

Chapter One

Although it was a few days before Christmas, it felt like spring. By ten a.m., the temperature had already climbed into the fifties, and people were shedding their coats, carrying them folded over their arms or tied around their waists. The grounds of my aunt's pet hotel, Wiggle Butt Manor, were buzzing as locals and vacationers flooded the property for the grand opening of Orca Cove's one and only agility course.

Noah, my buff-colored Cocker Spaniel—and a very good boy—stuck close to my side as I navigated the crowd. We'd arrived the night before following a four-day drive across the country from my hometown in New Jersey, arriving at the Pacific Northwest island town my aunt Jo-Jo called home.

Ten-hour days behind the wheel of the moving van I'd rented were exhausting, and my body was stiff from sitting for so long. But we made it. I was about to dive into my new life headfirst. I was now a permanent resident of Orca Cove.

People I recognized from my recent stay on the island greeted me warmly as I passed booths in various stages of readiness for the day. I found Aunt Jo-Jo walking around the property with a cane in one hand and a clipboard tucked under her other arm. A leash encircled her wrist as she tried to subdue Maya, who I wouldn't exactly call a good girl, but she had her moments.

As I approached, my aunt handed me control of the miscreant, the town's most infamous resident, best described as a basic brown dog.

"How'd you sleep, Charlie?" Aunt Jo-Jo asked, bending down to give Noah some attention and dropping her clipboard.

I scooped it off the ground before Maya trampled it. On it was a checklist of everything that had to be done for the daylong event. People would shop the booths in the morning. Baked goods, hot drinks, and pet-related items were for sale. The ribbon-cutting, with photo opportunities for the local paper, would be the highlight of the afternoon. For the grand finale, an agility champion would run the new course. The crowd expected him to dazzle them with his speed and skills.

The opening of the agility course was a dream come true for my aunt. She'd been planning it for months and wanted everything to be perfect.

"How'd I sleep? I repeated, falling into step beside her. "Like I'd eaten a poisoned apple." I always slept well on the porch of my aunt's home with the fresh ocean air wafting in through a cracked window. But I was itching to find a place of my own.

With a twinkle in her eye, my aunt said, "And did Prince Charming wake you this morning?"

I blushed at the thought. She meant Nick, or Officer Sabato, as many called him. He was the town's hottest cop who had wooed me the last time I was here. Unfortunately, fate intervened, disrupting our relationship before I could completely fall for him.

First, Nick had a murder to solve. I may have stuck my nose where it didn't belong, but that hadn't run him off. It was the unexpected news that he was the father of a sullen sixteen-year-old that knocked him off his feet. While dispensing law and order was in his blood, parenting was new to him. He'd let me know he was in over his head. Not in love with me unfortunately, but in his new role.

He hadn't been at my welcome party last night. Only my aunt, her sidekick Martha, and Nick's daughter, Kyleigh, greeted us. Of course, Maya was there. My aunt had assured me Nick wanted to come, but he was on duty.

The others had met me with a welcome-home sign, a bouquet of balloons, and a seafood feast. Once everyone went home, I fell asleep instantly—Maya on one side and Noah on the other. My happy place.

This morning, I woke up to a text message sent late the night before. *Welcome home, Jersey.*

Nick. So, in a way, Prince Charming had woken me. But I didn't want to give my aunt any more ammunition, as she'd been playing matchmaker for months. I changed the subject. "Looks like a great event. What can I do to help?"

"Follow me."

Aunt Jo-Jo led me past a stall decorated like a toy shop, where a man dressed in a Santa costume practiced his jolly laugh. "Make sure you get a photo of Noah and Maya with Mr. Claus," my aunt said. We stopped at an undecorated booth with the Wiggle Butt Manor sign stretched across a folding table. Boxes sat on the ground. "There are decorations, brochures and giveaway tennis balls for the pups," she said. "Please decorate and organize. Once people start showing up, you can distribute the balls to anyone who wants one. Oh, and can you answer questions about the hotel? Make sure vacationers know we'd be glad to watch their dogs while they're out whale watching or kayaking. We do more than overnight visits."

"Sure thing," I said.

And with that, my aunt was off to manage other things.

I tied the dogs' leashes to the table leg and set about opening boxes, hanging signs and displaying handouts on the tabletop. My slightly swollen hands were painful, a reminder that I'd forgotten to take my rheumatoid arthritis medication that morning. I would have to get back to my normal routine, something no thirty-year-old should have to do. Bent over a box and

engrossed in my task, I looked up when a shadow darkened my booth and the dogs went bananas.

