



Christmas
by
Accident

★ Bestselling Author ★
CAMRON
WRIGHT ★



Welcome to the
READMORE CAFÉ

A quirky but quaint bookstore and dessert shop where Abby McBride, a Christmas lover, and Carter Cross, a holiday hater, are destined to have an *accidental* meeting.

Curl up by the fire and enjoy a heartwarming holiday story that even includes a few delicious recipes from the ReadMore Café.



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SHADOW
MOUNTAIN

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*To those who carry the
Christmas spirit all year long,
and to chocolate!*

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Chapter 1

Meet Carter Cross

The squeaking of cheap leather shoes scuffing across the room's cut-pile carpet should have forewarned Carter. The footsteps carried the sound of breathing, but Carter didn't move, didn't glance up, didn't twist around.

Instead, he pushed his body against the rubbery rim of his laminate desk and let his restless fingers resume their full frontal attack on his waiting keyboard.

The breathing behind him deepened.

Carter's eyes narrowed, his chin lifted, his gaze leapt word to word as his sentences crawled up the flickering monitor. His story was like Frankenstein's monster rising from the table, and as Carter mouthed each syllable, the paragraph drew a breath. His office chair squeaked.

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A distant copy machine gurgled awake. He ran anxious hands through tousled hair as he read:

Asphalt streaked below Ashton Blake and his motorcycle like a swollen spring river rushing beneath a bridge. The lane's painted center lines pulsed past so hypnotically that the man began to count—two, three, four, five. The curved road reminded him of a woman draped in Chinese silk, and he couldn't help but lean his bike close, so close he could have kissed pavement. WHAM—a watermelon-sized boulder suddenly slammed onto the road and clipped the front tire of his Triumph Tiger 800, sending it into a horrific skid.

A nearby clock ticked with apparent glee and appreciation. It was the most exciting thing written in the wearisome office in weeks. Carter's jaw tightened. He studied his last sentence. Should he use the em dash or a comma?

The breathing behind him burst into a scold. "You're embellishing again, aren't you? Even after Harold warned you, *no more embellishing!*"

It was an assault that cracked the silence, punctured the pleasure, let the lingering contentment that had pooled around Carter spill to the floor and drain away. He despised these moments, the first glimmers of recognition after being yanked back to reality. It was dreaming of tanning on a tropical beach, surrounded by bikini-clad beauties, only to be awakened by honking on the street

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outside his cold apartment—and to roll over to remember that, at age twenty-eight, he was still alone. It was believing that a college education would make an honest difference in the workplace, only to receive a single offer of employment at Business Alliance Deposit Insurance, an establishment so drab and boring it was all that Carter could do to not bludgeon himself to death every morning with his company-issued desktop stapler.

“Well?” the voice behind him pressed. “Why do you embellish?”

The question rolled around in Carter’s head, searched for a rational explanation. When Carter didn’t answer—didn’t move—Lenny, his shorter, balding coworker pressed harder.

“We’re insurance adjusters, Carter. Our job is to describe accidents as succinctly as possible.” His voice was high, almost scratchy. “We don’t embellish! If Harold finds out you’ve embellished again, he’ll . . .” Lenny’s words trailed off, as if the punishment would be too horrendous for any human to bear.

Carter’s shoulders dropped. His cheeks twitched. He released a long, laden breath before he spun around to face Lenny directly. He wouldn’t offer him the satisfaction of anger.

“It’s not embellishing, Lenny. It’s called creativity.” His

tone was almost transparent. “It’s describing the accident with words that make the situation clear. That’s my job as a claims adjuster. Harold can’t get mad at that!”

But the surrender in his reply answered for him. *Yes, Harold undeniably could.*

Lenny pushed sagging glasses against his face, then, with a puff of exasperation, leaned in to peruse Carter’s screen. “You haven’t always been like this. What happened?” When Carter said nothing, Lenny continued, “I taught you better. You need to follow company policy.” He wiped at his nose with a starched handkerchief.

“Otherwise . . .” His head began fish-flopping from side to side, and as he forced out the gruesome truth, he stepped back to create distance.

“ . . . Carter, you’ll get *fred!*”



Chapter 2

Meet Abby McBride

Abigail McBride—Abby to her friends—tapped her pen a dozen times around the word *bamboozle* until she'd created a peppered halo. The usage of the word was fine, even arguably creative, but there were better choices. It was a matter of style, one of the more difficult concepts she struggled to teach new writers.

“Excuse me, Abby, do you have a book on karate?”

Abby stifled a giggle. The customer asking was Mrs. Lenore Jenkins, a store regular who had to be at least eighty-five.

“We do, but I'll only show you if you promise not to hurt me.” It was a bad joke, and as soon as the words scampered out, Abby regretted trying to be funny.

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“Why would I hurt you, dear?”

“No, of course you wouldn’t!” Abby offered an agreeing smile, set aside the manuscript she was editing, and waved her patron forward.

“Fire up that walker and follow me,” Abby declared. “The martial arts section is over here.”

