

a HOLIDAY
ROMANCE

e.a. west

Breath OF
CHRISTMAS

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E. A. West

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BREATH OF CHIRSTMAS

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Dedication

To my mom, who has shown me asthma doesn't have
to hold you back.

Praise for

Dreams Do Come True

“Ms. West’s writing flows as seamlessly as invisible thread. She’s able to capture the reader and bring them straight into the story.” ~ Miss Mae, author of romantic mysteries

“I loved this sweet uplifting story...I will definitely be on the lookout for more from this author as she convinced me that dreams really do come true.” ~ Theresa Joseph, The Romance Studio

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“I highly recommend *The Key to Charlotte* to anyone who needs to be reminded of the love available to us through both other humans and God.” ~ Crystal, CK2S Kwips and Kritiques

“This book, hands down, is one of the best I have read all year. It swept through my heart with so much power I found myself hating to see the story end.” ~ Marianne Evans, inspirational romance author

1

Early morning sunlight sparkled off the fresh snow making Esther Beauchamp thankful she'd remembered her sunglasses.

The brisk air invigorated her as she watched the crowd arriving at Cedar Valley Resort for the Santa Snow Challenge and added to the festive atmosphere created by Christmas decorations on every building, a few trees, and the resort's lone ski lift.

Esther's heart thumped with anticipation. This was her first big event since moving to the small Colorado resort town. Never mind the fact that she'd never skied a day in her life; she knew how to drive a snowmobile, which was enough to qualify her for the position of competitor transportation at the slopestyle course.

She adjusted the safety orange jacket she'd been given and wondered how many people it would blind when the sun hit her. Black letters on the left front labeled her as "Staff," as did the large black letters across the back. So far, she'd only been asked for directions by a few parents herding exuberant preteens, but she should soon meet the competitors.

"Hey, Esther!"

Her boss and neighbor, Leonard Morris, approached from the left. The clipboard in his hand had seen better days, and it looked as if he'd tried to cram every paper from his overcrowded desk onto the

thing. However, his cheerful personality more than made up for his lack of organizational skills.

"Hey, Leonard," Esther said as he joined her. "What's up?"

"You get light duty for the competition." He cocked his head to the side, one bushy gray eyebrow lifted in question. "By the way, do you like dogs?"

"Yeah, they're great. Why?"

"Because you're going to be spending a lot of time with one this weekend." He shuffled through his papers and unearthed a photo. "This is Molly."

Esther accepted the picture and studied the large black Lab seated beside a handsome blond man in his mid-twenties with hazel eyes and an athletic build. Try as she might, she couldn't figure out what a dog had to do with shuttling competitors to the top of the course. She handed the photo back and studied her boss. "Cute dog, but why are you telling me about her?"

"The man in the picture is Robbie Kendrick." Leonard tucked the photo into the pile on his clipboard. "He's one of the snowboarders, and you'll need to keep an eye on his dog while he's doing his runs."

What was so special about this guy that his dog warranted a babysitter? "What about the other competitors? I thought I was going to be busy running people up to the top of the slope."

"That was the original plan, but it changed." Leonard led her away from the growing crowd. "Look, Esther, Molly is Robbie's service dog. When he's not on the course, he'll need her by his side. That's where you come in. You'll take them both up to the top, and then you'll come back down here with Molly and meet Robbie when he finishes his run. I've been assured his

coach will be at the top to help him out if necessary between the time you drop him off and the time he joins you at the bottom.”

“Wait, one of the snowboarders needs a service dog? Should he even be competing?”

“Molly is a medical alert dog, and Robbie and his coach are the ones who came up with this plan, so I assume they know what they’re talking about.” Leonard shuffled through the papers again, but came up empty handed. “I have a doctor’s note for him somewhere clearing him to compete, but I must have left it in my office. Oh, well, you don’t need to see that, anyway. The important thing is Robbie’s the only competitor you’re transporting.”

“OK, let me get this straight.” Esther rubbed her forehead. “I’m responsible for one snowboarder and his dog. While he’s doing his runs, I’ll be dog-sitting at the bottom of the course. Is that right?”

Leonard gave her a huge grin. “You’ve got it.”

