

# Snowflake Sweethearts – Chapter 1

Contemporary Inspirational Romance

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Annie Romano tucked the loose end of her red wool scarf into the front of her jacket and snuggled down into the soft lining. Puffing out a breath, she tried to warm her chilly face as she waited at the corner of Eleventh and Harris in the historic district of Fairhaven, Washington. A brisk, early-November breeze blew up the hill, carrying the fresh, salty scent of Bellingham Bay.

Clenching her hands in her pockets, she gazed across the street at Jameson's Bakery and lifted a silent prayer. Please, God, help me find a job. Not just for my sake, but also for Emma's.

With her stomach knotting in a tight ball, she stepped off the curb and crossed the street. It wasn't that she didn't want to see Irene Jameson, or that she was afraid to ask her for a job. The sweet, elderly owner of Jameson's Bakery had always treated her kindly. But seven years had passed since Annie left Fairhaven, and her life had taken some drastic turns since then.

What would Irene say about Annie's daughter, Emma?

A powerful mixture of love and guilt rose and battled in her heart, but love won. She pressed the guilt deeper away to deal with another time.

Straightening her shoulders, she pushed open the front door. A bell jingled overhead. The delicious scent of cinnamon and freshly baked bread filled the air. Her mouth watered, and sweet memories came flooding back.

It wasn't just Irene's kindness or the tempting bakery treats that had kept her working at Jameson's when she was a teenager. She'd had a huge crush on Irene's grandson, Alex, who also worked there. But Alex had left for college when she was only fifteen, long before she had the courage to tell him how she felt.

Regret burned her throat. She wished now that she'd made more of an effort to stay in touch with Alex and Irene. But when she'd left Fairhaven after high school, she hadn't thought she would ever come back.

Muted conversation drifted from the bakery kitchen. "Be right there," Irene called, then stepped through the doorway wearing her familiar smile. "Good morning." Her eyes widened and she gasped. "Annie? Is that really you?"

Annie smiled and nodded. "Hi, Irene."

The plump owner of Jameson's walked with a halting sway as she came around the end of the bakery case and enveloped Annie in a warm, fleshy hug. "Oh, it's so wonderful to see you."

"Good to see you, too."

Irene stepped back. "My goodness, just look at you. You're lovely."

Annie blushed and shook her head. Contacts had replaced her glasses, and her smile was free of braces, but she'd never classify herself as lovely.

"Oh, I'm so glad you didn't cut off all those gorgeous curls." Irene reached out and touched a strand of Annie's hair.

"I threaten to at least once a week."

"Well, don't you dare!" Irene motioned toward one of the four small tables lined up by the front windows. "Can I get you a cup of coffee? How about an apple fritter? I remember those were always your favorite."

"No, thanks." Annie didn't have any money to spare, though the thought of those melt-in-your-mouth treats made her empty stomach quiver.

Irene tipped her head, and her double chin sagged to the left. "Are you sure, honey?" She pulled a paper napkin from her apron pocket and swiped at her glistening nose and cheeks. "We've got some fresh pumpkin muffins or blueberry cake doughnuts if you'd rather have one of those." Her hand shook slightly as she tucked the napkin away.

"No. I'm okay." But Annie wondered if the same was true of her friend. She looked heavier and had aged quite a bit since she'd seen her last.

"Let's sit down." Irene pulled out a chair and lowered herself into it with a heavy sigh. "My poor old knees are complaining today." She smiled across the table, but it didn't erase the weary lines around her eyes and mouth. "How have you been, Annie? It's been ages since I've seen you. Are you back in town to visit friends?"

"Actually, I moved back to Fairhaven a couple months ago. I wanted to get settled in time for my daughter, Emma, to start kindergarten."

Irene's eyebrows rose, but her smile didn't falter. "Oh, that's wonderful. I didn't realize she was already five. Do you have a picture of her?"

Annie's heart lifted. She should've known Irene would be as warm and caring as she'd always been. She took a photo of Emma from her purse and handed it to Irene. "That was taken at our church's Fourth of July picnic in Portland, before we moved up here."

"Oh, she's beautiful. She looks just like you with those big brown eyes and dark curls."

"Thanks." Annie tucked the photo back in her purse. "I want Emma to grow up here in Fairhaven, where it's safe and she'll get a good education."

"Of course you do. I'm sure you're a wonderful mother."

Annie shifted in her chair. She needed to get to the point of her visit. "I worked my way through culinary school in Portland, and I've started my own business here in Fairhaven as a personal chef."

"Oh, that's great. You always were creative in the kitchen. How's it going?"

