a future with you.

I want forever with you.

"I, um, want to meet up and talk in person, if that's possible," I said, biting my bottom lip. Hopefully he was just in the shower and hadn't heard his phone ring, and didn't know I'd called him. "I'm free from now until Christmas. Reach out when you're ready."

With that, I hung up, staring down at the phone like it was a snake in my hand. What had I just done? Had I called too soon, pressured him into something he didn't want to do? What if he didn't want to see me ever again? Did that make me the crazy ex? Oh, the horror!

"Ruby," Katie said, shaking me out of my thoughts. "What's going on, honey?"

I opened my mouth to explain everything to her, or at least give it my best shot, but then my phone lit up in my hand.

A text notification.

From Connor.

He wasn't calling me back. Was this a text telling me to back off, to let him live his life in peace without me? My stomach plummeted at the thought.



I thumbed open the notification with a slight tremor in my fingers. I hadn't eaten much today except an egg bagel for breakfast—well, and too much popcorn—and I was feeling sick to my stomach. Swallowing hard, I read his text: *I'm sorry I couldn't come to the phone, but I agree that it's a good idea for us to talk. It's a little late tonight for a serious conversation, but I could do tomorrow evening? Let me know what you think.*

My heart did a tap dance in my chest. He didn't sound angry, but he didn't sound excited either. His tone was impossible to read in a text. What did he mean by a serious conversation? Did he expect me to sit across a desk from him and draft up a formal break up agreement? I hated it when he got all formal on me.

My fingers flew over the keyboard and I typed back: *Tomorrow night works fine. You pick the place and time. I'll be there.*

Three dots popped up as he typed, and sweat prickled on the back of my neck. Katie, who had probably gotten fed up waiting for me to explain, sidled up beside me and peered over my shoulder at the messages.

“Oh, I see,” she said, sucking in a breath. “I hope you know what you're doing, Ruby.”

Connor typed back: *Is meeting at my house okay? 8pm?*

I wrinkled my nose at that. I was expecting him to suggest we meet at a nice neutral location, like The Sharing Tree. Why was he inviting me onto his turf? It would be needlessly cruel to invite me into the house I had once dreamed of sharing with him (someday) just to let me down easy. Or not so easy. Ugh.

Still, I wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt. If meeting at his house is what made him comfortable, so be it. I typed back: *Yes, see you then.*

*Thanks. Goodnight, Ruby.*

*Night, Connor.*

And with that, our conversation was over. I took a deep, shaky breath and set my phone down on the countertop.

Without having to ask if I needed one, Katie pulled me into a hug.

“It’s all going to be okay,” she said, smoothing my hair.

“I hope so,” I said, against her shoulder.

\* \* \*

I barely slept three hours that night. I kept waking up to thoughts of Connor, and not good ones either. I tossed and turned, trying to fight the terrifying images of him telling me he never wanted to see me again. When I finally did get some shut-eye, my dreams were haunted, replaying that sleigh ride we had taken together when the world seemed so much kinder.

I groggily dragged myself through my shift at the doggie spa, then spent my few hours after work pushing food I couldn’t stomach around on my plate and chewing my fingernails down to nothing. Katie helped me with the decision paralysis of what to wear, and together we settled on warm woolen tights underneath a comfy knit dress. If I was going to get my heart smashed into a thousand pieces, I might as well look cute while it happened.

Finally, just before eight o’clock, I drove to Connor’s house and idled in the car for five minutes, trying to talk myself into opening the car door. The house looked stately in the snow. Strangely, none of the Christmas lights were on outside. Maybe he wasn’t feeling very festive.

I could see the Christmas tree trimmed in golden garland through the front window, and Connor passed in front of it as he moved behind the glass.

My heart leapt into my throat.

I’d wanted my second chance. It was now or never. So, I popped open the car door, walked up to his house and rang the doorbell. When Connor opened the door, the planet stopped spinning and came to a perfect halt.

His hair was tousled and still slightly damp from the shower, and he was wearing that chunky green sweater that I

loved to bury my face in. His eyes shined in the twinkling lights from the wreath on his door, and his lips were slightly parted, as if he was surprised to see me.

“Am I early?” I asked, glancing at the time on my phone, which read 8:03.

“No, you’re right on time,” he said, and his voice brought a wave of emotion crashing over me.

“Okay,” I said, my throat tightening at the distance between us. I suddenly felt like I was about to cry, and I dug my nails into my palms to steady myself.

“Come in.” He opened the door wider and I stepped inside, getting all wrapped up in his soap scent as I passed by him. It was enough to make my head spin.

I followed him into the living room, where we sat down in two armchairs nestled together by the fire. Close enough that we could chat, but not close enough that we could reach out and touch each other. I wondered if he had rearranged some furniture to make the space more conducive to a serious conversation.