“So, what happens if he doesn’t make it through to the finals Sunday? Does that mean I’m out of a job?” Although this gig was for one weekend only, the extra cash would help pay off the student loans that lingered from earning her computer science degree.

“No, I’ll find something else for you to do if that happens.” Leonard winked, a teasing twinkle in his eyes. “I doubt you need to worry, though. Robbie’s been competing for years, and he’s been in the finals of every competition he’s entered in the last two years.”

Suddenly, she wished she knew more about winter sports. Ever since she moved to Cedar Valley a month ago, she’d been listening to people talk about the Santa Snow Challenge and the competitors they expected to see. Esther had never heard of any of them,

but it quickly became clear she was a minority in this small ski resort town.

The radio at Leonard's hip crackled to life, and he responded to the call from one of the security personnel. As soon as he finished answering the man's question, he focused on Esther. "You need to be at the registration desk in the lodge in about half an hour. Robbie and his coach are supposed to meet you there."

"I'll be there."

Leonard wandered off, speaking in to his radio as he walked, and Esther turned towards the huge lodge constructed of logs. The rustic building nestled in the valley between mountains welcomed visitors and offered the promise of a warm fire and comfortable chairs after a long day on the slopes. The other resort buildings had the same rustic, log-cabin look, and the design elements had bled over into the rest of the small mountain town. The job offer by a small software company in downtown Cedar Valley had originally brought her here, but the laid-back atmosphere of the area had convinced her to take the job.

She sidestepped a couple of kids chasing each other, her thoughts going to her charge for the weekend. Why would a snowboarder need a medical alert dog?

2

A cold, wet nose nudged Robbie's hand, and he glanced down to find Molly wagging her tail. He smoothed his hand across her head. "I'm OK, huh, girl?"

The black Lab's tail waved a little harder, and she plopped onto the floor beside him. Robbie shook his head with a smile. Molly regularly checked him and always wagged her tail if he was fine. If she kept nudging him and gave him the worried look that wrinkled her forehead, then he needed to be concerned. Although a lot of people had questioned the wisdom of continuing to snowboard, he wouldn't give it up unless his doctor insisted. Besides, with the dog looking out for him, he'd had a lot fewer trips to the emergency room than he had before getting her.

He looked towards the lodge entrance again, hoping to spot the event staffer he'd been promised. Knowing he had someone dedicated to taking care of him and his dog this weekend gave him a feeling somewhere between relief and humiliation. Thanks to Gary's plan, he would have someone with him at all times, except for when he was actually running the course. Although embarrassing to admit he needed the extra help, it certainly beat the last competition where Gary had waited at the bottom with Molly, leaving Robbie on his own at the top. At first, the arrangement hadn't seemed like such a big deal, but then he had

that sudden attack with no one but the poor event volunteers for company. Not the greatest situation, since they'd done nothing to help alleviate the anxiety of being unable to draw in a breath and had inadvertently caused it to take twice as long to recover.

Hopefully, whoever had been assigned to keep an eye on Molly while Robbie was doing his runs would have a little better understanding of asthma. Or at least be able to stay calm if he had an attack. Not being able to breathe gave him enough anxiety without worried people adding to it with their own concern. Usually his inhaler and Molly's calming presence were enough to get his lungs working properly again.

The door opened and a young woman wearing a neon orange staff jacket walked in. Her brown hair hung in a braid down her back, and her green eyes scanned the lobby as she unzipped her coat to reveal a lithe build.

Robbie smiled when her gaze landed on him, and she walked over to where he stood. It looked like they'd given him a pretty staffer. Hopefully, she liked dogs and didn't mind snowboarders who needed them.

She gave him a friendly smile as she reached him and held out her hand. "You must be Robbie Kendrick. I'm Esther Beauchamp."

"It's a pleasure to meet you." He admired her firm handshake. Not a lot of women showed that much strength when they met him. He had never figured out if they assumed he was fragile because he had a service dog or if they wanted to show how feminine they were by not gripping tightly.

Esther shifted her attention to the dog sitting by his left leg. "And you must be Molly. You're a pretty

girl, aren't you?"

