



Nancy Naigle



*Christmas  
Joy*



ST. MARTIN'S GRIFFIN

NEW YORK



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# Chapter One

*How could two pint-sized kids whip my well-controlled focus group into a frenzy in a matter of mere seconds?*

“Let’s all be quiet and settle down.” Joy Holbrook kept her voice steady, but her stomach was knotted. She felt more like a teacher than a market research executive this morning. And the fact that MacDonald-Webber gave every job a cutesy name didn’t help. Her executive position over “all things Christmas” had been tagged Red Suit Blitzen Bunch Lead. She was darned if she’d ever put that on her résumé, but despite the ridiculous title, this job was a step up from and a pay increase over her position at the stuffy old-school competitor she used to work for.

Silly title aside, life always came down to trade-offs, and this session was beginning to rank near the top of the list of challenging ones. Hopefully her last trade-off if she landed that promotion to Director of Focus Groups. The misbehaving little girl did a pirouette and tapped her chubby hand on one of the other children’s heads as if she were playing a *Swan Lake* version of Duck, Duck, Goose. Her brother swiped a candy bar off the table, then raced around the room so fast that his sneakers squeaked against the floor.

“Now,” Joy said, leveling her gaze on the two towheaded terrors. “Please. Take a seat.” If the Weather Channel was looking for tropical storm names, Joy had two to recommend.

Lola and Richard.

Otherwise known as the boss’s kids.

Lola rolled her eyes as her brother skidded across the floor and into one of the chairs with a *thunk*. She hesitated, but finally followed Richard’s lead and sat down in a huff.

Joy’s insides vibrated as if a thousand angry bees had taken up residence within her. She was running important focus groups, not the corporate babysitting service.

*How could Margie do this to me again? Breathe. Smile. Just a few more questions and we’re done.* Joy powered through the final points, not allowing a single second’s pause for the children to deviate from the plan. With one last count of raised hands, she was done.

“You did great!” She applauded the children and they joined in, smiling. “Thank you for sharing with me today.” Joy lifted the top from a silver foil-wrapped box that had served as the centerpiece on the table, revealing a cache of candy bars. Squeals of delight filled the room as most of the kids reached into the box. No surprise, Richard grabbed another candy bar in each hand, and even stuffed one into his pocket.

“My mom says candy bars make you fat,” said a tiny redheaded girl.

Of all the kids at the table, she looked like she needed a candy bar the most. The little girl with the strawberry curls that tumbled wildly across her forehead, much like Joy’s, had been the best-behaved child in the group. “Maybe your daddy would like one,”

Joy whispered quietly.

The little girl's bright blue eyes danced. "Thank you!" She pressed her finger to her lips, carefully deciding which one to select.

Most of the children had already unwrapped and begun to chomp on their treats.

Joy transferred the last data to her moderator's guide, then signaled for Renee to herd the little ones back out to their parents.

"You can come with me now," Renee said from the doorway. Chairs slid across the tile floor, sounding like an out-of-tune tuba followed by the crinkling of candy bar wrappers as the kids scampered toward the door on a sugar high.

Renee tipped her head toward Lola and Richard. "Sorry," she mouthed to Joy as she led the kids out of the room.

Joy shook her head. Poor Renee. Her chestnut hair, usually hanging long down her back, had been pulled into a knot with her pencil stuck through it—a sign that Renee was stressing, and, boy, did Joy know how that felt.

Joy's jaw ached from clenching her teeth so tightly. She stacked her things, trying not to lose her composure in front of whoever might be lingering in the observation room, where her team had been collecting data from the session. Her reflection in the two-way glass revealed a composed professional woman wearing a suit and heels, but underneath that guise, she felt ready to put a blitz on her own boss for another near mishap that had almost ruined her research. Was Margie that clueless, or was she out to sabotage her? Joy was really beginning to wonder.

A few moments later, Renee rushed back into the room. "I tried to tell Margie that we'd already checked everyone in. She just wouldn't take no for an answer." She spoke

in a hushed whisper, glancing toward the mirrored wall, then grabbed a roll of paper towels and a spray bottle from a cabinet next to the table. “When I didn’t get out of my chair, she just took them into the focus group herself!”

Testing holiday packaging for the nation’s leading candy manufacturer, and one of MacDonald-Webber’s biggest clients, was usually a quick process, but Joy’s team had run into a few challenges. Not because there was a problem with the packaging. This time it was more of an *internal* problem. A Margie problem.

“It’s not your fault.” Joy turned her back to the mirrored glass. “I know how pushy Margie can be. And her kids are out of control. I’m just not used to that. It’s days like this that make me thank goodness I never had children.” She grimaced at how harshly that had come out. “No offense.”

“None taken. My girls would never carry on like that. In public, anyway.” Renee laughed. “All kids get a little wild now and then, but even at their worst, they are the best thing in life.”

“I’m going to have to just take your word for that,” Joy said, because after the past year of leading all the market research analytics completed by the Red Suit Blitzen Bunch for the under-twelve demographic, parenting wasn’t something she could see herself signing up for.

Renee blasted a stream of cleaner across the surface of the chocolate-smudged table.

The smell of bleach replaced the sugary scent in the air. Joy pulled an arm’s length of paper towels off the roll. With all the vigor of a gambler with a scratch-off ticket, Joy scrubbed away the last remains of the rough morning.

“At least it’s done. Come on. Let’s get out of here.” Joy picked up her paperwork from the session and headed out the door with Renee right behind her.

Joy held her temper until she and Renee got into the elevator and the doors slid shut. “Margie has got some nerve.” Joy hugged her paperwork to her chest. “If she hadn’t done the same thing last week, we’d already have been finished. What is wrong with her?”

“She’s clueless. Rumor has it she’s the sister-in-law of one of the Webbers,” Renee said, leaning against the wall of the elevator.

*At least that would make sense.* “I tried to politely explain that she was compromising the research the last time this happened. She either doesn’t understand, or doesn’t care. I’m not sure which is worse.”

Joy wouldn’t vent like this to just anyone, but she and Renee had become close over the past year. “We’ve finally got all the demographics covered for this test now. We’ll deliver on time and on budget, despite Margie’s interference.”

“I was so worried her brats were going to ruin it.”

Joy had been too. “We deserve a long lunch after that. Let’s make it an early one. What do you say?”

“I’m so in.” Renee tugged the pencil from her hair and let out a sigh.

The elevator doors opened on the eleventh floor. From here you could see the heart of D.C. MacDonald-Webber held office and meeting space on three floors of this building in the business district of the capital city. When Joy left Sonic Group in beautiful Northern Virginia to come to MacDonald-Webber, giving up her office with the view had been the hardest part.



Renee followed Joy through the maze of tall-walled cubes.

Joy placed her paperwork on the desk in her cubicle. The Christmas shopping list she'd started just yesterday during the back-to-back conference calls was covered in red and green Christmas doodles. She ripped the list from the notepad and showed it to Renee.

"At least my holiday list looks festive, even if I don't feel that way," Joy said. "We're down to just weeks before Christmas, and I haven't even begun to shop."

"An occupational hazard," Renee said. "A person can look at wrapped presents, new holiday products, and Santas dressed in every color of the rainbow for only so long and stay in the spirit."

Joy tucked the list in her purse. Her spirit had definitely dwindled. "I've been focused on this red and green holiday for the sake of market research for nearly sixteen months straight." She dropped into her chair, trying to push aside the aftermath of Lola and Richard's surprise appearance. "About six months too long to stay sane," she responded with a sigh. "We'd better change the subject."

"Fair enough. A friend of mine just took a job over at Sonic Group. Isn't that where you used to work?"

"Yes. For five years." Joy still missed her office with the view of lush green Northern Virginia.

"She loves it there. Their offices sound amazing," Renee said with a lift of her brow.

"True, but they don't get the high-visibility work we get here. It's a trade-off." *Hopefully a good one.* Joy had nailed the interviews for the new director position at

MacDonald-Webber. She envisioned a big red bow on the door of the vacant office across the way—the one with the street view and access to the private outdoor terrace. She could totally see it. . . .

JOY HOLBROOK

Director of Focus Groups

Her name in block print letters on the frosted glass door. And the best part—her calendar filled with a nice balance of campaigns to manage, not just holiday-focused assignments, and she could get that stupid “Red Suit Blitzen Bunch” off her business cards. *That would make for a Merry Christmas indeed.*

“Guess we have to take the good with the bad. Walls would be nice, though,” Renee said, leaning on the edge of Joy’s desk.

“Knock, knock.” Margie Stokes’s voice was a little too loud under regular circumstances, but for some reason when she did that singsongy “knock, knock,” it made Joy grind her teeth.

