

Sleigh Bells at the Grand Hotel

Sabrina and Ross

by

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Chapter One

Sabrina Davis held open the back door of her pizza restaurant—Island Pizza—so the clerk at the pharmacy located next door could step inside and stay dry while she hunted for her key.

“Thank you,” Mary Elizabeth said as she rooted in the bottom of her giant purse. “Ever since our pharmacist left to take a job on the mainland, I’ve been doing double duty. When the new guy gets here, I’m taking a week off so I can put up my tree, do my outdoor decorations, and write out my Christmas cards.”

“You need a break,” Sabrina said sympathetically.

“Damn straight,” Mary Elizabeth said, grinning.

Sabrina smiled, even though a drip of rain was running down her arm from holding the door open. The fifty-something woman next door ran the drugstore, dispensed medical advice, assisted the pharmacist in residence, and loved making little rhymes.

“Hope the new guy is great,” Sabrina said, humoring her business neighbor.

“Maybe he’ll be single and handsome,” Mary Elizabeth said as she pulled out tissues, a wallet, two pairs of glasses, a roll of stamps, and a cell phone.

“The last pharmacist was single and handsome,” Sabrina said.

“He was also fifty-two years old. Practically twice your age and he had an ex-wife willing to take him back as soon as he moved back to Augusta.”

“Good for him,” Sabrina said. “Don’t you know who the new pharmacist is?”

Mary Elizabeth shook her head and used the flashlight app on her phone to search the bottom of her big bag. “The parent company that owns this store—I call it the Mother Ship—recruits pharmacists. I’m sure it’s a challenge finding someone who wants to move to an island, even one as nice as this.”

“I can’t imagine not living here,” Sabrina said. She’d never left, except for a few vacations and short visits for shopping or seeing friends on the mainland. Other people in her graduating class from the small island school had moved away, although some had stayed, some of them even taking over their family businesses, just as she had.

“There you are!” Mary Elizabeth yanked a key out of her purse. “I’ll let you know when I lay eyes on the new pharmacist,” she said and then dashed next door at just minutes before nine to open the drugstore for the day. Sabrina wasn’t usually so early to her pizza restaurant, but it was shipment day which meant she needed to rearrange the coolers and storage room to get ready for the supplies coming over on the morning ferry.

Sabrina pulled the rear door of Island Pizza closed and wiped her feet on the rug. She shoved up her long sleeves and organized boxes of napkins, straws, and pizza pan liners on a shelf. The holidays would be busy. Not quite as busy as summer tourism season, but a close second with locals coming home for Christmas, anxious to enjoy the nostalgia of pizza that tasted just like they remembered.

She hadn’t changed a thing when she took it over from her parents—at least, not a thing about the quality and taste of the food. She had added mobile ordering and updated the décor in the dining room in addition to a few tables under the front awning for *al fresco* dining on nice days. And there were plenty of nice days on White Pine Island where the ocean breeze kept the air fresh in the summer and the sun shone most of the winter.

Her phone rang, and she saw her friend Ellen’s name on the screen.

“Wedding shower in five days,” Ellen said when Sabrina answered the call.

Sabrina laughed. "This is your problem because it's at your hotel. If it were at my pizza joint, I'd be the one fussing."

Ellen, along with her siblings and cousins, was in the third generation of the Phillips family to own and operate the island's Grand Hotel. In addition to helping with management, she also piloted the hotel's private plane and worked as a captain on the White Pine Island ferry.

"I'm not a shower person," Ellen said. "Baby showers, wedding showers, I always feel like it's something other women are good at planning, but I'm missing a gene or chromosome or maybe I have the wrong blood type."

A ferry horn sounded in the background.

"Are you talking on the phone and driving the boat at the same time?" Sabrina asked. "We still have five days so you should keep your eyes open for pirates or sharks or something."

"That was the five-minute warning for anyone getting on the nine o'clock ferry. I'm over at the dock in Oceanside, and these ferry crossings give me time to think. What kind of flowers should I order for the tables for Annabelle's shower? And the food. I should ask the kitchen to come up with something Christmas-themed because Annabelle is all about having a Christmas wedding at the Grand."