“How have you been?” I asked, because I had no idea how to start.

“Pretty good,” he said, then pressed his lips together. “Well, actually not so good. But I figure you haven’t been having an easy time either.”

“No,” I said, wondering if I should play my cards carefully. Come on too strong and I would scare him away. Play it too cool, and he might think I didn’t care. Oh, this was torture. “I’ve been ... coping. Katie has been a big help to me. Things are still bonkers at work. We’re short staffed and losing clients left and right.”

“The bank has also been hectic. Folks are rushing to get their business done before we close for the holidays.”

“Of course.” I nodded, forcing a smile.

Was this how it was going to be between us from now on? Just talking about work and the weather like two

acquaintances? This seemed like a fate worse than death.

“Listen, Ruby,” he said, his expression completely unreadable. “I asked you to meet me here because I wanted to talk to you. I mean *really* talk.”

“Me, too,” I said, the words coming out in a relieved rush. This was my chance. I had to say my piece before he got a chance to call things off for good. It was my last-ditch effort to save the precious relationship we had started building together. “I want to apologize for the way I talked to you outside your parents’ house. I shouldn’t have accused you of taking your mother’s side without giving you the chance to explain. Basically, there’s a lot I shouldn’t have done.”

His shoulders sagged. A sigh of relief? Or sadness?

He shook his head and my heart stopped.

“Ruby,” he said, looking straight into my eyes. “I’m the one who should apologize. I never should’ve shouted at you, no matter how upset I was. And I shouldn’t have let my mother speak about you like that, no matter what her intentions were. I know she can be hard to deal with, but that’s my problem, not yours.”

For the first time in four days, hope stirred in my heart. Was I hearing him correctly?

“We still need to decide if we’re really a good fit for each other,” he said, his voice quiet, and all that hope inside me shriveled up and died.

“Oh,” I said, softly.

“Because if we do this, Ruby, I want us to do this for real,” he said, his tone firm. “No more holding each other at arm’s length. No more being suspicious of each other’s intentions.”

Wait, hope started to peek out again. The conversation had barely begun and already I felt emotionally exhausted. Did he want me or didn’t he? Was this a reconciliation, or the final nail in the coffin of our relationship?

“I agree,” I said, my voice brittle. “Have you given it some thought?”

“Yes. What about you?”

“I’d like to hear you first,” I said, thinking it was cowardly of me, but I didn’t think I could handle getting my heart broken again. Not three days before Christmas.

“Will you come outside with me?” he asked, standing suddenly. He wiped his palms on his thighs, as though they were sweaty. Was he nervous? If so, was that a good sign or a bad sign?

I stood. “What’s outside?”

“Can you trust me one more time? For old time’s sake?”

I looked at him, seriously considering if I wanted to trust this man who had so badly hurt me. But in the end, I couldn’t deny that a big part of me, (okay, most of me, or actually, all of me) still loved him. And love naturally came with trust.

So, I followed him back out the front door. He walked right into the middle of the yard, standing in the snow. I followed him with my arms wrapped around my middle. My throat tightened and my vision blurred.

“If you’re going to tell me to get lost then I’d rather you do it in a place where the temperature is above freezing,” I said with a nervous laugh, only half-joking.

“This will only take a minute,” he said, fiddling with something in his hands.

It looked like a small remote control, the kind you might use to control a children’s toy helicopter or a garage door. He took a deep breath and then clicked the shiny red button on the remote control.

A second later, all the Christmas lights on the facade of his house blazed to life. There were icicles hanging from the eaves, fat yellow bulbs framing the door, and an elaborate display of red and white on the sloped roof. At first, I thought the design was abstract, but as my eyes adjusted to the glare, I realized that the string of lights was arranged in looping cursive letters.

I read the words once, then twice, and then burst into tears. They read: *Connor + Ruby*.

“Oh, no,” Connor said, dropping the remote and hovering his hands over my shoulders as though he were afraid to touch me. “It’s too much. You hate it, don’t you? I’m sorry, Ruby, I’ll turn it off—”

“No,” I said, through my tears. “Connor, I *love* it.”

I threw my arms around his neck, wrapping him up in a tight hug. He squeezed me against him and I snuggled into his chest. I had never felt so secure. I sobbed into his sweater, not caring that my mascara was running and my nose was sure to be glowing red.

He wanted me. And he cared enough to show me just how *much* he wanted me, in a big way.

“When did you put up the lights?” I said, with a sniffle, feeling as baffled as I was grateful.

“I took the day off work to make it happen. I’m friends with a contractor who was able to help me out. I just ... wanted something special for you. I wanted you to know that I’m serious about us.”

“Really?” I said, pulling back a little.

Connor looked at me with those swoon-worthy eyes. His expression was serious and nakedly vulnerable, like he was confessing a secret. “I want to be with you, Ruby. Do you ... Do you want to be with me?”