Joy and Renee exchanged a subtle knowing glance.

“What brings you by?” Joy forced a smile, camouflaging her anger until she could find a polite way to address the sore subject of Margie dropping off her kids in Joy’s focus group *again*.

“That little focus group this morning was over in a jiffy. Richard and Lola had so much fun. Didn’t it work out perfectly that I happened to have them here with me?”

*No time like the present.* “Well, actually, Margie, we’d already recruited for that session. It was a bit of a problem.”

There was a momentary flash of annoyance in Margie's expression. "What's a couple extra opinions? It's fine."

Joy held her tongue. If she let go now, it wouldn't be good for anyone. Maybe the best part about the possible promotion wasn't the office with the view after all, but that she wouldn't report to Margie any longer.

Margie tugged on her bright pink suit jacket. The Chanel-like chains and pearls embellishing the pockets might look cute on a twentysomething girl, but on middle-aged Margie, they came across as a failed attempt to keep up with the younger crowd.

Margie fanned out a handful of glossy red and green tickets. "I knew you wouldn't want to miss out on Richard and Lola's Christmas pageant week after next. I saved you the best tickets in the house—right next to me."

Margie was nearly sharkish about her approach to these things. Swimming in quietly. Cornering her prey. And with the seats right next to her, you couldn't even not show up. All she lacked was the ominous musical accompaniment.

Renee's lips pulled into a tight line. "I'm going to go get those reports."

"But don't you want—?" Margie spun and wedged herself between Renee and the opening to the cubicle.

"Oh no. I've got a family commitment. This time of year is so busy," Renee said, squeezing between Margie and the cubicle wall. "I'll check back later, Joy."

And there Joy sat. Captive.

"My Lola is the lead." Margie waved the tickets around like they'd grant admission to the National Symphony Orchestra at the Kennedy Center. But they were for her kids' Christmas pageant, and Joy wasn't interested. She'd seen enough of Margie's

wicked little wackadoodles this morning to last her a year.

“You must be so proud.” Visions of Richard with chocolate smeared across his cheeks like a sugar-crazed Rambo flashed in Joy’s mind.

Margie rattled on. “I had to practically force that new teacher to cast Lola in the lead. For heaven’s sake, that woman was going to put her in the role of a tree. Can you imagine? My Lola. Standing there wrapped in burlap like a wooden trunk holding felt leaves. No, ma’am.” She rolled her eyes and blew out a breath that had her hair-sprayed-stiff bangs flying up, then settling all catawampus.

Margie’s irritating eye roll—similar to Lola’s—stabbed at Joy’s sanity.

“There’s so much going on—”

Margie narrowed her eyes. “It’s a fund-raiser.” Her words were clipped, almost curt; then Margie plastered a too-white smile on her face. “’Tis the season, and all that. I’ll put you down to buy two. They’re only a hundred apiece. I knew I could count on you.”

*Lucky me.* “Great.” Joy regretted ever pretending to be impressed by Margie’s kids to establish common ground with her boss. It wasn’t that Joy disliked children, but she was an only child herself and she’d known little to nothing about the under-twelve demographic before getting the dreaded Red Suit Blitzen Bunch assignment. Mom had always said that lies never paid off, and, boy, did Margie’s Richard and Lola plucking Joy’s every last nerve prove Mom right.

Margie counted out two tickets, but just before handing them over, she snapped her fingers. “I almost forgot. I need you to cover my meeting at Wetherton’s this afternoon.”

Joy's throat went dry. "At Wetherton's? The executive offices?" She'd led the Santa @ W event last year and had been invited to only one meeting at the flagship store. This was a big deal—her chance to really shine in front of MacDonald-Webber's biggest client. Hope filled her hammering heart.

"Yes. Just a quick update. Nothing fancy. I can't go. I have to take Lola to rehearsal."

*Maybe good karma is making up for the debacle this morning.* "Of course, I'll be happy to cover for you. What time?"

"You'll have to get a move on. They wanted me there around one o'clock." She twisted her wrist and checked her watch. "I meant to mention it earlier."

Joy could probably get there in a single bound on the energy coursing through her right now. *Is it possible this is some kind of test before the final decision on the promotion?* "I'm on it. I've got everything right here."

"Great. I knew you could handle it." Margie handed the tickets to Joy.

The purchase of the tickets was a little easier to bear now. "Wouldn't miss it."  
*Another lie. Wonder what the penance for that one will be?*

## Chapter Two

Ben Andrews parked his dark blue 4WD pickup in front of Mars Hardware on Main Street. Snippets of Christmas carols collided in an offbeat but beautiful noise from the neighboring stores as customers opened and closed their doors. From the looks of the hustle and bustle, business was booming in Crystal Falls.

Ben dropped the tailgate of his truck and dragged the scaffold ladder from the bed. He hoisted it over his shoulder, taking the time to check out the front window of Mars Hardware, which had been empty just yesterday.

Jason, the owner of the hardware store, had already been hard at work this morning. A wintry scene showcased a Mr. Snowman made from five-gallon paint buckets with blue spigot handles for eyes, holding the gloved hand of a snow kid who'd been fashioned out of regular paint cans with a red bucket turned upside down as a hat. Mrs. Snowman stood next to a Christmas tree as if decorating it while she watched the boys play nearby in the snowy backdrop. The tree was the same one Jason had created last year—made from hand-tied nuts, bolts, and all kinds of shiny gadgets into twenty-four six-foot lengths of hardware garland swept out to form the shape of a shiny metallic tree. A huge bow made of drywall tape spray-painted Carolina chrome graced the top.

Ben edged closer to the window, trying to figure out what Jason had used to create the snowy substrate beneath the snowman.

*Popcorn? Well, not edible popcorn. Ceiling spray texture used to touch up those old popcorn ceilings. Genius. It really does look like snow, and it probably didn't take two bags to fill the whole window. A twenty-buck solution.*

It wasn't quite so original as Jason's Halloween display. An array of different types of brooms hung from wire with WITCH BROOM? spelled out in an assortment of nails and tacks hammered into a length of one-by-eight wood, but pretty cool just the same.

The bells on the front door jingled as Ben walked inside.

Jason pushed his long hair behind his ear and gave Ben a chin-nod as he cut a key for an old man in an Elmer Fudd earflap hat. "Hey, bro, be right with you."

"Take your time." Ben headed toward the counter, the ladder clanking against the floor with each step he took. They weren't related, but there'd been a time when the two of them hung out so much that people thought the two tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed guys were brothers.

Ben inhaled the familiar smell of bagged fertilizer left over from the summer. That mixed with the oily metallic scent from the key-cutting machine and the woodsy sweet scent of sap of fresh lumber teased his senses. This hardware store always brought back good memories. He and Jason had racked up hours of hard work there as teens, learning skills that you just didn't get in school.

"Nice job on the window," Ben said.

"Thanks. You done decorating already?" Jason lowered a pair of clear safety glasses and put the final cuts on the key.

“Hospital? Pretty much. Haven’t started at my house, but don’t need this scaffold for that.” Ben slid the ladder back into the bin from which Jason had removed it yesterday, then meandered over to the counter. Once the customer left with his keys, Ben said, “But that scaffold worked like a charm putting up the tree at the hospital. Thanks, man.”

“No problem.”

“The girls had a system going, one up on the scaffold stringing lights as the other pushed her around the tree. Saved a ton of time. Then they repeated the process with the bucket of ornaments. Have to admit it looked like they were having fun. I was a little envious.”

“Well, putting up Christmas decorations isn’t the worst thing you can ask people to do. Has to be better than desk work.”

“True. They got the tree done so quickly that we were able to get the live pine roping up too. Thanks for ordering that with your discount. The lobby smells great.”

Jason rang up another customer, then leaned on the counter. “No problem. Since I couldn’t be there to help this year, I’m glad I could at least give you a hand with supplies. That rolling scaffold was the best twenty bucks I ever spent at an auction.”

Friends since junior high, he and Jason had been to more than their fair share of farm and equipment auctions with the older men from Mars Hardware. Once Ben had scratched his head and ended up buying a stack of oak rough-cut lumber. Getting splinters in both hands, and sweating it out in the Carolina humidity had taught Ben a hard lesson about the art of conduct at an auction.

Unlike Ben’s dad, who had crunched numbers his whole life and wasn’t much of



an outdoorsman, Jason's dad farmed, and his grandfather owned the hardware store. They'd treated Ben like another son, and taught him every handy skill he had.

"Need any help from me decorating the hospital this weekend?"

