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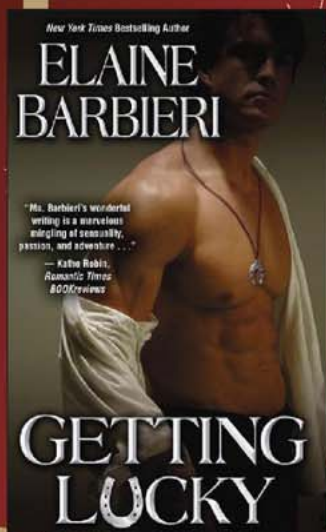
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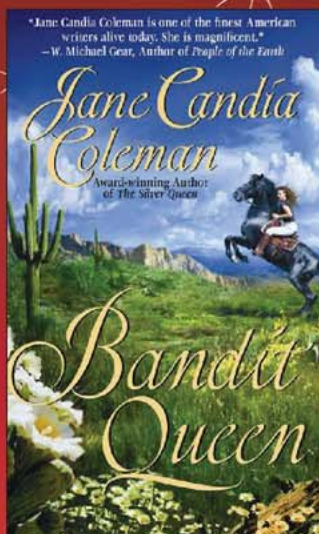


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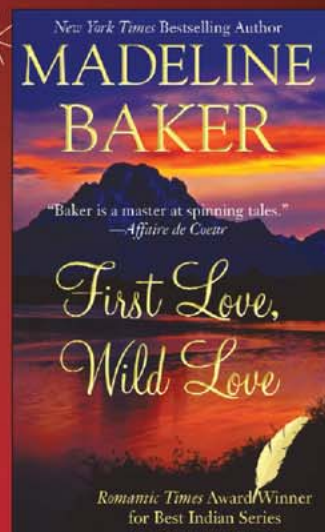
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A World Of Christmas Wishes

Changed My Outlook

"Dad, I'm going to start calling you Scrooge. You're just being an old humbug," my daughter said to me from her apartment in New Zealand. "You've got to carry on Mom's Christmas traditions. We owe her that much."



For a moment, as I tried to keep my expression neutral, I wished my daughter couldn't see me over our Internet connection. She had no idea how much that conversation hurt me.

My wife died nearly eighteen months ago and the weight of gloom I'd been living with has slowly lightened, but everything about the upcoming holiday threatened to bring it back. Holly, who was born on Christmas day, had adored everything about the entire season. She started shopping in August and began decorating before the turkey was cold Thanksgiving Day.

I'd made the mistake of answering truthfully when Kylie asked if I planned to put up her mom's Christmas decorations.

"Sweetie, you know I was never good at that kind of thing. It can wait until you're home again and can do it."

It was Kylie's turn to look sad. "Dad, I haven't made up my mind about where I'll go to school next year."

My daughter, a sophomore in college, was doing a year as a foreign exchange student at Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand.

"I'm not sure if I'm going to transfer to the University of Wyoming with you or stay in New York."

I had taught for years at a university in New York, but when my daughter moved halfway around the globe, I moved across the country hoping to start over in a place not filled with painful memories. Everything in New York reminded me of Holly. Out in the "wild west" things were so entirely different that I could focus on my teaching and research again.

It was quite a shock seeing the small town of Laramie for the first time. I had, of course, flown out to interview, but was only on the lovely campus and had no time to explore the town.

It turns out there isn't much town to explore. Laramie has fewer than thirty thousand people, the entire state only about half a million. New York's five boroughs contain eight million and Long Island, where we lived, is one of the most densely populated islands in the world.

As I walked through the small,

downtown area with its outdoor-theme shops, I felt an odd sensation of being exposed, out in the open, and very alone. The town sits on the high plains between a couple of mountain ranges, which are visible in the distance. The sky is huge, because there are no geological or architectural structures to obscure it. The tallest buildings in town are the dorms.

I'd never realized how accustomed I was to the constant bustle of New York—the sheer feeling of density of the people, the buildings, and the traffic. Even the air in Wyoming felt lighter, perhaps because of the high altitude and the ever-present wind.

Crowding all of Holly's Christmas decorations into the little home I'd bought would plunge my memory, and emotions, right back where they'd been.

"I know you're not sure about next year and I understand," I hurried to assure Kylie, and to change the subject. "Tell me about your drive to Palmerston North."

We had a nice conversation as she told me about the breathtaking, snow-capped mountains she'd seen. Kylie let the subject of Christmas drop, but I knew she'd bring it up again. Last Christmas had been only six months after Holly died. Kylie had stepped into her mother's shoes and did all the things Holly would've done. It seemed to help her feel closer to her mother.

But to me, every syrupy carol, every gaudy ornament was agony. It made me miss Holly so fiercely I ached. I planned to ignore the holiday completely. Thankfully, I was busy enough adjusting to a new job, new city, and new home to not even think about it at all.

Autumn in Wyoming proved glorious, with a blaze of yellow aspens threading through the dark, green pines. I never knew the sky could be brilliant blue and clear as crystal. I took every opportunity to get up to the mountains and enjoy the outdoor life, which was one of the reasons I'd decided to make the radical move. Aaron Donaldson, a good friend who I knew since college, teaches political science. When another position opened up he urged me to apply.

Aaron and his wife, Myra, went out of their way to welcome this city boy to the west. We put in hours of hiking and Aaron promised to introduce me to the beauty and rigor of cross-country skiing after the first good snow.

But Christmas seemed to be on everyone's mind, even though it was weeks away.

"What are you doing over the break?" Aaron asked one evening as we grilled buffalo burgers. The scent of roasting meat and charcoal perfumed the evening air. Their sleek, black cat wound around my legs, hoping I'd drop a little meat. Bending down to pet it, I remembered how much Holly loved cats, but we could never own one because of her allergies.

"You could come to Colorado with us. I'm doing a big race while we wait on our first grandchild. Myra will be busy fussing with our daughter and the nursery. I'd go stir crazy just hanging around the house."

"Thanks for the invite, but I think I'll just use the break to finish getting settled." I went back to flipping the burgers. "I have boxes I haven't even opened yet, especially at the office. The students have started using them for extra seating during office hours."

The thought struck me that lots of the unopened boxes at home held Christmas decorations, but I didn't want to get on that subject again. Thinking of my wife made my throat ache with sadness. So, I deftly changed the subject once more.

"This is a cross-country ski race, right? How many participants?"

We talked about more pleasant things until the end of the visit, but I couldn't escape the subject completely.

As I left, Myra hugged me and said, "We meant it. We'd love to have you come with us at Christmas. Our daughter has plenty of room. You would be good company for Aaron. Think about it, okay?"

I *did* think about it after they left. *How can I spend Holly's special holiday with a couple so obviously in love? Especially as they wait on the birth of their first grandchild? It'll be worse than being all by myself!*

Despite the Donaldsons' friend-

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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.

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

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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.

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Lindenwold

Christmas Cheer

(Continued from page 3)

ship, I often found myself alone. Although I was alone in New York after Holly's death, it felt different in Wyoming. In New York, you feel connected to the entire world. An act as simple as running errands puts one in contact with people from around the globe. Whether I was on campus or on the streets, I'd hear a barrage of languages and be surrounded by a literal melting pot of people.

Laramie feels much more isolated. The local people are friendly, but in an independent, self-sufficient way. At times, I rattled around my empty house. Perhaps because I missed New York's multicultural lifestyle or because I was so aware of my own daughter living in a different country, Myra talked me into volunteering with my church's international student outreach, which she ran.

For the first few months the duties consisted of helping serve meals on Friday nights at the student center, and then joining in the game and fellowship time afterward. Several of my students came to these events. I saw myself in almost a temporary father role as I visited with young people who aren't much older than my daughter.

I mentioned this feeling one evening while Myra and I were finishing the cleanup from a Friday night supper.

"I'm glad you feel that way, Alex, because I have a big favor to ask you."

The tone of Myra's voice alerted me that it *wasn't* a simple request. I quit stacking dirty pots and looked at her.

"Which is?"

"It's about Christmas."

I instantly felt my heart plummet. I knew where the conversation was going. I like Myra and volunteering with the students, but helping with the Christmas party was out of the question. Looking back at the stack of dishes, I tried to formulate a polite way to say *no*.

"I've always hosted the Christmas party," she said in a rush. "But since Aaron and I will be out of town waiting on the baby, I can't do it this year. I know it's asking a lot, but

would you consider hosting the party?"

I just gaped at her, blinking my eyes like a calf at a new gate.

"Uh . . . uh," I answered eloquently.

She hurried on. "I'd ask someone else, but since the party actually falls on Christmas day, everyone will be busy with their own families."

I know Myra didn't mean to remind me of the fact that I was facing the "happiest time of year" without my wife or daughter, but her words stung. Thinking hard, I tried to formulate a negative answer that wouldn't leave me trying to explain why Christmas is so especially hard for me.

"I'm sorry, Myra, but I'd be useless trying to host a Christmas party. Holly always handled that kind of thing."

"It doesn't have to be anything fancy. Just a simple get-together."

"I don't think so."

She wasn't about to give up that easily.

"Think how crucial it would be to these kids who can't go home."

Myra had me there. I already felt bad about Kylie being alone on a holiday that's so momentous.

Still, I shook my head.

"Lots of these kids know nothing about Christmas. They think it's all about Santa Claus and gift giving. Don't you think it's important for them to see the *real* reason we celebrate?"

"I'm sure it is—" I started, but she cut me off.

"What better way to show God's love than to open your home? You've already forged such nice friendships. Can't you see what a wonderful opportunity this would be?"

I hesitated. Myra seemed to read the conflict on my face.

"Alex, I know it will be hard to go through the holidays without your wife and with your daughter so far away. It would be good for you to have something to do. Hosting this party would be good for you."

I don't know if it's because her words had an element of truth to them, or because I felt I owed her for everything she and Aaron have done for me. They encouraged me to take the job, found the house for me,

helped me move in, cooked me meals, entertained me, and introduced me to people in my new hometown.

Whatever the reason, I was still surprised to hear the words, "Okay, I'll do it," come out of my mouth.

As soon as they did, though, a pleased smile lit Myra's eyes.

"Thank you, Alex. You won't regret it."

I already do.

Unfortunately, I couldn't take the words back even though I tried to get out of it several times. Myra couldn't be moved. So, I did the next best thing and put it out of mind. *Christmas is weeks away. I don't have to think about it.*

But Christmas is hard to ignore, no matter how hard you try.

Even the weather seemed to be a determined reminder. It suddenly got cold, a much different cold than New York, because there is nothing to stop the wind. Trudging up to campus, forceful blasts cut through my heaviest clothing like icy knives. Laramie even got a dusting of snow, which didn't last.

I worked on getting settled bit by bit. I planned to barricade myself in my office over the break to get organized, which should keep me well away from other people's annoying holiday cheer. At home one evening, I opened a box labeled *Bedroom Books* and started putting volumes on the shelf. I grabbed a small, leather-covered notebook without recognizing it. Then I flipped it open. It was Holly's day planner.

It felt like a tranquilizer dart to the heart had frozen me in my tracks.

I simply stood and looked at it for a couple of moments, before sinking into a chair. Slowly, I flipped through the pages. Every notation in her neat handwriting exploded into a clear picture in my mind of all the precious, mundane events of our life before the traffic accident that had changed things forever.

Finding the book was totally unexpected, because Kylie had helped me pack up and carefully label all of Holly's things. I hadn't opened any of those boxes since. Somehow we'd missed the one item that had been so important to my wife it was nearly an extra appendage. I'd tried to buy her an electronic organizer for her last

birthday, but she hadn't been interested.

"I'm a pen and paper girl," Holly had said. "My mind sorts things out when I make lists. I tried using the computer for a while. I'd make a list and then forget what folder I put it in. Was it under 'owner,' 'documents,' or 'user files?' What did I call it? It was hopeless. I'll stick to my day planner, thanks."

It felt like I was holding a portion of Holly's life in my hands. One of the tabs said *holidays*. I opened it and found a neat list of everything Holly did at Christmas. No wonder she was always so busy!

She had listed all the normal activities: buy gifts, wrap gifts, mail gifts, take photo for Christmas cards, write cards, address envelopes, etc. Each category was also broken down into steps or contained more information—like all the friends and relatives we exchanged gifts with, and their addresses. Holly not only listed decorating the tree and house, but also had notations of how many boxes were in the attic and what was in each one. There was a list of people she baked for with reminders of food allergies.

Not only was I amazed at all my wife had accomplished each year and how organized she was, but the thought also crossed my mind that now all these chores have fallen to me to do.

I foolishly agreed to host the Christmas party and could see no way out of it. *Won't the students expect the house to be decorated and for me to serve traditional Christmas food? What have I gotten myself into?*

Holly's shopping list alone looked overwhelming. I counted quickly. It seems my wife and I had been exchanging gifts with thirteen different relatives and six close friends. I had no idea!

They're all people I care about. It looked like I had to go shopping. I groaned at the thought.

Laramie doesn't have a mall and I wanted to get that chore over all at once. On Saturday morning, I headed to the nearest large retail outlet, which is in Colorado. I actually enjoyed the spectacular drive through the mountains to Ft. Collins—until I walked into the mall and my stomach clenched. All my

grumpy, Scrooge-ish feelings about Christmas rushed back over me.

Seasonal songs blared from hidden speakers. Giant silver and blue Christmas baubles hung from the ceiling. I spotted exhausted mothers trying to corral their youngsters as they waited in line to get a picture taken with a too-jolly, too-polyester Santa.

Why in the world did Holly love this holiday so much? I wondered.

I hit the first store with the list of all my relatives clutched in my hand. I didn't have the faintest idea what my elderly Aunt Harriet would want, or my kid sister's three boys, either. There wasn't a single person on the list that I could think of something for, including Kylie.

I marched on in a sensory overload from the abundance of holiday merchandising effort surrounding me. I wandered in and out of toy stores, clothing stores, sports stores, and one place selling soaps and lotions that I could smell from a hundred feet away. After only five minutes inside, I doubted the cloyingly sweet "Christmas Cookies" scent would come out of my clothes without dry cleaning.

Two and a half hours later, the only purchase I'd made was a pair of hiking socks guaranteed to "wick away moisture" that I'd bought for myself, because I felt bad for the salesgirl trying to help me. It was her first day at work and I couldn't walk away without buying something.

At this rate, I'll be lucky to have gifts for next year's Christmas.

I felt like I'd failed my first foray into the world of Christmas shopping. I fled the mall and justified my hour-long drive by eating dinner at an Italian restaurant that Aaron and Myra had recommended. At least the manicotti was worth the drive.

Another week passed and I still hadn't thought of anything to buy anyone on my list. I began to feel panicky with the constant Christmas countdown on the news and reminders of the approaching day everywhere I went. It would be my second Christmas without Holly. I wanted my family to think I was doing okay since my big move to Wyoming, no matter how much I still really missed my wife.

I decided to tackle the problem

like I would one at work. I got on the computer and did some research. It turns out that you can buy most anything online. Even Christmas presents. After surfing for a while, I came up with the brilliant observation that everyone likes to eat. So, I decided to order food gift packages.

I wanted to send people something from my new state. I decided on gift baskets of jam and syrup from Raspberry DeLight Farms in Shoshoni, Wyoming. One went to every person on Holly's list. The best part was that the whole thing took less than an hour and the raspberry farm handled all the shipping. In one stroke, I could mark two items off my—uh, *Holly's* list.

Why didn't I think of this before and save myself so much aggravation?

I was quite proud of my achievement until I remembered that I had to come up with something a little more personal for my own daughter. A basket of jam wouldn't cut it. Kylie knew I was never good at the whole gift-giving thing and her mom had lovingly chosen each and every gift she'd ever received from us. She'd understand if I just sent money, but sending her something I'd picked out would mean so much more. I wanted Kylie to know how much I missed her.

I wish she were here so we could snuggle in for movie night, I thought sadly. Movie night had been one of our favorite family pastimes. It just isn't much fun alone.

Suddenly, it hit me. *I'll send Kylie a movie night in a box*. I got so excited by the idea that I found my shoes and car keys and headed straight to the biggest store in town.

I went a little nuts in the movie area and picked out a handful of newly released DVDs, as well as some old classics she loved.

Kylie can't watch a movie without popcorn, I thought, heading for the grocery area. *I'll get her some of the microwave kind along with a couple of bags of her favorite candy*.

Crossing the store, I passed a rack of colorful T-shirts and flannel-pant pajamas. They were the kind Kylie always wore. I picked out a pair in blue with small snowflakes on the pants. I could just picture her curled up in them, watching a

(Continued on page 59) 7

Love Cure

Romance Is The Best Medicine

Am I going to lose my hair?”

That was *almost* the first question I asked when the specialist walked in for the consultation on my first day of chemotherapy. I'd had a double mastectomy a few weeks before and was just starting to feel comfortable again. I was annoyed when my surgeon insisted I complete a course of chemo as well.

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Storm Blue



"But it's gone!" I'd protested. "I had the mastectomy. Didn't all those follow-up scans and tests tell us you got all the cancer? Why do I have to do this?"

"Because I said so," Dr. Oliver had answered sternly. Then he smiled. "Seriously, Sabrina. This is just another step in the process. We do chemotherapy not only to ensure that all the cancer is gone, but to ensure that it doesn't come back."

"Am I going to lose my hair?" I'd demanded.

"That'll be a question to ask Dr. Astor. Give her this order. You know where you're going?"

"Annex behind the hospital," I'd said obediently. "The one that says *Cancer Center* in black letters that are four feet high."

"That sign wasn't my idea. Just go, Sabrina. Promise me you'll go. If your hair does fall out, it's only temporary. Think of chemo as your guarantee that you'll live to grow it back."

So there I was, perched unwillingly on a plastic chair in the consultation room at the chemo center. Dr. Astor, the specialist, looked all of thirty and was unbelievably gorgeous, with a luxurious sweep of coal-black hair and a model's body.

I glanced at my reflection in the mirror behind her. *Not much comparison there*, I thought sourly. I was forty-one, but looked older. I had prematurely gray hair that I hadn't bothered to color recently.

Since the surgery I was too thin, almost bony, with no muscle tone after weeks of lying around feeling sorry for myself. No makeup; I hadn't used any since the surgery. I wore jeans and a sloppy, too-big sweatshirt because I wasn't comfortable with the prostheses that are supposed to replace my missing breasts.

"Possibly," Dr. Astor said with a smile that was supposed to comfort me. "You might lose a little hair, or all of it. The chemotherapy cocktails we prescribe are actually poisonous to cancer. They're meant to attack and kill cancer cells, which are fast-growing and fast replicating. Unfortunately, hair follicles are also fast-growing and fast-replicating, so sometimes they're affected."

10 "But if my cancer is gone," I said,

not willing to give up the argument I'd already had with the surgeon, "why do I even *need* chemo?"

"Everything we know tells us your cancer is gone," she agreed smoothly. "But we don't know everything. This is a very sensible precaution, the best we have, and we encourage *all* of our patients to take advantage of it."

I sighed. "Okay," I agreed. "Let's get it over with. Tell me what I have to do."

She turned me over to Chelsea, a perky, young nurse with a stack of folders, binders, and clipboards.

"Most of these are for you to take home and look at later," she said. "Let me give you a tour of the facility as we go along. We're very proud of it."

"Yeah, can't wait to see all the sights," I muttered.

Can you blame me? Would *you* have wanted to be there? *No one could want to be here*, I thought, *except maybe the nurses, who seem to have pretty cushy jobs*. I slumped down the hall after Chelsea, silently resenting the soft colors, the well-stocked snack bar, and the padded recliners.

There were six enclosures that held six recliners each. Only five of the enclosures had televisions, thank goodness, so I chose the sixth, a smaller space with a bigger window. I was the only patient who doesn't like TV, it seemed. The other enclosures were crowded with patients and visitors, chatting and carrying on like there's nothing wrong. Some of them were playing board games. How could they?

I just wanted to be alone. I'd refused to let anyone come with me.

"Now then," Chelsea said, settling me into my chosen recliner. "Comfy?"

"It'll do."

She spent the next forty-five minutes explaining what would happen. I would be getting a personalized cocktail of chemotherapy drugs intravenously at intervals over a nine-week period. Each visit would take about three hours, and I was free to bring friends or family to help pass the time.

Chelsea encouraged me to snack and drink plenty of fluids during the visits, and she gave me a detailed

diet to follow at home. There were instructions for every contingency. If I felt nauseous, I was to do this. If I developed mouth sores, I was to do that. I was to stay out of the sun, stay away from sick children, and stay away from crowds of people altogether, because the drugs would depress my immune system. I was to have weekly blood tests. The list went on and on.

"Sounds like a fun time," I grouched.

"Oh, it'll be over before you know it," Chelsea sagely predicted. "Chemotherapy sounds awful, but most people don't find it to be such a bad experience. Most people are grateful for it because it gives them that much more of a chance for life."

Yeah, I knew that. I knew the doctors were right and I had to do it, but despite Chelsea and her perkiness, I didn't have to be happy about it.

She started a saline IV and went off to mix my personal drug cocktail. I pulled out my new electronic book reader, a gift from my coworkers, and tried to lose myself in the latest bestseller by my favorite author. Chelsea came back with another nurse, and they carefully verified that I was getting the right IV bags. There were ice packs, too.

"We'll put these around your arm," Chelsea said. "Once the drugs start into your veins there can be a burning sensation."

"Oh, great. Something to look forward to," I muttered.

She ignored me. "Now, feel free to get up and walk around. Just be careful to keep the IV pole close to you. The bathroom is to your right, and the snack bar is up the hall to the left. I'm going to start you out with something to drink. Coffee? Soda? I think there's lemonade, too."

"Hot tea," I ordered. "Plain."

"Got it," she said cheerfully, shooting me a thumbs-up. I didn't return it. She brought snack crackers, too, and some salted nuts, which I ignored. When the burning sensation started to crawl up my arm I ignored that, too. I tried very hard to notice nothing for the next three hours.

"Well?"

Liz, my sister, was waiting to pick me up at the front entrance after my first session. Liz and her husband, Edmund, only live a mile from me, and our parents are next door to them. Meredith, my other sister, lives down south with her family. Edmund is a truck driver and is away a lot. Their kids are grown and on their own, so Liz had appointed herself my personal caretaker.

She demanded details. "Was it awful? Did it hurt? Are you sick to your stomach?"

I snapped the seatbelt and leaned back against the headrest, eyes closed.

"It was okay," I allowed. "Sort of a burning sensation up my arm, but okay. The center wasn't a downer at all. Surprised me. The most depressing thing in the whole place was me."

"Hmph." Liz snorted. "Of course it was. Sabrina, you need to ease up a little. You're going to live. Shouldn't you be happier?"

My eyes snapped open and I sat upright. "Hey, let's stop next door at the hospital. We'll get them to give you a double mastectomy and see how happy *you* are about it."

Liz flushed and the ride home was silent. I didn't ask her into the house. I knew my family was tired of my attitude, but I couldn't help it.

Until three months ago, I'd always been the cheerful one. Liz and Meredith are natural-born worriers, and my parents have that raised-during-the-Depression mentality where they always expect the worst and prepare for any outcome. Not me. I lived for the moment, squeezed every ounce of joy from my carefree life, and always expected the best. Although I never married or had children, I was supremely happy.

