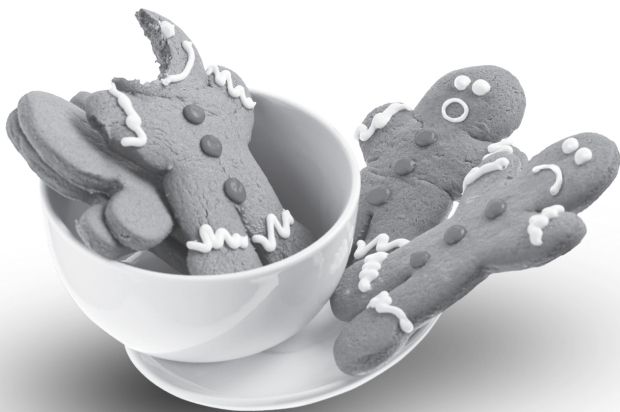


Humburg
Merry Christmas



Once Upon a Jingle Bell

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Nashville, Tennessee

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*Ronald Reagan said the smartest thing people can do
is to surround themselves with the best people they can find.
I've certainly done that.*

*Deepest thanks to
my steadfast and loyal Marian Miller;

my delightful collaborator, Julie Gwinn;

and my unstoppable rock, Rachelle Gardner.*

*You women GET ME.
I'm so grateful
(and so sorry).*

PROLOGUE



Rich and Betsy Snow, upon receiving their only child into the world on the morning of December 25, showed considerable lack of judgment or forethought when they decided on impulse not to name her after Betsy's favorite aunt Jocelyn as planned. Instead, with beaming pride and perfectly straight faces, they announced their baby's name to the nurse on duty. Betsy spelled it out for her.

"M.E.R.R.Y. Merry."

"Pretty. Middle name?"

"Christmas," Rich had replied.

"Beg your pardon?"

Yep. That's right. On December 25 at 7:17 a.m. in San Bernardino County, California, unto the world a child was born.

Merry Christmas Snow.

Her name had come to seem like a Before & After puzzle from *Wheel of Fortune*.

By the time she reached twenty-five, Merry'd had just about all she could take of her given name. She'd carried the thing around with her like a joke book tucked into the back pocket of her jeans,

and frankly, she was sick and tired of the same old punch lines. So on the day after Christmas, the year of her twenty-sixth birthday, Merry Christmas Snow went to court and changed her name to Jocelyn Merry Snow.

She'd wanted to rid herself of the Merry part too. But David Cassidy, grinning down at her from the framed vintage pillowcase on the wall of her home office and urging her to keep some small part of her former life for the sake of sentiment, just wouldn't let her do it. And so she kept the Merry, deciding to hide it behind the simple initial M.

Jocelyn M. Snow.

Very grown-up. And punch line free.

If only the judge would have signed off on a change of birth date too. She didn't particularly like sharing her birthday with someone so famous that people decorated evergreen trees and baked turkeys and pecan pies in His honor. Joss wished for a nice random birth date, like April 3 or May 5.

*On the first day of Christmas,
Murphy's Law gave to me . . .*



a Partridge with the first name Keith.

1



Joss's best friend Reese giggled at her from across the table at Starbuck's. "You always say that you want a nice normal birthday like May 5. You do realize that's Cinco de Mayo, right?"

"Oh. Right. Maybe not May 5 then."

"You are such a head case."

"What do you know, Dr. Pendergrass?" Joss slumped in her chair, crossed her arms, and slid one leg over the other. "You, with your shampoo commercial hair and all the letters behind your name. Do not negate the influence of my highly dysfunctional life."

Reese thumped her coffee cup down on the table and grinned. "Joss. I was named after a chocolate-covered peanut butter cup. My parents were vegans before anybody ever heard of it, and my brother dances in Peoria in the chorus of *Billy Elliot*. You do not have a corner on the quirky family market."

Joss tossed a good-natured wave at her friend and shrugged. "In fact, I have no family on the market at all."

“Sorry.” Reese’s tone told Joss that things had turned serious when she wasn’t looking.

“Talk to me when you start twitching each and every year as the holiday season arrives and people start wishing you a Merry Reese Pendergrass.”

Reese bubbled up with laughter like air blown through a straw.

“Hey,” Joss realized. “When I called to ask you to meet me so I could tell you something important, you said you had something important too. What is it?”

“You first.”

Joss caught hold of Reese’s sky-blue gaze for a moment and grinned from one ear to the other. She yanked the brochure from the pocket of her oversized bag and slapped it down on the tabletop.