Ben shook his head. "Nope. Everything's been delegated. The guys from Fire Station Nine offered to hang the building lights with the new ladder truck. Mom wrangled donations of foil to wrap all the doors in the pediatric wing, and her friends from the Senior Circle are doing that on Monday. And Ashley is handling the judging of the annual Carolina's Best Flour Extreme Gingerbread Bake-off this year."

"I saw the article in the *Crystal Falls Courier* this morning announcing all the entrants. I bet your mom was glad you weren't judging it this year, so you could help her again."

"Yeah, well, she did win last time I helped."

"No surprise. That extreme gingerbread mansion with Santa and his reindeer flying over those three-story houses was mind-boggling. Never forget when you came in here to buy a new drill and dowels because you were making a cake. I was going to take your man card."

"That was a cool cake. Wait until you see this year's creation. I found an old record player at an estate sale last month. I plan to put that turntable to good use on our part of our entry. On a timer. Top of the hour, every hour. Like feeding time at the zoo."

"You're crazy, but I have no doubt it will be amazing. I'll have to take the kids over to see it and cast my vote for you," Jason said.

"Don't promise your votes until you've seen them all. The theme is 'Country Christmas.' It just might be the best year yet."

Jason shrugged. "I honestly don't know where you find the time."

"Being single doesn't hurt." Jason had his hands full with a wife, and three kids all under the age of six. Then again, having someone to help wouldn't be bad now and then either. When those kids were older, Ben would be the one wishing he had all those handy helpers. "I'm almost afraid to admit it, but my life is going amazingly smooth."

"Don't say that out loud. You'll jinx your good luck and everything will crash and burn."

Ben knocked twice on the solid wood counter, just in case. "I take it back."

"You putting the lights up at your house this weekend?"

"I could use a hand with that. It's a two-person job, that's for sure." Ben's historic three-story home boasted fine trim work that he had spent over two years repairing, even having new pieces recast to match the original. His house had once been known as one of the most palatial homes in three counties. One day she'd shine like that again. Unfortunately, the house had lost most of her charm sitting empty for years, deteriorating.

"It'll take all day to get that many lights up. It's a ton of work to do for just less than a month of dazzling display."

"And bragging rights."

"Well, there is that." Seeing families cruise by all month, knowing the kids had their faces pressed against the car windows in awe, made the effort totally worth it. "I'm not really complaining. You know how much I love Christmas."

"More than anyone I know. If we get an early start, maybe we can get it knocked out tomorrow and then you can help me drywall Ol' Lady Watson's house on Sunday."

"Sure thing." Ben had almost forgotten that the poor widow had accidentally

burned down half her kitchen in a chicken-frying incident last month. She couldn't afford to repair it, so the locals pulled together to raise the money for the supplies. Jason and Ben had offered their labor for free to get her place back in shipshape before Christmas.

"If we start at seven on Sunday, then we can be done before the football game starts. I've got some guys ready to come do the mudding on Monday," Jason said.

"Like you're going to be up at seven on a weekend? Who are you fooling, but the Panthers play the Steelers, so let's put the stuff in my truck while I'm here. That way I can guarantee at least one of us will get an early start."

"You insinuating something?"

"Early to you and early to me are like two different time zones." Ben followed Jason to the back of the store. Jason already had a pushcart full of supplies marked for the Watson project.

"So I'm a night owl. That's why I open the store at nine thirty instead of seven like Gramps used to," Jason said. "I stay open later when more people have time to stop in." He lifted a finger to his temple. "Got to work smarter these days."

"Or you just didn't want to get up early."

"True. Especially when Gramps quit coming in and I couldn't afford to replace him. Seems like every year I have to figure out new ways to do more with less."

"Who are you telling? My staff at the hospital is half what it was last year. I mean, it made sense—administration isn't nearly so important in a hospital in the scheme of things—but it sure hasn't been easy. I thought we could get a lot of the same things done with the help of volunteers, but everybody is stretched everywhere. It's an ongoing challenge."

“At least you found a way to keep the hospital here in Crystal Falls. The way they were talking there for a while, I was afraid they were going to close it down for good. Driving sixty miles just to get stitches would’ve been crazy.”

“I was worried about that too.” Ben still felt the churn from that ordeal. It had been no easy task to find a way to make things work for everyone.

“Then again, if that had happened, you and I could be flipping houses together for a living, and taking three months off a year.” Before Jason inherited the hardware store from his grandfather five years before, he and Ben had flipped a half dozen houses in their spare time. They’d each made enough profit to purchase homes and renovate them themselves with hardly any mortgage.

Those house-flipping days were over. Dad had been adamant that Ben go away to college, and since he’d inherited Dad’s head for numbers, the accounting and business degree was a natural path. He’d been at the right place with the right degree when the accounting position came open at Bridgewater Regional, and he stepped into that job and moved up quickly.

Jason pushed a cart toward the front of the store—one wheel wobbling and clanking like an old freight train.

Ben held the door and then helped Jason unload an air compressor, drills, boxes of drywall screws, a pair of drywall stilts, and other materials into the back of his truck.

Ben climbed into his truck, then pulled away from the curb. In the short time he’d been in the store, the barbershop had wrapped the blue stripe of its spinning barber pole in red and green, and a Christmas tree sparkled with scissors and silver combs hanging from the branches in the front window.

The town's cherry picker was parked on the side of the street. Two men dressed in hard hats and blaze orange safety vests hung a MERRY CHRISTMAS flag from a lamppost. Giant lighted snowflake sculptures were being strung between every other pole down the street. If snowflakes that big ever fell in Crystal Falls, the town would surely shut down. There wasn't much chance of that today, though, not with it being an unseasonably warm sixty-degree day.

Then again, this town had a way of building things up. Even the town name was an exaggeration, the "falls" being no more than a slightly unimpressive rapids at the river.

Being the first Thursday in December, it was no surprise to see every merchant in the five-block town square busy decorating for Christmas. It wasn't an official law, but one that everyone abided by. He didn't mind helping enforce it. Christmas being his favorite holiday and all. Ever since the year he'd played one of the Three Wise Men in the church play on Christmas Eve, only to be rewarded with the clear-as-a-bell sound of hooves on the roof. He'd lain there, afraid to open his eyes. Wanting so badly to see Santa himself.

Even right now, he could feel that rush of excitement he'd felt as a boy that night. Lying as still as he could, hoping Santa wouldn't realize he was awake, and his heart pounding so fast and hard that he was certain the jolly old man was going to know.

Years later, Dad had held the ladder as Ben climbed to the roof, clomping a hiking boot just above the gutter to give the kids who lived next door a magical night even though their own father, who was in the military, had been shipped out to a country they'd never heard of.

If there was one thing that could be said for Crystal Falls, it was that the town had

a firm grasp on tradition. A local could guess the date by the activities and events going on. Each holiday throughout the year was clearly defined. No overlap. No siree. Halloween wouldn't overlap Thanksgiving, and nary a speck of red and green would appear until those leftovers were pretty well gone on the first of December.

Only once did anyone break that tradition. A new merchant. Two years ago. The locals had quickly schooled him, though. In a nice way, of course, helping him take down the decorations, but also helping him put them up again in December.

Old-fashioned? Maybe. But the traditions were what made Crystal Falls special. There'd never been a doubt in Ben's mind that he'd live and raise his family here in this town someday.

## Chapter Three

Joy tossed the tickets to Margie's children's Christmas pageant on her desk. Two hundred was a small price to pay if it helped her land her dream job. Margie notwithstanding, MacDonald-Webber was a great place to work, and Joy loved being responsible for the data that allowed her to follow and forecast marketplace and sales trends.

A tingle of excitement coursed through her as she pulled her things together. She couldn't wait to give that update at Wetherton's this afternoon. It was true those corporate bigwigs couldn't care less about the R-value and other statistics, but, boy, did they love it when she broke down what all that meant into simple English. And that put a smile on her face.

With her attitude readjusted, she focused on her customer. Wetherton's deserved her best, and it would get her best.

With the latest stats from its project plan tucked inside her leather tote along with her laptop, she was ready to leave when Renee poked her head in Joy's cube.

"I see the coast is clear," Renee said.

"No thanks to you," Joy said with a playful glare.

"Ready for that early lunch?" Renee hugged her purse to her side.

“Change of plans.”

Renee slumped.

“Just a detour, though. First stop, Wetherton’s, to cover a meeting for Margie.”

Renee’s face lit up. “That’s great!”

“I know.” Joy patted her briefcase. This kind of last-minute opportunity was exactly why she was so crazy about making sure all the data and analyses were always in ready-to-report shape. “Plus, the alterations are finished on my dress for the gala. I can pick it up while I’m there. The timing really couldn’t have been more perfect.”