The dog wiggled with pleasure at Esther's sweet tone, and Robbie grinned. "You sure know how to make friends with dogs."

"They're great animals." Esther glanced around. "I was told your coach would be here as well."

How much had she been told about him and his situation?

"He had to go talk to the management about a room change. The last people to stay in my room broke the rules and smoked."

"Is that a big issue?"

"Yeah, I'm allergic to tobacco smoke." Thankfully, Molly had blocked him from going into the room and kept him from having a severe asthma attack. The light wheeze from standing at the open door had been enough to convince him he wanted to share Gary's single room for the weekend if the lodge couldn't find him a smoke-free room.

"Ah, I see." Esther shifted her weight and glanced towards the door. "So, have you seen the course yet?"

"No, I haven't had a chance." Robbie lifted an eyebrow, knowing his proposition would make Gary mad. "You want to show it to me before I have to go down it?"

Esther smiled and held her hands out to her sides. "Whatever you want. I'm your transportation and dog-sitter for the weekend."

"In that case, you can show me around." He held out Molly's leash. "Do you want to hold Molly while I put on my coat? That way the two of you can get acquainted before the competition starts. Molly, say hi."

Esther took the leash and knelt to pet Molly. The

dog sniffed her face carefully and tilted an ear towards her, then nudged her shoulder and wagged her tail. Surprise widened Esther's eyes as she looked up at Robbie. "What was that about?"

He chuckled and zipped his coat. "She decided to check you. The nudge and wagging tail are to let you know you're OK."

"Well, that's good to know." She stood and scratched behind Molly's ears. "So, what is it she checked me for?"

"Asthma." Robbie pulled the face mask from his pocket, but paused before putting it on. "Didn't they tell you that's why I have Molly?"

"No, Leonard just said she's a medical alert dog." Esther studied him, and he shifted under her gaze. "You know, you are the first person I've ever heard of that needed a service dog because of asthma."

"I get that a lot." He put on the face mask, which covered the lower half of his face. He didn't mind looking like a bandit from the Old West since the mask helped warm the air he breathed. Once it was secure, he took Molly's leash. As they headed for the exit, he continued. "My asthma is pretty bad, and Molly can detect the attacks before I can. That means I have a chance to use my inhaler before it becomes impossible to breathe, which makes it take a lot less time to recover. That and her presence helps lessen the effects as well."

Esther zipped her coat as he opened the door. "How does that work?"

"She helps me stay calm." He motioned for her to pass through, and then he followed her into the snowy outdoors. "And on days like this, her warmth helps, too."

Esther opened her mouth as if about to speak, but then apparently changed her mind and closed it again.

Robbie said a silent prayer of thanks that she hadn't questioned his decision to be a snowboarder. He wasn't sure he could handle yet another woman who thought he couldn't do the sport just because his lungs weren't always as cooperative as he'd like.

His regular doctor and the specialist he'd seen had both approved his continued participation and encouraged him to exercise. According to them, it would help strengthen his lungs. As for the cold involved with snowboarding, well, he had the face mask and knew when to go somewhere warm for a while. It wasn't the doctors' fault he didn't always listen to his body.

That was one of the reasons Molly was so important. With an eighty pound dog insisting he go inside, he didn't have much choice but to do it.

The crowd thickened as they approached the slopestyle course.

Molly walked happily at Robbie's side and received little attention from the people they passed. Having her be invisible was a nice change from the questioning looks when people realized she was a service dog. That was the reason he'd acquired a black vest for her with plain white lettering. It blended with her fur and made it less noticeable than the red vest that had been suggested by his doctor.

Esther led him through the crowd to a cluster of snowmobiles. "Mine is the one with the blue stripes."

Robbie checked out the machine and nodded. "Nice. Do you have a sled you can attach for Molly to ride on?"

"I haven't heard about one, but I can ask." Esther

studied the dog. "Is that how it usually works at competitions? Your transportation to the top has a sled for her?"

"Only sometimes. Other times, she rides in my lap." Robbie grinned and leaned closer. "If we go that route, she'll ride in your lap on the way down. Of course, it's when I have to use a ski lift that it gets really interesting."

