

Growing Connected

LIVING FOR LOVE

PENNY HEART



CHOCOLATE CAKE READS



Prologue

DEAR PATRICK,

Our anniversary is coming up soon—my fourth without you—and I’ve decided to do something different this year. You’re going to love it, my darling. It’s exactly the sort of thing we used to do together.

A few years ago, I moved into this small apartment complex, Happy Hollows, because there were too many memories in our house. Everybody here is delightful, but none of them have found their other half yet—so I’m going to do it for them! Doesn’t that sound fun?

I’ve carefully studied all of them, and I think I’ve got everybody at Happy Hollows all matched up. Not with each other, of course. You know I have connections everywhere.

I did a trial run with one of the tenants and my goddaughter, Joey, and they’re moving in together, which freed up the apartment for someone special to move in for another of my little projects.

Oh, my darling, I’m positively giddy. I wish you were here to see it!

Of course, I’m starting with Susan. She was almost engaged to a different young man when you knew her, but they weren’t right for each other. She and Jacob are perfect together. I can’t wait for all my connections to come to fruition!

Love always,

Linda



Chapter 1

S^{USAN}

“Thank you for taking on this project, Susan. I know you’ll make us proud. Let’s chat for a few minutes after the meeting adjourns to iron out some details. Have a wonderful summer, everybody.” Principal Hubbard beamed at her staff with genuine affection.

At Dr. Hubbard’s words, Susan Meyers put away her tablet. The thirty-two-year-old blonde listened to the surrounding chatter at Ada Lovelace Elementary. The final faculty meeting of the school year ended, and the celebration began.

Most of the school’s teachers were in attendance for the afternoon meeting/party. After Dr. Hubbard’s dismissal, they made their way to the table of cake, snacks, and sherbet punch while they discussed their summer plans.

“I can’t believe you agreed to take on this entire project. It’s too big to do everything yourself like you usually do.” Isabella Trejo shook her head in disbelief.

“It’s not too much,” Susan denied stubbornly.

“It’s probably going to take all summer to get everything set up. Summer is supposed to be a time for fun and relaxation. I love teaching, too, but everybody needs to recharge.”

Isabella cocked her hip and dared her friend to refute her comments. Susan didn’t have a valid argument, so she tried to distract her best friend.

“It’s not like I do much in the summer, anyway. I’ve spent my last few summers working for that tutoring company to have something to do,” Susan reminded her. “This’ll be interesting. Plus, it’ll get me out of my apartment more.”

“My sister would love for you to come see her again; you know she adores you.” Isabella fluttered her thick lashes and widened her big brown eyes in an exaggerated pout.

“I appreciate the offer, but I don’t want to interrupt your family bonding time. Newborns are amazing, but it’s hard for new parents. They don’t need to feel like they need to entertain guests when everything’s already topsy-turvy.”

“Fair enough,” Isabella replied before she brought up her favorite topic. “You should date again. It’s been over a year since you broke up with Kevin, and I don’t think you’ve gone on a single date since then. I know you’re not hung up on him.”

Susan snorted.

“Not interested. I like my life the way it is. At this point in my life, dating isn’t about choosing between different guys; it’s choosing between living my life exactly the way I want it and having to accommodate someone else,” Susan said.

“The right guy would—”

“I’m too busy. If someone great falls in my path, I won’t run him off, but it’s not my priority right now. You said yourself this project was a lot of work.”

“I know, I know. I want to see you happy, like Carlos and I are.”

Susan would much rather be single than date someone like Carlos. However, she knew Isabella saw only sunshine and rainbows where her boyfriend was concerned.

Isabella wasn’t ready to let the topic drop. “Just because you fell out of love with him doesn’t mean you’re not capable of finding love with someone new. You even said Kevin thought you were too self-reliant. Being independent is great, but it’s also good to let people in, let them help you. You can be self-sufficient without keeping everyone at a distance.”

“I let you in,” Susan argued.

“Yeah, but as much as I love you, I’m not going to date you.”

The two women laughed together, and Susan felt some of her tension release until Isabella’s next words.

“I worry about you without me here. You don’t seem happy.”

“Making this garden a success is all I need to be happy right now,” Susan said flatly.

Isabella rolled her eyes but accepted that Susan’s love life was closed for the moment. “I thought you didn’t know anything about gardening.”

“I don’t, but I’ve always been a fast learner. One of my neighbors has a green thumb, so I’m going to ask her for advice. And I’ve been watching videos and reading online.”

“There’s a big difference between growing house plants and planning and planting an entire children’s garden.”

Susan and Isabella walked around the meeting room as they said goodbye to colleagues leaving for the summer. Their group of friends had already scheduled social events for those who would be around over the summer. Susan returned to their conversation after they completed their circuit of the room.

