

*Just
One
Wish*

*Holiday Stories from
The Roses of Prose*

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Smashwords Edition

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A Tropical Holiday

by [Brenda Whiteside](#)

She had just one wish for the holidays. Peace. Not the world kind of peace. Inner peace. Yuma Camry needed to forget the divorce from a lifeless marriage, to find herself once again. Wow, did that sound corny. But it was the truth, damn it.

No sun and a cold beach breeze drove her off the sands at her hotel. Now, sitting at the back of a guided tour bus, she rested her forehead against the window, breathing the cool outside air seeping in around the window seal and trying to avoid the combined breath wafting from the gabby couple in the seat in front of her. It was obvious they'd recently enjoyed the local specialty, salsa rich with cilantro and onions. A fish in an oxygen-deprived aquarium would have more fresh air. She sighed and glanced out the window at thick green foliage of trees, bushes, and vines whizzing by.

Her sister, Setty, hadn't exactly cheered her on when she'd announced her vacation plans. Well-meaning-still-married Setty told her that a trip to Cancun, Mexico, solo, might be rash, yet she hadn't tried to talk her out of her one-person holiday. In fact, Yuma thought her sister envied her a bit, taking off by herself. It was romantic. There's romantic and there's romance. Yuma had insisted reflection was her goal, not romance. Setty had given her that oh-sure-whatever-you-say smile. It didn't do any good to argue with her sister who believed all the important things in life like sex, kids, mowed lawns, and a well-tuned auto required a man. She didn't need what Setty needed.

But...if a little romance came her way, a slight distraction from reflection, then that would be fine.

The bus slowed as it traveled along the main street of a small town. Franco, the tour guide, gave a running commentary on village life in Mexico. They picked up speed, and a few moments later approached the entrance to the Mayan ruins of Tulum.

Yuma looked at the backs of the heads of her fellow tourists. And they came in twos; old couples, young couples, a gay couple, and two elderly English ladies who kept asking the guide personal questions and turning around to smile at Yuma every few miles. The empty seat beside her became a neon sign announcing *this woman in her forties is alone*. Well, she was just very twenty-first century traveling without a companion.

Although, it would've been okay to see someone else sightseeing alone, someone that would perhaps have found her interesting enough to chance a...friendship.

But no single, middle-aged, American professor existed who specialized in Mayan history and would ask her to his room after the tour to share a bottle of wine; who would find her irresistible long into the night and serve her breakfast at dawn.

"You will enjoy the tour, even if Mexico is unreasonably cold." Franco laughed heartily at his play on words as the bus pulled into the parking lot. Day two in sunny Mexico remained chilly and cloudy, exactly like day one. Guaranteed warmth should've accompanied the high price of a holiday vacation.

Hugging her jean jacket to her, Yuma stepped off the bus and into the arms of the two English ladies, one on each side, looping their arms around hers.

"Hello, dearie. We saw you were alone and thought you should chum with us. I'm Maureen." Maureen looked over rectangular gold-framed glasses perched on a nose not quite in the middle of her face. Bright hazel eyes smiled under fluttering white lashes. The warmth of her bony fingers penetrated the jean jacket covering Yuma's arm. "This is my baby sister, Helen."

Helen tugged slightly on her, forcing Yuma to shift her attention to the plumper face of the baby sister. Faded blue eyes stared up while a whiskered upper lip curled in a smile, reminding Yuma of a baby seal in a Disney movie she'd taken her niece to see. Helen patted her arm. "We single birds have to stick together."

Although she'd have preferred to continue the tour alone with her thoughts, Yuma couldn't manage to disengage from the sisters. Resigned, she joined the single birds and followed Franco around the grounds of Tulum, learning bits of Mayan history sprinkled with tour guide humor, the best of which amused Yuma and eluded the English sisterhood. They stayed at the front of the group for Helen's sake, partly deaf in her left ear, according to Maureen, thanks to a bloody kick to the head from a mongrel cousin when she was four.

“Have you been single long?” baby sister Helen asked when the tour concluded for lunch. “You leave him or did he leave you for a younger woman?”

“Helen! Don’t be so nosey!”

Helen’s seal lips pouted, and her round eyes grew watery. “I only meant to make conversation, Miss Bossy. You came up with the younger woman scenario anyway.” She took a huge triumphant bite out of her cheese sandwich.

“Well!” Maureen turned to Yuma. “Sorry, dearie, but...”

“No need.” Yuma waved off the explanation. “I think I wear divorced like a badge. Or maybe a scary mask.”

“Oh, nonsense,” Maureen said. “A sweet, young thing like you? There must be all sorts of opportunity for romance.”

Yuma smiled at the sweet, young thing description. “I don’t really care about romance.”

“Romance is highly overrated.” Helen nodded, mouth full of sandwich, hurt feelings apparently forgotten. “In this day and age you can get more than romance if you aren’t careful.”

Maureen clucked her tongue and gave her sister a scornful look.

Yuma knew a middle-aged redhead in the commercial loan department at work who would agree with Helen. She would’ve preferred to bring back a case of pineapples from Hawaii rather than her case of herpes. But Helen needn’t worry. This Mexican vacation, solo style, was not a desperation samba. Yuma needed some time alone, that was all.

Still, it would’ve been okay if yesterday, walking the streets of old Cancun, shopping the Mercado, and eating lunch on the patio of a restaurant under cloudy skies, she’d met someone. But no young Don Juan had plied her with tequila and seduced her into getting a tattoo on her hip while caressing her cheek and murmuring what a fascinating creature she was.

“No more romance for you, Helen?” Yuma crumpled her napkin and stuffed it into her empty paper cup. The notion of romance finding Helen seemed more remote than the idea that Helen could even know what dangers lurked in a careless flirtatious union.

“Oh, if it were true romance, I wouldn’t walk away from it.” She scrubbed mayonnaise from her whiskers. “I’ve had my share though, dearie. It’s Maureen here that’s always on the lookout for a man, the marrying kind.”

“Helen, really!” Maureen stood and carried her lunch container to the trashcan.

More composed when she returned to the table, she didn't sit down again. "You'll have to excuse my sister. She has no sense of propriety." She looked down over her glasses and gave her sister an obviously long-practiced scowl, a speechless language understood between siblings.

"I think they're loading the bus." Yuma stood and tossed her lunch remnants into the trashcan. "Thanks for the company. Enjoy your holiday." Walking away from the sisters, she was glad Franco had instructed everyone to return to their same seats. Chumming with Helen could be amusing, but Maureen – not so much.

Yuma was the fifth one back in her seat. The gay couple quietly bickered, sitting as far apart as the bus seating would allow. Gabby couple clumped together, silently. Mr. had his head back and his eyes closed, rubbing his bulbous abdomen. It wasn't that she needed someone in her life. She'd proved that when she walked away from a twenty-year marriage. She certainly did not need the arguing or the nursemaid duties all men seemed to require. No, that was unfair. She'd had one marriage, one man. Maybe they didn't all need nursemaids. Mrs. Gabby Couple opened a package of antacid tablets, took out two, and placed them on Mr.'s extended tongue.

It's always easier to figure out what you don't need. The trick is figuring out what you do need. So what did she need in her life?

Maybe all husbands weren't selfish, unimaginative, reticent and clueless. She was hard pressed to think of any of the men she knew who weren't. Leaning her head back, she stared at the ceiling. Maybe Dr. Tanner, her optometrist. Or Carl in accounting. Not knowing either one on a personal level, she could imagine them to be different from the husbands she actually knew. Could Dr. Tanner look into his wife's eyes without checking for glaucoma? Could he see the soul without seeing the iris?

What exactly did she expect from this trip? Turning her head, she looked out at gray skies and sighed. She expected to get some damn sun in Mexico and lie on the beach in the bright yellow two-piece swimsuit that cost too much. Then again, if some younger-than-she-was hunk happened to notice her and find her attractive, she'd be like Helen and not walk, or swim, away from him. She closed her eyes and rested her head against the window. A little sun, a little adventure, a little...

"Do you mind?" A deep voice asked as he settled into the seat beside her.

"Oh...no, go ahead." Yuma turned her face toward the warm drawl in time to see the back of his head as he bent over to stow a backpack under the seat. The empty seat beside her

suddenly overflowed with warmth. His amber colored hair covered his neck and brushed at the shoulders covered in a waffle-weave shirt.

“Man, am I glad there’s an empty seat.” Straightening he smiled, raking his hand through his hair. Yuma wished her hair would fall in such full waves around her face. “I missed my tour bus back.” He scratched the beginnings of a beard then stroked downward as if to smooth it into place. “Hi. I’m Eirik.” He offered his hand.

“Yuma.” Eirik’s firm handshake warmed her, his skin just rough enough to prove he had no fear of manual labor.

“Great name! Very visual.” His smile brightened the gray day. “And I’ll bet there’s a story behind it.”

“Of sorts.”

“Come on.” He turned slightly toward her and pushed broad shoulders against the bus seat as if settling into an overstuffed chair. “Tell me a story.”

“I was conceived in a rest stop outside Yuma, Arizona,” she blurted without a second thought. “In my parents’ younger days, they traveled around a bit in a VW bus.”

“Wow.” He thumped his chest with his fist. “That’s a great story. It has lust, adventure, romance and love all compacted into two sentences.”

