A photograph of a man and a woman walking away from the camera down a snowy path in a forest. The woman is on the left, wearing a brown coat and a hat, carrying a pair of white ice skates. The man is on the right, wearing a dark green parka with a fur-lined hood and dark pants, also carrying a pair of white ice skates. They are holding hands. The background is a soft-focus winter scene with snow-covered trees and a wooden building in the distance.

SUSAN MAY  
WARREN

*Christy Award-winning author*

# Evergreen

a  
*Christiansen*  
winter  
novella

# Praise for the Christiansen Family Series

## *It Had to Be You*

“*It Had to Be You* is a sigh-worthy, coming-into-her-own romance highlighting the importance of family, the necessity of faith, and how losing yourself for the right reasons can open your heart to something beautiful.”

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*ROMANTIC TIMES*

“Susan May Warren delivers another beautiful, hope-filled story of faith that makes the reader fall further in love with this captivating and intriguing family. . . . Powerful storytelling gripped me from beginning to end . . . [and] lovable characters ensure that the reader becomes invested in their lives.”

RADIANT LIT

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FICTION ADDICT

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*BOOKLIST*

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*CBA RETAILERS + RESOURCES*

“Warren’s latest is a touching tale of love discovered and the meaning of family.”

*ROMANTIC TIMES*

EVERGREEN





*a Christiansen winter novella*

# Evergreen

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*Evergreen*

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*Evergreen* is a work of fiction. Where real people, events, establishments, organizations, or locales appear, they are used fictitiously. All other elements of the novel are drawn from the author's imagination.

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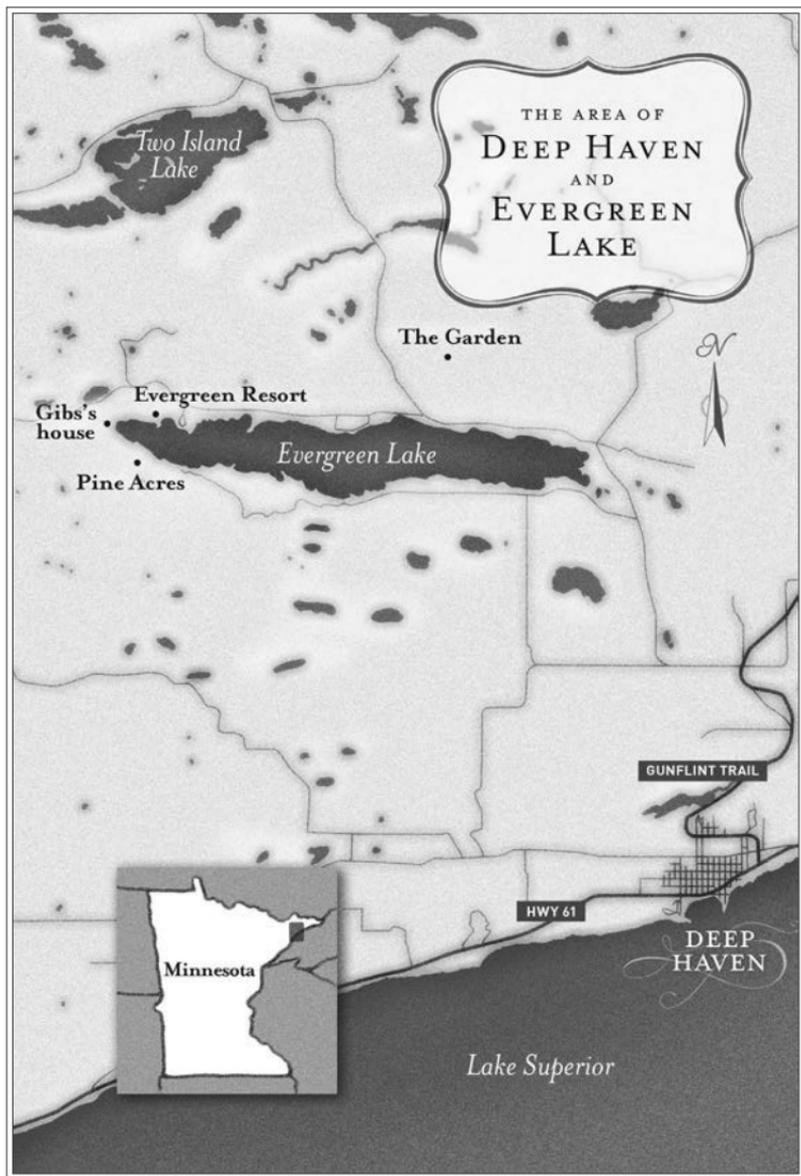
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*Dear family and friends,*

