

from award-winning author

Christina Dymock

Ruby's selfish  
Christmas wish  
might get in the  
way of what she  
*truly needs*



NORTH  for  
CHRISTMAS  
a novel

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# Chapter 1



RUBY RIPPED NOVEMBER off her desk calendar with a flourish. She pressed her lips against December 25th and left behind a Cider Berry-colored kiss.

“Someone’s excited for Christmas,” said Zandra. She set her gourmet hot chocolate next to her keyboard before taking off her coat. “I’m guessing it’s not Santa Claus you’re hoping to find under your tree.”

Ruby picked up the framed picture of her and Justin at his birthday party. Even in that stupid cardboard hat, he looked devastatingly handsome. His deep green eyes and dark, curly hair were enough to make heads turn every place he went. She turned it around so Zandra could see the picture. “All I want for Christmas is right here.”

“He’s worth wrapping up.” Zandra winked. “That boy is on the fast track to a successful life, and the way he spoils you. . . . I wish I could find me a man like that.”

“He is pretty amazing.” Ruby turned the picture back around. Justin’s résumé for business law was outstanding: the best schools, top grades, and all the right connections. Ruby wasn’t in love with his employability, though—it was his résumé for romance that had her swooning. He was full of compliments, quiet dinners by candlelight, and chocolate chip cookie dough ice cream on her worst days. As of late, he’d missed a couple ice cream opportunities due to his new, and extremely demanding, client. That was sure to change once the contracts to license and patent his client’s new video game system were complete.

Zandra slid her chair closer and looked around to make sure no one was listening. Their office had an open floor plan—no cubicle walls to hide behind or provide an ounce of privacy when a girl needed to adjust her tights or have a private conversation.

“Do you think he’ll offer to change your last name for Christmas?”

Ruby buried her doubts and squealed, “Yes!”

From two desks away, Sherri shushed them. The woman hated noise, be it squeals of joy, tapping a pencil on the desk, or even Christmas music.

Zandra glanced toward Rob, their supervisor, and leaned closer. “Your momma may own the company, but my momma still works at the school cafeteria, so keep it down.”

Ruby grinned. “You know Rob loves you.”

Zandra flushed. “He respects my skills. That’s all.”

Ruby threw a meaningful look up and down Zandra. “If that’s what you want to call them.”

“You!” Zandra threw her cold, slightly damp scarf at Ruby. “Leave my *skills* out of this.”

Laughing, Ruby swiveled around to finish writing her to-do list. “How are you feeling this morning?” she asked over her shoulder.

“Much better. The soup you brought over last night must have been chock-full of vitamins because I woke up peppy again. Thanks.”

“No problem.”

Ruby’s desk phone gave a short but obnoxious beep, and her mom’s secretary, Michelle, announced, loud enough for everyone within a five-desk radius to hear, “Miss Jeavon, your presence is requested in the president’s office.”

Ruby snatched up the phone and hit the button to take it off speaker. “Thank you,” she said. “I’ll be there shortly.”

Sherri raised an eyebrow.

Ruby tried not to let her embarrassment show. At least she’d been able to get Michelle to stop announcing that her *mom* wanted to see her. That had stopped most of the condescending looks and Sherri’s opportunities to bring up the fact that Ruby was hired by her mother.

*Technically it’s true, but I’ll earn my way to the top.*

Ruby straightened her jacket, squared her shoulders, and walked to the elevator. She fidgeted with her belt as she tried to calm her nerves. For the first time in her life, Ruby had asked her mother for something big.

Kathleen had never been one to spoil her daughter. Ruby wasn't sure how much money her mother made, but she knew it was more than many people in the business world. Still, Ruby had spent many teenage weekends with only her textbooks for company in order to qualify for scholarships. Once in college, she'd eaten cold cereal three meals a day so she wouldn't have to ask her tight-fisted mother to help pay for college.

The fact that she had asked for this favor should have told her mother how important this was to Ruby. She hoped her mom would understand.

It didn't take long for the mirrored doors to slide open and deposit Ruby on the executive level.

Ruby was no stranger to the claw-foot couch or mahogany coffee table in the waiting room. She'd practically grown up in this building, spending many an afternoon at that very table hunched over her math book. She breezed past the main desk and took a left toward her mother's office.

"Hello, Ruby," said Michelle. Her workspace was to the right of the president's office. It was meticulously clean, not a speck of dust or a pen out of place.