“Yes, of course I do,” I said, unable to hold back from him a moment longer. So, I pushed up onto my tiptoes and kissed him, like I meant it.

He kissed me back, threading his fingers through my hair and pulling me closer. I felt like I could live inside that kiss forever. We kissed until my toes started to tingle from holding up my weight, and until my ears started to go numb from the cold. Then Connor pulled just far enough back to look at me, cradling my face in his hands.

“I’m sorry about my mom,” he said, rubbing his thumbs against my cheeks. “I talked to her after you left, and I told her she was way out of line. I told her that you are kind, hardworking, and that you make me happy. I reminded her that you built a business caring for people, and that’s something to be proud of. She had trouble adjusting, but she understood.”

“Understood?” I said, wanting to make sure I was hearing him right, that I wasn’t just making this all up in some desperate dream.

“She understood that I’m choosing you.”

“Connor ...” I began, then had to stop when I got choked up again. “I choose you, too. And I’m going to work on not being so intimidated by your family.”

“My family can be intimidating,” he said, with a smile.

“But I want to be a part of your life, and that includes them,” I said, meaning every word. “I can stand on my own two feet, I’m a grown woman. But it’s a lot easier with you there holding my hand. Thank you for talking to Ivy about me.”

“And thank you for calling me last night. It means a lot to me that you’re giving me a second chance after everything.”

“So, are we okay?” I said, holding my breath.

Connor pressed a kiss to my cheek. “We’re better than okay. Now what do you say we get inside and warm up by the fire? I’m sure we still have a lot to talk about.”

He kept his arm around me as we walked back inside, as though he didn’t want to stop touching me for even an instant. We curled up together on the couch and talked for hours that flew by like minutes, our fingers laced together in our laps. We talked with Clarice at our feet until the fire burned down to embers, and until the moon was high in the sky. We even talked until we both started to doze, and then Connor pulled an Afghan around both of us.

I fell asleep being held by him, feeling like everything was right in the world.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The next two days passed in a rosy haze. Connor and I spent almost every moment together, making up for lost time by window shopping on Main Street, cooking meals together in the townhouse with Katie (who was very much team Get Those Crazy Kids Back Together), or taking brisk walks in the woods just outside of town.

The stress from work chaos eased when I remembered Sylvia's words: *In the end, it's all about love.*

So, I focused on the people I loved ... my family, my friends and Connor, knowing that any other problem in life could be solved. Connor and I were so lost in each other that we barely noticed when Christmas Eve rolled around. But sure enough, the day arrived before I knew it.

"Uh-oh," Connor said, lifting his head up from my shoulder. We were cuddling on his couch, half-watching *The Grinch* on television. "It's almost five."

"What's at five?" I asked, groggily. I was full of hot cocoa and sugar cookies, and I felt a nap coming on. It didn't help that Connor was the comfiest human being in existence.

"Ruby, the competition," he said with an amused smile.

I sat up a little straighter. Right. The Christmas Competition. That huge thing that had been propelling me forward the last month, could either make or break my business, and had been driving Connor and me to compete against each other even as we were drawn closer together.



“We should get to the town square,” I said, tossing back the blankets and standing up. My feet were numb from being curled up, however, and I swayed a little bit. Connor caught me, pulling me into his lap. I nuzzled into his neck. “You’re still always catching me,” I said.

“It’s what I do,” he said, pressing his lips to my forehead.

“You do it well,” I said, snuggling against him.

“You’re lucky I want to know the results,” he said in that teasing voice. “Otherwise, I would keep you here with me all night.”

I gave him a big kiss, and then wiggled out of his grasp.

“Come on,” I said, tossing his coat to him as I wiggled into my snow boots. “Plenty of time to cuddle later. We don’t want to be late!”

Connor and I hurried out of the house and he drove us into town. He parked and then we made our way toward the town square, which was already packed with people, who were milling about drinking hot cider and chatting animatedly amongst themselves.

“Everyone and their cousin is here today,” I said, squeezing my way as politely as I could through the crowd, with Connor holding my hand, helping me weave through the sea of bodies.

“That building Anita Rivera left is one of the biggest in town,” Connor said. “And the competition has certainly generated the community spirit she intended. I’m not surprised half the town is out here to hear the results of the vote.”

We pressed our way to the front of the crowd, and I bumped into Andrea, who was bouncing up and down on the balls of her feet to keep warm.

“Hey, Ruby!” she chirped, smiling warmly at me. Her smile only deepened when she saw Connor. “And Connor. This is a nice surprise.”

“Andrea,” he said, pleasantly.

“I heard you two called things off,” she said, sounding genuinely concerned. “Am I correct to assume that things are back on?”

“That’s right,” he said, squeezing my hand. “Best decision I ever made.”

