

A Bookshop for Christmas
Sample

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Chapter One

We are better throughout the year for having, in spirit, become a child again at Christmastime.

—Laura Ingalls Wilder
Little House on the Prairie

Six Months until Christmas

Jeremiah Chilton studied the people at the glass table in the lawyer's office, silently cursing himself for showing up. For thinking that *this* was the best decision, trying to reconnect, trying to respect the last wishes of Ward and Julia Chilton.

He cleared the lump in his throat as he met Brooke's gaze. Man, she was just as beautiful as when he'd last seen her seventeen years ago.

If only she didn't look at him as if he were a ghost, a mirage. To her, maybe he was.

He shifted to a friendlier option—Shawn. But nope. His old

friend—the cousin he'd been “as thick as thieves” with, according to Julia—stared at him with an open mouth that didn't show any hint of transforming into a smile. Jeremiah scuffed his work boot against the carpet, deliberately avoiding looking at Delaney.

Now *there* was an awkward conversation times ten. Maybe he shouldn't feel uneasy around her, but no doubt his return would make things uncomfortable again. How could it not?

“I received a call to meet here at one o'clock. I was held up with an inspector and...” Jeremiah stopped his rambling. What did they care about his job? What did they care about him? “I guess you guys weren't expecting me.”

The lawyer's secretary had explained that all of Ward and Julia's grandchildren would be at the meeting. Sure, Jeremiah doubted his place, not being blood and all, but when had he ignored a request from the Chiltons?

“Jeremiah. I can't believe you're here.” Shawn's twin Madison stood to give him a hug. He remembered the time he found her crying behind her grandparents' shed because Truman made a fat joke at her expense. Jeremiah told her she was beautiful. And he wasn't just being nice—she *was* beautiful. All the Chilton grandchildren were beautiful. One big, beautiful family he once thought he could be part of.

Once Madison sat, he shoved his hands in his pockets, suddenly conscious of the paint splattered on them. He shouldn't have come. He'd been finalizing a punch list on the Alden renovation and could have closed the job today if not for this meeting.

Besides, what was the harm of continuing to pretend the Chilton grandchildren had never been an important part of his life, continuing to pretend he didn't think about them still? Thank God it wasn't Christmas. Chilton Christmas memories were the worst—by which he actually meant the best.

No one did Christmas like Ward and Julia Chilton.

Every crummy, lonely holiday season since his years with the

Chiltons had been like catching a clump of seaweed instead of a wide-mouth bass.

Disappointing and without substance. Meaningless.

Cassidy, the outspoken, free-spirited cousin, held up a hand. "Wait. You didn't even come to the funeral. But as soon as the lawyer calls about the will, you race down to see what's in it for you?" Leave it to Shawn and Madison's younger sister to blurt out what everyone else was likely thinking.

Jeremiah didn't miss Brooke's pale face. He could only imagine his own. Fact was, he wrestled long and hard about attending Ward and Julia's funeral. News of the car accident left him paralyzed with doubt for days. In the end, he'd snuck into the back of St. Peter's, honoring them and their family the best way he knew how—by being invisible.

"I saw him." Delaney's voice met him with unexpected compassion. "He was in the back."

"You all had enough going on without me forcing you to acknowledge my presence." He raised his gaze to Brooke, the oldest of the group. "Okay if I sit?"

She nodded. He tried not to study her too much when all he wanted was to drink her in. Yes, she'd aged. No longer the lithe teenaged girl he'd loved, her curves had grown a bit softer, her face aging in beauty. And those eyes—he could dive in and explore them for the rest of his days.

He'd heard of her marriage, of course. Knew that her son had been diagnosed with Down syndrome at birth. And then, the awful plane crash that rocked the nation. The names and faces of the victims had been honored all over the news and social media and popular magazines, their stories told. Including that of Brooke's husband, one of the pilots flying Flight 1725.

"I don't know why you bothered to come."

"Truman!" Brooke hissed at her brother.

Truman shrugged. "What? It's true. It's not like Gram and Gramps would leave him anything of value."

Jeremiah swallowed. Truth be told, Truman was the cousin with whom he'd always lacked a connection. Light-haired, all-American boy, star of the football team, the apple of his grandparents' eyes. Jeremiah, with his foreign looks and Romani heritage, his deep thoughts and strange ways, could never hope to compare.

But he had hoped to be friends.

For whatever reason though, Truman kept him at a distance. Seemed things hadn't changed.

Jeremiah monitored his tone. "I'm here because Ward and Julia asked me to be here. In all honesty, I'd be happy if all I took away from their estate was a forsythia clipping."