What was this little flutter Yuma felt in her chest? His description sounded exactly the way she had always felt about her beginnings into this world. She stared into eyes, the same amber color as his hair. Although he had to be at least ten years her junior, his eyes were ageless, old and knowing, youthful and laughing. Her heart overrode her head with the notion she’d known these eyes forever.

“What about Eirik? Is there a story behind your name?”

“It’s a Norse name.” He laughed. “That creates a picture, doesn’t it? But the only story is the one I’m creating.” He looked around her and out the window. The bus pulled away from the parking lot. “Tulum was great. So many revenants standing guard on their history, overlooking the sea.”

“You believe in ghosts?”

His gaze swept her face. He traced her lips, looked at each of her eyes. A slow smile blanketed his face. “You do, too.”

Maybe she did. She had never considered the subject beyond the Hollywood movie, rattling chain kind. Why hadn't she looked among the broken stones to see the ghosts of Tulum?

"Tulum." He rested his head against the top of the seat and stared into the air above them. "A visual. Large transparent circle with a solid tower rising out of it in a swoop, spreading at the top and disappearing from sight."

Yuma stared at him while he drew the vision with his hands. She smelled the dust of the ruins, and a warm woodsy scent rose from his skin. Gazing into the air he drew his vision from, she wondered what he'd been smoking.

"Words are great, aren't they? Some words evoke great shapes. Like Tulum."

"Shapes?"

"Yeah, some words take shape. For instance, mellow looks like a double camel's hump. Cracker is a little jagged point and then two larger jagged points and then a splintered line. Laughter is a round exploding circle with a dangling tail."

Yuma laughed. "I'm sorry." She laughed more. "You're a little crazy."

He laughed with her. "Yeah, but you're the only one who knows." He touched her arm. "Really, you're the only person I've ever told. Some words have shape. I *see* them."

His hand slid down her arm and back to his lap. Feathery ripples followed in the wake of his fingertips. Yuma thought his hand could've stayed on her arm longer.

He leaned in closer. "And some words have stories. Entire stories in one word. Like Yuma."

"Complete stories?" She breathed deeply, inhaling his scent. Her peripheral vision closed to a pinpoint filled with Eirik's face and the amber color of his hair.

"Not always. Stories in the works. Stories unfolding."

"So the story of Yuma is still unfolding?"

"I think there are whole blank pages to fill." He laughed again. "How inventive did your parents get with your siblings names?"

"I have one sister we call Setty, short for Settled."

"Oh, poor Setty." He chuckled.

"Yes, well, she is their testament to giving up the bus and finding roots."

"And does Setty live up to her name?"

“Rooted.” Her sister had always been the straight and narrow, stay at home kind. “Do you think it was pre-destination?”

“How can we say?”

Eirik reached under his seat and pulled a bottle of water from his pack. “Drink?”

“No thanks.”

His lips were wet and glistening as he replaced the cap. A small water drop hung from the corner of his mouth, and she imagined wiping the droplet with her finger, feeling the wet softness. He brushed his fingertips across his lips and winked at her before turning his attention to the tops of the ruins peeking above the trees. Yuma wondered if he read her mind. Her face flushed warm as the two English sisters peered at her from the front of the bus. She couldn't hear what Franco said; the blood rushing to her head was too noisy. Or was that the engine of the bus coming to life?

The bus bumped onto the main road.

“That was great!” Eirik said.

They turned toward the window to get one last look at the ruins before a thick leafy barricade blocked the vision.

He smiled, nodding his head as if bidding farewell to unseen friends. “Silent to all but those who hear.” Reaching under his seat he replaced the water bottle in his backpack.

“And what do you hear?” Yuma asked.

“I could say the lives of those before me, but I think it's more my own inner voice ricocheting off the generations.” He shook his head, and she wanted to touch his hair. “Yuma, you make me say things I say to no one else. Are you a witch?”

“I could be a witch.” Witch and bewitching. *This young man with exotic ideas thinks I'm a witch.* Could she weave a lusty spell? She wondered what shape he would give to lust.

“I think you are. You know me, and we've only just met. It's difficult to get past the lust and see it, but I'm sure we know each other quite well.”

The witch was an amber-haired man who read minds. “Lust?”

“Lust for life. People who travel alone, especially during the holidays, are adventure seekers, overcome with too much lust to share their road with less romantic souls.”

What if a like romantic soul came along? Could you know someone in a half dozen sentences, have doors open that you had been banging on for years then put to words your vague

ideas? Yuma stared into his serious ageless eyes. Romance and romantic. Love and lust. Words with shapes. Now that she understood there were blank pages of her life, it would be easy to write. Easier than erasing – which was what she had been attempting to do. Lust for life.

“Where are you, Yuma?”

“I’m...thinking.” She’d lost her lust somewhere. “The shape of –”

“Lust?” He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. “An opaque bubble, opaque because it’s filled with white smoke.” He opened one eye like a very young, cute Popeye and smiled. “Go ahead. Try to see it.”

Yuma leaned her head back and closed her eyes. A gigantic bubble floated overhead, the white smoke swirling inside. It fit. She stepped gently into the smoke. When the bus slowed and came to a stop, her eyes remained shut and her hearing deaf to Franco’s words. She felt Eirik stir beside her then his mouth against her ear.

“Goodbye, Yuma.”

He stood and nodded toward the window. She looked out to a bus stop on the main street of a busy Mexican village. As she opened her mouth to question, he appeared outside below the window. The bus groaned as the driver shifted to pull away from the stop. Eirik made writing motions in the air, and she read his lips, “keep writing.” Blowing her a kiss and waving, he disappeared in a faint cloud of dust as the bus pulled away.

The bus hit a larger than ever rut in the road. Yuma’s head bounced twice off the window.

“Damn!” She laughed out loud and looked around. Half of the gay couple had fallen from his perch on the edge of the seat. The English single birds were clutching each other. Yuma turned back to the scene out her window, but it had changed. She craned her neck to see the bus stop. No bus stop. No Eirik. Even the village had vanished.

She sighed, a bit disoriented, gazing out the window as the bus picked up speed taking her back to the resort. A flash of metal danced across the chrome on the back of the seat in front of her; the sun broke free from the clouds for the first time since she’d landed in Mexico.

~ * ~

The sunlight soaked her with warmth when she descended the steps to the white, silky sands of the beach. She wore the yellow swimsuit she paid too much for but clutched the oversized towel around her against the chill of the ocean breeze. Sunbathers were sparse and a

choice of lounge chairs available. Choosing one facing the aqua waves, she sat on the edge, huddled under the towel and listened for revenants floating on the ocean breezes. If Eirik were beside her... she closed her eyes and pictured the word ocean.

“You won’t get much sun like that, but you’re probably warmer than I am.”

She opened her eyes to the voice. A man about her age, golden hair reflecting rays of sun, had reclined on the lounge beside her.

“The sun is luscious, but the air is still a bit chilly for me.” She smiled and shivered as a draft of salty air tickled her exposed calves.

In spite of his relaxed position, goose bumps prickled his muscled arms. “Yeah, I kind of had a warm beach vacation in mind myself. Then again, this beats the snow I left behind in Minneapolis. White sand trumps white snow for me this holiday.” He laughed. “You took the Tulum tour this morning, didn’t you?”

“I did. How did you know?”

“I saw you get on the bus.” His hands fidgeted on the arms of the lounge. “Are you alone?”

“Yep, that’s me. Alone.” And she didn’t mind at all.

“So am I.” His blue eyes sparkled like the sun on the ocean. “We’re fellow adventure seekers.”

Her heart thumped. “Funny you say that.” She swung her legs around to the side to face him.

“Why?”

“Someone called me that earlier today.” Under the towel she pinched herself. Ouch. “I’m of the mind that adventure seekers have a strong lust for life.”

“And funny you should say that.”

“Why?”

“Someone used those same words to me earlier today.” He heaved his bronze shoulders off the lounge and sat on the edge, his knees coming into contact with hers. “Do you believe in coincidence?”

“No.” She stared into his face. Moments passed. A seagull sang overhead. A woman called to her daughter who’d gone too close to the water.

“Would you like to take a walk, see what the breeze blows our way?”

“Yes.” She stood, unfurled one of her arms and smiled. “I think it’s actually warming up.”

His glance registered the yellow swimsuit, and she was happy she’d paid too much. He stood, stepped closer and his eyes looked inside her. “My name is Egill.”

“Egill? Is that...Norse?”

“How did you know?” A seagull repeated his call overhead.

She laughed. “Oh, lucky guess.” She glanced at the gull, floating on the air current overhead. Or riding on the shoulders of a revenant. “My name is Yuma.”

“As unusual a name as mine. I bet your name has a story behind it.”

They strolled away from the loungers. “Of sorts. But if I tell you, you’ll have to help me fill some blank pages of my story.”

“I can do that.”

#####

A Very Special Holiday

by [Barbara Edwards](#)

She had just one wish for the holidays. Annabelle Wilson wanted to spend the day alone. Shifting her weight, she slipped her aching foot from her shoe and wiggled her toes. After wiping her hands on her apron, she finished filling the last box of chocolates. Her fingers trembled with fatigue. After the overwhelming pressure of the past few months she needed a break.