My heart swelled in my chest. I loved being his girlfriend.

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said, warmly. “You two should come over for coffee and dessert sometime. I’d love to hear the story straight from the happy couple.”

Connor smiled at Andrea, the small, genuine smile of two people who had once shared something special and who had parted amicably.

“We’d like that,” he said.

“Have they announced the winners yet?” I asked Andrea.

“No, you’re just in time. Look, there’s Mr. Miller now.”

Gerald Miller was making his way to the podium in the town square, and the spectators graciously parted to let him through. He was holding a small envelope in his gloved hand.

“Connor,” I said, a sudden fear gripping me. “What if you win? What if I win?”

“What do you mean? Either would be good news.”

“But what if we fight about it? What if it pulls us apart again?”

Connor tapped my cold nose with his forefinger. It was turning into a special method of communication between us, an inside gesture of affection.

“That’s not going to happen. I promise. No matter what happens, we’re still going to support each other. I love you, Ruby.”

“I love you, too,” I said, relieved.

A hush fell over the crowd as Mr. Miller slowly climbed the small platform that had been erected specifically for this purpose. He approached the podium and held a wireless

microphone in one hand, clearing his throat to get everyone's attention.

“Welcome to the culmination of The Christmas Competition,” he said, in his warbly voice. “It's my great honor to announce the finalists of Anita Rivera's competition, and then to award the deed of the renovated building to the winner.”

I was so excited I was practically vibrating. Connor shifted from foot to foot beside me, probably feeling the same way.

“This competition has brought out the best in our small town,” he said, smiling at the audience. “I'm incredibly proud of all the businesses that participated. You've proven that the spirit of Christmas and the principles of charity, love, and kindness are alive and well in Christmas Mountain, just as Ms. Rivera had hoped. So, without further ado, the finalists in no particular order ...”

I chewed my thumbnail, as Mr. Miller ripped open the envelope and pulled out the card.

“After counting all of the votes submitted, we have four finalists. The first finalist is Reed Bank, in recognition for their service and guidance to the community.”

I threw my arms around Connor, and all the air left his lungs in a surprised woosh.

“You made it into the finals!” Andrea exclaimed.

“Good job, Connor,” I said, pressing a firm kiss to his stubbly cheek.

We fell quiet as Mr. Miller lifted the card to continue. “The second finalist is Prancer's Pancake House, for their warmth and hospitality to the Christmas Mountain residents and visitors. The third finalist is Silver Bells Luxury Tours, for all of the joy and magic Santa's Grotto has brought to the children of our community.”

My heart hammered in my chest. Only one business left...

Connor leaned down and murmured in my ear. “No matter what happens, remember that I'm on your team. You did an

amazing job, Ruby.”

Mr. Miller retrieved his glasses from his pocket and slipped them on to read the final name.

“And the fourth finalist is the Divine Doggie Spa and Training, for the way they’ve cared for the pets of Christmas Mountain and how they brought the community together through the power of creativity. We had dozens of write-ins who loved the Snowwoman Contest and many suggestions that it should be an annual contest here in Christmas Mountain.”

My mouth dropped open. Connor swept me up in a hug so fierce that my feet left the ground, before he set me down and kissed me full on the mouth.

“Yes!” he said, like his favorite team had just scored a touchdown. “Oh, Ruby, you deserve this. I’m so proud.”

I let out a deliriously happy laugh, feeling a little woozy. I was dimly aware that people were congratulating me, but I barely heard them.

Connor and I had both made it into the finals.

How was that for a Christmas miracle?

I squeezed Connor’s hand and he just squeezed mine right back.

“We’re a team,” I said, making that promise to him. “No matter what happens.”

“That’s right,” he said. “You and me.”

Mr. Miller returned his glasses to his pocket and leaned toward the microphone, his eyes twinkling. “It’s my great pleasure to announce the winner of The Christmas Competition, the business who had the most votes and who will inherit the renovated building from dear Ms. Rivera. And the winner is ... Silver Bells Luxury Tours. Congratulations!”

A cheer went up from the crowd, and disappointment crashed over me. Now I would have to find another way of saving my floundering business. Connor sagged against me,

slinging an arm around my shoulder, and I suspected that he was in the same boat.

The owner of Silver Bells Luxury Tours, Adam Kline, approached the platform, holding the hand of his girlfriend, Faith Sterling, and they both waved in delight at the rowdy crowd. Connor and I clapped and cheered. When I looked over at Connor, I saw that he was beaming.

He didn't seem crushed by the news, but I was still worried. What would happen to his relationship with his father now that he had failed to secure a new building? What would happen to his job?

I looked up at him. "Connor ..."

"It's okay, Rudolph," he said, still smiling. "I promise. I have something else in mind. Trust me."

I decided to trust him.

