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TRUE ROMANCE

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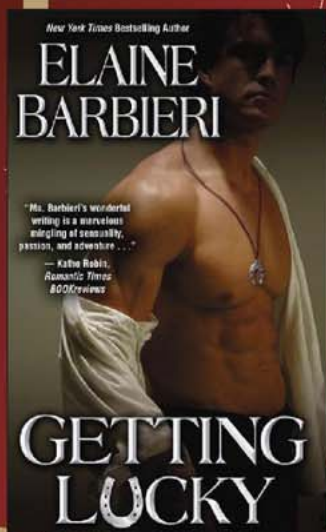
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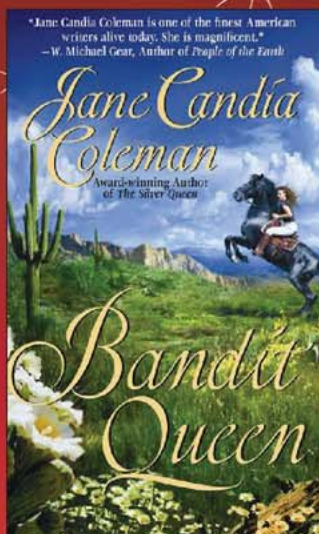
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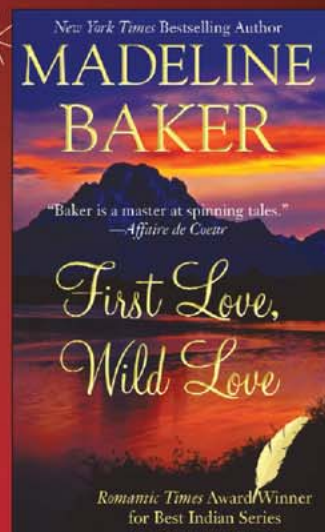
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Bargain For Love

I love the day after Christmas even more than the holiday itself—as far as the gifts are concerned. I know the true meaning of Christmas—the importance of family and tradition and the birth of Jesus. Trust me, I get it, and it means a lot to me.

But all of those sales the next day? It's like a treasure hunt. As far as I'm concerned, it's even better than Black Friday. So the morning after the big day, I loaded up the gifts I didn't want (sorry Aunt Fay, I've told you I don't wear turtlenecks, especially not with penguins on them), wrapped a scarf around my neck, and trudged out into the snow, ready for battle. I know I'm not the only post-holiday warrior—things can get ugly at a seventy-five-percent-off sale. I was properly caffeinated, dressed for battle, and ready to rumble for marked-down holiday merchandise.



I drove to the store early, right after it opened. The parking lot was packed, and not surprisingly, the returns line was already snaking through the store. No problem, though. I was expecting it. So I got in line, waiting to return my stuff, get store credit, and then scour the shelves for bargains. My heart was actually beating quickly just thinking about it. Pathetic, I know.

I smiled at the guy who scooted in line behind me. I looked at the packages he held against his chest. "So I take it you're not a fan of the Snuggie?" I asked.

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, sure I am—just not four of them. I'm hard to buy for, apparently."

I laughed. "You must not have any hobbies or collections then."

He ran a hand through his mussed up hair. He must have just gotten out of bed. He looked really cute, though—brown wavy hair and pale blue eyes. He frowned. "I guess I don't have any hobbies these days. I used to run, but I don't have the time for that anymore. Work keeps me pretty busy. But how did you know?"

"Simple. Because you would have been returning novelty golf items if you were a golfer, or a 365 days of tennis calendar or something. Once people know you have a hobby or collection, you're toast. I had to send out an email informing my friends and family that I was no longer collecting unicorns, and in fact, had stopped collecting them when I was twelve. Once people know you collect something, forget it. You're doomed to get frogs or ducks or cat figurines for the rest of your life."

He laughed. "Good to know. I won't start collecting anything."

I raised an eyebrow, feeling bold. "And you must not have a girlfriend or a wife."

He rubbed his stubbly chin. "Why do you say that?"

"Because she would have volunteered to bring your stuff back for you so she could go shopping."

He frowned a little. "Actually, I am seeing someone, but she hates shopping. . ."

"A woman who hates shopping? Weird," I said, with a little bit of regret because Mr. Snuggie was cute. Like snuggle-under-the-Snuggie-together kind of cute. "I'm Joy." I held out my hand.

"I'm Landon, and I should have known better than to come here today. But I couldn't stand to look at these things for another minute." He looked around the store wearily.

"Oh, you picked the best day to come here. All those sales? In fact, I'm going to finish my Christmas shopping today." I crossed my arms, very satisfied with myself. I felt energized, ready to go.

He scrunched his eyebrows together. "What do you mean? Christmas is over."

I nodded. "True, but I haven't visited all my aunts and friends and their little kiddos yet. So, they'll never know I'm scooping up their Christmas gifts today at a super-bargain. I mean, what's the difference if I bought the bath and body set two weeks ago for twenty dollars, or if I buy it today for five?"

He nodded appreciatively. "I never thought of that. You're right. I have a bunch of people I haven't seen for the holidays yet and could pick a few gifts up for them. Where are these mythical bargains?"

I pointed to the back of the store. "I'll show you myself after we return our stuff. I'll give you a crash course in Joy's Bargain Shopping 101, if you want."

"Okay. You're on," he said.

I got my store credit for fifty-three dollars and seventy-eight cents and waited for Landon, now Snuggie free and ready to roll. "Okay, rule number one. You have to grab a cart, even if you think you're not going to buy much, because you never know what you're going to find. One year, I found gourmet fondue pots for ninety percent off. Can you imagine if I had to go back for a cart? Someone else would have gotten them."

His eyes widened. "They mark things off ninety percent?"

"Sometimes, if you've got some really good shopping karma going on. They were three-ninety each, I bought ten of them, and half my Christmas shopping was done for the next year. Helps to have a lot of storage at home, by the way." I shook a cart loose from the front of the store. "Now, if you're shopping on Black Friday, you better grab one of these in the parking lot, because chances are they're all being used."

"Black Friday, that's the day after

Thanksgiving, right?" he asked.

I grabbed his arm. "You're kidding, right?"

A smile split his face. "Yeah, I am. Even I've heard about Black Friday." Landon grabbed a cart and followed me. "I feel like I should be writing this all down."

I laughed. "Really, I should write a book—then I wouldn't have to bargain shop with all that money, right?" Although I think I'd still bargain, even if I were a billionaire. It's exciting to see what kinds of deals I can score. "Okay, back to business. Now, sometimes having a cart will slow you down, especially if the aisles are packed with other carts, so sometimes it's good to shop with a friend who can guard the cart while you squeeze through the crowds to grab your loot. Then you take turns."

"Shop with a buddy." He frowned. "Now, that might be a tough sell for the guys I know."

I laughed and thought, *Wow, funny and cute. What a keeper if not for the pesky girlfriend problem.* We cruised back toward the seasonal section. "Here's another good tip. If you see something you like, grab it. Don't think about it. You can always put it back. But if you walk away from it, chances are someone else will take it."

Landon swallowed hard and we stopped in front of the five aisles of marked down holiday goodies. People were swarming the aisles, some already wheeling away overflowing carts. "I'm scared," he said.

I laughed. "I won't let you get hurt. Who are you shopping for?"

He scratched his head, still scoping out the situation. "I have a couple of dinner parties to go to, and I didn't buy anything for my uncle Jerry yet. And I always like giving my nieces a gift here and there."

"Good. Look for ornaments or fancy holders for the wine bottles for those dinner parties, bath stuff or hair accessories for the girls, and if you see solid red wrapping paper, grab it. You can use that for any occasion."

He took a deep breath and nodded.

"Ready to go in?" I asked.

"Ready."

"Oh, one more thing."

"What?"

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Eight Saucy Stories!

"Wanna stay and watch a movie? I think there are a couple good flicks on cable tonight." He put a movie on and got us each a glass of wine. This time when he sat down, it was right next to me.

I took a long sip of my wine, hoping to gather up a bit of courage. I set it down and leaned toward him. "I don't really want to watch a movie," I whispered.

He set his drink down, and his lips met mine. A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold night raced through me. Remaining on the couch, his hands tangled through my hair and he pulled me on top of him.



MacBride put out his hand, and despite the fact I only wanted to be away from the man with whom I had managed to make a fool of myself all day long, I shook it. When our palms touched, a tingle of electricity passed from him to me. Though I shake many hands a day while playing out my role as an attorney, I had never experienced anything quite like the tiny current that had just rushed from my palm all the way down to my stomach.



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NOTICE OF ACTION

First Lady Pearls Now Being Released

2,500 Strands of Perfectly Hand Matched, Individually Knotted, Polished Genuine Glass First Lady Pearl Necklaces will be released within the next 72 hours

By: B. Michael John, Media Services

You can now get your very own strand of First Lady Pearls.

Yes, just like the pearls that Jacqueline Kennedy, Laura Bush and now Michelle Obama have been wearing for years... the most famous piece of jewelry a lady can get.

A true elegance and style that has withstood the test of time. Beauty that works for everyone from our First Lady to the youngest little lady. The beauty our First Ladies have been proud to wear for the last 50 years.

From Jackie Kennedy to Michelle Obama, every First Lady has loved the genuine look of pearls.

Right now 2,500 beautiful, genuine glass pearl necklaces are being released in honor of our new First Lady and fashion icon; Michelle Obama.

Each First Lady necklace has 61 hand-tied perfectly matched and polished 8mm genuine glass pearls. A hand-knot is placed between each pearl by Lindenwold Fine Jewelers' renowned craftsmen, just like the finest of all pearl necklaces. A hand-tied knot is placed after each pearl is strung for perfect spacing and in case for some reason it should break, all of your pearls do not go flying to the floor.

Each necklace has a perfect-size lobster claw clasp so anyone can easily put it on and take it off.

Each necklace will be released in a beautiful gift box, accompanied by a genuine Certificate of Ownership.

So whether you are keeping this gorgeous strand of First Lady Pearls for yourself or giving it as a gift, you will have a Certificate of Ownership for each one you receive.

These First Lady Pearl necklaces are nothing short of fabulous!

They easily rival the beauty, color and shine of \$40,000.00 pearl necklaces.

And yes, we are clearly aware that everyone likes to talk about the tough economy. But for \$17, yes just \$17, the way you look and feel while wearing these First Lady Pearls is something no one can take away from you.

You will feel like a million dollars each and every time you put them on... \$17 is such a small price to pay to feel that beautiful, classy and sexy. Such a small price to be among the most elite in the country... such a small price to feel like a true unstoppable woman.

Every woman should absolutely get a strand of these magnificent genuine glass hand-matched and polished stunning pearls.

You can wear these amazing strands with jeans or your finest dress.

As soon as you respond, you will be mailed up to 6 strands of beautiful genuine glass pearls. No gimmicks and no strings attached.

Lindenwold Fine Jewelers, the company responsible for these amazing strands, is allotting 6 necklaces per household so that you will



be able to have one for yourself as well as for gifts to loved ones.

There really is nothing to lose. Lindenwold Fine Jewelers offers a complete, 100% money-back guarantee on absolutely everything they sell.

So if you're not 110% satisfied with your First Lady Pearls, simply return them and Lindenwold Fine Jewelers will return 100% of your purchase price with no hassles, no questions and no worries.

I must warn you, other Americans will be jamming the phone lines trying to get their hands on a First Lady Necklace like this.

So respond now by calling 1-800-343-0452 or by returning the special coupon attached.

RELEASE CLAIM CERTIFICATE

2,500 Strands of perfectly hand matched, individually knotted, polished 8mm genuine glass First Lady Pearls will be released within the next 72 hours. There is a strict limit of 6 First Lady Pearl Necklaces per household - no exceptions please. Each strand of First Lady Pearls comes with a Certificate of Ownership.

- To order by phone, call TOLL-FREE 1-800-343-0452 and give the operator your Authorization Number: X9392. Place your order by using your credit card. Operators are on duty Monday - Friday 6am - 3am, Saturday 7am - Midnight and Sunday 7am - 11pm, EST.
- To order online, visit us at www.Lindenwold.com
- To order by check or credit card, fill out and mail in this coupon to the address below.

This product carries a complete 60-Day Satisfaction Guarantee. If you are not totally satisfied, your purchase price will be refunded. No questions asked.

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CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP CODE _____

☐ First Lady Pearls only \$17. How many: _____ X \$17 = \$ _____

Shipping & Handling \$ 6.85

Only one time shipping fee -- all extra strands are shipped FREE

Guaranteed Priority Processing & Delivery Assurance Option \$1 _____

TOTAL ENCLOSED: \$ _____

Enclosed is \$ _____ in: ☐ Cash ☐ Check ☐ Money Order

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MAIL TO: Lindenwold Fine Jewelers Dept. X9392
7800 Whipple Ave. N.W.; Canton, OH 44767

Lindenwold

Bargain For Love (Continued from page 3)

"Keep an eye on your cart. People will totally pluck the good stuff out if you're not looking," I warned.

"Come on, you're kidding." He gave me a funny look.

I held up one hand, palm facing outward. "Honest to God. Now let's go."

We pushed in with our carts, and I reached out and plucked a pair of fleece pj's from a shelf without stopping. We maneuvered our way into the first aisle. "Okay, here's the bath and body stuff. These are great gifts for birthdays for the women in your life. Just hide it from your girlfriend so she doesn't know what you really paid." I grabbed five baskets filled with creams and soaps before Landon could register what I was saying. "Move it or lose it, Landon."

He plucked two baskets from the shelf and dropped them in his cart.

I pointed behind him. "And we've got cute little baskets of girls' hair supplies over here. Perfect for your nieces." I handed him two and grabbed a few for myself.

"So, how much will these be after the seventy-five percent off?" he asked, looking at the fifteen dollar price tag, doing the mental math.

"Easy, three-seventy-five," I quickly answered. "If it's seventy-five percent off, divide the original price in half, then in half again. So fifteen would be three-seventy-five. Thirty would be seven-fifty. Fifty percent off is easy enough, and if you're lucky enough to find anything ninety percent off, just grab it. But if you really want to know how much it costs, just take a zero off the end of the price. A fifty dollar item would be five bucks."

He stood frozen, taking it all in. "I guess you have done this a few times."

I shrugged and handed him a stuffed cat holding a box of earrings. "Perfect for the nieces on Valentine's Day."

"Thanks," he said, setting it in his cart.

"Looks like aisle three has the entertaining supplies. You could find some stuff for your dinner parties over there." I led him over to aisle

three and wondered if Landon thought I was a cheapskate. Maybe I shouldn't let major date material see this side of me so soon. *But then again*, I reminded myself, *he's not on the market, so no worries*. I took off my coat and tossed it in the cart. It was hard to maneuver in a tiny aisle, plus I was working up a sweat.

We rolled our carts into the entertainment aisle, pushing past others shoppers—nice and polite, no mall rage or anything, but you've got to be assertive. I saw a cute set of coasters, the kind you add your own photos to, and went to grab them, but someone snatched them off the shelf before I could get to them. *Huh?*—That hardly ever happens to me. I looked up, a little ticked. I'd been wanting photo coasters.

Landon held them up in triumph.

My jaw dropped, and I wagged a finger at him. "You catch on quick."

"I have a good teacher." He handed them to me.

I held my hands up. "No way. Those are yours. Well done."

One side of his mouth quirked up and he placed them in his cart.

We made our way through the aisles, laughing and joking and scooping up bargains. After an hour of shopping, we headed for the checkout lines. My cart was overflowing with stuff, and Landon had a good pile in his. The lines were long to check out, but you've gotta expect that kind of thing. I pulled out a granola bar and offered one to Landon. "You've got to be prepared for long lines, hunger, and dehydration on your shopping expeditions."

He laughed. "No, I'm good. I think I'm going to grab some lunch after this. Would you like to join me? I'd love to thank you for your on-the-spot bargain shopping education."

I smiled and dropped my granola bar back in my purse. "I'd love to."

My total bill was only sixty-eight bucks. Landon only had to fork over forty-two smackeroos, and he checked his receipt three times to make sure it was right.

We dropped our goodies in our cars and planned to meet at a restaurant down the street for lunch.

I pulled my hair out of my efficient shopper's ponytail and dabbed on a little lip-gloss. It figures that I'd meet a cute guy while I was scrounging for deals in comfortable but not cute clothes, no makeup, and a totally

uninspired 'do. But oh well, we were going to lunch, weren't we?

Landon was waiting for me by the hostess station, and we were quickly seated.

"So, you don't think I'm a total nut?" I asked him. "It's kind of like a sport for me, really. I like to bring home my spoils and show them off to my mother when she visits. Sometimes I let her buy stuff from me."

He laughed. "You're not nuts, you're smart."

"Gotta do what you gotta do in this economy, right?"

"Absolutely. I sell insurance. Folks are dropping policies, scaling back." He let out a breath.

"I bartend while I'm finishing up my graduate degree, and let me tell you, the tips ain't what they used to be." I looked up into his beautiful blue eyes and suddenly felt a little shy. That whole shopping extravaganza had felt pretty intimate in the afterglow.

"Where do you bartend?"

"Over at McAllister's."

"Oh yeah. I know where that is. Never been there though."

Nope, you haven't, because I would have remembered you.

"Well, lunch is on me today, Joy. You saved me a bundle. From this day forth, I am a bargain hunter." He raised his glass in a toast, and so did I.

I scanned the menu and checked out the two for ten-dollar lunch specials. I pointed it out to Landon.

"That's a good deal, I'll give you that. But get whatever you want. I'm in the mood for a big juicy burger. I worked up quite an appetite back there."

We finished lunch and I was sad for the day's adventure to come to an end.

"So are you going to show your girlfriend your shopping trophies, or keep it a secret?" I tried not to sound too put out.

He blew out his breath. "I guess I'll show her. There's a whole discounted world out there for us to discover."

"Lucky girl," I said. And I meant it. Landon was a catch—just not my catch. Like the best bargain in the store that someone else snatched from under you. Worse even than

losing those photo coasters.

I had a blast the next week visiting my cousin Tanya. Her three girls each got their very own bath and body set. They argued over who would take a bath first to use them. And it was only four o'clock.

"The girls always love your gifts. You're too generous," Tanya told me.

I waved her off; if only she knew the three sets hadn't cost me as much as one set would have before Christmas. I wondered how Landon had fared with his presents. I'd had fun with him that day.

I had other relatives to visit and parties to attend that week after Christmas with my discount goodies in tow, and before I knew it, it was New Year's Eve—fun for everyone but the holiday working stiffs, like bartenders.

I always got gussied up on New Year's Eve, even if I was working. I slipped on my sparkly silver tank top that I'd gotten for six bucks at Macy's, originally fifty-two dollars, thank you very much. I piled my curly brown hair on top of my head in a fun twist and secured it with rhinestone hairpins—fifty cents at Wal-Mart! I fished out my dangling rhinestone earrings—two bucks at Marshall's—and eased into my shiny black party pants. Hopefully, my getup would inspire some serious tipping.

The bar was hopping, but not as busy as it was years ago. My shift started at seven, and before I knew it, it was eleven. I was bringing champagne out from our back cooler, getting ready for the midnight toast, when someone called, "Joy!"

I looked up, shocked to see Landon standing there in all his hot glory. "Hey! You must've heard about our free midnight toast."

He laughed. "No, but that's one good reason to be here."

"Who'd you come with?"

He shrugged. "No one."

"Where's the girlfriend?" I blurted out, not at all subtly.

"We broke up a few days ago." He shrugged. "It really wasn't that serious anyway."

I set down the bottles of champagne and wiped my hands on the little black apron slung across my hips. "I'm sorry to hear it. What happened?"

He opened his mouth, and then closed it. He shook his head.

I held up a hand. "I'm sorry. It's none of my business. So, what can I get you?"

"No, it's okay. Believe it or not, we got in a fight after our shopping expedition."

My smile fell. "I'm so sorry," I said, holding my hand over my heart. "Why?"

He shrugged. "Well, she's wicked jealous and didn't like that I spent the morning with another woman." He rolled his eyes. "And she was being critical of the bargains I got. Thought it was cheap of me. So I told her she was a snob, and it sort of went downhill from there."

I put my hands on my hips. "She sounds beastly."

"I think you're right. It was a good move. Can I get a beer? You look great by the way."

I lifted one shoulder and grinned. "Thanks."

I handed him his beer, but it was busy and I couldn't chat with him as much as I would've liked. It didn't bother him though. He stayed at the bar, catching little bits of conversation with me when he could, which I thought was really sweet.

I passed out glasses of champagne as midnight approached and gave one to Landon. We counted down together and clinked our glasses when the clock hit midnight.

He reached across the bar and leaned toward me. "Is it okay if I give you a kiss?"

I nodded. "I think it's required, being New Year's and all."

He brushed his lips against mine in a kiss that definitely wasn't a friendly New Year's peck. We both smiled at each other like idiots.

"Hey, I didn't mention that I'm having a New Year's party. I'd love for you to come," I said.

"After work tonight?" He looked confused.

"No, next Saturday. I'm going to pick up all the discounted New Year's stuff tomorrow and celebrate next weekend."

He laughed. "Of course you are. I keep forgetting; you're beautiful *and* smart."

Well, that made my tummy tumble. I gave him the information for the party, and then had to deal with the crush of customers at the bar, look-

ing for their first drink of the New Year.

Landon caught my eye over the crowd and waved goodnight. I waved back, and then crossed my fingers that he'd come to my party.

Well, that was a long week of waiting. But I picked up my super cheap supplies, decorated my apartment, made my favorite party dips and appetizers, and waited for the guests to arrive. One guest in particular.

I didn't have to wait long; Landon was the first one there. He looked gorgeous in a pale blue shirt, almost the same color as his eyes.

"Wow, you look gorgeous," he said.

I twirled around in my purple party dress to give him a better view of the low cut back. "Fifty percent off, I'm happy to report."

"Well done. I brought you something," he said.

"You didn't have to." I took the gift bag he handed me and peeked inside. I laughed. "Photo coasters? How did you know? You must have spent a fortune on these," I teased.

"I did indeed." He came in, and I kind of wished I hadn't invited anyone else. But the crowd picked up and I had to play hostess. We had a great time, dancing and toasting the New Year all over again at midnight. Most of the crowd thinned out by one, but Landon stayed after everyone left to help me pick up.

"That was fun," he said, picking up a streamer that had fallen down.

"I'll get that tomorrow. You don't have to help me clean up." I flopped on the couch and he sat next to me. He put his arm around me and smiled.


"So, what's your New Year's resolution?" I asked.

"To never pay full retail price again. And to hang out with women smart enough to do the same." He leaned over and kissed me again, nearly knocking the breath out of me. "So what's yours?" he asked.

"To do a lot more than this," I said, kissing him back. "What a bargain, right? Tons of fun and totally free."

He laughed and pulled me closer, and we both kept our resolutions that year. And when it came time to pick out my diamond ring a year and a half later, he made sure to shop for the absolute best price.♥

Beating the Winter Blues

A photograph of a young man and woman smiling at each other. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a green sweater. The man has short brown hair and is wearing a dark coat with a grey scarf. They are in a room with a window in the background showing blinds and some indoor plants.

If someone had told me several years ago that there would come a time in my life when I would actually enjoy the cold weather, I would have told them they were crazy.

In the past, I'd always dreaded the approaching winter months. Every year, when fall rolled around, I'd find myself reconsidering my son's offer to pull up stakes and move to Florida to live with him and his family.

And, truthfully, the idea did have certain appeals once upon a time. While the most obvious was the fact that I'd no longer have to live through another harsh winter alone, another huge plus was that I'd get to see my four-year-old granddaughter every single day. My current situation only allowed me visits twice a year, once when the three of them visited in the summer, and another time when I visited them for a week at Christmas.

But even though I truly hated the thought of spending another dreary winter by myself, the thought of giving up what freedom I had always made me reconsider. I enjoyed having a space to call my own. I enjoyed my peaceful evenings, and I took great delight in knowing that I could come and go as I pleased.

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Storm Blue



While I loved my son and his family, I knew that a permanent living arrangement with them would greatly alter that situation. At forty-five, I was still a young, vibrant woman, capable of making it on my own.

Sitting in my kitchen, peering out at the moving van in the driveway across the street, I felt a wisp of sorrow. My husband, Chris, and I had loved sitting at the bay window watching the leaves turn colors and silently fall to the ground as the weather grew colder and drearier. We'd spend many mornings together like this, sipping hot cider or coffee and simply enjoying each other's company before heading off to work.

When he died suddenly two years ago, loneliness set in, and I began to dread the approaching winter months.

Across the street, a tall, good-looking man about my own age stepped out onto his front porch. I'd watched the huge moving van unload his belongings the day before, but didn't notice how many people were moving into the house. Holding my cup in one hand, I offered a friendly wave in his direction. He returned the gesture with a warm smile.