The gilded sign announcing Belle's Best Candy gleamed in the light from the street. The bell over the door jingled as her favorite customer entered. Matt Stone's grin warmed her more than was warranted by his casual greeting. He stopped everyday on the way to the nearby fire station for his work shift, and she looked forward to his version of eye candy.

"Taking tomorrow off? I'll miss my daily dose of sweetness," Matt said. His clear blue eyes gleamed with humor. Belle looked at the way his lips curved and wondered if they would taste like his favorite chocolate. Her heart skipped like an excited child. She taped shut the full box of hand-made chocolates and handed them to her most frequent customer with a wry smile.

"First time since I opened in October." She shrugged. "My entire family is getting together for Christmas dinner."

A Southern California tremor rattled the glass shelves. A shiver raced up her spine. She flattened her hands on the counter, and his warm fingers covered hers.

"Don't be afraid." His voice was bedroom husky, and a fleeting picture of him whispering against her skin sent a different kind of shiver over her skin.

"You'd think I'd be used to them after all these years." Belle sighed as her gaze wandered over his tall frame. He was a little over six foot tall, and her head would fit under that square chin when they danced. She stifled a longing sigh. Although lean, he had a muscular strength her female imagination wanted to test in a playful wrestling contest. Not for the first time she regretted the lack of time for more than a light flirtation.

"I never have," he soothed.

Her cell phone burred, and she answered with a cheerful, "Hi, Mom. Are you ready for

tomorrow?” Matt’s smile broadened when she identified her caller, and she swallowed before slipping her hand free. “I’m closing the shop in a few minutes. I won’t be late for church service. And I’m bringing a box of your favorites. Bye.” She disconnected.

Matt held his candy box close to his chest like a treasure. “I’m running behind. Will you be okay?” Usually her last customer of the day, he’d made it a habit to walk her to her car.

“I’m fine. I waited to close until you came.” She felt her cheeks heat. Her gaze met his, and her lips parted. He seemed to read her mind.

“Maybe we’ll see each other, do dinner, and make it a really special holiday.” His bright blue eyes twinkled as he bent to press a gentle kiss to her mouth.

“Why did you do that?” she whispered. He did taste of chocolate.

“An early Christmas gift? It was time.” He traced a finger over her heated cheek and smiled.

“Call me,” she whispered as she scribbled her phone number on the box top. Her lips felt swollen and tender. “Have a Merry Christmas.”

Closing took a few minutes. Another tremor rattled the glass shelves, and she prayed the repeated quakes didn’t damage anything. Belle’s Best Candy was her pride and joy-her baby.

Opening her candy shop before the Holidays had been an inspiration. First Halloween, then Thanksgiving had been busy. Her repeat customers grew by leaps and bounds, but the eighteen hour days had left her exhausted. After she waved good-bye to Matt, she flipped over the closed sign on the front door and checked her watch.

She’d promised to attend midnight services with her family, and she had exactly ten minutes to reach the church. After slipping her leather handbag straps over her shoulder, she ran her hand through her tousled hair. The glass in the door shivered as another tremor tickled the California landscape.

This time she barely noticed. She looked forward to a quiet hour with her family. Her parents thought she’d been working too many hours making candy and not enough with them. Thankfully the sidewalk was empty and the passing traffic light. Nearer the Mall, last minute sales had drawn crowds.

Next to her building, a four-story parking garage encouraged shoppers to visit the area. When Matt walked with her to a rear section designated for business owners they often chatted for a few minutes. Memories of his kiss lightened her tired spirits. Maybe she could heat up their

flirtation with a date. Her heels clipped on the concrete floor.

Another, stronger quake shook her car, and the alarm went off. Luckily she had the keys in her hand and quickly silenced the loud blare.

The thick concrete floor buckled upward. Dust filled the air as a deep rumble shook her.

A scream ripped from her throat as she was flung into the air.

Impressions strobed before her frightened gaze: the cracking ceiling bulged like a balloon; dirt fell in a hideous blinding blizzard; her car leaped like a goosed rabbit.

Deafening noise from the failing structure roared like an attacking beast.

She fell. Time slowed. Incredibly her mind raced. This couldn't be happening! Death reached out its cold hand, and she shrieked in her mind.

The hard cement smacked the air from her lungs. Her shoulder twisted to the side. Concrete ceiling chunks cascaded down. Pain exploded in her head, and everything went black.

What happened? She hurt all over. Belle opened her mouth to moan. Debris coated her tongue. The coppery taste of blood turned her stomach. She coughed and spit. The slight movement shot pain through her entire body.

Earthquake! There's been an earthquake and she was buried in the rubble. Her racing pulse sent blood pounding through her. Panic grabbed her by the throat, and she screamed. A loud creaking from overhead turned her shriek to a whimper. Gradually her pulse slowed. Matt's smiling face filled her mind. She remembered the touch of Matt's hand and his reassurance. "Don't be afraid."

Hiccupping a watery sigh, she relaxed. Matt. He'd been heading to the fire station down the street. A prayer for his safety quivered from her lips.

She eased her head from the floor and squinted into the dust-filled dark. There wasn't much she could see. Her nose was clogged, but she smelled oil and a trace of gasoline. Pain lanced up her neck. This time her groan escaped.

A broken laugh caught her by surprise. It looked like she had the bad luck to be in the wrong place when the big one had hit.

Inches of grit covered her hand. Slowly she became aware she still clutched her keys in her fist. Pressing her other hand to her cheek, she felt tears. She hadn't known she cried. Her arm was held fast, and she tried to pull free. It didn't budge.

For a horrifying moment she feared she was paralyzed. Panic grabbed at her, but this time she managed to keep control. She could feel every inch of her aching body. The entire parking garage must have come down. She was trapped under four stories of concrete. Shivers racked her chilled muscles. Thank goodness Matt hadn't walked her to her car.

How long would it take for someone to look for her? Had the quake been large enough to hit the church where her parents waited? Or the fire station where Matt worked as a fireman? Her thoughts scrambled like a rat on a wheel. She prayed everyone was unhurt, then snuck in a short plea for herself. Deafening creaks, bangs and clangs came from overhead, and she feared the entire place would fall.

The ground hitched under her like a caterpillar. Overhead the slabs shifted, the grating noise filling her ears as her fingers clawed for purchase.

When the motion halted, her clothes were soaked with sweat, and dust coated her wet face. Her heart stuttered with fear. Unless she fought free, she'd eventually be buried.

Time had taken on a weird elastic shape. There was no way to tell how long she'd been trapped. After a long moment, she wanted to slap her forehead. Her wristwatch. She eased her hand forward, keeping her grip on the keys. The tiny luminous numbers read twelve fifteen.

It was Christmas day.

Belle pressed her face to her forearm and cried. This wasn't what she meant when she wished to spend the day alone. She wished she'd agreed to Matt's invitation. Her heart ached with regret. He had to be safe. He was trained for all kinds of emergencies.

She pictured her family kneeling in church. Maybe they were trapped, too. Imagining she might never see her family again tore at her soul. She loved her parents, her irritating older brother and younger sister. All the in-laws and outlaws, too. If any of them had been hurt or worse, she'd never get over the grief.

After a long session of uncontrollable weeping, Belle sniffed and tried to remember if she had tissues in her handbag. Following the straps with her hand, she realized the strong leather was what held her arm in place. She slipped it free and traced the straps over the concrete pinning her bag. The bottom was crushed but she found a sample tissue wrapper, blew her nose and for some reason the homey action cleared her mind. Except for bruises and scrapes, she was unhurt. Maybe she could get out of here. Biting her lip, she pressed the car opener.

A tiny slit of light appeared at floor level to her right and the horn honked. The little

vehicle had somehow been undamaged. She blinked as her eyes adjusted. A concrete slab had come down between her and her car. When she stretched out her arm to the left, her fingers banged against another rough surface. She could barely make out the jagged edge of broken cement and steel rebar posed overhead.

More shivers wracked her body. If that piece fell, she'd be a goner. She'd never get the chance to kiss Matt again or go on that dinner date. Longing to see him welled from deep inside, bringing determination with it. Her hands fisted.

That lighted slit didn't offer a way out. She frowned. She couldn't wait for help. She had to find an escape.

She inched forward. Every muscle in her bruised body protested. A groan tore from her throat. Too bad her aspirin was in the crushed bottom of her bag. Pausing, she pawed through what she could reach. The crushed pieces of her cell phone scratched her fingers. Her Mom's box of chocolates spilled into her hand. She stuffed them into her pocket. Who knew how long she'd be in here.

The light automatically blinked off, and she licked her dry lips. What should she do? The battery might not last long, but honking the horn would alert rescuers to her exact location. Matt and the rest of his buddies were probably searching for trapped people as she crept forward.

Pressing the opener, she crept further. Rebar tangled in her hair, and she winced. Her clothes caught on the rough surface, and she jerked free. The light went off, and she repeated the light and honk again. The next hour dragged like her body through the tight space.

By crawling forward, she'd left the light behind. Her bruised fingers bumped into a wall, and she frantically felt around for an opening. Her heart stuttered. Solid cement blocked the way.

Okay, she'd try going back. Unable to turn in the narrow slot, she wiggled and squirmed until she returned to where her purse lay. Her body felt heavy. It must be daylight by now, but no-one had found her. Dirt had sifted under her clothes and irritated her skin. Her fingers were bleeding from a dozen cuts. Fatigue swamped her body and she longed to surrender.