“Check it out.” She could hardly contain herself. “Go ahead. Check it out.”

“What is this?” Reese asked as she examined the brochure.

“It’s where we’re going this year on our annual Escape Christmas Altogether Girls’ Week Out!”

“Oh.” Reese’s soft features dropped slightly. “About that.”

“Come on!” Joss encouraged her. “A little excitement, if you please. Remember I told you I was searching for the ultimate anti-Christmas vacation for us this year?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Well, get a load of this!” Joss exclaimed, snatching the brochure from her and holding up the front toward her. “The *Bah Humbug Cruise!*”

Reese chuckled and took the glossy fold-over from Joss’s hand. “The what?”

“The Bah Humbug Cruise. It leaves out of Los Angeles for seven days, cruising . . . wait for it . . . the Mexican Riviera!”

“Oh. Wow. Joss.”

“Look!” she said, tapping the brochure, and then snatching it away in her enthusiasm. “Cabo. Mazatlan. Puerto Vallarta. A cabin with two beds, a private balcony . . . and that’s not even the best part.”

“No?”

“No! The cruise leaves L.A. on the afternoon of Christmas Eve and returns to port on New Year’s Eve, with not one single mention of Christmas the whole time. And there are still cabins available. Is that too delicious to *believe?*”

Reese popped out a chuckle, but the amusement didn’t reach her eyes.

“What’s not to love about this, my friend? Not a wreath, ornament, stocking, or reindeer in sight. Who thinks of something like that?”

“I was just wondering that myself.”

“I mean, we’re not the only ones on the planet who are sick and tired of the whole comfort-and-joy, families-together, ho-ho-ho extravaganza. I know we always vowed we wouldn’t go to the same place twice, but this might turn out to be an all-new tradition, Reese. We could do this every single year from this year forward.”

“Yeah. About this year.”

Joss’s jaw snapped shut, her heart began to palpitate, and her mouth went dry. “Oh no. Uh-uh, Pendergrass. You wouldn’t dare.”

“I’m so sor—”

“No!” she objected, holding up both hands and leaning across the table. “Do not be sorry. Because sorry is always followed up with *I didn’t mean to disappoint you, BUT—*”

“But . . . I really *am* sorry to disappoint you.” Reese winced and raised one-half of her mouth in a sorry excuse for a smile.

“Then don’t,” Joss cried in hope. “We’ve been going away every Christmas for five years now. We said we’d always rescue each other from holiday overload. The only thing that would ever change that was going to be—”

Joss froze, and she dropped her hands and slowly leaned back in her chair and sighed.

“That’s your news, isn’t it?”

Reese nodded.

“He proposed?”

“He proposed,” Reese confirmed, and she held out her left hand and wiggled her fingers until Joss had to shield her eyes from the reflection. She wondered how she hadn’t noticed it before.

“Look at the size of that thing. I thought you didn’t do flashy.”

“I don’t,” she replied with a grin. “But fortunately . . . *Damian does!* Isn’t it fantastic?”

Joss popped from her chair and rounded the table, sweeping Reese into a bouncy embrace as her friend giggled like a schoolgirl.

“It’s great. I love Damian.”

“Me, too.”

She planted a kiss on Reese’s cheek and squeezed her arm before taking her chair again.

“The two of you were made for each other.”

“Oh, Joss, I’m sorry about Christmas.”

Her heart dropped an inch or two at the thought of spending her first Christmas/birthday in five years without the benefit of Reese’s fun-filled diversions.

“He wouldn’t understand?” Joss asked, squeezing her mouth into a lopsided frown. “You couldn’t write it into the vows? You promise to love, honor, and cherish him fifty-one weeks out of every year?”

Reese shook her head and wrinkled her perfect nose.

“He’ll understand. Even pediatricians get Christmas off, don’t they?”

“We’re spending the holiday with his folks in Sugarloaf. Can you believe that? Isn’t that the cutest name for a town? Sugarloaf.”

“Where is it?”

“In the mountains above Big Bear. They have a place there. It’s been in their family for three generations. Oh, and get this. There might actually be *snow*, Joss! Can you believe it? Me and my fiancé and his family and a white Christmas too?”

Joss fell back against her chair, tugging at the invisible arrow through her heart.

“Ooh, but you could come with us!”

Joss glared at her. Then, without a word, she stood up, shoved the brochure into her bag, and drank the last of her coffee. “I have an event to plan.”