“The garden won’t open until the school year, so I’ve got plenty of time to figure out what I need to know or find people who know it. It’ll be fine.”

“If it can be done, you’ll do it. You’re frighteningly competent,” her friend teased.

Susan stuck her tongue out at her friend.

“There’s nothing wrong with being good at your job.”

“Of course not,” Isabella assured her while she rolled her eyes.

“This summer is about organizing things, and that’s my superpower.”

“I’m sorry I won’t be around to help you get started. I’ve been looking forward to seeing my sister and the cutest baby ever for a few weeks. But I’ll help you once I get back.”

“I hope you have a great visit seeing your sister and her family. Don’t hog that baby too much!”

“I love babies, but only if I can give them back. A few weeks of stinky diapers and midnight feedings will remind me I’m in no hurry to join my sister in motherhood.”

Susan laughed. “I know what you mean. I love my fifth graders, but I also love going home to my calm, clean apartment. No need to think about scented markers, lost homework, food allergies, first dates, and first periods.”

Isabella pulled her vibrating phone out of her pocket. “Hang on. I’ve got to take this. I’ll be right back.”

Susan looked around the room to see other friends and colleagues making plans to get together over the summer to help each other and spend time together. She took the job at Ada Lovelace to move closer to family, but after six years here, she couldn’t imagine working anywhere else.

Susan returned her gaze to Isabella, who put her phone away. Isabella now looked dejected, but she didn’t mention an emergency with her family, so Susan assumed Carlos was being his usual charming self.

Isabella wouldn’t make eye-contact with her. When Susan asked if she was okay, Isabella brushed her off with a half-smile that didn’t reach her eyes. She fidgeted with the

ring on her thumb and breathed deeply, a common tactic of hers when she tried not to cry.

“Is there anything—”

“Not now. Please.” Isabella’s whispered entreaty made Susan furious on her behalf. Unfortunately, her friend was unwilling or unable to believe she deserved better than Carlos. Susan half-heartedly picked up the thread of their earlier conversation to distract her.

“I’m eager to get started right away, but I’ll still have plenty you can help with once you’re back. What interests you?”

Isabella shrugged listlessly as her eyes glittered with unshed tears, though she seemed calmer than when she first got off her call.

Susan counted off tasks on her fingers to redirect Isabella’s thoughts. “I need to raise awareness in the community; solicit donations; train volunteers; find an experienced gardener designer—”

“That sounds like my cue,” Dr. Hubbard said as she joined their huddle.

Susan smiled genuinely at her principal and mentor. Isabella took her leave, promising to text Susan later. Susan watched her go before she returned her attention to her boss.

Dr. Hubbard addressed Susan. “Thank you again. It’s an enormous project. I’ve identified some potential volunteers here at the school and have done some initial outreach that will smooth the way.”

“It will be fun. I’m looking forward to the challenge,” Susan said.

“The School Board is very excited about the garden, as are many of your colleagues. Quite a few of the other teachers volunteered to take on specific tasks that play to their strengths. I’ve got a list here with availability, contact information, prior experience, and general notes.”

Dr. Hubbard held out a folder that Susan glanced at before her boss spoke again. The principal pointed out the volunteer list and described the volunteers and their experience.

When Dr. Hubbard first asked for volunteers to create the new school vegetable garden, Susan felt as uncertain as everyone else. As she thought more about it, though, her interest grew. A busy summer project was exactly what she needed to overcome her restlessness. The monthly stipend wasn’t much, but enough to justify her time.

“There’s a list of some curriculum resources in the folder, too. Let me show you the designated space, and then we can stop by Mrs. Hopkins’s office. She’s set you up with a purchase card and needs you to sign some paperwork.”

Susan followed her boss through the halls until Dr. Hubbard unlocked an exterior door and ushered her into a large, open space.

“I never knew this was here,” she said as she looked around in astonishment.

“It was the original play area before the school’s expansion a decade ago. Once the school purchased the lot next door and moved the playground, we abandoned this space since it can’t hold as many kids.”

Susan’s imagination supplied images of neatly planted rows of vegetables and two dozen kids weeding and watering them.

“I’ve reached out to a few places to help you find an expert consultant. The School Board is interested in partnering with one or more of them, but a decision hasn’t been made yet. I’ll let you know when it happens.”



SUSAN FELT REJUVENATED WHEN she pulled up to her small parking lot. Her complex comprised two small buildings, three and four units each, at the end of a short cul-de-sac. Trees and verdant greenery surrounded the buildings and parking area, making it seem whimsical. It was a literal oasis in their hot, north Texas city, and she loved coming home to it.

