

Sandman Publishing...

First Love, Second Chance

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Holiday eBook Freebie

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"Perfect, except there is no way for me to get it all home." Dana pursed her lips and looked at the home improvement store clerk for a suggestion. She wanted the new house to be festive for the holidays, but a tree, wreathes, pine boughs, and all the accoutrements would never fit in her sedan. Not even in three trips.

This was the first time she felt like celebrating the holidays since her divorce two years ago, and she wanted to do it right, no matter the damage to her credit card. When she'd asked for help selecting a tree stand for the Douglas Fir she'd chosen, she hadn't anticipated wanting one of nearly everything.

But then, she'd spent three years compromising and making concessions, and part of moving back to her hometown was doing what she wanted, and only what she wanted. No point in decking the halls if you weren't going to do it right.

"Well," the clerk began. "We do deliver construction supplies, so I think we could do this as well. It's a twenty dollar fee."

"Perfect!" Dana reached into her purse and pulled out the credit card. "Merry Christmas to me."

On the drive home she cranked the holiday tunes and thought of all the things she wanted to do once the house was set. Her ex hated having people over, but since she'd solved that two hundred pound problem she could have as many gatherings as she wanted. Now that she'd moved back home, she had no shortage of people to invite. She'd host the cookie swap, a holiday cocktail party, the book club, a wrap session, maybe she'd invite her girlfriends over to address Christmas cards en masse.

Safely in the garage of her townhouse, she snagged the bags she'd managed to cram into her sedan and carried them inside. When she moved she'd left everything behind, choosing to make a fresh start by bringing none of her tainted belongings with her. So now, this place was perfectly her own, from the deep ruby rug on the hardwood floors to the white sofa she'd always wanted to own before she had kids.

That thought stopped her short. Her biological clock had been ringing louder than the Jeopardy theme song since the divorce. She was happier now and wanted to share that happiness with someone else. Telling her mother she was considering having a baby on her own would cause even more lectures than the divorce had, and she didn't really want to do it all on her own.

With a huff of breath she put the thought out of her mind. She pulled the scrunchie from her shoulder-length blonde hair, finger combed it, and then smoothed it back into its ponytail. Time to get to work assembling the wreaths she planned on giving friends as gifts. The magazine article said it would be easy to put them together. Here's hoping.

The knock on the door startled her from the wreath of winterberry branches that was probably finished. Stepping towards the door she looked back at the sprays of red berries. Good enough.

Laughing at herself she pulled open the front door and gasped in shock. Benji Ellis. Her high school prom date, fifteen years later. She wouldn't thought she'd have recognized him, but there he was, the same dark wavy hair that defied combing, warm brown eyes, and that laughing twinkle in his gaze. Some things she knew deeper than a memory.

"Hi Dana." He smiled, dimples pressing into his cheeks.

Why did he have to get better with age? His lanky frame had filled out, his dark eyes now held wisdom behind the playfulness she remembered. She hadn't spoken with him since he left for college.

She ran a hand over her curly blonde hair that had to be frizzy by this time in the afternoon. Was it still being held in some sort of semblance by the scrunchie? She wished she'd have checked the mirror before answering the door.

He cleared his throat. "I saw you at my store, but by the time I had a moment to say hello, you'd left."

She blinked, noticing for the first time his hands were filled with swags of evergreen. "You're making the delivery."

She stepped out of the way, her cheeks heated in a blush as she waved him inside. He recognized her at the store, but was it in the same way as she did him? A person changed in the journey from eighteen to twenty-eight, she was living proof of that. A decade ago seeing Benji at the door would mean something, but now? Odd were it meant nothing more than he was making a delivery.

"Sorry, I'm not usually so slow on the uptake."

"I remember." He stepped across the hardwoods to the fireplace, laying the swags on the bare mantel. He turned back towards her, his gaze roving around the room. "Did you just move in?"

She nodded, seeing as if for the first time the starkness of the furnishings. She'd only picked up pieces she fell in love with, not wanting to buy a coffee table until she found the perfect one. "I moved back to town a few months ago. I'd been upstate where I went to college, but after the divorce I didn't want the house as much as I thought I did."

Benji shook his head and took a step closer. "Divorce is hard. Took me a year to get over the feeling of failure."

"Three, if you count the year I shouldn't have wasted in counseling." Dana gave a wistful smile and took a step of her own so she could look up at him the way she used to, before she'd been disappointed, jaded. He met her gaze, peering deep into her eyes and flashing that boyish half-smile of his, as if he could see her deepest desires.

"You tried. That's what matters." He broke the connection and made for the door. "I'm going to go grab the tree."

Right, the tree. She followed him out to the truck, helping to haul in her purchases. After three trips, everything was inside.

"Benji, thanks for the delivery. It was nice to see you again." She offered him her hand.

"It's Ben now." He grinned, the dimple returning, and tilted his head towards the tree. "Why don't I help you put that in the stand. It takes two people to get it straight."

She hadn't remembered that. "Wow. You are very good at customer service."

He laughed, showing her how to open up the tree stand so he could set the tree inside. "I don't think this is part of our usual delivery routine."

"It's nice of you to help me get this set up then." Wiping her hands on her jeans, she stepped back. The tree was perfect. "You are very good at this."

"I wish," he murmured, his voice thick. "Dana, I don't usually make deliveries. I wanted to see you."

"Oh? Are you looking for a new job? The temporary agency I manage—"

He held up a hand, silencing her. "I own the store. That's not what I meant." He heaved a heavy sigh. "Is there any chance you'd want to have dinner with me? Maybe go see *The Nutcracker* or *A Christmas Carol*? I could help you decorate the tree. I'd even go shopping."

A grin spread across her face, tightening her cheeks. "Can I say yes to all of it, or do I have to pick one?"

Dimples pressed into his cheeks as he smiled. "I'll get tickets and let you know about the dates. You pick when we go shopping."

"Deal." Dana held out her hand. He took it, rubbing his thumb along the back. A shiver shot through her as their hands joined. Flesh on flesh had a particular magnetism all its own. Her lids

fluttered closed for a brief moment to better savor the sensations, and recall that the last time she'd felt so cherished had been with him.

"I'm glad you came home, Dana. Your number was on the delivery form. Is it okay if I call you tonight? I need to get back to the store."

"Sounds good." She withdrew her hand, walking to the door and opening it. She watched him leave, waving after him.

She tackled the wreaths again to have something to do with the energy he'd imparted on her with a simple touch, her mind spinning with the possibility of more. She'd finished two more wreaths when the phone rang.

She expected Ben, but her sister's voice came across the line. Within two sentences she was extolling the virtues of blind dates. Again.

"I don't think so, Connie."

"Dana, you have to get out there. You can't sit at home and expect the perfect man to just knock on your door."

She bit her lip to keep from laughing. "You never know. It could happen."

Author Biography

Jenna Bayley-Burke is a domestic engineer, freelance writer, award-winning recipe developer, romance novelist, cookbook author and freebie fanatic. Blame it on television, a high-sugar diet, or ADD; she finds life too interesting to commit to one thing — except her high school sweetheart and two blueberry-eyed baby boys. Her novels can be found online and in bookstores, as long as you live in the UK. Her short stories, both naughty and nice, are available online and in print anthologies. When she is procrastinating, she has lots to say on her [blog](#), [website](#), and reading group, [We Call It Research](#).

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