Under normal circumstances, Chris and I would have gone over and welcomed our new neighbors to the area with a plate of warm, home-baked cookies and a fresh pot of coffee.

But Chris was no longer here, and I'd made some changes since his death. One of those changes was I now lead a more healthy life. Chris had died unexpectedly of a heart attack at the young age of forty-five. I realized too late that a healthier lifestyle probably would have allowed the two of us more time together.

Unfortunately, we both thought we had many more years before needing to worry about our diets. As many working couples do, Chris and I fell into the easy, convenient routine of picking up fast-food dinners on the way home from work. We'd often settle in front of the television, clogging our arteries with hamburgers, hot dogs, and greasy French fries instead of taking a few minutes to prepare a healthy dinner together.

TR Gardening had become my pas-
10 sion since Chris's death. Growing my

own vegetables in the spring and summer not only produced a variety of healthy food, but working outside in the yard also kept me from sitting inside my house, eating junk food and watching television. I even had a small greenhouse built into the enclosed back porch in order to produce a few homegrown vegetables throughout the winter season.

Walking was another change I'd made in my life. Each day, as I started on my journey throughout the neighborhood, I wondered why Chris and I had never experienced the beauty of an early morning walk. The breathtaking view of the dew glistening on trees and lawns was a sight to behold. Surely we would have enjoyed the early mornings outside in the fresh cool air instead of sitting in our comfortable kitchen, devouring enormous, unhealthy breakfasts of pancakes and heavy syrup, sipping cup after cup of coffee.

And now it was too late to share these things with my husband, I realized sadly. These things I now do by myself would be nicer if Chris were able to experience them with me. Loneliness is everything it's cracked up to be—the one reason I still contemplated the possibility of moving in with my son and his family in Florida.

Finishing off my cup of green tea, I reached for the tennis shoes by the door, slipped my feet inside, and laced them up. Stepping onto the front porch, I did a few stretches before embarking on my morning walk. The air was crisp and the sun bright with the promise of a beautiful late fall day.

The new occupant of the house across the street was no longer outside when I walked by. Although I knew it was silly, I found myself wondering if he and his wife were holing up in their new house, the way Chris and I used to. I hoped not.

Circling the block, I tossed a friendly wave to the few neighbors I passed along the way, pausing once in a while to offer a friendly chitchat. I soaked in the beautiful array of trees, some of which still had orange, red, and amber leaves. While I had to admit the late fall colors were a site to behold, I knew I wouldn't enjoy the dreary, lonely winters that always followed such beauty.

W hen my pedometer indicated

that I had walked a mile, I turned down a side street and continued my walk toward my house, my heart beating a pleasant rhythm of accomplishment. I felt so much more invigorated and full of energy after a morning walk. I knew I'd be ready to tackle some much-needed garden work, as well as cleaning out the flowerbeds in preparation for another long winter.

As I rounded the corner to my house, an unfamiliar voice caught my attention. "Good morning!"

I stopped in front of the new neighbor's house and offered a friendly smile. "Welcome to the neighborhood," I said, putting my hands on my knees to catch my breath.

I wasn't sure if the shortness of breath was from the vigorous walk or the sight of my new neighbor. The brief glimpse I had from my window earlier allowed only a dim view of the man who now stood before me. His slightly mussed brown hair framed a tanned face with dimples that deepened when he smiled.

"I'm Claire Saddlite," I finally managed to choke out. "I'm your neighbor just across the street."

He walked down the steps and held out his hand. "I'm Doug Sheppard," he replied warmly. "It's nice to see a friendly face in a completely unfamiliar situation. I'm a bit out of practice when it comes to meeting new people."

I wasn't sure what he meant by that statement, so I tried making a joke. "You didn't just get out of prison, did you?"

His smile widened, exposing those gorgeous dimples even more. "Nothing like that," he assured me. "But after living in the same house for over twenty years, and working at the same job all that time, it's very difficult to pack up and start over. It's kind of like when I graduated from high school and moved into my first apartment."

"You did make a major change," I said, wondering what would make someone want to start completely over in a new location and a new career. My curiosity was hoping he'd offer to expand on that strange statement. His next words both intrigued and frightened me.

"I just made a fresh pot of decaffeinated coffee. Would you care to join me for a cup?"

He must have sensed my hesitation, because his next statement eased my concern. "I was just about to bring a cup out to the porch. How about if I bring an extra cup?"

"I'd like that," I said truthfully. Although I didn't consider myself the suspicious type, I didn't know anything about this man who had suddenly left his previous life behind. While I couldn't deny the obvious attraction I felt, I also knew better than to place myself in an awkward or dangerous situation.

While he entered his house for the coffee, I made myself comfortable on the front steps. Looking across the lawn, my gaze settled on my own house across the street. I'd done a good job landscaping my lackluster yard over the past two years. Vibrant chrysanthemums added a comfortable, homey atmosphere to an otherwise drab existence. Chris would have been proud.

"I saw you outside watering your flowers while my movers were here yesterday," Doug said as he shut the front door and handed me a cup of hot coffee. "Do you live alone?"

Warning flags shot through my body again, making me tense. Doug must have noticed my sudden discomfort.

"I'm doing this all wrong, aren't I?" he said, shaking his head.

I smiled a bit uncomfortably and took a cautious sip of my coffee. "Well, you are being a bit mysterious," I said, without meeting his gaze.

He took a huge gulp of his coffee and laughed. "You're right. I need to start all over—in more ways than one," he added with a grin.

He set his cup on the porch, turned to face me, and extended his hand. "Hi, I'm your new neighbor, Doug Sheppard. "I was married for twenty loveless and childless years. I ended that, along with our business partnership. I finally decided to just cut my losses and start the rest of my life over in completely unfamiliar territory, because life is way too short to dwell on past mistakes."

He raised his eyebrows. "How am I doing?"

"Not bad," I admitted, finding myself suddenly curious about this new stranger in town. "Except that you still haven't said why you picked

this neighborhood of all the other places in the state."

He pursed his lips and nodded his head before taking another sip of his coffee. "I have to admit that I drove through this neighborhood, as well as several others, many times before deciding it was the place for me."

"So what was the deciding factor in your decision?" I asked.

"I liked what I saw," he said, meeting my eyes with a warm smile. He gulped the last of his coffee. "And it was close enough to my new job that I can ride my bike there if I want to."

"Ride your bike to work?" I asked, surprised by his remark. "You really did give up the rat race, didn't you?"

"In a lot of ways, I've been pretty fortunate. Luckily, my ex-wife and I parted on amicable terms. We've always been better friends than marriage partners. Our business was the only thing we had in common. So when I decided to leave it all behind, she bought me out."

"So you're semi-retired?"

Doug laughed and combed a hand through his thick hair. "Are you kidding? At my age? No way am I hanging it all up for a life of leisure. But I'm fortunate enough to work at a low-paying job I really enjoy, instead of fighting my way into the world of cut-throat business dealings."

I nodded, amazed at the information he had shared so freely. And also amazed at how much we were alike, although I didn't realize it until he spoke the words aloud. When Chris died, his life insurance would have afforded me the luxury of leaving my teaching job behind and settling into a sedentary lifestyle. But, apparently, deep down, that wasn't what I really wanted. I had to admit that teaching gave me something to look forward to each day—especially during the dreary winter months. Those were the months when I could very easily succumb to a life of depression and self-pity.

"So, how'd I do?" Doug asked, tearing me away from my thoughts. "Am I a bit less mysterious now?"

"Absolutely," I answered, feeling more satisfied with my life than I had in two years.

Doug pretended to wipe sweat from his forehead. "Whew! I thought I had blown this new life thing before it even got started," he said. Reaching for his cup, he started to take another

sip before realizing it was empty. "I think we need a refill," he said, taking my cup as well. "But when I come back, it'll be your turn," he added softly.

While he was gone, I took the time to dwell on the things I'd been missing. Even though my husband was no longer with me, I still had a lot to be thankful for. I had my health, a nice place to live, and wonderful friends and neighbors who would be willing to help if ever I needed anything. I realized I had more than a lot of people in my situation.

Doug returned moments later and handed me my cup of steaming coffee. Once he settled onto the porch, he wasted no time in continuing our previous conversation. "Okay," he said, sipping his hot brew. "The floor is all yours. Tell me all about yourself."

I sucked in a deep breath as I thought about what to say. The stranger had already made me see my life in a different way. "Well, let's see," I began. "I'm a widow of two years. I teach high school English, and I just recently embarked on a healthier lifestyle," I said, all in one long breath. "And, oh yeah," I added a bit hesitantly, "I absolutely despise the winter weather. So you might as well know right now that I tend to be a real grouch during the cold months."

Doug's smile almost turned into a laugh. "Now why is that?" he asked with a lift of his eyebrows. "Why does cold weather turn you into such a grouch?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I replied. "It's cold! We have to keep the house closed up for several long, dreary months. The grass dies; all the leaves on the trees die. In some ways, it seems like the end of the world."

My words surprised me. Until Doug had forced me to speak my thoughts out loud, I hadn't realized how terrible it all sounded.

Doug smiled his understanding. "Believe me, I know exactly how you feel," he admitted. "Because I used to feel the same way."

I raised an eyebrow. "I *don't* believe you!" I responded with doubt. "I can't imagine you ever being depressed over anything. You're not making fun of me, are you?"

(Continued on page 61)



Snowboard Baby

It was cold. I could see my breath when I got out of the car and my feet crunched on the ice. A few snowflakes spit from the slate gray sky as I looked around the parking lot. The sight of Edward's rusted green jeep made me want to go home, get into bed, and pull the covers over my head. But no. . . I couldn't. There were things to be said and papers to be signed.

After studying his car for a moment, I walked purposely towards the base of the mountain. Edward would be there—I'd have to face him. I needed to tell him news he wouldn't want to hear. Ignoring the doubt and trepidation that was my constant companion for the last eight months, I walked past the ticket booth and up the incline towards the chairlift.

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"Hey," Tad McGrath, the chairlift operator, called out to me. "It's Holly Foster," he added as he helped a family of four onto a quad lift. Tad had been working at the resort for the last twenty years. He was an old-school boarder, and back in the day, he knew Jake Burton. "Long time no see."

"Yeah," I replied, letting my head bob up and down. "I've been away." As his eyes drifted down my body, I folded my hands over my belly. I didn't know if he could tell, but I wasn't going to say anything. Edward deserved to know first.

Then he pointed over my shoulder. "I just put Edward on," he said. "He should be coming down the superpipe in about ten minutes."

I nodded and went towards the hill. As I weaved my way through the skiers and sidestepped the snowboarders, I ran into Blake Conners. "Its patrol girl," he said, looking me up and down. "I was wondering when you'd make an appearance again. Edward's heart's been bleeding all over this mountain," he added with tons of snark in his voice.

I returned his greeting with barely a smile. Blake deserved nothing more because there was nothing pleasant about him. The only time Blake was decent to me was when his leg shattered in three places and I was his only means of help. He was also Edward's biggest rival in the area. Since they were eight years old, the two have traded first and second-place medals.

When I arrived at the bottom of the superpipe, I could see Edward coming down. I knew it was him because he wore black ski pants, an orange jacket, and a purple helmet. Supposedly the helmet gave him luck. I sat down on the bleachers as I watched him execute a backside air flawlessly, then a rodeo five followed by a back flip. I decided I would never tease him about that helmet again.

Edward didn't see me when he stopped in a cloud of powder at the bottom. After high-fiving a few kids, he took his gloves off, unsnapped his boot, and started sliding towards the chairlift. I could tell he was in the zone, and I wasn't sure if I should

was on ski patrol, we didn't talk much during the day. He had his job, and I mine. Finally, he looked up and our eyes met. "Holly," he raised both eyebrows at me, and I could see them fold up under his helmet.

"Hi," I said. I was excited to see him but didn't want to show it. Even though I had a solution to the problem I was dumping on his doorstep, I knew this wasn't going to be a happy reunion.

He scooted the last few paces towards me and reached for my hand. "I didn't think you were coming back," he said. I thought I heard a touch of melancholy in his voice.

Nevertheless, I pulled away. If he knew what was good for him, he wouldn't want anything to do with me. I could ruin his future, and Edward was not one to be messed with. Last year, he signed a deal with an ice tea company. This year, he won gold at the Winter X Games. Next year, if he qualifies, it's on to the Olympics.

He looked hurt. "Where have you been?" he asked as he pushed his goggles up onto his forehead. Then he pulled down the bandana he had wrapped around his chin. Edward wasn't gorgeous in a classic, runway model type of way. His eyes were dark and close together. There was a scar on his chin from a particularly bad fall off a rock ledge, and his front tooth was chipped—he didn't have the money or the insurance to fix it. But when he smiled, it all came together and he was the most beautiful man in the world—at least to me.

Perceptively, he picked up on my mood and stopped smiling. With a worried glance in my direction, he leaned over and unfastened his other boot from the board. I noticed he had a new board. Burton—I wondered if they were sponsoring him, too. I wouldn't be surprised if he had signed another contract. While I was in California whiling away the hours, turning into a butterball, he had won gold at the World Cup in Switzerland.

After picking up his board, he gave me a good, long look. I tried to not let his velvety brown eyes fluster me. I had my mission, and I needed to stick to it. Because of the heavy coat, I knew he couldn't tell why I was here. I had a few more minutes to enjoy him before he threw me out of his life. "Want to get a hot choco-

late?" he asked.

"Okay," I said, trying to force a smile.

He threw his board over his shoulder and waited chivalrously for me to stand up. Edward had been raised right. Even though he was pretty hot stuff on the hill, he wasn't all ego like Blake.

An electronic Santa bellowing "ho, ho, ho" greeted us as we stepped into the wood paneled cafeteria. Like a typical ski lodge, the floor was slick with ice and slush. Even though I knew to expect it, I needed a moment to gain my footing. Edward put his hand under my elbow as I steadied myself. Before he could wrap his arm around my waist, I stepped out of his embrace.

"You okay?" he asked.

"Fine," I replied in a squeaky voice as we walked around the fireplace toward the tables.

"Why don't you sit by the window," he suggested as he pointed a gloved hand at the large bay that overlooked the bottom of the mountain. "I'll get the cocoa."

As I watched the sun send dark shadows across the snow, I contemplated the skiers and snowboarders coming down the mountain. It was the last run of the day and always the busiest for ski patrol. I recognized many of the faces because I had put ice on their bruises, bandages on their cuts, and even set broken bones.

It made me sad to think that last year I was important to those people and their safety on the mountain. In fact, I even saved a few of their lives. But now I felt like nothing, just an uneducated single woman with too few options.

"I told Lettie you were back in town, and she added whipped cream," Edward said as he placed the cup in front of me, the cream rolling down the sides.

I smiled. I always liked Lettie. On the coldest of days, she'd have something hot ready for me in the kitchen. When I moved to California, I tried to recreate her turkey chili. I wasn't successful; the most important ingredient was missing—the mountains. "I'll have to say hi," I told Edward.

Before sitting down, my former boyfriend pulled off his helmet,

unzipped his coat, and put it on the back of his chair. A woody smell drifted towards me. It was as familiar to me as my own scent.

After sitting down, Edward eyed me carefully. Besides being well mannered, he was also observant. Nothing got by him; he could see treacherous ruts in the snow from the top of the mountain. "Why don't you take your coat off?" he suggested.

As I met his gaze, I knew it was my moment of reckoning. I needed to face Edward and tell him exactly what was going on. "Edward," I said as I looked out at the chairlift shutting down. The chairs bounced up and down while the signal went through the cable. Because I couldn't find the words to explain everything to Edward, I unzipped my coat and let my belly roll out.

It took him a moment to understand. At first, he stared at me with a dark shadow over his face. Then he lifted both eyebrows as he reached across the table and touched my stomach. "You're pregnant," he finally said.

"Yes," I breathed, shifting in my chair. I really wanted to close my jacket, get in my car, and drive back to California. At twenty-three years old, we were both far too young for something like this.

If I could've, I'd raise the baby alone. But the law wasn't written that way. Once the child was born, and if the father was known, he had to be notified about any decisions concerning the child's well being.

Just as the color was starting to return in Edward's face, Blake Connors burst into the room. He had his arm around a blue-eyed blond girl wearing a pink Spyder parka and a red Santa hat. "Edward," he called out. As I said earlier, Blake was Edward's rival but also his practice partner. There was a complicated love-hate relationship between the two.

As Edward tried to wave off his fair-weather friend, I quickly closed my parka. If Blake knew about this, the whole mountain would know in less than an hour. I didn't feel like explaining my current predicament to the lift operator up on Bonanza.

Edward stood and met Blake over near the fireplace. "This is not a good time," I could hear him mutter.

"Just wanted to say hi to Holly," Blake replied. I think he may have already had his first après ski. "It's great that she's back in town," he slurred.

"Why don't you catch up with her later," Edward suggested as the fire crackled. After a moment of studying both of us, Blake muttered okay and moved on. With one final glance, which seemed more like a victory dance, Blake left.

Even if Blake didn't know our exact situation, I could tell he knew something was up and that it would be a distraction for Edward. He quickly calculated an advantage for himself. After a moment, Edward sat back down. Before looking at me, he ran his hands through his hair. "This is why you left early last spring," he finally said.

"I went to my aunts in California," I explained, looking down at my hands wrapped around the Styrofoam cup. Steam rose from the cocoa.

He put his face into his hands. I didn't know if he was mad, upset, or seeing his future vanish in a puff of powder. I decided to reassure him. "I'm going to put the baby up for adoption," I said in a low voice. When he didn't respond, I continued, "I wouldn't have bothered you with this, but I need you to sign some papers."

"What?" Now I could tell he was annoyed. However, I wasn't sure if it was because I came back and placed this problem on his broad shoulders, or because he was mad I was pregnant in the first place.

"Don't I have a say in any of this?" he demanded. Then he narrowed his eyes and looked at me like I was a thief who stole his best board off the rack out front.

"You have a say now," I replied, trying to sound logical. There was no sense getting emotional. I'd made a terrible mistake and I would pay for it for a very long time. But at least I could give my child an opportunity at a life with two parents who loved him and a stable household. "Sign the form," I suggested to Edward.

"What if I don't want to give my kid away?" he asked, challenging me with a disgusted look.

Now that surprised me. As I said before, Edward had a bright future. The kind that included awards,

endorsements, and money—lots of money. Not the kind that was about two a.m. feedings, dirty diapers, and playground politics.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, pushing the form back towards me.

"You had the X Games," I said, feeling slightly defensive. At the time, I thought I was doing the right thing for him and me. Edward and I dated most of last season and we liked each other a lot, maybe we even loved each other. But when I found myself pregnant in early March, I knew the potential for this ruining both our futures was pretty sure. Some may interpret my actions as cowardly, but I thought I was doing what was best for all involved.

He picked up a snowman salt-shaker and rolled it around in his hands. "Who is going to adopt the baby?" he asked, and I could hear the catch in his voice.

"A nice young couple living in San Diego," I replied with fake enthusiasm. "They have a big backyard and a nursery with blue walls that looks over a garden," I continued my pathetic sales pitch. "Plus they both have good jobs," I added that more for myself than for him.

Since I had summers off, I didn't make a lot of money doing ski patrol. I drove an old car, shared my apartment with another patroller, and had about two hundred dollars in my savings account. There was no way I could give this child the advantages the couple in San Diego could.

"It's a boy," he said.

"It will be a Christmas present for them." Then I stopped myself and shook my head, "I think they're Jewish." I started to say the name of the holiday but couldn't remember. Along with my body turning into a butterball, my brain was going to mush. I used to be a lean and decisive machine. On a regular basis, I made life and death decisions; now, at nine months pregnant, I couldn't decide if I wanted Cheerios or corn flakes for breakfast.

"Hanukkah," Edward supplied.

"What?"

"The Jewish holiday," he pointed out. He shifted in his chair and rubbed his hand over his chin.

I pushed the paper back towards him. "I wouldn't have come to you with this if I didn't have to," I

explained. The Open was in two months, and I knew he had to train for it.

"It's not a problem," he said reassuringly as he looked down at the paper. Then he picked it up and read the first few lines with a frown. "I've got to think about this," he warned as he stood. "I'm not sure I want to do this." Then he turned and walked away. With his ski pants hanging low, snow clinging to the bottom of his jacket, and his laces flapping around his toes, he looked too young to have a baby, at least to me.

The next day, Edward called. "Where are you?" I asked. I could hear wind in the background and the noise of a chairlift unloading skiers.

"At the top of a trail," he replied.

"Are you going into the back country?" I asked. With nothing better to do, I spent the morning listening to my roommate's short-wave radio. I knew the ski patrol was worried about avalanches. Twenty inches of snow fell during the night and it wasn't letting up. I also knew the fresh powder would be tempting to someone like Edward.

"Yeah," he said. "The powder is—"

"There's an advisory," I interrupted, knowing what he was going to say. I'd seen firsthand the devastation of an avalanche, and usually there was no rescue work needed—just search. Last year, out by Black Bear Pass, a precipice had fallen and killed a skier. We spent three days trying to find the body.

"Maybe you should stay out of the back country today," I suggested as I looked out the window. I could only see the lower part of the mountain. The day was gray with a dusting of snow. However, farther up, storm clouds were gathering. "It looks like there's a squall coming," I said, a shake in my voice. Again, I chalked this unsteadiness up to the pregnancy. Even though I worried about Edward in the past, I never showed it.

"I wish you were out here to pick up the pieces," he said wistfully, and I knew exactly what he meant. Our relationship cemented after Edward took a terrible spill in the Puma Bowl. I was the first medic to arrive on the scene. After stabilizing him, and while waiting for the toboggan, we talked. I soon learned he wasn't one

of those showy boarder types like Blake, but a thoughtful, considerate person. Every five minutes he thanked me for staying with him.

"Is anyone with you?" I asked.

"No," he said. "I wanted to be alone."

That just increased my worry twofold. With those clouds rolling in from the west, I knew if anything happened to Edward, it'd be difficult to find him. "I'll call Mila," I suggested. "She can go with you."

"No," he replied again, this time much stronger.

Edward had been on the mountain since he was three years old, and I knew my words offended him. For a moment we were silent. All I heard was the wind blowing and ice pounding against my windows.

In the few minutes that Edward and I were on the phone, the spitting snow turned into something stronger. I could see skiers heading towards the lodge, and the few who stayed in the lift line zipped up their jackets and pulled goggles down over their eyes.

"It's getting worse," I said.

"I know," he replied. Then he changed the subject. "Could Rocky and I stop by later?" he asked. Rocky was his German shepherd, about a hundred pounds and all fur. When Edward wasn't on the mountain, he was with his dog.

"Sure," I said.

"See you later," he replied. Then he hung up as I started to admonish him to be careful, but my words vibrated against the dead phone line.

Around six-thirty, there was a knock on my door and I breathed a sigh of relief. I knew it was Edward because I recognized the sound of his truck pulling into the driveway. Mila was still at work. She would be out most of the night. The ski patrol needed to close trails and set explosives for controlled avalanches when no one was around.

Before opening the door, I rearranged my face. I didn't want Edward to see how concerned I'd been for him. When Edward stepped into the apartment, he smelled like the mountain. The scent of pine trees and fresh powder rolled in along with his dog Rocky, who I was particularly fond of. After greeting me with a few sniffs and allowing a pat on the

head, Rocky plopped down in front of the fireplace and closed his eyes.

As I watched Edward's loyal companion, it felt like nothing had changed. Even though a year had passed and we had a life-changing decision to make, things felt familiar. Especially when Edward stuck his nose in the refrigerator and rubbed his belly.

"Have you got anything to eat?" he asked, closing the door and reaching for the kitchen cabinets. He made a face when he found them empty.

"Not much," I explained, affirming his assessment. "I haven't felt like food lately," I added with a crinkle of my nose.

"Whose apples?" he asked, eyeing the fruit sitting in a bowl in the middle of the table.

"Mila's," I replied. "I don't think she'd mind if you had one," I said as I waddled over to the couch and dropped myself down with a huff. I really didn't like my less-than-one-percent-body-fat of a former boyfriend seeing me like this. I used to be built like him—lean and concave.

Glancing at me curiously, Edward tossed the apple back and forth between his hands. "Why don't you want to eat?" he asked, still not taking a bite.

"My stomach is upset," I explained, running a hand over that area of my body—the one causing me so many troubles. The baby wasn't due until the twenty-fourth of December, and I really wasn't sure how I'd get through the next three weeks. My doctor was annoyed with me for making this trip to Colorado, but I had to do it. For my own peace of mind, I needed all the paperwork in order before the grand finale.

"I'm sorry," he said before taking a bite of the apple, ingesting almost half. I watched the juice run down his chin, small chunks rolling out the corner of his mouth. He used his sleeve to wipe the mess off his worried face. "I didn't mean to get you pregnant."

"It wasn't your fault," I replied as I looked into the fireplace. The warmth from the flames felt comforting on my face and eased my aching body. "We both should have been more careful," I muttered under my breath.