"Hi, Michelle. How's your grandbaby doing?" asked Ruby as she approached.

"Wonderful. He looks adorable in the outfit you sent."

"He'd look cute in anything—those chubby cheeks melt my heart."

"Mine too." Michelle smiled. "She's ready for you. You can go right in."

"Thanks."

Since the door was partially open, Ruby didn't bother to knock.

Her mother, Kathleen Marie Jeavon, stood with her back to the door. Her strawberry-blonde hair—more strawberry than blonde since her last salon appointment—was cut to her chin in what Ruby identified as an onion bulb bob. No matter how strange the comparison, it looked stunning when matched with her mother's apple cheeks and winning smile.

"You asked to see me?" Ruby sat in her mother's chair. It was an old habit. As a child, she would roll the seat up to the desk, pretending to be the

president of Pearl Marketing Inc. and send memos until whatever meeting her mom had to attend was over.

Kathleen turned, her mouth set in a thin line and her shoulders back as though she were setting herself up to face a necessary but unpleasant task—like taking out the smelly garbage.

Ruby's stomach clenched.

What she'd said to Zandra was true. Justin hinted at a future between them, and they'd reached a point in their relationship where it was time to move forward. Spending Christmas with Justin and his family would bring them closer together and hopefully closer to a suburban house and several beautiful children.

This year, after three years of dating, Justin's family had invited her to Christmas with them in Selva, Italy, at a small resort, which thrilled her to no end. It meant his parents accepted her and wanted to include her in the family. However, they hadn't offered to pay her way, nor would she expect them to. She would insist on separate accommodations, much to Justin's frustration, and she couldn't expect his family to take on the added expense. If she and Justin were married, there wouldn't be a question. But they weren't—not yet anyway.

Ruby needed to be in Italy this year. Her salary was mainstream and didn't leave much for holidays in Europe. She'd hoped her mother, a stickler for sticking to a budget, would fund the trip as an early Christmas present.

Kathleen opened a file on her desk revealing the brochure Ruby had given her and several pages of spreadsheets. "I had Michelle gather the information on a flight from California to Italy, the hotel, and ski passes. I'm sorry, dear, but it costs too much. I have other obligations this time of year."

Ruby's heart sank.

So much for getting engaged at the bottom of the Alps. Her disappointment must have untied the tight bow around her doubts, because they slipped past her lips before she could stop them. "Justin leaves the week before Christmas and will be gone until after New Year's. If I miss this trip, I'm not sure what that will do to us."

Kathleen leaned against the desk and put her hand on Ruby's back. "If your relationship can't handle a couple weeks apart, then it's better that you find out

now.”

Mortified that she'd opened herself up to the woman who taught her how to hold it all in, Ruby responded defensively. “It's not like that. We both work hard and need a break. That's all.”

*Maybe if I used my Christmas bonus and drained my savings . . .*

“Absence makes the heart grow fonder.”

Ruby ran her fingers over the image of a charming Italian ski village on the front of the brochure. The resort, located at the bottom of the Italian Alps, was like a winter fairy-tale cottage. Dark, stained wood outlined the windows and doors of the cream-colored building. The roof had a steep pitch; nevertheless, the snow piled up and hung over the eaves like whipped cream on pie. Small square windows dotted the first and second story, framed with bright red, blue, and green shutters. The windows on the third level were rounded on the top with a single stained glass, circular window in the middle. It was magical and—without her mother's help—as out of reach as fairy dust.

Why would her mother deny her this, her one Christmas wish since she begged for the Susie Sleeps-a-Lot doll? Kathleen had the money. There was no reason to hold back.

Michelle poked her head in the door. “The gentlemen from Foxwell & Nash are waiting in the board room.”

“Thank you.” Kathleen took a folder from the upright organizer on the corner of her desk and a Bic pen from the drawer. “Are you coming?”

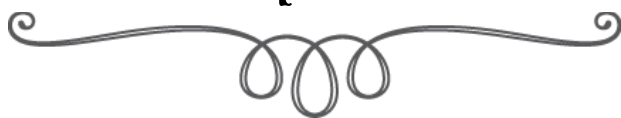
“Coming?” Ruby asked.

“Yes, to the charity review meeting.” When Ruby didn't look up from the picture, her mother tapped her foot. “We discussed this at your review last month.”