Renee straightened to her full five-seven in flats. “You bought a dress at Wetherton’s and didn’t tell me?”

Joy almost regretted mentioning it. “I hope the Christmas bonus covers the splurge. It’s my present to myself. The meeting shouldn’t take long. Then we can do lunch like we’d planned.”

“Please tell me we have time to try on dresses while we’re there.”

Joy stood, always feeling short next to Renee, even in her high heels. “You will have plenty of time while I’m in the meeting.”

“Perfect. If only I could afford something from there. Even window-shopping is a treat at Wetherton’s. I wouldn’t miss this for anything,” Renee said.

“Let’s go, then,” Joy said. “When I’m done with the executives, I’ll meet you on the fourth floor.”

\* \* \*

Joy pulled her red Prius right up to the curb to drop Renee off in front of the grand entrance of Wetherton’s. The stately limestone architecture of the eight-story building



had taken up the high-traffic corner since the 1940s, and it was still stunning in contrast with the modern buildings in the surrounding area. “I’ll meet you as soon as I’m done.”

“Seriously, take all the time you want. I’ll be in heaven.” Renee stepped out of the car and headed inside.

Joy pulled away from the curb and drove around to the east side of the building. Using her temporary parking pass, she swiped it at the gate and then parked near the private elevator to the administrative floors of the building. There were no longer many stand-alone stores of this size, but then Wetherton’s wasn’t just any store. It advertised and delivered a high-end shopping experience. From the doorman to the elevator assistants and the high-fashion salespeople who greeted every customer by name if they’d ever shopped there before, Wetherton’s delivered a one-of-a-kind experience.

Joy took the elevator up, then stepped through the ornate wooden double doors onto the executive floor. The opulent surroundings of Wetherton’s flagship store always gave her goose bumps. It was like stepping into another time, and today was beyond important.

Carols filled the air, and a decked-out tree, complete with an angel on top, filled an entire corner of the waiting area. Wetherton’s proudly displayed decorations throughout all its stores. No amount of outside pressure had changed its Christmas traditions. *Poppy Wetherton’s touch for sure.* Under her leadership, the upscale retailer had become known as the elite place to shop soon after Poppy had taken the reins from her father, the business’s founder. And she didn’t care if she offended anyone with her Christian beliefs or traditions. And somehow her making no apologies seemed to make it more acceptable. Joy admired the fearless businesswoman for her tremendous

accomplishments.

Joy rubbed her hands together, trying to expend some nervous energy. She'd made presentations like this hundreds of times, but now she was among the best of the best at Wetherton's. Customer-facing opportunities like this were her chance to shine. She'd worked hard to ensure this project was perfect. Her heart raced just thinking about the possibility of presenting to Poppy Wetherton.

The VP of Marketing met Joy at the front desk and escorted her to the meeting room. He was on the tall side of six feet, and his tan skin, even in December, told of weekends spent doing other things aside from being hunched over a laptop. Probably sailing, or some other luxury pastime.

Joy yearned for the day she'd be in a position that would give her a little more work-life balance, but for now her focus was on her career.

The marketing VP opened and held the door to the conference room for her. They took their seats, and he got right down to business. "Our second annual Santa at W event has been sold out for over a month. Leveraging what we learned from the market research conducted by MacDonald-Webber last year, we are positioned for an even bigger success this year. Joy Holbrook is here to give us an update."

Joy noted the faces of the executives at the table, then sucked in a breath when she made eye contact with the petite woman sitting at the end. *Poppy Wetherton*. "Thank you." Joy ignored her twirling tummy, diving straight into the data points. All those butterflies began to settle as she outlined the next key milestones of the plan. "My team has completed the calls to generate the right representative sample for our post-event focus group."

She glanced toward Poppy Wetherton. Her upswept white hair might look severe on anyone else, but she appeared youthful and vibrant despite her years. No one seemed to know exactly how old Poppy was, and even standing this close to the woman, Joy couldn't guess with any confidence. "Ms. Wetherton's generosity certainly made it easier for us this year. It's a difficult time to recruit, but parents were delighted at the chance to earn the exclusive twenty-percent discount in exchange for their child's participation in the study."

Poppy gave Joy a nod.

Joy paused, not for effect, although it would certainly appear so, but because a nod from Poppy was like an all-out gale of wind in Joy's sails. *This might be the best day of my career.*

Joy continued with the update, making eye contact with each person in the room. *This. This is what I want to be doing, impacting big business and interacting with senior leaders. Not dangling candy bars in front of children.*

"We've refined the questions and we'll be working diligently to keep the focus group session to a maximum of fifteen minutes, start to finish. My experience has been that if it goes any longer than twenty-two minutes, the data becomes a bit unreliable because we start losing the children's attention. We'll get the information you need while making it a fun and exciting session for your customers."

"Maybe we should try keeping our staff meetings to twenty-two minutes," the VP of Marketing joked.

Polite laughter filled the room.

The executives appeared pleased with the progress report, and those who hadn't

been around last year seemed eager to see the event unfold.

Hoping she'd nailed her presentation, Joy shook hands with the team, then headed for the door.

"Joy?" Poppy Wetherton said with a lift of her chin.

"Yes, ma'am." Joy's stomach sank. *Maybe I didn't nail it. Why would Poppy call me aside?* She ran through a mental checklist, hoping she hadn't forgotten an important detail. "What can I do for you?"

"May I have just a moment with you?"

Joy's hands trembled. "Yes, ma'am." She gripped her tote bag to steady herself. "Of course." She followed Poppy to the edge of the conference room as the others cleared out.

"I've been watching you." Poppy tilted her head slightly. "You did a wonderful job on our Santa at W event last year, and I admire your dedication to this project. I'm very impressed by what you've done for us over the past year. Your ideas and innovation have pushed my team to work even harder. You've exceeded all my expectations to make this year's event even brighter. I like that."

Was there a "but" coming? She held silent for a two-count, but no. *She's impressed!* "Thank you." Joy hoped the words actually came out. She was so overcome by the compliment that she glanced away to be sure she was really still in Wetherton's executive meeting room. *This is really happening.*

Poppy extended a shiny gold envelope with a swirly silver W on it. "From me, but don't open it until Christmas." The old woman gave her a mischievous wink.

Joy hesitated, worried about the rigid guidelines that restricted MacDonal-

Webber employees from accepting gifts from clients. Even so, she was dying to know what was inside the envelope. “What is—?”

“I know what you’re thinking. Don’t. It’s not business. It’s personal. Just say thank you, dear.”

“Thank you.” If it had been anyone else, Joy would feel obligated to refuse. But this was Poppy Wetherton! And she’d said it was personal. Even making the Christmas-card list of someone like Poppy was a gift in itself.

“Good. Now, you keep infusing energy and ideas into my team.” Poppy placed a gentle hand on Joy’s arm. “If you ever want a position here at Wetherton’s, you come talk to me personally.”

Poppy’s vote of confidence was better than anything that could possibly be in the pretty envelope Joy had just tucked into her bag. She tried to swallow past the lump in her throat. “You can’t begin to imagine how much that means coming from you.”

“You remind me of myself about a hundred years ago.” Poppy smiled and, without so much as a wobble, walked away in heels higher than Joy’s.

Rather than take the elevator, Joy headed for the stairs. For one hot second, she wished she were brave enough to set her butt on the shiny brass railing and slide down with a whoop. She was that exhilarated!

As soon as she stepped out of the stairwell and into the store, the melody of “Silver Bells” filled the air. The Bing Crosby version had always been Mom’s favorite. An overwhelming feeling of pride mixed with nostalgia filled Joy.

She blinked back tears as she whisked through the racks of gem-colored gowns to a beautiful off-white desk that appeared to be a turn-of-the-century antique, empty except

for the simple tablet register, which took up very little space. A sales associate appeared out of nowhere, as they always seemed to, and said, “How can I help you today?”

“I’m here to try on my dress,” Joy said. “The last name is Holbrook.”

Without having to check a log or look up anything, the tall model-like platinum blonde responded. “Yes, ma’am. We have it ready for you to try on. Right this way.”

Joy followed her. “Oh, and I’m meeting a colleague. Her name is Renee. If she comes looking for me, would you let her know how to find me?”

“She’s actually in the Cameo Dressing Room now, trying on some dresses.”

The sales associate led Joy through the spacious salon area furnished with upholstered couches with white-on-white swirly Wetherton Ws woven into the fabric, flanked by silver side tables. Champagne buckets were placed like sculptures throughout the room.

“Champagne?” the associate offered.

Joy almost declined. It was barely afternoon after all, but this was a good day to celebrate, so she answered with a simple, “Thank you.”