Until three months ago, that is, when a routine mammogram disclosed cancer. The surgeons I talked to all recommended aggressive treatment. I didn't hesitate. I agreed to the double mastectomy. When I awoke after surgery I thought: *There. That's done. Now I can get on with my life.*

How naïve is that? I thought now, sitting in my darkened living room.

I should've realized that it couldn't be that simple. When cancer hits you, it hits for life. For the

rest of mine—no matter how long I live—I'd be waiting for the cancer to come back. Before I could even do that, though, I had to get through the next few weeks. So I sat in my living room and waited for the sickness to start.

It was late the next day before I even felt queasy. Chelsea had said my particular combination of drugs wouldn't necessarily make me sick right away, but I didn't believe her. The nausea was light, and I was able to ignore it.

On Saturday, three days after the treatment, Liz called.

"Let's go to lunch," she said. "Are you up to it?"

I didn't want to go, but I knew Liz would browbeat me into it. I gave in.

"I can handle it, I guess."

"Of course you can," Liz said. "We'll talk about the cruise."

Liz and Meredith had promised me a cruise to the Cayman Islands as soon as my cancer treatment was finished. They're both cruise junkies, but I'd never been on one.

"I'm not so sure about the cruise," I protested. "What if my hair does fall out?"

"We'll go a month later. It'll grow back fast. Pick you up in twenty."

We ordered soup and salad at a local café. I propped my elbows on the table and tugged at my shaggy, gray hair.

"It's never been that great-looking anyway," I said. "Maybe I'll look better bald."

Liz sighed. "As if we didn't have enough trouble boosting your self-image. Now you're going to be bald, too."

That got us laughing.

"How's it going with the prostheses?" she asked.

I squirmed and made a show of pushing them into place.

"I'm sort of getting used to them," I admitted. "The woman who fitted me said most women have several pairs. One for everyday use, one for swimming, and one for when you want to look good in a tight sweater."

"Which pair do you have on now?" she asked, glancing at my chest.

I looked down at my loose T-shirt. "This is my starter set. Wait until you see the giant ones I ordered for dress-up, though."

I arrived for the second chemo session in a somewhat better mood.

"No nausea?" Chelsea guessed.

"None to speak of," I agreed. "And, look, I still have hair."

"Don't get cocky," she warned. "If your hair is going to come out, you won't notice for awhile yet."

"Now you tell me," I groused. But I really was feeling better about the whole thing—until other people invaded my space.

That time I didn't have the television-free station to myself. Chelsea introduced me to Cady, a timid sixty-year-old who whispered that she had colon cancer, and Jasper, an elderly man who'd just had part of his lung removed.

Jasper's wife and daughter were with him, and his daughter had brought a dice game.

"We used to play this constantly when we were kids," she said. "I thought it would help pass the time."

They pulled chairs into a circle around a rolling tray and invited Cady and me to join them. Cady agreed, but I shook my head.

"I'm not feeling well," I lied. "I'd rather just read."

I couldn't help listening to their conversation, though. Jasper started telling Cady how much better his life had been since his cancer diagnosis.

Better? I thought. *How is that possible?* Still pretending to read, I didn't ask the question out loud. Cady did.

"I pay more attention now," he answered simply. "We have the most beautiful wildflowers out in our woods, but I never looked at them before this spring. My granddaughter has been asking to go fishing for two summers, but I never made the time to take her until just last weekend. Every morning when I wake up, I tell my wife how much I love her. Every night, I tell her how much I appreciate her."

"You know," Cady said, "I'd always wanted to go to Ireland, to see where my parents were born, but I never wanted to spend the money. Just before I had the surgery, I dragged my brother onto a plane and we went to Ireland. We had a wonderful time and we don't

(Continued on page 14) 11

Miracle of Faith Mini-Story

I was playing the piano at my father's church in a small town from the time I was nine. That has been my goal since I first started piano lessons. I continued playing hymns for Dad's congregation until I was grown and married. After my husband's job transferred us to the city, I'd hoped that we could find a church that might need a piano player and I could continue doing what I loved the most. As it turned out, the pianist at the first church we attended was moving and they were happy to hire me as her replacement.

I'd never played for a choir or a choir director before, but I didn't think that would be a problem. I was wrong! The choir director was a tyrant who'd alienated most of the choir members with his hot temper and rude criticisms. Everyone told me to just ignore him like they did, but I couldn't do that. Every Wednesday night at choir practice it was a battle with this cantankerous, old man who was critical of everyone—especially me! Nothing I played was done to his satisfaction. For the first time in my life I was beginning to hate someone. That made me very unhappy.

When the director became ill, we were shocked to learn

that it was a fast-growing cancer. He was soon in hospice care. I knew I should be forgiving and visit him, but how could I pretend to care when I felt such anger toward him? My father didn't raise me to be like that, so I prayed God would help me visit this man and find a way to end my anger and forgive him.

My first visit wasn't easy because he was still grouchy and disagreeable. I had to give my prayers a chance, so I went back three more times. He was a little nicer each time, and on my last visit before he died he took my hand. With tears in his eyes, he thanked me for coming because no one else from the choir had visited him even once!

He asked me, in the gentlest way I'd ever heard him speak, to forgive him for the way he had treated me, and all the others, in the past. Even as he asked, I felt the hard knot of hate and anger melt away. My prayer was answered and my faith was restored, since his last words to me were delivered with a friendly wink and a mischievous grin: "But I *still* think your piano playing is too slow!"

—H. D. Moore, California



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Love Cure

(Continued from page 11)

even miss that money. So I guess I agree with you," she said with a smile. "I appreciate my life more now."

Cady glanced over at me, but I didn't look up from my reader.

"I still feel pretty good," I admitted to Chelsea as I left. "Are you sure this is chemo?"

"There you are," she warned. "Cocky again. Remember what I said? The worst nausea comes twenty-four to thirty-six hours later. Don't plan anything big tomorrow evening, or you might be sorry. Stay at home quietly, just in case."

"I'll be okay," I insisted. "I can handle these drugs just fine."

"I hope so," she said.

I drove myself that day, convinced I had nothing to worry about. I was right. I even stopped at the mall to look in a wig store just in case. I picked out one in a short, sassy style, but I didn't buy it. *After all*, I reasoned, *I might not even need it*.

As soon as I got home, I called my boss. I work at a medical transcription office. We use computer keyboards all day, so the surgeon insisted on the full six weeks off after surgery, to let my shoulder and chest muscles heal.

It had only been five weeks, but I felt so good that I told my boss I was ready to return on a part-time basis.

"I have three-hour chemotherapy appointments off and on for the next eight weeks, but I feel great and I'm ready to work as much as I can."

"We could sure use you," Molly said. "But what if the chemo makes you sick? When my mother had hers—"

"Oh, those were the old days," I said breezily. "Chemo's nothing to worry about now. I'm fine. Really. How about if I start back Monday morning?"

"If you're sure you're all right," she repeated doubtfully.

"No worries, Molly," I promised. "See you then."

Well, that was Wednesday. On Thursday morning I woke up, said, "Oh, no!" and made a dive for the bathroom. I barely made it in time. Huge waves of nausea rolled through me as regularly as the tide for the next twenty-four hours.

Between trips to the bathroom I laid on the bed, limp and groaning. Liz called sometime in the afternoon.

"Sick," I whispered into the phone. She was there in half an hour, carrying a carton of chicken soup. One whiff of the soup had me stumbling to the bathroom again.

"Get that away from me," I moaned. "Far, *far* away."

"Sabrina, you have to eat something," she insisted.

"No, I don't. I may never eat food again."

"Maybe some ice chips," she said worriedly. She hurried off to the kitchen while I resumed my groaning.

I felt better by Friday afternoon, and by Sunday I was able to go to church. I went out for lunch with my parents, Liz, and her husband, Edmund, but only ordered iced tea.

"I don't think you should go back to work tomorrow," my mother said.

"I don't, either," Liz said. "It's too soon."

"Chemo's going to take eight more weeks," I protested. "I can't take eight more weeks off work. My sick leave will run out and Molly will have to replace me. How will I pay the mortgage with no job?"

"We'll pay your mortgage," Liz said abruptly.

"What?" I gasped. "You can't afford that!"

"Not by myself, but we talked about it." She nodded across the table to our parents. "Mom, Dad, Meredith and Bill, and Edmund and I. We all agreed that if it comes down to you not being able to work, among all of us, we could handle your bills for awhile."

"No!" I cried. "I won't let you! And it'll never come to that anyway," I insisted over their protests. "I feel fine now. Chelsea told me the nausea is short-lived. It's not like I'm going to be continuously sick for two months. If I work half a day on chemo days, and stay home the day after to puke my guts out, it'll work. Molly needs me and I need to go back to work."

They argued for a while, but I refused to listen. I did cave in enough to order a double malt milkshake, and that made them happier. I felt pretty much normal on Monday morning, so I ate a whopping, big bowl of oatmeal and went to work.

Though my arms and shoulders ached at the end of every workday, getting back to a regular schedule felt normal and good. As I drove to the next chemotherapy appointment, I thought about the conversation I'd overheard between Jasper and Cady, my chemo neighbors.

I had to admit they were right. My family was right, too. I'm lucky to be alive, and lucky that my prognosis is good. Surgery and chemotherapy are both modern-day miracles giving me a chance to live a long and healthy life. I should be more grateful. And as Liz never stopped reminding me, I should lighten up.

I'll join the dice game today, I decided, walking into the cancer center with a light step.

Cady, Jasper, and I greeted each other like old friends. Cady gave each of us a set of terrycloth wristbands she said would help with nausea. The wristbands have hard, plastic buttons on them that you're supposed to position between the tendons on the inside of your wrist.

"There's an acupuncture point there that suppresses nausea. My daughter is a flight attendant and she said lots of passengers use them for air sickness."

We agreed to give them a try. We were setting up for the game when Chelsea breezed in with a new patient.

"Everyone, this is Harmon," she said.

She hustled the man into a corner recliner and sat down to give him the orientation talk. We kept our game quiet.

Being with the others made the three hours go quickly. Before I knew it I was walking out to the parking lot with Harmon, the new patient. He hadn't said a word to any of us.

"You've got one session behind you now," I said companionably.

"Big deal," he sneered. "That only leaves a couple thousand to go."

"Surely not that many," I said with an uncertain smile.

"Might as well be," he said. He peeled off without even saying good-bye.

Was I that unfriendly at first? Yeah, I think I was.

With the third chemo appointment behind me, I felt like an old pro. The

sickness that time was no worse than before, and I recovered faster. I thought the wristbands Cady had given me helped just a little. I bought one of those white, plastic things you put over your bathtub drain to catch hair. Maybe I wouldn't need it, but it was best to be prepared. My finances were shaky enough that I couldn't handle a big plumbing bill if my hair did fall out.

"Still got it, I see," Molly commented at work the next day.

"So far," I said lightly. "I'm a third of the way through, and I have this week off from chemo. Maybe I'll have my hair after all."

"My mother didn't lose hers until the chemo was almost finished."

"If there's one thing I've learned about chemotherapy, it's that everyone's journey is different. I'm determined not to believe anyone else's experience will be like mine. No offense, boss."

"None taken," she said. "Think you can handle Dr. Daveigh this morning?"

I groaned. Transcribing dictation tapes from Dr. Daveigh, with his thick accent, made all of us groan. "Lay it on me."

Later that afternoon, with the difficult job behind me, I was comfortably settled into a familiar routine. Soft jazz was on the office radio. I sipped a steaming cup of two-cream, three-sugar coffee, and nibbled at the chocolate cream doughnut Molly had laid at my elbow. Through my headset, sweet-voiced Dr. Bowne was describing a routine appendectomy. My fingers danced over the worn surface of my trusty, ergonomic keyboard. Out of the blue, an odd thought popped into my head. *I love my life.*

What! the cynical half of me retorted. *You almost died. You could still die. You're going through hell. What's to love?*

But that first thought, I mused, is nevertheless true. I was going through chemotherapy, sure, but it wasn't turning out to be so bad. I'd made some friends, the side effects were bearable, and I had the end firmly in sight. When it's over, I could be that much more confident in my survival. In the meantime, I had taken hold of my life again, and, yes, I was actually happy.

So it was with an almost carefree

smile that I walked into the cancer center a week later.

"Back again," Chelsea said brightly. "Want your regular spot?"

"Let the games begin," I said.

"Oh, by the way, Cady's not coming. She got out of synch with all of you because her schedule's different. But Jasper and Harmon are here."

What a bummer, I thought, heading down the hall. *Maybe we can convince Harmon to play with us.*

In our pod, Jasper was trying his best.

"C'mon, Harmon, we'll even spot you two hundred points. It helps pass the time."

"Not interested," Harmon replied shortly. He was sitting stiffly in a corner recliner, elbows jammed back on the armrests, avoiding eye contact. He didn't even have a book to read.

"I know what will help," I told Jasper in a low voice. "Later."

We started our game; hardly noticing when Chelsea inserted the IV drips. Although I was secretly appalled, I teased Jasper about his new bald spots.

"Yeah," he said. "I meant to shave my head this morning, get that multimillion-dollar basketball player look, but I forgot."

"I keep waiting for mine to fall out, but nothing's happened yet." I glanced over at Harmon, and then raised my voice a little. "You know, I'm almost looking forward to losing my hair."

Jasper's daughter stopped shaking the dice cup. "You're almost *what?*"

"Looking forward to it," I insisted. "I've never had great hair. It's coarse, dull, and mostly gray. I picked out the cutest wig at the mall the other day. I honestly think I'll look better in it than I do with this." I tugged at my short mop of hair in disgust. "My luck, though, it'll never fall out."

Jasper's daughter shook her head. "Well, God bless you, Sabrina, for keeping such a positive attitude." She shot a glance at Harmon and then gave me a short nod.

I smiled. "I've been trying it out—that positive attitude thing—and it's working much better than the negativity I was spewing just a few weeks ago."

"What else are you positive about?" Jasper asked.

"Besides my life? Let's see, my job, for one thing. I went back two weeks ago. It's great to have a routine I can count on again. These wristbands, for another thing." I held out my arm. "They're definitely helping with the nausea." I stopped for a minute. "Rain. I'm positive about rain, because my flower garden has been great this year."

"And our chemo nurse," Jasper put in. "Let's be happy about her. We could have gotten a mean, old battleaxe. Instead we have sweet, perky little Chelsea."

That called for a toast to Chelsea with our ginger ale. Then, figuring Harmon had had enough of a nudge for one day, I changed the subject. The three hours passed easily, and I again found myself walking out to the parking lot with Harmon. That time, he was the first one to speak.

"Those wristbands. I saw you wearing them. Are they those anti-nausea things I've read about?"

"They sure are," I said, holding up an arm for inspection. "You can buy them in most drugstores. They'll be with the motion sickness remedies."

"Thanks. Maybe I'll check them out."

Good, I thought with no small amount of satisfaction. *I've got him leaning toward the positive side, too.*

All my big talk about being happy again, and thinking positively, nearly went right down the drain when I looked at the bottom of the tub after my shower one morning.

Great knots of shaggy, gray hair clumped around the plastic drain protector. I jumped out of the tub, wiped condensation from the mirror over the sink, and stared in dismay at the huge, bald patches on either side of my head.

"All at once?" I cried aloud. "It's coming out all at once?" I stuffed what was left of my hair under a ball cap and called Liz. "I'll pick you up in an hour. We have to go to the mall!"

"You were right," Liz said at the wig store. "You do look better with the wig than you did with your original hair."

I turned my head from one side to the other, admiring the wig. I

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A photograph of two women hiking up a grassy hill. The woman on the left is wearing a black jacket with red accents and white pants. The woman on the right is wearing a purple jacket and black pants. They are both seen from behind, walking away from the camera. The hill is covered in green grass and some small white flowers. The sky is not visible.

Live Life To The Fullest

It's Never Too Late To Learn

I first met Agnes the day she returned a pair of slippers to our store. Nothing unusual about that, except that she's seventy-five if she's a day and the slippers were high-heeled, scarlet satin with matching scarlet feathers for trim.

The fact that she'd waited a whole year to return them didn't help, either.



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"It's because of my hip replacement," she said. "I didn't get any chance to wear these, and now the doctor says he'll drop me as a patient if I do. Any chance I could get my money back?"

I had to smother my smile at that. The way she stood there, with her hands on her hips and ready to take on the world, I had no doubt that she's the kind of lady who could wear these slippers. And I envied her.

I'm less than half her age and I've never worn scarlet slippers, or done anything close to outrageous in my whole life! Who is she?

Suddenly, I wanted to find out.

"I think we can return them," I told her. In fact, I was sure that when my supervisor showed up at the end of my shift, she would tell me we couldn't. But I didn't care. I'd pay for the refund myself. It turned out to be worth it.

"Well, thank you, young lady!"

"I'll ring up your other purchases now, ma'am," I told her.

"Don't call me ma'am. My name is Agnes," she said.

"I'm Laci. Nice to meet you."

I noticed that she had a number of bags to carry to her car. I wondered if she had someone to help her with them, but I was afraid to ask.

"I—uh, I'm just getting off my shift," I said. "Would you like some help out to your car?"

"I don't have a car, dear. There are other ways to spend money," she said, and winked.

I don't know if I want to get into that with her! Who knows what she does with her money, this woman who loves scarlet slippers?

"Maybe I could give you a lift, then?"

"You've determined that you're going to help me today, aren't you, Laci?" she said, and laughed that bold laugh that I would come to know so well. There isn't anything shy about Agnes.

I managed to evade my supervisor, who was just coming through the back entrance of the store. Tara loves to keep her staff over half an hour past their shifts without pay, just talking about things she wanted done the next day. For once I didn't feel like facing her.

58 "Something wrong, honey?"

Agnes asked as we got to the parking lot and walked to my little car. Although Agnes was slower than me, I didn't notice any limp from her hip surgery. She looked very fit.

"Oh, nothing. It's just that for once I got out before my boss could nab me for a lecture," I said, and then bit my lip. Agnes was a customer and I really shouldn't be talking about my boss in front of her.

"Thank heavens for retirement,"



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she commented. "I had about a dozen bosses like that over the years. No, make that two-dozen. Life is too short for that, Laci."

"I know," I said, sighing. "But I've got to make a living."

"You look like a smart girl. There are lots of exciting things you could do."

"Yeah, but I've let my brain surgery license lapse," I told her.

She paused while putting on her seatbelt. Then she burst out laughing. "I thought you were serious for a moment! You could be a brain

surgeon if you wanted to."

I started up the car and pulled out of the parking lot, still expecting Tara to come running out after me to tell me some last-minute detail.

"So, what is it you want to do with your life, dear?" Agnes asked.

"You mean career-wise?"

"Every-wise!" she said, holding both arms high as though she was taking in the whole world. As though a person could just reach out and grab what they wanted. As if. But I knew differently.

"I haven't thought about it," I lied.

"Of course you have! You know what your problem is, Laci? You're pokey."

"I'm what?"

"Pokey. Slow. One day you'll turn around and you'll be sixty. Life goes by too fast. I should know."

I was silent, wondering just how fast her life had been. I didn't know anything about her, but I had the feeling that I was about to find out.

"Now tell me without thinking. What do you want in life?"

"A decent job!"

"Good! What else?"

"Better pay! A vacation near the sea! A great book to read tonight."

"Get wilder," she prodded.

"Okay. A bubble bath with purple bubbles. And a man to go in it!"

There was silence then. I shocked myself. *A man? I can't believe I just said that. I got a divorce some time ago and haven't been interested in dating at all.*

Agnes nodded her approval. "Keep going."

I made a silly list of everything from beehives to world peace. Before I knew it we'd arrived at the address she gave me.

I didn't want our time together to end. I got out of the car reluctantly and carried her packages to the door. It was a small house. Nothing that would make you look at it twice.

Agnes unlocked the door and we went inside. I put her packages on the kitchen counter and turned to leave.

"Where do you think you're going, young lady? Of course you're staying for supper."

"But I couldn't."

I should go home and make something for myself and feed my cat. *But I don't like the thought of*

spending another night at home just to get ready for work again the next day. My life has become one long, dull routine.

"Let me check in the fridge and see what garbage I can come up with," she said, and then looked over her shoulder at me. "Just kidding."

"I couldn't possibly put you to such trouble," I said.

"Then return the favor sometime," Agnes told me, shrugging.

"All right," I replied, feeling my smile fill my whole face. It had been a long time since anyone had shown me friendship like that. But, to be honest, it had been a long time since I'd been good company for anyone. Including myself.

As we sat there eating spaghetti and meatballs, I looked over and saw a framed photograph hanging in the living room. It was of a young couple on a motorcycle. They looked so happy that their eyes were laughing, if that was possible.

"Who are they?" I asked Agnes. "Is she your granddaughter?"

She looked where I was pointing and a warm smile transformed her face.

"Nope. That's me. Well, that's me several decades ago. I was a bit wild back then."

Back then? It seems to me that she still is.

She got up from the kitchen table and brought the picture back so I could see it better. The photo captured one moment of pure happiness in this young couple's life. The young man was handsome in his black leather jacket. Agnes was a knockout with her lovely dark hair. She was holding onto his waist tightly. They looked like they were very much in love.

"Laci, don't you ever need to feel the wind in your hair? Think you have to do something a little wild or you'll just explode?"

I stared at her. I don't think I'd ever heard one of my friends say such a thing, let alone an older woman! Then again, my friends tend to be conservative and a little stuffy, like me.

"Tell me about the man in this picture," I urged her.

"Ah. He was a little wild, too. Never drove anything but red Harleys. The new bikes today, why,

you could fall asleep while sitting on the back and not fall off. I tell you, in the old days you had to hang on for dear life! I slipped off the back a couple of times. No fancy seat to keep you on."

I looked at her in amazement. You'd never guess that this gray-haired woman was once a biker! I started to think about all of the other seniors I see each day. *What are their lives like? Did they do exciting things like Agnes?*

We forget that the older generation used to be young. They used to have crazy dreams like any of us. And one day we'll get older, too. Some of us feel old before our time.

"Enough about me," Agnes said, putting the picture down. "Tell me about yourself, Laci."

"Well, I'm divorced."

"Divorced? Why?"

"It's complicated," I said, looking down at my hands and the place where a ring used to be.

"What was it? Money? Another woman? Gambling?"

"It's hard to talk about," I said, trying to avoid the issue. But I got the feeling that avoiding Agnes was like avoiding a semi truck bearing down on you. "It ended peacefully."

"Peaceful? A peaceful divorce? Well, that's a first," she said, shaking her head in disbelief.

"Okay, then. It was another woman," I confessed.

She reached over and put her hand over mine. "I'm so sorry, dear. You know, it wasn't your fault."

I looked up then, directly into her wise eyes.

"How can you tell that?"

"Think about it, dear. If he'd been honest with you, he'd have come to you long before he got involved with someone else. He would have said, 'I'm sorry; this isn't working out. Can we get a divorce? Or can we get counseling?' But no. He goes to another woman and messes up her life as well. I bet she didn't know he was married, did she?"

"No, I don't think she did at first."