“Oh, right.” Even though Ruby had insisted on working her way up the company, Kathleen wanted her to sit in on certain meetings to get a feel for how the company ran at the executive level. One of those meetings was the annual charity review with the esteemed accounting firm Foxwell & Nash.

Ruby took a moment to peek at the price list behind the picture of the resort. Her shoulders dropped. Even with her bonus and her savings, she was short. There had to be a way to get the money. She needed to be with Justin this Christmas.

## Chapter 2



NORTH FOXWELL STIFLED a grin as his partner, Fredrick Nash, adjusted his bright green bow tie. “New tie?” North asked.

Fredrick looked down and frowned. “Rita bought it for me. She said it would go great with the suit. I’m still not sure.”

North cleared his throat to cover his chuckle. Fredrick’s wife was slowly making him over from “party-loving frat boy” to “adorable nerd.” North thought her efforts were noble. Facing clients in a bow tie was much more professional than the sloppy clothing Fredrick used to wear.

“It looks good.”

Before Fredrick could respond, Kathleen Jeavon and her daughter entered the room.

Buttoning his jacket, North got to his feet. Pearl Marketing Inc. was, by far, their biggest client. When Kathleen Jeavon was happy, Foxwell & Nash was happy.

Offering his hand, North said, “It’s good to see you again, Ms. Jeavon.”

“You too, Mr. Foxwell, Mr. Nash.” She shook Fredrick’s hand as well, her eyes dropping to his bow tie. If she disapproved, it didn’t show. “I’d like you to meet Ruby Jeavon.”

Ruby smiled as she took in Fredrick’s gold-rimmed glasses and shaggy hair.

Fredrick turned on the charm. “It’s lovely to meet you. We’ve heard wonderful things and are thrilled to have you with us today.”

North barely refrained from rolling his eyes. Fredrick was happily married to a beautiful wife who had just finished culinary school and had two children

and a cat, but he enjoyed flirting on North's behalf.

North didn't fault him when it came to Miss Jeavon. She was tall. In her heels, she was a complementary height for his six-foot-two frame. He found most women too short to dance with, too short to hug comfortably, and too short to kiss without getting a backache.

Perhaps it was his thoughts of kissing Miss Jeavon that, when their hands touched, caused North to feel like a marshmallow floating in hot chocolate. He held her fingers for a moment longer than was necessary as he took a real look into her chestnut eyes. Ruby returned his interest, and when he looked past the beauty, past the composed future executive, what he saw in those bright browns was discouragement with a dash of frustration. Ruby retracted her hand, seemingly startled by North's attention. North's mind stuttered as he wondered what had caused the sadness while a desire to right the wrongs in her life rose up in his chest.

"Shall we get started?" Kathleen took the seat at the head of the table.

North and Fredrick sat in seats on her left, and Ruby took the one on her right.

North handed out spiral-bound reports. "The first couple of pages are summaries of charity donations already given this fiscal year along with the results. As you can see, the Thanksgiving coat drive, coupled with Pearl Marketing Inc.'s promise to match all donations, was a huge success. Over three thousand children received warm coats for the winter."

"Your suggestion, Mr. Foxwell, to involve the employees and their families, was a wonderful idea. We'll continue with it again next year."

North's neck grew warm under Kathleen's praise. He glanced at Ruby, who gave him an encouraging, though small, smile. Her eyes went to the folder in front of her, the one she'd carried in, and her smile disappeared.

"Moving on to your Christmas donations, please turn to page fourteen." There was a rustling of pages and North waited for everyone to settle. He and Fredrick had gone over this report at least three times and had one of their managers review it twice. He'd even dreamed about the meeting. Of course, his dream didn't include the beautiful Miss Jeavon.

Fredrick nudged North. *Have I been staring?*

“Most of the donations have stayed at-level. As per your request, we added the Children’s Giving Tree and the Venture Home for Disabled Adults.” When Kathleen had asked for recommendations for new charities, tax deductible of course, North didn’t hesitate to mention two in his hometown of Nashville.

Ruby sat up in her chair. “You mean these are new charities this year?”

“Yes.” Fredrick nodded.

“Have they been notified that the donation is coming?”

“No.” North shook his head. “These donations are from Ms. Jeavon’s private account. The checks will be delivered in the next couple of weeks.”

Ruby turned and placed her hand on her mother’s forearm. “This could pay for Italy,” she said in a whisper.