With a crystal flute of champagne in hand, Joy was led to the Fleur-de-Lis Dressing Room, where her gown hung from a dazzling hanger that looked as if it were studded with Swarovski crystals. Her heart fluttered just as it had the day she’d spotted the dress for the first time. She’d been killing time before a meeting, wandering through Wetherton’s with no intention of buying a thing when she’d laid eyes on the emerald green dress. The color was rich, the lines elegant and simple. And seeing it again today, she had that same awestruck feeling, like this was the most beautiful dress she’d ever seen.

Joy stepped out of her heels, then her deep teal blue pantsuit, and draped the slacks over a padded hanger. She scratched her manicured nail over a smudge on the hip of her pants. “Chocolate?” She stepped to the mirror. Thank goodness there wasn’t anything on her face. *How many people in that meeting noticed I had something on my slacks?*

Even if they had, it didn’t stop the most important person in the room from complimenting her. A flurry of excitement zipped through her again as Poppy’s words replayed in her head. Turning her back on the pants, she marveled at the dress hanging there.

Joy reached for the exquisite fabric. The airy fabric slipped between her fingers, light as snow. And the translucent beading shimmered under the dressing room’s bright lights. It wasn’t often that she splurged on something so frivolous, but she hadn’t been able to resist this dress. The shoes she’d purchased were placed neatly on the floor beneath the gown—barely there strappy sandals that looked as if they’d been made to match her dress. They were as comfortable as they were expensive, and that was *very*.

Joy stepped gingerly into the dress, then pulled up the zipper. Her heart danced as she gazed at herself in the mirror. The dress’s simple neckline didn’t reveal a thing, but was still alluring in a sophisticated way.

A light tap sounded at the door. “How are we doing in there?”

“You can come in.”

The sales associate walked in and helped Joy zip the back. “Beautiful. The color accents your green eyes. Not just anyone can pull off that color green.” She linked the tiny hook at the top of the zipper for Joy, then tugged in a few places. “It hangs nicely.

What do you think?"

Joy smoothed her fingers along the fabric. She'd been worried that too many junk food lunches on the run might have compromised the fitting she'd had two weeks ago.

"Even prettier than I remembered."

She turned and looked at her reflection in the wall of angled mirrors. "I love the way the top is embellished like fine jewelry." She lifted the skirt, liking the way it fell ever-so-softly. "But the rest is so simple."

The saleswoman stepped out of the dressing room and motioned to Joy. "Come on out here."

Joy stepped out into the main salon. Renee stood on a platform in the center of the room in a short shimmery-black dress that showed off her never-ending legs.

Renee's expression in the mirror made Joy blush.

"You look breathtaking," Renee said, then turned and faced her. "I think I need to go back and find something more like that." She stepped down from the platform, looking a little deflated. "You look beautiful and smart and capable, and you even look sexy with just about every inch of you covered."

"Don't be silly, that dress is great on you," said Joy. "You look amazing. I could never pull it off."

"We have different styles, but your dress is perfect for the gala. I'm so glad you get to go this year."

Joy couldn't wait to attend the MacDonald-Webber holiday gala, to which old, new, and prospective clients were invited. The event had such a reputation that it was often the differentiator that had caused some of the company's most impressive accounts



to choose MacDonald-Webber over the competition.

“I set the research schedule this year, and I made sure it didn’t conflict with the gala,” Joy said. “Last year, while everyone else was enjoying a swanky evening rubbing elbows with clients and celebrating, I was gathering data from dozens of sugar-buzzed children while they waited for Santa. Talk about a bum deal.”

“I remember.” Renee shook her head. “I was so glad my job with you didn’t start until the next week. If I’d had to miss the gala, I would have been crushed. It’s one of the best perks of working there.”

Joy lightly twisted a loose tendril of hair that had fallen across her shoulder. Renee’s choice of a short, flirty number made Joy feel almost overdressed. “You don’t think this dress is too fancy for the gala, do you?”

“No. It’s elegant and feminine,” Renee said. “It’s absolutely you.”

Joy barely recognized herself in the mirror. “The bodice reminds me of my favorite Christmas ornament when I was a kid.” *That’s what drew me to this dress in the first place.* “A delicate, sphere-shaped glass ornament with finely etched details that seemed to change color from every angle—from turquoise to deep emerald green.” The fabric felt smooth against her skin. “Just like this.”

“That sounds pretty,” Renee said. “We always had a theme tree. One color. Lots of ribbons, and I wasn’t allowed to help. Christmas was just one more business party for my mother.”

“I can’t imagine not getting to help with the tree. When I was a kid, it was almost as fun as Christmas morning. I’m sure your Christmas tree was picture-perfect, though.”

“Like in-a-magazine perfect in that living room look-don’t-touch kind of way.

Trust me. It was no fun.”

“Our tree was probably a hot mess in comparison, but we loved decorating it together. Mom loved the holidays.” Joy’s throat felt dry. She missed her mom more than anything. “Picking the right spot for that special ornament on the Christmas tree with her is one of my favorite memories.” Joy wasn’t sure what had happened to all the boxes of family decorations after her mom died, but it didn’t really matter. She hadn’t bothered to have a tree since then. Christmas just wasn’t the same without Mom.

The sales associate poured more champagne for Joy and Renee.

“Are you bringing Todd to the gala?” Renee asked.

“Todd?” Joy was surprised to hear his name. “No, he’s pretty much in the ex category these days.”

“I hadn’t heard you mention him in a while, but I didn’t know it was over between you two. Sorry.”

“No, it’s okay. That relationship never really went anywhere. He’s more into his work than I am. Who knew that was possible?” But she’d be lying if she didn’t admit that she still missed having him around for those late-night ten-minute chats. Feeling connected to someone—heck, anyone—meant more to her than she’d realized. But if Joy wanted to meet her thirty-year goals by her next birthday, her job had to be her top priority. “Hard to be over, when it never really got started.”

“He never really seemed like your type anyway. He always seemed just a little too slick to me.” Renee finished her glass of champagne.

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I would’ve if I ever thought you might get serious about him, but I figured you

saw him for what he was. Anyway, that's not important now. Tell me! How'd the meeting go?"

"Amazing."

"I knew it would, and when you get that promotion to director, Margie won't be able to drop her kids off on you anymore." Renee cut her eyes. "And when you're choosing your new team, please think of me being stuck with the crazy woman." Renee pressed her hands together. "You wouldn't do that to me, would you?"

"You mean like you left me earlier today when Margie was shoving tickets to her kids' Christmas pageant down my throat?"

Renee raised her hand to her mouth. "I did leave you hanging, didn't I? I had to. There was no way I was letting her guilt me into buying tickets. Besides, I'm not as nice as you. I'd have ended up fired for sassing her about that mess with her kids."

"Cost me two hundred dollars," Joy said.

"You'll make more than that with the raise that comes with the promotion."

"That promotion is not mine yet."

"Everyone says you're the best candidate. I think the interview was just a formality." Renee placed her empty glass on a nearby side table.

"I hope you're right. My fingers are crossed. Well, I better change out of this so we can get back to work. Now's not the time to look like I'm slacking off." Joy headed to the Fleur-de-Lis Dressing Room to change.

Back in their business attire, Renee stood looking through a display of holiday scarves while Joy settled her alterations bill.

Joy's phone rang. She glanced at the unfamiliar number and quickly silenced the

incoming call as she signed the receipt. Just as Joy took the clear plastic dress bag from the sales associate, that musical tone letting her know someone was calling sounded again. “Someone is being persistent. I better take this. Thank you for your help.”

“You’re welcome, Ms. Holbrook.”

Joy answered the call.

“Joy, honey, it’s your aunt Ruby’s friend. Shirley.”

Her mind spun as she imagined a hundred dreadful situations. “Yes. Is everything okay?” Joy hugged the dress.

“Ruby took a fall and broke her foot. Her ankle—well, I’m not sure what all, but it didn’t sound good. They just took your aunt into surgery. I thought I better call and let you know.” Shirley’s words were rushed and hushed. Joy could picture her in the hospital waiting room.

As the news sank in, Joy’s body felt weak. She walked over to an upholstered bench and sat down.

“Is everything okay?” Renee whispered, looking concerned.

Joy held up a finger. “Do they know how she fell? Was it an accident or did something else cause her to lose her balance?”

“I’m not sure. Ruby was fussy and kind of out of it. I’m not entirely sure what happened or how long she’d been lying out there hurt when I found her. She told me not to bother you, but—”

Shaking her head, Joy said, “No. I’m glad you didn’t listen to her and called to let me know. Which hospital?” She ended the call and stood there almost unable to breathe. “It’s my aunt.”