"I have a few clients, but not enough to support us. I need to find a part-time job." She hesitated, hoping Irene would understand where she was going, but the older lady simply nodded and waited for her to continue.

"So...I was wondering if you need any help here at the bakery."

Irene's smile faltered. "Oh, honey, I'd love to hire you again." She glanced toward the kitchen and lowered her voice. "But the truth is, business has been pretty slow. I'm barely able to pay Harry, and I had to cut back on Janelle's and Clyde's hours. I'm sorry."

Annie's hopes deflated, but she forced a small smile. "It's all right. I'm sure I'll find something."

"Of course you will. You're a good worker. I'd hire you in a minute if I could." Her smile returned. "Say, why don't you put me down as a reference? I'll give a glowing report to anyone who calls."

Annie forced a smile. "Thanks, I'd appreciate that." But she had few other connections in Fairhaven and no idea who else might hire her.

Irene patted her hand with cool, clammy fingers. "Now, don't worry. Just pray and trust the Lord, and something will work out. You'll see." She glanced toward the kitchen again. "Why don't I tell Harry you're here? I'm sure he'll want to come out and say hello." She rose and stepped away from the table, then swayed slightly. Her hands shot out as if she was trying to regain her balance.

Annie's heart lurched. "Irene, are you all right?"

Irene lifted a trembling hand to her forehead. "I'm sure I'll be fine...in a minute." But her face had gone pasty pale, and her eyes fluttered as she searched the room.

Annie jumped up and reached for her friend. "Irene, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Oh...Annie." Irene grimaced and clutched her apron over her chest. Her eyes widened and anguish

flashed across her face, then she crumpled.

"Irene!" Annie lunged to catch her before she hit the floor. Adrenaline shot through her as she grasped Irene's shoulders and lifted her head. "Harry! Harry, come quick!"

"What's going on?" The old baker hustled through the kitchen doorway, spotted Annie and Irene on the floor, and gasped.

"Call 9-1-1! Hurry!" Annie's stomach roiled as she searched Irene's pale face. Oh, God, please have mercy.

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Alex Jameson strode through the main entrance of St. Joseph's Medical Center and headed for the front desk. "Can you tell me the room number for Irene Jameson?"

The elderly woman behind the desk pushed her silver-rimmed glasses up her nose then slowly tapped the computer keys. A few seconds passed before she finally looked up. "She's not listed."

A huge fist lodged in his throat. Was he too late? No, he couldn't be. "I'm sure she's here. I just spoke to the nurse about two hours ago when I landed in Seattle."

The woman sniffed and looked down at her computer again. "How do you spell that?"

"J-A-M-E-S-O-N." Alex clenched his jaw and prepared to vault over the desk if she didn't hurry up and give him his grandmother's room number.

She stared at the computer for a few more seconds. "Here it is. She's in the Cardiac Care Unit, room 417. The elevator is just..."

He charged down the hall without waiting for the rest of her directions. He didn't like to be rude, especially to elderly women, but he had to find his grandmother and make sure she was all right.

He punched the up button and glared at the unmoving numbers above the elevator doors. Maybe he should take the stairs. But the elevator slid open, and he hustled in and punched the fourth-floor button.

Closing his eyes, he tried to slow his breathing and calm down. He had to prepare himself to see his grandmother. The nurse he'd spoken to said she'd had a heart attack. They weren't sure how much damage it had done. They were still running tests.

At least it had happened at the bakery when there were people around to help. What if she had collapsed at home when she was alone? If that had been the case, he would have gotten a very different kind of phone call.

He gritted his teeth and pushed that terrible thought away. Everything was going to be all right. This hospital had a great reputation. They would give his grandmother the best care possible. He'd make sure of it.

His thoughts rushed back to that morning and the frantic phone call he'd received from his old friend Annie Romano. It was strange that she had been the one to call. He thought she'd left Fairhaven after she graduated from high school. Apparently she'd come back.

His thoughts jumped back to the call. Hearing the ambulance siren wail in the background as Annie hurried through the story had shaken him to the core.

He could not lose his grandmother. She had raised him since he was twelve and seen him through the most difficult years of his life. She was the only family he had left.

The elevator doors opened on the fourth floor, and he hustled down the hall, scanning the room numbers as he went. The scent of hospital antiseptic lingered in the air, along with what smelled like meat loaf. He glanced at an uncovered dinner tray on the meal cart, and his empty stomach contracted. He hadn't eaten since breakfast.

"Alex?" a female voice called.