He opened a window and tossed the apple core outside for the birds



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before drifting over to the hearth. After sidestepping around Rocky, he sat down at my feet and leaned against my knees. "I'm sorry I wasn't there for you," he said, not looking at me.

My fingers twitched. I wanted to run them through his tangled hair and push the loose ends off his forehead like I used to do many winter nights ago. Instead, I shifted my position to a more comfortable slouch and continued to look into the flames.

Abruptly Edward turned and put his head in my lap, facing my belly. I tried to slide away but couldn't. The weight of him held me in place.

"Ever since you told me," he said slowly, "I feel like he's talking to me." "Who?"

"He's telling me," Edward continued, ignoring my question as he lifted his hand. "I'm yours," he said, tracing his finger in the air over my belly. "I'm your gift."

Now I knew. He was talking about the baby. I spent the last nine months trying not to personalize or fall in love with this child. If I did that, it would be harder to give him away. I couldn't believe that in one day he'd stolen Edward's heart and was now bargaining for his soul.

"Can I feel your belly?" my former lover asked.

"Yes," I whispered, knowing that would cement the deal between them. Even though Edward was a tough competitor and sometimes crass, he wasn't without feeling. When he liked someone, he felt it deeply. I think that was why our bond was so strong last winter.

He ran his broad hand up over my sweater. As I watched his callused fingers slide down the sides of my belly, I felt sad for what could have been. If only this had happened at another time, when Edward and I were older and had the resources to support a family.

Then the baby kicked against his fingers. "Ohhh," Edward cried out. "Are you trying to talk to me little fella?" The baby kicked again as Edward leaned closer to me. "What do you need?" Edward whispered into my belly. "Are you ready to come out of there and face the world?"

bare skin. The baby's knee or elbow pressed against my side, creating a bulge under my ribcage. Edward cupped the limb in the palm of his hand. With that simple gesture, all the emotions I'd suppressed for the last nine months crashed to the surface.

Tears I hadn't shed blurred my vision and clung heavily to my eyelashes. With his other hand, Edward reached for mine. He held me as he continued to talk to the baby. "You know, baby," he said softly, "your mommy thinks she's tough. Climbing into avalanches, skiing black diamonds at full speed, rescuing people off cornices. But don't you worry," he advised. "She's really a marshmallow under it all, and even though she doesn't show it, she loves you as much as I do."

That night Edward got into bed next to me. I rolled over onto my side and he rubbed the base of my spine. At that moment, his warm fingers felt better than sex and chocolate combined. And while the sound of his soft breath lulled me into sleep, I felt the least anxious I'd felt in a long time. Maybe everything would be okay, maybe this could work out.

While I slid over that precipice into oblivion, I thought I heard Edward say, "I love you, Holly." But I was too far gone into the land of the sheep to be sure. Plus I wasn't sure I wanted to know. Tomorrow was another day, and God willing, I'd have the strength to face my heart's desire and the decisions that had to be made.

I think you should stay the course," Mila repeated herself sternly the next day. My roommate was practical like me. We both ate right, balanced our checkbooks, and got eight hours of sleep every night. "Edward's going to be in Argentina by May, and you can't follow him there with a baby in tow." After hearing Mila's assessment of the situation the first time, Edward got up and left, muttering something about wanting to raise his son.

I nodded again. Mila had a point. Many of the top-ranked snowboarders went to South America in the summer to continue their training. Besides being cold and snowy in Las Lenas, Edward's accommodations

were rustic. The landscape was beautiful, but he stayed in a dormitory with a bunch of other guys.

"You don't want to be some board groupie?" Mila raised her eyebrows in a "do you?" kind of way. When she found the expression on my face not as outraged as she thought it should be, she added, "Those women are sad."

It certainly would be degrading to follow Edward around the world from ski resort to ski resort. But he loved the baby. *Would I regret my decision if I didn't try to make this work?*

"He won't sign the form," I said to Mila, trying to explain why I was reassessing my options. "He loves the baby," I said, and I think the happiness in my voice surprised her.

"Yeah, right," she rolled her eyes and shook her head. A few years back, Mila's father remarried; now she had a two-year-old stepsister, so she knew all about this stuff. "Is Mister Gold Medal still going to love that baby when he can't sleep at two in the morning?" She pointed her spoon towards me. "What about when he loses a major competition because he didn't have enough time to practice?"

I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes and sighed. "You're right," I conceded.

"Don't you want to follow your own path? Build a life?" she continued, now driving her point home a little too hard, and not march around the world watching *him* get all the glory?" she pressed.

Even though she was being beyond annoying, she was probably right. I wasn't famous like Edward, but I was well respected in ski patrol circles, and that made me proud. On the other hand, maybe I could put my pride on hold for a few years.

"Stick to the plan," she suggested. "Don't let Edward derail you." Then she put her bowl in the dishwasher, grabbed her jacket, and headed out the door.

After she left, I studied the clock. I had a long day ahead of me. Since it was sunny outside, the patrol radio wouldn't be as interesting as it was yesterday. I needed to find something else to do, and I wanted to clear my head communing with nature.

Without warning, my insides flood-

ed out of me in a river of warm water—otherwise known as embryonic fluid. I wasn't expecting this when I decided to snowshoe up Rabbit Pass. All I wanted to do was enjoy the sunshine for a few hours. Not have a baby.

I quickly got Mila on the phone.

"This morning Edward told me he was going out that way," she said.

"Is he boarding the back country alone—again?" I spat, agitated beyond belief.

"Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?" she countered.

"I'm snowshoeing, not going down a mountain at fifty miles per hour," I shot back. I knew everything was going to be okay, but I was feeling a little edgy.

She ignored my reasoning and got down to business. "I'm going to call him. He can probably get to you in fifteen minutes. It will take me close to an hour." Using her official tone, she explained, "I'll also radio around and find out if there are any other patrollers in your vicinity."

I hung up the phone and watched the snow melt around my butt. If I weren't in such a bad situation, I would have laughed as steam rose between my legs. I couldn't believe this was happening to me. Didn't I have another three weeks to prepare? Wasn't I supposed to be in sunny California delivering this baby, not on a mountain face miles from civilization and near the Continental Divide?

Deciding it was better to keep busy than think about my predicament, I started to take my snowshoes off. Before I could reach for the bindings, a contraction was upon me. The pain rolled through my abdominal area and around my hips. I cried out so loudly, the birds in the trees above me stopped tweeting and flew away.

When it was over, I fell back into the snow and looked up at the sky, panting heavily. As puffs of mist covered my face, I noticed an angry cloud rolling off Mount Glory was covering the crystal blue vista.

"Mila, please get here soon," I pleaded into the wind. But it wasn't listening. It was completely happy pushing the dark clouds over my head. For a moment I thought about walking out by myself, but another contraction engulfed me, and I knew

I wasn't going anywhere without help.

"Holly," a voice called from above.

"Holly," Edward said again.

"Here," I croaked and peeled my hand off my belly to wave at him.

Within a minute, he was on top of me. Stopping next to where I laid and sending a mini-avalanche cascading down the mountain. "You okay?" my former boyfriend asked, concern written all over his rosy cheeks and frostbitten nose.

"I'm fine," I lied. "It's just that the baby is coming and I don't think I can walk out because of the contractions."

He put his hand on my belly. "I knew he was coming," he said with a smile. "Last night he told me he wanted out of there."

"When you boys were having that talk," I countered. I was feeling better now that I had company and was between contractions. "Couldn't you have said something like—" I stopped speaking as I made my voice deep like Edward's. "Son, on the side of a mountain is not a good place to make your appearance in the world."

Edward pulled his gloves off. "It was after you were asleep," he defended himself. "We had to keep it down because we didn't want to wake you up." He placed his hands under my jacket and on my belly.

"You're cold," I said, squirming away.

"I'm telling him to stay in there a little longer." He rolled his lower lip between his teeth. "Just until we can get you to the hospital."

"I don't think he's listening to you," I moaned through gritted teeth as another contraction came over me.

"Breathe," Edward suggested, ignoring my comment. "Deep breaths," he said as he got behind me and supported my back and head against his chest.

When it was over, he looked at his watch. "One-thirty-two," he noted. "The doctors will want to know how far apart they are when we get to the hospital," he said in a very involved way. When I made my decision to go to California, never in a million years did I think Edward would be interested in this baby. I completely misread the situation.

Three contractions later, Mila arrived and chastised me for going snowshoeing alone. Edward nodded

in agreement as I was loaded onto the toboggan, covered with tarps and tied down. As I sledded down the mountain, the two of them had a great time telling me what a dummy I was, with Edward reassuring our son that I wasn't always like this.

When the next contraction ripped through my body two minutes earlier than expected, they shut up and got to work. Within minutes they had me at the road and loaded into the ambulance. Edward rode to the hospital in the back with me and showed up in the delivery room wearing a mask and scrubs. He said seeing his son born was even better than winning gold last year.

After it was over, I laid in my hospital bed, exhausted with my newborn baby at my breast. Edward sat next to us, and every time the door opened, he used his broad shoulders to shield us from some imaginary threat. Usually it was a nurse and he would back up, but when Mila came by, he wouldn't budge. I guess her words that morning about staying the course made him nervous.

Once she was gone, he gathered the baby and me into his arms. "We've got to make this work," he whispered. He held our son's foot in the palm of his hand and looked at it like it was a rare gem. Then he leaned over and kissed the tiny big toe. "I don't want to give him up," he looked at me solemnly, his eyes searching my face.

"Are you sure we can do this?" I asked.

He kissed the baby on the forehead and then me. "Yes," was his firm reply. "I don't want him to be anyone else's gift," he said with tears in his eyes. "He is ours, and we will make it work, no matter what." He squeezed my hand with the decisiveness of a man who knew what he wanted out of life.

That day, I took a leap of faith with Edward, and it was the best decision I ever made. Yes, life is hard for us. We don't have a lot of money, but we have each other, and that's all that counts. We named our lovely baby boy Noel, and the joy he brings us was worth giving up everything else. Someday I'll go back to ski patrol, but right now I want to be with my family—wherever that is in the world.♥

Winter Love Affair



I hit a patch of ice and screamed, gripping the steering wheel. My knuckles were as white as the snow falling outside. The car skidded, and then spun in a circle while my heart was thumping and bumping in my chest. I pressed my foot on the brake, but I had no control over the vehicle. My little car whirled right off the road and into a ditch.

The impact threw me into the steering wheel. The wipers swooshed back and forth, and the radio played on as I sat there, stunned. I slumped forward and started crying. *What am I doing here? A Florida girl does not belong in the tundra!* But love makes you do funny things, like move to upstate New York from the Deep South. Not that I was in love anymore. That relationship fizzled fast. And now here I was—stuck, in more ways than one.

I allowed myself a few more tears, wiped my face with the back of my hand, and grabbed my cell from my purse to call for help. A knock on my window made me jump. I rolled it down.

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"Are you all right?" A guy about thirty, probably the same age as me, peered into my window.

My lip trembled. "I. . . I'm not hurt. But I don't know about my car."

He opened the door for me. "You didn't hit anything, you just spun out. I think your car's fine. We just gotta get you out of there."

"I was just about to call for a tow truck." I shoved my hands in my pockets and my teeth started chattering.

"Let me see if I can get her out for you. That's just a little ditch. I've got some floor mats we can slide under there; maybe that'll give us enough traction." He smiled, and dimples puckered his cheeks, which were pink from the cold.

"Seriously? I don't want to keep you from anything." *Kind and cute? What an unlikely combination.*

He shrugged. "I can't leave you here by yourself." The snow was falling harder, clinging to his long eyelashes. His dark hair curled under his hat. He jogged back to his truck and pulled out two large floor mats. He wedged them behind my rear tires and hopped in the driver's seat.

I walked back toward his truck and wrapped my arms around myself. I crossed my fingers, hoping he could get the car out of there.

The tires spun in the snow, and the floor mats popped out and flew back a few feet. He got back out, grabbed the mats, and wedged them under tighter. This time, he pressed the gas lightly and rocked the car up and out of the ditch.

My headlights illuminated the snow falling in the late afternoon dusk. I ran up to my car. "I can't thank you enough! This is my first winter driving, and it's a lot more challenging than I imagined." I reached my hand out to thank him.

He shook it, and then wrapped both of his hands around mine. "You're freezing. Where are your gloves?"

I shrugged, a little unnerved by the way his hands engulfed mine; he was a big guy. I felt oddly protected by him.

I grimaced. "I forgot them."

He laughed and shook his head. "Right, your first winter. Where are you from?"

TR
22 "Florida. I'm still getting used to bundling up every time I leave the

house. And today, it wasn't snowing when I left."

He let go of my hand and rubbed his chin. "That's lake effect snow for you. It can pop up without warning as long as the lake isn't frozen. And it won't be frozen for a while."

I looked up at the big gray clouds dumping snow on us. "When do you think it's going to let up? I don't exactly feel confident driving home right now."

"Not anytime soon. Listen, there's a little diner right down the street. What do you say we grab a cup of coffee, warm up, and wait for the snow to taper off?"

"Sure, my treat." I hopped in my car and followed him about a mile down the road. I still felt a little shaky and was glad to put my car in park and dash into the diner.

A hostess led us to a booth, and we slid onto the black leather seats and both ordered a coffee. "I'm Corrine Lisbon, by the way. Tampa, Florida transplant and horrible winter driver."

"I'm Tate Bellinger. Lived here in Orchard Park all my life. What brought you up north from Tampa?"

I frowned and snapped open my menu. "A guy."

Tate leaned back. "Oh."

I looked up. "Oh, no. We broke up four months ago. Right after I got a semi-decent job at an ad agency. And here I am, all alone." I had met Rod on a Caribbean cruise with my girlfriends, and we started this steamy, long distance affair. Six months later, we decided to give things a try. He had a job as a teacher up here and didn't want to give up what he'd earned toward his pension, so we decided I should move up north. I moved in with him and found a job. Three months later, I realized it had been a bad move and got my own place.

Tate clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Ugh, that's tough. You move up here for a guy and he breaks up with you?" Tate's big blue eyes widened in sympathy.

"No, actually I broke up with him. Living with someone is a whole lot different than long distance phone calls and romantic weekends visiting each other." I shrugged. "I'm planning to move back to Tampa once I can find a job down there. I've got

some resumes out, we'll see. Today kind of sealed the deal. I can't take the winter. TGIF is all I've got to say. I'm going to need the whole weekend to recover."

"Have you done anything fun yet? I think winter is great. Sure, the driving can be tricky, but there's so much to do outdoors." His face brightened just talking about it.

The waitress brought our coffees, and we ordered burgers for dinner.

"No, careening into the ditch is the only adventure I've had with the outdoors so far." I grinned over my coffee, happy my heart was finally slowing down after the spinout. Although, the way Tate was grinning back at me made it speed up again.

"Well, then after your driving lesson tomorrow in the empty school parking lot, you're going snowmobiling with me." He brought out the killer grin again.

"I am? I'm taking a driving lesson? And I'm going *snowmobiling*?"

"You are. I can show you how to drive in the snow, how to get out of a skid. Then, I'll show you how much fun snow can be. What do you say?" He raised one eyebrow.

Hmm, sitting home feeling sorry for myself, watching the snow pile up, or hanging out with my hot hero man? "Sure. That would be great. If it's no trouble."

"No trouble at all. I'll be keeping the streets safe and all," he teased.

We each downed two more coffees and shared a piece of lemon meringue pie. Two hours had passed and the snow finally died down. I had a nice time learning about his job at a bank, where he was quickly moving up the ranks. And he talked endlessly about his golden retriever, Benny, and his nieces and nephews, whom he adored.

"Do you want me to follow you home to make sure you get there all right?" Tate asked.

"I live about ten minutes away. Are you sure it's not a bother?" I twisted my hands in my lap.

"I live right around the corner from here. Not a problem at all."

"Okay, well just to warn you, I'm going to be driving very, very slowly."

"See, you're learning already. That's the first rule: If there's snow, you must go slow."

Tate insisted on paying the bill, so

I planned to bake him a batch of cookies that night. Not like I had anything else to do on a Friday night. He helped me into my car and followed me out of the parking lot onto the freshly plowed road. It felt nice knowing Tate was behind me.

I pulled in the driveway of my apartment building and Tate hopped out. He walked me to my door. "Okay, so I'll meet you here tomorrow, let's say after lunch? How about one o'clock?"

"Sure. I really appreciate it, Tate. I'd probably still be stuck in the ditch if it weren't for you. You're my hero." I felt like popping up on my toes to kiss his cheek, but I didn't. Instead, I reached for his hand and squeezed it.

He grinned. "It's not often we men get to flex our knight-in-shining-armor muscles. I was happy to help." He shrugged. "I would have helped anybody who slid off the road. It just turned out my driver in distress was a lovely damsel." He wiggled his eyebrows and I giggled. "Wear your gloves tomorrow. And please tell me you have warm boots."

"I have cute boots," I offered.

"Wear a couple pairs of socks, then. See you tomorrow, Corrine."

I let myself in my apartment and looked out the window. I watched him walk back to his car, wishing our night hadn't ended so early.

After bundling up in a hat, several scarves, and putting long underwear on under my jeans, I realized it's hard looking cute and staying warm at the same time. I was dressed and waiting for Tate when he rang the bell at one. My heart sped up a bit, and I wondered if he'd felt the same attraction I did the day before. And then I panicked, wondering if I had been attracted to him just because he saved me. Would he seem different to me the next day?

I opened the door, and Tate smiled. *Nope. Major attraction still there*, I thought, relieved.

"You ready?" he asked.

"Not at all. But I'm willing to give it a shot. And here," I handed him the plate of cookies. "A little thank you for yesterday."

"Ah, the way to a man's heart is through his stomach. I'm easy that way."

I laughed and climbed into my car,

really looking forward to our day together. I followed Tate to the high school across town. He took the wheel of my car and purposely sent it spinning into a donut, as he called it. I gripped the door handle and whimpered.

"You don't want to pump the brake because you have anti-lock brakes that do the pumping for you, but you could possibly prevent this by turning the wheel into the direction of the skid before you start going out of control like this."

Tate was very patient, explaining his driving tips to me when I took the wheel. He reached over several times and corrected the wheel for me. It was hard concentrating with him so close to me. He smelled a little like pine trees mixed with a warm, smoky scent. When I was finally able to pull myself out of a skid after several tries, I stopped the car and he smiled at me. "Congratulations. You should be able to stay out of ditches for the rest of your stay here in Western New York."

I grinned. "Thanks. You are an excellent teacher."

"Now the fun part. You ready to ride?"

I stared at him for a moment and then shook my head, suddenly remembering. "Oh, right. The snowmobile. Will I be okay in jeans and long underwear?"

He frowned. "And those little boots with the heel? No. Let's stop at the sporting goods store and get you some snow pants and decent boots. That's half your problem, dealing with the snow. You weren't prepared for winter."

"I didn't exactly have anyone to help me."

"Stupid ex-boyfriend of yours. Although, I'm glad he was stupid." He put his hand on my shoulder. "Good thing I came along," he teased.

I looked up at him, that I-want-to-kiss-you-feeling taking over again. "I'm glad you *did* come along."

We drove to the store, bought boots that cost way more than they should have for something so ugly, and drove back to his place. It was a cute little ranch house settled far back from the road, surrounded by woods. I slipped on my new boots and snow pants. Then Tate led me to

his garage, where he proudly uncovered his snowmobile.

He patted the hood. "My baby. My number one favorite thing to do in the winter."

"Where do you ride this? On the road?"

"Oh, my little Florida girl, you're killing me. Nope, there's a system of trails across the area where you can ride. Farmers and landowners who don't care if we ride across their property." He handed me a helmet.

"I need a helmet?"

"We go fast."

"How fast?"

He grinned and fastened his helmet. "You'll see."

This is really fast!" I screamed as we zoomed along the trail behind his house.

He turned back to me. "No, it's not. Hang on!" And with that, he doubled his speed.

I screamed again and hung on for my life. But once I realized that he knew what he was doing, I enjoyed myself. The woods were beautiful and sparkling with the fresh coat of snow. We rode for an hour or so, and Tate parked the snowmobile at a small tavern. "I thought you could use a break," he said.

"We're going to go inside like this?" I asked, gesturing to my stupid, bulky outfit.

"Yeah, there're other sleds here. There'll be other riders. Come on. There's a fire inside. We'll grab a beer."

I took off my helmet, thinking of how frightening I must look. We ordered a beer and settled in a booth. I quickly forgot about my helmet head. I was surprisingly relaxed around this guy.

"So, what did you think?" Tate asked.

"I was really scared at first, but it was fun. I'm shocked. I didn't think I could ever enjoy being out in the snow."

"See? And you haven't even tried skiing or sledding or ice skating, have you?"

"Nope."

He set down his beer. "What about building a snowman?"

I shook my head.

"Snow angels?"

"I haven't done anything outside. TR

(Continued on page 26) 23

Love Poetry



Christmas Magic

I fell in love one Christmastime;
I never thought I would,
But fate kindly intervened
And really thought I should.

He was a handsome man, you
know. . .
Chin straight as it could be.
His eyes so warm, I melted,
Every time he looked at me.

He caught me near the mistletoe;
I thought that I would faint,
But in reality, I knew
That I had no complaint.

I think back to that Christmastime;
How special could it be?
We fell in love forevermore,
When he asked to marry me.

Each Christmas, I'm reminded
Of the magic Christmas brings.
Two people falling deep in love;
To my heart that image clings.

—Elinor Filice

Mother Makes Sweet Christmas Memories

Memories, sweet memories—
What precious bonds they are,
For they keep us close
In heart and thought
Whether we're near or far.

Memories are so precious
That they're treasured lovingly
And each recall a Christmastime
In days that used to be.

The family around the table,
The presents, big and small,
The laughter and the merriment,
The spirit of it all.

Each one recalls a holiday
Just perfect through and through,
And looking back, it's plain to see
So much of it was you!

—Lucy Marie Duncan

A Beautiful Thought

A heavy white blanket
Of snow on the ground
A wintry night
With nary a sound
A silvery moon
Shining on high
Lighting the heavens
Way up in the sky
This portrait of winter
For those who believe
Is welcomed with joy
Each Christmas Eve.

—Marlene Klotz



Great Expectations

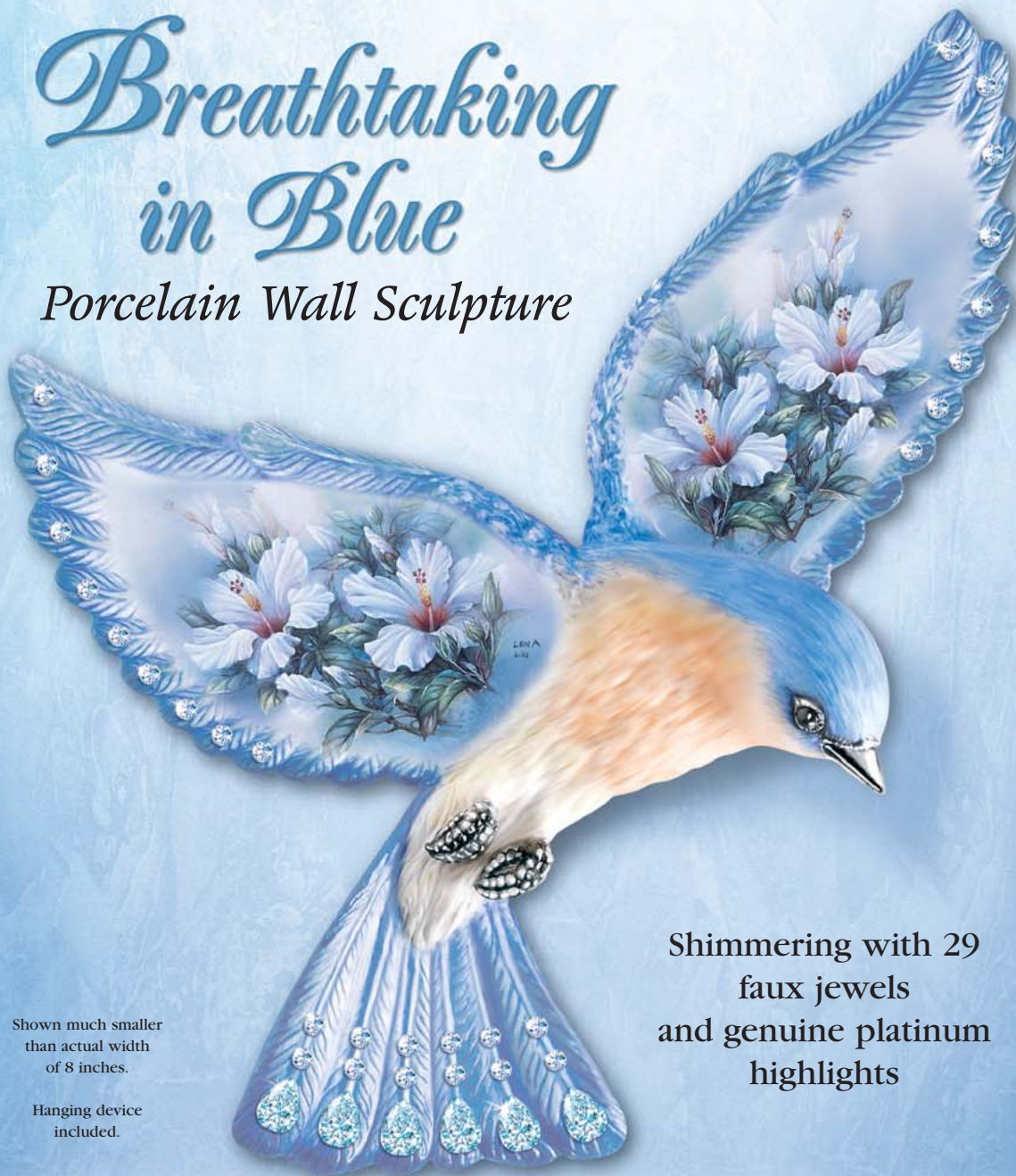
From out of the midnight sky—
that inky-black mystery—float
huge, fluffy snowflakes.
Sound begins to fade, muffled
by the quickly forming blue-white
crystalline cloak, which brightens
and bejewels the landscape.
It is Christmas Eve.
Such a reverential hush is more
than welcome
and beyond peacefully pic-
turesque.
The event approaches allegory,
reenacts,
reassures that Heaven's purity can
reach—
has reached—our lives.
A cleansing purity, destined to
return.
On this silent, holy night, I stand
transfixed, fully expecting love.