“Ruby?”

She pressed her phone against her chest. “They took her by ambulance to Bridgewater Regional Hospital in Crystal Falls.”

“Is it serious?” Renee stepped closer.

“I didn’t think so at first. She broke her ankle, but they’re taking her straight to surgery. That’s always serious, right? Especially for someone who’s seventy.” This day had pushed her emotions like a pendulum—from awful to amazing, and then princess to peril. If she were ever at a risk for a heart attack, today would most certainly have done her in.

“I can catch the Metro back to the office,” Renee said, “and I’ll give Margie an update. You’d better go.”

Sweat dampened Joy’s forehead, making her bangs feel heavy. “It’s over a five-hour drive. I’ll never make it back in time for the presentation at the off-site meeting tomorrow.” Panic filled her, making the chorus of “Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer” playing in the store sound like white noise as she tried to process the news.

“I can cover that. Plus, it gives you the whole weekend to take care of your aunt and get back home.”

“Right. Yeah. Oh my gosh.” Joy swiped at the tear that slipped down her cheek.

Renee placed her hand on Joy’s arm. “Are you sure you’re okay to drive?”

Joy fumbled for her keys. “Yes. I’ll be fine.”

“Then don’t just stand there. Go. Don’t worry about a thing at the office.” Renee hugged Joy and stepped back, urging her to leave.

Joy walked as fast as she could to the nearest elevator to the executive parking

level, then ran all the way to her car with the dress bag billowing over her shoulder.

## Chapter Four

Ben stooped to pick up an ornament that had fallen from the Christmas tree in the atrium of Bridgewater Regional Hospital. He'd worked at the hospital for ten years running—ten Christmases—and this had to be the prettiest tree yet.

He flipped the ornament in the air and caught it.

It had taken him three trips to find the perfect Fraser fir that would do the skylighted central court justice. He'd made careful calculations to determine just how tall the tree needed to be so that once it was in the stand with the tree topper, it would just clear the ceiling. All his effort had paid off too. Not an inch to spare. Decorating for the holidays hadn't been in the budget, but his staff had embraced the opportunity to get creative. Garlands made of plastic patient bracelets laced the branches in a twisting kaleidoscope of color. Recycling at its best. The staff had also volunteered to decorate everything themselves since there was also no budget to hire the team that usually came to do that work. The people in this town lived the holiday spirit every day.

Ben admired the ornament he'd just rescued, its shimmering fabric pinned into place with stacks of sequins in red, white, and green. Each ornament was tagged with the name of a patient, and the shiny length of ribbon on this one read SARA. Ben hung the

ornament carefully on a limb near a bright blue twinkle light, hoping Sara would be back home by Christmas Day.

It was tradition at Bridgewater to have ornaments that represented each patient staying in the hospital over the holidays—a tradition his mother had started years ago as a candy striper. When a patient was released, they took their ornament home with them, or moved it out to the community tree located in the grassy area outside the emergency room.

Ben had always hoped that by Christmas Day, the only remaining ornaments on the tree inside would be the shiny red balls. That wasn't realistic, but it didn't stop him from believing that maybe one day that would be the case. Because every heart deserved to be filled with hope, no matter what seemed logical. After all, miracles happened at the most unexpected times.

Soft holiday music filled the corridor, and the scent of pine from the fresh boughs of greenery draping the hospital entrance hung in the air, masking the usual aroma of antiseptic and adhesive.

Only one family sat in the waiting area right now. Although it wasn't good for business, seeing a near empty waiting room had its pluses. Especially this time of year.

Ben shared a smile with the family waiting to be called to complete admission paperwork. He wondered which member of that family would have an ornament on the tree tomorrow. The mom, dad, or one of the children?

His phone rang as he walked down the hall toward his office. "Hello, Mom."

"Honey, your grandmother just called. Ruby took a fall, she just got out of surgery. If you have time, could you stop in and pay Ruby a little visit while your



grandmother is there with her? It would make her day to show you off a little, and I thought maybe you could pull a few strings to make her stay a little more pleasant.”

“Of course.” Ben always had to laugh at how Mom called Bridgewater *his* hospital. He refrained from asking her what had happened to Ruby, else he’d end up on the phone for a good thirty minutes.

“Thank you, son.”

“It won’t take but a few minutes. No problem.”

“Thanks, Ben. Oh, and I wanted to talk to you about Christmas dinner. I heard from your brothers. Finally. Everyone will be here this year. Kendra and I have an idea. Can I run it past you? Do you have a few minutes?”

“Sorry, Mom, I don’t.” If he hung on the phone with her too long, he’d have to mention that they might have to drop out of the Extreme Gingerbread Bake-off this year. He’d rather find a replacement for Ashley than disappoint Mom. Either way, it was better to have that conversation in person. “Tell Kendra to hang around. I’ll stop by the shop and catch up after work. Does that work for you?”

“Yes. It can wait. But don’t forget to stop in on Ruby.”

“Got it. I’ll talk to you later.” He pushed his phone into his pocket, turned, and headed for the elevator. Might as well knock that out now while he was thinking about it. He took the elevator to the top floor. The facility had only three floors, the first dedicated to the ER, gift shop, cafeteria, Outpatient Services, and Administration. What used to be the physical therapy wing was now rented out as doctors’ offices to bring in more money for the facility.

When the doors of the elevator opened on the third floor, gone were the soothing

holiday scents of pine from the first floor, and the holiday music was replaced by the sounds of nurses doing their jobs.

A first-year nurse glanced up from the beeping monitor in the nurses' station. "Good evening, Ben. What brings you here?"

"Checking on a friend who was admitted earlier. Ruby Johnson."

"She came through surgery fine. She's still foggy as a Froot Loop, but you can visit her. She's a pistol, that one."

"That's an understatement. What happened? I hope it's not serious."

"She took a nasty fall, but she's going to be fine." She pointed down the hall behind her. "Hope I'm just like her when I'm her age. Room 326."

Ben exchanged hellos with a couple other nurses moving equipment down the hall. He knew most everyone who worked at the hospital, if not by face, then certainly by name, since he oversaw all the hospital's accounting, including payroll.

Easing open the partially closed door of room 326, he knocked as he entered Ruby's room. She was propped up against pillows with her leg elevated, her bruised toes sticking out the end of the cast. "What have you gone and done to yourself, Miss Ruby?"

"Ben." Ruby dragged his name out like it was three syllables long. "Did Shirley call you to help spring me from this joint?"

His grandmother was seated in the chair next to the bed.

"Hardly." Ben's lip trembled with the need to smile at that. He placed his hand on his grandmother's shoulder. "But you and my grandmother better be behaving."

Ruby put her hand across her mouth. "Your grandmother and I always behave."

"I wish I believed that," he said, teasing her affectionately. "They treating you

right, Ruby?” He squeezed his grandmother’s shoulder. “How are you doing, Grandma Shirley? You keeping Ruby in line?”

Ruby raised her arm, sending the plastic tube of the IV flinging like a jump rope. “Keeping *me* in line? If she were a good friend, she’d be wheeling me out of this place!” She crossed her arms over her generous bosom and harrumphed. “I can’t believe I broke that easy. I’ve had much worse falls. I just stepped in a hole this time. Funny thing is, it isn’t even the ankle of the foot I stepped in the hole with that got broken. Figure that out, would ya?”

Shirley shook her blond curls and tsked. “I keep telling her she needs help around that place. If it hadn’t been bridge day, no telling how long she’d have lain there until someone found her.” Shirley tugged on Ben’s sleeve. “She never misses bridge. When she didn’t show up, I knew something was wrong.”

“You were just missing my famous spinach artichoke dip.” Ruby wasn’t spitting out her words quickly or clearly. “I’m fine. Be a good boy, Ben, and fetch me some crutches so I can get on about my business.”

“That’s big talk for someone who just came out of surgery,” Ben said. “I believe those pain meds have you feeling ten feet tall and bulletproof, but I don’t think you’ll be going anywhere anytime soon. What can I do to help make your stay more comfortable?”

“Get me home.”

“Besides that.”

“Not a thing. It was sweet of you to come by and check on me, though,” she said with a crooked smile.

Shirley shook her head. “Actually, there *is* something he can do for you.”

Ruby's eyebrows shot up. "What?"

"Have you forgotten how much work it is to get your place ready for the Crystal Christmas Cookie Crawl? It would be a shame for me to have to cancel your house as a stop. Oh goodness, we don't have much time to figure this out. They are printing tickets this week!"

Ruby glared at Shirley. "Cancel me? You will do no such thing. This is a temporary setback. I will have my house ready, like I always have for as many years as you've hosted that holiday home tour."