North blinked and exchanged a look with Fredrick. Had they missed something? Was there a memo for another charity that went unnoticed? He ran through his memory, searching for a link to Italy and tried not to panic.

“Ruby, it’s too expensive.” Kathleen’s voice was soft but firm.

“Not more expensive than this.” Ruby shook the report, crinkling the pages.

Kathleen met her daughter’s pleading gaze with her lips pursed.

“It’s not impossible,” pressed Ruby. “All you have to do is reallocate the funds.”

“Would you have me tell a child Santa isn’t coming because my daughter wants to ski in Italy?”

Fredrick sputtered and North kicked him under the table. Fredrick’s mouth clamped shut like a nutcracker on steroids.

“Are these strangers more important to you than your daughter?” snapped Ruby.

“That is a ridiculous question. Your needs are met. These children will receive underwear and pajamas—”

Ruby stood.

“Where are you going?” asked Kathleen. “We’re not done.” She waved her hand toward North and Fredrick.

North wanted to hide under the table. The meeting had quickly gone from business professional to family feud. He was embarrassed for Kathleen and mortified for Ruby because of her outburst. His first impression of the russet-haired beauty was quickly deteriorating.

Ruby glared at Kathleen. “You’re right, I have my needs. What I don’t have, what I never had, is a mother who understands.”

Kathleen jerked in her seat.

Ruby cast an apologetic glance at North. “Merry Christmas, gentlemen.” She shut the door firmly behind her.

Kathleen’s shoulders curved forward. “But I do understand,” she said quietly to the closed door.

In the ensuing and uncomfortable silence, North contemplated the tabletop. He peeked up at Kathleen, who he’d never seen out of sorts. In all their meetings, even in the economic down times, she’d kept a stiff upper lip. Yet, with a few simple words from her daughter, the woman fell into a contemplation so deep, she appeared to forget there was anyone left in the room.

“I’m sorry if we’ve—” began Fredrick.

Kathleen lifted the corners of her mouth in a smile that didn’t convince North she was all right. North shuffled papers around, giving her time to shake off what appeared to be a heavy blow.

After a moment, Kathleen straightened her back and reopened her report. “The Giving Tree and Venture Home donations will stay.” She waited for them to acknowledge her statement with a nod. “Please continue, Mr. Foxwell.”

Kathleen Jeavon was back.

North and Fredrick completed the presentation in less than fifteen minutes and were soon in the elevator on their way to the parking garage.

North wiped his brow. “That was unbelievable. Have you ever seen a woman pitch a fit like that?”

“That was nothing. You should see what Rita does when I leave a sock somewhere.”

North gave him a disbelieving look. Fredrick was wicked smart when it came to accounting law, but he was quirky. Usually Rita found his quirks charming, and North thought Fredrick was lucky to have found a woman with a good sense of humor. “Don’t you mean socks? As in a pair.”

Fredrick chuckled. “Nope, just one. It’s the one sock that drives her nuts.”

“Why do you leave just one sock around?”

Fredrick shrugged. “Only one foot gets hot.”

North laughed as the elevator doors slid open. Only they didn't open to the parking garage. They opened to the marketing floor where his laughter echoed over the entire open-floored department. Every head turned to see him, hand on his stomach, as jolly as Old Saint Nick himself. His laughter died off as he made eye contact with Ruby, who sat at her desk, eyes red, and with a tissue in her hand. She turned away, disappearing behind her shiny loose curls.

*She thinks I'm laughing at her.*

If the tears were any indication, Ruby *had* feelings, and North was sure that from her perspective he was stomping all over them. Before North could pull his brain together enough to step out and explain himself, a middle-aged man stepped in and pressed the button for the lobby. The doors shut.

"Way to go," Fredrick said, punching him in the shoulder.

"You think she noticed?" North could only hope the answer was no.

"She noticed. We'll have to work with her one day, you know."

North rubbed his stomach, which all of a sudden burned.

Fredrick nudged him and inclined his head toward their elevator companion. They completed the rest of the ride in silence.

There was more to this Jeavon mess than the look-see he'd had upstairs. The heartache in Ruby's almond-shaped eyes was deeper than just a ski trip, and the sorrow in Kathleen's voice had developed long before today.

North shook his head. He didn't have the time nor the position to jump into someone else's family feud—not when his own brewed back home.

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