—Jill Marie Bonnier



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Winter Love Affair (Continued from page 23)

I've pretty much been counting down the days until winter's over."

He rolled his eyes. "Oh, you've got a lot of catching up to do."

I grinned at him over my beer. "Okay. I'm game for anything."

He lifted an eyebrow. "Then we need to get you back to my place pronto."

I blushed. "That didn't come out exactly like I meant it."

"Oh, I know exactly what you meant. Come on."

We returned to the snowmobile and started driving back. I clung to him, wondering what he thought was going to happen back at his house. I was attracted to him, no doubt about it. But I wasn't sure I was ready for any indoor sports just yet. I mean, I just met him the day before. Then again, it had been a lonely few months since I'd left Rod.

We hopped off his snowmobile, and my heart was pounding just as hard as when I slid off the road. Tate took me by the hand and led me toward his house. Then he fell backward in the snow and started flinging his arms and legs around. "Come on, you can't go through life without making a snow angel."

I laughed and fell into the snow, swishing my arms back and forth. I giggled like a silly girl lying on the ground. Tate packed a handful of snow together and tossed it at me.

I scrambled to my knees and threw handfuls back at him, but the snow just broke apart. Tate's snowballs were well packed and firm as they slammed into me. "Why are yours so good?"

He came over and showed me how to pack a snowball—which I promptly threw at him. We played around a little bit more, but then my teeth started chattering. "Can we go inside for a little while?"

"Yeah, your cheeks are red. We'll save the snowman for another day."

Well, that certainly warmed me up a bit. *He was thinking ahead to another day?*

We went inside, and Tate built a roaring fire. He made hot chocolate with little marshmallows bobbing on

I told him about growing up in Florida—the long days spent at the beach and our sweltering summers. The sun had slipped from the sky, and I wanted to stay inside his warm cozy house where I felt safe and tucked in for the night.

"Wanna stay and watch a movie? I think there are a couple good flicks on cable tonight." He put a movie on and got us each a glass of wine. This time when he sat down, it was right next to me.

I took a long sip of my wine, hoping to gather up a bit of courage. I set it down and leaned toward him. "I don't really want to watch a movie," I whispered.

He set his drink down, and his lips met mine. A shiver that had nothing to do with the cold night raced through me. Remaining on the couch, his hands tangled through my hair and he pulled me on top of him. The movie had ended by the time we came up for air.

"Wow," I said.

He grinned at me, looking absolutely adorable, with his hair all rumpled. "Yeah. Wow." Then he looked out the window and his eyebrows knitted together. "It's really coming down. I'm not so sure you should drive home."

His window was covered in white, and the wind was howling. I bit my lip.

He held up his hands. "I'm not trying to force you to stay over or do anything you don't want to do. I just think that looks like a nasty storm. I can let you sleep in my bed, and I'll take the couch."

"You're six-foot-five. You wouldn't fit on this couch. I'll sleep on the couch. Or. . ." I didn't know if it was because of all the new things I'd tried that day, or the wine, or the way I felt so safe in his arms on this cold, stormy night, but I proposed another idea. "Or, we could share the bed. Just sleeping. I don't usually move that fast."

He wrapped his arm around me. "You're not trying to tease me, are you? That's going to be mighty tempting. Keeping my hands to myself?" He smirked, and I knew he was teasing me.

I smirked back. "I didn't say you had to keep your *hands* to yourself."

He laughed and grabbed my hand, leading me out of the family room

and toward his bedroom. "I'll do my best, Corrine."

He tossed me an old T-shirt to wear for pajamas, and opened a new toothbrush for me. It was very strange crawling into his bed; I had just met him last night. But I really liked this guy, and I wanted nothing more than to fall asleep in his arms and feel safe: from the storm, from this strange new place, from the lonely life I'd been leading.

So, we didn't get much sleeping done the first hour or so, but eventually after more kissing and talking, he wrapped his two big arms around me and pulled me against him.

We spent the next few weekends together exploring the outdoors: cross-country skiing, ice skating on a pond near his house, building snowmen. We talked during the week and went out for dinner and movies. I guess you could say we were dating. I wasn't seeing anyone else, and I didn't think he was either. I had wanted to keep things casual since I was planning on moving back to Tampa. But I was falling for Tate—big time. And I was also falling in love with winter, go figure.

I was getting ready on a Friday after work for some late night snow-tubing when the phone rang. It was six o'clock, and I hoped Tate wasn't canceling. He'd caught a cold and was feeling a bit under the weather.

But it wasn't Tate. It was the creative director from an advertising agency in Tampa. "We'd like to fly you down for an interview," the woman told me.

My heart sank. "Really?" I hoped I sounded more excited than I felt.

"Yes, I'd like you to call my assistant on Monday to make travel arrangements. We were very impressed with your resume, Corrine."

Tate rang my bell right after I hung up. I tried to force a smile for him, but he narrowed his eyes at me. "What's wrong?"

I opened my mouth to say, "Nothing," but I burst out into tears instead.

He pulled me over to the couch and sat me down. "Hey, it's going to be all right no matter what it is." He rubbed my back as I tried to regain my composure.

"I just got a call from an ad agency

in Tampa. They want to fly me down for an interview."

His hand stilled on my back. "Oh. Really. . ." He looked off, out the window. "I'd like to say that's great, but I don't want you to go. Corrine, I . . . really care about you."

"Me too." I sniffed and nodded. "I don't want to go either. But it's a really great opportunity. If things don't work out between us, I might regret not going."

He nodded. "I totally understand, especially after what happened with your last boyfriend. I don't want to be your decision maker here. You do what you think is best for you—what you want to do." He shrugged. "Maybe the long distance thing would work for us. Heck, I wouldn't mind visiting Tampa."

I swallowed hard and nodded. "So, let's just go tonight and not talk about this anymore, okay?"

"Okay."

But things were strange between us the rest of the night. We had a blast zooming down this giant hill on big black inner tubes under bright spotlights illuminating the night. But on the ride home, we were both silent. "Come in and stay with me tonight," I said quietly.

He grabbed my hand and squeezed it. "Okay."

Tate held me and stroked my hair as I quietly cried in bed. Somehow he knew it was best not to talk. I fell asleep in his arms and dreamed we were skating and I fell through the ice. I reached for him, but couldn't grab his hand.

I woke with a start, sobbing and panting.

Tate sat up and pulled me into a hug. "Hey, you're okay. Everything's fine. It was just a bad dream."

I shook my head. "No it's not. Everything is not fine. I'm going to be without you. It's not going to be okay at all."

He was quiet for a moment and scratched his head. "So, you've decided to go."

I shrugged. "I at least have to go to the interview."

He nodded and settled back on his pillow.

I reached for his hand and tried to fall back asleep. I guess I was too scared of having that dream again. I was up until dawn.

But I must have fallen asleep, because I woke to a heavenly scent from the kitchen. Tate had made breakfast. "We're going to spend every minute together this weekend. If you're leaving, then I better enjoy you while you're here."

We spent a great weekend on his snowmobile and playing outside with his dog. On Monday morning, I made my arrangements to fly down to Tampa that Thursday. We didn't talk about it for the rest of the week, until he drove me to the airport.

"Well, I guess I should say good luck," he said.

"So say it."

"Good luck—figuring out what you want." He kissed my head, and I filed into the security line. My heart dropped when I watched him walk away.

Eighty thousand dollars?" I asked, trying to stay calm.

"Yes. Plus benefits, of course. So what do you say?" the director asked me over dinner.

I swallowed hard. "May I have a day to think this over, and call you when I get home?"

"Absolutely. But we'd like a decision by the middle of next week. We need to fill this position," she said.

Eighty thousand dollars was twice what I was making in New York. And it was back in Tampa where my mother was still living, and my old friends. But it was missing one big thing—Tate.

Tate picked me up from the airport, and I couldn't look him in the eye. Maybe if things were further along in our relationship, I'd feel comfortable staying in New York to be with him, but it's only been three months.

"So, I'm guessing it went well," he said as he drove me home.

I nodded. "They offered me the job. It pays very, very well."

He squeezed my knee. "It sounds like you should take it. You know, I could always find a job down there, if things keep going well."

I looked up at him. "You'd move for me?"

"Heck yeah. I love you, Corrine." He seemed just as surprised as I was by his words.

"But you love it here, too," I said, once I recovered.

He shrugged. "I can try something

new. I like water skiing and fishing. But really, I could be happy anywhere, as long as it was with you."

"All your friends and family are here. You wouldn't see your nieces and nephews," I argued. "Your family is much bigger than mine. And you're up for another promotion at the bank. You'd be giving up so much." *Why, oh why, did he have to pull me out of that ditch? He should have left me miserable and alone. It would've been a lot easier on my heart.*

He just sighed.

"Let's just go home and not talk about this."

"Your home or mine?" he asked.

And that's when I realized that I thought of home being wherever he was. Home wasn't a place; it was a person. It was Tate. "Yours. I miss your dog. And Tate?"

"Yeah, honey?"

"I love you, too."

The grin that split his face was probably the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

We spent that night not talking about the job. But in the morning, I'd made my decision. "Hey." He was sleeping, but I poked him with my finger.

He opened one groggy eye and smiled. "Hey. You're still here."

I nodded. "And I will be. I'm not taking the job."

He sat up, and that killer smile was back. "Why not?"

"You were willing to give up *everything* you have here to give Tampa a chance. To give *me* a chance. But I don't want you to do that. I like it here with you. I like this new life, the change of seasons." I shrugged. "And besides, I bought those expensive snow boots. What am I going to do with those down in Tampa?"

He laughed and pulled me into a hug. And I know he'd never admit to it, but I felt his tears against my cheeks as he held me.

I had a hard time dialing the agency in Tampa to give them my decision. However, four months later, I had a much, much easier time with a different decision—Tate had asked me to marry him.

It was a winter wedding the following year, of course. And my wedding gift: my very own snowmobile!♥

The Perfect Tree



How about this one?" Chrissie gestured toward a towering Douglas fir with perfectly shaped limbs. "I thought you wanted a Charlie Brown Christmas tree?" I said, pushing the pom-pom of my Santa hat out of my eyes for what felt like the hundredth time.

Chrissie pulled a ratty looking, slightly used tissue out of her coat pocket, dabbed at her nose, and said, "Well, I thought I did, until I saw all these perfect trees. Now I want a huge tree, festooned with garlands—"

"Festooned?" I said, giggling.

"Yeah, you know, with garlands draped all over it."

"I know what *festooned* means. I've just never heard anyone use it in conversation before."

Laughing now, Chrissie persisted, "Really, how much do you think this one is?"

"I don't know. Do they sell them by height or weight?"

"Weight?" repeated Chrissie, and realizing the absurdity of my question, I started to giggle again.

"Height," said a deep voice behind us. Shoving the furry white pom-pom out of my eyes yet again, I turned to see who spoke. *Whoa, serious hotness here.* He was tall with dark, curly hair, dark eyes, and well-fitting jeans that accentuated his long, muscular legs. "That one's about eight feet, so probably a hundred bucks."

"A hundred bucks!" echoed Chrissie. "Maybe a Charlie Brown Christmas tree would be best for me after all."

"You can still festoon it with garlands," I suggested, setting us both off on another round of laughter.

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breaking off.



AFTER: See how split ends have been
corrected. Goodbye to weak, brittle,
straw-like hair that breaks in bunches.

The man squinted at us slightly, and if I wasn't mistaken, he looked a bit annoyed. He said in a clipped voice, "When you decide on a tree, let me know."

"Well, who put a bug up his so-very-fine ass?" Chrissie asked as he walked away, and neither of us could help ogling that part of his body.

"Who knows?" I said, shoving the damned fuzzball out of my eyes yet again. But I felt slightly deflated and foolish. The wine we'd had with dinner may have made us a bit giddy. We were probably acting obnoxious.

"So, where's the bargain department of Big Tom's Christmas tree lot?" Chrissie asked, and we headed toward a group of smaller trees.

After debating until I thought my fingers would freeze and fall off—while also wanting to take off my ridiculous Santa hat but not being able to due to the warmth it provided—Chrissie and I agreed on a slightly lopsided five foot tree that would look perfect in the corner of her living room.

"So, how do we move this damned thing?" Chrissie asked.

"I'm not sure. . . maybe if you hold it at the bottom, while I pull the top toward me?" Chrissie began tilting the tree in my direction. She was a bit too forceful though, and the tree and I landed in a pile on the snowy parking lot.

"Oh no, are you okay?" Chrissie asked, running to my side.

"I'm fine, just wet. And covered with pine needles."

"Let me get it." Suddenly Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass was at our side, effortlessly lifting the tree off me and onto his shoulder.

Chrissie hauled me to my feet, and I brushed the rapidly melting snow off my butt as we followed Chrissie's tree to the front of the lot. She did an impersonation of the Christmas tree handler (what were they called?) but my good humor had dissipated as quickly as the snow had melted off my jeans.

"I like your hat," said Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass as Chrissie proffered her twenty-five dollars for the Charlie Brown tree.

"Ha, ha," I said, thinking that he was making fun of my campy, leopard-spotted Santa hat.

TR "No really, I do." He smiled, and
30 both Chrissie and I nearly dissolved

into the pile of snow.

A week later I was back at the same Christmas tree lot, this time with my friend Pam.

"The cheaper ones are over here," I tugged on Pam's puffy down coat.

"Oh, I don't want a cheap one," Pam sniffed, and I knew it wasn't the frigid temperatures that gave her the sniffles. "I'm having a party on Christmas Eve, so I need a really nice one."

"Of course," I adopted a haughty tone. "Let's go this way then."

As we passed a family admiring a particularly tall tree, I noticed Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass with them. I admired his jeans and the somewhat snug sweater he wore under a down vest. To my embarrassment, he caught me staring and smiled. "Where's your Santa hat?"

I can't believe he remembers me.

"Oh, she left it in the car," Pam chimed in absentmindedly. "Some guy made fun of it last time she was here."

I wanted to hide behind a large pine.

"Really? That's too bad. It looked cute on her." He turned away, seamlessly resuming his conversation with the all-American family.

I nudged Pam in the ribs—hard—just as soon as we were out of hearing distance. "That's Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass," I muttered.

"The guy who made fun of your hat? He didn't seem so bad. You're right about his butt, though. Pretty darned impressive," Pam said in an offhanded manner and, self-absorbed as she could sometimes be, she immediately launched into an analysis of how each tree would look in her far larger and grander (than Chrissie's) living room.

Once again, Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass took the money for the tree and strapped it to the roof of Pam's car. "See you later, Leopard Santa," he said as he waved us away.

The next time I visited Big Tom's tree lot was just a few days later, but it was getting close to Christmas, so the lot was noticeably busier. Plus, a gentle snow was falling, not enough to make the roads treacherous, but pretty enough to make you feel like you were in a snow globe. If you could ignore the fact that you were

standing in the middle of an immense parking lot in a sprawling anonymous shopping center in the middle of suburbia.

Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass was strapping a tree to the top of a minivan when my friend, Matt, and I got out of his Prius. He nodded to me, and I could feel his gaze follow us as we walked into the lot. I was wearing my leopard Santa hat again as a sort of test to see if he really liked it, or if he was secretly ridiculing me.

"So that's the Christmas tree hottie you've been talking about?" Matt asked as he examined a medium-sized tree.

"Yeah," I said, keeping my voice low in case Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass had superhuman hearing.

"He does have a nice butt, but do you think Christmas tree attendants make any money?"

I scrunched my nose. "Not sure. It is kind of a seasonal job, isn't it? He's here all the time, too."

"Maybe he's moonlighting, trying to earn extra money to buy gifts for his five children."

"Ha, ha," I said, shaking the branches of another tree and watching needles fall to the snow-covered pavement. "This one's kind of dry."

"You should be an expert by now. I think you're our only repeat customer."

I was startled. *When had Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass snuck up behind us?*

"What kind of tree are you looking for today?" he continued.

Matt straightened and squared his shoulders, looking almost. . . butch. *What was he doing?*

"I'm looking for a tree about five feet tall, but kind of—" he held his hands slightly more than shoulder-width apart, "wide, er, kind of squat."

"Okay," said Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass. "You're in the right general area. Any preference as to tree type?"

At Matt's bidding, the lot attendant began a lengthy description of the kinds of trees and their attributes and shortcomings—it was somewhat interesting. I noticed that he was well-spoken, and of course, I took the opportunity to examine him more closely. *No wedding ring.* I had to get that out of the way first—that way I'd know if I was just window-shopping or actually browsing. As

usual, he wore jeans—not tight, but form fitting enough so that one could appreciate the attribute by which he earned his moniker—and a down vest, with a cable-knit sweater underneath. Tonight a watch cap covered his dark curls, but he wore it well. I loved hats, but that was a hard style to pull off. I could never wear one without feeling extremely unattractive.

As if he read my thoughts, Matt said, “Tiara, what do you think of this one?”

“Tiara?” echoed Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass. “That’s your name?” He suppressed a chuckle, and I was thankful it wasn’t my name, or I would have been offended.

“No, but we call her Tiara because of her fondness for, um, interesting headgear,” Matt explained, gesturing toward my leopard-print Santa hat as I flipped the pom-pom out of my face. “Her name’s Teresa.”

“You don’t say.” Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass’ eyes crinkled as he looked at my hat.

“Yes. I’m Matt,” Matt said, thrusting his right hand out in an assertive manner while looping his left arm around my waist, “and this is my good friend, Tiara. But you can call her Teresa.”

His hand tightened, and he pulled me to him in a half-hug. *Oh no, was he trying to make the lot attendant jealous?* It was time for him to behave in his most swishy manner, not play at being my boyfriend.

“Pleased to meet you,” Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass said, shaking Matt’s offered hand, “I’m Tom.”

“Tom. Does Big Tom only hire people with the same name as him?”

“I’m Big Tom.”

Matt snorted and gave the former Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass—currently known as Big Tom—a once-over, “You’re not *that* tall. . .so what does the ‘big’ refer to?”

I elbowed Matt sharply in the ribs, thankful my Santa hat wasn’t the traditional red—my face would be matching it if it were.

“My feet.” Big Tom put one booted foot forward for us to admire. “Just my feet.”

As he added that little aside, he turned toward me and winked. If my face got any hotter, I’d turn the winter wonderland parking lot into a giant puddle.

His attempt at masquerading as a straight male with a Santa-hat wearing girlfriend apparently forgotten, Matt cooed, “I bet that’s not all that’s big.”

“Matt!” I shouted, just as Big Tom, his face reddening, said, “About that tree?”

“Oh, that one’s perfect.” Matt pointed to the first tree we’d examined. “It will look just darling with my collection of Keepsake Ornaments.”

I smiled, and Big Tom grinned at me. “Shall I get the tree for you?”

Matt puffed out his chest and replied, “Heck no. I can get it. I work out.”

I laughed as Big Tom raised his hands in an “I tried” gesture. “No problem. Go ahead.”

Matt made a production of hoisting the tree onto his shoulder and thrusting his butt out a bit more than strictly necessary—in my opinion, at least. Smiling, I rolled my eyes behind his back, Big Tom grinning in response. Staggering slightly as he straightened, Matt quickly corrected himself and headed toward his sleek hybrid.

My next trip to Big Tom’s Christmas tree lot came less than a week later, late in the afternoon on the day before Christmas. For some reason, I thought it might be busy, but when I pulled in the deserted lot, there were only two other vehicles—a pickup and a compact car, both parked way off to one side.

I wore my traditional Christmas Eve outfit, although “traditional” was a word only I would use to describe it. A hot pink Santa hat and matching satin skirt trimmed with light pink velvet along the bottom was just how I celebrated the holiday of joy and light. It always garnered attention—not always positive—but I felt like a figure skater or one of the girl elves from *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* in it.

As I approached the lot, Big Tom disengaged himself from conversation with a teenaged boy.

“Well, Tiara, you are looking festive tonight,” he said with a smile.

“Where’s *your* Santa hat?” I countered. Today, in deference to the slightly warmer temperatures, he was hatless.

Running his fingers through his dark curls, he said, “Left it in my

truck.

“So are you finally here to buy a tree for yourself?”

“Er, no,” I replied. “I actually need a kind of a big one for the nursing home where I volunteer. I hadn’t been there in a while, and when I was there last night, I saw that they didn’t even have a tree!”

“How big were you thinking?”

“At least eight feet.”

As we walked toward the bigger trees, I suddenly felt slightly awkward. The other times I’d been here, I’d always had a friend along. Trying to think of casual conversation, I said, “I thought you’d be busy today.”

“No, Christmas Eve is usually pretty slow. The Saturday after Thanksgiving and all the weekends in December are pretty hectic, but by now, people usually have their trees.”

“My grandparents always waited until Christmas Eve to get a tree when my father was little. I think my grandfather got good deals if he waited late enough.”

Big Tom looked at me out of the corner of his eye, “Are you hoping for a good deal?”

I flushed, “No, no, of course not! I was just, you know, making small talk. About why I thought you’d be busier today.”

“Hmm, I see.” Big Tom—thinking of him as Big Tom was certainly an improvement over Mr. Grouchy Good-Ass, but it still seemed odd—*Tom*, I corrected myself. “I thought you’d be with your boyfriend tonight.”

“What boyfriend?”

“The guy you were here with last time.”

“Matt?” I laughed. “Hardly. He’s probably with *his* boyfriend tonight.”

Smiling in response, Big Tom—*Tom*—said, “I thought as much, but I wanted to double check.”

I looked at him expectantly, hoping he’d finish his sentence with, “before I asked you out,” but instead he just stood there, allowing the silence to grow. Finally, he grabbed a statuesque tree by its trunk. “This is a really nice tree. I can’t imagine why no one has bought it yet. Really nice needles, nice shape, very fresh. What do you think?”

“It’s lovely,” I agreed, gulping. Like many people, I was already dreading

my credit card bills come January. But then I thought about those elderly people in the nursing home. *Christmas without a tree?* I decided I'd find a way to pay for the tree they deserved. "Er, how much do you think it would be?"

"Oh, I don't know. I'm sure we could work a deal."

"No, really, I wasn't hinting. I'll pay what it's worth."

He shrugged. "Most of these trees are headed for the shredder the day after tomorrow. I'd feel better if someone could enjoy it. So, is it a yes?"

I hesitated no more than a second. "Yes, it's beautiful."

"Great," he grinned. "I may actually need my helper with this one."

"Not a chest-beater like Matt?"

He laughed, "The only workout I've gotten this month is carrying Christmas trees around."

I blushed, willing my mind out of the gutter, even as I thought, *I'd like to give you a workout.*

The teenage boy, his jeans hanging low enough on his hips to reveal a pair of reindeer-decorated boxers, helped Tom carry the tree to my small Toyota. Tom frowned at it.

"I hadn't noticed how small your car is. There's no way you can drive safely with this huge tree on your roof."

I thought again of the nursing home residents and their lonely Christmas Eve. Biting my lip, I asked, "But *can* I drive at all?"

Tom looked from the car, to me, and back again. "Why don't I take the tree in my truck?"

"Don't you need to stay here?"

Tom looked around the empty parking lot, the empty tree lot, and then at me. He grinned, "No, I don't think so." He motioned to the teenager. They each picked up an end of the tree and carried it over to the pickup truck on the far side of the lot. He exchanged a few words with his young employee and met me at my car.