As she unloaded her classroom decorations, Susan’s neighbor, Linda, called her name. She knew and liked all her neighbors, and she enjoyed their monthly get-togethers. Linda was special, though; Susan considered the long-time family friend a proxy mother.

“I have the best idea for your school garden thing,” Linda enthused. “I’m dear friends with the guy who oversees the plants at the best garden center here in town, and he’ll know what you need to do.”

“Great,” Susan replied as she set her box down and dug out her keys. “If he’s a friend of yours, he’ll be great.”

“Jacob *is* great, but he can be a bit ... difficult to get to know. He’s the person I go to whenever I have a sickly plant or a difficult problem. You should know he’s a little grumpy, but I’m sure he’ll be glad to help you. He does a lot of work at The Green Thumb, the biggest and best garden center in the area.”

“I’ll talk to him and see how it goes,” Susan answered noncommittally. “I’ve also been given some contact information for the college and a local garden shop. The more the merrier, though.”

“He’s perfect for you, I mean, for your project, but you’re smart to keep your options open.”



Chapter 2

JACOB removed the bandanna from his back pocket, wiped the sweat from his forehead, and he pushed his dark, shaggy hair away from his skin. He finished packing up the seedlings for transportation to The Green Thumb. While he let them recover from being manhandled, he readied the next batch.

He loved the convenience of growing plants year-round, but the Texas heat was already out of control in late May. At least his plants were still thriving. Not everything had gotten completely messed up after his relationship exploded. With the rising temperatures, he needed to get his greenhouse's fan system fixed after his ex-girlfriend sabotaged it.

"Get your head in the game, man. You've got stuff to do," he reminded himself.

As he made his way through the greenhouse, he tried to shrug off the negative thoughts. He had more affection and patience for the plants he grew than he did for most people. As a result, his greenhouse was more than his workplace; it was his solace. At 33, much of his life involved betrayal by people close to him.

His greenhouse was also where he felt most in control of his emotions and his life. If he followed the rules and stuck to the tried-and-true patterns, he knew what to expect, barring any external disasters. He wished that people and relationships were as easy to cultivate.

While Jacob carefully arranged the seedling trays into the shelves he built for the back seat of his pickup, he heard the crunch of gravel on his driveway. His irritation fled when

he recognized his younger sister's car. Amelia was one of the few people he trusted, so even though he felt out of sorts, he was happy to see her. He looked up and walked to her car.

"Hey," she called through the open window. "Can I borrow your dehydrator again? I got a bunch of apples to make apple butter, but I have a ton left over so I want to make apple chips. That way, I can pretend all the food in my apartment is healthy."

"I don't know why you have your own apartment," Jacob grumbled. "There's plenty of space here, and you'd have tons of room for all of your kitchen gadgets."

"I love you, but I don't need you all up in my dating life. And if you ever have another one, I don't want that level of detail about yours."

"Got a hot date?" He enjoyed laughing at his sister's regular failed attempts.

"No, but at least I'm open to it, unlike some people I know."

"I'm not ready to move on after Candice."

"Ugh, when you say it like that, it sounds like you miss her."

"No!" The words practically exploded out of him. "Hell no. I wish I'd never met her. I keep expecting her to pop up around the corner to mess with my head some more. Even after all this time, I still check my statements religiously to see if she's stolen even more money."

Candice somehow knew his sister had worked out of town for a few months when she engineered their introduction. She preyed on Jacob's loneliness and the anxiety disorder he'd had since childhood. It was one of the many ways she tried to exploit him.

"Let me get the dehydrator for you. Do you have time to come in?"

"Nah, I've got a virtual meeting with my team soon, but I needed to return a package, so I thought I'd swing by here on my way home."

Her phone rang, so she dug it out of her purse as he headed to grab the dehydrator for her. When he returned, Amelia had finished her call.

"Everything alright?" he asked as he put the dehydrator on the floor on the passenger side. He sat half in her car to take advantage of the air conditioner.

"That was Eric. Linda sent a friend of hers, Susan, or something like that, to Eric's store. She's setting up a school garden. Linda wanted to make sure you don't scare her away when you go to The Green Thumb."

"I'm not so bad that I scare little old ladies."

Amelia raised her left eyebrow at him, and Jacob felt the lifelong annoyance of being unable to pull off that move.

"I'm not that bad!" After a pause, he asked, "Right?"

Amelia laughed, and he felt the tension in his shoulders abate.

“Want to go with me?” he asked hopefully.

“Sorry, meeting, remember? Stop thinking about The Catastrophe and get your butt in gear. Eric’s waiting, and more importantly, so is Linda’s friend.”

He swiftly tousled her hair like a good brother should and leaned back before she returned the favor. “Are we still on for dinner later this week?” he asked as he climbed back out of her car.