*A warm Christmas greeting from the  
Christiansen family in snowy northern Minnesota.*

*We've had a year of joy as each of the family has  
found new adventures. Darek and Ivy tied the knot  
last Memorial Day, and Eden and Face Jacobsen  
followed with a celebration in August. Casper has  
moved to Roatán to work on a sunken galleon in  
pursuit of his archaeology degree . . .*

*Dear family and friends,*

*A warm Christmas greeting from the  
Christiansen family in snowy northern Minnesota.*

*The Christiansen family has seen much change  
this year. We've worked hard on the resort, and it is  
nearly rebuilt after last year's devastating forest fire.  
Grace is finally pursuing her love of cooking, working  
as a chef in Minneapolis and looking forward to  
marrying NHL hockey player Maxwell Sharpe.  
Meanwhile, Owen has been out west, fighting fires*

## Evergreen

*with a hotshot team. We were all delighted when he showed up for Eden's wedding . . .*

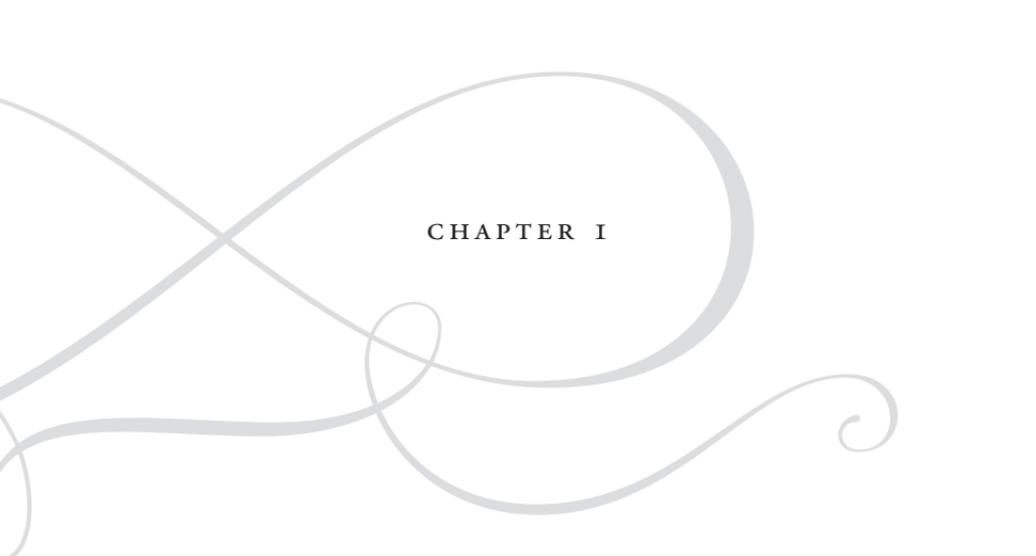
*Dear family and friends,*

*A warm Christmas greeting from the Christiansen family in snowy northern Minnesota.*

*It's a year of new beginnings for us as our children start new chapters in their lives. We are thrilled to have sent Amelia off to Prague for her first year of college . . .*

*Dear family and friends,*

*A warm Christmas greeting from the Christiansen family in snowy northern Minnesota!*



## CHAPTER I

OF ALL THE DAYS for the pastor to expound past the allotted time for his sermon, he had to pick potluck day. The day of the quarterly business meeting.

The day of the Minnesota Vikings home opener—against the Green Bay Packers, no less.

John Christiansen stood in the buffet line of the fellowship hall and glanced at the clock hanging over the pass-through to the church kitchen. He did a quick calculation. If he skipped the dessert line and another cup of coffee, and if he planted himself next to his best friend, Nathan Decker—who could run interference between John and the entanglements of mindless conversation about the unusual Minnesotan warm snap this late into September—he just might make it home before the end of the first quarter.

He'd give Nate his voting proxy for any sudden decisions at the meeting. Yes, he'd agree to be a Salvation Army bell ringer at the grocery store this Christmas. No, he didn't think the church needed to hire a snowplowing service—he'd be glad to come down with his truck again this year. Or to send his oldest son, Darek, over. It seemed about time Darek inherited that duty too.