A loud banging filled the air. For a second she wondered if the supports were failing.

"Belle? Annabelle? Can you hear me?"

"Matt? Matt? I'm here!" She shrieked with relief and pressed the opener. The horn blared.

"Stay still. I'll find you," he called. "I can see the car lights."

Belle pressed her hand to the cement. “But I’m not there,” she whispered.

“Matt!” she yelled despite her scratchy throat. I can’t reach the car.”

The silence was broken by the patter of dirt falling. A rumble followed by another threatening heave made her press to the floor. She crossed her arms over her head and prayed.

“Where are you?” Matt shouted.

“The headlights are near my head, a big slab of concrete to the right is between me and the car,” she gasped.

“Stay where you are,” he ordered. His commanding voice filled her with relief. He was a fireman. He knew what he was doing. The headlights went out but a powerful light flickered back and forth over the crack. “I’m looking for an opening.”

“Hey, If I could move, I’d be out of here,” she replied. The sudden surge of relief left her dizzy. Matt had come for her. And she planned to accept that dinner invitation. Her fingers curled in the silt and she pushed sideways so she could look the other way. A faint gleam appeared, and she realized there was a hole. With fierce determination, she managed to wiggle around. Her blouse tore with a ragged sound, and her shoulder scrapped painfully on the encroaching walls.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

“Just scratches and bruises.” She panted as she crept forward. “I can see your flashlight. There’s a hole.”

“Be careful. Don’t knock anything lose. The whole garage came down.”

Belle winced but didn’t ask about her store. It wasn’t as important as Matt’s safety.

“But you’re okay? Do you know about the rest of the city? The church? My parents?”

Her voice ended on a wobbly squeak.

“Hush. Hush. The quake is pretty localized. No reported loss of life. I helped rescue some others on the upper levels, but I told them I had to find you.”

“Can you see me?” Belle reached the opening and thrust her arm through. She started to cry. “It’s too small. I can’t get through.”

His warm hand closed around hers. “I’ve got you. Don’t be afraid.”

“I’m not. Not since you got here. I know it’s silly to feel safe, but that how you make me feel.”

Knowing he was so close sent hope rocketing through her. She tried twisting her shoulders sideways, but remained trapped.

“I should have gone on a diet,” she grumbled under her breath.

“Don’t be silly. You’re perfect the way you are.” Matt shook her hand gently. “I’ll get you out.”

“But how? That concrete is a foot thick.” She wondered if she sounded as frantic as she felt.

“I wish I could hold you. I know you’re anxious.” His fingers tightened. “Hang on. I have tools with me to chip away some of that block, and if that doesn’t work, the department has bigger ones. Are you thirsty?”

“Oh, yes,” she managed, suddenly aware her throat felt like a desert road. The light brightened. Her gaze moved over the jagged cement and twisted rebar as he fit a plastic bottle into her fingers.

“You need to keep hydrated. Drink that,” he instructed.

“Is it like the magic potion Alice drank? Will I shrink so I can get through that opening?”

“Don’t I wish. Then we could share a magic chocolate to return you to normal.” His familiar laugh wrapped around her like a cocoon, and she drank carefully. It wasn’t easy lying on her stomach. Water splashed down her chin. She dug in her pocket for a tissue and found the chocolate. The wrapped pieces were intact. She took a couple out.

“Matt? I have that magic chocolate here. Take one.” Although she was enclosed by the blocks, she managed to reach through the opening and handed him one of his favorites.

“What a girl! Just what I needed. Did you know your kiss tasted sweet?”

She heard the rustle of the wrapper and smiled. She bit into one and the flavor filled her mouth. The walls shook. Rumbling deafened her. Matt’s hand snagged hers, and she clutched him. A piece of rebar jabbed her in the back and she squirmed sideways. The slab was coming down.

Matt yanked on her arm as the world tilted.

She popped through the twisting hole like a raft over rapids. His powerful arms wrapped her in a protective embrace. When everything settled, she was sprawled over him.

“Don’t call me,” she whispered.

“Why not?” He gave her a quizzical stare.

His arms remained locked around her, and she pressed her face to his chest. The thick rubber protective clothes felt strange under her hands, but his familiar form reassured her.

“That number is no longer in service.” She sighed and gestured at the rubble. He laughed and kissed her. His mouth felt like home.

A long moment later he lifted his head. “Much as I’d like to continue, we need to get out of here.”

Belle nodded. He crept through a jungle of broken slabs, and she kept one hand on his thigh as she followed.

Her parents were waiting outside. She scrambled to her feet, but didn’t let go of Matt. Her heart filled with joy. Everyone she loved was safe. Her best wish had come true.

“Come and meet my parents. You’re invited to dinner. I’m not wasting another day wishing.”

#####

A Visit from Santa

by [Jena Galifany](#)

She had just one wish for the holidays. Each time someone asked her what she wanted, she felt foolish. It was something small, but she missed it so much it put a damper on her holiday spirit every December twenty-fifth. That was only a few days away, and she didn't know if she should tell Lou or be resigned to another disappointing Christmas morning.

At the age of twenty-four she thought she should be over childish things. Besides, there were more important things to worry about. Lou had been acting strange recently. He was preoccupied, even secretive, but not in a holiday surprise kind of way. He was hiding something, she was sure.

Fine. She accepted that he was developing other interests. She knew she was kidding herself about their relationship, especially after the things he'd been doing. When she arrived home early from work, she heard him talking on his cell.

"You know how important it is that she not find out about this. It'll ruin everything if she did, Kel."

Jayne stopped in the entry, unsure what she should do. Why was he talking to Kelsey? He didn't even like her, or so he'd said.

Lou had made negative comments about Kelsey while driving home after attending Thanksgiving at her spacious and completely white condo. She had white carpet, white walls, white draperies with white sheers, a white grand piano in a living room furnished with white sofas and wing-backed chairs beside the white brick fireplace. The only obvious color, beside Kelsey's creamy chocolate complexion, was the aurora borealis crystal chandelier which hung in the dining room, a priceless bauble acquired from husband number three.

Lou smirked on the drive home that night. "I thought I was in a blizzard. Her place is harsh on the eyes." He shook his head. "She's a man-user. She's wealthy but only because of several divorce settlements that worked in her favor. She's a gold digger, and marriage is only a

career move in her book. No commitment, only a business transaction.”

“I thought she was a friend of yours,” she commented as she stroked her hand over his where it rested on the gearshift.

“We had some business some months ago. She had me do an appraisal on the properties husband number four or five, I don’t remember which, owned. She was working up to a divorce and wanted to know what her fair share should be.” His dark eyes cut to her. “That’s how I know what kind of woman she is. I guess I did her a favor with the assessment. That’s why she invited us tonight.”

“I don’t think she liked me.”

Lou smiled and raised her hand to his lips to place a light kiss on her knuckles. “I like you and that’s all that matters.”

Jamie smiled. “I’m wondering what she’s doing with a grand piano. Does she know how to play it?”

“I think it’s for show. More than likely, she got it from one of her ‘business transactions’. Maybe you can get to be friends and you can teach her how. Who knows?”

She laughed. “I don’t think so. We don’t move in the same circles. I don’t think she’d care to learn, in any case.”

He pulled the car into the driveway and pressed the garage door opener. He pulled in and cut the motor as the door closed behind them. “I wonder if her bedroom looks as virginal as rest of the place?”

Jayne tried to ignore the comment but planned to do her best to make sure he forgot all about Kelsey and her ‘virginal’ condo.

He turned to her and pulled her toward him, his eyes communicating what was to come. “It’s her loss. All I care about is you.”

The kiss was long, deep, and raised her core temperature to near boiling in anticipation of what the night would bring. He caressed her cheek, and looked into her eyes. “It’s early. Let’s get in the hot tub and see what trouble we can get into.”

* * * *

Jayne thought back to that conversation. With a sinking feeling in her middle, she now wondered if Lou planned to find out the answer to his question, or perhaps he already had.

She pushed the thought from her mind, not wanting to jump to any conclusions or

suspicions that were unfounded. She had to deal with her own insecurity and low self-esteem issues without damaging her relationship with the man she loved, the man she hoped truly loved her.

It's not that he didn't show his affection. Sometimes he was over the top with the things he did for her. She'd dated men like that before, who went out of their way to pamper her only to keep her from knowing they were stepping out behind her back. Although she tried to leave the old baggage behind, sometimes it crept into her thoughts. She had to stop comparing Lou with those who'd hurt her before.

Lou was different, she was sure. He'd committed to live with her, moved them into a beautiful ranch-style home complete with pool, spa, walk-in closets, and a housekeeper during the week. He paid for it all, too, which was far different from the men she'd known in the past. Since she owned a successful graphic design business, she seemed to attract men who planned to reap the benefits from her hard work. Lou refused her offer to pay half from the beginning. They'd dated for just over a year before he offered to buy them a home to share.

"It's not that I don't want to marry you, Jayme," he'd explained as they walked through the house with the realtor. "I just want you to be sure I'm what you want before you need to make that decision. You truly won't know me until you live in the same house with me."

"If you want me to sleep with you, Lou, wouldn't it be cheaper to rent a hotel room?" She made the joke, surprised at his comment concerning marriage. The subject had never come up before and hadn't since.

