

What do you do when your second chance changes everything?

# WRITE AFTERMATHS



**THOMMY HUTSON**



# Chapter Thirty-Nine



Abby made sure Lolo got back to her room safely with Chloe. In turn, Chloe would go straight home.

Abby, though, did not. She waited until the crowd of people, filled with those who were delighted and those who were dismal, went back to their own business. She strolled over to Cameron, who waited on the porch of his toyshop.

He sat on the long, wooden bench Abby remembered he and his father had carved so long ago.

She took a seat next to him, but said nothing.

The two looked out at the town, though Abby felt as if she were looking past the town. To what could have been or even what might be. Thoughts like these haunted her. Made her question the very question her mother had hounded her with.

*why can't i be happy here*

There was no easy answer, there couldn't be. Even now with things so changed and her trying to make them the same. But what was the equivalent? The concept of alike or matching or similar just begged more questions. She'd tried to make things like they used to be, but maybe she was the one torn apart as she looked and longed for something different? Didn't she want—

*more*

—things to be better, for everyone, not just for her? Or, was that how selfishness worked? Being lulled into the understanding your actions

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are right for all, when really they pour forth from the egoism of what we want for ourselves.

“You really started something,” Cameron said.

His voice broke Abby from the too many thoughts of what she had never done, and what she had now set into motion. She welcomed the disruption.

“Me?” she asked, almost rhetorical.

He nudged her shoulder. “Call it a hunch.”

The contact was nice. The little signal meant they were there together, for real.

Whatever real meant.

She turned to him. “Can we talk? Really talk?”

He continued to face forward, then looked at her.

Abby could tell by the direction of his gaze he looked at her hair first, then her lips, then her eyes.

“I’d like that.”

His answer, his willingness, pleased her. What she did next took a moment for her to realize. One of those quick, instinctual gestures you don’t think about unless it’s not normal and it pulls your focus.

She held out her hand for his.

When he took it, she felt a calm wash over her.

The two stood and walked off the porch. Neither of them noticed two things.

One which would make them happy.

One that would decidedly not.

The former was Chloe, coming back from walking Lolo to the care facility. She glanced at her parents hand in hand and she smiled.

The latter was Darla, furious.

Abby and Cameron walked, shuffling through snow, kicking it, as they reached the arched Winter River Bridge. The water below frozen into a smooth, icy blue. Abby ran her hand over the ornate railing.

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“Mister Carpenter made this bridge,” she said.

Cameron laughed.

“What?”

“You always called him that,” he said.

“Well that’s what he was. Mister Carpenter,” she answered. Her eyes wide, as if there were any other answer. “And I wasn’t the only one.”

“Yes, true. And Mister *Reynolds* would be thrilled you still remember him.”

Abby thought about it. He had been as kind a man as he’d been talented. The idea of people going away, in whatever way, made her frown. “I do, but he’ll always be Mister Carpenter to me.”

Cameron nodded. “That’s what makes you, you. And you taking on Darla takes some guts.”

She didn’t want to talk about Darla, not really. But, if she had to be honest, she probably could have talked about Darla for hours. Who she was, who she is, what happened, how the town had ended up with her in this form. The questions and thoughts went on and on. There were other things to discuss, though. More pressing—

*selfish*

—things.

“I know it’s been crazy. I’ve been acting crazy. And things might get crazier, but—” She stopped herself. “That all sounds crazy, doesn’t it?”

His nod made it clear it might. “It certainly sounds like a lot of crazy.” He smiled.

She sort of returned it.

This was harder than she had expected. She grabbed both his hands, which might have surprised her more than him.

They faced each other.

“I don’t want Chloe to go,” she said and held his hands tight when she felt him start to pull away. She spoke again before he could

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say anything. “Wait.” She moved closer to him. Looked up at him. He was so tall. “And I don’t want you to go, either. Not yet,” she said. She had to stop because her eyes got tight and her throat closed a bit. “Not until things are finished here. Not until—not until Christmas. I know even if you asked me to try to explain it all it would probably make things worse and I’d really sound nuts and then you’d really want to run.”

She stopped. Had to. If she kept talking she would go on in a way that would start making no sense even to her.

Cameron drew in a breath and held it.

“It’s a lot, I know,” Abby told him.

“What do you want me to say?”

She swung their interconnected hands back and forth a bit. Looked down. She didn’t have to think about the words. Knowing them was easy. Saying them was hard. It always had been, even when things were good between two people, and Abby couldn’t lie to herself, not about this. Things between them weren’t perfect. She faulted herself. She looked at him again. “That you won’t go. That you’ll wait.”

Cameron broke the gaze and looked out at the frozen stream. “I’m not sure I can do that again.”

Abby didn’t like it, but she was prepared for that.

He took his hands out of hers and started to walk. The act told Abby the conversation was as hard as she’d worried it would be.

She hoped it wouldn’t get harder and she heard her mother in her head. Her mother before all of this. How she’d talked about love.

*it’s never easy*

She followed him. “Please, Cam. You’ve given me so many chances to see all the wonderful things, and people, were right in front of me. The only thing I can do, the only thing I know how to do, is ask for one more. And I know how that sounds.”

She hated how it sounded.

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*selfish*

He stopped, but did not turn to her. She could not read his face. That troubled her. She could always read him. Read people in general. It was one of the things she was good at. But now, here with him, she was no longer sure.

She said nothing. She had a million things to say, but let it be not her turn. She waited. Watched him. For any sign that whatever happened next would be nothing less than what she had wished, which was to at least give a stay to the plans taking their daughter—

*and him*

—away.

Cameron reached into his pocket. “Can I ask you a question? Something serious?”