John guessed he had about seventeen minutes to effect his escape before Pastor Dan rose and trapped him in a two-hour meeting that he'd gladly trade for having his fingernails plucked out with a pair of snub-nosed pliers.

But it all hinged on catching his wife with the hairy eyeball of desperation.

Sadly, Ingrid had planted herself with her back to him, holding a plate of food, talking to Ellie, Pastor Dan's wife.

He tried not to accuse his wife of being diabolical.

"Oh, good, there are meatballs left." Nate reached over from the opposite side of the buffet table. "I love Ingrid's barbecue meatballs."

"It's her hockey-mom potluck specialty," John said, scooping into the garlic mashed potatoes.

"I'm glad she decided to share it with the church," Nathan said. "Can't let all those fabulous potluck recipes go to waste, even if the high school hockey years are over."

He added mashed potatoes to his own plate. “So how are your honeymooners doing?”

John glanced at Ingrid, seeing her move on from her small talk with Ellie. She looked pretty today in a pink sweater and floral skirt, her blonde hair pulled back with a headband. Sometimes she looked as fresh and young as when he’d first noticed her, thirty-some years ago.

Yeah, she still possessed the power to unravel him, steal his thoughts, turn his mouth dry.

He nearly called across the room for her to save him a seat, but that felt too desperate. She didn’t look at him, stopping to chat with Edith Draper, head of the hospitality committee.

Danger! Danger! He nearly abandoned his meatballs right there and made a dash for his wife.

But after nearly thirty years of marriage, she knew not to volunteer him for any committees or projects, right?

Somehow he managed to keep a cool head and answer Nate, updating him on the status of his adult children.

“Eden and Jace are looking at houses in Minneapolis. Hitting the parade of homes. Grace’s fiancé, Max, survived hockey camp. They have a preseason game coming up in a few weeks. And Grace is working on her catering business.”

“They set a date yet?”

Oh, good, Ingrid had laughed, shaken her head, and walked away from Edith, looking for an open space to sit in the crowded fellowship hall.

The claws in John's chest loosened.

"Nope. I wouldn't be surprised if they had their wedding in Hawaii."

"That sounds expensive." Nathan handed John a roll of silverware. John took it, balancing it under his plate filled with potatoes, green beans, meatballs, corn salad, and a few items he didn't quite know how to name.

"Maybe. But Max has money. After all, he does play for the NHL." He noticed Ingrid had taken a chair next to Helen Harrison, Nathan's mother. No danger there. Helen headed up the Christmas decorating committee, but even if Ingrid did suddenly decide he'd be perfect to cut and put up the church's tree, it still wouldn't interfere with any of John's plans.

He set his plate on a table, slid out a folding chair. Nate sat next to him.

"Have you heard from Casper?" Nate asked without looking at him, unrolling his napkin.

Only a handful of people knew about the Christiansen family debacle the morning of Eden and Jace's wedding—the fistfight between his two younger sons, Owen and Casper.

“He’s living on some Caribbean island and loving his new gig working on an archaeology team for the winter.” Or at least that’s what he made it sound like. But John had the sense that he hadn’t gotten the full story from Casper in years.

“Fun. I remember when we used to dream of traveling. Nice to know your kids are actually doing it, huh?”

*Actually doing it . . .* Well, maybe Nate could keep a secret. John kept his voice low. “I’m booking a trip for Ingrid and me to Europe over Christmas.”

There, he’d said it out loud. Made it real. Actually put words to the idea that had been simmering inside him since they’d said good-bye to Amelia, their youngest child, two weeks ago at the Minneapolis–St. Paul International Airport.

Nate looked away, then back to John as if trying to comprehend his words. “Seriously?”

Okay, so he’d known the idea could be risky, but . . . “Listen, Ingrid is always saying she’d like to travel, and I thought with Amelia over in Prague this semester, and with all the other kids busy . . . it’s perfect. We’ll be back in time to get ready for the resort grand opening over Valentine’s weekend, and I’ve been tucking money away for years. It feels like it’s now or never.”

Nate smiled. “It’s fantastic, man. I’d love to escape with Annalise for the holidays, but she’d kill me. Too many traditions.”

“We have traditions too, but this year the kids have plans, with the exception of Darek and Ivy—and they’re celebrating their first Christmas as a family—so it seems like we’ll be largely on our own. Ingrid’s been acting sort of . . . down, ever since the wedding.”