Cassidy softened. "Remember when we used to make hideouts under that big old bush?"

Madison smiled. "The color of lemon drops in spring."

"Gram helped us make Christmas cookies to decorate it one winter. Do you remember that?" Delaney glanced around the table. Several of the cousins nodded.

"I helped Gramps prune it every spring." Shawn, the self-proclaimed underachiever of the group, was clad in jeans and a t-shirt that showed tattooed arms of elaborate mountain scenes. He looked ready for a shift behind the bar of *Pine Knot Pub*, a fact Jeremiah knew only through social media.

Bittersweet silence hovered over the group, all of them lost in memories of simpler times, better times maybe.

Had those been the best days of Jeremiah's life and he hadn't even realized it? Had he taken it for granted? He should have slowed down to enjoy it, sucked every bit of goodness from them.

"I'd like a forsythia clipping, too," Madison whispered.

Brooke swiped at one eye. "Man, this is hard."

Before anyone could agree, the door to the room opened and a silver-haired man in a suit and black glasses stepped in, thick file in hand.

"My apologies for keeping you all waiting." He chose the empty seat beside Jeremiah.

“My name is Lawrence Sullivan. I was a friend of your grandparents for a long time. Ward and I used to be bowling buddies.”

Lawrence tapped the folder in front of him so the papers inside neatly aligned at the bottom. “I am deeply sorry for the unexpected loss of your grandparents. Ward and Julia were lovely people—some of the best. And with the way Ward spoke, he thought the world of his grandchildren.” He looked carefully around the room at each of them, even Jeremiah, which made him ten times more uncomfortable. “They loved you all very much.” He took off his glasses and wiped them with a piece of cloth he kept in his breast pocket. “Now, I’ll be meeting separately with your parents, but it turns out your grandparents had something special in mind for their grandchildren—something a bit unique, actually. I hope you will take their wishes seriously and consider them a joy and not a burden. And no matter what, please know I will be here to help you navigate every step of the way. Understood?”

He raised his eyebrows to a bunch of nodding heads.

“Okay, then. Let’s begin.”

Chapter Two

For it is in giving that we receive.

—St. Francis of Assisi

Delaney tried with all her might to concentrate on the lawyer's words, but to no avail. She reached in her pocket for the kneadable eraser and squeezed it, focusing on Mr. Sullivan's balding head.

She could use her knitting needles about now. Or maybe a White Claw.

No. She kicked the idea out of her head faster than her sixteen-year-old son could throw a baseball. No, she did *not* need a drink.

This too shall pass.

She repeated one of the mantras she'd learned at Alcoholics Anonymous.

The first time she showed up at the group in the basement of Truman's church, she doubted whether she belonged. She wasn't an alcoholic in the truest sense of the word. She didn't drink hard

liquor. She didn't drink during the day. She was a functioning, productive member of society who enjoyed a glass of wine or two or three when unwinding from a long day after her shift at the post office.

Not that there was anything wrong with working for the postal service. It was a good, respectable job. At times, she even enjoyed it. But she'd had such big dreams for her life. Her teachers had called her gifted, a rare talent. She would write the next great American novel.

Getting pregnant at eighteen had changed all that. Now, her own son was nearly the age she had been when she'd gotten pregnant.

She thought of what she'd found in his pocket while doing laundry the night before. A condom. A condom!

Was Sam having sex?

The thought caused her chest to tighten. She kneaded the eraser harder, practically salivated over the thought of a glass of pinot grigio.

No.

Don't quit before the miracle happens.

That's it. She waited on a miracle, but she must participate in it also. She must make wise choices one day at a time.

But Jeremiah showing up here served to bring on a fresh onslaught of guilt and shame, his mere presence reminding her of all the events that had transpired seventeen years ago. Naturally, her thoughts turned to her then still-in-the-womb son.

My goodness, she loved that kid. If only he didn't push her away so much. And for the love of all that was good in the world, please don't let him be having sex!

Mr. Sullivan cleared his throat. "Now most of your grandparents' estate will be dispersed to your parents, but there is one property that Ward and Julia felt strongly should be given to you."

Across from Delaney, Brooke worried her bottom lip between her teeth. Delaney's heart went out to her. As fellow founders of

the Soul Sisters Single Moms Club: members two, Delaney understood the complicated emotions that must be coursing through her older cousin right now. She held her own breath.

"I believe most of you are aware of the historic church building Ward and Julia bought last year?"