"So, why don't you lead?"

A thought had occurred to me while I watched him chat with the young man. "What about your helper? Doesn't he want to get home? It's Christmas Eve. . ."

Tom chuckled. "Not to worry. TR Nate's Jewish, and I gave him 32 Hanukkah off. I told him to stay open

until eight, then lock the cash box in the safe and go home."

I led Tom to the Senior Center a few miles away. My grandmother had lived there until her death a little over a year ago. A few months after her death, I thought about some of her friends who had looked forward to my visits—as well as all the people who seemed to never have visitors—and I started volunteering. But I had been shocked when I went the other day and saw that the residents didn't even have a Christmas tree. The Senior Center's administrators claimed budget cuts were responsible, but I'd been appalled. I *had* to get them a Christmas tree. My trunk was full of lights and ornaments I'd borrowed from my mother and friends at work.

The residents were still at dinner when we arrived, and Tom made quick work of getting the tree in its stand—the advantage of having a professional as an assistant. He wasn't quite as impressive at putting the lights on the tree, but I supposed his job didn't necessarily give him extra practice with that, and we still worked faster than I would have been able to by myself.

As we worked, we chatted.

"So, what do you do the rest of the year?" I couldn't help asking. I'd been wondering about it since the day I discovered he was "Big Tom."

"Well, owning a chain of Christmas tree lots isn't quite a year-round job, but you'd be surprised how much work it can be. I'm always having to renegotiate leases, visit Christmas tree farms, arrange transport, hire employees—but I do have a few other business interests to keep me from getting bored. And I take a *long* vacation in January. I work fourteen-hour days for most of December, and I really need a break."

For a minute, I imagined working long days every single day leading up to Christmas and asked, "Do you even still like Christmas?"

He took a deep breath and held it, finally exhaling several seconds later. "That's what I like least about my business. I try really hard, but I have days that I just start to hate Christmas. Or I resent all the happy families that come in, knowing that after a long day at the lot, I have an empty house to go back to. I con-

fess, I was a little bit cranky the first time you came in. You and your friend were having such a good time, and I guess I was jealous."

"Wow," I said softly, "I never really thought about what it would be like to have a Christmas tree lot."

He laughed. "It's hardly up there with fireman, doctor, or lawyer on any little boy's list of what he wants to be when he grows up. My great-uncle had one lot in the city, and I started helping him, and here I am today."

"Was he Big Tom, too?" I looked sidelong at him.

"No, he was Big Ed," Tom retorted.

"Oh my gracious!" someone exclaimed from the doorway, and we turned to see Dot, one of the nurses. "Teresa, did you bring this?"

Before I could respond, she shouted down the hall, "Lisa, come see what Teresa brought!"

A few seconds later, several nurses and nursing aides crowded the doorway and residents were starting to make their slow path down the hall toward the community room. Tom and I had just finished stringing the last strand of lights, and I stood back to see how it looked. A little bare with just the lights on, but beautiful nonetheless. I mouthed "thanks" to him as the residents entered the room and began admiring the tree as well. As intended, they started opening boxes of ornaments so that everyone could help trim the tree.

"Teresa." Dot walked over and stood next to me. "This was so sweet of you."

"Don't thank me," I said. "Tom donated the tree. I just provided the lights and decorations."

"Don't let Tiara—I mean, Teresa—be too self-effacing. She came to my lot looking for a tree, fully prepared to buy it. I just gave her a hefty discount."

"You own a Christmas tree lot?" a crackly voice asked from the vicinity of my elbow. I looked down and saw Gwyneth, a good friend of my grandmother.

I gave her a half-hug as Tom replied, "Yes, Big Tom's."

"You're Big Tom?" Gwyneth gave Tom an unabashed up and down look, lingering in the vicinity of his crotch, making the blood rush to my face.



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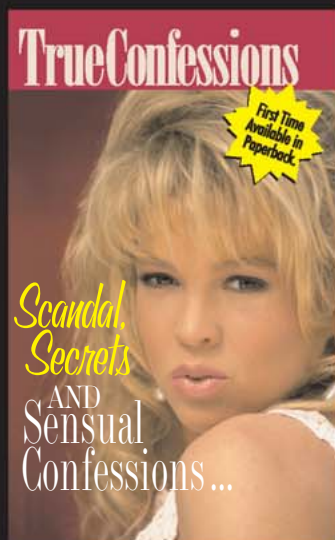
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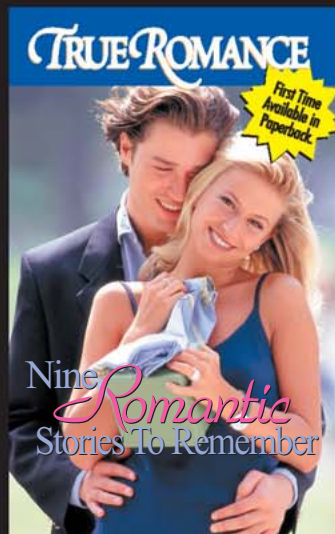
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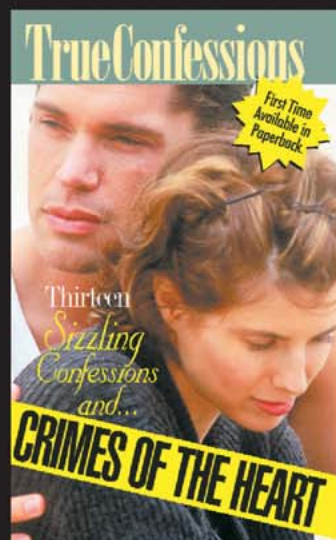
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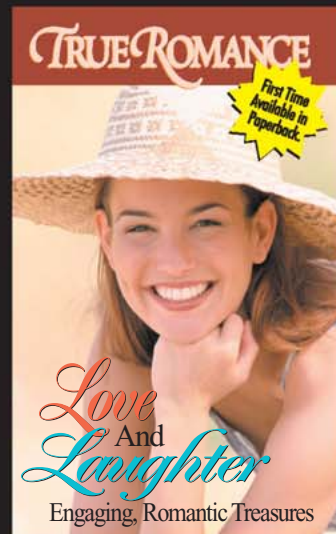
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"My feet," he gave his standard reply with a grin and a wink.

Gwyneth cackled, "No difference. I know damned well a man's shoe size is a good indicator of the size of his—"

"Gwyneth!" I interrupted, trying desperately to think of a change of subject. "How's your new blood pressure medicine working out?"

"Not well at all when I'm looking at a young hottie like this," Gwyneth fanned herself while batting her eyelashes at Tom.

Good Lord, I thought, wondering how to rescue Tom from an octogenarian flirt. I opened my mouth to say something distracting, but nothing came to mind. I hoped I didn't look like a fish. Before I could come up with something, Gwyneth continued, "So does that make you Big Ed's grandson?"

"Great-nephew."

"Then I'm not embarrassed to say that if you're half the man Big Ed was, Teresa better hang on to you."

Sheesh. I'd imagined myself spending the evening sipping hot cocoa and singing Christmas carols with a charming group of senior citizens, not trading tales of male organ size with my grandmother's best friend. Not that I knew anything so personal about Tom, of course. I didn't even know his last name!

His eyebrows raised, Tom glanced toward me before responding. "Do I want to know how you knew my uncle Ed?"

A smirk on her face, Gwyneth smoothed her tunic over her ample bosom—a demure gesture completely inconsistent with her conversation. "*How* I knew him is no great story. We were in the same bridge group. *How well* I knew him. . .well, that's another story." And she gave Tom an exaggerated wink.

"Well, um, let me help trim the tree," I said, desperate to extricate myself from this embarrassing conversation.

Gwyneth harrumphed. "No wonder you spend your spare time with a bunch of old people, Teresa. Before you know it, you'll be sagging, bagging, and dragging, wishing you'd enjoyed yourself more when you were young."

I kissed the top of Gwyneth's head. "But I *enjoy* spending time with you. Now I'm going to see about

decorating the tree Tom was kind enough to give us."

I didn't realize Tom had followed me until I heard his voice in my ear as I hung a sparkling disco-like bulb I remembered from my childhood. "This really isn't how I imagined I'd be spending Christmas Eve."

I sighed, thinking again about my vision of Christmas carols around the piano with the nursing home residents. "I'm sorry I dragged you into this."

He took a step back and turned me to face him. "Why?" he demanded. "I'm having a great time!"

"You are?"

"Hell yeah. Usually I stay at the lot way too late, then go to my parents' house and watch my mother fuss over my nieces and nephews. She gives me these 'what the hell is your problem' kind of looks all night."

I couldn't think of anything to say that wasn't too much along the lines of "Why don't you have a girlfriend?" so I kept silent.

"Sooo," Tom continued. "You came to my lot three times and never got a tree for yourself. Which lot stole your business away from me?"

"I have an artificial tree," I answered automatically.

Leaning toward me and cupping his hand behind his ear, Tom asked, "I beg your pardon?"

I lifted my chin, looked him straight in the eye, and annunciated clearly, "I have an artificial tree."

He put a hand over his heart and gaped at my admission, then dropped the act and laughed. "Seriously? Why?"

I smiled, thinking of my extra-sparkly tree. "Weren't you telling me just a few hours ago what happens to trees that don't get bought? I have a vintage aluminum tree I got off eBay."

The skin around his eyes crinkled as his smile widened and he took another look at my hot pink satin and velvet outfit. "I guess I shouldn't find that surprising, but I hear you. Fortunately for me, most people don't see it that way."

"Well, when I have a bigger place, I'll probably give in to the whole huge tree thing. I just love the way they smell." I took a deep breath, inhaling the pine. "Mhmm. . .They sure are hard to resist. I'd put it in a foyer, decorate it with Victorian orna-

ments—" I broke off, blushing. *Why am I telling him all this?*

"It sounds great." He gave my hand a squeeze. I looked down in surprise. When had he taken my hand?

"We're ready to put the angel on top of the tree," Dot announced. "Who's tall enough?"

Leaning my head back to get a better view of the tree—surely over ten feet in its stand—I answered, "No one. Isn't there a ladder?"

"I think our little angel should do the honors," Gwyneth said.

"Great idea, Gwyneth!" agreed Dot, looking straight at me.

As understanding dawned, I shrank back. "No, I didn't do anything. I just had an idea. Tom. . ."

I turned to him for support, but he gave me a push forward, agreeing, "Tiara definitely should be the one to put the angel on the tree."

I glared at him, but he smiled back at me, oblivious.

"I can't possibly reach the top of the tree—"

"Sure you can." All the Christmas tree hefting Tom had done in the past month had obviously paid off as he effortlessly lifted me plenty high enough. Gwyneth—with amusement glinting in her rheumy eyes—handed me the vintage 1970s plastic angel.

Traitorous old witch, I thought, not really meaning it of course.

Muffled cheers and claps—along with one catcall—followed my placement of the angel. Looking over my shoulder at the happy faces of the old people brought a lump to my throat, but as Tom lowered me to the floor, allowing my body to slide down his firm torso, I felt a far different emotion.

My feet touching the floor now yet still standing quite close to Tom, I tilted my head back. To my surprise, he was already looking at me. Our eyes caught and held. For a moment, I forgot I was in a room full of my grandmother's contemporaries. As hokey as it sounds, I just gazed into his eyes and everything else slipped away. If anyone in the room spoke, I couldn't hear them. I took the smallest step forward, but Gwyneth's raspy voice broke the spell.

"What we need is some mistletoe."

My face undoubtedly bright red, I

backed away. The rest of the evening passed in a closer approximation of what I'd expected: Christmas carols sung along to the radio (because there wasn't actually a piano in the community room) and some homemade wine Nunzio brought from his room. The first sip made me cough and nearly retch, but after that it was much smoother. I suspected if I drank enough, it might actually start to taste good, but my liver may never recover. After Gwyneth had a few glasses, she was making googly eyes at Nunzio.

The party winding down, Tom found his way to my side again.

"I think I need to put in an appearance at my parents' house—"

"Oh, good Lord, look at the time," I exclaimed after a glance at my watch. "My mom's going to be frantic. Thank you so much—"

"Listen, Tiara," he interrupted, placing his hand on my arm. "The tree really wouldn't have fit on your car very well, but I had an ulterior motive in coming here. I didn't know if I'd get the chance to see you again, and I couldn't bear the thought of waiting eleven and a half months in the hopes that you might tree-shop at my lot with all your friends."

He stopped to take a breath, and I smiled at him encouragingly.

"I'd really like to see you again, but the next few days. . ." He shook his head.

"I don't have plans for New Year's," I announced, then clapped my hand over my mouth. *Sheesh, don't sound too eager, Teresa.*

"Neither do I. Is it a date, then?"

As I nodded, Gwyneth walked tipsily over with a piece of greenery in her hands. I suspected it was a clipping from one of the houseplants that rimmed the room, but she made a valiant effort with all of her four-foot-eleven frame to hold it above our heads, saying, "I finally found some mistletoe."

Tom shrugged and leaned forward to give me the briefest of kisses, pulling away to breathe against my lips, "Merry Christmas, Tiara."

"Merry Christmas, Big Tom," I responded, wrapping my arms around his neck and deepening the kiss. I ignored the wolf whistle—which was so close to my ear that I knew it had to be Gwyneth. ♥



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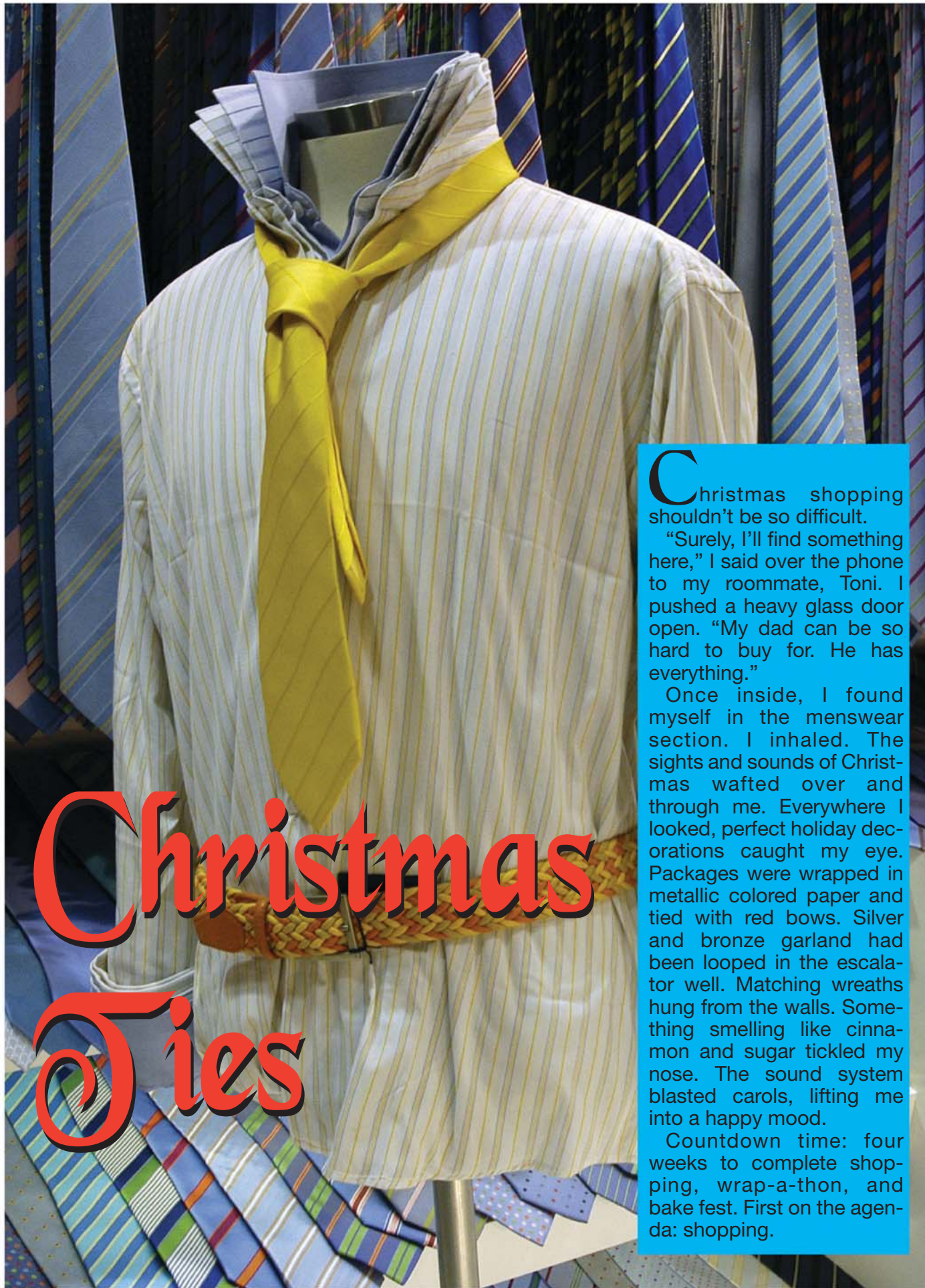
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Christmas Ties

Christmas shopping shouldn't be so difficult.

"Surely, I'll find something here," I said over the phone to my roommate, Toni. I pushed a heavy glass door open. "My dad can be so hard to buy for. He has everything."

Once inside, I found myself in the menswear section. I inhaled. The sights and sounds of Christmas wafted over and through me. Everywhere I looked, perfect holiday decorations caught my eye. Packages were wrapped in metallic colored paper and tied with red bows. Silver and bronze garland had been looped in the escalator well. Matching wreaths hung from the walls. Something smelling like cinnamon and sugar tickled my nose. The sound system blasted carols, lifting me into a happy mood.

Countdown time: four weeks to complete shopping, wrap-a-thon, and bake fest. First on the agenda: shopping.

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Toni's voice pulled me back to the present. "I always give my dad a Christmas tie. He gets a kick out of wearing it Christmas day."

I shifted the phone to my other ear to study my to-buy-for list. "Oh, I can't get my dad a tie. He has a bazillion." My dad, a stockbroker, wore one to work every single day. He'd arranged ties by color on the top of his dresser. The light from the ceiling fixture hit them just so, drawing the eye to one and then another and then another. "He probably has three hundred. A psychologist would label him an addict. For his last birthday, my sister, my mother, and I had all given him the same one. My dad laughed and laughed. I guess we all have the same taste when it comes to ties! So I want to avoid toppling into the trap. Never again."

"I like ties. Men look so sexy wearing them, especially with their shirt sleeves rolled up."

"Same page here. I just want to find him something different."

However, as I passed display cases of vibrant ribbons of silk lying on glass shelves, my eye strayed. Ties were seductively knotted around shirt collars, draped over mannequins, matched with silk pocket squares.

Shaking my head, for I did not want to go there, the thought "not a tie, not a tie" passed through my mind. Until the neatly arranged rainbow rows of dots, stripes, and solids beckoned me closer. The dark side seduced and something mystical propelled me to rove in that direction. I sighed like a chocaholic plastered to a candy store window. "Maybe I'll get one after all. Phone you later."

Disconnecting my call, I trailed my finger across a row, pausing at a pale yellow one—the color of early morning sunlight. Diagonal stripes of sky blue and white woven in the finest silk—absolute perfection. As I reached for my prize, another hand dove in and snatched it up.

"Hey." I jerked to my right and pointed to the tie he held. "Excuse me. That's mine."

He shook his head no. "I saw it first."

"No. / did. It's for my father."

"Sorry. It's mine." His hand smoothed over the tie he wore, identical to the one in his hand.

How odd. I narrowed my brow.

"Why do you need two of the same tie?"

His glance dropped down to his white shirt, then back to me. "I guess it does look funny. My dad liked mine and since he's so hard to buy for—"

"You thought you'd surprise him with one for Christmas."

"Well, yeah." His devilish smirk showed off his straight white teeth. Spinning away, he said, "See ya."

What a scumbag! He had my father's Christmas present. My hands fisted at my side as I watched him weave around tables, heading toward the checkout counter. He robbed me and was not going to get away with it. Racing to catch up, I accidentally bumped into a customer and called a "sorry" over my shoulder as I sped past. When reaching the villain's side, I tapped his shoulder. "Wait a minute, buster. That tie is mine."

His tight gaze swept over my face, which made me feel like a total idiot.

"You've got to be kidding. This one," he waved it in my face, "is mine."

All this ruckus for a tie? With a snort, I knocked his hand to one side. "If you'll recall, you rudely snatched it from under my nose."

"Did not—"

"Did too."

Nose to nose, we glared at each other like two arched cats ready to scratch and claw. Our chests heaved. Our steely-eyed stares deeply penetrated through each other to our spines. Claws distended. Heat, not just the kind from anger, but from the lightening-hot voltage powered by attraction also surged between us as our eyes met. Sizzles pricked my skin. The awareness baffled me, sending my hand to rub my temple.

On cue, a sales associate rushed over. "Excuse me." His timely interruption prompted us to simmer down and step back. "Can I help you?"

We pointed at each other and said in unison, "That's my tie."

"I'm buying it," I said in a firm tone. "I saw it first."

"No, / am. I picked it up first."

"Whatever happened to 'finders keepers'?" I asked sarcastically, firmly setting a hand on my hip.

"Exactly." His finger punctuated the air. "I found it. I keep it."

"Technically," the associate stepped between us, arms spread to push us combatants to our respective

corners, "the tie belongs to the store until someone pays for it." A broad smile went over the clerk's face as he turned to the thief. "Hi, Mr. Malbec."

The uncouth boor returned the smile, transforming him into something more pleasant-looking, like a sickeningly sweet teddy bear. "Jay! How are today's sales?"

"Pretty good, considering the economy. Suits are down."

At that moment, I saw my case sink like the Titanic.

"Suits are more expensive." Mr. M. stroked his chin thoughtfully. "But next week they go on sale. Maybe that'll help."

"Should—"

"Wait a minute." I crossed my arms. "You *know* the clerk?"

"Sure he does. He owns this store," Jay said. "Don't you recognize Grant Malbec?"

Now I did and inwardly groaned. *The Grant Malbec*, the guy our local newspaper, the *Mystic Forest Express*, referred to as the most eligible bachelor in town.

Nary a week passed when his photo didn't appear on the society pages. Arm candy, dressed in the latest designer outfits, always graced his side. His short blond hair tousled just so. His eyes, the shadowy blue-gray color of a summer storm, smoldered with adventure—like the travel section purported. Recently, his picture graced the automotive page, his long frame easing into a new silver BMW convertible.

Anybody. . .but Grant Malbec.

Last Sunday, while perusing the paper over breakfast tea and toast, I'd remarked to Toni, "You'd think he's the only attractive man living in Mystic Forest." I tossed the *Living* section in her direction.

Laughing, she'd shoved on her oval reading glasses and examined the article. "He's pretty hunky." Her dancing brown eyes peeked over the top of the page. "You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd think you have a crush on him."

"What?" I'd catapulted upright so abruptly, the hot beverage spilled all over my lap. Racing to the kitchen for a dishtowel to clean the mess, I threw a "do not" look behind me.

"Do too!" she yelled. "If he asked you out, you'd go."

Towel in hand, I returned to the sofa. "Would not. I like real, honest-to-

goodness hardworking guys. I don't date playboys."

"Why not?"

"Remember, the scumbag my sister divorced? The one who rushed her to the altar? Then dumped her two years later when a bimbo caught his eye? Enough said."

"You're right. That one was a *scumbag*. However, I still say you'd go out with Grant Malbec."

"Would not."

Well. . .maybe. Although I'd never say it out loud. I mean, wouldn't most women go, at least once?

Now, the darling of Mystic Forest, the epitome of supermodel handsomeness, stood in front of me in his dark gray suit—bringing out the same color in his eyes—bright white starched shirt, French cuffs fastened with silver "M" links, the already mentioned tie, and perfectly shined black oxfords.

I wanted to smack him.

I also wanted to die. Did it have to be him? I prayed silently. *Please get me outta here ASAP.*

"Look," Jay's voice sounded calming. "There's a way to help both of you. How about we transfer an identical one from another store? Let me check online. . ." In two strides, he was behind the counter, his fingers skillfully playing over the computer keys. Instantly, brightness stole over his face. "Here we go. I can have one in by Friday."

"That's great," Grant Malbec said. "Send it and be sure to get Ms. —" He squinted. "What is your name?"

I glared at him. "Piper Lucida."

"Get Ms. Lucida's address and phone number, Jay. The minute the tie arrives, please let us know."

"Sure, Mr. M." After inputting my cell number, home number, and address, he rang up the sale and handed the bagged package to its new owner.

"Thanks Jay," Grant Malbec said. "Happy holidays, Piper." As he walked off, I heard him singing "White Christmas."