Maybe it *was* okay.

Maybe, somehow, everything was going to be okay.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Christmas Eve at my parents' place was a big deal, and I wouldn't want to miss it for the world. The Sugar Plum Inn went all out every year, decking every hall and proudly displaying every bough of holly. I had spent so many childhood winters running through the inn and playing with my cousin Katie as the adults gossiped and laughed and sang along to Christmas carols. Now that I was one of those adults, I even had a special person to bring tonight.

Connor and I dressed to match, him in a blue button-down and me in my favorite robins-egg sweater, and we showed up holding hands. My mother, who had heard all about the breakup, was ecstatic to see me arrive with Connor in tow, and she gave him a big hug and a peck on the cheek the moment he walked in the door. My dad pumped his hand so hard I thought Connor's arm might fall off, and then he immediately pressed a glass of eggnog into Connor's hand.

"Welcome, welcome!" my father boomed, bringing merry to a whole new level. "Please, make yourselves at home. We're firing up the piano in the lobby soon, so I hope you're ready to sing along."

Connor laughed, and so did I. There weren't enough words in the world to describe my delight at seeing my family embrace him with open arms.

We meandered through the downstairs level of the inn, passing couples cuddling on couches in the sitting area and a group of Christmas Mountain residents playing charades at the

game table. We passed Macy and Cal, who were telling stories about their experience as Mr. and Mrs. Claus this year. We exchanged hugs and promises to catch up soon with Morgan and Dallas, who were deep in conversation with some of the oldest residents of Christmas Mountain about the proper way to trim a tree. Lacey and Jacob were here, too, gazing into each other's eyes by the glow of the fireplace and talking about the latest television show Lacey was working on.

My gang of besties from the book club were cozied up in the parlor, talking amongst themselves. They all but shrieked with glee when they saw me, and I was crushed between the hugging arms of Harmony and Carol, while Giselle bumped Connor with her hip and gave him a knowing eyebrow waggle. Nina disappeared to the inn's kitchen to refill our mugs of eggnog, and gave me a kiss on the cheek when she returned.

"Congrats on snagging the best Christmas present of all," Amanda said, her voice too low for Connor to overhear. "You look really happy."

"I *am* really happy," I said, smiling at my friends.

These women had been with me through everything, and they weren't about to let me forget it. They immediately launched into the gossip session, demanding to know how Connor and I had gotten back together. I regaled them with the tale of apologies and promises and holiday lights on the roof. Amanda practically swooned from the romance of it all, and I caught Giselle taking a few notes in the little notebook she carried around for capturing book ideas.

After the girls had gotten their scoop, it was time for the part of the night that I had been worried about the most.

Connor had invited his parents to join the festivities here.

"Ready?" Connor asked, giving my shoulder a squeeze.

"As ready as I'll ever be," I said.

Ivy Reed was sitting in the living room, her hands clasped in her lap as she listened to one of the Christmas Mountain High School seniors play a waltz on the lobby's piano. I had always been a little afraid of her frown and the furrows of

displeasure between her eyes, but I was double afraid of her now, after hearing what she truly thought about me.

“Are you sure about this?” I whispered to Connor.

“Positive. Give her a chance.”

Ivy looked up and saw me, and to my surprise, a small but genuine smile touched her lips.

“Ruby,” she said, patting the seat next to her on the couch. “It’s so nice to see you here.”

“Well, it is my parents’ inn,” I said, awkwardly, wanting to kick myself as soon as the words were out. Could I have said anything more ridiculous? Ugh. I sat down slowly beside her, as though she were a wild animal that might bite.

“Connor, sweetie, would you get me some more sparkling water from the kitchen?” she asked. I knew Ivy well enough to know she was telling him to give us privacy.

“Sure thing,” he said, dropping a kiss to my cheek before disappearing.

Now, I was left alone with Ivy Reed. Well, with her and the churning in my gut.

“Ivy ...” I began, ready to launch into a pre-prepared speech about why I deserved to be with Connor, despite any appearances to the contrary.

“No,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t say anything. I’m the one who has something to say to you, all right? I think an apology is overdue.”

Apology? What the ...? I clenched my hands together in my lap but said nothing for fear of jinxing anything. Ivy fiddled with the cocktail napkin in her lap, tearing it into tinier and tinier pieces, which was so unlike her. Was the ice queen nervous? Around me?

“I said some ... unwarranted things the last time we met. Connor told me you overheard, which is unfortunate.”

Yeah, totally agreed with her there.



“I don’t need to rehash them, but I want you to know that I’m sorry,” she said, looking me in the eye. “It’s possible that I’m a little overprotective of Connor. I just want the best for him. For the longest time, I thought that was Andrea.”

My stomach dipped at the sound of her name. Andrea and I might have patched things over, but that didn’t mean I was excited to hear that Ivy preferred her to me.