Abby grew nervous. What did it mean, her asking for another chance? For him to stay so she could try to figure things out and keep the family, whatever that meant, together? If even for a while longer, but definitely for Christmas. But the holiday didn’t exist, not to anyone but her and Lolo. Even if the two of them tried their hardest, Christmas might never be anything more than construction paper, jingle bells, and reindeer.

She shook her head as if she had to physically shake off the million, trillion things flying in, through, and around it.

“Anything,” she finally answered.

“What in the world is this thing?” He turned to her and showed one of the candy canes.

She grinned. Laughed. Relief didn’t wash over her, it tsunami’d. A cleansing mix of fresh air, clear thoughts, and more importantly, more time.

“That,” she beamed, “is a candy cane. It was—is—one of your favorite things about Christmas. And I know, I know. Christmas. Please, go with me on it for now.”

She took it from him and undid the bow. “Here, taste.”

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He hesitated, a look of uncertainty on his face.

Abby, never more sure, gave it a small lick. She savored the sweet, peppermint goodness. She hadn't had one in forever, no matter what world she lived in. It had been too long.

"See?" She moved it up to his mouth.

He crinkled his forehead.

"It won't bite, I promise," she assured him.

He touched her hand to steady it. Abby absorbed the sweet, hoped for intimacy.

He took a taste of the candy cane. His face registered confusion, then surprise.

Delight.

Abby felt a rush. Some sort of goodness.

"It's good. Minty."

He took the candy cane away from his mouth.

The two were very close. Closer than they had been in a very long time.

Abby swallowed, her gaze locked to his.

"How are you doing this?" he whispered.

Abby put her head down and tried to think of the answer, the right answer. Tried to find a way to compress everything into a coherent sentence or even a word. But how could she?

"I don't—"

Cameron grabbed her chin, lifted her face up, and kissed her.

The kiss was deep, tender. A connection she hadn't felt in so long, didn't know she could feel, didn't know she needed until it happened.

He wrapped his arms around her and she did the same.

Any thoughts of what was happening or why or how long it would last were gone. The worries she harbored blew away like the tips of snowdrifts in a gusty wind. Left behind was what remained important. The foundation. This moment.

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This kiss.

As she kissed him back, the one feeling she was sure of was it felt romantic and perfect.

It might not last forever—

*nothing does*

—but the moment, the gesture, the connection was exactly what she needed and wanted right now.

She directed her eyes up to his. “And we didn’t even need any mistletoe.”

Cameron’s eyebrows squished together. “Mistletoe?”

Abby raised her eyebrows in response. “Never mind,” she said as she went in for another delicious kiss.



The sun was almost down when she walked back to the office. She felt silly, lighter. As if there were more air to breathe, or that it filled her with a new, more buoyant outlook. A way to refresh and uplift her spirit.

Barely halfway down the entrance hall of Nicholsons, Sandra, James, and Chloe ran up to her.

“Chloe, what are you doing here?”

“We couldn’t find you and you weren’t answering your phone.”

Sandra and James moved forward. “We have major problems.”

Abby did not want to let go of the feeling she had after seeing Cameron. After all the thoughts and words that happened. “If this is another design problem, we’ll fix it.”

Chloe looked at her mother. She shook her head.

Abby shook hers in solidarity, even though she didn’t know why. “It can’t be that bad.”

Chloe’s face appeared pale, grim.



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“Why do people say that?” Sandra asked. “Because when people say that, things end up worse.”

“And this is worse,” James confirmed.

Abby watched the two of them volley the words, the issue, back and forth.

“After the reindeer incident,” James started.

“Darla went ballistic,” Sandra added.

Chloe joined in. “She gathered up her people and ordered everything down. For real this time. Didn’t you see it?”

Abby hadn’t. She’d walked right through the area wrapped in happiness, a shield of her own garland and tinsel and light. The notion of what Darla threatened, and had started to do, slammed into her. “She can’t.”

James gave her a look. “She says Christmas is—well—”

“Over,” Darla finished for him.

James, Sandra, and Chloe turned around.

Abby looked past them.

There she stood. Darla. In all her dark glory.

She clicked a tall, thin, black heel on the floor. The sound jabbed at Abby. Clack, clack,

clickety-clack. The sound bothered her more than the obvious. Something she felt deep inside, or way back. An echo, a reminder, from her other life.

Darla scowled at them. She meant business.

Abby might not know this version of Darla, but one thing was clear: whatever this woman was after, it was not good.



Abby Nicholson used to love Christmas. Until she didn't.

After leaving Winter Glen, the small town famous for its Christmas celebration and her family's greeting card company, Abby is forced to return to the home she left behind when the unexpected passing of her father thrusts the business into her hands.

Turning her back on the magic of the holiday beloved by her father and the town, she decides to sell the business. Signing the paperwork with the very pen her father used to create it, she is shocked to discover her hometown has become a whole new world.

One where Christmas has vanished!

Now stuck in a place devoid of hope, joy, and the spirit of the season, Abby sees family and friends altered in the most terrible of ways.

Determined to set things right, though unsure how, Abby takes out her father's pen and begins to draw. When she realizes her art is coming to life, she sets out to recreate the holiday and bring back the most wonderful time of the year.

But some are determined to keep an iron grip on the town and will do anything in their power to stop her.

"This heartwarming fantasy updates a favorite Christmas trope as a Scrooge-like woman is given the magical gift of a new perspective on her life. Christmas enthusiasts will find this hits the spot."  
~*Publishers Weekly*

"*Write Christmas* will make you believe in the magic of the season again."  
~*The Nerd Daily*

"... a blend of romance and fantasy in *A Christmas Carol* style of writing. An outstanding inspirational read for the holidays."  
~*Midwest Book Review*

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