Great, just great. I drilled a nasty look into his back—a look my mama wouldn't be proud of. First, my tie had been stolen. Now, my favorite Christmas movie was tainted. I wouldn't be able to watch the film during bake fest without thinking of how he'd done me wrong-wrong-wrong.

At that moment, a delicious, evil

notion sliced through my mind, sending a quirk to the corners of my mouth. I envisioned firing a paintball gun and sullyng his pristine image with volley upon volley of fluorescent yellow, pink, and green splotches.

That was mean and not something I'd ordinarily do, but I'd thought about it.

I turned back to Jay and found him eyeing me while pressing tissue paper flat on the counter. "It'll be okay, Ms. Lucida. Your tie'll be in on Friday. I'll call."

Staring at the mindless work, he shifted slightly. When his gaze returned to mine, he said, "I don't know if you've heard. . .Mr. M's dad isn't in good health. The family's having an early Christmas, just in case. . .well, you know."

I'd read an article in the paper about the Malbec patriarch's terminal cancer. His dire situation was sad. "I do understand. Not a way to spend the holidays. Thanks for your help." Then I found my way back to my car.

On Friday over lunchtime, just as I stuffed a chip in my mouth, my cell phone rang. Vigorously, I chewed and munched into the phone, "Hell-wo."

"Ms. Lucida? Jay speaking from Malbec's Department Store. I'm calling to let you know your tie arrived."

It had? I'd begun to worry. Immediately, my heart sang. Drinking from my bottle of water, I washed the food down and drew exclamation points on a sticky note. "This is excellent news, Jay. Can I come by after five?"

"Sure. Malbec's has extended holiday hours. The store closes at ten."

"See you then. And thank you." I disconnected the call, thinking "cool." With my holiday shopping completed, all I had left was the wrap-a-thon and bake fest.

I couldn't wait to get to the store and pick up my package. Hitting the office door exactly at five, I rushed to my car. At that point, Lady Luck abandoned me. All the freakin' traffic lights were poorly timed. Waiting for an indeterminable amount of time at each one made my insides edgy.

"Come on, come on." I rolled my fingers fast and furiously on top of the steering wheel. Parking wouldn't be available in my preferred lot, and there'd be wall-to-wall customers crowding the store—shopping hell.

Finally, the mall came into sight and I exhaled a bark of relief. Parking my car in the last spot, I sprinted to the store dodging potholes and puddles—which wasn't easy to do in heels.

Again, I had to contain my impatience while Jay finished assisting a customer. He'd seen me standing off to one side, shifting from one foot to the other. He pointed his finger to the shopper and mouthed, "Five minutes." Understanding, I'd dipped my head and wandered to the shirt display.

After a few moments, I heard, "Ms. Lucida?"

I swiveled around. *Jay, thank God.* My hand flew to press my breastbone. "Hi. My package?"

He pointed to the counter. "If you'll follow me. . ."

I followed him. But Jay didn't put a small, flat rectangular box in front of me. Instead, he set a pretty gold one festooned with a red satin bow and a sprig of green holly. How did he know Godiva chocolates were my favorite indulgence?

Nudging the box in my direction, he said, "This is for you. And this." He set a white envelope on top.

"Me?" My head went from side to side. "I didn't order any chocolates. I ordered a tie."

"Maybe the note will explain."

With one wary eye on Jay, I removed the card. A picture of the store decorated prettily with boughs of greenery, trimming, and lights had been drawn on the front. At the bottom, in red script, was *Happy Holidays! From Malbec's Department Store.*

Uh oh. *What does this mean?* My sixth sense went into overdrive. All I wanted was my tie and to get on with my life without any unexpected complications, like Grant Malbec.

The card read:

Dear Piper,

Thanks for being a good sport the other day. I apologize for my bad manners and am hoping the chocolates will sweeten the deal. Have dinner with me tonight?

*Grant Malbec
555-8882323*

No way. An invitation from Mystic Forest's most high-flying playboy? A flush went from my freshly painted toenails to my highlighted locks. My cheeks burned. *Dinner with him? God,*

(Continued on page 42) 39

Christmas Tree Shopping

By Nicole Scarmeas



I love the holiday season! The twelve days of Christmas, eight days of Hanukkah, Christmas shopping, eggnog, pumpkin pie, spicy ginger cookies and flavored lattes. Even boundless lines at the mall, with the heat turned up to recreate a summer day in Vegas, and the same Mariah Carey Christmas song playing on a loop, it's still a jolly sensation! Watching your savings dwindle down to just enough for a rent/mortgage payment has its own special magic—sacrificing your hard-earned cash to make your loved ones smile.

But for the past several years, I've been truly stumped over what kind of Christmas tree to get. So enchanting is the fragrance of pine and sap, intensified by hot lights strewn across the branches. I can't help but feel wasteful and anxious when it's time to give such a happy example of nature's beauty the heave-ho.

This guide will give you the pros and cons of each, ensuring that your December holiday is nothing but joyous, from cut Christmas trees, to live potted ones, to the artificial, you'll get the info you need to make your choice.

Cut Trees

Surprisingly, these can be a very eco-friendly choice. These days, most cut trees are harvested from tree farms. At these farms, one to three seedlings are planted for each

one that gets chopped down. Tree farms enrich the surrounding land for miles around by absorbing carbon monoxide and preserving acres of land. As long as a tree farm is occupying that space, it can't be turned into a strip mall or apartment buildings—it gets to stay wooded, saving land from over-industrialization. After all, a single mature tree can absorb forty-eight pounds of carbon dioxide per year and release enough pure oxygen back into the atmosphere to support two human beings.

However, many farms use pesticides. How harmful these chemicals are to humans, wildlife, and groundwater is disputed. But the solution is simple—better to be safe than sorry. Look for organic trees.

Also know that holiday trees and wreaths can be recycled. Many communities have recycling programs with designated curbside pickup. Check with your area for dates or go to earth911.org for a listing of local programs. Since trees are 100% natural, composting it yourself is an option if you have the space. Just don't chop it up and burn it in your fireplace—you'll get tar in your chimney, clogging it and possibly becoming a fire hazard.

Potted Trees

Instead of a cut tree, you can opt for a potted tree. Available in different sizes, they're sold at organic nurseries, tree farms, florist shops, and traveling lots outside of grocery stores. However, keeping your potted tree alive until the next holiday season—not so easy. Keep it in a garage or cold house during freezing cold weather. In a moderately cold climate, put the tree outside and pile mulch or leaves around the pot for insulation. If you live in a place that is warm year-round, remember to frequently water your tree. Consult



gardening books at your local library or do an online search for quick tips on replanting the tree or maintaining it.

Artificial Trees

Reusable and cheap? Yes. Renewable materials? No. Made from the likes of vinyl, polyethylene, PVC, steel, and aluminum, your artificial tree will spend hundreds of years in local landfills. It's said that artificial trees are typically only used for six to nine years anyway, so the money saved is minimal. Especially when you consider the toxins it expels into the environment and your body. Also, three out of four artificial trees sold in the U.S. come by way of China, and many contain lead. Lead dust is so typical that the state of California requires a warning label on all fake trees and wreaths. If your situation requires an artificial tree, purchase a vintage aluminum tree off eBay or a thrift/consignment store so fewer trees will be taking up precious space in a landfill.

If and when you decide to get rid of your artificial tree, try listing it back on eBay or donating it to a local nursing home, church, or charity, since most recycling programs won't accept them.

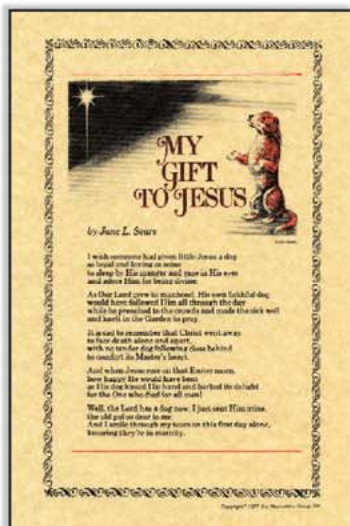
Christmastree.org has lots of great info to help further guide you in your decision. Whatever tree you choose, may your days be filled with the light and love of the holiday spirit!

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Christmas Ties (Continued from page 39)

no.

Jay lightly touched my shoulder. "Are you okay, Ms. Lucida?"

I shuddered and sensibility, the kitchen kind I'd inherited from Mom, took over. "Fine. I'm fine." I returned the note to the envelope. "Now, how about my necktie?"

"Well. . ." He glanced away and cleared his throat. "I can't give it to you."

I closed my eyes and prayed. *Please, God, give me strength to get through this. I vow to never eat chocolate in bed again if your Divine Intervention will take me out of here. Please.*

But upon opening them, I was still in the store. *Rats.*

"Exactly," I fastened Jay in my infamous squinting evil eye, "why can't you give me the tie? You said it had come in."

"It's here. You have to call this number." He tapped the envelope. "You get it after."

Jay put the chocolates in a Malbec shopping bag, and I snatched it from his hands, rage building. I didn't need the tie; however, I *did* need chocolate. There were plenty of ties in this great big wide world. I'd find one somewhere else. The darn thing could probably be found online.

Turning, I knocked into someone standing right behind me. They were so close that the tip of my nose was inches from the other person's chin. Immediately, I slid a giant step to my left to move out of the way. "Excuse me."

The person mimicked my stride.

I shifted to my right.

The person followed.

"Look—"

"You didn't call."

I recognized the voice and cringed. So much for a fast getaway. Raising my gaze, I said to Grant Malbec, "What do you want?"

"You didn't call about having dinner with me."

Crap. Of course I didn't phone him about dinner. I didn't date playboys. Period. End of story. Yet, this predicament read difficult, and I was stuck.

TR Grabbing a girlfriend's best excuse, I
42 said, "My roommate and I have

plans."

He lifted a brow in that Jack Black way, challenging me with an *I don't think so* expression. "You have no plans. I already checked with your roommate."

Why, what an arrogant, pompous jerk. "You. Did. What?"

He shrugged. "I called your home number and asked her to save the date for me."

Now I knew the whole truth. Toni had asked me to have dinner with her, and since I had nothing else to do but assemble ingredients for bake fest, I'd agreed. The nerve of her to conspire with this. . .this. . . creep. Oooh, a scream threatened to blow Mount Vesuvius-style. *How could Toni do this?* She knew my feelings. Undoubtedly, she was laughing her fool head off.

Interestingly, an itty bitsy part of me did want to go to dinner with him. To see what it would be like, sitting across the table from him and having his undivided attention. But reality grounded me. I couldn't have dinner with Grant Malbec. Playboys were *not* my type.

He waved a box wrapped with the silver signature Malbec paper out of my reach. The red bow flapped in a fluid wave. "Come to dinner with me, and you can have this."

He was holding my tie hostage! What an egotistical, pretentious donkey's behind. The audacity. I'd show him. I had plenty of tricks up my sleeves. "You know, other stores carry neckties. I can buy one from them."

"But it won't be this one," he sing-songed. "Come on. Let's get to know each other. I promise not to bite—well, not tonight, anyway."

Unexpectedly, his finger brushed the length of one strand of my hair from temple to jaw. My insides melted as quickly as double-trouble chocolate ice cream on a hot summer's day. If one touch from him could affect me this way, what would all of him do? I'd probably dissolve into a puddle like the creepy guy at the end of the *Indiana Jones* movie.

He lifted my chin so I could look him squarely in the eyes. Panicky sensations overwhelmed my gut. Surely, he could sense how hard my heart thumped?

Straightening my spine, I said, "I'm not like the women from the paper, the fancy ones with designer dresses,

French manicures, dripping in jewels. I'm plain-Jane Piper."

The glint in his eyes went serious. His hand dropped to his side. "There's nothing 'plain' about you, Piper. I see a beautiful and sassy woman, someone I want a chance at getting to know better." He paused. "Those other girls mean nothing to me. If I wanted to have dinner with them, I would."

My head went woozy with all the confusion tornado-ing through it. How unbelievable. Grant Malbec wanted to socialize with *me*? I couldn't think of anything to say, except a thoughtful, "Oh."

What the heck? I could do this. He hadn't made a lifetime commitment—just an opportunity to get to know me. After a beat, I asked, "Just dinner?"

"Just dinner. Name the place. I have Chamberlain's in mind."

How funny. "That's my favorite restaurant."

"So your roommate said."

Secretly, the overwhelming compulsion to murder my roommate—slowly, very, very slowly—boiled and brewed like witches' stew. But I couldn't. Wouldn't. I'd go to the slammer, and she'd still be laughing her silly head off. Besides, blood makes me faint.

"You need to decide soon." His thumb gestured behind him. "You're holding up the line."

Peeking over his shoulder, I saw three customers with sappy grins watching us. Fantastic. Take photos, people. And to my horror, a woman held up her camera phone and snapped away, saying to her companion, "That's Grant Malbec and his new girlfriend. I can't wait to send this photo to the paper."

"Okay." I pitched my hands skywards. "Fine. Dinner. But no weird stuff."

"No weird stuff." He pulled my hand through to rest on the crook of his arm. As we walked toward the parking lot, he said, "I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

Great. He *had* to quote Bogie. However, Grant Malbec and I seemed to have a lot in common—ties, movies, and chocolate.

What else could there be? At that moment, like-love squished into my heart. My insides sunk.

It couldn't be, could it? With a tilt of my head, I looked at his gorgeous face and smiled. Had I met my soul mate over a tie?♥

Happily Ever After

We did not meet until my early forties. Working as a research librarian, I never expected to find true love in a hardcover book. He needed my help with a STN (Scientific and Technical Information Network) search. It was a struggle and we were getting nowhere. He sat next to me in front of the computer, suggesting relevant search terms. I would translate them into the search language for the pharmaceutical databases and assess the results. Normally, that would not be enough to spark a romance. But our first encounter felt like our fiftieth. It felt like I had known him for years, not minutes.

My first date with Paul was actually a dog walk. He joined my dog and I for a lovely stroll through the forest. It all sounds very romantic, but I have to come clean—we got quite lost in that forest, and to top it off, it was during a downpour. We may have been soaked to the skin, but our mutual attraction was impervious to rain.

Two months after our first date, we took his parents out for lunch. I met Paul in the doorway of the restaurant. "I've told them we're engaged," he said. My jaw must have hit the floor. Like all new couples that are hopelessly in love and fascinated with each other, we

talked about getting married one day. I just wasn't expecting that day to come so soon. It was truly spectacular. A round, ideal-cut emerald surrounded by diamonds. Just when I think I couldn't be any more shocked, he refused to go down on one knee; moreover, he didn't even ask the question! "Here you go. It should fit. I must go to the loo," he said, heading for the back of the restaurant. Had I just been proposed to? Standing there, staring at the way the brilliant green stone reflected light, I smiled, my heart telling my head that yes, I had been.

We learned by experience that life's intricate patterns caused fewer migraines if I organized everything. Paul was somewhat involved. His role consisted mostly of writing the checks that made the smoothness and order of his life possible. It still works that way. To his credit, it took him just one week to adjust to the invasion of his solitary life by a high-maintenance woman and her dog. Though he claims that he has never compromised on anything. He has coped with the insanity I endured when I decided to quit my job and go back to school, as well as my abiding love affair for expensive pens and jewelry. I have coped with his view that life is black and white, and the knowledge that his

first response to everything will be "what can go wrong with this?"

Twelve years later, we are still that drenched couple, laughing in the rain while searching for our cars—hugging and kissing once we finally stumbled upon them. We still joke about the time I told him I wanted a love letter. "I can't write love letters," he said. "I'm a scientist. I can only write scientific reports." But I've never read a scientific report that contained these poetic words: "A sunset is only beautiful if seen by two pairs of eyes." My heart always skips a beat when I remember those words spoken to me one warm evening during our engagement. It skips a beat at the thought of him coming home. And he never fails to thank me for agreeing to be his wife. We believe it is a privilege to be married to each other. Hand in glove doesn't even come close.

—Avril Field-Taylor

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Holidays In Plaid

Had the mysterious man with the strong chiseled face only glanced at me as ketchup dribbled from my curly-Q fry onto my sweater while I walked through the mall, I think I could have managed just blushing and then not have given any more thought to the incident. My ending up with whatever I drank or ate on my clothes was certainly nothing new for me. Ask my dry cleaner. But the infuriating dark-haired stranger drinking coffee near the mall's fountain proceeded to stare at me and chuckle, making the embarrassing scene indelibly etched in my memory.

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Born and raised my twenty-eight years in South Carolina, I was woman of the South and was taught to observe and practice strict Southern etiquette. As far as that etiquette was concerned, a man snickering at a lady was no gentleman, even if he was extremely handsome. Evan Michaels, the current object of my very strong interest, certainly wouldn't have laughed at me. He was a true gentleman. It was little wonder so many women were vying for his attention and were all mad as hornets that I'd already gone out with him twice.

Already feeling edgy over what might end up being the most humiliating evening of my life, I had half a mind to let my Irish temper get the better of me and march over to ask Mr. Chuckles if the ruination of my favorite sweater was really all that damned amusing. I was in no mood to be laughed at. But rather than give him the satisfaction, I turned on my heel and walked away. I still had a dress, shoes, and a slew of other things to buy for the evening's holiday benefit ball, and time was quickly getting away from me. If I was going to entice Evan Michaels to be my New Year's Eve date, I had to look my best tonight. Then again, even thinking he'd be interested in anyone but me was silly. We were dating after all.

When I finally purchased the last item needed for the evening's ordeal, my watch showed it was already four o'clock. Unfortunately, at this time in the afternoon the mall, all decked out in its holiday splendor, was as crowded and crazy as a picnic lunch being raided by swarming fire ants. Navigating through the crush of people was nearly impossible, especially as my arms were weighed down with at least a half-dozen colorful bags and a large dress box. I was beginning to worry how I would open the mall's exit doors when I noticed the man who had laughed at me earlier was also leaving with packages of his own.

I generally don't turn tail and run from any person, but without thinking, I made an immediate turn to my right and ran smack into a heavysset woman toting a soda and a barbeque sandwich. I fell backwards onto the hard floor while my bags and boxes arced high in the air and barbeque sauce rain fell over every inch of my body.

TR 46 "Oh my!" the woman exclaimed. "Are you all right, darlin'? That was some tumble you just took."

I looked all the way down to my toes, noting the bright red blotches over my jeans and sweater, then raised my gaze. By some small miracle, the woman I had run into remained standing, her soda undisturbed in her hand.

"I think I'm all right," I sputtered. Other than my sore bottom and a very bruised ego, I wasn't hurt. "I'm so sorry. I should have been paying better attention to where I was going." I pulled myself upright and was preparing to stand when a large hand extended from my left.

"Allow me. I don't want a pretty lass such as yourself to be trampled on by this crazy crowd."

I sat transfixed. The handsome yet irksome stranger with the dark hair clasped my hand and forearm and hauled me up as though I weighed no more than a feather. His deep, lyrical Scottish dialect, even thicker than my southern accent was sexier than anything I'd ever heard before. While I collected my wits, he gathered my bags.

"There now," the stranger said as he surveyed me. "Other than a few drops of sauce on your face and clothes, you look as right as rain." He shifted the weight of my things in his arms and produced a hankie, which he handed me. "I'll just help you take these packages to your car."

I ran a finger down my cheek and came in contact with something wet, cold, and sticky. Holding on to what little dignity I had left, I accepted his handkerchief and wiped my face. When I finished, I held the hankie out for him to take and couldn't help but notice its once white material was now completely covered in red sauce.

He waved me off with a rakish grin. "You're welcome to keep that, lass. I have plenty more."

Evidently, the ketchup incident and my literal run in with a barbeque sandwich in front of this man wasn't enough to complete my humiliation. Oh goodness no. My embarrassment had to be topped off by his refusal to retrieve his handkerchief.

As though the last of my pride had been plucked like a note from a violin, I felt the control over my emotions prepare to give way. I was either going to cry or come up fighting. Either way, Hell would have to freeze over before I allowed this stranger to follow me to my car. I knew all too well the dangers of mall parking lots and the chances of a lone woman getting mugged or worse

while she tried getting into her vehicle.

I was about to politely but firmly thank him and decline his offer, when a familiar voice piped up behind me. "Colin MacBride! You're a brave man to be out in a mall on the Saturday before Christmas."

Pastor Truitt Sims, my minister and a life-long friend of my father's, stopped near the Scot and held out his hand. After much difficulty, the stranger adjusted the bags draped over his arms and accepted the preacher's handshake. Then Pastor Sims noticed me and his eyes went as round as daisies. "What in Heaven's name happened to you, Jennifer? Are you hurt, child? You look like you had an argument with a ketchup bottle and lost."

My bottom lip trembled and my shoulders fell. I had accepted the fact that I was an ungraceful klutz many years ago, a definite drawback when one was supposed to be a sophisticated Southern lady, but why had my clumsiness reared its ugly head today in front of this stranger and now my minister?

Pride, I told myself. With my certainty that Evan Michaels would pick me for his New Year's Eve date during this evening's events, I had allowed my pride to get the better of me and now I was getting my just desserts. Karma was surely a nasty little thing.

"I'm fine, thank you Reverend Sims." I sighed and attempted a smile I didn't feel. "You know this man?" I nodded toward the tall, dark-haired Scot holding my bags and noticed for the first time his incredible golden brown eyes. Like sunshine sparkling off a glass of fine Kentucky bourbon, his eyes twinkled with a warmth that was far too intoxicating. A woman could get punch-drunk looking at his handsome face and dwelling in his gaze too long.

I blinked and mentally shook my head. My fanciful, overly romantic brain was plotting some kind of crazy love connection with this stranger without my permission. Evan Michaels, I reminded myself, was the man I wanted. Evan was the closest I'd found to a perfect Southern gentleman, and if I had my way, he'd soon be all mine.

Pastor Sims' face lit up and he patted the Scot on his broad back. "This is Mr. MacBride, the new owner of the bed and breakfast in town. I'm surprised your father didn't mention anything about him. Your dad was the real estate agent responsible for selling the proper-

ty to Mr. MacBride.”

My father hadn’t mentioned a word about the Scot, but I was hardly surprised. When I visited my parents’ house, we practiced two rules: no phones or texting while in each other’s presence, and no shop talk. “I suppose he may have,” I fibbed, “but he has so many clients, it’s hard keeping up with all of them.” My father could thank me or scold me later for exaggerating a tad bit about his business.

“So you’re Patrick Flann’s daughter. It’s a pleasure to meet you, lass. Your da spoke quite often of you as he toured me through the available properties.”

MacBride put out his hand and despite the fact I only wanted to be away from the man with whom I had managed to make a fool of myself all day long, I shook it. When our palms touched, a tingle of electricity passed from him to me. Though I shake many hands a day while playing out my role as an attorney, I had never experienced anything quite like the tiny current that had just rushed from my palm all the way down to my stomach. Not even my first and subsequent kisses with Evan Michaels had resulted in such a strong reaction.

I glanced at the Scot’s face to see if he had felt the sensation too, but his happy smile never altered. Apparently my overactive imagination was still hard at work.

“Ms. Flann’s father is a friend of mine, and you’d be hard pressed to find a better man. As a matter of fact, you may be seeing him again this evening at the benefit gala. You do know about the event, don’t you, MacBride?” Without waiting for an answer, Pastor Sims glanced at his watch. Concern flashed across his usually serene face. “If you’re still being auctioned off tonight, Jennifer, you may want to hurry. The program starts at seven.”

One of MacBride’s eyebrows raised high on his forehead. “You’re being auctioned tonight at the gala tonight then?”

Feeling more than just a little embarrassed at having been talked into participating in this evening’s auction, I suppressed a groan despite the sinking feeling in my heart. But I needed to make a good show of myself if for no other reason than to encourage people to attend the benefit ball, so I raised my chin and nodded. “Several single men and women are auctioning off a date to

the annual New Year’s Eve dinner and dance. It’s a part of our town’s holiday tradition. All the money from tonight’s gala and the auction goes towards buying gifts for children whose families can’t afford them.”

“That’s verra interesting.” MacBride stared at me for a long moment. I’d swear I saw cogs and wheels turning behind his golden eyes. “And all the money goes to charity? Wee underprivileged children?”

“Oh yes, every dime,” Pastor Sims answered. “But if you plan to bid on someone like Ms. Flann here, be prepared to pay a pretty price. According to my wife, our Ms. Flann here is quite a catch. I’ve been told several gentlemen have already shown an interest in having Ms. Flann as their date to the New Year’s Eve dance. She’s very particular and doesn’t date just anyone. But be warned,” the elderly preacher winked at me, “God blessed her with red hair for a reason.”

I couldn’t believe my ears. My own minister was carrying on about me as though I wasn’t even there. Heat radiated throughout my body, making my sweater feel all together too warm and constricting. I simply had to get outside into the fresh air. “I was fixin’ to leave when I fell. Mr. MacBride was kind enough to gather my things for me.” I held out my hands, willing the Scot to simply give me my bags without further incident. Apparently MacBride was bull-headed. He made no effort to return my things. Instead he flashed a dazzling smile and hiked some of the bags further up his arm.