"I think we should serve pizza baked into shapes like Christmas trees and snowmen," Sabrina said. She was ready to go into the freezer to rearrange, but her phone would cut out in there and she didn't want to cut off her lifelong friend.

"You're not taking this seriously," Ellen said. "We have a big responsibility being the only two islanders she asked to be in the wedding."

"We're her oldest friends. Stop being nervous. She's just going to be happy to come home and get married at the place we all grew up thinking was the most wonderful place on earth, and I mean the island *and* the hotel. The wedding shower would be fine if we ate microwaved frozen pizza rolls off paper plates in her mom's basement," Sabrina said.

Ellen gasped and silence fell.

"I was kidding about the pizza rolls," Sabrina said. "You know I would never."

"It's not that," Ellen said. "You wouldn't believe who just drove onto my ferry."

"Santa."

"Not even close. I wonder if he's coming for the wedding? But why would he come so early and bring his car? A car means he's planning to stay for a while," Ellen said, musing aloud.

"Listen, Nancy Drew, I have to get ready for my supply shipment that is also probably on your ferry, so either tell me who's on the ferry or let me go so I can go freeze myself in the walk-in moving stuff around."

"It's Ross Huntington," Ellen said. "I haven't seen him since..."

Her friend's voice trailed off, but Sabrina knew exactly when she and Ellen had last seen Ross. It was his taillights she remembered on that cloudy December day when she was supposed to marry his best friend.

Ross sat in his car on the ferry and watched the windshield wipers for a moment until he realized he didn't need them. All he had to do was engage the emergency brake and sit there until the ferry docked on the island where he'd drive...home. His parents still lived there, and his sister and her family. But his home would be a downtown apartment.

It was a temporary assignment, only a month. And that month happened to include Christmas and New Year's. He could have turned down the assignment and stayed tucked away

in Atlanta where White Pine Island was an idyllic memory more than a real place. But his parents were getting older and he had a niece and nephew who barely knew Uncle Ross.

And then there were his friends. He had to go back and face them sometime. Three years was long enough for...feelings...to fade.

He should have driven on the ferry early enough to give him a minute to run up to the pilot house and see if Ellen was the captain. She'd been a member of his tight-knit friend group growing up on the island. But the ferry got underway as soon as he set the car's brake, and he didn't get out. He just watched the gray December sky through his wet windshield and tried to think about what he'd say to Sabrina.

When the ferry docked, he followed a delivery truck up the ramp and down the island's main street. If it wasn't raining, he'd have the window down, inhaling the scent of pines and ocean air that lived in his memory and took him right back to his childhood with just one sniff.

He pulled into the space behind the pharmacy—familiar from working there as a teen when he knew his career would involve medicine of some kind. He left his luggage locked in the trunk and strode to the back door, but he stopped with his hand on the knob when someone said his name.

He knew that voice. It had deepened and softened as they'd grown up, but it never failed to take him back to that summer he knew he was—utterly and hopelessly—in love with someone he couldn't have.

“Sabrina,” he said.

It was pouring rain and she held open the rear door of Island Pizza. She also held open her arms and he indulged in a coming-home hug from an old friend. She smelled the same, a mix of rising dough and spice. He pulled back and looked at her. She hadn't changed. Her hair was long and dark, pulled back, and her eyes were so dark they were almost black, but they still flashed with warmth.

“I thought I'd see you on Christmas at Annabelle's wedding,” Sabrina said. “But then I heard there was a new pharmacist coming to the island and Ellen called and said she saw you on the ferry, and I put two and two together.”

A Christmas wedding. Ross barely heard anything else Sabrina said. They'd never talked about what happened that day.

He pulled himself together and cleared his throat.

“It's only a one-month assignment, just filling in until they can get someone permanent. But the timing was good for me with the holidays.”

“Oh,” Sabrina said. “Convenient then. That makes sense.”

“But great, too,” he said quickly. “We can get caught up since I'll be right next door.”

She nodded. “Sure. A lot has happened in the last three years. I've made improvements in the restaurant since I took it over.”