"Have you even started?"

"No, but I'll get it done, and Ben had already scheduled to come over next Thursday to start the outside lights."

"Then you'd better plan on letting Ben get moving along on decorating the inside too."

"I'm happy to do that," Ben said. "Don't worry about a thing."

Ruby's face sagged. "You know how much I appreciate you helping me out now and again, but you don't have to do that. I can still carry my own weight. I'm not some helpless old lady," she insisted. "No doctor is going to treat me that way either. I'll be up and out of here tomorrow. Take my word on that." Her lips pulled into a tight line. "I can decorate some trees and bake with a cast. It's not like my arms are broke. No big deal."

"Not so fast there, Ruby," Ben said, carefully choosing his words. "You need to follow doctor's orders, or your stay could end up even longer."

*Pffft.* Ruby's face contorted and dismissed the very thought.

"After seven years running, I know exactly where everything is stored and where

it all needs to go. I'll take care of the decorations, Ruby."

Brushing her hair back from her face, Ruby sniffled and said, "You know how much I appreciate you being my handyman, but I will *not* ask you to do all of that by yourself. Besides, you've got your own place to worry about."

"You don't have to ask. I volunteered. Besides, my house is not on the Cookie Crawl. It's as much for me as it is for you. I like winning." And there it was. One more thing on his top-heavy plate to juggle. "Besides, you know how much I enjoy those projects."

Her expression softened. "That's true. You can sure whistle a holiday tune like nobody's business too. You kinda break all those stuffy, boring accountant stereotypes."

"Thank you. I think?" He had to admit he hadn't had much in common with the other students majoring in Accounting back at NC State. In fact, most of his buddies there had been in vet school or off campus, already working blue-collar jobs. And as much as those guys had bellyached about those jobs, Ben loved doing that kind of work. His position in administration at Bridgewater Regional Hospital had come with a nice salary, but there was something to be said for getting outside and seeing the sunshine now and again. "Your farm will be the best-looking stop on the Crystal Christmas Cookie Crawl again this year. I promise. I'll have it all ready for you in time for the event."

She shot straight up in her bed. "I better be home well before that!"

"I hope so, but don't push yourself, and don't give the nurses a hard time." But Ruby was known for her fiery redhead behavior in this town.

"I won't be here long enough to give anyone a hard time."

Somehow Ben doubted that. In fact, if he had to guess, everyone already had their

hands full with Ruby, and she hadn't even spent the night yet. "I'll check in on you tomorrow."

He checked his watch. It was going to be a late night in the office for him tonight, but he had errands to run too. Maybe he'd zip out now, take care of a few things and grab dinner, then come back. Probably wouldn't hurt to check in on Ruby later either.

He hoped, for her sake, that she did get back on her feet soon and home, else he might have to put a warning label on Ruby Johnson to protect the staff.

## Chapter Five

Joy clung to the steering wheel so tightly that her arms ached. For the last hour she'd wrestled with her emotions, unsure which was winning—concern for her aunt or regret for letting so much time pass since her last visit to see her. Okay, and the guilty feeling that she should really have stayed at the office, but it had to have been over two years since Joy made the trip to Crystal Falls, North Carolina.

Ruby had come to visit her in D.C. twice during that time.

Joy stretched tall in the seat, trying to ease the pain of sitting still for this long. *How could I have let a seventy-year-old make this trip?* Maybe because Ruby had always seemed rather invincible, but now Joy could kick herself for not having made a better effort. Joy stretched her back against the driver's seat. It was a long drive even for her.

Once she finally reached her exit from the interstate, the roads quickly became narrow and dark. Water ponded along the side of the road from a recent shower, splashing beneath the wheels of the car, sounding as if someone were saying “shhhhh.” Joy wished the white noise would shut down the negative thoughts playing in her mind. *Mom would hate that I haven't kept in touch with Aunt Ruby. What if Ruby's injury is serious? I can't lose her. She's all I have. Ruby is so different from Mom, so why does it*

*break my heart all over again when I'm with her?*

Joy pulled in front of the small Bridgewater Regional Hospital just before nine o'clock.

She swung into a front parking spot and rushed inside. Her footsteps echoed in the atrium, empty except for the furniture and a huge Christmas tree. Across the way, a uniformed security guard, who had to be pushing seventy himself, sat behind the reception desk, flipping through a magazine.

"Ruby Johnson was admitted earlier. I'm her niece, Joy Holbrook. Can I see her?" She slid her driver's license across the desk, trying to speed up the process.

"That's not necessary, young lady." The old man tugged his glasses off and cleaned them on his shirt. "Visiting hours ended a little while ago, but let me see what I can find out for you."

She glanced around the familiar atrium, trying to remain calm. This place still held icy memories for her.

The last time she'd been to a hospital, it was to visit Renee after her daughter, Cassie, had her tonsils removed. There were still five minutes left before visiting hours that day, and they wouldn't let her up. Her worry had only increased during the five-hour drive when her attempts to call Ruby's friend back to get an update had gone unanswered. *Don't let it be bad news.*

The hospital lobby looked different decorated with fresh greenery for the holidays, adding cheer to the place in an odd way. Not how she remembered it all. So maybe it wasn't exactly like the last time Joy had been here, but those memories still haunted her.



The security guard made a phone call, then snapped his fingers to get her attention. “You can go right down this hall and take the elevator to the third floor. The desk nurse will help you.”

The flood of relief that those words gave her made her want to leap across the desk and give that guy a hug. If she hadn’t been able to see Ruby tonight, there was no way she’d get a wink of sleep. “Thank you so—” She spun and nearly collided with a gentleman walking by. “I’m sorry. I—”

The dark-haired man caught her by the arm, her keys just inches from his shoulder. “Whoa, there.”

She shrank back to keep from stabbing him with her keys. Out of habit they had been laced through her fingers like little spears. City living kept a girl on her toes.

“Yeah. Sorry. I’m here to see a family member.” She yanked her hand down to her side and shook the keys loose from her fingers.

His smile was easy. His grip firm. Even though he wasn’t wearing a doctor’s coat, he had that I-belong-here look about him. “Sorry to hear that. The elevators are that way.” He pointed down the hall, although she already knew the way. Knew it all too well.

“Yes. Excuse me.” Joy sidestepped him and forged ahead. She stabbed at the elevator button, then glanced back. The man walked with purposeful intent down the far end of the hall.

Those days she’d spent here with Mom suddenly felt like just yesterday. Fighting the frantic feeling washing over her, she searched her mind for something less personal.

*Research studies proved that the traditional lighting in hospitals never gets bright enough to tell the brain it’s time to be awake and alert, nor does it get dim enough to*

*ease sleep, which could impact a patient's ability to heal.*

She knew more trivia about things she'd done market research on, from agriculture to health care to zoo life, than one person should ever know. That trivia was usually her safety net, but right now it felt highly inappropriate. Hopefully, her aunt wouldn't be in here long enough for the lighting to make a difference. *Please be okay.*

Joy punched the elevator button again and waited. Then pressed it again. Finally the elevator arrived. The doors opened so slowly that she practically ran into them as she got on. After a painfully slow lift to the third floor, she stepped out, and the desk nurse, a ripe-bodied woman, smiled and motioned her over. "You must be Mrs. Johnson's niece."

"Yes, ma'am. I just got here from D.C. I've been so worried. Can I see her?" The last words barely made it out. She took in a deep breath and pressed her hands together. "Please?"

"Oh, honey, you better settle yourself down or you'll end up her roommate. I'm busy. I don't have time for any more patients on this floor tonight." A hearty laugh filled the air as the woman hoisted herself up from the chair. Her bright white shoes squeaked with every step as she rounded the nurses' station to Joy's side. "Your aunt is going to be just fine. Come with me."

For a moment, Joy froze. Unsure if she could walk down the hall. The beeping of machines and the chatter on the hospital floor competed with her ability to breathe and separate her memories from the present.

"Are you okay?" the nurse asked.

Joy glanced down the hall in the direction of room 304. She hadn't realized, until just now, that she even remembered her mom's room number. Her palm sweated against

her keys.

“Come on. Let’s get you down to see your aunt. You’ll feel better once you see her,” the nurse said.

Joy’s lips felt numb as the scent of the hospital cleaner mixed with the cherry gelatin that seemed always to be on the food trays around here tugged at old wounds.

The nurse motioned. “She’s down this end of the hall.”

Joy fell in step next to the nurse, who walked as slow as the elevator ride had been. If Joy could get her mouth to work, she’d just ask the nurse to give her the room number so she could sprint down and see for herself that all was well.