“Mrs. Reed, I—”

“Let me finish please, dear,” she said, holding up her palm in true Ivy fashion. “She’s a nice woman, yes, but more than that, I wasn’t threatened by her... She wasn’t taking my baby away from me, unlike you.”

“Me?” I said, blinking in surprise.

“It’s obvious how much he loves you. You are the most important person to him, which can be a hard fact for a mother to take. It’s hard to let a child go, Ruby. To accept that they’re their own person with their own needs and desires that have nothing to do with you anymore. I realize now I was trying to control Connor to keep him close, and that’s not right.”

I gulped, unable to believe my ears.

“Connor told me how much you mean to him.” She reached out and covered my hand with her own. “I can see that you make him so happy, and more than that, you make him into a better man. I worry sometimes that I pushed him too hard when he was young, and now he has a hard time getting close to people when it really matters. But he got close to you, and you lit up his world. That counts for a lot, Ruby. It counts for everything.”

I blinked back tears as I let her words settle inside me. Never in all my days and nights did I think I would win Ivy Reed’s approval, but here she was, holding my hand, apologizing and also complimenting me.

Me, with no college degree and no fancy job. Me, who had swept into Connor’s life and disturbed all her carefully laid plans for him.

“Ivy,” I said, feeling at a loss for words. “That’s...You’re ...”

“Just tell me you care about him as much as he cares about you, and that you’ll take care of him,” she said, her eyes looking desperate.

I squeezed her hand. “Making him happy is all I want. I love him, Mrs. Reed.”

“Please, call me Ivy.” She smiled at me, tears shining in her perfectly-lined eyes. “Come here, Ruby.”

She pulled me into a tight hug, even more tight than the hugs she had given me when I was a child who had fallen and skinned her knees.

I hugged her back, and I meant it.

Connor reappeared with seltzer in hand. I wondered if he had been waiting in the wings for the right moment to return. Knowing Connor, I’d bet on it.

“Mind if I steal Ruby, Mom?” he asked.

“Go ahead,” Ivy said, letting me go. “You two enjoy your night.”

Connor looped his arm through mine and led me to a quiet alcove. It wasn’t entirely private, but we could talk without our voices being drowned out.

“There’s something I need to say to you,” he said. “About the competition.”

My heart sank. Oh, no. My greatest fear had been that tension would come between us over not winning the competition. But, now? I had complete faith in Connor, and in us. I wasn’t sure what he wanted to talk about, but I knew that we had each other’s back. Maybe his dad had gotten really upset with him at the loss?

“What is it, Connor?” I said, looking up at him.

“Before Ms. Rivera’s building went to Adam Kline, I realized I needed to live my life for me and not in a way that might make my dad happy,” Connor said, looking strong and

confident and nothing like a little boy who needed his dad's approval. "So, I did something spontaneous for once. I used the trust fund my grandparents left me for a down payment and purchased the building next door to the animal shelter. I'm going to expand the shelter, so that no dog will be left without someplace warm to sleep."

I clasped my hands together. "Oh, Connor. That's amazing!"

"Here's the interesting part," he said, and I blinked, surprised that was only half the story. "When I told my dad we didn't win the building and then told him what I'd done, I braced myself for his disapproval, resolved to be true to myself even if he's disappointed. You know what he said when I told him?"

I shook my head, my complete attention on him as I waited for the devastating words Mr. Reed surely must've said to him.

Connor shook his head and blew out a breath. "He remembered when I was a kid and had found that stray dog on Christmas Eve. He said he'd been impressed at my determination to find that dog's home, and that back then he'd secretly wondered if I'd become a vet or something instead of working at the bank."

My eyes widened. "Really?"

He nodded. "Then he put a hand on my shoulder and said 'Every person has to make their own way in the world and you're following your heart. I'm proud of you.'"

A burst of joy spread through my chest. "How wonderful," I said, throwing my arms around him. "I'm glad he's finally supporting you."

Connor laughed into my neck and I could tell how much his father's words meant to him. He didn't *need* his father's approval, but it was nice to have it all the same.

"He congratulated me on taking initiative, and that felt good," he said, pulling back and taking my hands in his. "But that's not all."

I laughed. "There's *more* to this story?"

He nodded. “The thing is ... well, I wondered ...”

“Wondered what?” I asked, sidling up to him.

He smoothed my hair out of my face and brushed my cheek with his knuckles. “Well, the building has a lot more rooms than will be needed for the shelter. I’m going to market them for lease. There are some units that might be nice to rent out to a doggie spa who needs more room. I’d give you the friends and family discount, of course, and there would be no worry about paying any interest.”

A smile spread across my face. “Then I could afford to expand my business. No way!”