Everyone—everyone, except Jeremiah, that is—nodded.

"Saint Benedict's," Brooke said softly.

Saint Benedict's. A small, quaint church—the very church their grandparents had been married in. The very church where they practiced their faith.

It was the church Delaney went to after Saturday-night sleepovers at Gram and Gramps's. It was where Gram raffled off her famous quilts at the fall fair every year, where they organized fish fries and food drives, book clubs and blood donation drives. It was where eight-year-old Delaney had played the Virgin Mary in the Living Nativity.

Huh. Her, playing a virgin and then getting pregnant ten years later as a teen. What a joke.

Oh, but Saint Benedict's! Their grandparents loved that place. Gram especially had been heartbroken over the closing of the church. And after the building had been on the market for a year, Gramps moved around some of his investments, made a big withdrawal, and gifted the building to Gram for their fiftieth wedding anniversary.

"Ward Chilton, just what am I going to do with an old church building, and at my age?" Gram said through tears as she held the deed to Saint Benedict's in her hands. "It wasn't only the building that made that place special, it was the people. The faith we shared."

Gramps's eyes twinkled. "Then maybe it's time to bring people back in." He winked at his wife. "I have a feeling you'll come up with something amazing, my love."

And she had. Brooke had told Delaney about the crazy dream

Gram shared with her. Delaney supposed it made sense that Gram shared her secret vision with the grandchild who was an actual librarian, but it hurt, too. Because Delaney also loved books. At least, she used to. Before life and motherhood and sleepless nights and alcohol-brain numbed her senses. Before she relegated her own hopes and dreams to the backseat. Because supporting her son, Sam, was everything to Delaney, and she didn't regret that for a minute.

Still, it would have been nice to be included in Gram and Brooke's plans. But Gram hadn't discussed her plan for the old church building with anyone else—not the Parents or the other cousins. And when Gram and Gramps died, it was still just a crazy dream, something to propel Brooke out of bed in the morning, to keep her hope alive that good things could come from the ashes of death.

And now...well, now...how did Saint Benedict's involve all of them, even Jeremiah?

"Your grandparents desired that, upon their death, the building be given to you."

Silence fell over the room.

Truman spoke first. "All of us? For us to sell and split the profits? Is that what you mean?"

"We can't sell it!" Cassidy said, while a variety of altering opinions volleyed across the table.

Mr. Sullivan coughed softly. "Your grandparents' desire was to transform the historic building into a one-of-a-kind bookshop. A place for the community to come together." He looked up over his dark-rimmed glasses. "They did share this desire with you, did they not?"

Shawn raked his hand through his hair. "No, I didn't know anything about it."

Madison shrugged. "Me neither."

Truman blew out a frustrated breath. "This is crazy. We all have lives. Gram and Gramps couldn't have expected us to drop

everything and build some bookstore. Who even buys books these days? Aren't bookshops across America failing?"

Delaney made an obvious gesture of clearing her throat and speared Brooke with a pointed look. *Tell them!*

"I knew about it." Brooke pushed one strawberry-blond lock behind an ear. "Gram and I were kind of planning it...together."

Truman threw up his hands. "They should have left it to you, then."

Delaney kneaded her eraser harder. "Truman, no one's asking you to do anything. Can we all just cool it for a hot minute?" She loved Brooke's brother, but he sure got under her skin when he got all hoity-toity.

"Why don't you tell us about this project, Brooke?" Madison asked.

Brooke tapped her fingertips on the glass table. "It was going to be small scale. But Gram and Gramps had enough to get it going. We started looking for a contractor before..." She pressed her lips together, squeezed her eyes shut. Delaney could imagine the words rolling around in her cousin's head. The same haunting words her own mother had spoken to her.

There's been a car accident. They did everything they could, but... Gram and Gramps didn't make it.

Brooke cleared her throat. "Anyway, we didn't get far. But we thought a combination bookshop and coffee bar might be perfect for Hope Creek. Right now, the only place to gather is *Pine Knot*."

"Where everybody knows your name." Shawn grinned.

"Which is great, but what about a space to read and hang out and browse books, all while having a really good cup of coffee or tea, maybe a baked good from our talented Madison?"

Madison looked as if she would burst with enthusiasm. "I have a ton of ideas that would be perfect for a bookshop."

Well played, Brooke Winters, Delaney thought.

Shawn blew out a long breath. "Well, a bookstore is great for Brooke and selling baked goods great for Maddie, but what about

the rest of us? I hate to say it, but Truman's right. I have a lot going on. What did the Grands expect of us?"