"You can have your own room. I don't mind and I don't want you to do anything you're uncomfortable doing." He shared a bright smile, perfect teeth made whiter by the rich tan of his complexion.

Now, standing alone at a party where she was virtually unknown, she shook her head to clear the suspicions from her thoughts and carried her empty glass to the bar for a refill.

* * * *

"What happened to your wall unit?" Jayme was shocked when she walked in from work earlier that evening. What had he done with his most prized possession, his entertainment center? The large empty area was far from unnoticeable when she came into the living room. It appeared that half of the furniture was gone.

Lou shrugged as he lounged on the sofa, a drink in his hand. "It was taking up too much

room. I thought you'd be happy to see it gone." He frowned.

"Well," she hesitated. "What did you do with it? All of your music? The big screen? How will you watch your games?" She eyed the glass in his hand and wondered why he was drinking so early in the day.

He shrugged. "I'll watch at a friend's house. No problem."

Something had to be wrong. He lived for sports. Now only a lone sofa and a sparkling tree decorated the large living room. It looked bare and sounded hollow when she crossed the room, her heels clicking on the hardwood surface.

"Lou, are you moving out one item at a time?" Jayme hugged herself as she stood with her back to him. She braced herself for what she was sure was to come.

The long silence ended when his arms wrapped securely around her. His lips lightly brushed her ear. "I'm not moving out. Why would you think that?" He kissed her neck.

"Your closet suddenly seems to have more room, for one thing." Jayme had noticed the difference this morning when she put his laundry away and wondered what was going on. "And why else would your entertainment system be gone?"

He held her. "I had Elise take out the older clothes and donate them. Besides, don't you think it looks cleaner in my closet and in here now?"

"I'm not keeping the house uncluttered enough?" Jayme wrapped her arms over his to keep him close against her back. She blinked away the tears that threatened to fall.

"You keep things perfect, Babe. No worries." He turned her to look at him. "Why are you so insecure about us? Did I do something wrong?" He brushed a tear from her cheek.

The memory was driving her crazy and she had to ask. "Why were you talking to Kelsey? What should I not find out about?"

Lou froze for a moment, a long moment, too long of a moment. "I... I didn't want you to find out she called. I know you don't like her so I didn't want you to worry about me talking to her."

"What were you talking about? Why did she call? She doesn't have another husband yet. What did she need to talk to you about?" Jayme waited, searching his face as he obviously worked to formulate an answer. Before he could answer, she pulled from his grasp. "Unless she's expecting you to be number six or whatever number she's on."

Lou laughed. "Are you kidding?" He laughed again. "Like that would ever happen. I

don't make enough money for Kelsey to be remotely interested in me."

His comment didn't make her feel any better, and his laughter fueled her tension. Was she reading things into the situation that weren't there? "I don't know what to think. You're talking to the Black Widow. You hang up the phone when I come in. Now you move your things out. Do you see what I'm seeing, Lou?"

He dropped his hands to his sides and frowned. "No, I don't." He turned and left the room. Jayme watched him go, not knowing what to say. Had she just caused the damage she thought was already done?

"Lou?" She hurried to follow him to the room they'd shared for months. He pulled his shirt off and tossed it in the hamper. He kicked off his shoes, and sat on the foot of the bed before he looked up to where she stood in the bedroom door.

"I'm getting a shower and forgetting about this conversation. It's Christmas Eve and we have a party to go to. I won't let this kind of foolishness ruin our evening. There's nothing going on, Jayme. I love you, and I'd hoped that by now you'd know it. Just let it go, okay?"

That's where it had been left. They both showered and dressed separately. No words were exchanged. He avoided saying anything and Jayme was afraid to ask. Kelsey would be at the party tonight. Jayme would see how they reacted to each other. That would surely tell her something.

* * * *

In the ten minutes it had taken for them to drive to the hall, Lou had completely changed his countenance. He was smiling and happy, as if nothing had happened. Jayme felt like she'd been left out of some great adventure he was enjoying without her. She was afraid to be left out of his world but was unsure how to get back into it after the apparent foolish assumptions she'd made earlier.

At that moment, he reached for her hand and kissed her fingers. "I'm sorry for the things I've been doing that upset you. I promise I'm not doing anything you have to worry about." He cut his eyes to her as he pulled into a parking space. Once he'd killed the motor, he turned to her. "Can you forgive me for upsetting you? Especially on Christmas Eve? No one should be upset on Christmas Eve. Santa might not show up at our house."

"I don't want that to happen." Jayme gazed into his eyes. "Did I ever tell you what I really want for Christmas?"

Lou's mouth twitched and his lips curled ever so slightly. "No, but don't you think it's a bit late now? It's only four hours away." He toyed with her hand.

"I miss getting up in the morning and finding something under the tree that wasn't there the night before. I guess I miss Santa Claus." Jayme gave a nervous laugh, expecting him to laugh at her for her childish wish.

He didn't.

"I've never really thought about it but, yeah, I do, too. It's been a long time since he gave me what I really wanted." He pulled her across and lightly kissed her on the lips. "I'll see what I can do about that."

Jayme smiled. "You do that."

He sat back in the seat, his attention on the brightly decorated entrance to the hall. "So, do you forgive me?" He adjusted his jacket before turning to her again.

"How could I not. Lou, I do love you." She caressed his face.

"I love you, too, Jayme." He climbed out of the car, and came around to help her out. "I hope we both have a great time tonight. No worries, only fun. Got it?"

Jayme saluted. "Yes, sir."

"Good." He held out his arm to her and she hooked her arm through his as they strolled up the steps to the brilliantly lighted dining hall that spilled forth holiday music.

* * * *

Jayme sipped her drink as she stood at the side of the room, her attention focused on Lou. He talked with a gathering of fellow business associates, but his gaze kept drifting to Kelsey. He shared a smile with her when their eyes met, and then abruptly, his attention switched to Jayme as if he'd only just remembered she was there. He gave her his brightest smile and silently toasted her with a raise of his glass before taking a drink and turning back to his conversation. She returned his salute and emptied her glass. This party was not the happy diversion she'd thought it would be.

As she thought about him, watching him mingle with the others, she noted that his attention continued to stray to Kelsey. Sure Kelsey had a killer body, and she knew how to dress to attract but did Lou have to be so obvious about it? Shouldn't he be spending his time with Jayme? After all, they were a couple, weren't they? They'd been together over a year, but she hoped her earlier doubts didn't make him think the relationship was a mistake.

She wandered to the bar for a refill. Taking the refreshed drink from the bar tender, she turned to find Lou standing behind her. “There you are.” She smiled at him.

“Here I am.” He returned her smile. “Are you having a good time?” She smirked as he reached around her to set his empty glass on the bar for a refill. As the bar tender mixed him a new gin and juice, he wrapped one arm around Jayme. “I forgot my cell. I’m going to dash home to grab it. I don’t want to miss any calls, you know. Could be big business.”

“I’ll go with you.” Jayme set her glass down. Lou placed his hand around hers on the glass.

“No. You stay and enjoy yourself. I’ll be right back. I promise.” The million dollar smile surfaced again.

“If you really want me to.” Jayme felt abandoned. “Hurry back, though. I don’t know that many people here. It’s awkward.”

He kissed her forehead. “You’ll be fine. Twenty, thirty minutes tops.”

Before she could protest the length he predicted, he’d downed his drink and melted into the crowd of party-goers.

* * * *

Twenty minutes stretched into thirty and then forty-five. Jayme was getting a little upset when Lou finally strolled through the door, a smile and a touch of color that looked suspiciously like Kelsey’s on his lips. Heat flared up her spine as she looked around for Kelsey. She wasn’t in the room. Jayme wondered how long she’d been gone. She wondered but figured it was probably around forty-five minutes. She fumed as Lou walked toward her.

Jayme decided not to make a big deal out of it in the presence of so many people she didn’t know. She didn’t want to cause a scene and mark herself as a drama queen. She might have the opportunity to work with these people professionally in the future. Better not to make a public display of the fury and hurt she felt. She turned to the bar and collected a napkin, turning back to wait for Lou to reach her.

He took her hand and moved in for a kiss. He was met with a napkin over his mouth. The puzzled look in his eyes would have been comical if it hadn’t been such a painful moment. He grabbed the napkin to complete the motion of wiping his mouth. His gaze on Jayme, he asked, “Was there something on my face?”

Jayme nodded as she took a long sip of her drink. She looked around the room again and

noticed that Kelsey had returned. “It’s not your color, either.” She remained calm on the outside though her insides were boiling.

Lou looked at the napkin, his eyes cutting from the evidence to Jayme’s face. “I…”

Jayme held up a hand. “Let it go, Lou. Not here. Finish up your party and let’s go home… if you still live there.”

Lou stuffed the napkin into his pocket. “I was hoping to make this a great holiday for you. I guess I blew it.” He turned to the bar tender and requested a gin. Jayme blinked hard to keep tears from forming.

“You could say that. This isn’t what I wanted for Christmas, Lou.”

“Me either.” He took a long drink. “I only wanted to make you happy.” They both stood with their backs to the bar, eyes sweeping across the crowd. “Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?”

Jayme felt the bark of laughter trying to escape. She held it back. “Sure. Give me that one wish that I’ve wanted so long for Christmas.”