“Joss.”

She paused momentarily and shot Reese a serious expression. “Can I try on the ring?”

Reese grinned. “No.”

“Then I’m leaving.”

“Joss.”

“Congratulations, traitor.”

“Joss!”

“Traitor! You’re a total traitor!”

JOSS PITCHED HER BAG over the back of the sofa before collapsing with an armful of mail. She opened her electric and water bills first, then the dozen or so Christmas cards.

Joyous sentiments, warm wishes, and envelopes puffed with faith, hope, love, and jingle bells. All very nice, but each of them completely Christmas-centric and particularly stinging right on the tail of discovering Reese would never again be available for their December tradition.

Don’t any of you people know me better than this? Joss skimmed over glitter snowmen and embossed hillside scenes, the shiver of it all quickly annulled by a seventy-nine-degree Los Angeles winter on the other side of her bay window.

Caleb, Joss’s six-year-old sheepdog mix, lumbered into the living room and peeked at her through a tuft of unruly white fur that blocked all but a fraction of one eye.

“Hey, buddy. You were napping on the comforter in the guest room again, weren’t you?”

Caleb yawned in reply and plodded across the living room toward her. First one enormous paw and then the other clawed the

sofa cushion, followed by the long, slow crawl to drag his eighty-pound frame up beside her. Joss groaned when he tossed himself into her lap.

“You are one enormous lapdog,” she told him, smoothing back the hair from his beautiful brown eyes. “Aren’t you, boy?”

He panted at her, and it looked very much like a happy grin. Joss leaned down and kissed him several times on the bridge of his nose. When the telephone rang, it took her two tries to reach it overtop her smiling dog.

“Urgh,” she grunted when she finally snatched the handset from its base. “Hello?”

“Are you all right? Did I catch you in the middle of moving heavy furniture?” Ryan Butler, Joss’s business partner for the last four years, could never resist an opportunity for a job.

Joss chuckled. “No. I’m just pinned down by a guy who finds me irresistible.”

“How *is* Caleb?”

“Hairy.”

“The same then.”

“Pretty much, yeah. What’s up?”

“Are you coming back to the office today?”

“I don’t think so. I’ve got those releases to write, and I can’t think with all the volunteers there stuffing swag bags for the bash this weekend. I think I’ll work from the house for a few hours.”

“I’m making a run out to the hotel to see how things are coming for the event. Char can keep an eye on the bag stuffers while I’m gone. Then I’ll get her started on gathering our stats for the meeting with Jenkins next week.”

“Thanks, Ry. I’ve got the proposal draft almost completely worked up.”

Since the day they opened the door at Images Public Relations, Joss and Ryan’s working relationship had been like a set of well-oiled gears. The two of them, along with their assistant Charlotte Hunter—the glue that kept it all pulled together—seemed to be separate appendages of the same body.

“Did you get to see the good doctor?”

“Oh yeah,” she replied on a stifled groan.

“What did she think about the cruise idea?”

“She can’t go. Damian proposed. My December escapes with Reese are officially behind me.”

Ryan fell silent for several beats. “So you’re not going away? Why don’t you come with us to wine country.”

“Oh, I’m still going.”

“By yourself?”

“Yep.”

“Joss, are you joking?”

“No, I’m not joking, Ryan. The only thing that’s changed is Reese as my wingman.”

“C’mon. We’ll ride all-terrains, sip some stuff; it’ll be a Top Ten list of fun. Oh, and we have this tradition where the kids—”

“As charming as that all sounds, Ryan, I have to pass.”

“Oh, come on. Come with us. You’ll have a blast.”

“Some other time,” she suggested. “But not at Christmas.”

“You know, you might be taking this whole thing a little over the—”

“Yeah, so let me know how things are progressing at the Hyatt?”

“Joss.”

“Later, Ry.”

He paused. “Later, tater.”

Joss propped the handset on the back of the couch and combed her fingers through the long fur at the base of Caleb’s neck. He sighed and snuggled her knee before closing his eyes again.

“People think I’m a loon, Caleb,” she whispered. “But not you, huh?”

No response, but Joss figured that might have been for the better. She’d been running up against people’s expectations and judgments about her Christmas aversion for as long as she could remember. It was partially her own fault, she supposed. If she could find the inclination to explain all the gory details to every Christmas lover she encountered, perhaps the opposition wouldn’t be so tenacious. After

all, what *ho-ho-ho-er* would try to perk her up to enjoy a happy little holiday that fell every year on the same regrettable date that had severed her family ties in one horrible moment?