She pulled a small radio from her coat pocket. "I'll see about a sled while you go look at the course."

He laughed and headed for the corduroy, the groomed snow still bearing its signature ridges, on the other side of the barriers. "I thought you'd say that. See you in a few."

As he looked up the side of the mountain at the quarter pipes, rails, jumps, and other features the resort had built into the course, his cell phone chimed with a text. He dug it out of his pocket and read the worried message from his coach. Trust Gary to assume something terrible had happened rather than thinking he might have gone to do something fun.

Robbie slid out the keyboard to reply. *I'm fine. Just checking out the course with the staffer. Her name's Esther.*

He sent the message and returned the phone to his pocket. Gary would undoubtedly arrive soon to make sure he was still breathing and wearing his face mask. While it was great having someone who cared about him, some days Robbie regretted choosing a close friend of the family to be his coach. Everything he did got back to his parents. When it came to his family and his coach, they still wanted to coddle him like a child. Nevertheless, Gary Truman was one of the best.

Robbie glanced down and met his dog's gaze. "At least you can appreciate going places and being active.

But then, your skills make you better able to handle it than most people, huh?"

Molly wagged her tail and turned in the direction from which they'd come. Robbie spotted Esther standing a few feet away. He joined her and motioned towards the course. "I can't wait to shred that."

Esther's laugh floated on the air like the music of wind chimes. "That seems to be the opinion of a lot of snowboarders. The only exception was the kid who saw the course and decided to be a spectator instead."

"Ah, I've faced tougher courses." Robbie looked up the slope again. "Of course, I've faced easier ones, as well. But this one looks fun."

"I hope so. The resort has been working hard to make this a great experience for both competitors and spectators." Esther drew in a deep breath. "I asked about a sled for Molly, but it doesn't look good. You'd better show me how to carry her on the snowmobile."

"It's really easy." He straddled the one Esther had pointed out. Then he patted his lap. "Molly, climb on."

The dog half jumped, half climbed onto the snowmobile and lay across Robbie's thighs.

He smoothed his hand across her head and neck. "See? Nothing to it. Just drive carefully when you have her onboard. She's an expensive piece of medical equipment."

"That makes her sound like a wheelchair."

"Maybe so, but a service dog counts as medical equipment, and she'd be a huge pain to replace. It took a while to find a dog that could do what I need."

"Couldn't you train any dog to do it?"

"As it turns out, no, not really." Robbie wished Esther would let it go. He had no interest in discussing Molly right now, not with the preliminary rounds of a

competition starting in less than two hours, but he tried to remain civil. "For one thing, Molly gives me more warning of an asthma attack than any other dog I've met, and I tried a few others without luck before I met her."

A radio crackled, and Esther lifted it to respond as she stepped away.

Robbie signaled to Molly to hop down, and then he climbed off the snowmobile.

Esther returned a moment later. "There are no sleds available."

"Well, you know how to get Molly on the snowmobile. Besides, you'll probably appreciate having a heated lap blanket before the day is over."

The withering look Esther gave him made him question how well he would get along with her this weekend. Could it be the pretty staffer had no sense of humor?

3

Esther watched Robbie and his coach discuss the course as Molly sniffed the snow around their feet. From the way other competitors walked up and greeted him, Robbie was well-known and fairly popular.

Esther noticed that no matter how many people were around, the dog always seemed focused on Robbie. Several times she sniffed towards his face and cocked an ear in his direction then she nudged his hand and wagged her tail. Without fail, he looked down as soon as Molly's nose touched him, and then he smoothed his hand down her head and neck without ever interrupting his conversation. The two were clearly a team.

Robbie's coach patted him on the back, and then the two men walked to Esther sitting on her snowmobile.

Gary Truman had gray hair and a weathered face. The wrinkles around his eyes and mouth indicated not only a love of being outdoors, but also a ready smile. Now, however, his expression was much more serious.

"Esther, has Robbie explained the plan to you?"

"I'm taking him and Molly up top, and then bringing Molly back down here to wait."

"Yes, and in addition to waiting down here with Molly, you'll be the one in charge of arranging medical treatment for Robbie if he needs it."