"People who cheat aren't being honest with you, but they especially aren't being honest with themselves. You can't trust a person like that."

The way Agnes explained it made me open my eyes. I'd spent months

(Continued on page 51)

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Angels Among Us

My Dreams Fulfilled

brushed the snow off my jacket, stomped my boots, and grabbed a cart so that I wouldn't look obvious. I snatched a weekly flyer and walked over to the Adopt An Angel Christmas tree. I knew exactly where Benny's tag hung. No one had picked my guy's wish list yet.

"May you have love that never ends,
And may God send love again and again"

The Irish Blessing

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It had been hanging there for two weeks. I sighed. *What happens to the kids whose lists don't get chosen?* My heart hurt just thinking about it.

I plucked his tag from the tree and traced my fingers over his meager wishes: Action figures, art supplies, and a coat. The coat just about killed me. He had a hand-me-down from his cousin, but he wanted his own winter coat; a big boy coat that didn't have cartoon characters on it, like his currently did.

I hung his tag back on the tree and sighed. *A five-year-old boy should have the Christmas of his dreams, but I can't give it to him.* Seeing his tag on the tree was a brand-new low for me.

"It's hard to choose, isn't it?"

I looked up at a handsome man who had walked over to the tree. I forced a smile.

"Yes, there seem to be more wish lists on the tree this year than last."

He pulled three tags off the tree, reading over the requests.

"I think you're right. I usually adopt two or three angels each year. Well, my company does. My assistant would take care of this, but this year it's fallen to me. Maybe I should take a few extra names. A lot of people are down on their luck these days."

He smiled at me, and pulled off another two tags. Not Benny's, though.

"That's very generous of you."

"You, too. Looks like you're doing a good deed, as well."

His cheeks were pink from the cold and his eyes looked kind. My mom always thought you could tell a lot from a person's eyes. Apparently, I should have paid closer attention to the eyes of all the losers I found myself with. Like Benny's dad, for one.

"Yeah," I lied. "I'm still picking out the right kid. It's hard to choose."

He smiled at me. "Well, happy holidays."

"You, too."

I took Benny's tag off the tree again as he walked away. I let out the breath I'd been holding. If only he knew I was the recipient of this holiday charity and not doing a good deed.

I scanned Benny's list again and

realized he hadn't asked for a building set. He'd talked about wanting one. I pulled a pen from my purse and carefully added that to his list. I placed it back on the tree in a new spot, so maybe it would be more noticeable.

"That's very nice of you to add requests for the kids. I hadn't thought of that."

I looked up and saw that the man with the kind eyes had returned. My mouth hung open, waiting for the right excuse to come out, but it didn't. I felt my lips move and the tears pool in my eyes. I looked away.

"I was adding something to my son's list. I figured since no one had picked him yet, it wouldn't matter. He really wants a building set, too, and I . . . I . . . can't afford to get him anything this year. We'll be lucky if we still have a place to live."

I grabbed my cart and tried to make my escape, but the man caught my arm.

"Hey, take a deep breath. It's going to be okay."

He had a deep, calm voice. I squeezed my eyes shut, trying to pretend this wasn't happening.

"You're right. I'll be fine. If you'll excuse me." I tried to walk away again, but he wouldn't let go.

"Is this your son's?" He reached for the tree and pulled off Benny's tag.

I nodded. "You don't have to. You already pulled off a bunch."

"I was coming back to pick another one. Somehow I grabbed all girls' lists. I wanted to buy some cool stuff for boys, so I'd be thrilled to choose your son's. Why don't you help me out and show me exactly what he'd like?" He held out his hand. "I'm Seth Bingham. I own Bingham Builders."

I smiled at him and held out my hand. "Brandy Seaver. Unemployed mother of the cutest five-year-old you'll ever meet."

"Nice to meet you, Brandy. Let's head to the toy aisle."

I took a deep breath and tried to swallow back my embarrassment. Seth made it easy. He didn't look at me with pity or sadness.

"I don't normally accept charity, Mr. Bingham, but I'd do anything for my son. I couldn't bear to see him disappointed on Christmas morning."

"Of course not. You're a mother who loves her child. I can only imagine I'd feel the same way if I'm lucky enough to have a kid someday."

We stopped in the toy aisle. I showed Seth the building sets that Benny didn't have, and which action figures were on top of his wish list. Seth bought them all.

"You don't have to do that. One or two is fine," I said in a husky voice.

He shrugged. "I want your son to have a magical Christmas. I can make that happen, so why not? Now, can you help me find stuff for the other kids?"

I wasn't going to tell him how much Benny had really wanted the coat. Seth had done too much already. So, I grabbed a few tags from him and filled my cart with goodies for the kids.

"You don't have any children?" I asked.

"Nope. Never been married. Building your own business doesn't leave you with much personal time. I was engaged once, but Kim said I cared more about my company than I did about her and she left me."

"Did you try to get her back?" I asked.

He stopped his cart. "No, I didn't. So I guess that says something."

Poor girl, I thought. *This guy is a catch.* I followed him to the checkout.

Seth stopped. "Oh, let's swing by the clothing department. I think your little guy wanted a coat, didn't he? Why don't you pick out what you think he'd like?"

My throat was too thick with emotion for me to say anything. I just nodded and picked the perfect coat for Benny. I hoped I wasn't going to wake up and realize this had all been a dream.

"Can you help me get the bags over to customer service once I'm checked out?" Seth asked.

"Sure."

Once Seth paid for the toys, we dropped them off at customer service with the appropriate tags. We headed for the exit.

"I can't thank you enough, Seth. You're a wonderful guy. You are going to make quite a few kids—and their parents—very happy Christmas morning. I wish there was something I could do for you."

He tapped his finger on his chin.

"Actually, there is. You said you aren't working right now. Correct?"

I shoved my hands in my pockets and nodded.

"My assistant moved away with her fiancé a few weeks ago, which is why I'm out here buying the toys this year. Would you be interested in the job? It's sort of a personal assistant-receptionist-customer service kind of thing." He laughed. "I can pay you twelve dollars an hour."

I nodded like my head was on a spring. "Absolutely. Can I bring my homework with me if there's any downtime? I'm studying to be a teacher."

"Not a problem. When can you start, Brandy?"

I laughed. "I could start right now if you need me."

"Alright then. Follow me to the office and I'll show you the ropes."

I got in my car and said a little prayer to God: *Thanks for sending me my own Christmas angel.*

I followed Seth across town to a plaza. He led me into an office with a big sign overhead that read *Bingham Builders*.

A guy looked up from the reception desk and cocked his head.

"Please tell me this is my replacement, bro."

"It's your lucky day. Brandy, meet my brother, Jesse. Hopefully you didn't scare off too many customers while I was gone," Seth said with a laugh.

"No, I just didn't answer the phone."

Seth jerked his thumb at Jesse. "A real joker, this one. And he likes pretty women like you, so please ignore him."

"Hey, you're the one dragging a hottie back to the office." Jesse glared at Seth and swung his feet off the desk. "I'm heading out to the Gerber project."

"Thanks, Jesse. And now, Brandy, let me show you around."

I was staring at my feet, embarrassed, but I followed him. The office was small, with just the front reception area nicely decorated. There was a small kitchen, a bathroom, a big conference room, and an office for each brother.

I settled in at the reception desk.

"So, just man the phones for now. Here's our appointment book. You'll be scheduling our appointments for

estimates, filing receipts. Oh, all sorts of fun stuff." He grinned. "Jesse's usually out on the job site with the crew and sometimes I am, too. You might be alone from time to time. That okay with you?"

"Sure." *But I'd much rather have handsome Seth hanging around all the time.* The phone rang and my heart actually sped up, realizing I had to answer my first call. I cleared my throat.

"Bingham Builders, this is Brandy. How can I help you?" And I booked my very first appointment for them.

I tucked Benny in that night and gave him an extra-big hug and a kiss.

He bounced in his bed. "You're so happy today, Mama. I like it."

I rubbed his head and noticed his hair needed a trim. "I am. Good things happened today. It's going to be a good Christmas."

"Did Daddy come back?"

Good feelings all gone. I folded my hands in my lap.

"No, honey. I don't think that's going to happen. I got a new job and I have a feeling Christmas is going to be great this year."

He crossed his arms and pouted. I tucked him in and kissed his head.

"We'll be okay, kid."

For the first time in a long time I went to bed believing it *would* be okay.

The next day, I showed up at eight. I tidied up the office a bit when I wasn't answering phones and squeezed in a little study time. It really was the perfect situation. Then it got even better. Seth came back from his appointment holding up two brown paper bags.

"You do like Chinese, right?"

"It's my favorite," I told him.

He grinned and I was again struck by how handsome he was.

"Meet me in the conference room and you're going to be a happy woman."

I already am a happy woman, I thought. We talked and laughed over lunch. I grabbed the occasional phone call in the conference room.

"Don't tell my boss, but I took an hour and a half for lunch today."

"He's a nice guy. He wouldn't mind."

I smiled at him; he *is* a nice guy. Too nice. I couldn't let my feelings

get carried away for a guy I couldn't date. I needed the job more than I needed romance in my life, although that had been sorely missing for a while, too.

Benny's dad, Kevin, left a year ago. We'd never married, so it was real easy for him to pick up and join his brother out in California, working at an auto body shop. He sent some money here and there, but not much. I knew he wasn't making big bucks, either. You can't get blood out of a stone.

I hadn't been out with anyone since Kevin left, which made Seth all the more attractive. I soldiered on over the next few weeks, ignoring the way conversation flowed so easily between us. Jesse wasn't in the office that often. He was moodier than Seth, and not as chatty. Seth had definitely been blessed with the charm in the family.

Seth was pretty much in the office all the time. We ate lunch together most days, and talked a lot. I didn't get much studying in and spent late nights getting my homework done, but I was happy. I had a good job, I was trying to improve my future, and I had a great holiday for my son on the way. It was a big change from the previous month.

I was addressing holiday cards for the company the week of Christmas when Seth stopped by my desk.

"What are you and Benny doing for Christmas?"

I shrugged. "We go to my mom's Christmas Eve, and mostly spend Christmas day by ourselves. His father isn't in the picture." I shrugged. "But we're lucky. *Really* lucky this year. I happen to know from a very good source that there's going to be a bounty under the Christmas tree." I smiled at Seth, remembering his generosity at the store. I couldn't wait to see Benny's face Christmas morning.

"Listen," Seth said, playing with a stray paper clip on my desk. "I was wondering if I could stop by on Christmas. I'd love to see how excited Benny is with his presents. I always wonder what the kids think Christmas morning when they open the things I bought. Could I stop by later in the day?"

"You're not going to be busy?"

"My mom has a Christmas dinner.

(Continued on page 26) 23

New Faces



Holiday Cheer!

Asia'Lynn Harris, four years old.
Shaquana Jackson is her mother.



'Tis The Season!

Aaron Robert Chase, sixteen months old.
Jinnie Norman and Joe Chase are his parents.



Jingle Bells!

Trevon Jack, fourteen months old.
Shannan Jack is his mother.



Buddy is ten years old. He's been my faithful friend and companion since he was six weeks old. Teddy is his favorite toy. Buddy likes to be next to him all the time. —*Eileen Wood, Pennsylvania*

LET ME TELL YOU ABOUT MY PET!



Daisy is fifteen years old and she loves to dress up!
She's all ready for Santa Claws! —*Jenifer Lambert, South Carolina*

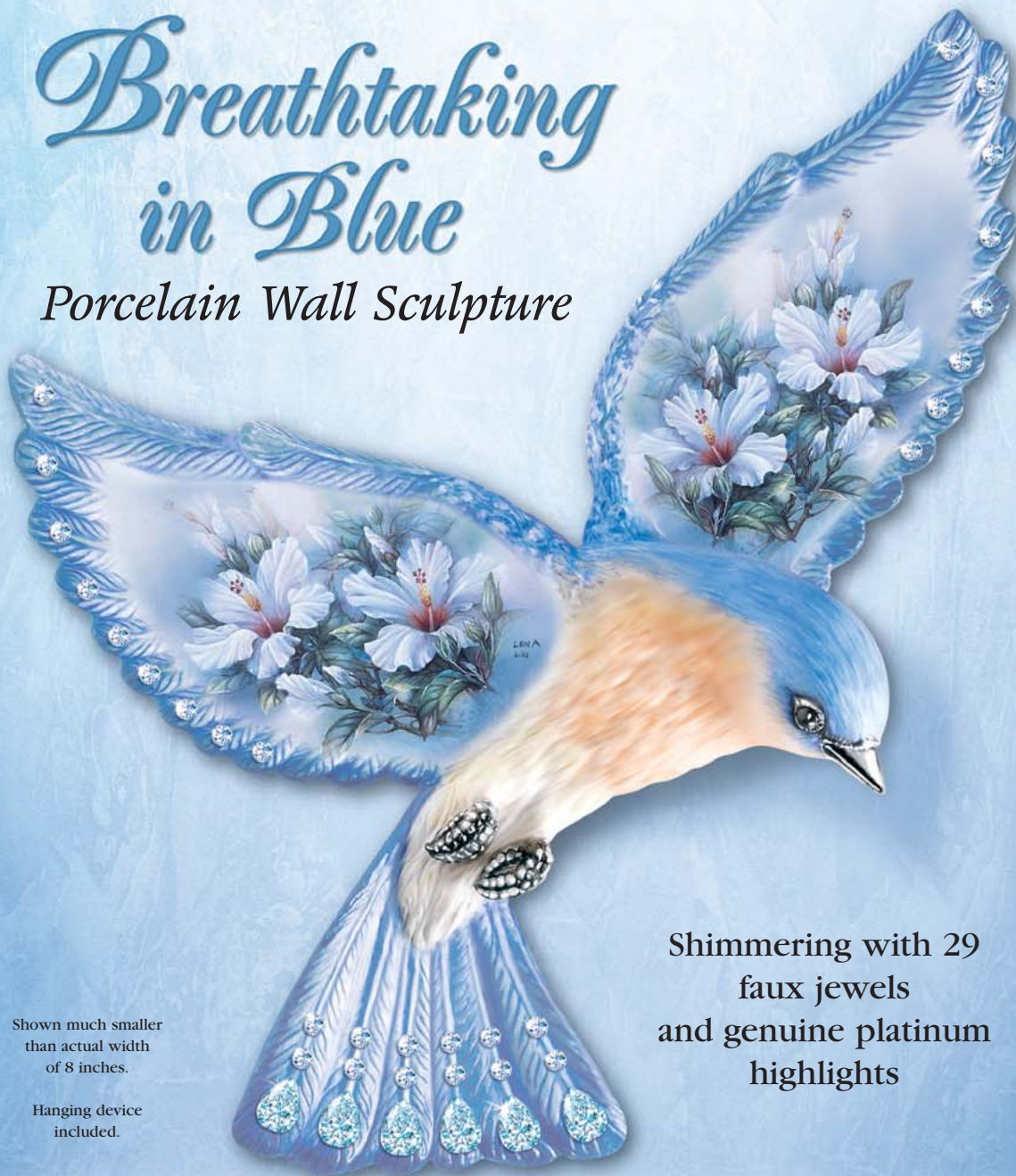


This is my sweet, loving, playful kitten, Mazie. She's showing off her blue and green eyes. I adopted Mazie at an animal shelter. I would never part with her for anything in the world! —*Hannah Jones, Ohio*

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Angels Among Us

(Continued from page 23)

I was thinking lunch, maybe?"

It seemed a little too close for comfort, given the feelings for Seth that I was holding back, but how could I say no? He'd been so generous.

"Absolutely. Come over. I'll make lunch."

"No way. No cooking on the holiday. I'll bring something."

"Sure. That would be great."

I gave him directions to my house and spent the rest of the week as excited as Benny waiting for Christmas to roll around.

"Mom! Look at all these presents," Benny cried on Christmas morning.

He ran into the living room of our tiny apartment and started tearing open his gifts. He held up one of the boxes Seth had bought.

My eyes filled with tears and I wondered what the morning would be like if it hadn't been for Seth. *Would we even be in the apartment still?* Seth had changed everything for us.

Benny opened the box that had his coat and said, "Yes!" He put it right on. It was a little big on him, but that was good; he had room to grow.

I cleaned up the wads of wrapping paper while Benny played with his new toys. I set the kitchen table and lit some candles, wondering what Seth would think when he saw our little place. *Oh, well. It is what it is,* I thought to myself.

I pulled out the holiday sweater I'd worn for Christmas the last two years, straightened my hair with the flat iron, and dabbed on a bit of makeup. *Oh, well. It is what it is,* I thought again, looking at myself in the mirror. I felt older than I looked at age twenty-eight.

Seth showed up right at noon, his cheeks pink from the cold and his eyes bright with excitement.

"Merry Christmas!" he said, bustling into the apartment with several big bags. Snow swirled in behind him before I could close the door.

Benny galloped over and I wrapped my arm around his shoulder.

26 "Remember I told you Mommy's

new boss is coming over? This is Mr. Bingham."

"Hi, Mr. Bingham. Did you get a bunch of toys for Christmas? Cause I did. I figure it's cause I was really, really good this year." He clasped his hands in front of him and jumped up and down, barely able to contain his joy.

My hand fluttered over my mouth and I told myself not to cry. A big smile split Seth's face.

"I bet that's why, buddy. You must've been very, very good. And I brought you a few, too."

"Seth," I whispered. "You've done enough already."

He frowned at me and set down his bags. "And that's enough from you, little girl. Open your own presents." He handed me a big gift bag, stuffed with presents.

Great, I only knitted him a scarf. I opened my mouth to protest that I couldn't accept all the gifts, but he pressed his fingers against my lips. I felt a shiver slide down my spine as I felt his flesh against mine. *Uh-oh.*

Seth took off his coat and sat on the couch. He wore dress slacks, a red sweater, and a big grin. Benny ripped open two more building sets and looked up, wide-eyed, at Seth.

"How did you know what I wanted?"

"Lucky guess, I suppose. What about you, Brandy? What did you get?"

"You certainly could give Santa a run for his money," I said, carefully opening the big box I pulled out of the bag. I unwrapped a beautiful, black sweater. "This is gorgeous, Seth."

He shrugged. "I thought it looked like something you'd wear."

I opened the next gift and slipped on the red leather gloves. The next box held a cashmere scarf.

"Don't want my assistant getting sick?" He winked at me.

"This is too much," I told him.

"Well, there's one more in there."

I peeked in the bag. There was a tiny box at the bottom that screamed *jewelry!* I opened it with shaky fingers and sucked in a breath. A beautiful pair of gold hoops winked at me.

"Seth, I don't know what to say."

"Good. That's the reaction I was going for."

"I'm afraid my present for you is going to be mighty disappointing." I

reached for the box under the tree and handed it to him.

"Hey, taking on the job as my assistant was gift enough. Good help is hard to find." He tore off the paper and lifted out the scarf.

"Don't want you getting sick, either, so I made you a scarf. I hope you like the color."

"You made this?" He wrapped it around his neck. "I don't think anyone has ever made me a gift before."

I looked at my feet and blushed. He must have known I was embarrassed.

"No, I meant it's a wonderful thing. It's easy to grab something off a store shelf, but to take the time to knit me a scarf? With all your responsibilities?" He shook his head. "Thank you, Brandy." He reached over and squeezed my hand. That shiver raced down my spine again.

We sat down and dished out turkey and all the fixings. It felt really good having the three of us at the table. It felt like we were a little family; and that was never going to happen. I couldn't let it. Tears pricked my eyes again and I excused myself from the table. I rushed to the bathroom to compose myself, but Seth was right on my heels.

"What is it, Brandy?"

I braced myself on the counter. "I just didn't realize how much I missed being a family, even though Benny's father wasn't any prize. It just felt really natural, having you here with us. But that can't happen. We can't get involved."

He took me by the shoulders and turned me to him. "Why not? I have feelings for you, Brandy. I think you do, too."

I nodded. "But having a job is more important in my life right now than having a boyfriend. What are the chances things would really work out between us? And if they didn't, how could we work together? I can't take that chance. My life has finally just settled down. I'm not tossing and turning at night anymore. It's horrible not being able to provide for your child. I can't get involved with you. I'm sorry."

He let out a deep breath and pursed his lips. "I think you're wrong, but I have to respect your decision. I hope you'll change your mind. I'm not giving up on you, Brandy."

He went back to the table and we finished dessert, with Benny doing most of the chattering.

Seth pushed back from the table. "I hate to run, sport, but I've got to go and see my mother now."

"Okay," Benny said. "Thanks for my presents, Mr. Bingham. I hope you get what you want for Christmas."

Seth looked at me. "I'm not sure that's going to happen this year."

He walked out the door and my heart dropped into my stomach. But it was for the best. I couldn't ruin my good situation by taking a chance. Love just wasn't in the cards for me.

Seth didn't mention what happened when we went back to work. We still shared the occasional lunch and chatted, but it certainly didn't feel as flirty. The weeks went by and I realized he had accepted my decision. He'd said he wasn't going to give up on me, but it seemed like he had.

Part of me wished he'd protested a bit more, but perhaps that was a good indication that he had only been mildly interested in me. And who'd take a chance on just mild interest? It was a good thing we hadn't gotten involved.

When Valentine's Day rolled around, my thoughts again turned to love. I tried to chase the romantic images from my head, but Seth looked more attractive than ever to me. The more I got to know him, the nicer he seemed. He was exactly my kind of guy. As far as I knew, he wasn't dating anyone. I wondered if maybe I was being stupid by denying my attraction to him.

I was filing away company receipts when the front door opened. A deliveryman walked in with a huge vase of roses.

"Can you sign for these?"

I nodded, and scribbled my signature on his clipboard with shaky fingers. He set the roses on the desk and I melted into my seat. I plucked the card from its holder . . . and then dropped it. The flowers weren't for me; they were for Seth. The little white envelope was addressed to him.

I swallowed hard and pressed my hands against my eyes. I took a deep breath and dialed Seth's extension.

"You have a delivery at the desk," I told him in a flat voice.

"Thanks, Brandy." He strode up to the desk and looked at the flowers. Then he looked at me. "Is this the delivery you're talking about?"

I nodded.

His lip curled into a delicious little grin. "Any idea who they're from?"

I shook my head and his smile fell. He walked over and plucked the card from its holder. He read the card and his eyebrows shot up.

"Huh," he said and walked away with the card.

Well, that was a long morning. I was dying to know who sent him flowers. He seemed just as surprised to see them as I did. Clearly, someone was sending him a message.

I got up the courage to ask him about it at lunch.

"So, who sent you the roses?"

He took a long drink of his soda. "Remember I told you about Kim, my last girlfriend?"

I nodded, feeling the knot grow in my belly. "The one you were engaged to."

He shrugged. "She's looking for another chance."

I poked at my salad. "So, what are you going to do?"

He stared at me. "I don't know. I don't really have any reason not to, do I?"

I broke away from his gaze and said nothing.

He pushed back from the table. "That's what I thought."

That was an even longer afternoon. Seth stayed in his office and I couldn't wait to go home. I was distracted all night and I couldn't sleep. It really bothered me to think of Seth with his old girlfriend. I wanted more from him than just the friendship we had. *But is it worth risking my job?*

I took extra time getting ready the next morning, not entirely sure what I was going to do. The roses were still on the desk when I came in. I took them into the conference room; I couldn't stand to look at them.