“And you think tickets to Europe are going to fix everything?”

“Of course. Why not?” He finished off his last meatball. His wife could cook with the best of them—probably where Grace got her culinary skills. “I thought it could be a sort of second honeymoon.” He looked at his plate. “I’m planning to take her to the top of the Eiffel Tower and renew our vows.”

Nate shook his head. “Who knew? John Christiansen is a romantic.”

“I’m going to pretend you didn’t say that.” But maybe, down deep, he could be. Sweep his wife off her feet, just like he had once upon a time. “I figure, we raised our kids, and now it’s time for us, right?”

Nate grinned, lifted his glass. “You’re the man.”

Yeah. That’s right. “I’m buying the tickets tomorrow—”

“Grandpa!”

John turned as Tiger ran up to him. The six-year-old flung his arms around his neck. “Am I comin’ over to watch the game?”

“Absolutely—”

“Sorry, buddy.” This from Ivy, John’s daughter-in-law. She wore a pretty lime green-and-brown dress and had tied her red hair back in a green scarf. She came up behind Tiger, holding a jacket, so easily moving into the role of stepmom that it seemed she’d been handpicked by God to fill the void left by Tiger’s mother’s death. “Grandpa has to stay for a church meeting.”

Shoot. How obvious would it be now for him to sneak out? He glanced at Ingrid again and tried not to harbor the belief that she was intentionally ignoring him.

By now, the Vikings had probably surrendered at least one touchdown.

He spied movement from Pastor Dan, making his way to the front.

Beside him, Nate laughed. “I just hope you taped the game, pal.”

John grimaced and reached for the coffee carafe.

Dan led them in prayer. John visited the dessert table during the reading of the minutes, tried to get the score

on his phone, and nodded a few times at the discussion of a men's community Bible study.

He signed his name on the pass-along sheet for Salvation Army volunteers and then on a whim added Ingrid's name, just in case she tried to sign up separately. If he worked it out right, they could be at the airport by the evening of December 23.

He'd already planned the surprise in his mind—he'd spring the gift on her at Thanksgiving. He didn't know what the head count might be for that weekend, and she just might be feeling glum. The thought of her elation made the details of the hospitality report bearable.

"On to new business," Edith said. "Our church is hosting the annual community live Nativity this year."

Oh no. He made a face at Nathan, who mimicked it. John cut his voice low. "Another tradition I'll be glad to miss."

Nathan nodded. "Last year I think we did a drive-by, saw maybe a handful of families out there. Remember the year we replaced the baby Jesus with a ham?"

John laughed, earning a death glare from Ingrid. The live Nativity display might hold a fascination for a dwindling handful, but he'd spent too many hours, from his childhood and beyond, standing in the cold,

bulwarking a tradition the town should have let crumble long ago.

And then it happened.

Edith turned to Ingrid, and in his beautiful wife's face John saw an expression that ignited a dark, twining horror. He barely bit back the impulse to leap up, take a run at old Edith the troublemaker, and tackle her and her clipboard before she could utter another word.

But convention rooted him to his chair, cold fingers digging into his chest as Edith smiled at Ingrid and said, "I have in our records that John and Ingrid are signed up to coordinate it."

No! The fingers clamped down, choking off his words, when he saw Ingrid nod. "Of course. We'll be happy to."

She didn't even look at him.

*Do something.* The voice careened through his head as Edith moved on to other items, something about the Christmas tea—

"Wait!" The word emerged faintly high, sounding woe-fully unlike his own voice.

Even Nate turned, his expression so vivid, John could hear him behind the chaos of his panic, warning him off. If only he were a good listener. "Do we have to actually *be* there for the live Nativity, or can we just organize it?"

A hush vised the room, and John's heartbeat pulsed in his ears.

Edith frowned. "I . . . well, I suppose not. As long as all the roles are filled."

"Thank you, Edith. We'll make sure the parts are filled and everything is perfect."

"Oh." She pressed a hand to her chest as if to pat her heart back into place. "Okay, then."

He refused to surrender. He did, however, glance at Ingrid.

Her lips froze in a forced smile, her jaw drawn so tight he thought she might be grinding molars.

"Way to do an end run," Nate said quietly. He made a fist and held it out for a congratulatory bump.

John met it. Yeah, that's right. Nothing—not even Ingrid—would stop him from giving his wife the best Christmas of her life.