"Maybe we can sell off our portion to those who don't want in."

Madison threw up her hand. "You know most of us can't afford that, Truman."

But Mr. Sullivan shook his head. "That's actually not possible. There's a stipulation in the will."

Truman cocked his head. "That we can't sell the building?"

"Not exactly. You can sell it, as a group, if that is the consensus. But Ward and Julia's hope was that this would be a project the whole family could get behind. They've provided the funds that are designated to go to renovations, supplies, overhead, all of that."

Truman drummed his knuckles on the glass. "And if we decide to sell, where do those funds go?"

"Truman!" Delaney stopped herself from lunging across the table to slap him. "All you ever care about is dollar signs."

He had the decency to blush, at least. "That's not true, I'm just being practical. Gram and Gramps' intentions were noble, but the time a project like this would take is consuming. We all have full-time jobs and families and lives. If this was a passion of Gram's and Brooke's, I can see leaving it to my sister, but why should we all be tied to it?"

"I wouldn't mind being tied to it." Madison spoke without looking at anyone. "I—I could use a change."

Delaney studied her shy, overweight cousin. Despite her size, it was sometimes easy to overlook Shawn's twin sister. Never one for the spotlight, Madison quietly made her way through life as a chef for an upscale restaurant in Chatham. When was the last time they'd talked—*really* talked? Delaney vowed to remedy that soon.

"It might be fun to take on a project together." Delaney stopped fiddling with the eraser in her pocket. "Truman's right about one thing—life *is* busy. We hardly ever see one another

anymore. This would give us an excuse to get together, and a perfect way to honor Gram and Gramps.”

Thank you, Brooke mouthed. But this wasn’t only for Brooke’s sake—Delaney meant every word. What better tribute to their grandparents than completing the dream they hadn’t lived to achieve?

“Again, at the risk of being the heartless one here, I think it’s only right we know how much money Gram and Gramps set aside for this project and what happens to that money should we decide to sell the building.”

Shawn nodded. “I don’t think that’s an unfair question.”

“Of course.” Mr. Sullivan named a number that had Delaney’s ears ringing.

Truman leaned forward. “I’m sorry?”

The amount was more than Delaney would likely make her entire lifetime—maybe fifty lifetimes—working at the post office.

Shawn whistled low. “I had no idea the Grands were so loaded.”

Mr. Sullivan gave a tight smile. “Ward didn’t like to speak of it much, but he inherited a sizable sum from his parents upon their deaths thirty years ago. As you know, he was very smart with his investments. In addition to trusts for your parents and for each one of you”—he began passing out manila folders to each of them—“they have a sizable sum going to charities and the church. If you decide to sell the building, the money set aside for the bookshop project is set to go into that pool of charitable giving.”

Delaney looked at the number on the paper before her. Her name and an account number, with a balance over one hundred thousand dollars. Sam’s name on another line with an additional account number and fifty thousand dollars.

Delaney closed her eyes as emotion climbed her throat. Her hands shook. *Thank you, Gram and Gramps. Thank you.*

While it might not change her entire life, it was an impossibly generous gift.

Cassidy dropped her head onto her arms on the table and sobbed. "I wish they were here so I could thank them."

Shawn rubbed her back. "We all do, Cass."

Delaney stole a glance at Jeremiah, who stared at his folder. He shifted in his seat, shook his head almost imperceptibly.

He wasn't one of them, not really. He didn't share an ounce of blood with their grandparents, or with them. Instead, he'd come into their lives when they were young elementary-school kids, the son of Uncle Curtis's pretty new wife, Kendall. Jeremiah's father hadn't been in the picture, and they had taken him in as one of their own. He wasn't a Chilton, but if Gram and Gramps were good at one thing, it was welcoming in the stranger and making them family. Making them part of the fold.

If only they'd never found out the truth. If only long-held grievances in the generation before them had stayed buried. No matter how petty they seemed now, the grievances had stolen too much from them.

Mr. Sullivan closed his folder. "Nothing needs to be decided today. I suggest you all take some time to talk this over. Why don't we plan to meet back here in say, two weeks?"

A collective sigh of relief sounded across the table. Though Delaney knew her cousins well enough to know what their final decision would be, better to have some time to talk over the logistics, to convince Truman and any other doubters of the worthiness of this endeavor.

Don't quit before the miracle happens.

For the last eleven months, the miracle for Delaney had been getting through a day without wanting a drink. So far, that one hadn't happened. But amid their grief and brokenness, could there be another miracle waiting for them all?