Seth came in whistling and my heart fell. He looked like a man in love. I didn't need to ask him if he was going to see Kim. It was written all over his face. I had to make my move, but I didn't know what to do. *What if I'm too late?*

I was surprised when he asked me out to lunch. We usually ate in. I grabbed my purse and climbed into

the front seat of his car. We drove down to the river and I wondered what restaurant we were going to.

He parked the car and turned to me. He opened his mouth, but before he could say anything, I leaned over and kissed him. He kissed me back and then pulled away, looking at me, confused.

"Don't go out with your old girlfriend. I want to give it a try. That is, if you still do," I said quickly.

He laughed. "That's why I brought you here. Before I called Kim, I wanted to ask you one more time if there was a chance for us."

I kissed him again. "There's your answer."

He took my head in his hands and kissed me like I've never been kissed before.

"Good. I didn't want to go out with Kim again. Not when I want you so badly." He squeezed my hand. "Alright, I promised you lunch. Where do you want to go? I suppose it would be our very first date. Better make it somewhere special."

I raised my eyes to his and figured, *Let's jump in.* "Your place?"

He grinned and fired up his car. We didn't make it back to the office.

That next Christmas, we went shopping together and chose ten angels off the tree. It was nice not seeing Benny's tag there. We didn't need the help that year. We rolled our carts to the toy aisle, but then Seth turned back to the tree.

"You've got such a soft spot in your heart," I said. "How many more are you taking this year?" *Man, I love him.*

He turned to me. "Actually, this one is *my* wish list." He popped open a tiny jewelry box. A brilliant diamond ring sat perched inside. He dropped to one knee. "One year ago, I met a beautiful woman right here by the angel tree. Now I'm asking that angel, my Christmas angel, to be my wife."

I cupped my hands over my face and nodded. He stood up and slipped the ring on my finger.

"Yes!" I managed to say.

I leaned against him in a hug, the twinkling lights on the angel tree blurry through my tears. What had been the lowest point in my life a year earlier was a turning point and my best Christmas gift ever. ■ 27

FAMILY CRISIS

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The Baby!**



Rudy, my ten-year-old son, handed me a slip of paper that looked like it had been in his book bag for a long time. “Mom, you need to sign this.”

I accepted it warily. “What is it?” He shrugged and bent down to tie one of his shoelaces. “A permission slip. I gotta turn it in this morning.”

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See the following clinical photos.



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

"This morning? How long have you had it?" A dumb question, but one that bore asking.

Another shrug.

Why doesn't the school mail these things directly to the house instead of depending on ten-year-olds to deliver them?

"Well, this is just great." I slapped the paper against my leg as tears stung my eyes. "It says you need ten dollars."

"Uh huh."

"I don't have ten dollars," I said with a definite whine in my voice. I took a deep breath and started over. Our family's money problems aren't Rudy's fault, nor should he have to worry about them. I just wished he'd given me a little heads-up.

He lowered his head and his bottom lip jutted out. I knew he was trying not to cry. He was a sensitive child and had overheard arguments between his father and me about money, or rather the lack thereof.

"I have five dollars in my piggy bank I was saving to buy a new video game," he said.

I felt like an absolute heel, although I wanted to use his money to help pay for the field trip. How had things gotten this bad? I pasted a smile on my face and ruffled his blond hair.

"Don't sweat it, sweetie. I'll think of something."

I glanced at the clock on the wall as I headed into my bedroom to scrounge through my extra purse in the closet for loose change.

Rudy has to catch the bus in fifteen minutes. Where am I going to come up with ten dollars in fifteen minutes the day before my husband's paycheck is deposited into our account? Ten dollars isn't much to a lot of people, but when you don't have it, it might as well have been ten thousand.

John and I had nothing but money trouble since we got married four years ago. It was a second marriage for both of us. My ex-husband never held a job long enough for the child support garnishments to catch up. John had walked away from his marriage with his dignity and little else.

But we were in love. Secondhand furniture and a mountain of credit card debt couldn't keep us apart. John worked the nightshift in a factory and I was the manager of a self-

serve gas station.

My income was barely enough to keep Rudy in shoes and put a few groceries on the table. When I got pregnant, John and I decided it wasn't worth the cost of daycare for me to keep working, at least until Rudy was older. I wasn't thrilled about putting my new daughter in daycare anyway. I'd missed Rudy's early childhood since I had just divorced my first husband and had to work two jobs to keep a roof over our heads. I didn't want to do the same thing with the new baby.

I had planned to work all the way up until the baby was born, but my car blew up two months before my due date, sending me to the unemployment line a little early. I can't say I was disappointed. I was anxious to stay home and finish getting ready for the baby.

I didn't regret being a full-time mom, but at times I wondered if I could afford the luxury. I hated that Rudy missed out on things because John and I were always broke. More than once, he missed a friend's birthday party because it was held at a fancy arcade that we couldn't afford. Last summer a friend invited him to an amusement park out of town. The friend's parents offered to pay for the hotel and the park's admission. All we had to come up with was Rudy's personal spending money and food. We just couldn't do it. Rudy took it like the little trooper he is, but I knew he was crushed.

Two weeks after Kendall was born the fuel pump in John's truck left him stranded along the highway. It cost us four hundred dollars on our credit card to have the truck towed to a garage and fixed. I pinched pennies everywhere I could to make John's paycheck stretch as far as possible. He earned a decent salary at the factory, but with a new baby and no child support from Rudy's dad, and the same old bills and responsibilities, we barely kept our heads above water.

Almost immediately it was time to shop for school clothes. I hated it that we couldn't afford to buy Rudy what all the other kids were wearing, within reason of course. It wasn't his fault his father wouldn't send regular child support payments and his baby sister outgrew her sleepers every other week.

He was shocked when I insisted he buy the basketball sneakers he was secretly salivating over. With a book bag, new jacket, jeans, and several shirts, I went way over the amount John and I agreed upon. I didn't know what I'd do when Rudy needed a winter coat.

So there I was digging through pockets and old purses trying to find ten measly dollars to send my son on a field trip. I thought of my worthless ex-husband who hadn't sent a child support check in months. *Can't he see how his selfishness and irresponsibility is hurting his son?* I wondered if he could so easily forget his obligations if he were the one who had to look into Rudy's eyes and tell him he couldn't go on the field trip because he couldn't be bothered to pay child support.

Nursing my anger at the worthless louse that had fathered my son wouldn't change anything. I needed to do what I could for Rudy and not worry about the mess his father was making of things. Rudy would figure out soon enough that life wasn't fair.

There was no money in the purse I carried to church, but I found three forgotten dollars tucked into a slot in my wallet. With Rudy's birthday money, it was almost enough.

Just then the baby began to cry. I looked at the clock on the bedside table. Three minutes until the bus came. I didn't have enough time to run across the hall and beg two dollars off the neighbor or cash a hot check at the store on the corner. In desperation I turned my wallet upside down and emptied the change compartment onto the bed. Two dollars and five cents. I scooped it up and ran back into the living room.

Rudy had his jacket on. He was hopping from foot to foot.

"You're going to have to use your birthday money, bud," I told him as I thrust the money into the pocket of his backpack. "I'll pay you back tomorrow."

He gave me a dirty look, more at the rattle of change in his backpack than over the birthday money. He ran to his bedroom to retrieve the money.

"Don't forget to sign my permission slip," he called over his shoulder.

I scrawled my signature on the proper line and held the door open as Rudy dashed out. I shut the door

behind him and leaned against it, fighting tears. *I should've kept him home today. Then I wouldn't have to worry about forking over ten dollars I can't afford for a field trip.*

I didn't have long to feel sorry for myself. Kendall's cries grew impossible to ignore. I headed back down the hall to get her up and ready for the day.

That night after dinner, John and I had the same discussion we'd had a hundred times since Kendall was born.

"Maybe I should go back to work."

It always started out the same and in the end I was always relieved when John talked me out of it.

"What would you do with Kendall all day? What about Rudy? He's too young to come home to an empty apartment."

"He's very responsible. Besides, I'm just talking about something part-time. I'm tired of living like this. Every time the littlest thing comes up, I worry myself sick about how I'm going to pay for it."

"Then stop worrying. We can't afford for you to go back to work right now. Even if Rudy was old enough to stay alone, you'd still have to pay somebody to watch Kendall."

I sank onto the bed, self-pity washing over me again. "Mrs. Nolan across the hall would watch her for practically nothing."

John sat down beside me. He put his arms around me and pulled me against him. "Mrs. Nolan is a sweet lady, but she can't handle it. She loves Kendall, but I don't think she has the strength to take care of her all day. Face it, Maya, any part-time job you get will barely pay for daycare."

He was right. I'm unskilled labor. I'd never had a job that paid much more than minimum wage and I didn't have the time or money, let alone the energy, to go back to school.

"I just hate to keep disappointing Rudy," I said. "He's outgrown all his winter clothes from last year and we can't afford another school shopping trip already. In another year or two we'll be disappointing Kendall, too."

He wrapped his arms around me. "It'll get better, babe. I promise. You know I want to give you, Rudy, and Kendall everything you could ever want. Someday I will." He lifted his shoulders in defeat. "We're just going

to have to tighten our belts and tough it out."

I didn't have the heart to remind him if we tightened our belts much more we'd suffocate.

Every Christmas John and I exchanged only small gifts so we could afford more for Rudy. Plus we have Kendall to think about, too. I shopped early, as usual, and hunted for bargains.

It still didn't seem like enough. Clothes and diapers would be the only things under the tree for Kendall. At least she had no concept of the holiday. I did, however. I couldn't resist splurging on a green velvet dress and black patent leather shoes for her to wear to her first Christmas service at church. What mother wouldn't want to show off her little angel?

Rudy's father hadn't sent a child support check since September and hadn't called since Thanksgiving. I knew Rudy was wondering what he did to make his own father forget him. A child support check or a nice gift didn't seem likely. I couldn't bear to see his heart broken yet again.

I borrowed four hundred dollars from a payday lender to go along with the meager amount I had saved. I was counting on John's Christmas bonus to pay it back. I bought the newest gaming console on the market and three games to go with it. The interest rates from the payday lender would take a huge chunk of the Christmas bonus, but I couldn't risk the consoles selling out before John got the money.

When John brought the check home the next week, I knew the news wasn't good.

"My bonus was only half of what we were counting on."

I nearly burst into tears. I'd hoped to avoid telling him about borrowing from the payday lender. I had no choice. After paying off the loan and the exorbitant interest charges, we had less than a hundred dollars left to pay for everything else that went along with Christmas. I promised John I'd never again spend a bonus I didn't have in my hands.

The day after New Year's, John's truck stopped running at a traffic light while I was grocery shopping with Kendall and Rudy. Kendall had been crying for a half hour by the time a

friend brought John to the intersection where we were stranded. Rudy was worried the police would come and yell at me and give me a ticket. I was tired of relying on John's broken-down truck.

"We have to get a dependable car," I told him that night.

"We can't afford it, babe."

"We can't *not* afford it," I said, dangerously close to tears. "It took you nearly an hour to get there to fix the truck. Fortunately it wasn't that cold and I had snacks in the car for the kids, and plenty of diapers. What would've happened if we broke down on a deserted road with no cell phone service or people I could trust to ask for help?"

John put his arms around me and tried to pull me close. "It doesn't do any good to worry."

I pushed him away and rolled out of bed. "Forget it, John. I am not putting my babies in that broken-down truck again. It's bad enough when you're the one waiting for a tow, but it's downright dangerous for the kids and me."

He propped up on one elbow. "What do you suggest we do? Our credit cards are practically maxed out. We owe everybody. My insurance benefits keep going down and costs keep going up. We'll be paying the hospital for Kendall's birth until she's sixteen. At least we don't have to worry they'll repossess her."

"John, this isn't funny. We need a dependable car. I don't feel safe driving around in that truck with the kids. Besides, I hate being stuck while you're at work every day. What if something happens and I need to take the baby to the hospital?"

John heaved a sigh. He couldn't argue with my logic. "All right. Let's go car shopping."

"Oh, John. I'll get Mom to watch the kids this weekend and we'll go see what's out there."

"Anything in mind?" He brought my fingers to his lips.

"Something reliable, with four doors to make it easier to deal with a car seat. It doesn't have to be brand-new," I quickly added.

"They're advertising good interest rates and incentive programs on new models."

My eyes lit up. "You think we qualify with our lousy credit?"

"Let me worry about that." John 31

pulled me against him.

I held my breath while the loan officer at the car dealership ran the credit check. We'd found a silver sedan with all the safety features I wanted, not to mention it looked sharp. I had never owned a brand-new car before. Most of the ones I'd relied on had been third and fourthhand clunkers that were barely roadworthy.

A half hour later, John followed in his old truck as I drove our new car to Mom's to pick up the kids.

The euphoria of driving a brand-new, factory-perfect car was short-lived. Even though we'd desperately needed the car, we didn't have any more money to make the payments than we did before signing our names on the dotted lines. Each month found us farther and farther behind. The monthly payments stretched us to the limit, but what choice did we have?

We were able to breathe a little easier the following month when we received our income tax refund. I paid off the credit card I'd used to buy Rudy's school clothes last fall that he already outgrew. I stocked up on diapers and other necessities and then went shopping. The March snows had melted and spring was in the air.

It felt great to have money in my pocket for once. I admit I went a little overboard. We *all* needed new clothes, especially Kendall. She was growing like a weed. Most of her clothes were hand-me-downs from my sister's kids. I wanted to see her in something that had never been spit up on before. By the end of the weekend, there was barely enough in the checking account to pay last month's car payment and a little on one of the many co-pays from Kendall's birth.

When John learned the checking account was empty again, he hit the roof.

"Maya, I thought we agreed to save some of that money."

"What did you expect me to do? Kendall doesn't have anything to wear. Your work boots were shot, and all my spring clothes are maternity clothes. I didn't buy one thing we didn't need."

His shoulders slumped. "Maybe not, but some of it could've waited. I was hoping to get a little ahead. I'm

tired of living hand to mouth."

I put my hand on his arm. "Believe me, you're no more tired of it than I am."

That night I fixed steaks with all the trimmings to make it up to John. He was still annoyed that our income tax refund was gone, but there was no use crying over spilled milk.

I vowed to be extra-careful with every dime for the next few months. Any new clothes would come from thrift stores, and those were the last steaks on my broiler for a long time. I told myself that by the time Rudy got out of school for the summer, things would be better.

One Friday Rudy came home from school sick. I'd hoped it was a twenty-four-hour virus, but by Monday I knew he needed to see a doctor. He wasn't covered on John's insurance. In the divorce agreement, my ex-husband and I were supposed to split the cost of insurance or any medical bills Rudy incurred. Neither of us could afford the premiums for insurance. Any time I took Rudy to the doctor, my ex was nowhere to be found with his half of the payment.

The clinic gives out free inoculations, no questions asked. When it comes to doctor visits, we have to provide proof of income. We made too much money to get a reduced rate, but not enough to pay the bill. We just couldn't afford for Rudy to get sick.

I dropped Kendall off at my sister's and spent two hours in a crowded waiting room with a very sick little boy. Fortunately, all he had was a minor infection. The doctor prescribed an antibiotic and a few days' bed rest. Rudy didn't mind missing school. I was glad he wasn't seriously ill, but I was sick myself when the receptionist slid the bill across the desk.

The sign on the wall demanded that payment be made at time of service. I had no choice but to write a hot check. I wrote another one at the drugstore. By the time we headed home, I had spent two hundred and twenty-seven dollars that we didn't have.

If only I didn't buy all those summer clothes. I wished I could take everything I'd bought for myself back to the store, not that it would come close to being enough. But I had already cut off all the tags and hung

everything in my closet. I'd even worn some of the stuff a few times.

Then I turned the corner and saw the familiar sign. After the Christmas bonus fiasco, I vowed to *never* use a payday lender again. The interest rates were too high, and it was too easy to get sucked into a hole I couldn't climb out of. *But what choice do I have? The two checks I'd just written have probably already bounced. I need to cover them before the bank hits me with overdraft charges.*

Rudy dozed in the car while I went inside with my head down. I felt like a criminal. *What kind of mother can't afford to give her sick child medical treatment?* The woman behind the counter was friendly and helpful. In short order, I walked out with three hundred dollars. I went straight to the bank and then to pick up Kendall. I'd deal with John soon enough.

The next week we couldn't pay back the money I borrowed. I paid what I could, but a week later I had to borrow another hundred and fifty dollars against the following week. With the fees, I knew the whole thing was going to snowball. It was a vicious cycle. We were desperate. They had what we needed, and we were willing to pay whatever was necessary to get it.

The tellers soon knew me by my first name. Every week, I'd pay off what I owed and by halfway through the next week, I'd be back for more. Some weeks I couldn't pay off the whole amount, and I'd get stuck with another fee. I didn't see that I had a choice.

I didn't tell my family how John and I were surviving from week to week. My parents were dead-set against going into debt for anything other than a mortgage. If they knew how much we owed on our credit cards or that we were a payment behind on my new car, they'd go through the roof.

Every time I walked out of the payday loan office, I heard my dad's voice in my ears: "We didn't raise you to live like this, Maya. If you can't afford something, you don't get it."

It was a good argument, but better in theory than in practice. It wasn't my fault my ex-husband didn't send child support payments or that Rudy isn't insured. There were some things in life you couldn't do anything about.



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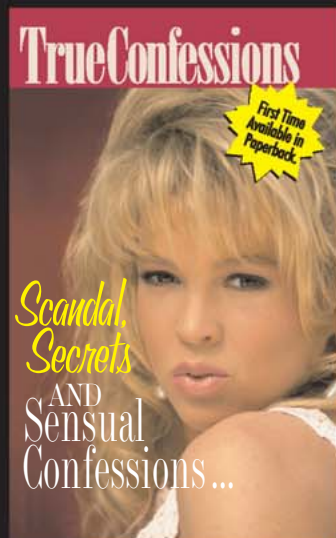
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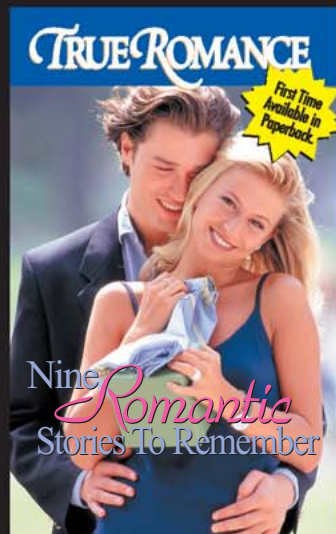
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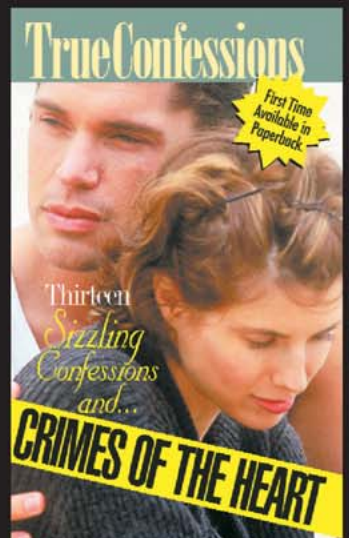
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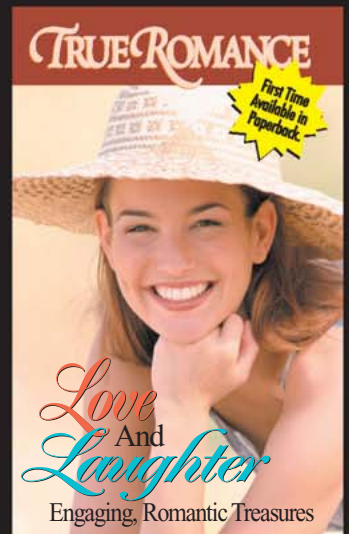
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The hospital turned my account over to a collection agency. When the representative called, I told him exactly what I told the hospital's accounting department.

"I'll pay what I can when I can."

"That's not good enough, Mrs. Phelps. Your payment history has been too erratic and the payments too low."

"I don't know what to tell you," I shot back, close to tears. I bounced Kendall on my lap while I talked. I didn't want her to pick up on my stress. "I'm doing the best I can."

"What's the minimum amount you can pay every month?" the representative asked. He sounded as tired as I was. I wanted to hate him, and part of me did. But it wasn't his fault. He was just doing his job.

After a few minutes of negotiating back and forth, I agreed to a monthly payment we couldn't afford.

I hung up, set Kendall in her playpen, and went into the kitchen to have a good cry. Kendall was eight months old. Expenses to take care of her kept going up. Rudy's eleventh birthday was right around the corner. He wanted to have a party at a local arcade with his friends. I really wanted to give him one, but we simply couldn't afford it.

I'd used a new credit card to pay off what I owed to the payday advance people. Maybe I could get another hundred to throw him a nice birthday party. John would be against it, of course. *But doesn't Rudy deserve a nice birthday? He isn't a spoiled or demanding kid. He's already denied so much. I want his birthday to be memorable.*

Kendall started fussing in the other room. I dried my face, blew my nose, and pulled myself together. I'd think of something.

Two weeks later Jake called out of the blue and asked if Rudy could visit him for his birthday. He had visitation rights every other weekend, but since he never showed up on any kind of schedule and his child support payments were practically nonexistent, I never felt obligated to change my plans to suit his.

"Why the sudden interest, Jake?" I asked. "You haven't seen Rudy in three months."

"I haven't spent his birthday with him since we divorced, Maya. It isn't

fair that you always get the good days."

"Nor is it fair that I get the medical bills, school clothes, and field trips, either," I snapped. "We already have plans for his birthday."

"Whatever you have planned can be rescheduled."

"No, it can't. I already paid a deposit at Chuck E. Cheese," I fibbed. "The place books fast. I can't reschedule. Besides, why should I? Rudy will be disappointed if he can't have a party with his friends."

My heart sank when I looked up and saw Rudy watching from the doorway, wearing a grin from ear to ear.

"All right," Jake conceded. "I'll pick him up the following weekend. Tell him his old man is going to do something great for his birthday."

I had no intention of doing any such thing. He'd spent enough evenings staring out the window and watching for Jake's car to pull into our complex's parking lot.

I turned my head so Rudy wouldn't see my face as I hissed into the phone: "You better show up this time, Jake. It's cruel when you get him excited about a visit and then don't show."

"Give me a little credit, Maya."

I hung up the phone. Rudy hurled himself across the living room and into my lap.

"You mean it, Mom? I'm having my birthday at Chuck E. Cheese?" He jumped up and pumped his arm in the air. "I can't wait to tell everybody. They aren't going to believe me. How many friends do I get to invite?"

I was *definitely* in over my head.

"I don't know, sweetie. I'll have to talk it over with John first."

Rudy threw his arms around my neck. "I love you, Mom. You're the greatest."

I rocked him back and forth and stroked his hair. *How in the world am I going to pull this off?*

John reacted to the party the way I knew he would.

"We can't afford to throw an expensive party just to teach Jake a lesson."