“Aye, that’s right,” the Scot agreed. “Now where’s that car of yours parked, lass?”

Before I could protest, Pastor Sims chimed in. “I’m on my way to the parking lot, too. We’ll all go together. I want to find out how you’re going to advertise for your bed and breakfast, MacBride. I’m not a professional advertiser, but I’ve got several ideas to pass by you.”

My minister happily chatted the entire way to the car. Normally his lengthy discussions wore on me after the first fifteen minutes, but today I was all together relieved to have him accompany me. He might know and trust this new man in town, but I didn’t. Despite the Scot’s good looks and dreamy accent, I resolved myself to approach Mr. MacBride with extreme caution. Although he was kind enough to help

me get my things to my car, I had seen his true colors earlier in the day, and I wasn’t so easily deceived.

By the time I finished getting ready and arrived at the holiday ball, most attendees were already finding their seats for the dinner. I searched for my parents’ table and was utterly taken in with the opulent beauty of the room. Gaily decorated with Christmas trees, evergreen boughs, humongous ribbons and bows, and small twinkling white lights, the place had a warm glow that would surely melt the heart of even the Grinch. Good thing, too. With the economy still suffering so badly, more families than ever needed a helping hand this holiday season. The more money raised at this evening’s party and auction, the better.

My father, both hands full with punch glasses, walked over to me and guided me to our table. “We have the most interesting man seated with us tonight,” he mentioned as we meandered our way through the sea of full tables and chairs. “He’s a new resident in town. A delightful gentleman from the Scottish Highlands. Since he doesn’t know many people yet, I’ve invited him to eat with us. I plan to make introductions for him this evening.”

I cringed. “Colin MacBride?”

“Why yes. Have you already met him?” my father asked.

I nodded, feeling my face flush at my embarrassing run in with the barbeque sandwich and the curly-Q fry incident, all of which the Scot had witnessed. “Pastor Sims introduced us this afternoon at the mall.”

“That’s fine then.” He nudged me around two men standing in the aisle. “You can help me with his introductions.”

I was about to tell my father that I would do no such thing when I saw Colin MacBride standing near my mother. I stopped dead in my tracks. The Scot wore a formal kilt of dark green and blue topped off by a dashing black tuxedo jacket, vest, white shirt, and black bow tie. A silver and black sporran hung from his hips, and thick cream-colored socks reached his knees. Festooned in his native garb, MacBride was truly breathtaking. Much like when he touched my hand earlier in the day, a faint tingle radiated deep inside my stomach.

Before I could give the reaction much thought, I noticed several other women



As the holidays find their way to us, here are a few gift ideas sure to please the finickiest of them all! Find a larger selection in our Gift Guide at TruesOnline.com!

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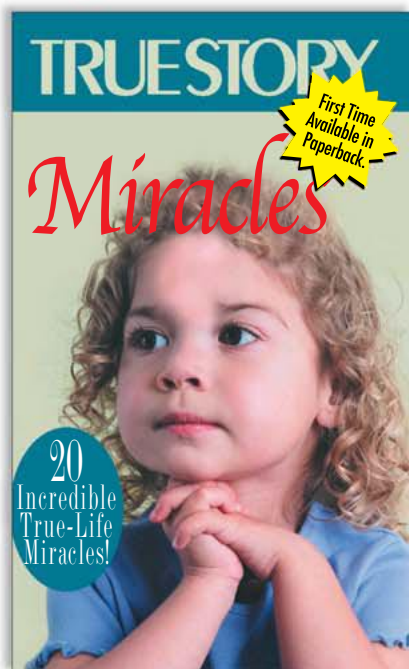
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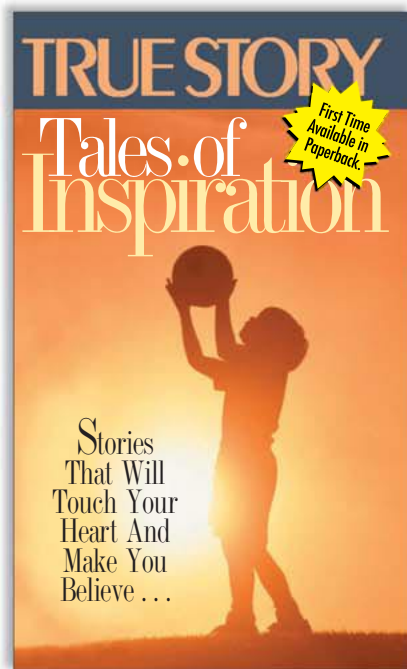
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Holidays In Plaid (Continued from page 47)

around the room admire the Scot. Like carb craving dieters, they longingly eyed his tall, muscular body and the scarce bit of naked leg peeking out beneath his kilt. As I surveyed the room to see just how many ladies were checking out the new man in town, I spied Evan Michaels standing at another table close to the auction stage. He, too, looked keenly handsome. His red and green holiday tie popped against his white shirt and dark suit. Every strand of his blond wavy hair was perfectly placed, framing his lovely face in the nicest way.

I waited for the excitement of seeing my current love interest to flutter around my insides, but the feeling never came. Instead a little green bubble of jealousy floated to my throat. Misty Carter, the local blonde vixen herself, clutched Evan's arm and looked up adoringly as he spoke to her. She flashed her brilliant beauty queen smile at him and batted her lashes. Evan responded by gently tucking a strand of her golden hair behind her ear. Within a matter of seconds, my little bubble of jealousy grew and grew until I couldn't breathe.

"You're as white as a sheet, Jennifer." My mother put down the glass of punch my father had just given her and stepped to my side. She placed her cool hand on my forehead. "You don't have a fever, dear, but you feel clammy. Have you eaten anything today?"

I could barely take my gaze off of Evan and his carrying on with Misty. My eyes had to be lying. *He was interested in me, not her.*

"Jennifer," my mother repeated. "Are you listening? Have you eaten today?"

I reluctantly dragged my attention from the terrible scene unfolding near the stage with Evan. "Yes, Ma'am." No way I was going to tell her I hadn't eaten a thing since last night. I just had to fit into the perfect dress for tonight's auction to impress Evan. I glanced back at the stage. Misty laced Evan's fingers with hers and she led him off to a darkened corner of the room. My vision misted over. Obviously all my efforts to impress Evan were a waste of time.

"I think I'm ready for a dram of whisky. Care to accompany me to the bar, Ms. Flann?" Colin offered me his

Like a robot without feelings or conscious thought, I took Colin's arm and allowed him to escort me away, not caring where we went as long as I didn't have to witness any more of Evan and Misty's public display. When we reached the bar area, we stood in line behind all the others who waited for a drink.

Colin patted the hand I used to hold his arm. "I'm glad to see you wore green tonight. 'Tis a bonny color on you, lass."

Although I don't consider myself a vain person, the Scot's flattery lightened the terrible weight pressing against my heart. "That's very kind of you," I somehow choked out while focusing on the floor. I simply couldn't meet his gaze. My emotions were too tender and tears threatened to fall. Colin witnessed me looking my worst this afternoon and I wasn't going to compound his already bad impression of me by allowing him to see me at my emotional worst this evening.

The big Scot sighed. "Come with me." He pulled us from the line and led me across the room and through a set of French doors to the veranda.

The scene outside was Christmas card perfect. Small white lights twinkled in tall pine trees not far from the balcony, and the stars above shone bright against the night sky. The evening air, cold and crisp, made me shiver. My little green dress was definitely not appropriate for outside attire on a December night in the mountains of South Carolina. Before I could utter a word, Colin removed his tuxedo jacket and draped it over my shoulders, which I gratefully accepted. "What are we doing out here?" I asked, genuinely confused. "I thought you wanted a drink?"

"Aye, well, I figured we both needed a breath of air a wee bit more."

After a few moments of quiet between us, he gently tipped my chin up. I had no choice than to stare into his dreamy golden brown eyes. My legs started to shake, but I wasn't sure if my wobble was due to the cold or having him touch me.

Colin frowned. "I want you to know you can do a hell of a lot better than that sod, Evan Michaels."

Stunned by his unexpected, unkind remarks about Evan, I sucked in a lung full of frigid air and felt my chest burn along with my indignation. I wrenched my chin away from his hold. "Why, I'm

sure I have no idea what you're speaking about, Mr. MacBride."

"You're a terrible liar, Ms. Flann. I saw when you noticed Michaels with that blonde lassy just a few minutes ago. You looked as though someone had ripped a rug out from under you." He took a step closer. "I had'na planned to tell you, but you need to know. Evan Michaels has taken more than one woman to my bed and breakfast since I opened in November. The man's a womanizer and a jerk."

Evan had been sleeping with other women while he dated me? My mind refused to believe what Colin said, though why he'd make up such things didn't make sense. "That can't be true. Evan Michaels has been dating me for the last two weeks. He's a gentleman and wouldn't dream of sleeping around."

"He checked in this morning with the woman he's with tonight. Her name is Misty Carter. I had a chance to talk with her while she waited for Michaels to park his car and get their things out. She said she and Mr. Michaels might be getting engaged this weekend. I thought that odd, seeing as Evan Michaels had come to the B & B with another pretty lass just the weekend before."

The bottom of my stomach dropped. I thought I might be sick. *How could I have been such a fool?* Little wonder Evan rarely answered my calls. He was too busy sowing his wild oats.

My hurt feelings were quickly replaced with anger. I wanted to march right back into the party, pull Evan outside, then slap his face so hard he'd have to look for his teeth. But I was a Southern lady raised with better standards than he obviously had. That kind of behavior simply wouldn't do.

Colin eyed me expectantly. Evidently, he didn't know just how I would react to his startling, heart-breaking news. Perhaps he thought I would fall apart or crumble. I, however, would do no such thing. Standing my ground, I crossed my arms and straightened my shoulders. "You have no business in my affairs. I barely even know you."

A broad grin spread across the Scot's face. "Aye, lass, you don't know me now," he leaned so close I smelled his musky cologne, "but you will."

Despite Colin's warm jacket, another wave of shivers rippled through me. *What exactly did he mean by that?* Befuddled by Evan's terrible behavior

and Colin MacBride's advances, my mind raced. Suddenly the Scot felt too close, looked too handsome, and smelled too darn good. I had no idea how to react, especially as I had just come to terms that Evan Michaels had been two-timing me with a fleet of women. "I think we'd better get back to the party. Dinner is fixin' to be served soon, and then I need to get on the stage for the auction," I said a little breathlessly.

The handsome Scot laughed and stepped back. "Aye, Lass, you're right. Would'na want you to miss your auction."

All too quickly the dinner was served, and when the plates were removed, Pastor Sims, the evening's Master of Ceremonies, called me up to the stage where I took my place with the other available singles being auctioned. Two-hundred dollars started the bid for each person, and most auctions closed at five hundred. Misty Carter's auction was another story. Several eager looking men crowded the stage when she stood ready for her auction. Bids were shouted and countered for a good ten minutes before Evan Michael's final bid of sixteen-hundred dollars went unmatched. The attendees of the charity banquet all stood and clapped at Evan's generosity. His winning bid broke the current auction record of fifteen-hundred dollars. Everyone thought he was a magnanimous gentleman. I knew better, and the knowledge burned a scalding hole through my heart.

Let her have him, I thought miserably as Misty trotted off to Evan and I made my way up to center stage. From my ketchup mishap all the way to tonight's catastrophe, today obviously just wasn't my day. But I was a Flann, and the Flann family never backed down and never gave up, including and especially me. Though Evan Michaels' bad decision in choosing someone over me might be ripping my esteem to shreds, I was a true Southern lady. It would take more than a rogue like Evan to keep me down. I stepped forward, straightened my back, and smiled like I was having the time of my life.

To my relief and chagrin, even more men hovered around the stage than when Misty was auctioned. Once again the auction started at two-hundred dollars. After almost twelve minutes the bid was up to a thousand dollars, but the

bids were coming in much slower. I was more than a little worried. The high bidder was Todd Potts, a chubby balding dentist I never considered dating. Though a nice man, Todd Potts wasn't exactly the kind of man women dreamed about.

Pastor Sims was just about to call the auction to a close, when Colin MacBride stepped through the crowd. Resplendent in his coat and kilt, the Scot shouted, "I'll wager five-thousand dollars for the privilege of escorting Ms. Flann to the New Year's Eve dance."

A sudden hush fell over the room. The many spectators watched in open-mouthed wonder. Pastor Sims, looking a bit pink and overcome with shock, cleared his throat. "Did you say five THOUSAND dollars, Mr. MacBride?" The poor old minister held the microphone so tightly the whites of his knuckles could be seen even from where I stood.

"Och, aye." Colin raised his gaze to mine. His amazing golden eyes glittered with some unknown merriment. "No one else will do."

The good minister pulled at his bowtie and swallowed so hard his Adam's apple protruded from his long neck. "That's five-thousand going once." He nervously scanned the room. "Going twice. SOLD to Colin MacBride for five-thousand dollars!"

Pandemonium broke out throughout the room. Several members of the group enthusiastically whooped, while others cheered and whistled. The crowd's clapping grew even louder as Colin walked up the short staircase to the stage and then offered his arm to me.

Like Prince Charming claiming his Snow White, Colin placed a chaste kiss on my cheek after I took his elbow, making the spectators applaud even louder. My entire body sizzled with electrical current that started where his lips touched my face, down through my chest and legs, and out through my toes. Even on the best date I'd had with Evan, his kisses never affected me the way Colin's small peck did. I could only imagine what a full-on kiss might do to me. As we walked off the stage and back to our tables, my feet never touched the ground. I floated on the air of excitement that was Colin MacBride.

Even now, after eight years of marriage, Colin still spins stories to the guests at our bed and breakfast about the beautiful redhead who stole his heart the first moment he laid eyes on her and the kings' ransom he paid at Christmas to win a date with her. Though my handsome, dark-haired Scot may tease and laugh about the way we met, a true Southern lady like me will never find a more perfect gentleman than my man in plaid.♥

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Rocky Mountain Christmas



I opened my eyes to a pristine sweep of snowy slopes backed by the jagged peaks of the Rocky Mountains. Tall evergreens stood along the ridge, casting bluish shadows on the snow. Framed by my uncurtained bedroom window, it was the perfect rectangle of winter landscape, just like the cover of a Christmas card.

I groaned and rolled over. I'd loved the snow at first; it was one of the reasons I'd chosen Colorado for my new home. But the snow had lost its charm weeks ago. Not to mention the cold! I hadn't been really warm since September.

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Nellie, my calico cat, was asleep under the covers with me. I got up, careful not to disturb her, and tucked her in snugly. One of us might as well be comfortable.

Shivering in spite of my flannel pajamas and fuzzy socks, I pulled on my bathrobe and added some logs to the coals in the wood-burning stove. One thing I had learned since moving to Colorado was how to build and maintain a fire. I hadn't yet learned to drive sixty miles an hour on icy roads that offered twenty feet of visibility between curves, the way the natives did. I wasn't sure I wanted to learn that.

I flipped the switch on the coffee pot, and it began to rumble and drip. The tiny kitchen, like the rest of the cabin, was as neat and well appointed as a picture in a magazine. My previous house had been a montage of backpacks, schoolbooks, sports gear, overalls, and work boots. The cabin stayed tidy all the time. I cleaned up after myself, and no one else was there to make a mess.

For weeks I'd looked forward to the explosion of colorful chaos that would liven up the place when Carson and Cameron arrived for Christmas. This would have been the boys' first visit to my new home. I'd enjoyed making the loft cheerful and inviting with plaid cushions, rustic furnishings, and several of my handmade quilts and wall hangings. I'd even given a trial run to the small upstairs stove. But the boys' leave had been canceled at the last minute. I'd be spending the holiday alone.

I dressed near the stove, poured a cup of coffee, and sat down to the queen-sized quilt in the big frame. A few more lines of hand quilting in the border, and I'd be ready to start the binding. If I hustled, I might finish today.

I ran my hand over the richly colored patchwork. This was a non-commissioned quilt; I'd invented the modified nine-patch design and selected the fabrics myself.

It's too special to sell. But I sure could use the money.

I slipped my thimble onto my middle finger and went to work.

TR Soon the rhythm of the needle
54 soothed away the running budget

ledger in my mind.

My quilting frame stood before an east-facing window. When a shadow fell across my line of stitches, I looked up and saw Christian, the Garners' hired man, riding his horse along a fence, backlit by the morning sun, his half-breed coyote-dog trotting behind. I often saw Christian at a distance, and the dog always gave me the shivers. I was glad Nellie was content to be a house cat.

It was a beautiful image—very Colorado. But the uneasy sensation in the pit of my stomach told me that this Rocky Mountain serenity was not for me. I should never have come.

Just two years ago, I was a happily married homemaker in Northern Florida. I loved cooking and cleaning and making things pretty, driving my twin boys around, going to their games, and generally taking care of them and their father. Rob and I planned to do some traveling after the boys graduated, but retirement was still years away. Rob was only forty-two, healthy and strong, and he liked his job as a welder at a small factory.

When he died in an industrial accident in the spring of the boys' senior year, it was as if the roof fell in.

The first several months of widowhood were the hardest of my life, but at least they had the saving grace of necessary work. There was so much to do. Carson and Cameron had to finish school. I had mountains of paperwork to sort through. As the school year drew to an end, the activity level intensified. Then suddenly all the final exams, ceremonies, celebrations, packing, and travel arrangements were over. The boys left for the Navy, and I was really alone.

The initial outpouring of sympathy and freezer casseroles was long gone, and now I felt isolated. I'd never thought about the quality of my friendships before; Rob and the boys were enough for me. Suddenly I felt like a stranger in the city where I'd lived all my adult life.

In the fall, I started substitute teaching. I couldn't live off the principal of the life insurance

money, and with all the recent dismal stock market activity, Rob's retirement account was worth a fraction of what it had been only a few years ago. I had to earn something.

The job choice wasn't a good one. I didn't like the work; it made me nervous. And moving around from school to school, I didn't have a chance to get acquainted anywhere. I'd never been quick to make friends anyway; Rob was the gregarious one.

My sewing was a lifeline, giving order and purpose to my evenings and days off. I could get up in the middle of a sleepless night and find relief at my machine or my quilting frame. The work didn't make the hurt go away, but it soothed me, quieted my mind for a while. I felt less alone with my work than I did with other people.

When Cameron and Carson came home that first Christmas, they were such hardened military men that I barely recognized them. The holiday was a difficult time, with all of us trying to pretend things were the same and knowing they never would be. I could tell the boys were struggling too, and trying to be strong for me. I think we were all relieved when it was over.

After suffering through the anniversary of Rob's death, I made two decisions.

First, I'm not working for the school district anymore. After this school year's up, that's it. I don't have any romantic notions about shaping young minds. Most teenagers frighten me, and younger kids aren't much better. Every time I spend a day in a classroom, I come home stressed and exhausted. I'll find some other kind of work—something I enjoy.

Second, I'm not spending another Christmas in this house. It's too much for me to keep up on my own, and too much to pay for. If I can live someplace small and keep my expenses low, maybe I can afford to be choosy about my job.

So what sort of work should I look for? What do I enjoy? What am I good at?

The answer was staring me in the face: a stack of colorful quilts, neatly folded in a display cabinet.

I'd lost count of how many unused quilts were in the house. I'd had vague ideas about giving them to future grandkids, but at the rate I was going, the boys would have to start young and be awfully prolific to keep up.

I have enough for a small shop. But I wouldn't want to risk the capital to open one. I wonder if I could operate an eBay store.

The wheels started to turn. *I wouldn't have transportation or wardrobe expenses. Overhead would be practically nothing. I could stay home and do what I love.*

I put a few small quilts on auction, just to see what kind of response I'd get. They all sold within a week. One buyer, after receiving her purchase in the mail, wrote to praise my work and asked if I would be interested in making a king-sized quilt on commission. I estimated the hours of labor the project would require, multiplied by how much I wanted to earn per hour, then added the cost of materials. The total seemed high, but I crossed my fingers and sent the woman my price. She replied the same day, asking when I could start.

I went to work on the quilt and called a realtor. At her suggestion, I spent a few thousand on some paint and minor repairs. In May, a few days after I shipped the finished quilt, I put the house on the market. It sold in three weeks.

"I thought houses took months to sell!" I told my realtor. "I thought the market was supposed to be sluggish!"

She shrugged. "Most houses do stay on the market a long time. The sellers start out asking too much and eventually lower their price. Your house was priced to sell and ready to move into."

I needed a place to move, fast. Panic soon gave way to an adventurous streak I'd almost forgotten I had. I could go *anywhere*. My eBay business could be operated anywhere within easy driving distance of a UPS office. The boys were in the military now; they'd be moving around for years, and there was no telling where, or when, they'd eventually settle. I suddenly found myself thinking about the Rocky

Mountains. It was one of the places Rob and I had talked about visiting one day.

I studied a map of Colorado and traced the contours of the Rockies with my finger. Maybe a small town is what I need—a real community, where people know and care about each other.

After a few hours of Internet research, I found a classified ad for an eight-hundred-square-foot log cabin on a cattle ranch in a rural community. The ranchers, Russ and Debbie Garner, had a website advertising their grass-fed beef, free-range chickens and eggs, and organic produce. I liked the tone of the website, and I thought I'd like the Garners. And the amount they were asking for rent was something I could easily afford.

A few emails later, I'd arranged to take the cabin.

The second week in July, I loaded up my station wagon and one small U-Haul trailer with what was left of my belongings and headed west. I'd hired a professional estate sale guy to dispose of most of my worldly goods. I pared down ruthlessly, keeping only what I could drive away with. I wasn't going to fool around with storage buildings. I had the memories; I didn't need the stuff.

It was a good decision. The sale brought in a good chunk of change, even after the estate sale guy took his share, and I didn't have to bother about the leftovers. Driving into the setting sun with my bare necessities, I felt like a pioneer.

The boys were more or less pleased about my move. Carson was a little guarded; he's always been the cautious one, and may have been secretly worried that I was having a midlife crisis. Cameron, however, is just as adventuresome as his father. He loved the idea.

I took a stair-step route from Tallahassee, my old home, to Grand Junction, the last sizable city before my final destination, stopping overnight in Mississippi and Kansas. West of Denver, the Rockies came into view. Early the fourth morning, I drove the last short leg of the trip.

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I stopped at the Garners' big post-and-beam house to pick up the key and meet Russ and Debbie. They were in their thirties, cheerful and capable, with a healthy, outdoorsy appearance.

"I hope you understand that the cabin's going to need some serious clean up," Debbie said. "It's stood vacant for eight years, and various varmints have camped in it. We had our hired man replace the broken windowpanes and fix the gaps in the chinking, but the rest will be up to you. I kept meaning to go out there and make a start, but I've been busy with the garden. We have such a short growing season here that we have to make the most of it."

I suppressed a smile. *Women are funny about houses. Just five days ago, I nearly fell off a ladder trying to clean the grease off the ceiling vents in my old kitchen, so the new owners wouldn't think I'm a slob, and here Debbie's worried I'll think less of her because of some raccoon droppings in a cabin that's been forsaken by human occupants for eight years. And that's after she already warned me twice in her emails.*

"My cleaning supplies were the last things I packed in my U-Haul," I said. "I'll give the place a thorough scrubbing before I move anything in."

Debbie was visibly relieved.

"It's a good thing you're getting an early start," said Russ. "When you're finished cleaning, call me on my cell. Christian and I will come over to carry in the heavy stuff."

I drove off, followed the narrow track around a stand of aspens, and saw my new home for the first time.

It stood at the foot of a green slope, surrounded by a blaze of wildflowers whose names I didn't know, underneath a sky like blue crystal. It looked small and snug and self-contained, and so in harmony with its surroundings that it might have just grown there along with the native trees. I loved it.

The interior was as big a mess as Debbie had warned me about. I dug right in, sweeping, dusting, scrubbing, wiping, and disinfecting. I'd missed this kind of work, a

really big cleaning task with a dramatic before-and-after scenario. By early afternoon, the little cabin was shining clean and ready for furniture.

Russ drove right over in answer to my call, bringing a tall, silent man he introduced as Christian. In the bed of the truck was a lean, shaggy, russet-colored dog, with a plummy tail, a luxuriant coat, and a competent, intelligent face.

The dog looked eager to jump out, but Christian told it to stay. It lay down and rested its nose on its paws, but its piercing amber eyes stayed watchful.

"Good-looking dog," I said. "What breed is it?"

"Aussie-coy."

"Excuse me?"

"Part Australian shepherd, part coyote."

I darted a glance at Russ. *Was this guy putting me on?*

Russ nodded. "It happens, now and again."

I suppressed a shiver. The animal wasn't tied. I hoped it would stay in the bed of the truck.