Joss closed her eyes. While still massaging Caleb's coat with one hand, she massaged her own thumping temple with the other and wondered why those particular memories always had to return so reliable and clear. Her parents had been on their way down from Tahoe on Christmas Eve in the hope of spending the holiday—and their only daughter's birthday—with Joss in L.A.

Pouring rain, heavy winds, and holiday traffic all played a part in the pileup, the highway patrolman had said. But no matter what the cause, all Joss ever really knew was that an inebriated old guy in a Santa hat, with a red bag filled with wrapped gifts on the seat beside him, had deprived her of a lifetime of Christmas spirit in thirty horrible seconds. She occasionally felt sorry that the one who shared her birthday had been the baby Jesus thrown out with the Christmas bathwater, but she was inclined to believe He understood. She'd made a decision long ago not to ask too many questions about the *why* of that turn of events. Instead of turning on God, she'd turned on Christmas, and it had worked fairly well for her until today.

The only living person who knew every private detail of her defective holiday mental health, in fact, was Reese, and she'd been walking in silent loyalty, supporting Joss through Christmases ever since. Before Damian delivered the rock, anyway.

A smile crept across her face at the thought of it, and Joss let out a sigh from deep within her. She hadn't even asked Reese about the proposal. Had he gotten down on one knee? Was it in a restaurant or some other public place? Were there flowers and promises of forever love?

Joss closed her eyes and tilted her head back against the cushion. For some reason a fairy tale popped into her head: a once-upon-a-time romance where the prince descended on one knee and asked the beautiful princess to marry him and live with him happily ever after. Oh, how many times she'd dreamed of finding her own *once*

upon a time. As happy as she felt for Reese, the hollow spot at the center of her rib cage rattled slightly with unmistakable regret.

Suddenly she was curled into the arms of her mother again, a five-year-old with unruly auburn hair and wide, hopeful eyes, hanging on every word as Betsy read the fairy tale to her daughter and then closed the book. “There’s a handsome prince out there just waiting for you, too, Merry,” her mother had promised.

“Do you think so, Mommy?”

“There will be a big wedding with lots of flowers and a shimmering dress, and then you’ll have children of your own. And your family will make memories together, and spend your birthday each year gathered around the Christmas tree, and Thanksgivings where three generations of Snows will hold hands around a big oak table with an enormous turkey and cranberries and pumpkin pie.”

“Living happily ever after,” little Merry finished for her, and Betsy laughed.

“That’s right.”

Believing used to be so easy.

Her parents had died, taking with them any hope Merry Christmas Snow had left for happy Christmases and family gatherings. In the years that followed, Joss’s closest friends had never once hesitated to include her in their holiday celebrations and spectacular, festive meals. But somehow, instead of being part of the jubilation, Joss only felt the sting of standing on the outside looking in while others embraced their children or looked lovingly into the eyes of their spouses. No matter how hard she tried to join in, Joss couldn’t manage more than the role of simple observer, never a participant, and the pain of it had finally backed up on her.

She hadn’t ever quite figured out why Reese had so readily sacrificed trips home to spend the holidays with her quirky family, choosing instead to forgo all traces of Christmas ornaments, boxes, and bows to create an annual Christmas-free zone with her slightly pathetic orphaned friend. But they’d had a spectacular time doing it.

It had become a bit of a private joke between them, shooting Santas with their fingers and hiding wreaths and poinsettia plants

behind shrubs. Joss's December 25 birthday dinner had been the same for the last five years: Chinese food eaten with the required chopsticks, a six-pack of Diet Coke, always preceded by a prayer of thanks from Reese, then a birthday cake and barefoot sing-alongs to their favorite old Motown tunes.

Joss's heart squeezed slightly at the memory, and she picked up the phone and dialed #1 on the speed dial.

"Reese? I'm so sorry. I didn't ask a thing about how it happened or what he said. Please forgive me?"

"Of course."

"How did he do it? Did he get down on one knee?"

"Oh, Joss, it was perfect. We went to dinner at McCormick's, and they led us through to one of those circular tables in the back, the ones with the soft leather booths. And there were red roses everywhere, and about twenty white pillar candles."

"What did you think when you walked in and saw it?" Joss curled her legs under her and closed her eyes as she snuggled into Caleb's thick fur.

"Well, of course, I started to cry like a big dope."

"Of course."

And then Joss started to cry too.