"I'm not trying to teach him a lesson," I said, although we both knew that wasn't completely true. "Rudy overheard me talking. I can't count on Jake to fulfill any of the promises he made. He'll just break Rudy's

heart again. It's bad enough on ordinary weekends, but his birthday? Come on, John. We can't do that to him."

"How exactly are we going to pay for this party?" John wanted to know.

"The way we always do."

"You mean with plastic?"

I lifted my chin. "Something like that. After this party, you can cut up all our credit cards. I won't buy anything unless I have cash. We're already in so deep, what's a little more dirt on our heads?"

"I won't cut up the credit cards. We might need them for emergencies. We can't keep living like this, Maya. We're behind again on the car payment and word at the plant is there might be more layoffs."

Layoffs. I wanted to throw up at the sound of that word. I almost didn't hear John remind me yet again that we needed to start saving money.

"How are we supposed to do that when we barely have two nickels to rub together?" I demanded, sick of the economy and sick of the whole pointless conversation.

John ran his hand through his hair. "I don't know. Other couples do it and they make less than we do."

He sighed and his shoulders slumped. He was in real pain. I felt a nugget of guilt for the stress I was putting on him, but the only thing I was guilty of was wanting our kids to be happy.

I stepped toward him and put my arms around his waist. He wrapped his arms around me without looking at me.

"After the party, I promise I won't use credit unless it's an absolute emergency. I'll bake the birthday cake myself and we'll only buy him one gift."

We both knew it wasn't birthday parties and school clothes that had gotten us into this mess. It was doctors' appointments, field trips, car payments, and day-to-day living that can't be avoided.

I needed to think again about getting a job. Regardless of how badly I wanted to stay home with Kendall, we just couldn't afford it. I wouldn't make much money at any job I found. I knew of college graduates taking whatever jobs they could get, so it wasn't likely I'd find much. But *anything* had to be better than the mess we were in.

As we held on to each other, I vowed to make some changes in my spending habits. I would start saving a little money, even if it killed me—at least enough to pay for last-minute field trips and unexpected illnesses. I just prayed Rudy stayed healthy until then.

“Mrs. Phelps? This is Pam, from the bank.”

My chest tightened. She didn’t need to say another word. I knew the reason for her call.

“I’m afraid the payment on your car is late again,” she continued unnecessarily. “It’s been late almost every month since you’ve owned it. If you don’t do something to remedy the situation, I’m afraid your credit is going to be damaged beyond repair.”

“I know,” I said meekly. *What else is there to say?*

“If we don’t receive both payments within ten days, we’ll have to move to the next phase.”

I didn’t ask what the “next phase” was. They don’t have debtors’ prisons anymore, so that left one alternative.

“I understand.”

Her voice got a little harder. “Mrs. Phelps, this is a serious situation. In two weeks, you’re going to owe a *third* payment. Do you understand what that means?”

Of course I understood. I wasn’t an idiot.

“Things have been a little crazy around here,” I tried to explain. “We have a new baby and my son has been sick.” My excuses sounded lame to my own ears, so I stopped talking.

“Yes, Mrs. Phelps, but you and your husband guaranteed you’d pay the loan in a timely manner. You do realize that if the car is repossessed, you will still be responsible for any lost monies on its sale?”

I groaned. “Yes, I know. I’ll get a check in the mail as soon as possible.”

“We need the money by the thirteenth. All three payments.”

“Yes, ma’am,” I said, feeling like a child. I hung up with a heavy heart.

After the birthday party, Rudy threw his arms around my neck and told me it was the happiest day of his life. Two days later a tire blew on John’s truck. The next week the secondhand washing machine my moth-

er gave us quit working. My promise to stop using credit didn’t last long.

How am I going to come up with three car payments? I hated to admit it, but we never should’ve bought that car. We didn’t even have it a year and it had become more trouble than it was worth.

John had no better ideas than I did about how to come up with the money.

“We may have to let the bank have it back,” he said as I cried in his arms that night.

“But we’ll still have to pay for it,” I argued through my tears.

“We don’t have a choice, Maya. We’re too deep in debt. There is no way I can come up with that much money by next week.”

“Couldn’t you ask for an advance at work?”

He was shaking his head before I even finished speaking. “They don’t do that no matter what the reason.”

“What about Denise?”

John’s parents had split up when he was a teenager. His father left town, but his mother used her half of the divorce settlement to start her own small business. She loves Kendall and Rudy and is a kind, generous person. She was also the only one I knew who could afford to lend us that much money.

John shook his head again. “No way. Mom scrimped and worked for every dime she has. She always taught me that you don’t get ahead in this world by relying on someone else. I won’t disappoint her by letting her know how bad things have gotten.”

I raised my head off his chest and glared at him. “You’re letting your pride get in the way of what’s best for this family. We need that car, and she can afford to help us out.”

John glared right back. “I’m *not* asking her, Maya. Forget it. Mom never asked anybody for anything. She won’t understand why I need to. This is our mess. I’m not asking her or anyone else to bail us out.”

I didn’t know what else to say. I couldn’t believe he would be stubborn and selfish enough to drive this family into bankruptcy. No, it wasn’t his mother’s problem, but it wasn’t all ours, either. We didn’t mean for the washing machine to quit working or for John to have so much trouble with his truck.

It’s expensive raising two kids these days. Surely Denise understands that. She suffered the same things when she was raising John and his sisters.

I climbed out of bed and tied my bathrobe around my waist. I didn’t want to look at John. Part of me was mad at him, but another part could understand why he didn’t want to crawl to his mother for a handout. I also understood why he didn’t want her to know the mess we were in. I didn’t tell anyone in my family the truth, either.

Friday was Rudy’s last day of school. The school had a field day outside with games and races. I loaded Kendall into the car and drove across town. It looked like half the kids’ parents turned out for the event.

My son is not a natural athlete. He didn’t win any of the events he competed in, but he had fun nonetheless. I yelled and cheered for all the participants the same as the other parents, while Kendall was passed from one set of eager hands to the next. She was cute as a button in her denim jumper with a big ladybug on the chest and a floppy hat with gingham check.

But I couldn’t stop comparing her used stroller to the fancy ones most of the other babies rode in. I had priced some of them before she was born and knew they cost several hundred dollars. My sister had given me a similar one she found at a garage sale. It was sturdy and functional, but it had seen better days.

Everyone was friendly, but I felt inadequate next to the other mothers. I bet none of them ever had someone from the bank yell at them about their financial situation.

I put our money problems out of my head for a few days. There was nothing I could do about it anyway, so I might as well not lose sleep over it. We had never lost our home, job, or anything else important. *John and I are good people. Everything will work out. It always does.*

Rudy had a sleepover at a friend’s house a few days later, so John and I planned to take Kendall shopping. Even without money, there were still things we needed. I hated to do it since I still owed several hundred dollars to the payday lender that John

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An Aunt's Love

My aunt has had a great impact on my life. When I was a small child, we lived nearby. She worked hard even then. Her husband was an alcoholic who spent his money only on things he wanted, and to get drunk. All the money that my aunt made was used to care for their four children. That didn't stop her from spending her time with them, or her nieces and nephews. I'm sure I'm not the only one in my family that has fond memories of spending time with her.

We moved away when I was eight years old and I didn't see her for over twenty years. When one of my uncles became ill, we decided that we should get together. I found out that she's still the same wonderful woman that I remembered.

Several years ago I got divorced and I decided to move closer to my aunt. My son and I spent a great deal of time with her. He got the chance to know the wonderful aunt that I had known. He came to love her as I had so long ago. He still talks about all the things she told him and about the times they shared. Now that we no longer live nearby, she misses us and wants us to visit.

In her I found the friend that I guess I needed for a long time. When something was upsetting me, she would hold and comfort me. Because of her I am happy. My aunt taught me that I had to let go of the past.

Thank you for teaching me to be happy and for being there for me. I love you!

—Lisa Johnson, Kentucky

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Family Crisis

(Continued from page 35)

didn't know about, but I stopped and got another two hundred after dropping Rudy off at his friend's house.

I owed over a thousand dollars with the fees they kept attaching to my debt. *What choice do I have? Kendall needs diapers and we all need groceries.* I fantasized about receiving a huge child support check, one big enough to get us out of debt. If the government would withhold one of Jake's income tax refunds the way they were supposed to, I would have enough to make a car payment or two and get out of hock with the payday advance lenders.

How did things get this bad this fast? It's not like I used our money to buy frivolous things or take expensive vacations. All I did was buy diapers for the baby and medicine for our son. None of those things could be avoided.

After we finished shopping, I suggested a nice restaurant. We were already so deep in debt I didn't see the harm in ordering from a real menu and not from a board behind the cashier's head.

Kendall played throughout the meal, bounced in her high chair, and charmed the other diners around us. John watched me affectionately across the table. I could read the intentions in his eyes. *It's been a long time since Rudy was out of the house. After we get home and put Kendall to bed, we hope to have a little time together for things that have been neglected too long.*

On the way home we stopped for gas. I sat in the car with Kendall while John went inside to pay. He winked at me through the window on his way around the front of the car.

My insides warmed. I love him so much. I hadn't told him or showed him how much in a long time. We were both so stressed and worried over money that we let it color everything else in our relationship. *Tonight I'll forget my woes and love my husband the way God intended.*

At the door he looked back and tapped a big sign in the window. It advertised milkshakes on sale. He looked at me and arched his eyebrows in question. The temperature had dropped since we left the restaurant, but a milkshake sounded good.

I nodded as he went through the doors. Knowing him, he wouldn't be sure of what flavor I wanted and order vanilla. I wasn't in a vanilla mood. I wanted blueberry.

I pivoted in my seat to look at Kendall. She was sound asleep in her car seat, her head slouched to one side and her cheeks softened in sleep. I hated to wake her up. The parking lot was deserted. She'd be okay long enough for me to run in and tell John what flavor I wanted. I didn't know how cold it would get inside the car by the time I got back, so I left the engine running and gently shut the door behind me. I hurried into the store. John was at the counter completing his order.

"What'd you get me?"

"Vanilla."

I wrinkled my nose and asked the attendant. "Is it too late to change?"

She smiled and shook her head. "I haven't even started making them yet."

"Good. Do you have blueberry?"

"Sure. One blueberry and one marshmallow."

"Thanks." I leaned against the glass door; ready to push my way back outside, when I saw John's eyes go wide. He was looking at something over my shoulder. I turned my head just as he screamed.

"The car!"

The attendant froze with her arm inside the ice cream freezer. I turned as if in slow motion to see our car speed out of the lot.

My mouth went dry and all the blood seemed to drain from my body. "Kendall!"

The attendant dropped the scoop inside the freezer and ran to the phone. I pushed through the heavy glass doors and ran into the lot with John right behind me. The car had reached the intersection and sped through without stopping for the light. The sight of our fading taillights made it all suddenly clear.

"My baby!" I screamed into the night. "Kendall!" I turned to John and pounded him on the chest. "He has our baby."

I crumpled onto the pavement.

Within moments the parking lot was a hub of activity. Several pairs of arms dragged me back into the store. I couldn't see. I couldn't breathe. *This isn't happening. My baby. My baby, my brain screamed*

over and over again.

"Please don't let them hurt her. Don't let her wake up," I prayed to God over and over while the attendant made phone calls and the store filled with curious onlookers.

Two police officers arrived and ushered John and me into a backroom. They eased me into the only chair in the room. John stood behind me with his hands on my shoulders. I held onto his hands for dear life.

"You shouldn't be here!" I screamed at the officers, my throat aching. "You should be looking for my baby!"

The female officer sat down in front of me and put her hand on my knee. "We just need some information, ma'am. The more you can tell us, the easier it will be to get your baby back."

"You left the baby in the car while you came inside?" the other officer asked.

He didn't say it accusingly, but it cut through me.

I gasped as if he'd slapped me. "Oh, my God. I left the car running." John tried to stroke my hair, but I jerked away. "It's my fault. I did this."

"Kendall was asleep," John told them. "My wife only came in for a minute. She'd barely stepped inside the door. We could see our car the whole time."

The male officer's radio crackled. The female officer squeezed my knee. "Mrs. Phelps, no one is blaming you here, okay? You didn't do anything wrong. We just need to get the facts straight."

She stood up to listen to the conversation between the other officer and the dispatcher.

I looked at John. He looked like he might break into a million pieces. *How will he ever forgive me? How will I forgive myself?*

I looked up to see both officers listening intently to the radio. "Subject advising that he just repossessed a vehicle matching that description," the dispatcher said. "What do you advise?"

The officers gave me a long look. "Was your car a silver sedan?" one of them asked.

I dried my face with my hand. "What? Um. . . ."

John tightened his grip on me. "Yes, it was."

Their shoulders slumped in relief.

The man spoke into the radio. I jerked my head around to look at John.

"What's happening?"

He bent down beside me and enclosed me in his arms. "They have Kendall." He sobbed into my neck. "She's okay."

I suddenly understood what had happened. The bank had repossessed our baby. Horror and shame washed over me.

What have I done? What if Kendall awoke with a strange man in the car? What if the repo man didn't notice her? He may have left the car in an impound lot somewhere, where she might not have been discovered for days. I envisioned snarling dogs, razor wire, and cars piled on top of each other. In the midst of that nightmare would be my poor baby strapped inside a car wondering where I was.

I dropped my head into my hands. "Kendall, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry."

John looked as guilty as I felt. The female officer led us out of the store-room and through the crowded store.

"It's okay, folks," the male officer said. "The baby's on her way to the police station. She's fine."

They burst into applause. Some reached out to congratulate me. I couldn't look at them. If they only knew what I'd done, they would probably throw rocks at me. Without a doubt I was the worst mother alive.

We called John's mom to pick us up from the police station. She was already in bed by the time we called, so we had to sit in the lobby and stew over our financial situation for nearly an hour before she arrived.

John told her everything on the way home—or as much as he knew, anyway. Denise was quiet most of the way. I knew she was disappointed in us and John was ashamed to have to admit his failures to her.

Back at the apartment, I put Kendall to bed and rejoined Denise and John in the living room. Denise got straight to the point.

She turned her focus on John. "This never should've happened, son. You know better."

John ducked his head like a disobedient child. "It's just that we started out so far in debt after both our divorces and all. Things broke down and had to be replaced. Then we had Kendall, and Rudy needed

things for school."

"That's life, John," she snapped. "You're supposed to plan for those things."

"We tried. It just never seemed to be enough."

She sat back in the chair and gave us a stern gaze. "What do you think is going to happen now? Do you think I'm going to write you a check and solve all your problems? Because I can't do that. Even if I could afford to, you'd end right back in the same mess inside of two years."

John studied his shoes. "We aren't asking you to bail us out, Mom."

I spoke up for the first time since getting Kendall back. "This is more my fault than it is John's, Denise. I pushed him into buying the new car."

He took my hand. "No, Maya."

I waved him away. "John is a good provider. He's always given us as much as he can, but I gave in to my emotions and bought things we couldn't afford because I didn't want the kids to suffer."

I turned to John and sheepishly confessed how much I owed to the payday lender. He and Denise winced simultaneously. I wanted to bury my face in my hands and cry, but the time for tears was past. I needed to stop hiding from our financial problems and face them head on. I hadn't exactly squandered our money, but I hadn't been prudent, either.

I put on a pot of coffee and the three of us sat around the table until three in the morning figuring out what to do. We agreed to cancel our cable and Internet connections and trade in our cell phone plans for a prepaid one. No more dinners out or trips to the movies. Denise agreed to pay off what we owed to the payday lenders. We would have to pay her back, including the interest we had accrued, but at least she wouldn't keep adding weekly fees.

As far as what we owed the bank for the car, we were on our own there. She said that maybe after a year or so if we proved ourselves responsible, she might help us buy a good used car if we were able to afford the payments after paying what we still owed the bank. She also insisted we sign up for financial counseling at our church.

"I don't think you've been wasteful or foolish with your money, but

you have to learn to live within your means." She paused and looked deep into my eyes. "Even if that means disappointing your children once in a while. It's a good lesson for them to learn that they can't have everything they want when they want it. Sometimes when we have to wait for things, it makes us appreciate them more."

I nodded through the tears in my eyes. I looked across the table at John. He had been worth the wait. I thought of Kendall and Rudy and how much they meant to me. I never wanted them to go without, but it wasn't fair to put them through what happened that night just to spare them a short period of discomfort.

"Thank you, Denise. I don't know what we would've done without you tonight."

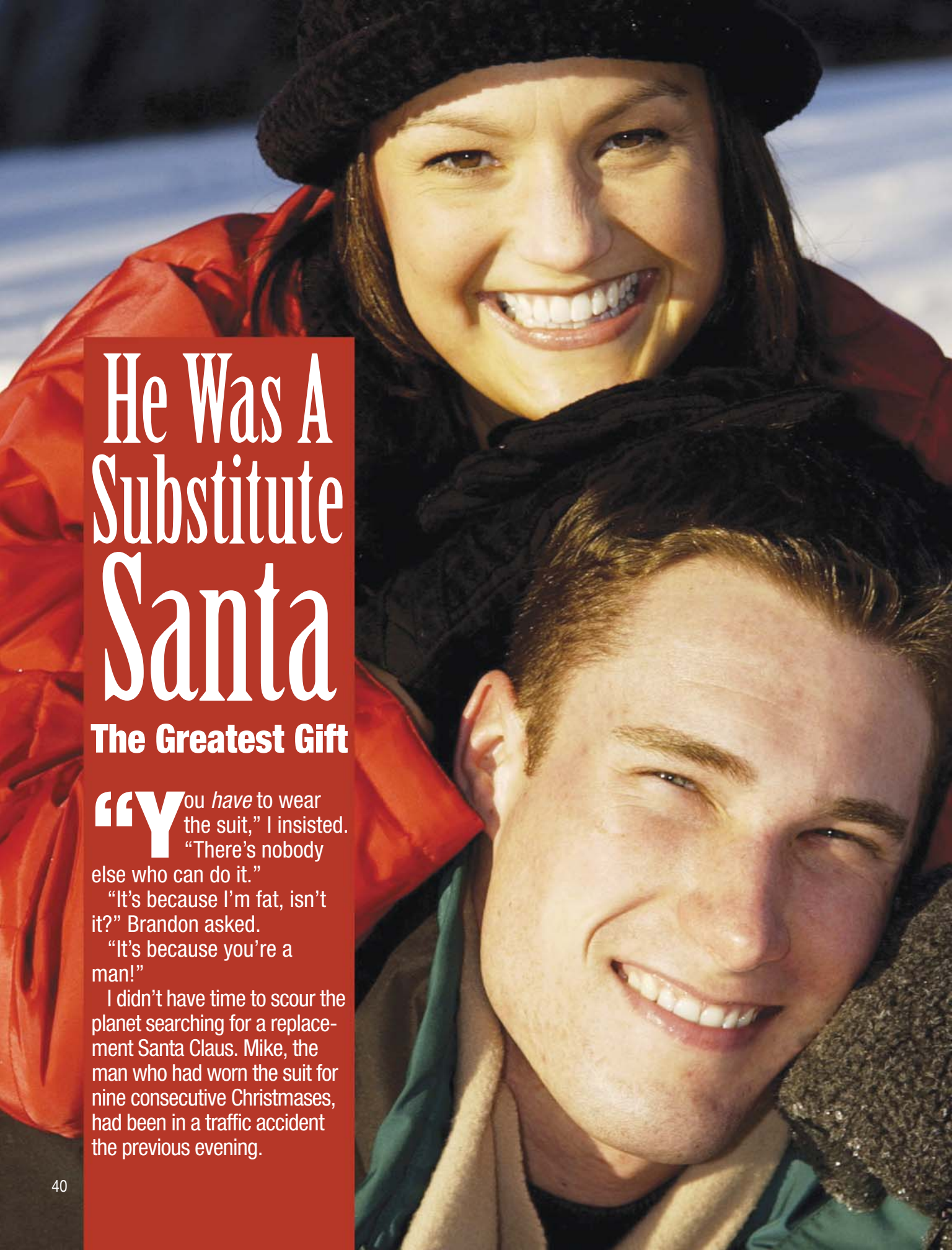
She smiled and squeezed my hands in hers. "It's going to be a long road to recovery. Things are going to get a lot worse before they get better."

I shook my head. "I don't know about that. A huge weight lifted off my shoulders just by laying everything out in the open. I already feel better."

It turned out that Denise was right. That fall when Rudy started back to school, I wasn't able to buy him as many school clothes as I would've liked. But he ran errands and worked a few odd jobs for our neighbors over the summer and could afford to go to the movies once in a while with his friends. He was learning the satisfaction of earning his own money, and I continued to learn that my worth as a mother isn't measured by the way I dress my children.

John and I are still in debt. I scarcely remember the smell of movie theater popcorn, and all I got for my birthday was a lopsided cake John and Rudy baked for me. But there are plenty of good things in my life that outweigh what I miss. My children are healthy and my husband thinks I'm beautiful.

Things will continue to get better. I may go back to work when Kendall gets a little older. I may even decide to take some college courses. For now I'll live within my means and enjoy the family I love.



He Was A Substitute Santa

The Greatest Gift

“You *have* to wear the suit,” I insisted. “There’s nobody else who can do it.”

“It’s because I’m fat, isn’t it?” Brandon asked.

“It’s because you’re a man!”

I didn’t have time to scour the planet searching for a replacement Santa Claus. Mike, the man who had worn the suit for nine consecutive Christmases, had been in a traffic accident the previous evening.

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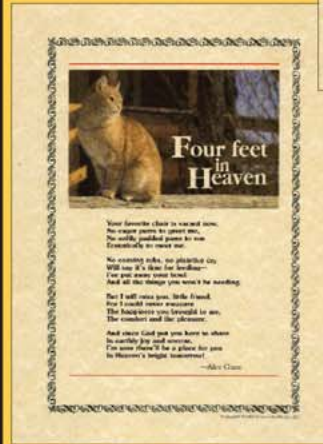
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Nobody bothered to tell me about it until ten minutes before I was supposed to present Santa Claus to a room full of shrieking six-year-olds.

"So put on the suit, put on a smile, and get your ho, ho, ho ready to go."

I shoved the Santa suit into Brandon's hands and took my costume into the women's restroom. By the time I emerged a few minutes later wearing a brown unitard, foam antlers, and a flashing, red nose, Brandon had pulled on the Santa suit and was adjusting the fake, white beard.

He looked at me and said, "You owe me big time for this."

"Whatever. Are you ready?"

He pulled on the Santa hat. "As ready as I'll ever be."

I led Brandon down the hall to the cafeteria where the employees' children waited. The instant I walked through the door they started screaming with excitement. When Brandon stepped into the cafeteria behind me, their shrieks grew louder.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he bellowed in a deep, hearty voice that I never would've expected to come from the shy, chubby guy who runs the mailroom.

For the next few hours, Brandon was the perfect Santa. He talked to all of the children, distributed the presents my assistant and I had purchased, and when it was time to leave, his final "ho, ho, ho!" was just as cheerful as his first.

As soon as the door closed behind us, I planted a kiss on Brandon's cheek.

"Thank you!" I told him. "You were great!"

Brandon blushed and his red cheeks seemed to shine even brighter through the fake, white beard.

"I . . . I . . ." He stammered.