If John wanted any hope of seeing his stupid football game, he'd better stop hanging around the church kitchen, looking at his watch.

And his phone.

And the clock.

As if the Vikings might be waiting for him to show up and save the day with a fourth-quarter eighty-yard run.

From his armchair.

Ingrid sprayed more water on her baking pan and attacked the barbecue residue with renewed vigor. Around her, other ladies on the hospitality committee finished unloading the commercial dishwasher, packing up leftovers, and cleaning out the coffeepots.

“You know who would make a good couple for the Nativity display is Ivy and Darek,” Annalise Decker was saying as she emptied the load of clean silverware into a drawer. “Although maybe we should wait a year for them—by then they might have a live baby to lay in the manger.”

Ingrid glanced at her and found a smile. “Maybe.” Another grandbaby. The thought really should seed some warmth in her heart, but . . .

Well, since that day when her family fell apart, when she saw her two youngest sons brawling on the morning of her daughter’s wedding, a slow chill had turned everything inside her to January.

And Mr. Hurry-up-or-I’ll-miss-the-game wasn’t helping. She’d wanted the floor to open up and take her when he suggested not being around for the live Nativity.

Not that she felt especially keen on coordinating and

staffing the town's feeble hold on the tradition either. In years past, the entire town of Deep Haven had gathered on Christmas Eve for a moment of community solidarity, with carols and a cookie exchange. However, every year fewer showed up to celebrate. And why not? Everyone was leaving home, lives changing.

No one wanted to stand around for an hour in the snow, watching a mock Mary and Joseph shiver in the cold.

"Are you all right, Ingrid?"

"Yes. I'm just thinking about the live Nativity."

"It's so sad that no one attends anymore. Pastor Dan was saying that the ecumenical board nearly voted to discontinue it. Maybe they will if we don't get anyone to attend this year." Annalise picked up a towel. "I remember my first Christmas in Deep Haven. The live Nativity felt so fresh to me. I'd never truly understood the story before. If only we could figure out a way to put new life into it."

"I just hope it doesn't storm like it did a few years ago."

"And that we can keep the angels from fighting." Annalise winked at her, and Ingrid's memory returned to a chilly night long ago when she discovered Casper and Owen, dressed in sheets, wrestling in the snow, their wings cast off and bent.

Acid filled her chest as she mustered up a smile, cheery

words. “Who knows? Maybe it’ll be the best live Nativity ever.” She turned back to the pan. “I don’t know why I forgot to line this pan with foil, but I think it’ll take a chisel and hammer to get this barbecue sauce off.”

“Let it soak at home, honey,” John said from the door.

She ignored him and the edge of impatience in his tone. The Vikings rarely won a game against the Packers. Fighting words hung on her lips, but—

No. Marriage called for patience. Especially for football widows.

“I’ve nearly got it.”

“Leave it here,” Annalise said. “It does need to soak, and you can pick it up tomorrow at women’s Bible study.” She handed Ingrid a towel, glanced at John. “Go Vikings.”

“Rah,” Ingrid said, but she gathered her purse and followed John from the church.

Outside, the afternoon sun cast shadows across the dirt parking lot, and the loamy tang of autumn seasoned with the piney tartness of the north shore scented the air. The church overlooked the deep-indigo waters of Lake Superior, the clouds thin and high. Another week or so and the days might start turning cool, but for now, they beckoned her out onto her deck to read, or to the dock to watch the loons paddle in the lake.

Ingrid climbed into the truck. She didn't need John to shut the door after her but smiled in his direction anyway when he did. No reason to pick a fight.

John backed out of the lot. "I thought I'd swing by Darek's and maybe we'd finish the game there."

Darek had moved to town with his new bride, Ivy—at John's suggestion, of course—beginning the transformation of her house into a tomb. Then Grace moved to Minneapolis to be closer to her fiancé, Max. And in the two weeks since Amelia's departure, the morose quietness of their resort home had begun to press like mud into her bones, turning every day a little swampy and thick.

"We need to get home. Butter has been trapped in the house all morning, and she needs to go out."

John glanced at her.

Ingrid didn't have to actually turn her head to see it; after nearly thirty years, she could predict his movements, read his mind. "I left her in the house for church because I thought it might rain," she added.

"She's a dog."

"She's a sixteen-year-old dog."

"She can wait."

"John, be fair. She's house-trained, and she won't go inside. Which means she's going to be in pain. Or worse,

she'll piddle on the floor and be upset. Her bladder isn't what it used to be. Do you want to clean it up?"