Nick stood on the other side of the table. He wore jeans, a T-shirt, and a brown corduroy jacket. Unruly chestnut hair skimmed his broad shoulders, defying department regulations. The skin around his nothing-gets-past-me brown eyes crinkled when he smiled at me. "Jersey, you made it."

My heart thudded as I stood up and smiled. "Hey, you." I was tall—five ten—but Nick had a few inches on me. I didn't feel like a big doofus when I was around him, as I sometimes did around shorter people.

Nick turned his attention to Noah and Maya. As he fussed over the dogs, I felt a tug toward him, like we should hug. But the table between us made things awkward. Plus, his newfound fatherhood wasn't the only obstacle in our way. I hadn't yet told him about my RA diagnosis, and I was afraid my unknown future might run him off. I mean, who wants to hear about stiff joints from a thirty-year-old?

As if he felt the same frustration, he sighed, then shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans and rocked back on his heels. "How was your drive?"

"Endless," I said. "But now I can add truck driver to my resume."

He laughed. "That would take you away too often. Hoping you'll stay put for a while."

My cheeks burned. "That's the plan."

He scanned the thickening crowd. "Have you seen Kyleigh?"

"Not this morning. How's that going, by the way?"

He blew out a long breath. "Don't think she likes me much. But we're making the best of things."

"Don't take it personally. She doesn't seem fond of most people. It took her a while to warm up to me."

He pursed his lips. "And now you're one of her favorite people. Hope she accepts me soon. Right now, everything I say is wrong." He checked his watch. "Gotta man the booth on microchips. Catch up later?"

"I'd like that."

He bid goodbye to the dogs and then walked off toward a booth at the other end of the lot. I looked at Maya and Noah, jealous of the hands-on attention they'd received.

Once my booth was in order, Kyleigh appeared, handing me a cup of chai tea. Though petite, she was no pushover. She handed out glares like goodie bags at a birthday party. Everybody got one. As usual, black clothing covered her from head to toe, and a curtain of black hair blended into the trench coat that dwarfed her.

“Bless you,” I said, accepting the drink.

Settled on the folding chair next to me, she propped her Doc Martens on the table and stroked Maya’s head.

“Did you catch up with Nick.... I mean, your dad? He was looking for you,” I said.

She wrinkled her nose. “Yeah. It’s all good.”

I took a leap of faith. “Might want to take it easy on him. He’s new to the game.”

She played with a loose thread on her coat. “I know.”

People started spilling into the space, and the festival was now officially underway.

There were almost as many canines as people in attendance. Maya watched the crowd with interest, while Noah turned his back on the festivities and slept. A wiry, small man wearing neatly pressed trousers, a vest and a bow tie hurried our way. A striking liver and white English Springer Spaniel walked in perfect step by his side.

He stopped at our booth, and his dog sat without a command to do so. “Can you tell me,” the man said, pushing glasses up his ski slope shaped nose, “where I can find Mrs. McMullen? She’s expecting me.”

I looked past him and scanned the crowd. “My aunt’s around here somewhere.”

He checked his watch.

Maya, who had been on her best behavior, decided she wanted to make a new acquaintance. Placing her paws on the table, she barked at the springer.

The dog looked to his owner as if he needed permission to respond.

“Control your mutt,” the man said in a haughty tone.

I resisted the urge to ask him if he had a leash for his ego as he paraded it around so confidently. Sometimes the Jersey in me appeared like a second personality. “Down, Maya,” I said, gently tugging on her lead. We did have work to do.

With a sigh, Maya complied, but the man seemed unimpressed. He puffed his chest out and grasped the lapels of his vest with both hands. "Please tell Mrs. McMullen that Miles Collins has arrived with Bentley. Bentley is a champion," he added, giving Maya the stink-eye.

"Oh," I said, wondering if I should bow or just laugh it off.

Clearly irritated, Mr. Collins turned and stalked off, Bentley obediently at his side.

"What was that about?" Kyleigh said, laughing.

"I don't know," I said. "I'm sure it's nothing us peasants can understand."

Kyleigh played with the hole in her jeans, giving me a sideways glance. Her Morticia Addams-like hair looked too heavy to carry around, almost brushing the ground. "Have you thought any more about the house?" she asked.