“Yes, we’re on. I have an idea about that, so I’ll text you tonight.”

Jacob couldn’t focus as he drove the handful of miles to his best friend’s garden shop. Hopefully, he made the right decision. Eric had pitched a partnership to grow both of their businesses and work together. Jacob had no qualms about working directly with Eric; he was more concerned about letting him down.

Once he parked at The Green Thumb, Jacob focused on his breathing. Between reminders of Candice and all the unknowns of a new business venture, his anxiety spiked. After a few minutes, he calmed down.



J^{ACOB}

Jacob carefully unloaded his rolling racks and pushed them to the employee entrance. Once he unlocked the door with his code, he dropped off the seedlings in the space reserved for deliveries. Jacob looked around for an employee.

He always ensured that someone signed off on his deliveries because he never wanted money to come between him and his friendship with Eric. Jacob sighed to himself when he ran across his least favorite of the garden shop’s employees. He couldn’t remember her name, but he actively tried to avoid her.

“Jacob! Hi! It’s so great to see you! I hope you’re having a wonderful day. Isn’t it positively gorgeous outside? I love an excuse to wear sundresses all the time. What do you think of this one?”

The bubbly woman continued her excited squeal and pirouetted. Jacob tuned out her noise. It was the same as the last few dozen times he’d seen her. She practically spoke in

exclamation points. Eventually, she wound down and looked at him expectantly. Shit. Did she ask him something? He didn't listen.

He grunted a non-committal noise, and her face fell. Well, fuckity fuck. He made things worse. He didn't want to talk to her or for her to talk at him, but he also didn't want to make her feel bad. All he wanted was to be left alone. If a robot checked in his delivery, that would be better than this misery.

Her happiness usually seemed inversely proportional to his, and now they were both miserable. Fucking great. He cleared his throat and tried to channel his sister, Amelia. People liked her. She knew what to say to make people happy.

"Cats are nice." *Cats are nice?* What the hell? Where did *that* come from? Yet, magically, it seemed to work. She lit up. It was almost fascinating how much her face changed with her moods.

"Cats are *so* great! You like cats, too? I love cats! It's awesome how much we have in common! Obviously, I love dogs, too, of course, but cats make me so happy," she chirped. "I'm not one of those cat ladies with a dozen cats or anything—I only have three—but they're so cute and funny. One of my cats..."

He tuned her out again. This time, he tried to keep some of his attention on her conversation so he would notice if she required his participation. It was hard to pay attention, though. He knew he was being harsh, but no one was this relentlessly cheerful all the time. Unless it was an act.

Jacob briefly entertained the idea that she created a fake persona to act overly exuberant to annoy him, but he realized quickly how vain that sounded. Plus, Eric said she received compliments all the time for her positive attitude and helpfulness. Clearly, he was the defective one. Nothing new there.

He tuned back in to see her beaming at him expectantly. Uh, oh. He lost the thread of her conversation again. Quickly, he reviewed the last things he'd heard.

"Um, I don't have any cats, but my sister does."

"Oh, that's too bad! They're wonderful. You're welcome to visit my cats any time you like. They've very well behaved."

Hopefully, his face wasn't as open and expressive as hers because her comment horrified him.

"Um..." was the best he came up with.

He had never learned how to say ‘no way in hell’ nicely, and this was one of the few places where he always tried to be polite at a minimum. He owed Eric that and more. How was he going to get out of this?

“C’mon, it’ll be fun. You look like you need more fun in your life, and I’m great at that! My friends always say I’m the most fun of all of us!”

Her energy made him feel old and tired.

“Thank you, but I’m not interested. I don’t date.”

“Date?” she asked in a horrified voice. “Did you think I was hitting on you?” She burst into peals of laughter. “God, no! No offense. I have a boyfriend. You look cranky all the time, and I read that cats help with stress.”

The store’s phone rang, and she waved cheerily at him as she walked to the desk to answer it. Her delighted laugh and merry voice filled the room as she helped a customer.

Well. That certainly put him in his place.

And now he felt unaccountably irritated. He didn’t want her to be interested in him, and he didn’t date. It was never one of skills before, and now... Well, he was better off alone. He didn’t have to worry about missing social cues or forgetting important dates or zoning out in conversation.

He thrust his invoice at the girl—what was her name anyway?—and gestured at his delivery. Jacob had no interest in hunting down another employee. She knew the process and confirmed the information on the invoice while she assisted the person on the phone.

After she handed the invoice back, he stomped off, embarrassed and pissed at himself. He needed to get his shit together, so he didn’t scare off Linda’s friend. No wonder she wanted Eric to keep an eye on him.