Mrs. Jenkins had not yet discovered the convenience of ordering books on Amazon—and for that she deserved to be worshiped.

The ReadMore Café was a family business, an eclectic favorite of the locals in Springfield that sat near the eastern bank of the Connecticut River, a place many described as charming. It was half bookstore, half desert shop, a fact that helped ensure ReadMore’s survival. When the big bookstore chains rolled into town in the late ’90s, followed by burgeoning online sales that extinguished many of the country’s independent bookstores, the ReadMore Café flourished. While it was true that ReadMore’s customers could buy books online for less, Abby’s uncle, company owner Mannie McBride, had devised a secret weapon: Apple Crostata Streusel. And that was not all. The place served an array of gourmet pastries, pies, puddings, and pleasures that many claimed would bring world peace. Even their sandwiches were, as a columnist for the local paper had once noted, *rapturous*.

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The bookstore/café was located in a quaint, century-old building that was once the city library. While rich with charm, it also meant that on occasion the staff had to explain to a few of Mrs. Jenkins's contemporaries that *no*, books couldn't be checked out, they had to be purchased.

Today, after Abby made certain that both Mrs. Jenkins and her walker were under control, she headed over to the café area of the store to help wipe tables.

In addition to Mannie and Abby, the business employed a half dozen book and food lovers of assorted sizes, ages, and tastes. One of the mainstays was Rosabelle (Rosa) Reinoso, a middle-aged, silver-haired woman of German descent, as plump as she was spunky. She'd been with the store since the heyday of *Sophie's Choice*, a book that still rested on her nightstand table. Even more impressive, a few years ago she had inherited a respectable amount of money—enough to retire—and yet she stayed.

Abby suspected it was the irresistible desserts created by ReadMore's master chef, André Boisen—and she was likely right. As she approached Rosa, she watched the woman's lips pinch into a heart. Her fingers wrapped a cup that whiffed of nutmeg, vanilla, and cinnamon—a new eggnog creation that André had been testing in the kitchen.

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“It’s *egglessnog!*” Rosa beamed, her words slurring as her tongue licked across her lip.

“I beg your pardon?” Abby replied.

“He made his eggnog recipe without using any eggs, just to see if he could do it!” She was bouncing—*all* of Rosa was bouncing. “I love him, just LOVE HIM!” Rosa declared with all the passion of a love-struck teenager. She pressed the mug toward Abby’s chin, let the willing vapors rush at her nose, brush her cheek, caress her neck, and tease the auburn hair that draped amply across her shoulders. Abby took the mug, sipped, sighed, and then eagerly licked cinnamon-laced cream from the rim with her tongue. For a moment, she had the urge to wrap in a warm blanket.

“I love him too!” she declared. “We’d better not tell his wife!”

André and his wife, Ziva, had come to the ReadMore Café a few years earlier to run the café side of the business. André’s uncle had worked for Mannie in the past and offered his highest recommendation. The young couple had been trained in Denmark, and, as Mannie put it, “They blend chocolate, butter, and cream together so sensuously, I have to leave the room.”

As Abby took another satisfying sip of André’s culinary handiwork, her gaze circled from the mug to the back room, to the cash register up front, and then back

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to the mug. The sweet smell of the eggnog started wheels churning in Abby's head.

"It's too early," Rosa declared before Abby had uttered a word.

"Too early for what?" she pretended.

"Child, don't you dare play coy with me. It's dripping like rain from your guilty face. You're going to put out the Christmas books!"

Abby briefly considered lying, but instead she attempted an appeal to reason. "Have you not looked outside? It's been getting colder! Leaves are falling! It's going to storm. It's that time of year. Why not put out the Christmas books?"

Rosa's stubby fingers were already spread out for counting. "One, it's not yet Halloween. Two, it's not yet Thanksgiving. Three . . ."

It had been a rhetorical question, and Abby was no longer listening. She almost skipped toward the empty book cart in the back of the store. It didn't take her long to gather a sizable assortment of holiday books, wheel them up to a table beside the register up front, and stack them into the shape of a Christmas tree.

She was looking for ribbon to craft a star for the top when her cell phone rang.

"Hi, this is Abby." She listened, pushing the phone

tight against her ear. “I’m sorry, you faded out. Can you say that again?” The news furrowed her brow. Her body stiffened. “Yes, Mannie is my uncle.” A longer pause followed. She reached for the table to steady herself. “I see. I’ll be right there!”

Rosa shuffled toward her from across the room. Abby’s eye muscles tensed. Her lips quivered. Her knees nearly buckled. She pulled the phone away from her ear, but her grip was like iron. Before Rosa could reach her, Abby jammed the phone into her pocket and lurched toward the front door.

“I have to go,” she called back. Her words were shaking. “Rosa, can you close?” She didn’t wait for an answer.

“Certainly! Abby, dear, what’s wrong?”

Tears were leaking now from Abby’s eyes. The words scarcely choked out. “It’s Mannie! Something’s terribly wrong! He’s been taken to the hospital!”