She'd sprung the idea on me at the party last night. Kyleigh had inherited the house of Maya's deceased owner, Lucy Masanova. It needed a tenant until Kyleigh was old enough to either live in it or sell it. Although I was comfortable sleeping on the daybed at my aunt's, her screened-in porch wasn't exactly winter-friendly. Plus, I needed my own space if I intended to make Orca Cove my home.

I'd looked for rentals online before I'd made the move. The place would have to take dogs. Not only did I have Noah, but my aunt had hinted that Maya was too much for her to handle after her accident. People weren't exactly lining up to take the devilish dog, so she was as good as mine. With her reputation, finding a rental that would take her wouldn't be easy.

But Lucy's house had a history that made me a tad uncomfortable. If there were another option, I might have declined Kyleigh's offer. But there didn't seem to be one, and I wanted to help Kyleigh out.

"I don't know," I said, giving her the side-eye. "Are you a mean landlord?"

She laughed. "As long as you pay your rent on time, we should be fine. And you can do what you want with decorating. Make it something I might want to live in someday."

I held out my hand, and we shook. "You have a deal."

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Dressed in her trademark overalls and lime green Crocs, Martha, who ran the pet hotel with my aunt, came our way. Her gray hair was in its usual state of disarray, and her glasses hung from a chain around her neck. "I'll take over for a few," she said. "Why don't you two check out the other booths. There are some good ones."

Kyleigh wandered off, and I took Maya and Noah for a walk. Mostly to stretch my legs, but also because I hoped to find my aunt so I could warn her royalty was on the premises.

Maya pulled us toward a stand where a person dressed in a Dalmatian costume handed out treats. When Maya sat obediently, the giant stuffed dog turned to me. "Can your dogs have cookies?"

"Sure."

She bent down and handed each dog a treat, which they gratefully accepted.

I noticed the goods laid out on the table behind her. Highly polished grooming instruments sparkled in the morning sun. A banner advertised Top Tails-Fine Grooming Instruments. A cutout life-sized photo of a Springer Spaniel sitting proudly with a medal around his neck almost looked real. "Is that Bentley?" I asked the girl.

"You know Bentley?" she shrieked.

I put on my best game face. "He's a champion."

Not getting my sarcasm, she nodded her oversized dog head. "Indeed, he is."

"So, he's famous?"

The girl cocked her head. I half expected her to scratch behind her ear. "He's our spokesperson. Or spokesdog, if there's such a thing. His photo is on the packaging of all our tools, and now," she added, pointing to a row of treat bags. "He's on the wrapper of our new organic treats."

I caught Bentley and his uppity owner walking toward the grooming booth across the way. Kyleigh was already there, talking to a young woman with strawberry-blonde hair. When Mr. Collins reached them, his displeasure was obvious. His voice raised, and he jabbed his finger toward the young woman's chest.

I steered the dogs over. As we got closer, I could hear the argument more clearly.

"Bottom line," the girl said, hands on hips. "You need to pay for the groom so we can settle your account."

"I'm not paying for the hatchet job you did on Bentley. The hair on one ear is longer than the other."

As if well-rehearsed, Bentley cocked his head, which made it difficult to tell if Mr. Collins had a point or not.

The groomer leaned forward and gently took the dog's face into her hand, leveling his ears. "Looks straight to me."

Mr. Collins yanked Bentley back, causing him to yelp.

"Hey!" Kyleigh jumped in. "Be gentle."

"Don't tell me how to handle my dog," he shot back.

As much as I didn't want to get involved, I didn't want my aunt's big event ruined by this bully of a man. And I wasn't about to stand by while he abused two teenage girls. "Excuse me." I fought to keep my voice calm. "Maybe take a break, Mr. Collins. I'm guessing this isn't the type of attention you want to attract." I motioned to the crowd that had gathered. Some of them had their cell phones out, recording the drama.

He huffed and turned back to the groomer. "I'm not paying for your shoddy work. If you have a problem with that, I'll see you in court."

He turned and stormed off, pulling Bentley behind him.

"I feel sorry for that dog," Kyleigh said, crossing her arms and watching Mr. Collins retreat.

He stopped at the Top Tails booth. The giant Dalmatian went all fangirl as she leaned down to offer Bentley a treat. Miles slapped the cookie out of her hand, and it flew several feet in the air before landing on the grass behind him. "Do not feed that junk to my dog!"

As he strode off across the lot, people slowly went back to what they were doing. But Mr. Collins had left a stain on the day.