John sighed. "Maybe it's time to think of putting—"

"John! We are not putting Butter to sleep."

He frowned. "I was going to say putting in a dog door."

Oh.

"Well, I don't think it's so much to ask to go home to let her out. You can watch the rest of the game from there."

"If there's any of it left."

She heard the mumble, although he probably hadn't tried to disguise it. "Sorry. But I think it is important to keep our commitments. We are members. We should attend the business meetings." *And do our part to run the Christmas Nativity.*

"I wish you hadn't volunteered us for that Nativity project." Apparently he could read her mind too.

"I saw you put my name down for the Salvation Army—"

"That's different. It's one hour, maybe two. And we can do it together."

She shot him a look. "Aren't you going to help me with the live Nativity?"

He sighed, and she braced herself. But his soft tone unseated her. "It's just that . . . I was hoping we'd . . ." His hands tightened around the steering wheel as they turned

off the main highway onto their road toward Evergreen Lake.

At his stalled words, she looked at him, frowning. Hoping they'd . . . what?

The low-hanging sun, the gold cascading through the cab of the truck, illuminated, just for a moment, the man he'd been, the one full of hopes, dreams. His wide shoulders still strong from his football days, built lean and tough and ready to conquer the world for her.

He'd fed her with stories of the life they'd build together and beyond. Hopes of family and adventure. And he'd given her most of it. Enough of it, at least. Then why, suddenly, since Amelia walked out the door, did she feel so empty?

She wanted to blame it on the recent fight between her children. Or simply the melancholy of being left behind as her children launched into their lives.

Yes, certainly that was it.

He sighed again. "Of course I'll help you with the live Nativity."

Ingrid looked away at the litter of bejeweled leaves scattered along the ditch of the dirt road. "You don't need to help, John." In fact, she didn't need him to have the best live Nativity scene Deep Haven had ever seen.

They pulled up to the house and he got out. She didn't wait for him to open the door but headed inside.

Butterscotch met them at the door, whining, and shot past Ingrid the moment she opened it.

Ingrid dumped her purse on the bench by the door, and John headed toward the den.

She heard the cheers of the game before she reached the kitchen. Nice. Maybe she'd make some cookies, bring them to Darek and Ivy's for Tiger.

She noticed a missed call on the caller ID. Didn't recognize it.

Butter appeared at the back door and Ingrid opened it, then decided to join the dog outside.

The wind cast barren leaves onto the path leading to the dock. The twelve new cabins, winterized and nearly ready for guests, still fragranced the air with the smell of sawdust and fresh paint. Hope for a rebirth of their resort.

So much had burned to ash that day over a year ago when a massive wildfire took out nearly everything they'd built.

Nearly. Sometimes, however, she didn't know how to salvage what they had left.

She followed the dog to the end of the dock, then sat and dangled her bare feet into the water. The wind brushed

the trees, a whisper rippling across the lake. The cold nip of waves tugged at her toes. Too soon, the water would sheet over, turn to ice. In their younger years, John would clear a square and they'd spend Sunday afternoons skating. Probably how their children fell in love with hockey.

Butter settled down beside her, sighed deep and long, then put her head in Ingrid's lap. Ingrid ran her hand over Butter's yellow fur. Rubbed under her ear. Butter pressed back, moaning a little with pleasure.

"Yeah, I know, that's what you like. Right there."

Butter lifted her head, her brown eyes meeting Ingrid's. A pained sadness burrowed inside her expression as if to mirror Ingrid's.

Silly tears edged Ingrid's eyes. Oh, good grief. She needed to snap out of this. Despite the recent wounds in her family, everyone would survive. Amelia loved Prague, Eden was living happily ever after in Minneapolis, and Grace was finally reaching for her dreams. Best of all, Darek had made peace with his past, begun a future.

And . . . Casper and Owen would make up. Someday. She had to believe that her family wouldn't stay broken forever.

But she knew, too, that some things could never be fixed. The dog leaned forward, gave Ingrid's chin a lick.

*Susan May Warren*

Ingrid laughed. “I love you too, sweetie.” She leaned back on her hands as Butter rolled onto her back. Needing just a bit more love.

Maybe that’s all her family needed too, to come back together.

Ingrid rubbed the dog’s belly. “Don’t you worry, Butter. Everything’s going to be fine.”