He turned, and his breath snagged in his throat. Annie Romano walked toward him...at least he thought

it was Annie. She looked so different, he wasn't quite sure. But the long black curls cascading over her shoulders in shiny dark tendrils were the same.

"Hi, Annie." He gave her a brief hug. The comforting scent of brown sugar and vanilla floated around her. "Thanks for calling me."

"Of course."

He stepped back and glanced down the hall. "How's my grandmother?"

Annie followed his gaze. "They brought her upstairs from the E.R. a couple hours ago, but she was barely settled before they sent her off for another test."

That didn't sound good. Why were they still doing tests? He'd hoped she would be resting in her room and he could see her right away. He frowned and looked down the hall toward the nurses' station.

Annie gently touched his arm. "The nurse said she's stable and responding well to the medications. I think she's going to be all right." Unmistakable compassion filled her dark brown eyes.

Suddenly his throat felt too tight to speak. He nodded and quickly looked away.

Annie set her foam coffee cup on the end table in the visitors' lounge. "I haven't spoken to any of her doctors, but the nurses have been great."

He watched her, still taking in the changes in her appearance. People had teased her about being tall and slim when she was younger. She'd even been nicknamed Grasshopper. But that description certainly didn't fit anymore. Her navy jeans and red turtleneck couldn't hide her attractive figure.

He blew out a deep breath. Enough gawking already.

Annie pointed to her cup. "Would you like some coffee?"

The thought and aroma made his mouth water. "No, that's all right. You go ahead."

"Please." She smiled. "I didn't drink any yet." She reached for the cup and held it out to him.

"Okay. Thanks." He took a sip and let the warm drink soothe his tense nerves.

He heard approaching voices and glanced over his shoulder. Hannah Bodine, Marian Chandler and Barb Gunderson, three of his grandmother's closest friends, hurried toward them.

"Oh, Alex, I'm so glad you're here." Tears glistened in Hannah's eyes as she reached to hug him. "Thanks, Hannah."

"As soon as Harry called and told me what happened, I called all the Treasures." Barb nodded toward Marian and Hannah.

Marian Chandler, owner of Bayside Books, clasped his hand. "We've all been praying. I know God's going to answer those prayers."

His grandmother and her three elderly friends were as close as sisters and affectionately known around town as the Bayside Treasures. For years they'd been meeting each week at Bayside Books to play Scrabble, share the latest news, and pray for friends and family.

"We couldn't just sit at home and wait for news," Barb said. "So I picked up the girls and we came over around noon."

"We've been here ever since, but we just took a little dinner break," Marian said, her pale face lined with concern. Alex nodded. "I appreciate you coming, and I know Gram will, too."

"There's got to be something we can do besides just sit in the waiting room," Hannah said, getting teary-eyed again.

"Praying for her is a wonderful idea." Annie's soothing tone relieved some of the tension.

"You can count on us for that." Marian gave a decisive nod. "We'll be storming the heavens."

"I think I'll go talk to the nurses and see what I can find out." Alex set the coffee cup on the end table.

"Maybe they'll give me more information since I'm family."

Annie's eyes widened, and she shot a quick look at the other women. They all exchanged nervous glances.

Barb cleared her throat. "Good idea. Maybe you'll be able to speak to the doctor."

He strode out of the visitors' lounge.

"Alex, wait." Annie hurried down the hall after him.

He turned and waited for her to catch up.

"There's something I need to tell you." She pressed her lips together, and her cheeks took on a rosy tint. "When I came to the hospital this morning, I told the nurse I was family."

He cocked his head and studied her.

"I'm sorry, but I was afraid they wouldn't let me see her if I said I was just a friend, and I didn't want her to be alone in the E.R." She looked up and met his gaze. "And then your grandma's friends got wind of it, and they all told the nurse they were her sisters."

He didn't know if he should be upset with them or laugh at their crazy antics. Then his stomach tensed as the truth became clear. He was the only family member Gram had left, but he hadn't been here to help her when she needed him. Thank goodness her friends had stepped in.

"I know I've been away for a while," Annie continued, "but I've always thought of Irene as the closest thing I have to family in Fairhaven. I hope you're not upset with me."

A smile tugged at one corner of his mouth. How could he be upset? She'd bent a hospital rule, but she'd done it to comfort his grandmother. "No, it's okay. I know she thinks a lot of you."

"Well, Irene was always there for me." She clasped her hands tightly. "And no one should have to go through a frightening situation like this alone. I know what that's like, and I wouldn't wish it on anyone." She stopped. Her eyes widened, and she quickly looked away.