“A visit from Santa?”

“Right.” Jayme finished her drink and went in search of her coat. Lou followed silently behind.

* * * *

The ride home was slow. Lou didn’t seem to want to get there. Jayme wanted nothing more than to get home, slip into her warmest nightgown and curl up with a blanket to hold off the cold that ate at her. The snow on the ground wasn’t the only thing causing a chill in the car. Though the heater blasted warmth, it didn’t make much difference.

She wanted to say something but was afraid anything she said would only make the night worse. It was their first Christmas in the house. She thought about the gifts she’d purchased for him that were gathered under the tree. He’d deposited several for her and the tree looked wonderful, sparkling with lights and ornaments. The sudden memory of the empty space now beside it marred her attempt to cheer herself up. She’d forgotten about the missing furniture and clothing. At least now she knew why.

They pulled up, waiting for the garage door to rise. Lou looked straight ahead, and tapped his fingers on the wheel. When they’d pulled in and the garage door closed, Lou killed the engine and sat back, his gaze remaining on the wall before them. “I think we need to talk before

we go in.”

Jayme groaned. “It’s cold out here.” She hugged her coat close around her shoulders.

“That’s okay. This will only take a minute.” He turned in the seat to face her. “Jayme, we’ve been together for a long time. I don’t want to break the trust we’ve built. I’m not going to lie to you. Kelsey kissed me.”

“That was obvious.” She rolled her eyes.

“The point is I didn’t kiss her.”

“Where were you when this assault on your person took place? If you’d been with me, she wouldn’t have had the chance.” Didn’t he see that he’d made the opportunity for Kelsey by being with her instead of with Jayme? Did he really need his phone that bad or was that only an excuse to be somewhere else?

“That’s what I need to tell you. We were here.” He looked away.

* * * *

Jayme was thunder struck. “Here? In our home?” She’d heard enough. She opened the car door and climbed out. He did the same, and came quickly around the car to stop her before she reached the door into the house.

“Jayme...” He grabbed her shoulders.

She shrugged him off, and placed both hands on his chest to give him a shove. He held his ground and stopped her.

“Get away from me, Lou.” The tears fell. There was no stopping them now. There was no reason to hold them back. She struggled as he folded her into his arms, more gently than she expected.

“No. This isn’t how it was supposed to play out. I’ve totally blown this, and I have to make it right before you walk in that house.” He firmly held her in place, and made eye contact as she looked up at him.

“What am I going to find in the house? What’s missing now, the rest of your things?” She fell against his chest, not wanting to see his face.

“I’d already bought your present. I couldn’t get it under the tree myself. I had to have help. Kelsey...”

“Helped you wrap a gift?” This was making no sense at all. “You already have several gifts under the tree for me. I doubt Kelsey’s ever wrapped anything in her life, except maybe

herself in furs.”

She felt his chest vibrate in a silent laugh. “She didn’t exactly help wrap it but she had to be here. It took longer than expected, and I’m sorry for that. I wanted to surprise you.”

“You did that,” she snapped.

“Not with what you think.” He pushed her to arms length and looked into her eyes. “Jayme, no matter what you are thinking, I love you. I’ve loved you from the moment I first met you. I don’t ever intend to stop loving you. I don’t always think things through, but I have good intentions. I want this to be a special Christmas, our first one together in our own home. I don’t want it to be the last. Can you give me five minutes to see if I can repair this damage and make you happy?”

Jayme swiped the tears from her cheeks, crossed her arms over her chest and cocked her head to the side. She fought to maintain her calm. “Okay. It’s Christmas. I’ll give you five minutes.

“Perfect.” He stroked her arms. “Umm... where to begin.”

“I’m waiting and it’s getting colder.”

“Okay. I wanted to get you something extra special for our first Christmas here. Something that would surpass anything anyone had ever given you. I found what I wanted about a month ago but it would be tricky to get it under the tree without you finding out about it. Kelsey offered to help me. I borrowed a couple of her friends, too. The party tonight was planned to give me the opportunity to take care of the gift. That’s why I was talking to Kelsey on the cell, to get this set up.” He paused.

“She was helping you?”

“It was more like she was supervising the project. Once you were at the party, we all met here to take care of the present. It took a little longer than we expected but we got it handled. It was perfect that you said you wanted to find something under the tree that wasn’t here before. I think I was able to make that wish come true for you. I hope you don’t mind seeing the gift before morning though.”

Jayme felt like crying again. He’d been taking care of her holiday wish. How could she have been so jealous? But wait a minute. “How does that explain you having Kelsey’s lip gloss on your mouth?”

Lou grinned. “She said I was such a romantic and so good to you that she’d be looking

for someone just like me. Then she kissed me for being a good guy. If I'd thought about her lip gloss I would have wiped it off. It didn't mean anything to me, Jayme. You are the only one who means anything at all to me, and I hope you forgive me again for making you so upset tonight." He held his arms open to her and she flung herself into his embrace.

"I'm so sorry, Lou. I have a hard time believing how lucky I am to have a man like you. I'm so afraid of something going wrong between us. I can't help but be defensive when I feel threatened."

Lou kissed her. "I promise there is no threat of losing me. I'm here to stay, Babe. I hope you forgive me for making such a mess of this."

Jayme cuddled to his chest, enjoying his closeness. "I'll forgive you if you'll forgive me."

"Deal." He grinned down at her. "Ready to see your present?"

"Actually I'm enjoying this." She wrapped her arms around his waist, and held tight.

"Come on, Jayme. After all I did to get this set up, you want to stand around in the cold garage?"

Jayme laughed. "I think you're more excited about it than I am."

"I am." He wrapped his arm around her waist and guided her toward the house. "Close your eyes."

She complied and allowed him to lead her through the house to the living room. "Can I look yet?"

"Not yet. I want you a little closer." He shifted her across the floor a few more steps. He let go of her and stepped away. "Okay, open them."

Jayme peeked through her eyelashes and then her eyes flew open wide. In the space where his entertainment center had been now set a white grand piano, the one that had graced Kelsey's living room at Thanksgiving. Jayme covered her mouth with both hands, stifling the joyful cry that tried to escape. She turned to look at Lou, back at the piano, and back at Lou.

Lou shrugged. "You don't like it." He frowned and pushed out his lip in a pout.

Jayme flew at him, wrapped her arms around his neck, and nearly strangled him as they both laughed. "You know I just hate it." She laughed again, and pressed kisses over his entire face.

"I thought you would. Can you at least play it once before I throw it out?"

Jayne sat down on the bench and opened the cover to the keys. Her eyes popped wide again. In the center of the keyboard sat a small red velvet box. She held her breath as Lou sat down beside her. They both stared at the box for several heartbeats.

She cleared her throat and nodded at the box. "Lou?"

"Open it."

Jayne bit her lip. "I don't think I can."

Lou took the box and opened it. The diamond sparkled in competition with the lights from the tree. Jayme gasped as Lou slid to one knee beside the bench.

"Jayme, I had just one wish for the holidays, one thing that I've asked Santa for." He took the ring from the box, placed the box on the floor, and turned back to her to take her hand. "Will you grant me my gift and become my wife?"

Jayne could hardly speak. The tears fell once more as she bobbed her head up and down, and hoped she could muster her voice. It took a long moment to collect her emotions, but she was finally able to squeak a timid, "Yes."

Lou slipped the ring on her finger and slid onto the bench beside her. He hugged her and kissed her. A tear slid from his eye as well.

Jayne wiped it away and held his face in her hands. "Looks like we both got just what we wanted."

#####

Christmas in Vegas

by [Laura Breck](#)

She had just one wish for the holidays. Snow. Roxanne Anderson yawned as she showed her clear plastic purse to the security guard at the employee exit of King's Palace Casino.

"Night, Roxie." He winked. "Merry Christmas."

She checked her watch. Five minutes after midnight. She smiled at the burly guard whose wrinkled face, gray hair, and glasses reminded her of her grandfather back in Minnesota. "I guess it is officially Christmas Day. Have a wonderful Christmas, Burt." And like her grandfather, Burt was the only person she allowed to call her Roxie.

She pushed out through the heavy metal door. No snow in the Las Vegas forecast, but an icy blast of air cut through the T-shirt and jeans she'd changed into after her shift. The casino required she leave her skimpy waitress costume hanging in the locker room so it could be cleaned or repaired if necessary. She'd like to leave it behind permanently.

God, she hated waitressing.

Roxanne stepped up into the shuttle that waited to take employees to the far parking lot. The heat in the van blasted full-strength to ward off the cold high-desert winter.

She pulled the pins and ponytail holder from her upsweep and let her long, red hair fall across her shoulder and down over her breast. She scratched her scalp, digging her fingernails in, loosening the hairspray she used to keep the mandatory hairdo in place.

Once the vehicle was half full, it took off. She glanced around but didn't know anyone. Not unusual, with the number of employees working at King's.

The shuttle stopped and everyone filed off.

"Merry Christmas," the shuttle driver repeated to each of them.

She returned the greeting and walked toward her truck. Her plans did not include a very merry Christmas at all. Driving up Mount Charleston to serve brunch at some rich Californian's chalet. But what else was she going to do? She didn't have the money to fly home to Minnesota.