"I'm starving," I said. "Let's get out of these costumes and get some dinner."

"But I'm—"

"Don't worry about it. I'm buying."

Actually, the company was buying because I would put the meal on my expense report, but who paid wasn't as important as ensuring that Brandon knew how much I appreciated him for filling Santa's boots.

An hour later we were perusing menus at a popular steakhouse. When Brandon ordered a chef salad and a diet soda, I reminded him that he could order anything he wanted.

"Salad's fine," he said, not raising his eyes from the menu. "I've lost thirty pounds since summer." He hesitated. "Not that you'd notice."

Have I noticed his weight loss? Honestly, I barely notice Brandon. He rarely leaves the mailroom, and when he does it's only to visit the lunchroom.

"Taylor mentioned something to me the other day," I told him, which was mostly true. My assistant *did* mention seeing Brandon walking around the company parking lot at lunch one afternoon. She said she thought he looked like a blimp. "I told her you must have been working out."

"A little bit," Brandon said. He couldn't meet my gaze for some reason. He seemed to look everywhere but directly at me. "Mostly I've changed my diet."

The man across the table from me seemed so different from the man in the Santa suit. I wondered if Brandon felt more comfortable playing a role than being himself.

"You were really good with the kids," I said.

"I was?"

"You were a *great* Santa."

"I'm built for the suit."

"It isn't that," I insisted. "Anybody could put on that suit, but not anybody could have filled the role."

He glanced up, his gaze meeting mine for a nanosecond before it slid away. "You think?"

"Mike's done it for the past nine years. He's a good sport about it and all, but the kids never took to him the way they took to you."

"I like kids."

Our meals arrived before either of us could say anything else. Brandon's chef salad with dressing on the side looked downright puny compared to my strip steak, loaded baked potato, and mound of sautéed mushrooms. That didn't stop me from digging in, though.

After a few bites, I realized Brandon hadn't said anything. I suspected he was waiting for me to restart the conversation, so I said the first thing that came to mind.

"How are things in the mailroom?"

"Fine," Brandon said. "We're getting a new postage meter next week."

I asked him a couple of leading questions and before long I knew everything there is to know about postage rates and regulations. I listened because Brandon obviously knew what he was talking about and he wasn't shy about sharing his knowledge.

Halfway through dessert, I asked Brandon where he lives and what he does when he isn't at work. I'm not certain why, but I expected him to say something along the lines of living in his mother's basement, collecting comic books, and hanging out at sci-fi conventions.

"I live in an old firehouse that I bought for next to nothing, help build houses with Habitat for Humanity, and for the past three years I've helped with the local Storybook Christmas campaign."

Suddenly, Brandon wasn't just the mailroom supervisor. I saw him in a new light. I didn't know which to ask about first, so I asked about his home.

"I bought the firehouse nine years ago, when the city was unloading some excess property. I've been renovating it in my spare time," he explained. "When I moved in, my brother said I was crazy. The building was in sad shape and it wasn't safe to be outside after dark. A lot has changed since then. The neighborhood's turned around and the local magazine featured my house in an article about turning old buildings into new housing."

Then I asked him about building houses with Habitat for Humanity and learned that he'd helped build five houses on the south side of town and had used vacation time to help build two houses in Mississippi and one in Louisiana after Hurricane Katrina.

"How come nobody knows anything about this at work?"

"Nobody asks. They look at this—" He motioned to his body. "—And they think they know everything about me."

Brandon was certainly right about that. I knew I'd never bothered to consider that he's a human being with feelings.

We stretched dessert into after-dinner coffee and then stretched that into a second cup, staying at our table long past our welcome.

After I paid the check, Brandon walked me to my car. He waited until I was driving away before he climbed into his car. By then I was half a block away and I only realized he was watching me drive away because I glanced in my rearview mirror.

When I finally made it to my apartment that night, I felt good about the day. The Christmas party was a tremendous success, in part because of Brandon's ability to inhabit the role of Santa with absolutely no advance warning, in part because Taylor and I did a great job of arranging everything else, and, I must say, in part because I look good in a brown unitard.

With Christmas still two weeks away, I had much to do before my apartment reflected the season. I'd moved the couch so that I could put a tree in the corner, but the only thing there was the tree stand. I'd carried my boxes of decorations up from the storage room in the basement, but hadn't yet unpacked them. I had a busy weekend ahead of me, especially if I wanted to be ready for the holiday party I had planned for the following weekend.

"So, how was your dinner with the blimp?" my assistant asked Monday morning when I stopped at her desk.

"His name's Brandon, and it was great."

Taylor seemed surprised. "Really?"

"You know how long it's been since I've been on a date with a man who didn't try to paw me?"

"I thought the dinner was to thank him for playing Santa."

"It was."

"But you just called it a date."

"I did?" I blinked. *Why would I call dinner with Brandon a date?* "Well, whatever it was, it was nice."

Taylor changed the subject. "How's the Christmas party coming along? Is there anything you need me to do?"

Each year I host a party for some of my coworkers and each year Taylor helps me organize every-

thing, just as she'd helped me organize the party for the employees' children. I gave her a list of things to do and then I stepped into my office.

Half a dozen voicemail messages and another dozen or so emails awaited me, most of them telling me how much the children had enjoyed the party and how much better they liked this year's Santa than the Santa we'd had in the past. I forwarded the appropriate emails to Brandon. I didn't think anything more about them until lunchtime when Taylor buzzed me to say he was outside my office.

"Send him in," I told her.

"I was headed this way, so I brought your mail." Brandon had a handful of envelopes in his hand and he placed them on my desk.

"Thanks."

"Actually, I wanted to thank you for taking me to dinner Friday. So, thank you."

"It was the least I could do. You did a great job, and I'm not the only one who thinks so. Have you had a chance to read the emails I forwarded to you?"

He said he had and he thanked me for them. After neither of us said anything for what seemed like minutes, Brandon said, "Well, then, I'll just go. Thanks again."

He turned and walked toward door. As he reached for the knob, I blurted out, "I'm hosting a holiday gathering this weekend."

He turned to me, an expectant look on his face.

"Why don't you drop in? My assistant can give you all the details."

The rest of the week disappeared before I realized where the time had gone. After the caterer slipped on an icy sidewalk and broke her arm three days before the party, Taylor went beyond the call of duty and found a last-minute replacement.

An hour before guests were scheduled to arrive, Taylor was in my kitchen with the replacement caterer and her staff, ensuring that everything was going as planned, and I was in the master bath putting the finishing touches on my hair and makeup. I could work a brown unitard, but I could *really* rock a little black dress.

Taylor whistled when I finally

joined her in the living room, where she was giving instructions to the bartender we'd hired for the evening.

"You think?" I spun in place, letting my assistant see me from every angle. As I turned I noticed that the bartender was watching me, too, and I put a little extra attitude into my action just for his benefit.

"I'm surprised you don't have a date for the evening," Taylor said. "Some man is missing a great opportunity."

"What about you?" I asked. "Don't you have your eye on that guy from accounting?"

"Edgar?" she asked. "I don't think Edgar even knows I exist."

"But you invited him, didn't you?"

"Of course. I just hope he comes alone. I'll be terribly disappointed if he shows up with some babe hanging from his arm."

We checked and double-checked everything, including proper placement of the mistletoe in the doorway to the second bedroom, during the last few minutes before the guests started arriving. Before long the party was in full swing and I had friends and coworkers elbow-to-elbow in my large, two-bedroom apartment. A few hardy souls even stepped out onto the balcony despite a chilly evening breeze.

I stopped answering the door and instead left it open so that attendees would feel free to come and go as they chose. I was standing at the bar, waiting for the bartender to refresh my drink, when I heard a couple of middle managers talking.

One said, "Doesn't he work in the mailroom?"

And the other replied, "He's the supervisor."

To which the first responded, "And that's any better?"

I turned to see Brandon standing in the foyer, looking a bit like a reindeer caught in the high beams. I'd forgotten that I had invited him, but I suddenly felt good that he came. I took my drink and worked my way across the room to his side.

"About time you got here," I said.

He thrust a bottle of red wine into my hand. "This is for you."

I glanced at the label and realized he'd dropped a good chunk of change on my Christmas gift.

(Continued on page 46) 43

My Visit From Beyond

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Her Spirit Remains

When I was ten years old, my aunt gave me a figurine for Christmas. It was a bear skating on an ice pond in front of a small village. When I wound it up, the bear would skate in circles on the ice. It was a small token of my aunt's love. She'd always been single and had no children. She enjoyed spoiling her nieces and nephews with little gifts. After I returned home, I took the little musical figurine out of the box excitedly and wound it up. The ice was a mirror and I loved to sit and watch the little bear twirl to the beautiful music. I'd dream of far-away, magical places. Each year I got the little bear out and enjoyed the same routine of watching him.

My aunt passed away suddenly from misdiagnosed uterine cancer when I was in high school. The Christmas following her death was especially hard. I got my little bear out to wind up and to remember the wonderful times with my aunt. As I took the figurine out of the box, it slipped from my hands and fell to the floor. When I picked it up, the mirrored ice was cracked in four different places. I couldn't get the little bear to dance or the music to play, no matter how hard I tried. I'd broken it. My heart sank as tears streamed down my face. I displayed the figurine anyway. I wasn't able to part with it.

I was in my mid-twenties when I had my beautiful daughter. On her first Christmas, I took out my old musical bear that didn't work and set it on the coffee table. I sat down on the couch, holding my new daughter and talking to my aunt, telling her of our newest blessing and how the world has changed since she left. After I was done talking, I sat there with my daughter and suddenly heard the familiar music I hadn't heard in years. As I looked at my little bear, he was twirling all around his cracked, mirrored pond.

My eyes filled with tears and in my heart I knew my

aunt met my daughter that night. Each year after that, I could never get the bear to dance or the music to play unless I talked to my aunt. Each year at Christmas, I call my mom and tell her that my aunt says hi. Mom always replies, "Tell her I miss her."

My aunt may have left this earth many years ago, but her spirit remains with us to this day.

—A. C., Ohio



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Substitute Santa

(Continued from page 43)

"I think I'll hide this away and enjoy it later."

"Okay."

"You can put your coat in there." I pointed to the second bedroom.

I headed toward the kitchen when I realized Brandon hadn't moved. So, I reached back and took his hand.

"Come with me."

I pulled him into the kitchen and hid the wine bottle in a lower cabinet, behind a collection of mixing bowls. Then I led him to the food spread in the dining room, pointed out where the bar was on the far side of the living room, and introduced him to two guys who lived in the building and were arguing about some referee's call in a recent football game.

I began circulating again, stopping for a moment when I noticed that my assistant had cornered dateless Edgar and was giving him her complete attention. By the time I circumnavigated the apartment, I saw that Brandon had finally removed his jacket and was helping himself to carrot and celery sticks from the buffet.

Guests began making their escape late in the evening, some mentioning babysitter curfews, others giving no excuses at all. At ten, the caterer transferred the remaining food onto my plates and she and her staff were through. At eleven, the bartender closed the bar, leaving three open bottles of wine for the remaining guests to self-serve until the bottles ran dry.

Taylor usually stays until the end of my parties to help me clean up, but she pulled me aside a few minutes after the bartender disappeared and asked if I minded if she left. Edgar had made an offer that she didn't want to turn down, but she knew she couldn't duck out without letting me know.

I waved her off, telling her that I could take care of things myself. The remaining guests drained the last three bottles of wine and then made a mass exodus. Moments before the stroke of midnight, I found myself alone in the apartment.

That is, I thought I was alone until I heard dishes rattling in the kitchen and I discovered Brandon standing over the trashcan, scraping plates.

"What are you doing?"

"I overheard you talking to Taylor," he explained. "I thought you might need some help cleaning up."

"I certainly can," I told him.

"Thank you."

I gathered glasses, dishes, and silverware from around my apartment and discovered, as I did every year, that my guests left their dirty dishware in the strangest places. I found wineglasses on my bookshelf, plates shoved under my couch, and silverware hanging from my Christmas tree. I dutifully gathered up everything and carried it into the kitchen. Brandon scraped the plates clean and stacked the dishes in my dishwasher until it was full. Then he started hand washing what didn't fit in the dishwasher.

"I'm still hearing good things about your stint as Santa," I told him as I grabbed a dishtowel and began drying.

"Thanks."

"It was a great party, don't you think?" I asked.

"Everybody seemed to be enjoying themselves."

"And you?"

"I had a good time, too."

"I'm glad." I touched his arm. "I notice you didn't bring a guest."

He shrugged. "I'm not seeing anyone. What about you?"

I shook my head. "Not in forever," I told him. "And Christmas is a terrible time to meet someone new. You've barely met and then you have to select Christmas gifts for each other? And if you select wrong, or don't offer anything at all, what does that mean?"

We were silent for a moment, and then Brandon asked, "So, do you have plans for Christmas?"

"Microwave dinner and reruns of *A Christmas Story*," I told him, but I didn't tell him why. My parents had passed on several years earlier and I don't have any siblings.

"I love that movie," Brandon said. "It reminds me of Christmas with my parents and my brother."

"What about you?" I asked. "Do you have plans?"

"Not this year," he said. "My par-

ents are taking a Caribbean cruise and my brother and his family are going to Milwaukee to spend the holidays with his in-laws."

One o'clock in the morning had come and gone before we finished with the dishes. By then the excitement of the evening was wearing off and I was starting to drag.

Brandon must have noticed, because he said, "I should go."

His was the last coat remaining on the bed in my second bedroom and I went to fetch it. After I retrieved his coat and turned, I saw that he was standing in the doorway watching me, completely oblivious to the mistletoe hanging above his head. I don't know what possessed me to do it, but after I handed Brandon his coat, I grabbed his face with both hands and planted a kiss on his lips.

His eyes widened in surprise, but he didn't resist. He didn't pull me into his arms, didn't move closer, but the kiss lengthened and grew so intense that it took my breath away and sent electric tingles shooting through my entire body.

After I pulled back, my legs weak and rubbery, I said, "I'm glad you made it tonight."

"So am I," he said, his voice low and husky. "I almost didn't."

I led Brandon to the foyer, thanked him again for helping me clean the apartment, and wished him a good night and a safe drive home. After he stepped into the hall, I closed and locked my apartment door.

Then I leaned back against the door and wondered what had gotten into me. Brandon is nothing at all like the men I'd dated in the past, and yet there's something about my replacement Santa that tied my thoughts in knots.

Monday morning my assistant told me more than I wanted to know about her night with Edgar. Throughout the day I heard from my coworkers that my annual Christmas party had been a rousing success. I didn't see or hear from Brandon, and my mail was delivered the usual way.

Three days later, I received an invitation to "a private dinner party" on Christmas Day. For two. At Brandon's.

I sat on my couch and stared at

the invitation for the longest time.

Then I called the number at the bottom and left a message on Brandon's voice mail that I would be happy to join him Christmas day.

I spent the next few days in a quandary. We weren't dating, so I didn't owe Brandon a Christmas present. At the same time, I couldn't very well arrive on Christmas Day without a gift. I didn't have any idea what to bring until I remembered something he told me at dinner after he played Santa. I took a long lunch two days before Christmas, visited a small office downtown, and left there a hundred dollars lighter.

I arrived at Brandon's fire station-turned-home precisely at five, and he greeted me at the door before I even had a chance to knock.

He took my coat, hung it up on a wall-mounted coat rack that had probably held the coats of many firemen over the years, and then led me into the station. He'd done a remarkable job converting the station into a home, even retaining the brass pole that connected the first and second floors through a large, circular hole in the floor.

I touched the pole. "Do you ever use it?"

"I have a few times," he admitted. "But I'm not usually in a hurry to leave the house."

I heard a buzzing come from somewhere and Brandon said, "Dinner's in the oven and it sounds like it's ready."

He led me into the kitchen, a room with industrial-sized appliances and a long table with bench seats suitable for seating six on each side. He'd covered one end of the table with a white linen tablecloth, china and silver place settings for two, a floral bouquet, a pair of tapered candles already lit, and a bottle of red wine waiting to be opened.

He seated me and then removed lasagna and garlic bread from the oven. I still had my clutch and I placed it on the bench beside me.

"This might not be your traditional holiday dinner," he said as he served the meatless lasagna. "I'm still learning to cook healthy meals."

He opened the wine, poured for both of us, and then took his seat across from me. As we ate, we

(Continued on page 50)



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The Gourmet Cookie Jar

The classic Italian biscuit gets a makeover in Black Forest Biscotti Cookies, crisp treats flavored with chocolate and cherries.

Black Forest Biscotti Cookies

Makes 1 dozen
(pictured)

- 1 $\frac{2}{3}$ cups all-purpose flour
- 1 cup sugar
- $\frac{1}{4}$ cup special dark cocoa powder
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup mini semisweet chocolate morsels
- $\frac{1}{2}$ cup dried cherries
- 2 eggs
- 2 tablespoons almond liqueur (optional)
- 1 teaspoon pure vanilla extract
- 1 teaspoon almond extract

Dark cocoa easy-to-melt candy wafers

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Line baking sheet with parchment paper.
2. In large bowl, combine flour, sugar, cocoa powder, and baking powder. Stir in chocolate morsels and cherries. In medi-

um bowl, whisk eggs, liqueur (if using), vanilla, and almond extract. Add egg mixture to flour mixture; mix to form stiff dough. Shape dough to form 3x12-inch loaf. Place on prepared baking sheet. 3. Bake 22 to 25 minutes. Remove from oven; transfer loaf to wire rack. Let stand until cool to touch. Using serrated bread knife, slice loaf diagonally into $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch-thick slices. Place slices on baking sheet, sliced-side down.

4. Bake 12 to 15 minutes, turning biscotti over halfway through baking. Remove from oven; transfer to wire rack to cool completely. 5. Place candy wafers in 1-quart microwave-safe bowl. Microwave on 50% power 1 to 2 minutes, stirring every 30 seconds until chocolate is melted. Drizzle chocolate over cooled biscotti. Allow chocolate to set. Store in airtight container until ready to serve.

Note: Dough that is too moist will not hold

After-school favorites with an added touch of class are what these goodies are all about. By making a few subtle changes to traditional recipes you can turn out batches of fancy baked goods just perfect for gifting. Here are some exciting variations on time-honored classics.—*By Diane Hodges*



Your imagination is the limit when decorating Brownie Gifts with frosting and edible decors.

Brownie Gifts

Makes 2 dozen
(pictured)

- 1 package (21 oz.) brownie mix
- Red, green, and white decorating icing

Plastic decorating tips

Holiday decors

1. Bake brownies according to box directions and let cool completely.
2. Cut brownies into squares.
3. Create patterns and ribbons on brownie squares using decorating icing and tip. Top with decors.

(Recipe and photograph courtesy of Signature Brands)

its shape. If dough is moist, turn onto floured work surface and work in additional flour. Avoid overworking the dough.

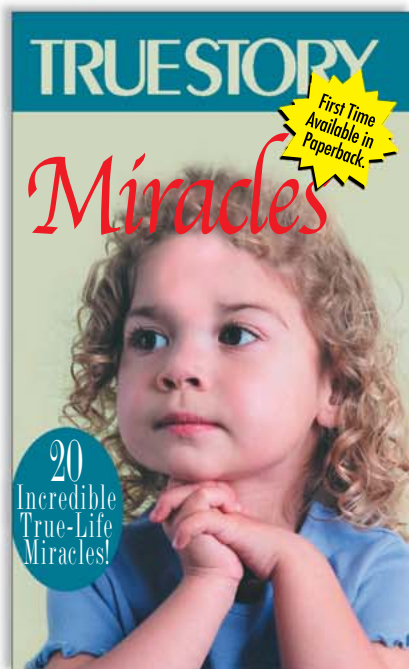
Gift Giving Tip: Place biscotti in individual pretzel treat bags and secure with twist ties. Place each filled treat bag in a glass Irish coffee mug. Tie ribbon around the handle of the mug with a gift card attached.

(Recipe and photograph courtesy of Wilton Enterprises)

(Continued on page 52)

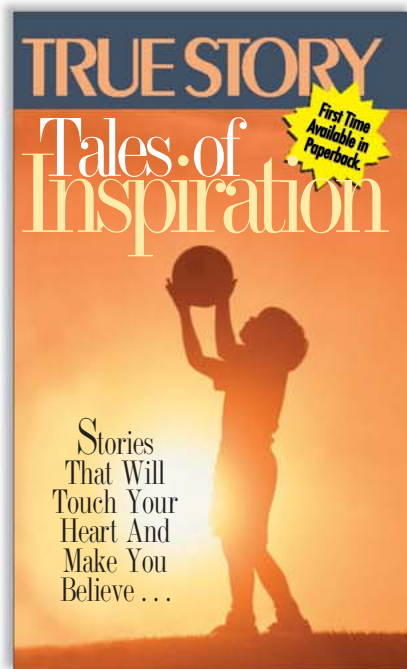
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Substitute Santa

(Continued from page 47)

talked about work and about his upcoming trip to help build homes in Appalachia. I knew then that I'd chosen the right Christmas gift.

After we finished the main course, he offered tiramisu for dessert.

"That's decadent," I told him.

"Well," he said with a grin. "Not everything I prepared is healthy." As he served dessert, he asked, "Have you watched *A Christmas Story* yet today?"

"No, why?"

"I have it on DVD. I was thinking we could take dessert into the living room and eat it while we watched the movie."

"Before we do that, though." I reached for my clutch and removed a small envelope containing a Christmas card and Brandon's gift. I handed it to him and I watched his face as he opened the card and saw that I had made a donation to Habitat for Humanity in his name.

"Thank you," he said. "This means more than you can imagine." He hesitated a moment and then continued. "I'm sorry, but I didn't get you a gift."

"Yes, you did. You gave me this." I indicated the dinner table with a sweep of my hand. "I thought I was going to be alone, eating a microwave dinner, and you gave me the gift of your company and your cooking."

Brandon blushed, and then hid his blush by standing and turning away from me. He quickly covered the leftovers and we carried our dessert into the living room, which had once been part of the garage where the fire engines parked. Soon we were eating dessert and reciting some of the movie's dialog along with the actors on screen. It was obvious that we'd both seen the movie too many times before.

Without thinking about it, I took Brandon's hand and held it through the last twenty minutes of the movie. I couldn't believe how comfortable I felt with him, as if we had known each other forever, and yet we barely knew each other at all.

After the movie ended, neither of us moved.

"What now?" I asked.

Brandon turned to face me. "I

don't know. I didn't plan anything beyond this."

"How about this?" I whispered. I leaned over and kissed him.

When the kiss ended, he said, "There's no mistletoe."

"So?"

I kissed him again and this time Brandon wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close. We kissed again and again, each kiss soul-searchingly deep, and each kiss flooded my body with unexpected desire. Before I reached the point where my hormones overwhelmed my rational mind, I pulled away and straightened my clothes.

Brandon cleared his throat and stood. "More wine? More tiramisu? More—?"

"I'm good, thank you," I told him. I stood. "Maybe I'd better be going. We don't want to do anything—"

"—That would embarrass us at work," he finished, a look of disappointment clouding his expression.

Our company doesn't have a policy that would prevent us from dating, but there's the company grapevine and it's quite active. Most of the company knew that one of the accountants took my assistant home after my party.