“I heard. From my parents,” he added. “They keep me up to date on the island news.” Including who was dating who and who was getting married. They hadn't said anything about Sabrina's personal life, aside from a rare comment that she seemed fine and happy and busy despite being jilted at the altar.

They stood inside the door with rain falling hard outside, but they both seemed out of things to say. This was going to be a long, awkward month if Ross didn't get past that squeezing sensation around his heart when he thought about Sabrina. He should keep it light and friendly, like it had always been between them, back when they were the best of friends, finishing each other's sentences and dinners.

“Mary Elizabeth doesn’t know I’m coming,” he said. “She’s going to be surprised when she sees who the company sent.”

Sabrina laughed. “She’s going to be thrilled. You’re her new boss for a month, and your name rhymes with boss.”

He smiled. “Good old Mary Elizabeth. She made up a whole jingle for me when I was a teenager and organized the dental section of the drugstore. I can never think of floss without thinking of her.”

“Welcome home,” Sabrina said. “I’m sure she still remembers that jingle and everything else about you. You’ve been away for a while, but island life tends to get stuck in time.”

Her expression became serious, and Ross wanted to ask her everything she remembered about growing up with him and the rest of their friends. Although he wished he could ask her to forget that day that was supposed to be her wedding—and his role in what happened. They’d never talked about it, which meant he didn’t know how much she knew and how much she’d blame him if she did know.

“While I’m here, maybe we could get together for dinner or something.”

“There will be lots of opportunities,” Sabrina said. “Plans are already made.”

“They are?”

“Annabelle’s wedding. She’s coming home tomorrow, we have a shower next week at the Grand and there are plenty of other things happening for the holidays and she wants all of us to get together.”

“Our whole group just like old times,” Ross said. He was both thrilled and fearful.

“Except for one, of course,” Sabrina said. “He’s not coming. I don’t even think he was invited.”

“Josh,” Ross said, and the name hung in the air along with the scent of rain and pines.

“We don’t talk about him,” Sabrina said.

Ross noticed she’d said we and not I. He kicked himself for not staying in touch with anyone in the friend group who might have clued him in on the mess he left that day he drove Josh to the ferry. If he’d only come home the past two Christmases...

“I heard he’s—”

“I honestly don’t care,” Sabrina said. “That’s all in the past, and now that you’re here, we’ll get the rest of the group together and it will seem like old times.”

Old times sounded appealing, and it would be so easy to fall back into that safe cocoon, but there would be a glaring hole in the cocoon. Josh’s betrayal of Sabrina. His empty seat at the table. And it wouldn’t help Ross get past his role in what had happened. Would Sabrina listen to his apology, and would it destroy her affection for him forever?

Maybe it was too risky to find out and he should just enjoy the warmth of the holiday season in his hometown.

“I’ve missed that,” he said.

“You have?” she asked.

He wasn’t surprised by her question. If he’d really missed it, she was probably wondering why he’d been such a stranger.

“I haven’t had good pizza in a long time.”

He was relieved when the tension softened in Sabrina’s face. “I can have your favorite ready for you when you get off work. Pepperoni and extra cheese.”

“I’m not working today,” he said. “I’m officially settling in upstairs and then starting tomorrow.”

“Upstairs?”

“The apartment over the drugstore.”

“You’re not staying at your parents’ house?”

He shook his head. “I’m too close to thirty to live at my parents’ house again.”

“I know what you mean. I live in the apartment over the restaurant now.”

He swallowed. She’d be right next door. Would he hear her shower run or her dishes rattle when she was cooking?

“Can I share my welcome home pizza with my new neighbor?” he asked.

“I could make it a half-and-half with my favorites on one side,” she said.

“Italian sausage and green peppers.”

She cocked her head and looked at him with surprise. “I’m surprised you remember that.”

“You remember my favorite.”

“But that’s different. Pizza is my life. You have plenty of other things to think about like saving people’s lives with medicine.”

He wanted to say that he remembered every moment of growing up on the island and being with her. But he was feeling his way carefully, uncertain where his place in the friend group was. Sure of the past—up to that pivotal moment three years ago—but unsure of the future. He had only a month to figure it out and make amends.

“Good food is medicine,” he said.

And so was coming home if he moved carefully.