

***Eight Hounds a-Howling* excerpt**
(from Chapter One: *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*)
By Marcia James

"I know we did the whole screaming-jumping-hugging celebration when you first told me the news, but I wanted to say again, 'Congratulations!'" Amy Walters raised her glass of Chardonnay and toasted her best friend. "To the first Klein-Tyler bun-in-the-oven!"

Smiling, Meg Klein lifted her decaf iced tea and clinked glasses with Amy. "I still can't believe I'm pregnant." She ran her hand over her flat stomach. "Tom's over the moon."

Amy took a sip of wine, hoping her envy didn't show. She was crazy happy for Meg, but there was a shameful part of her that longed for what her friend had. At thirty-one, Amy had yet to find a man she could picture herself being with for a *year*, much less forever. It wasn't for lack of trying, even if her small hometown of Jenkins, North Carolina, wasn't exactly teeming with eligible men. Amy had spent a good decade looking for her soulmate. The search had been a lot of fun, but...

Meg pulled a folder from her tote bag and set it on the booth's wooden table. "I want to talk with you about our annual Klein's K-9s' fundraising calendar. It's already mid-September, so we're getting a late start this year. But if we have the calendar finished and printed before Thanksgiving, I think we'll be fine."

Amy regularly volunteered in various ways at the Klein's K-9s service dog training facility—everything from exercising the dogs to writing the facility's information brochure. The last three years, she'd coordinated the shooting, layout, and printing of the calendar, and she was happy to handle that project again this year. The calendar was always fun to produce, at least it *had been* before last year's fiasco. No, she wouldn't think about the jerk tonight.

Meg glanced at her watch. "Jax must be running late."

At the sound of the jerk's nickname, Amy's stomach clenched. "I thought we were getting a different photographer this year."

"Jax volunteered again, and he's too good to turn down." Meg studied her for a moment. "I know something happened between you two after the shoot last year. Are you ever going to tell me about it?"

No way. It was too damn embarrassing. Amy shook her head, then tried to sound nonchalant. "I just don't think Jax lives up to his own hype. Besides, why do we need Mr. Big Shot Fashion Photographer to shoot a dog calendar?"

"Because he works for free." The smooth masculine voice roused unwelcome goosebumps along Amy's skin.

Hell and damnation. Amy glanced up, and there was K.W. "Jax" Jackson, his hazel eyes sparkling with humor and his sensual mouth lifted in a crooked smile. He made the black T-shirt and jeans he wore look like designer duds, and they fit him like nobody's business.

Amy, on the other hand, was keenly aware she was dressed in a comfy pair of blue yoga pants and a slouchy gray top. OK, she wasn't a poster child for ratty clothes. But it certainly wasn't the glamorous outfit she'd imagined herself wearing the next time she ran into this man.

He slid into the booth, which put him directly across from Amy. He looked even better than he had last year, dammit. His brown hair was cut to appear artlessly finger-styled, and he'd grown a trim beard that highlighted his strong chin and those tempting lips. She flashed back to how those lips had felt on hers and forced the memory away.

Jax focused his attention on Meg. "I cleared several weeks for this project because your work is so important."

"Thank you." Meg pushed a handout and a pen across the table to Amy, then gave the same to Jax. "For this year's calendar, we want to do a doggie version of the 'Twelve Days of Christmas.'" She beamed. "I love this idea. Each month will have a photo based on a lyric from the song. As you can see on your handout, January will be 'On the first day of Christmas, my true love gave to me, a poodle in a cat tree.' Amy, I thought maybe we could use Peaches in that photo."

Amy was determined to be all-business. "Peaches is a little diva, so I'm sure she'll have fun doing it." Her miniature white poodle had enjoyed appearing in last year's calendar—especially the treats she got for staying still for the photos.

Meg turned back to Jax. "I know it could be a challenge getting a number of the group shots, like 'Eight Hounds a-Howling' for August. But we've already lined up some of the dogs, and they're all very well-behaved."

He chuckled, the sound deep and sexy. "I can visualize most of these. But how will we get eleven sheepdogs to sleep at the same time?"

"Puppies." Amy, a marketing consultant, knew the appeal of baby animals. "We can get sheepdog puppies, who'll nod off after a meal."

Her best friend smiled. "That's a great idea. I'll reach out to my contacts and the local sheepdog rescue group to see if there are any litters of sheepdog puppies."

Amy made notes on her handout. "I'll brainstorm Jenkins' locations, although the Klein's K-9s' facility would work for a number of the shots, like 'Twelve Rottweilers Running.' I'll also speak with the dog owners to check their availability. Once I have that and a shooting schedule confirmed, I'll email the information to you both."

Jax held up a hand, traffic-cop-style. "I need to be part of the process. I'll scope out the locations with you, so I can see how they'd look on camera. It'll make the project go smoother." His expression was smug, as though confident he'd maneuvered her into a corner.

Amy mentally cursed a blue streak. She couldn't explain to Meg why she'd rather have a root canal than spend a day in Jax's company. And he'd probably realized Amy hadn't told her friend the details of that miserable night. Otherwise, Meg would never have accepted his help on this project, knowing what kind of man he was under the slick facade.

Dammit, he made her crazy. Afraid she'd be arrested for assault if she threw her wine in Jax's face, Amy barely restrained that impulse. "Sure," she said through gritted teeth. She'd really been looking forward to this shoot. But, just like the Grinch, he'd stolen all of the fun out of this Christmas-themed calendar.