“Yes way,” he said, touching his finger to the tip of my nose. “I understand if you’re hesitant about going into business together, or if you’d rather look for another space, but I really hope that you’ll—”

I pressed my lips to his, quieting him with a kiss. His arms slid around me and I melted into his touch, not caring who saw us. I had the best boyfriend in the world, the shelter was going to have more room for pets who needed a home, and Divine Doggie Spa and Training would finally have the space it needed at an affordable price.

We had Ms. Rivera to thank for all of this. She’d struggled through her life, had given so much to the students in her classes, and in the end had the strength and determination to purchase an old building downtown and renovate it into something beautiful.

Her kindness had brought me to my dream career and her generosity donating the building through the competition had helped Connor find something meaningful solely for him. I buried my head into Connor’s chest as warmth flowed through me. Thank you, Ms. Rivera. Sometimes it’s the quiet person that people don’t really notice, who spreads the most holiday spirit of all.

## EPILOGUE

Christmas Day dawned and I woke up to find the sun had decided to make an appearance, which made the snow outside twinkle and my heart full. I leapt onto Katie's bed like an excited child, who was waking her parents. She was surprise-shaken from her slumber to find me grinning at her like a happy fool.

"Merry Christmas!" I said, tossing my arms into the air.

"Merry Christmas, lovebird," she said with a laugh. "Is Connor here yet?"

"No, but he will be soon. Come on, get dressed," I said, hopping to the floor and jumping up and down. "We've got presents to open and cinnamon rolls to bake. But, first, coffee to brew!"

"You forgot boyfriend to kiss," she teased.

I swatted at her with a pillow, then left so she could put on her Christmas outfit before things devolved into an all-out pillow fight like when we were kids. I changed into a festive blouse, a silky red thing with a big bow that tied at the throat, and even went through the trouble of throwing on some lipstick.

Just about the time I was finishing up, the doorbell rang.

"Connor must be here!" Katie sang out.

I hurried down the stairs, threw open the door, and tossed myself into his arms the moment he crossed the threshold. "Merry Christmas, Connor," I said, pressing my lips to his.

He smiled against my kiss. “And a very Merry Christmas to you, too, Rudolph.”

I laughed, now loving the nickname he’d given me.

Clarice nudged under my palm, so I scratched behind her ears the way she liked best. Then I looked up to find Katie stumbling down the stairs, still yanking a brush through her hair. She was wearing a pine-green dress with a flared skirt and her favorite fuzzy slippers.

“Bunny slippers, Katie?” I said, raising an eyebrow. “On Christmas? Really?”

“They won’t show up in the pictures,” she said, with a shrug. “And it’s much colder here than in Sacramento, so cut me a break and let me be cozy. Merry Christmas, Connor.”

She slung an arm around his shoulder and pulled him into a hug. Then we all sat on the couch for the first round of present-opening. The second round would take place at the inn and the third would take place at Connor’s parents’ house, but for now, it was just us, swapping the little gifts we had picked out for each other to kick off Christmas.

Katie bustled in the kitchen getting the cinnamon rolls ready to bake, while I opened my first gift from Connor, a box of chocolates from a company who donated their proceeds to endangered animals. Then he opened my smallest present to him, a pair of woolen socks decorated with embroidered Rudolfs.

“I love these,” Connor said, kissing my nose.

A little while later, we embarrassed Katie by insisting she open our gifts while we munched on cinnamon rolls, and she was touched by the silky eye mask for optimal napping (my gift) and a collection of holiday scented bath bombs (Connor’s gift). She gave us both a kiss on the cheek for our efforts, and we all enjoyed some pastries and coffee to start the morning off right. Then it was time for us to head to the Sugar Plum Inn to celebrate the holiday with my parents. Katie asked if she could take a separate car, exchanging a look with Connor.

“Sure, that’s fine,” I said, grabbing my coat from the hook.

We started off in his car, which thankfully had all wheel drive and snow tires. But then he made a right turn instead of a left turn toward the inn.

I turned to him with a questioning look. “Where are we ...?”

“Mind if we take a detour?” he asked.

“Not at all,” I said, wondering if he forgot something at home.

He parked the car along the road above a spot by the river that we called Flat Rock. The view from here was beautiful and we’d spent many summers playing here as kids and hanging here as teenagers and even as adults. The gentle movement of the river flowing between the rocks provided a serene melody. I’d always loved this place.

We got out of the car and Connor took my hand, leading me to spot just above the rock that led into the woods beyond. We walked long enough that I got the inkling that this wasn’t a spontaneous stop at all, but rather its own destination.

“Where are you taking me?” I asked, biting my bottom lip.

“Christmas surprise,” he said, and continued leading me by the hand deeper into the forest. I grinned and followed along.

“Remember when you made me ride that sled you brought to the Flat Rock?” I asked, ready to admit a little secret. “I was actually scared to ride that thing into the river, but I didn’t want to let you know that so I acted tough.”