She was too new in town to have made any real friends. A week ago when the temp agency called looking for someone who'd work Christmas Day, she'd jumped at the chance to get her bank account above a zero balance.

She unlocked the truck, but the driver's door handle stuck—again—and she jerked it a few times to get it opened. Damn. She'd have to get this fixed, too.

Later that morning, after four hours of sleep, Roxanne dressed in black pants and a white shirt—the universal uniform for servers—pulled her hair back in a low pony, and poured herself a gigantic mug of coffee for the trip up the mountain.

After a half hour, the road sloped steeply upward. The clouds obscured the mountaintop and as she got closer, fog blotted out the sun.

Slowly the landscape of joshua trees, scrubby bushes, and tan dirt changed to pines and aspen and grass. Her breath caught. This looked so much like home. What was her family doing now? Probably opening gifts and sipping hot cocoa. Swallowing back a surge of homesickness, she turned on her headlights. The sky grew darker as she ascended.

A light sheen of moisture landed on her windshield and she turned on the wipers. Rain. Great. Not only a gloomy Christmas, but drizzly as well.

After a few miles, the wet turned to flaky. Snow? Really? It snowed in Las Vegas? She'd seen the white capped mountains in the distance, but it never connected that it was actually snow. That told her where her mind had been the last few weeks.

Once she'd given Charlie his ring back, sarcastically wished him good luck with his new girlfriend, and packed up everything she could carry in her truck, she'd focused on only one thing. Cooking in Las Vegas.

With chef jobs being so scarce because of the downturn in the economy, she'd taken a waitress job in a high-end restaurant, but the Egyptian goddess costume she was forced to wear didn't protect her butt from the pinchy fingers of over-sexed, over-served men.

She mentally checked the list of restaurants she'd be heading to tomorrow to apply for any openings in the kitchen, then went over the list of the places she'd already applied. The nice thing about Vegas was the nearly unlimited number of restaurants in the valley.

The rear tires of her truck skidded toward the edge of the road.

"Crap." The snow came down heavier and accumulated on the blacktop. She shifted the truck into 4-wheel drive and listened to the axels engage. She smiled. "Yep. This is just like Christmas in Minnesota."

Fifteen minutes later, she pulled into the back entrance of the mansion. "Wow." She hadn't expected it to be this massive. The red log structure resembled an A-frame, but with three sprawling floors, it looked more like a ski lodge.

Roxanne rang the back doorbell and a large, older woman in a white apron opened the door. Her eyes were wild and her graying hair stuck up at odd angles. "Are you my wait staff?"

"Yes." She reached out, expecting a proper hand shake from the woman.

Instead, the cook grabbed her wrist and tugged her inside. "God bless you for being early. The caterer couldn't make it up the mountain in the snow. He got halfway and turned around!" She shouted the words as if it were a federal offense.

Crap. Was the event cancelled? Would she still get paid? Roxanne looked around the huge stainless steel and marble kitchen. Cardboard boxes stood on every surface. "So, what's all this?"

The woman picked up a piece of paper. "The groceries were delivered yesterday. They were supposed to cook the dishes fresh today." She handed the sheet to Roxanne. "This is the menu, but for God's sake," her voice rose in pitch and alarm. "I don't know how to make those things."

She glanced down the list. It looked like Irish food. *Strange choice for a Christmas brunch.* She looked at the woman. "I'm assuming you're the cook here."

"Yes." Her hand shook as she held it out toward Roxanne. "I'm Marsha. I live on property and handle meals and cleaning."

They shook hands. "I'm Roxanne."

Marsha squeezed her hand between her two. "Thank God you're here. What are we going to do?"

"We?" How was she part of this? She'd been hired at minimum wage plus mileage plus gratuity to keep the buffet service filled and pick up dirty plates.

Marsha fanned her flushed face. "I've never done anything like this. The rare times Mr. Finn comes up here, it's usually for a day or two by himself. Not a party of twenty for the holidays!" The woman's eyes went a little wild. "Oh, God, what are we going to do?"

"Here." Roxanne pulled a stool closer. "First, you're going to sit down and take some deep breaths. Does Mr. Finn know that his caterer didn't show up?"

"No. I tried to call his cell, but they're skiing and it went right to voice mail. They'll be back in less than two hours, and I have nothing to feed them."

Roxanne checked the menu again. "This might be doable." She walked to the counter and went through each of the boxes, taking stock of the base ingredients.

Marsha pointed to the large double-door cooler. "Frigerated items are in there, on the right side." A tear escaped and ran down her cheek. "What are we going to do?"

The poor woman was so distraught, it touched Roxanne's heart. "Okay. We can do this. I'm a trained chef."

Marsha closed her eyes, laced her fingers together, and moved her mouth silently. After a moment, she looked up to the ceiling then at Roxanne. "You're the answer to my prayers."

She let out a laugh. She'd never been called *that* before, but she'd run with it. "Keep praying, Marsha. I've never made most of these items before, and a few of them I've never even heard of."

"Oh, no." The worry lines crept back into her forehead.

"I'll need a computer."

Marsha stood and opened a large cabinet. "Here's the kitchen computer." She turned it on. "Printer, too."

"Perfect." Roxanne pulled a chair over and sat at the little desk. "If you'd take everything out of the boxes and organize them on the counters, I'd—"

"Right away." Her voice was so cheerful, Roxanne couldn't help but smile.

The menu listed nine items. She'd print out the recipes and figure out which ones she'd have time to make. "Marsha?" She turned toward the woman. "Will you say one more prayer? This time, pray for the chef?"

Two and a half hours later, Roxanne put the finishing touches on the last of nine dishes. She'd been very relieved to find out the names on the menu were in traditional Gaelic, and the English meanings were very close to what Americans served at holidays. The goose roasted happily in one of the ovens. Spiced beef slices rested in a chafing dish in the warming oven next to stuffing, sliced soda bread, and three kinds of potatoes. Her mince pies were cooling and she

stirred the whiskey sauce for the baked pudding. Luckily, the Christmas cake came ready to serve, and Marsha was in the china closet looking for the perfect serving platter for it.

A man walked into the kitchen as if he owned the place. This must be Mr. Finn. Young. At least five years younger than her twenty-eight. How had he made his fortune? He glanced around. "Killian?"

Killian was the name of the absentee caterer. Roxanne wiped her hand on her apron and walked toward him. "Yes, but please, call me Roxanne." A twinge of guilt tightened her chest at the lie. Marsha had begged her not to let on that the caterer hadn't shown up until after the meal was finished. She'd sworn to keep the secret until the end.

He tentatively reached out and shook her hand, as if he was too good to shake hands with a lowly kitchen worker.

"Everyone's back. They're upstairs changing right now. I'll bring them into the serving room in fifteen?"

A tinge of nervousness rattled her before she reminded herself she'd done this same type of meal a hundred times. "Yes, that'll be fine."

He furrowed his brows. "Everything *is* ready, isn't it?"

Roxanne forced her best smile. "Of course it is." She gestured around the kitchen. "See for yourself." She half expected the man to actually look in each oven and pan.

He nodded. "Fifteen minutes." Turning on his heel, he raced out.

Roxanne made a face and mouthed those same two words to the man's retreating back as the oven timer rang. "Marsha!" She dashed to the oven and pulled out the goose.

The woman came into the kitchen carrying a gold and crystal pedestal plate. "Look at this. Just perfect for—"

"Beautiful. Sorry, but we just got our fifteen-minute warning."

Marsha squeaked and hustled to the counter and placed the sliced cake on the platter. "You met Mr. Finn? Isn't he just the most handsome thing?"

"Yes." *If you liked the snippy kind of man.*

"When you bring the cake out, will you light the flames under the chafing dishes?"

"Will do, Chef."

The compliment hit Roxanne like a joyful burst of adrenaline. She smiled at Marsha, who was grinning at her with a sweet look on her face.

Taking a deep breath, Roxanne said, "Let's do this."

Fourteen minutes later, everything was set. Roxanne adjusted the flames under the chafers, checked to be sure the right serving utensil sat next to the dishes, and slid back the hinged covers.

Voices came from another room and she quickly pulled off her apron and stuck it under one of the skirted tables. Seven people walked in and she smiled. Her face fell when she recognized most of them. This wasn't a family gathering. It was a celebrity party.

A Vegas magician who had his own casino showroom stood next to a female comedian who performed worldwide. A country superstar who'd just opened at a casino held hands with his wife, also a singing star. A politician and his wife walked in next, followed by two beautiful women.

Her mouth formed the words "holy shit" and she caught the amused glance of the next person to walk in the door.

He was a tall, gorgeous man with auburn hair that curled past his collar, sparkling green eyes, and a body that filled out his polo shirt and khaki pants very well.

He spoke to the magician as he guided the two women to the beginning of the buffet line.

Roxanne handed plates to the ladies, listening to their excited comments about the food. The country star and his wife were next, and she couldn't help the smile that crossed her face. They chatted with her as they started filling their plates.

Wait until she told her family who she spent Christmas with!

More guests filtered in, including a talk show host, a major financier, and a whole band. As the guests finished going through the line, they headed into the adjoining dining room and sat at a huge table decorated with a green tablecloth, gold napkins, and arrangements of flowers in cranberry-filled vases.