"You know what?" I told him. "This isn't about work, and it isn't about what people might say."

"It isn't?"

"No," I said firmly. "This is about getting to know each other first."

Brandon didn't seem completely satisfied with my response, but he accepted it. He walked me to the door, held my coat while I slipped it on, and then escorted me to my car. I turned and kissed his cheek.

"You're a wonderful man," I told him.

He thanked me, but he had the look of someone who'd been rejected once too often.

That look haunted me all night. I fell asleep that night wondering what was holding me back. Being with Brandon made me feel better than I'd ever felt with any of the other men I'd dated, but I didn't know how to convince him of the depth of my feelings.

Until the next morning.

We returned to work the day after Christmas. As I rode the elevator to my floor, I overheard two of my coworkers gossiping about a third.

I knew what I had to do before I reached my office. As soon as I settled into my chair, I called Taylor into my office and had her sit down.

"I wanted you to hear this from me and not from the office grapevine," I told her.

She leaned forward.

"Brandon and I are seeing each other."

"Brandon?" She had a puzzled look on her face. "The blimp? The guy from the mailroom?"

"He's the mailroom supervisor," I corrected. "And, yes, him."

"Really?"

I nodded.

She sat back in her chair. "Wow," she said. "Double wow."

I changed the subject and listed half a dozen things I needed her to do before noon. The one thing I most needed her to do *didn't* require instruction from me.

My phone rang shortly after ten that morning. I picked it up to find Brandon on the other end of the line.

"You're telling people that we're dating?"

"I told one person. And we are, aren't we?"

"Well, sure, I suppose so, but—"

"You aren't going to tell people I'm lying, are you?"

"No, but. . . ." He hesitated. "Are you sure you want people to know you're dating *me*?"

"I wouldn't have said a thing if I didn't. I told you last night that you're a wonderful man and that it doesn't matter what other people think. What matters is what you think and what I think. I think I want to get to know you better."

I heard the confidence return to his voice when he said, "Then we're dating and it doesn't matter who knows it."

We spoke for a few minutes more, making plans for the weekend, and after we finally ended our conversation I replaced the phone handset in its cradle and smiled.

My replacement Santa had been the hit of the Christmas party, handing out gifts to the employees' children, but the biggest gift of all was the one he gave me: The opportunity to get to know the man inside the suit.

It's a gift I look forward to exploring for many Christmases to come. ■

Live Life

(Continued from page 19)

trying to think of what I did wrong and I never once blamed Chad! He's the one who cheated!

"You're getting mad," Agnes said, watching my face. "That's good. Mad is good. Come with me."

She led me out to her garage. Once we were there she handed me a pair of safety goggles and gloves and put a pair on as well. Then she handed me a plate.

"What's that for?" I asked, feeling silly.

I jumped back a foot when Agnes hurled the plate against the far wall, where it seemed to explode in a hundred pieces.

"You can't stand there and tell me your husband left you for another woman and you're not angry? I don't believe you! Throw the plate!"

I was reluctant, but my anger seemed to rage up inside me. My arm threw that plate with all the fury I'd been keeping in for the past two years. It shattered into tiny pieces like a fireworks display and I watched with satisfaction.

I took another plate from Agnes. We did that, each taking a turn at smashing plates, for about half an hour. She got low on plates.

"Five . . . awful . . . years . . . of my life! Wasted on that jerk!" I cried, throwing plates as I talked.

Finally, we stopped. We were laughing so hard that we had to take a break.

"I'm sorry about all your plates!" I said.

"Don't worry about it. I have a friend who makes mosaics and she needs pieces of old china. Besides, I get all the plates from the second-hand store just for times when I get mad at the world."

We stood there for a moment looking at the pile of broken pieces.

"See? You were angry. You just didn't know it."

"Of course I was. Chad was a rat."

We started to laugh again and it took us a long time to stop. It felt like a heavy weight had lifted from my shoulders. For the first time in years, I was like a teenager again and the world was full of opportunities. My mind was racing.

"Who's the new love interest in your life?" Agnes asked.

Love interest? I'm avoiding all men because of the number Chad had done to my self-esteem. But now. . .

"Well, there is a guy who comes into the store almost every day. I know his name is Will, but that's all I know. He's polite and kind and very, very good-looking."

"Then why don't you ask him out?"

"Agnes!" I said. *Sure, this might be the twenty-first century, but I'm still shy about asking a guy out. And here Agnes is telling me to do it!*

I had no doubt that Agnes would've taken the initiative with a man she was interested in. I thought of that very handsome biker in the picture in her living room.

"Life is way too short, Laci. Take a chance."

I thought of her words all the next day at work. I thought about a lot of things. I didn't like my job. I liked the customers, but I'd always longed to do something different. As a kid I wanted to be a marine biologist.

Maybe that was out of the question, but there was no reason why I couldn't do something else. I just had to look around to see what was out there.

The worst part about quitting my job, though, was that I wouldn't see Will again. The way he laughed and joked with me made my day. I began to wonder if I could get up enough courage to ask him out, like Agnes had said.

"Hi, Laci! How have you been?" Chad.

"What are you doing here?" I asked.

"Just came in to pick up a couple of things. And to see you."

"Why?" I demanded. *I thought everything with the divorce is settled.*

"Maybe I just miss hearing your voice."

Oh, no. I knew that tone. He wanted something. "What's the matter, Chad? Are you having buyer's remorse? What happened to Olivia?"

At the sound of her name, he winced. "Uh, we split up, Laci."

I took a step back and stared at him. "What do you want?" I asked bluntly.

"I was thinking that if you're not busy tonight. . ."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. *This man has caused me so much pain, so many nights when*

(Continued on page 54)

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↑ A seasonal rendition, Snowflake Sugar Cookies are cut into a winter shape and enhanced with silver dragees and a drizzle of white icing.



↑ A mix for candy-rich Oatmeal Toffee Cookies makes a nice present, with baking instructions attached of course.

Oatmeal Toffee Cookies (Cookie Mix in a Jar)

Makes about 3 dozen
(pictured)

- 1 cup packed light brown sugar
- ½ teaspoon ground cinnamon
- 1½ cups quick-cooking oats
- ¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons toffee bits
- ¾ cup plus 2 tablespoons all-purpose flour
- ½ teaspoon baking soda
- ¼ teaspoon salt

Baking instructions (recipe follows)

Use clean 1-quart (4 cups) glass jar with lid. Stir together brown sugar and cinnamon; pack down into bottom of jar. Layer with oats, then toffee bits. Stir together flour, baking soda, and salt; place as top layer. Close jar; attach card with following instructions:

Baking Instructions:

1. Preheat oven to 375°. Lightly grease baking sheet.
2. Spoon contents of jar into large bowl; break up any lumps with wooden spoon. Add ½ cup (1 stick) softened butter, 1 lightly beaten egg, and 1 teaspoon vanilla extract; beat on low speed of electric mixer until well blended. Drop dough by rounded teaspoons about 2 inches apart onto prepared baking sheet.
3. Bake 8 to 10 minutes, or until edges are lightly browned. Cool 1 minute; remove to wire rack to cool completely.

(Recipe and photograph courtesy of Hershey's Kitchens)

Snowflake Sugar Cookies

Makes about 4 dozen
(pictured)

- 3 cups all-purpose flour
 - ½ teaspoon baking powder
 - ¼ teaspoon salt
 - 1 cup (2 sticks) butter, softened
 - 1 cup granulated sugar
 - 1 egg
 - 2 teaspoons lemon extract (optional)
- Silver dragees
2 cups 10X (confectioners') sugar
Milk (or lemon juice instead of milk for extra lemon flavor)

1. Line baking sheet with parchment paper; set aside. On second sheet of parchment paper, combine flour, baking powder, and salt; set aside.
2. In large bowl, beat butter and granulated sugar with electric mixer until fluffy. Mix in egg and lemon extract until well blended. Gradually beat flour mixture into butter mixture until smooth. Divide dough in half; shape into two flat disks. Wrap in plastic wrap; refrigerate 30 minutes to 1 hour, or until firm enough to roll.
3. Preheat oven to 375°. Roll out dough to ⅛-inch thickness between two lightly floured sheets of parchment paper or on lightly floured surface. Cut dough with 2-inch snowflake cookie cutter. Place 1 inch apart on prepared baking sheet. Decorate with silver dragees.
4. Bake 8 to 10 minutes, or until cookies are just beginning to brown on edges. Cool on wire rack.
5. In small bowl, mix 10X sugar and milk, adding milk slowly until desired consistency is reached. Drizzle over cooled cookies.

(Recipe and photograph courtesy of Reynolds Kitchens)

Chocolate Chip Shells

Makes 30
(pictured)

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 package (8 oz.) semisweet chocolate morsels (1⅓ cups)
- 4 large eggs
- 1 cup granulated sugar
- 1 tablespoon orange liqueur (such as Cointreau), or 1 teaspoon orange extract
- 1 teaspoon vanilla extract
- 2 tablespoons grated orange peel
- 1 cup (2 sticks) unsalted butter, melted
- ¼ cup sifted 10X (confectioners') sugar

1. Preheat oven to 350°. Generously grease and flour madeleine baking pan(s).
2. In medium bowl, combine flour and 1 cup of the morsels. Beat eggs, granulated sugar, orange liqueur, vanilla, and orange peel in large mixer bowl until light in color. Fold flour mixture and melted butter alternately into egg mixture, beginning and ending with flour mixture. Spoon batter by heaping tablespoon into each prepared mold.
3. Bake 10 to 12 minutes, or until wooden pick inserted in center comes out clean. Cool in pan(s) 1 minute. With tip of knife, release onto wire racks to cool completely. Wash, grease, and flour pan(s). Repeat with remaining batter.
4. Sprinkle madeleines very lightly with 10X sugar. Microwave remaining ⅓ cup morsels in heavy-duty plastic bag on High (100%) 30 seconds; knead bag to mix. Microwave at additional 10-second intervals, kneading until smooth. Cut a small hole in corner of bag; squeeze to drizzle over madeleines. Allow chocolate to cool and set before serving.

(Recipe and photograph courtesy of Nestle and verybestbaking.com)

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Live Life

(Continued from page 51)

I cried myself to sleep wondering where I went wrong in our relationship, and now he just casually strolls back into my life as though nothing ever happened? After our divorce?

"You have got to be kidding," I said between clenched teeth.

"Are you all right, Laci?"

It was Will. I didn't notice that he'd walked up behind Chad.

"I will be," I said in a firm voice.

"And Will, I would love it if you could join me for coffee after work."

I don't know who was more shocked—Will, Chad, or me! Chad looked me in the eyes and must have seen just what I thought of his invitation.

"I'd love to," Will replied with a big smile.

Chad gave him a glare and stomped out of the store.

"Friend of yours?" Will asked after Chad left.

"No. How about you meet me back here at ten?"

I don't know if I would've been so bold before Agnes's plate-throwing session. I really had to get a stack of old plates myself for when the anger inside me threatened to become too much. Far better to break a few plates than to blame myself for Chad's infidelity!

I kept thinking about Agnes's words: *Life is way too short, Laci. Take a chance.*

That night when I left the store, I waited for Will to show up. It was a little past ten and I began to worry that he wouldn't come, or even worse, that he'd forgotten all about me. All the self-doubting thoughts came rushing back. *Maybe he doesn't really like me after all. Maybe he's like Chad. Maybe. . .*

I heard the low roar of a motorcycle. I turned around and saw a man dressed in black leather and a black helmet. He stopped and took off his helmet.

Will! *I should've known*, I thought, smiling. I immediately thought of Agnes. *She'll approve.*

"I hope you don't mind riding on the back of the bike," he said.

"I don't mind. I don't mind at all."

I'd never ridden on a motorcycle before. I wrapped my arms around

took the corners just a little too fast so I'd hang on tighter. It felt good to snuggle so close to his lean body. I was on a date for the first time in months, or at least the closest thing to one I'd been on since my divorce.

Will took me to a little restaurant. We sat in a corner booth and just talked. He was so easy to be with. Will had done a lot of traveling on his bike and I sat transfixed as he told me about his trips to the seashore, the mountains, and the prairies. I thought of Agnes and the sense of freedom that she must've felt on trips like those. I closed my eyes and could just imagine it.

Will was a little shy. He didn't belong to a bike club or anything. He just liked to get away when he wasn't working at his job in the city. It was almost midnight before I knew it!

"Look at the time! I'd better go home. I have to work tomorrow."

Will drove me back. When I got off the bike and took off the spare helmet he had for me, he took his off, too. Then he leaned down and gave me a kiss—a real kiss, not just the hurried one you usually get on a first date. It told me that he was interested. And so was I.

"Details. I need details!" Agnes insisted when I went to her place that Saturday afternoon.

I knew I was glowing. I really liked Will. As Agnes dug around in her garden with her spade, I gave her some of the details of the butterflies I felt when I was with him.

"Do you think love can happen so fast?" I asked her.

"It could. Time will tell."

"Have you ever been in love, Agnes? I mean really earth-shattering in love?"

She stopped her digging and looked off into the distance. She nodded.

"With the biker guy?" I asked.

"Exactly with the biker guy," she replied.

She didn't give me any more details and I didn't think it was the right time to ask. Then she invited Will and me for dinner.

"Wait a minute! I owe *you* a dinner. I'll have you and Will over next Friday night."

I was a little nervous making din-

ner for the two of them. They're both people I respect a lot and I wanted them to be impressed with my cooking. Well, I really wanted them to be impressed with me.

Will was a natural flirt with Agnes. I could tell the two of them liked each other very much. I breathed a sigh of relief.

"That was a great meal, Laci," Will said softly as he picked up our plates and took them to the sink.

"Hear! Hear!" Agnes said. "See, Will? She's not only a beauty, she can cook!"

I looked over at her and saw the mischief in her eyes. Just so that Will didn't think he was dealing with an ordinary woman, I told him about Agnes's love of motorcycles.

"Yes, I loved the bikes. But I loved one biker even more," she said.

That's when she told us all about her love affair. I couldn't believe that I was hearing about a love story that had started almost sixty years before.

"My brother was really into motorcycles back then, you know. It was a natural thing, I guess, for me to tag along when he was out with his buddies. At first Jim didn't like the idea of his little sister hanging around. When I brought some of my beautiful friends along, he thought it was okay!" Agnes said, laughing at the memory.

"It wasn't too long after that when I met Hank. I just couldn't even notice any other man after that. Hank was the one for me and I was the one for him. There was never any question about it."

She told us about places they saw together, even about outrunning a cop who was determined to catch Hank for speeding.

"He'd even hide behind billboards, trying to catch him, but he never did! I don't know how many hundreds of miles Hank and I rode together. That was the highlight of my life. I guess I'll never top it."

"You have many more adventures in you!" I told her, touched by the story of the young lovers.

I wanted to ask what happened to Hank, but it didn't seem like the right time. Agnes had to check out Will's bike, of course, and she gave us tips on riding. I still couldn't believe I was hearing all of that from a woman who was almost eighty.

It made me think about my own life and what I'd done so far. Not nearly enough. I'd been living life so cautiously, always afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. I'd wasted years just trying to do the right thing by Chad, even after he cheated on me!

What do I want out of life? I'm unattached with no kids. What do I want to do and where do I want to go?

Agnes had started all these questions in my head. She shook up my world and I thank her for it.

After Will left that night, Agnes and I sat down in my living room with steaming cups of tea.

"Well, what did you think of him?" I asked.

"A really nice young man," she said.

"That's all?" I asked.

She set down her cup and turned to look me fully in the eye. *Oh, boy. Here it comes,* I thought.

"Laci, I've only known you a short time, but I don't think I've steered you wrong yet, have I?"

I shook my head.

"Good. Then my advice, for what it's worth, is that you decide what you want for your life, what you feel in your gut right now. Take a day off from that hectic job of yours. Go someplace quiet and beautiful. That's where you'll hear your own voice for a change, not all the—what do you young people call it?—white noise that surrounds you."

I laughed a little at that, but she was right. All day long the thoughts in my head were of what other people wanted of me. My parents. Chad. My boss. My customers. They all expected certain things of me and I'd been living my life to please everyone.

Everyone, that is, except myself.

I took Agnes's advice. I scheduled some time off on a Tuesday. Tara, my boss, wasn't very pleased about it.

"Tuesday? Oh, not Tuesday, Laci. That's when the new shipment of school supplies comes in. Wednesday? That's not a very good day, either. Why do you have to take time off anyway? Is it a doctor's appointment? I could let you have an hour."

"No, Tara. I need a day and I'm taking Tuesday," I told her firmly.

She just stared at me with her mouth open. I'd never stood up to her like that.

I jumped out of bed very early Tuesday morning, ready for my little adventure. I felt like a kid skipping school. Then I realized that whether I went to work or not, nothing would change. I didn't make much of an impact there. Some of my customers would miss me if I left, but I knew that I needed to move on with my life more than ever.

I packed a lunch for my small backpack. I drove to a park in our small city, a park that's really a part of the wilderness. There are streams, as well as trails and hills to climb. Once you're in the peace of the outdoors, surrounded by trees and birds, the rest of the world just seems to fall away. So did all my obligations.

I had a good hike and then climbed a hill overlooking the fast-moving stream below. As I opened my lunch a couple of hopeful birds landed in the nearby trees. I tore off a few pieces of my sandwich and tossed it some distance away. To my surprise, they flew down right away. I laughed as I watched them fighting over the crumbs.

I began to think of the future. *Agnes is right. Will's very nice. Can we make a go of it? That's a possibility, but the rest of my life is more important to me.*

I would quit my job pretty soon, that was a given. *But then what?*

I sure missed the outdoors. That's the worst part about working in a store all day. I longed to feel the sun on my skin. I didn't even mind when I got caught in a rainstorm. It's all part of nature and I love it.

I remembered my dream about being a marine biologist. As I sat there under the trees I realized that as a kid, I didn't know much about that occupation. But I knew that it would keep me outdoors most of the year.

I saw a small group walking beside the stream below me. They seemed to be following someone and every so often they all stopped to listen to her. *She must be some kind of nature guide, leading this group around the park and telling them about the different animals and plants that are here.*

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I was fascinated. The people were enjoying themselves and they were getting an education as well. I loved that idea.

Suddenly, the thought of being a nature guide seemed like the perfect thing. *Why can't I do something like that?*

You've got to live a little. Feel the wind in your hair. That's how you know you're alive.

As soon as I got home I searched online. I discovered that our city accepts volunteer guides. What better way to try out this new career idea? If I didn't like it, I could try something else just as easily.

I was so excited about it that I called Agnes right away.

"Let me know when you start and I'll be the first one on your tour," she promised.

It took me a few months of study and participating in other groups so I'd learn how to do it on my own, but it was fun. I looked forward to my life again. I still went to work, but afterward I had my head stuck in a book, usually in the park, reading up on this or that plant, flower, or animal species.

"I can't believe that it was right there in front of me all along," I told Will one warm evening when we went for a walk. "I've always loved nature. Why have I been denying this all my life?"

"Sometimes we deny ourselves. We think we're doing the best thing for everyone around us if we forget who we are. Sounds crazy, doesn't it?"

"Yes," I said. "And it's sure been true for me. I can't please everyone. I don't even know what everyone wants or needs, but I know what I want. Finally."

Will was very supportive of my decision. Sometimes he came over and just sat and read while I studied from my stack of books. I was looking into going back to school part-time to take courses in biology and even in drama. As a guide I'd have to know how to educate and entertain people.

I wasn't able to see Agnes during that time, and I felt guilty about that. One night she called me and invited me to supper the next day.

As we sat at her kitchen table, I got the sense that she was trying to tell me something. There were

silences in our conversation that hadn't been there before.

I looked over again at the picture of her and Hank on the bike. She smiled.

"Whatever happened to Hank, Agnes?" I asked.

Agnes got up and went to her bedroom. When she came back she was holding another framed photograph.

It was Agnes beside an older man. They were looking at the camera and beaming. There was something very familiar about him.

"That's Hank!" I said.

"Sure is. My husband of fifty-seven years," she said proudly.

"You married him!" I said.

"Of course I did. He was the one."

Hank had passed away just over a year ago. I would've thought that she'd be devastated, but she had a zest for life that's infectious. She gave it to me.

There were tears in my eyes as I handed the photo back to her. Somehow, I'd never think of either her or Hank as the older couple. I would always think of them as the young bikers with the wind in their hair.

"Now, don't go feeling sorry for me. You young people aren't the only ones to date, you know."

"Date?"

"Yes, dear. It's a four-letter word that means you have to get on with life. You are alive for a reason, and it's not about mourning forever."

I still didn't get what she was trying to tell me. *Is she referring to Will and me?*

"You and your young man come to dinner on Sunday," she said.

I told Will about her mysterious invitation. He just smiled in that sweet, handsome way of his. I grew more and more attached to him, but it was a nice feeling. We were taking our time getting to know each other. The more I knew, the more I liked. It might lead to a long-term relationship. Then again, it might not. Time would tell.

Will and I arrived at seven on the dot that Sunday. I was almost afraid to go. What would Agnes tell us? *Has she heard some bad news? A bad medical diagnosis, maybe?*

As these thoughts ran through my head I realized how quickly I'd gotten to know and love Agnes. She's right. Life is just too short for the good things.

"Laci, Will, I'd like you to meet Marvin."

An older man, maybe in his seventies, stepped up to shake our hands. He had a friendly smile and the two of them just looked like a couple. I wondered how long she'd known him.

Agnes had made fried chicken and Marvin had made the salad. We stayed until midnight, laughing and telling stories. It didn't seem possible that they're so much older than us. With their enthusiasm and love of life they could have been our peers.

Agnes had known Marvin years ago in the motorcycle club. He had been one of her brother's younger friends. Although he was too young for Agnes to consider boyfriend material back then, time has a way of making these things equal. Agnes joked that she was robbing the cradle by dating him.

I was so glad for them. I sat back and enjoyed the company of the people I never would've gotten to know if I'd continued to live my life in fear of doing or saying the wrong thing. But I took a chance and got to know Agnes, and I took another chance and actually asked Will on a date! Soon there would be even more interesting things ahead for me as I became a nature guide.

All because I was willing to put the past behind me and reinvent my future. Also, I had the good fortune to meet a certain woman with a love of high-heel, scarlet slippers. A woman who squeezed every last drop out of life.

I'll never forget Agnes, my adopted grandmother. Agnes is gone now, but she made me open my eyes to the life I was living, a life that was dull and painfully slow.

Yes, she's gone, but it's not what you're thinking. The last time I saw Agnes, she was holding on tightly to a seventy-something-year old guy in a black leather jacket. Marvin, of course. They were headed for Arizona with a group of bikers.

I'd never expect anything else of the lady with the scarlet slippers. ■



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Love Cure

(Continued from page 15)

thought it made me look younger.

"It's real human hair," I said. "This kind is more expensive, but I think it'll be worth it."

When I returned to chemo on Wednesday, it was with a whole new look. I was still too thin, but I'd found some clothes that didn't look baggy. I had pulled out all the stops with nail polish and makeup to complement my pretty, new wig.

Jasper whistled his appreciation. "Lookin' good, Sabrina. Lookin' fine!"