He chuckled. “You are tough, Rudolph.”

“Thanks,” I said, thinking of the first time I started to have feelings for him, even though I hadn’t realized it yet. “Remember when we came here with Morgan and Dallas? That time she fell in the river? That was a nerve-wracking night.”

He nodded. “I remember.”

“That was sweet how you came to my house to check on me after you visited Morgan in the hospital,” I said, wondering

how I'd missed that more than friendship had been developing between us.

"I always want to take care of you," he said, squeezing my hand. "You're important to me, Ruby. You're everything to me."

"The feeling is mutual," I said, my heart fluttering as we exchanged a glance, and gratitude flowed through me for having Connor in my life. I felt so incredibly thankful.

Eventually, we turned a corner and came upon a pine tree strung with garlands of popcorn, nuts, and seeds. Pieces of dried fruit hung from twine on the branches. Squirrels chattered in the branches as robins and cardinals alighted on the boughs and pecked at the treats.

From the looks of it, every ornament and decoration on the tree was animal-friendly. I took a few steps forward, mesmerized by the scene.

"This is amazing," I said, staring up at the tree and putting my hands to my cheeks. "How did you ...?"

My voice trailed off the second I turned to face him and saw that he was down on one knee in the snow, a ring box in the palm of his hand.

"Connor," I said, my heart pounding in my chest. "You aren't serious."

"You bet I am," he said, flipping open the box to reveal a beautiful princess-cut diamond ring. "I figured you wouldn't like a public proposal, but I know how much you love animals ..."

Tears welled in my eyes, and I brought my hands to my mouth. I would be lying if I said I hadn't imagined this scene before, but now that it was actually happening, the real thing was more vivid and more impactful than in all my wildest dreams.

"I've been in love with you for years now," Connor said, looking up at me with those gorgeous eyes. "I was never brave enough to say it, but I'm telling you now. I realized this year that you're the only person I want to spend Christmas with,



and that you're the one I want to spend my life with. Ruby Curtis, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

I dropped down to my knees in the snow, not caring that the damp and cold was seeping into the knees of my black pants. I took Connor's face in my hands and kissed him deeply. Then I pulled away and let out a little laugh.

"Yes, Connor. Yes, now, and yes to forever," I said, with a hand on his cheek.

His green eyes glistened for a moment, before he plucked the platinum ring from the box and slipped it onto my finger. It fit perfectly, and the diamond sparkled in the sunlight. Then he pulled me to my feet and laced our fingers together, kissing me one more time while the birds tweeted out their Christmas music all around us.

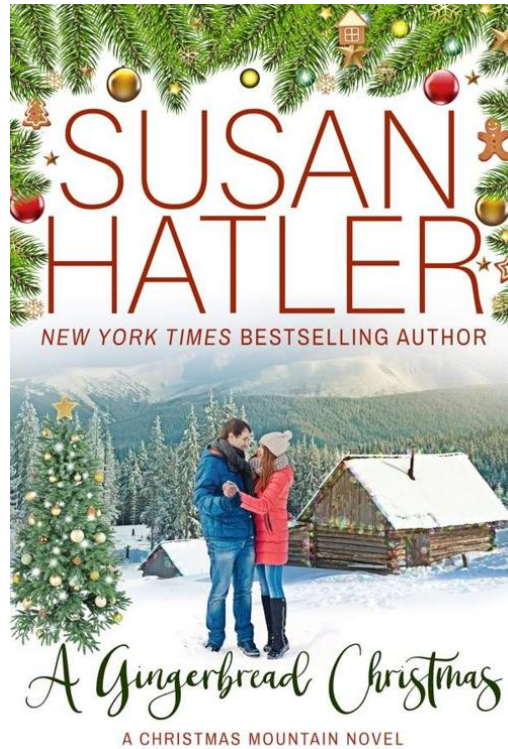
"I was hoping you'd say that," he said, holding me close. "Now, what do you say we go show off this new ring to your family, soon to be *my* family, too, huh?"

"Nothing would make me happier," I said, realizing his family would be my family, too.

We kissed in front of the trimmed tree for a small eternity, then started to make our way back, hand in hand along the river. Toward the car, toward the inn, and toward the people who loved us. Toward the future, toward countless more Christmases together, and toward forever.

## **The End**

**If you enjoyed spending time  
with these characters,  
be sure to read Nina's story in:**



**A Gingerbread Christmas**

*(Christmas Mountain Clean Romance, 11)*

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



SUSAN HATLER is a *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author, who writes humorous and emotional contemporary romance and young adult novels. Many of Susan's books have been translated into German, Spanish, French, and Italian. A natural optimist, she believes life is amazing, people are fascinating, and imagination is endless. She loves spending time with her characters and hopes you do, too.

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