Together, Russ and Christian moved my bed, dresser, quilting frame, sewing table, dining table, armchair, and trunk into the cabin. That was it for the big stuff. After the guys left, I went on unpacking and arranging things until far into the night. It was definitely an organizational challenge. The sleeping area had a partition that separated it from the living area, but no door. The cast-iron bathtub stood in a corner of the sleeping area; I'd have to get a screen to cover it. The kitchen was tiny, but adequate for one person. My quilting frame took up most of the living area, leaving just enough space for a small dining table on one side and an armchair on the other.

It's perfect.

That summer was the happiest time I'd had since losing Rob. Everything was so new and fresh to me—the cabin, the little town, my new neighbors, the beautiful weather. I took lots of long walks and fell in love with the land. The Garners were fine people, and I had a feeling that Debbie and I could become good friends.

But the summer was soon over, and after a beautiful but brief fall,

winter set in with a vengeance, along with some serious doubts.

For one thing, the homey, small-town social life I'd envisioned hadn't quite panned out. Debbie's responsibilities on the ranch kept her too busy for socializing. I'd met some nice people at church, but they didn't really draw me in, and I didn't know how to make headway on my own. A morning at church always made me lonely for Rob.

Business was improving, but not as quickly as I'd like. My goal was to make enough to live on without dipping into savings. So far I'd come close but hadn't quite made it. It didn't take me long to figure out that in the present economy, small projects like table runners and baby quilts were the real bread-and-butter. Because they required a few hours of work, I could charge my preferred hourly rate without sending the customers into sticker shock. Big quilts got a lot of looks but few takers, and I hadn't had another commission.

My sense of adventure had vanished along with the summer flowers. Now here I was, nearly two thousand miles from the place I'd called home for over forty years, cut off from all that was familiar. I felt lost and disoriented, as if I'd stumbled into somebody else's life by mistake. Sometimes I woke up at night in a panic because I didn't recognize my surroundings and couldn't for the life of me remember where I was.

I finished the last of the hand quilting, took the quilt out of its frame, and spread it over my bed. Straight rows of tiny stitches made puckered tracks through the colorful patchwork.

It really is beautiful. Maybe I should just keep it for myself.

I shook my head hard. *I'm running a business here! I can't afford to keep the products for my own enjoyment. I have a lot of capital tied up in this quilt, and I could get a lot of money for it if the right buyer comes along.*

I'd already prepared the French-fold binding. I machine-sewed it to the front of the quilt, then sat down in my armchair with a fresh cup of coffee to do the hand sewing.



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It was cozy, sitting there with the colorful new quilt on my lap. Nellie jumped up beside me and settled in for a nap.

I turned on my iHome and picked up where I left off on my latest audiobook from the library. Bindings go quickly. By lunchtime, I was halfway through.

I stuck my needle in my pincushion, took off my thimble, and did a few yoga poses to relax my back from all that hand sewing. I'd always been careful to stay fit; I knew I looked younger than forty-one.

It's not fair. I'm too young to be through with romance. And Rob was too young to die. He took care of himself; he ate right and worked out. He should have lived a long, healthy life.

I ate lunch at my laptop and checked my eBay store and my email. I'd sold a table runner and a matching set of cloth napkins. I packed them and printed a mailing label so I could send the package the next time I went to town.

I had a few business emails and messages from the boys. Cameron sent a funny video.

The last message was from the church.

I sighed. I'd gotten on the church email list back in June, rashly signing up when I was new and thought these people would soon be my friends. Now I wished I hadn't. It made me lonelier than ever to see friendly email exchanges between people that were so close to each other and virtual strangers to me.

For a moment I was tempted to delete the message without reading it and ask to be removed from the list.

But I didn't. And when I read the message, I forgot about my own loneliness for a while.

It was a call for help for a family in a nearby town whose house had burned down. I'd never met the people or even heard of them, but I felt for them all the same. The parents and four children had escaped with the clothes on their backs and the family dog. That was it.

So they need everything, the email said. Every kind of household and hygiene item, cleaning sup-

plies, towels, bedding, clothing, dishes, furnishings, and general "stuff." Bring your surplus to the church by three, and we'll drive it over. There will be more opportunities to help this family later, but we want to get a big haul right now so they can be somewhat settled in their temporary home for Christmas.

I looked around at my tidy little cabin. It was lonely sometimes, but it was warm and snug. I imagined standing outside in knee-deep snow and watching it burn to the ground. Two days before Christmas, too.

What do I have to offer them? My belongings are so streamlined that I really don't have any surplus.

Then my eyes fell on the beautiful, nearly finished queen-sized quilt.

I recoiled from the thought. *I can't give them that! It would be like throwing away a month's worth of work. They might not even like quilts, or these colors. Anyway, a gift like that would be too much. It would embarrass them.*

I disconnected from the Internet, washed my lunch dishes, and took up my thimble again. As I sewed inch after inch of the binding, I kept thinking about the homeless family, and imagining what it would mean to me to receive such a quilt at such a time. I remembered the kindnesses shown to me by friends and family after Rob's death, and how precious they all were to me. I wasn't embarrassed by anyone's generosity; I was thankful for all of it.

At two-thirty, I folded the quilt, right side in, and stuffed it into an oversized plastic grocery bag. I drove to the post office, mailed the table runner and napkins to my customer, then continued to the church.

Half a dozen women were there, packing stuff into boxes, but I was able to slip in, leave my bundle, and slip out again without attracting any attention.

I smiled on the drive home. *I was right. The quilt was too special to sell.*

When I reached home, the first thing I did was start reproducing that quilt. I bought fabrics by the

bolt now, and I still had plenty of yardage left of all the fabrics I'd used in the original. I pulled out my rotary cutter and got busy. I worked quickly, and before five o'clock I had all the cutting done.

I'd just taken the first two piles to the machine when I heard a knock at my door.

I was surprised, and Nellie was so spooked she ran under the bed. Come to think of it, nobody but Debbie Garner had ever knocked on the door—and this was definitely not Debbie's knock.

The man on the doorstep was tall, lean, brown, and vaguely familiar. He was dressed like a rancher and had a rancher's air of competent toughness.

Then I saw the dog, the half-coyote, sitting quiet and docile at his feet. It was Christian, the Garners' hired man. I hadn't seen him up close since July.

I invited him inside. I just had time to hope he didn't think I meant the dog, too, before he looked the animal in the eye and said, "Stay." From the adoring look it gave him, I'd guess it was prepared to wait on the porch all night for him.

He shook the snow from his boots and then walked in slowly, taking an appraising look at the cabin. "I've always thought this cabin had a lot of potential. I enjoyed doing the work to get it ready to move into. You've got the place looking real nice."

"Thank you," I said. "Please, have a seat."

I offered him the armchair, and I took the straight-backed chair from the quilt frame.

He sat down and looked at me. His eyes were a clear blue, very unexpected in his dark face.

"Did you give away a big brand-new handmade quilt to a family whose house burned down?"

I don't know what I'd expected him to say, but it certainly wasn't that. My cheeks grew warm. There wasn't any sense in denying it. "Yes," I said.

"I thought so. I've seen your work before, through the window. I thought the colors and pattern and all looked awfully familiar. It's the same one you've had in that contraption all these months, isn't it?"

He pointed to the big frame, now empty.

I nodded. I felt embarrassed, caught making such an extravagant gesture to a family I didn't know. I hoped he didn't think I'd done it to draw attention to myself. In fact, I'd done all I could to *avoid* attention. It was funny that the one person in town who could positively identify my work had somehow ended up on the distribution committee.

Christian continued. "The man whose house burned down is my brother."

I looked at him, surprised. He smiled a wonderful smile that opened up his face, and then went on, "Now, I'm no expert on textiles, but I know quality when I see it, and I could tell by looking that this was a valuable piece that would probably fetch a handsome price. But you gave it away. And I just wondered what sort of woman does a thing like that, and why."

I thought carefully before I replied. "I really don't know the answer to that. Maybe it's because I know what it's like to be hurt and bewildered at Christmastime. I've never lost the roof over my head, but I've lost a husband."

Christian was looking at me with a clear, open gaze, and suddenly his eyes went red around the rims. It made the irises look bluer than ever.

"Well, it meant a lot to them. It really did. It made my sister-in-law tear up, to think somebody she didn't even know would give her something so beautiful."

My throat tightened, but I managed to say, "Thank you for telling me that."

We chatted a little longer, and I found out that Christian and I attended the same church. I'd never seen him on Sunday mornings because he always did the feeding for Russ, so he and Debbie could attend morning service together. Christian attended the evening service.

The wind picked up, and Nellie came out from under the bed to warm herself at the stove. I thought about the shaggy dog—the quiet patience that shone in its amber eyes. The sweet thing wait-

ing outside obediently, even though it was freezing.

Tentatively I said, "Your dog must be cold on the porch. If we let him inside, will he bother my cat?"

Christian's eyes widened. "Who, Marvel? He's the best dog you've ever seen. I've got two kittens at my place, and he lets them snuggle up to him."

We let him in. Nellie bristled up at the sight of him, but he wisely ignored her and flopped down with a thankful sigh near the stove.

Rubbing Marvel behind the ears, Christian told me about the history of the town and his own history with it. He'd lived here all his life and obviously loved the area; he and his brother knew every rock and ravine in the county. Though he didn't brag, I could read between the lines and see that he'd lived a life of courage, adventure, and self-discipline.

"I was just twenty-two when my wife died. I never married again. I've never had my own place, though I've thought about it now and again. Sometimes I take a look at a likely property or two, but I never have felt right about it. I'm really pretty torn. I'm getting a little old to be a hired man, but Russ treats me right, and I like working for him. And there's really too much work for him and Debbie to do all on their own."

We'd gone through two more stovefuls of wood when I heard myself asking Christian point-blank, "Would you like to have Christmas Eve dinner with me?"

A smile of surprise and pleasure spread across his face. "I'd be happy to. Thank you."

Suddenly Marvel sat up and pricked his ears, and a moment later, there was a knock at the door. It was Debbie's knock this time.

"Hello!" she said when I opened the door. "I'm sorry to come by so late. I won't step inside. I just wanted to bring you this."

She handed me a basket full of homemade canned goods in ribbon-tied jars. "There's pumpkin puree in there and apple pie filling. I hope your boys like pie. You be sure and bring them by to say hello, okay? I'm eager to meet them."

"Actually, they aren't coming. Their leave was canceled."

"Oh, Alana, I'm so sorry! Well, in that case, you just come on over tomorrow and spend Christmas Eve with us."

"Thanks, Debbie. That's sweet. But. . .well. . .we just made plans for Christmas Eve."

I stepped back from the door and gestured inside. Debbie followed my gaze and saw Christian sitting in my armchair.

"Oh. Oh, I see! Well, that's fine!"

She looked as pleased as if she'd thought of it herself.

"Come on in, Debbie. I have something for you, too."

I gave her a quilted table runner with a snowflake and pine tree design. She exclaimed over the colors and the tiny stitches. Then she said, "Once the holidays are over, Alana, I want to get properly acquainted with you. There's no time for visiting in the fall, but once the cattle go to market and the holidays are past, things slow down a lot around here. I've been wanting to get to know you ever since your first email. You always seemed like such an interesting person."

Debbie left, and Christian did too. Before he walked off, he took a last look at the cabin and said, "I've always liked this place. I'm glad someone's living in it at last."

One year later, Christian and I celebrated our first Christmas together in that very cabin. Our engagement lasted less than a month; we figured we were old enough to know our own minds. Carson and Cameron came to the wedding, along with Christian's brother and his family. We held the ceremony on Russ and Debbie's huge front porch.

For a wedding present, Russ made Christian a partner in the ranch. They understand each other very well and have the same vision for the place.

I'm still quilting, and still selling from my eBay store. A week before Christmas, I finished the quilt I'd started the year before, the duplicate of the one I'd given Christian's brother's family. Now it covers the four-poster bed that was Christian's Christmas present to me.♥

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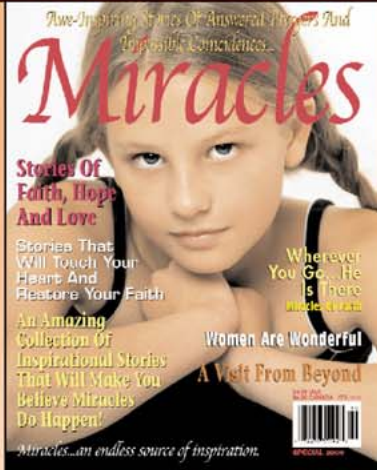
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Beating The Winter Blues (Continued from page 11)

His brown eyes held mine for a moment, making my insides sizzle. "I would never do that." He glanced away, his gaze staying off, as he seemed to consider something. "It's all about how you look at things," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"Take, for example, the snow that comes along with winter."

"Another reason to hate the cold," I replied. "You have to get up early and shovel the driveway just to get your car out of the garage. And then you have to pray you don't have an accident on the way to work."

"True," he agreed, with a mysterious twinkle in his eyes. "But if you turn that scenario around and look at it from another angle, it just might mean something totally different."

"Such as?"

"Let's say that instead of getting up early in order to do something totally boring, such as shoveling your driveway just so you can get your car out and go to work, you turn the tedious chore into something fun and exciting."

"Fun and exciting." For a second I truly thought the man had gone totally mad.

But Doug refused to be put off by my obvious lack of enthusiasm. "That's right. Fun and exciting," he reiterated. "The first time we have a really measurable snowfall, we'll get up early and put on some old, warm clothes, along with a pot of hot chocolate. But," he added, holding up a finger. "Instead of simply shoveling our driveways, we'll make huge snowmen for the whole neighborhood to see when they finally crawl out of bed and look outside."

I seriously thought he was kidding until I looked into his eyes. That's when I saw the kid that still resided in a man's body.

"You're serious!"

His eyes widened. "I certainly am," he stated firmly. "Like I said, it's all about how you look at it."

His enthusiasm was contagious. I had never looked at life the way he was forcing me to, and I had to admit, the thought of seeing something positive in something so dreary did have a certain appeal. "Maybe I'll

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try that during our first snowstorm this year," I said with a laugh.

"Maybe I'll help you," he added, clinking his cup next to mine.

Doug and I saw a lot of each other after that first meeting. I invited him to the neighborhood barbecue at the community center that very same day. We walked there together, pulling along a wagon filled with food, not really caring that several teenagers would pass us and toss us looks indicating their doubts of our sanity.

We didn't care. Even more shocking was that I didn't care.

People got used to seeing the two of us together after that. Whenever someone extended an invitation to a neighborhood event, it was always to Doug and Claire.

Oh yeah. It snowed for the first time in December. The two huge snowmen in our yards were the talk of the neighborhood. I don't know when I've had so much winter fun. Another storm is predicted for the weekend. Doug and I are considering building a whole neighborhood of snowmen.♥

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The **D** Files

By Letty Livingston

Free Hair!

Izzy rang my phone a handful of Thursdays ago. Izzy (Isadora) is my younger sister. She too lives here in the city of brotherly love. Her normally monotone voice was chirping with news. “Free hair!” She nearly screamed into the handset.

“Free hair? What do you mean?” I asked, puzzled by her exclamation.

Izzy went on to describe something that I had pondered in passing, and in private, on a number of occasions. She said that she had signed up and that she wanted me to be part of it. Her tone was jubilant. She thought that this may be something that would slay that beast that lurks beneath her clothing. . .beneath all of our clothing.

After clicking off with Izzy I continued on with my day. I tried my best to concentrate on the stack of new mail and invoices but I could not help but wonder *What if?* I looked back at my relationship with the topic. How it always seemed to be a nuisance, something to be ashamed of, even though we Latinas all seem to be “blessed” with plenty of it.

Body hair—have you ever been getting ready for a date and shaved your legs because you knew that the man might be rubbing up against them? Or have you worn sleeves instead of spaghetti straps because you didn’t have time to wax your pits? I know I have. I have what I would consider an average amount of body hair. I’ve got two sisters and I know that they both have way more body hair than I do. We used to call Isadora “the tarantula” when we

were teenagers. (Use your imagination.)

Izzy had learned that a medical trial for a new type of laser hair removal was being conducted in and around Philly. Like I said, she signed up for it and called me to do the same. I, in turn, called some of my girlfriends and asked them what they thought. Nikki, Lauren, Bea, Yoko, Lisa, and Angelica all told me to sign them up too.

Some other friends I called were already lasered years ago, where I was warned that the treatment might leave me wishing I hadn’t wasted my time or money. I did some research and discovered that for years there have been two common types of laser treatment for unwanted hair, Alexandrite and Nd:YAG lasers.

Some people react better to one type of treatment than the other, and a person has to repeat treatments to one body part numerous times. So, these people, the ones that were not happy about their results, could have undergone the wrong type of laser treatment, or may not have gone for enough treatments to reach the desired hairless result, or a combination.

I wound up being the point-person for my group of friends and made the call to the doctor’s office that was hosting the free trial. Yes, FREE trial. (As my sister had mentioned—Free hair! These were free treatments.) In fact, as the polite voice on the other end of the phone informed me, I would receive fifty dollars when I completed the trial.

This made a red flag go up for me. I don’t like to look a gift horse in the

mouth; however, I have come to learn that nothing is for free in this world, no less are there people lining up to pay me money so they can give me free things that I really want. And seeing how being as hair-free as a dolphin is something that is up there on my list of things I covet, I didn’t want to blow it and miss out on free hair (removal laser treatments), but I didn’t want to wind up with some unknown type of sarcoma growing where my pubic hair once was either. So, when the polite voice on the other end of the phone told me that she simply needed to ask me a few quick questions before she scheduled me, I cut her off and told her that she would be required to answer a few of my questions before I would answer any of hers.

The polite voice disappeared and a curt one answered. “Do you want to be a part of this trial or not, ma’am?”

Oh no she didn’t! I know she didn’t just call me ma’am! I thought to myself. I was trying to count to ten, to calm myself down. I did and answered softly, “I may [want to be a part of the trial]. First, let’s see what you guys are going to be doing.”

I asked to speak to the doctor that was going to be performing the procedure. The curt voice grew a bit more impatient and told me that she had all of the information I needed. I quickly fired back, letting her know that I am an acclaimed columnist with a prominent national magazine who has readers all over God’s green earth. And, I would really like the doctor to call me to let me know what the trial was about. The impatient voice was swiftly replaced by the polite one and my name and number were copied as I dictated them.

The doctor who called—and asked to remain anonymous)—sounded very congenial. He said that he heard I wanted to write about the trial. I informed him that he was misinformed. I was interested in being part of the trial, as was my sister and six of my close friends. I needed to know what the trial was about and what type of lasers we

would be subjected to. (I hadn't known I was going to write about the trial at the time.)

Dr. Congenial told me that the trial was for a new type of laser treatment. The instrument is called the Apogee Elite MPX and it uses two different types of laser wavelengths. This enables the treatment to be more effective on more types of people. He went on to tell me that certain skin types and hair types respond better to specific wavelengths of laser.

For this trial, he was looking for twenty women who were between the ages of eighteen and fifty who had black or brown hair. He said that we'd be receiving a total of four treatments and that the side effects, if any, were minimal irritation, possible slight skin discoloration, and a chance of some short-term inflammation where the laser makes contact with the skin.

We the trial subjects had to agree to let them shoot pictures of the trial site and to document the process. We had to agree to take notes on any side effects we may have and that we were agreeing to fulfill the entire trial, all four laser treatments. He asked me to let him know if any of my friends were flaky, so he could steer them away from the application process. I told him that we were all steadfast and true. He confided that he wished he could say the same of his first wife. We both laughed.

The next time I heard Dr. Congenial's voice was two weeks later; I was wearing a pink patient's gown and I was sitting in chair that reminded me of the one my dentist had. I had already read and reread the paperwork and signed it. I had removed my blouse and bra and had the hair under my arms, the hair I had grown for two weeks—yes, they told me not to shave or wax my armpits for fourteen days!—removed via some type of simple razor. I was brought by the woman who owned the polite phone voice into the procedure room and sat in the dentist-ish chair.

There was a team of two people from the company who built the Apogee. They were there to document the event. Also there were two nurses and Dr. Congenial. All of them had on large amber colored glasses to block out the blinding

light given off by the laser. They wore paper masks over their faces and garments one might imagine doctors only wore in operating rooms. The idea that my organs may be harvested at any moment flashed through my head. It passed just as suddenly as it appeared; I remembered I was not in South America any longer.

I was told to relax, that nothing was going to hurt, and that I was in good hands. I voiced my concern about my face not being photographed and the team from the laser company assured me that I wouldn't have to worry. Then a small pair of metal goggles, like the kind people wear in a tanning bed, except these were titanium or something like it, were slipped atop my eyelids.

The room was cool and quiet. The nurses took me by my arms and lifted them over my head. The chair made a whirring sound and tilted back until my arms were comfortably settled, and then Dr. Congenial said that they'd be starting.

I heard a slight hum and felt a light breeze on my left armpit. The air hitting my skin was fresh, but the odor emanating was anything but. The smell of burnt hair wafted passed my nostrils and it nearly gagged me.

"Really Doc?" I asked, trying to avoid the virtually noxious olfactory offense. He said that was the only downside to the treatment and that when he works on other body parts, ones that are not as close to the patient's nose, it isn't so bad. I pictured his nose always being close to any body part he treats and that nearly gagged me, too.

It took about seven minutes for both of my armpits to be laser treated. I was dressed and in my car no more than twenty-five minutes after the first whiff of my singed hair follicles. No pain, no marks, and no hair. Pretty amazing!

As I had mentioned earlier, I had entertained the idea of having laser hair removal before. Money wasn't the reason for my foregoing it. I just didn't know if it was that big of a deal. Well, now eight of us have been through two of the four treatments for this trial, and all of us seem really satisfied with the results. (All except for one of us, who happens to have an awful lot of white hair under her arms and the laser is not killing those follicles. She made

me promise to not tell who she is.) I'm considering having other areas of my body done.

Dr. Congenial says that this type of laser will be on the market soon and that there are others like it that people can already buy for home use, like the Tria home laser treatment system.

I don't think I'd go as far as buying a home laser hair removal system. But then again, I never thought that I would have satellite radio, a forty-inch flat panel television, or Blue Tooth Sync in my car. So, I may wind up never, ever, having to shave my legs or go for a bikini wax again, which'll be great. Would I get every single hair taken off my body? I don't think so. Sometimes I like to have a little bit of grass in my infield, if you know what I mean.♥

—LL

I will still be answering my readers' dating and relationship questions, so send them, along with your comments (and if you would like to receive my seasonal newsletter that is chock full of dating news, advice and links to wonderful resources) email me at help@letlettyhelp.com. All submitted material is considered for publication and all names are kept in the strictest of confidence.

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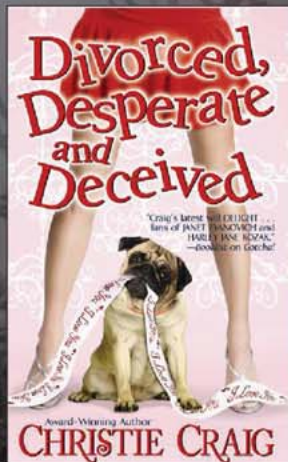
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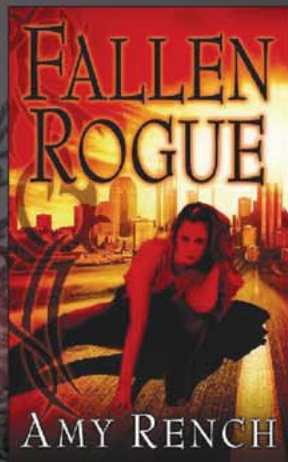
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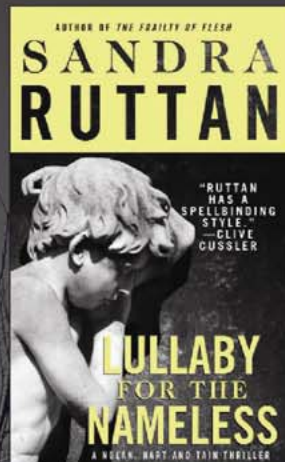
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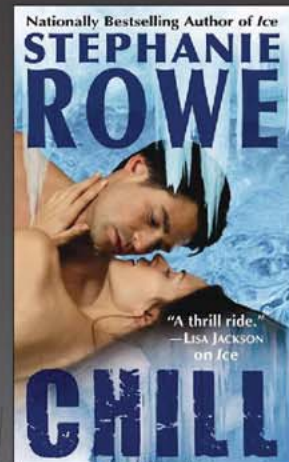
LULLABY FOR THE NAMELESS

Missing girls are turning up murdered, in ways that eerily resemble the MO of the killer from the first case that Hart, Nolan and Tain worked on together. Did they get the wrong man the first time? Will they be able to stop this killer before tensions drive the team apart—or get one of them killed?



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Alaskan bush pilot Luke Webber finds a bleeding woman on his doorstep and realizes the past he tried to leave behind eight years ago is about to catch up with him—in a very deadly way.



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