"Love the hair," Chelsea added. "And check out those hot-pink nails!"

I fluttered my fingers and preened a little. "You know, Chelsea, I think this might be the first time in months that I've actually felt feminine."

Even Harmon noticed the new me.

"You look good," he said, studying the total effect. "Um, Sabrina, is it?"

"Yes, and thank you."

He inspected me for a second longer, then blurted out, "How can you?"

"How can I what?"

"Look so great. Be so happy. You have cancer, you're in the middle of chemo, and obviously your hair's falling out. Yet you just told the nurse you feel feminine. I don't get it."

"Call it life-affirming," I said after a moment's thought. "I feel feminine again because I feel alive again. Breast cancer is a hard road to travel, but I've been down the worst parts of it now. Chemotherapy is the last big hurdle. When it's over I can look forward to an easier road."

"For a while," he said bluntly. "Then the cancer will be back and you'll have to go down that same road again."

Jasper broke into our conversation. "You don't know that," he said reasonably. "I could die from cancer next month, or next year, but I could also die from getting hit by a bus on my way home today. Or I could just as easily live another thirty years, so that's what I'm planning on doing."

"Me, too," I said. "Let's play."

Harmon did join us, but whether it

was because we'd made him feel better, or because he was bored, I don't know. He even opened up a little.

"I live alone. Been divorced six years. Our two kids are still in high school and they live with my ex, but they've been good about coming over and helping out. They take turns getting groceries and making sure I eat."

"That's my mom's job, too," I said. "Her thing is milkshakes. She'd feed them to me three times a day if she could."

All of us were surprised when the beepers signaled our courses were over. Chelsea sent us off with a cheerful wave.

I missed both Jasper and Harmon at my next two appointments because our schedules were different, but in my seventh week I walked into the room to see not only Jasper and Harmon, but Cady, too.

"Hey, this is like reunion week," Jasper greeted me. "The gang's all here, now."

We spent a few minutes catching up. All of us felt exhausted, but we knew that was a side effect. Jasper, ever optimistic, even said he was grateful for the exhaustion because it forced him to sit still and smell the roses in his wife's flower garden.

Dr. Astor was pleased with all of us, it turned out, and everyone was looking forward to finishing chemotherapy. That session was Cady's last appointment.

"I'm not complaining," she said with a smile. "But I'm going to miss all of you."

"Let's have an end-of-chemo party," I suggested impulsively. "Harmon, you'll be the last one finished. About a week after your last appointment, let's all meet somewhere for dinner and we'll celebrate."

I included Jasper's wife and daughter in the invitation, and when Chelsea came in we invited her, too.

"You guys are too much." She laughed. "You didn't know chemo was going to be fun, did you?"

The next month passed quickly, though not without trouble. I developed an infection in my left arm from the repeated IVs and that was a problem for a while, but I got through it. Most days I felt just wiped out, so I slept a lot, but that

was probably good for me. Nausea still bothered me and my eyebrows and eyelashes fell out.

"But, hey," I said to my sister on the phone. "My hair will grow back. Too bad my breasts won't grow back with it. You can't have everything, I guess."

"We still have you," Liz pointed out. "That's enough."

On my last day of chemo I hugged Chelsea and Harmon.

"Another month," I promised. "And then we'll have that party."

Harmon gave me a warm smile. "I hope you're looking forward to it as much as I am."

"Absolutely," I said, and breezed out the door.

It wasn't until I was halfway home that it occurred to me Harmon's comment might have had more meaning than I thought. *Is he coming on to me? Hmm.*

It was finally time for the end-of-chemo party. My original idea had grown from a simple dinner out to a massive celebration at a local banquet hall, with all of our families and half the chemo clinic staff invited. Even my sister, Meredith, and her family came up from Kentucky.

Jasper, Cady, Harmon, and I had the seats of honor, of course. Jasper's hair had started to come back in a light fuzz and Cady sported a pretty wig. Harmon still had his hair.

"No fair," Jasper said with good humor. "Why do you get all the hair? But good for you. Astor turned you loose, did she?"

"I'm cleared for takeoff," Harmon said. "And I'm looking forward to the rest of my life. In fact, there's something I'm ready to do now. Something that I've been putting off."

"What's that?" Cady asked.

Harmon looked at me. "Maybe Sabrina can guess."

I gave him a slow smile. "So that was a come-on the last day I was at chemo."

"It was," he admitted. His face actually turned red. "I haven't dated since my divorce, but I'm hoping I can convince you to have dinner with me someday soon."

"No convincing necessary." I reached over to take his hand. "Let's go live the rest of our lives." ■

Christmas Cheer

(Continued from page 7)

movie. I found the housewares department and picked out a cheery, red fleece throw-blanket. Even though it was summertime in New Zealand, it wasn't all that warm. Besides, I wanted Kylie to have something Christmassy.

I felt quite pleased with my inspired gift and couldn't help telling the cashier, "I'm sending my daughter a movie night for Christmas."

She glanced down at everything on the conveyer belt and looked up at me, grinning.

"What a cleaver idea! I wish my husband would come up with something creative. He always gets me a watch. I've got enough to last for years. My daughters still get stuffed animals, even though one of them is twenty."

Laughing, she scanned my items. "At least he tries. I know plenty of women who have to pick out their own presents."

We both chuckled and I left the store with her "Merry Christmas" ringing in my ears. *This gift-giving thing isn't as bad as I'd feared. You just have to think of what kinds of things the other person likes. Maybe I'll make it through the season after all.*

Wrapping Kylie's gifts turned out to be another matter. I hadn't thought of paper and bows when I was at the store. I considered making another trip out to buy wrapping stuff, but I had to get the package in the mail soon for it to arrive in time for Christmas. The next morning before class, I found colorful shopping bags in the closet and stapled my gifts inside. It would have to do.

The clerk at the mailing center assured me my package would arrive in time. Personally, I thought it could've been sent to the moon for what it cost in shipping, but at least Kylie would have something to open.

Kylie was really excited when I told her I'd agreed to host the Christmas party.

"That's great, Dad! Mom would be really proud of you. She thought Christmas was the best time of year because it makes people think about others instead of just themselves."

I let my daughter continue to think I'd agreed out of altruistic motives, not just because Myra wore down my resistance. The fact that I was also dreading the whole event didn't enter the conversation.

Aaron pretended to be stunned when I confessed to hosting the party.

"That will teach you to get out of town over the holidays. You should've accepted my invitation. If you had, my wife couldn't have roped you into something like this. Personally, I get enough of the kids during the school year."

His tone was serious, but his eyes were dancing. I've never known a teacher more devoted to his students. We both grinned.

"I'm just glad it's you putting on this shindig and not me," Aaron continued. "We're not even decorating this year since we'll be out of town."

His words reminded me of that particular chore on the list. Since the point of the party was to let international students see a traditional, American Christmas, I'd have to do more than play carols and serve holiday cookies. The thought of lugging out all the boxes of lights and decorations, then actually doing something with it all, depressed me.

That Friday at the weekly student dinner, Myra announced that the Christmas party would be at my house. Now the thing was set in stone. I felt guilty for my lack of enthusiasm when I saw the kids' faces light up and student after student made a point of thanking me.

"I appreciate you hosting the party," Nariko said. "I haven't been home to Japan in two years. Most people leave campus over the winter break, so I'm happy for something special to do."

Ronaldo shook my hand. "My parents will be thrilled that I have a Christmas party to go to. They hated for me to not be in Argentina with family."

Aisha seemed especially excited and her dark eyes shone.

"Christmas is the biggest celebration in Nigeria. I was sad to miss it, but I'll cook some traditional food to share at the party."

Her offer to cook gave me an inspiration and I made an

announcement to the students before they left.

"It would be fun to learn about traditions and foods from everyone's home country at the Christmas party. If you can, please bring a dish to share."

Myra came up to me shortly afterward and said with a wink, "How like a man to find a way out of a task. No Christmas cooking and baking for you now."

I grinned. "I've always said, 'why do something if you can get a student to do it for you?'"

She rolled her eyes at me, but she had an understanding smile on her face. "I actually think that's a good idea for the students to bring food. It's a great way for everyone to learn more about where the others come from."

"Besides, can you seriously imagine *me* doing Christmas baking?" I asked.

Myra leaned toward me and lowered her voice. "You want to know my secret?"

I nodded.

"Refrigerated sugar cookies and Christmas sprinkles."

I looked askance at her. "*You?* You're a good cook. I can't imagine you resorting to culinary subterfuge."

She shrugged. "With all there is to do over the holidays, *everyone* takes short cuts."

The next weekend I faced the fact that I needed to decorate. At our home on Long Island, Holly had handled everything inside. I always put up the lights outside. So I decided to start with what I knew. Hauling all the Christmas boxes out, I separated out the ones containing lights.

I won't go overboard like some years when my neighbor across the street and I tried to outdo one another, I thought. *Just a few lights so the house looks welcoming.*

In typical, unpredictable Wyoming fashion, the weather had turned warm again. It was a toasty sixty-five degrees out and the wind wasn't blowing, for a change. One thing I'd quickly discovered about my high-plains home is how hot the sun is because of the thin atmosphere. So wearing only my T-shirt and jeans, I began stringing lights.

When I felt hungry, I glanced at my watch, surprised to see it was 59

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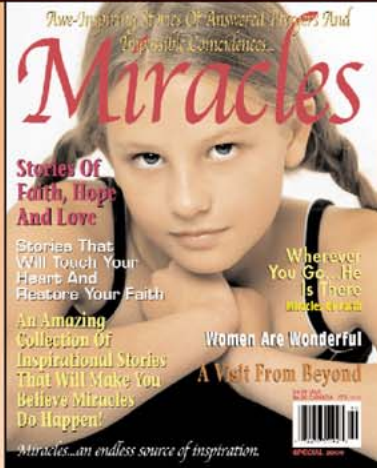
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already one o'clock. Although I'd put out a lot more lights than I'd intended to, I still had plenty left. My Laramie house is much smaller than the one in New York.

After making a ham and cheese sandwich, I plopped down on my couch to eat. The sight of a bland room and bare walls punctured the contented feeling I'd had when I came inside. I hadn't gotten around to unpacking artwork and knick-knacks yet.

Holly filled the house with cutesy snowmen, nutcrackers, and angels at Christmas. I just couldn't see myself arranging a little snow-covered village scene on the mantel. Truth be told, the thought of putting out all the special holiday ornaments Holly had collected over the years seemed like more than I could handle.

Lights look good outside, I reasoned. Why not inside, too?

I spent the rest of the afternoon assembling the artificial tree and covering it with masses of multicolored lights. Then I strung white lights across the fireplace, and the wall of built-in bookshelves. More lights draped from the other walls and across the doorways. When I finished, the entire room glowed warmly with tiny, white lights. The tree blazed with moving, twinkling dots of color.

There wasn't any room for the traditional decorations that normally covered every surface at this time of year. It wasn't Holly's style. She would've said I'd gone overboard on the lights, but I liked it. I thought about putting ornaments on the tree at least, but just opening a box and seeing each one lovingly wrapped in tissue by Holly's hand stopped me. There are other years for that.

The satisfaction from getting another chore done remained with me until the next day, when I went to mark *decorating* off the list. Staring me in the face was something I'd totally forgotten about: Christmas cards.

I was in the middle of finals. There was no way in the world I could go buy cards, write in each one, address each one, and get them mailed in time for Christmas—but there were *lots* of people on our mailing list who didn't even know I'd moved. I had to do something.

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Just when I thought I wasn't doing too badly with the whole Christmas duty, I'd smacked up against a wall of too much to do and too little time. I sulked about it for a while, until one of my students inadvertently solved my dilemma. Scrolling through email to take my mind off all I had to do, I opened an online card from a former student.

A dancing elf sang, "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" across my computer screen. The student had added a note saying she hoped I was enjoying my new school. Brilliant! Once again the Internet saved Christmas. It took a little longer than shopping had, but I figured out how to send cards with a brief message listing my new address and explaining that Kylie was at school in New Zealand.

Now all I have left to do is host a party. Ugh!

Thankfully, Myra came to my rescue.

"I felt guilty about leaving everything up to you," she said when she showed up at my front door. "I cooked some things ahead. That

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way you don't have to worry about food for the party."

She and Aaron came inside with a dozen plastic containers. Some held homemade cookies and others held dips and appetizers.

"College kids *love* to eat," Aaron explained as they filled up my counters and freezer.

"I was baking things to take to Colorado anyway," Myra explained. "I just made extra. We're leaving in the morning, but all this should be fine until the party."

"You saved those poor students," I said as I opened lids and looked at all the goodies inside. "I'd planned on bakery cookies, chips, and dip."

"I'll bet you'll be surprised at how much food the kids bring," Myra said.

"Many love to cook because they miss food they were used to getting at home," Aaron added.

Since I didn't have to worry about food, I got a little restless on the day of the party. It's not much fun to wake up alone on Christmas morning. I ate breakfast and opened the presents that had been mailed to me. Kylie sent me a T-shirt decorated with a Kiwi and a Merino wool hat. When I got tired of flipping through channels on TV, I stood at the window and looked out at a sparkling, snow-covered world. Once again, the weather had changed.

Currier and Ives couldn't have painted a prettier Christmas scene. I was antsy to do something and I remembered that when I'd been hauling out all the Christmas boxes, I'd run across a couple of those inflatable lawn decorations. One was a large, vinyl snow globe with a penguin inside it, wearing an elf hat. The fan that kept it inflated caused "snow" to swirl around inside. The other was a seven-foot tall snowman.

I decided to put them outside by the front door. Grabbing an extension cord to run the fan and lights, I took out the snow globe and then went inside get the other one. The snowman lay across the living room like a punctured hot air balloon.

I plugged it in and turned on the fan to make sure it hadn't sprung any leaks during the move. It seemed animated once it was inflated, with a whimsical face and out-

stretched arms that moved gently from the fan.

It bobbed at me as I left the room to look for another extension cord. Unfortunately, I'd run out since I'd covered the house with lights inside and out. No store would be open on Christmas day, but I hated to deflate the jolly snowman and take him down. I decided to leave him "dancing" in the corner of my living room.

I went outside and inflated the globe. After I got it up and running, I walked out to the street to admire my handiwork. The house looked festive, the snowman showing through the plate glass window.

The kids should like it, I thought as I turned to go inside.

A faint sound stopped me in my tracks. I looked around. A soft mewling came from a hedge bordering the sidewalk. Getting down on my hands and knees in the snow, I peered under the bush. A pair of green eyes stared back. I reached in and pulled out a scared ball of fluff.

The tiny kitten fit in the palm of my hand. It cried a heart wrenching little bleating sound and looked like a snowball with an open, pink mouth. Looking around, I wondered where it had come from. The neighbors on either side of me were gone for the holiday. In fact, the whole street looked deserted. I had the sinking feeling someone had just dumped the poor animal at the only house with lights on.

I looked at it for a moment, not knowing what to do. I couldn't leave the poor thing. It would freeze to death and it was nudging my hand as if to find food. I took it inside and rummaged through the cabinets until I found a can of tuna, hoping it was old enough to eat solid food. It wolfed down the little bit of fish I gave it in nothing flat.

I didn't want to make it sick, so I put the rest away for later and gave the kitten some water, which it lapped daintily. Once it finished, it seemed to remember it was in a new place. Puffed up like a dandelion, it backed into a corner, big eyes looking around. It let me pick it up and I sat with it in my lap. After a few minutes, it relaxed and purred loudly as I stroked it.

The snowman and the kitten were huge hits that evening during the party.

"Cool decorations," Ivan said as he came in. "I didn't know those balloon things could go inside."

"Who's your friend, Dr. T?" Nariko asked, looking at the cat. "She looks like a snowball."

The name stuck. Snowball had gotten over her earlier fear and seemed to enjoy being passed from person to person. Each student arrived carrying food to share.

True to her word, Aisha brought not one dish but several. One was a traditional Nigerian Ebó, made of manioc flour and eaten with pep-pery, stewed vegetables. She also made moin-moin, a mixture of meats, beans, and prawns steamed in large leaves. Delicious.

Nariko was proud of the first Christmas cake she had ever made. A Japanese tradition, it is a sweet sponge cake with waves of frosting covered with miniature figures of trees and Santa Claus. Emma brought an English Christmas pudding and Johann shared some marzipan his mother sent from Germany. The red ribbon on the box went around Snowball's neck.

Emma also brought English Christmas crackers. They are crepe paper covered tubes that make a loud pop when you pull on the ends. Inside are small trinkets. Everyone had fun popping them and it got the other students telling about special traditions where they live.

"In Bavaria, where I grew up," Johann explained, "we have something called Klopfnachten, or Knocking Nights. Masked children go through the neighborhood, clanging cowbells and banging lids. They knock on doors and recite a rhyme and the neighbors give them candy and coins."

"Sounds like our Halloween," I said.

Johann agreed, "But the Germans in Berchtesgaden celebrate Christmas Eve unlike anywhere else. The Christmas Shooting Club fires off rounds of shot into the sky right before midnight. They've been doing it for over three hundred years. Immediately afterward, the church bells ring and Midnight Mass begins."

"In Sweden, St. Lucia's Day on December thirteenth is the big Christian celebration which begins

Christmas,” Britta told everyone. “Because I am the eldest girl in my family, I get to wear a white dress with a red sash, and a crown of leaves and candles on my head. St. Lucia’s head was encircled in light when she brought food during a terrible famine. Wearing a crown of candles symbolizes light overcoming darkness. This year my little sister gets to do it. She is so excited.”

One of the young men, who was normally quiet, spoke up. “At Christmas in Ukraine we clean the house from top to bottom, except for spider webs.”

The others smiled at this. Ivan reached into his pocket and pulled something out.

“Spiders and their webs are considered good luck, because of the legend of a poor widow. She had no money for gifts for her children or to decorate the tree so it would be pretty when the Christ child visited. They were sad when they went to bed on Christmas Eve, but during the night a spider covered the little tree in a web. It sparkled in the early morning light and was very beautiful. Now every house must have a spider in their Christmas tree for good luck.”

Ivan crossed to the Christmas tree and put an ornament that looked like a spider among the branches. Made out of gold pipe cleaners and a Christmas ball, it glittered prettily, the only decoration among so many lights.

As everyone admired the ornament, I looked at the students gathered in my living room and took a moment to appreciate that feeling of being connected to the world that I so enjoyed in New York. I was doing something special for young people from around the globe here in my own home. Why had I dreaded hosting this party?

After a few minutes, the talk turned to cultures that celebrate Christmas with fireworks such as Argentina and Nigeria. We marveled at the descriptions and legends from countries, where people paraded around in masks like the dancing Mmo in Nigeria, the Rahnacte custom in Germany, and the Malanka in Ukraine, an end of year revelry symbolizing the defeat of evil by good.

Finally, Ivan mentioned that

although sharing traditions was fun, it’s important to remember the real reason for celebrating Christmas. The others agreed and decided to end the evening with another German tradition and have Johann read the story of Christ’s birth.

The students were effusive in thanking me for hosting the party as they left. I thought I probably enjoyed it even more than they had. Each one gave Snowball a final pat.

After everyone had gone and I had picked up a little, I glanced at the clock. It was time to talk to Kylie.

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She’d insisted I call after the party to tell her how it went. I was surprised when the call went through and the webcam worked well. Sometimes it was temperamental, so we only talked without being able to see one another.

“Merry Christmas, sweetheart.”

“Merry Christmas, Dad. Even though that was yesterday.”

Being able to see my daughter’s pretty face felt like an extra-special Christmas gift. She looked so happy, especially when I showed her the kitten.

“She is so sweet! Are you going to keep her?”

I could hear the longing in her voice.

“If I don’t find her owner, I will.”

Kylie squealed. “I’ve always want-

ed a kitten.”

After we’d talked about the cat, she said, “Tell me all about the party. Did you have fun?”

“You know . . . I did. I really did. About a dozen kids came and we had such a good time. They didn’t leave until almost midnight.”

I told her about the whole evening, and then asked her about her day.

“We went to church and then watched a Santa parade. There were floats, bands, and marching girls.” She laughed and added, “Then we went to the beach and had a barbecue. It’s the middle of summer, you know.”

“It’s probably easier to get into the spirit of Christmas in snow-covered Wyoming.”

She agreed, but said opening presents helped.

“Oh, and Dad, I *loved* my movie night in a box! My friends can’t wait to watch the first one. I thought we should start with *It’s a Wonderful Life*.”

We talked for a bit longer before hanging up. As I crawled into bed, tired but happy, I picked up the picture of Holly that sat on the nightstand. I didn’t make a habit of talking out loud to her, but that time it felt right.

“You’d have been pleased, honey. I got through Christmas on my own.”

I paused for a moment, thinking of how well things I’d been dreading actually turned out.

“I take that back. Your lists helped me get through Christmas.”

I smiled; knowing my admitting such a thing would have made my wife laugh.

“Actually, I didn’t get through Christmas alone. I think you’ve been here in spirit helping me all along.” I looked at Snowball curled up beside me and the house didn’t feel so lonely.

“I was afraid everything about Christmas would remind me of you and make me sad. Well, it did remind me of you and make me miss you, but I also felt close to you. I think I understand now why you loved this holiday so much. It’s hard to feel sorry for yourself when you’re doing something nice for someone else.”

I kissed her sweet face. “Thank you, Holly. Merry Christmas.” ■



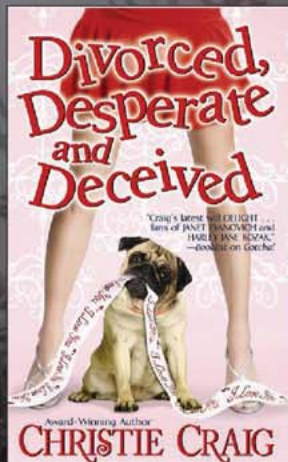
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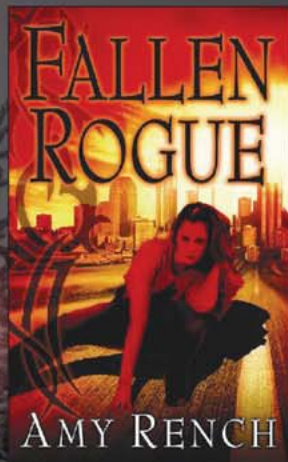
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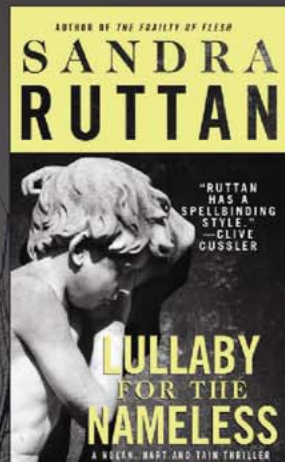
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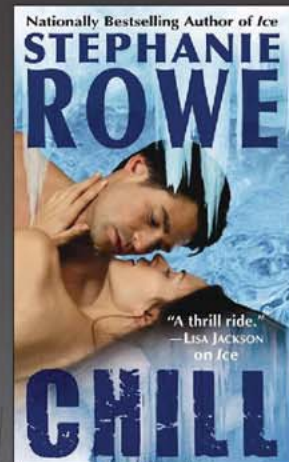
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