“She came through surgery fine,” the nurse said. “Broken ankle. Bad break.” The nurse shook her head, bunching her lips. “Real bad. Took a few screws and a rod to put her back together, but she’s awake and fussing. I usually take that to be a good sign.”

A burst of laughter floated into the hallway. Aunt Ruby’s laugh always made Joy smile. She could’ve found her without the room number or the escort. *Thank goodness.*

The nurse stopped short of the door. “They’ve been in there awhile. Make it quick. Visiting hours were over long ago. We don’t see any reason to rush folks too much, but your aunt does need her rest.”

Joy hesitated at the door. Two women she didn’t know stood next to Shirley, Ruby’s best friend, practically blocking her view. But even from here, the outline of Ruby’s body looked tiny lying there in bed. Then again, Ruby always looked small next to Shirley, who had to be at least five feet eight inches with wild Shirley Temple curls and the take-charge skills of a drill sergeant with a southern twist that left you unaware you’d been manipulated. Quite the opposite of Aunt Ruby, who, like Joy, was a fiery-

tempered strawberry blonde just a smidge over five feet tall.

Ruby rattled off the details of her accident as if it had happened to someone on a Hallmark Channel movie. Her familiar voice reminded Joy of the many late nights Ruby had entertained her with her tall tales.

Joy listened, her worry falling away with each word. It wasn't until one of the women moved to get something out of her purse that she finally caught a full glimpse of her aunt. And had she not heard her aunt's voice already, she wasn't sure that she'd have recognized her.

Ruby must have switched hair stylists because her red hair was now closer to red tomato than strawberry. She'd aged significantly since their last visit. *Stop that. She just came out of surgery. Be grateful Ruby sounds like her old self. . . even if she doesn't look like it.* Joy's lips quivered as she forced a thankful smile.

“ . . . and I stepped in a hole. It hurt like the dickens when I fell, but that's not even the ankle I broke. I don't know how I managed to break the other ankle. I must have been a sight toppling tail over teakettle. Anyway, with one foot in the hole, and the other all twisted backwards, I couldn't pull myself back up.”

“How long did you lie there?” one woman asked.

“Most of the morning. Glad it wasn't raining. Now, that could've been miserable. As it was, I think my menagerie thought I was hanging out for a sleepover, because they all came over and just walked around me in circles like it was a game of Ring Around the Ruby. All they wanted was for me to get up and get them a treat.”

“You're lucky,” another lady said. “You could have died right there, lying in your yard.”

“Seriously? It’s a broken ankle, and it was almost sixty degrees. Don’t be so dramatic!” Ruby snapped at the woman.

“Maybe you need one of those medical-alert necklaces. My son was telling me about those.”

Ruby tugged the sheet up around her. “Stop it. It was just an accident. One teensy mishap. I’m fine.”

Shirley cut in. “When Isabelle had that broken foot, she was in the hospital for days, and then had to go to the rehab center for physical therapy.”

“Well, that’s Isabelle. Not me. I told them I had things to do at the farm. Give me one of those walking casts and some crutches, and I can get some chores done.”

“Now, Ruby, you heard Ben—”

“Don’t you start—” Ruby’s voice rose two octaves.

Even after being gone so long, Joy still recognized the tone Ruby took when she was ready to argue. “I came as soon as I heard,” Joy said, hoping to head off a quarrel between her aunt and Shirley.

“Joy?”

The look on Ruby’s face nearly caused Joy to choke on the tears that threatened to fall. “Yes, ma’am.”

“You drove all that way? You didn’t have to do that. How did you know? Who called you?” Ruby demanded.

Shirley bristled but didn’t speak up, and there was no way Joy was going to throw her under the bus.

“I must be listed as your next of kin. Besides I deserve to know these things.

We're family." Joy knew that she hadn't treated Ruby like real family, though. While dodging her own painful past, she'd shoved Ruby aside too, always allowing work to take precedence unless Ruby showed up. And even then, Ruby had to resort to showing up with hardly any notice to keep Joy from worming her way out of the visit.

"Phooey. It's no big deal. Next of kin is for when you're going to die. I'm nowhere near dead. But you get on over here. It sure is good to lay eyes on you." Ruby flung her arms open wide, and her friends stepped back to let Joy get close to the bed.

"Girls. This is my niece, Joy," she said proudly.

"It's good to see you. I'm sorry it's been so long. It shouldn't have taken something like this to get me here." Joy leaned down to hug Ruby, whose grip hadn't suffered one bit.

"You're busy, sweetie. Don't you worry. I understand." Ruby's eyes glistened, and guilt stuck in Joy's throat like a pill too big to swallow. Lying in the hospital bed, her aunt didn't seem like the vibrant, unstoppable woman Joy had always known. Was it the surgery, or had she really paid so little attention?

A blond-haired nurse knocked on the door. "I hate to break up the party, but our patient needs her rest. She'll be up for visitors again tomorrow."

All Ruby's friends left, but Joy lagged behind. "I'll be back in the morning."

Ruby grabbed Joy's wrist. "Honey, I'm sorry they called and worried you, but thank you so much for being here. Seeing you has almost made it all worth it."

Those words stabbed like a knife to Joy's gut. "Don't say that." But her voice came out so quietly, she wasn't even sure Ruby heard her. Joy cleared her throat. "Please don't you ever worry about worrying me. I'm here. Where I should be tonight." She

rested her arms on the rail of Ruby's bed, and lowered herself into the bedside chair.

Ruby laid her hand against Joy's cheek. "You're staying at the farm, right?"

"I'd planned to."

"You look exhausted. Are you working too hard?" Ruby waved a bony hand.

"Don't answer that. You always do. I know you better than you think, young lady."

Of course she did. She was Mom's sister, and had been there through the hardest times of Joy's life. "I can help you until you get on your feet."

"I'll be home tomorrow. They never keep anyone in the hospital long these days. Insurance runs that mess, not the doctors. But you can help me with one thing."

"Anything."

"Could you please feed the animals for me tonight? That would be a huge help. I know they're probably raising a ruckus. They're used to their six-o'clock feeding. I've taken in a few more since you were last here. I just can't bear the thought of animals going to slaughter, so I've kind of become the rescue lady. Oh, and Molly, that darn rabbit, is in a cage on the sun porch now. She just can't tolerate the cold these days since Mr. Bugs crossed the rainbow bridge. At least there won't be any more baby bunnies."

"Not a problem."

Ruby's face contorted into a frown; then she began pushing the sheets down and edging to the side of the bed. "It's too much to ask. I really need to get home. Help me get out of this bed and get dressed."

"Lie back down. You're just feeling good because of that cocktail they have in your IV." She placed her hand on Ruby's shoulder. "You relax. I'll make sure every single animal gets fed something tonight. No one will go hungry on my watch." She

crossed her heart. “I promise.”

Ruby deflated back into the pillows. “There’s a list on the barn wall of everything that needs to be done. The goats, Nanny and Waddles, and the donkey, you remember Jack, right?”

That stubborn donkey had to be fifteen years old by now.

“They should have had a new bale of hay put out today. Don’t worry about the cow. He belongs to Tommy, a 4-H’er in town who needed somewhere to keep her until showtime. Good little boy. He never misses a day, but check the gate. He doesn’t always latch it right.”

“Got it.”

“The chickens have most certainly dumped their water over, they always do. Oh goodness, they are all probably starving.”

“I’ve got it. Don’t worry a—” Joy spun around at the sound of the door swinging open.

“Ladies. I’m sorry. I really need to ask you to wrap this up.” The nurse who had escorted Joy down earlier cocked her head in that way that told Joy she meant business.

“I’m going.” Joy stood, stepped away from Ruby’s bed, and started for the door. “I’ll be by tomorrow to visit.”

“Molly!” Ruby called out, waving her hand frantically. “I almost forgot. You have to take care of Molly. She can’t be alone in the morning.”

“You girls can talk tomorrow,” the nurse said.

Joy kept moving. “No problem. I’ve got it all under control. Go to sleep.” Joy breezed through the doorway, and the nurse pulled the door closed behind them. “I’m



sorry. I haven't seen her in—”

“I get it. She'll be here tomorrow.” The nurse ducked into the room next door to reset a beeping monitor.

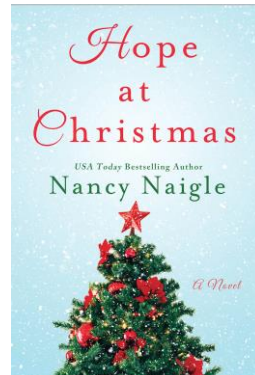
Loneliness hung over Joy as she made her way down the empty hallway. She had every intention of making up lost time to Ruby, no matter what it took.

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