The last two men in the serving room were Mr. Finn, who hadn't changed clothes since he'd been in the kitchen, and the tall, dreamy man. They seemed to be arguing quietly. Mr. Finn pointed at her and walked into the kitchen.

She gulped. Had she been found out?

The hunk strolled toward her, a concerned look on his face. "Killian?"

She nodded. "Please, call me Roxanne." She handed him a plate.

"Roxanne." He set the plate down. "Could I talk to you for a moment?" His light Irish accent was too sexy.

She felt heat rise up her cheeks. "Of course."

The magician came back into the serving room. "This is absolutely fabulous. My God, Finn, Killian has outdone himself. My compliments to the chef."

Roxanne smiled and nodded, but when she realized what he'd called the man next to her, her face sobered. Looking up at the stud next to her, she asked, "You're Finn?"

He nodded. "I'm Finn Brayden, owner of the Emerald Isle Casino."

Oh holy crap. "And Killian is...?"

"Not you." He turned and pushed open the kitchen door. "If you have a minute." He gestured for her to go in ahead of him.

Marsha's voice melded with the voice of the smaller man as they argued.

Finn cleared his throat and there was silence. "What the feck is going on here, Marsha?" His accent thickened.

The cook started talking about the caterer at the same time the snippy man said, "I knew nothing about this, and I—"

"Dún do bhéal," Finn said and pointed at the man. "You. Out."

He stomped from the room.

"Marsha." Finn crossed his arms over his chest and stood glaring. "Who the hell is this?" He jerked his head toward Roxanne. "And where is Killian?"

"Mr. Finn." She wrung her hands in front of her belly. "This is Roxanne...uh..."

"Roxanne Anderson."

He barely spared her a glance.

Marsha's face looked pale. "Killian called and said he couldn't make it up the mountain and was turning around and heading back to the city. Then ten minutes later, this angel was sent from heaven in answer to my prayers."

He turned full on Roxanne then, his narrowed gaze boring into her.

She pressed the palms of her hands together in a saintly gesture and fluttered her eyelashes.

A barely perceptible tick curled the corner of his lips for just a second.

When Finn didn't speak, Roxanne stuffed her hands in her pants pockets and told her story. "I was hired as your wait staff. Marsha and I together figured out how to—"

Marsha stepped forward. "Oh, Mr. Finn, truly, Roxanne did it all herself. I was just the helper."

Finn nodded to Roxanne. "Continue."

"I have a culinary certificate, ran a restaurant in Minnesota, and am currently employed at the Faroh's Steak House in the King's Palace Casino."

He lifted a brow.

She knew she had to tell him everything. "I'm a waitress."

He rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and took a deep breath.

"But I'm applying for cook positions. I've only been here two weeks, and with the downturn in the economy, it's tough—"

"Okay." He held out a hand. "Everyone has eaten your food. I guess there's nothing we can do now but wait and see if they start dropping dead."

Her jaw hinged open. "Dropping dead?" She stomped up to him, hands on hips. "I've never had a health violation in my restaurant. I tested and retested the ingredients today to...be...sure..."

He grinned at her.

The meany was teasing her?

"My apologies, Chef Anderson, for the inappropriate joke." He turned to Marsha. "Would you please keep an eye on the buffet line?"

She smiled and nodded. "I'd be happy to."

He wrapped his hand around her arm. "Chef and I are going to have a taste of her creations."

The touch of his hand sent sparks flying through her body.

They filled plates, hers with a sample of everything, his with mounds that would have made her pass out.

He guided her to a small room off the kitchen. A cozy table and four chairs sat next to a floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the mountain.

She sat and stared outside.

"Reminds you of home?"

She nodded and looked at him. "It does." Her voice choked. "Christmas with the family."

He stared at her for a moment. "Wait here." He stood and left the room.

She quickly tasted everything on her plate. It was still fresh and would definitely not kill anyone.

Finn walked back into the room carrying a one-foot live pine tree in a pot of soil. The pot was wrapped in festive foil, and each limb of the tree had a tiny ornament and garland strung from it.

It was so sweet of him to do this for her. She pressed her lips together to stop the emotion from bursting out and embarrassing her.

He stared at her.

With a curve of her lips, she said, "It's perfect."

Finn looked down, then a moment later, touched something on the tree and tiny lights came on, and the star on top lit up. "Merry Christmas."

"Thank you." It came out a whisper. Was it the loneliness of being away from her family today? Or was it Finn's kindness that had her chest tight and her heart aching with unshed tears?

With a mouth full of food, he said, "This is excellent."

She pushed her plate aside and crossed her arms on the table, watching him dig into her cooking. "I printed recipes off the internet. I don't know how authentic they are."

"Much better than anything Killian ever made."

"Who is this Killian?"

He smiled at her. "My soon-to-be ex-chef."

She tipped her head. "Please don't fire him because of today. I would feel so bad—"

"Uh uh." He waved a fork and swallowed his food. "I'm not firing him. I'm promoting him."

Her mouth opened but she didn't know how to respond.

"He'll be in charge of supervising the chefs."

"Oh. He's a better manager than he is a cook?"

"Exactly." He wiped his mouth with a cloth napkin and sat back. "And you, Roxanne Anderson from Minnesota. I'd like to give you a tryout in the kitchen of my Irish Pub."

A thrill of excitement raced through her. "Really? I'd love to. Thank you."

"Thank you for stepping in today. You saved the party." He nodded toward the kitchen. "Probably saved Marsha from a heart attack, too."

"She's a sweetheart." Roxanne hated for this to end, but she had a job to do, and Finn needed to get back to his guests. "May I call you at the casino?"

"You'll stay the night." He stood and picked up their plates, balanced them in one hand, and held his other hand out to her. "Even though you're native Minnesotan, it's too dangerous for you to try to make it down tonight."

She took his hand. The electric shock of the touch had her heart thumping and her belly jittering. She took back her hand and looked out the window at the accumulating snow. "Okay. I'll take you up on your offer." She gestured toward the dining room. "Are we making another meal tonight? For the guests?"

"No. They're all heading home this afternoon. They each have houses on the mountain, and every year, those of us stuck in Vegas over Christmas get together."

"What a nice tradition." She wished she had a group of friends who would celebrate with her. Some day. She sighed.

"Hey." He set down the plates and put his hands on her arms. "What's that face for? What's wrong?"

She tipped her head down and held in the sad whimper that rose in her throat. "Being in a new town...it's been difficult."

He touched his knuckle under her chin and lifted her head. "You won't be lonely long." His green eyes darkened and the sincerity in his gaze shook her. "You're an amazing woman. What you did here today was unexpected and incredibly unselfish." He ran his thumb along her jaw, then looked startled at his action and dropped his hands.

"Those people out there, my guests, are in the same situation you're in. They couldn't get home to family because of contract restrictions, or bad weather and airport closures. The meal you made them helped ease that feeling of homesickness."

"Wow." She smiled, her heart a bit wobbly at his praise. "A cooked goose did all that?"

He grinned. "A delicious cooked goose." He picked up their plates. "I'm guessing I couldn't talk you into leaving the dishes for tomorrow?"

She took the plates from him. "No. Definitely not."

"When you and Marsha are finished, come and sit in the living room with us."

Her mouth dropped open and she shook her head.

"Don't look so pale. Marsha joins us every year. One of those musician-types plays piano and we sing everything from Silent Night to Jingle Bell Rock. We have a couple drinks and head outside to make snowmen. That Christmas tree I brought in here? Its great grandfather is standing all decorated next to the fireplace. You'll love it."

She couldn't imagine what it would be like to hang out with Vegas's premier performers—not to mention a casino owner. "As long as Marsha's there as well, okay. But you know I'm going to be too star-struck to say a word."

"You'll get used to them. They're just people, like you and me."

She gave him a dubious look. "You're the one I should be more nervous around. I'm just glad I didn't know this was Finn Brayden's home. I probably would have made a mess of every dish."

"Oh, yeah?" He grinned. "So, I'm someone who makes you star-struck, too, then?"

She bit her lip and felt another blush rise. "You're one of the young legends of Vegas. Your casino, the incredible restaurants you've opened." She looked at him, a wave of shyness stealing over her. "You're larger than life."

He took the plates from her and set them down again. "You're going to have to forgive me for doing this, but I can't fucking stop myself." He cupped each side of her face in his palms. "I want to kiss you, Roxanne. I've been wanting to do it since I saw you standing at the buffet table cussing like a sailor."

She giggled, then sobered. "Kiss me, then, Finn."

"Aw, mavourneen, my sweet. Merry Christmas."

His lips touched hers.

She thanked heaven for granting her wish for snow.

#####

Going Home

by [Jannine Gallant](#)

She had just one wish for the holiday. *Survival*. The aircraft jolted and shook like a tilt-a-whirl gone wild. Clutching the armrests in a white knuckled grip, Lacey Chandler braced her feet against the carry-on bag beneath the seat in front of her and prayed. When a sudden air pocket sent the plane in a free fall, a squeal of sheer terror tore from her throat.

“You okay?”

She stared at the man in the seat next to her. Lowering his newspaper, he regarded her with a raised brow. Even in her petrified state, she couldn't help noticing his rugged good looks. She'd been sneaking glances since the plane took off in Los Angeles.

Forcing her clenched teeth apart, she answered, “I'm just peachy for someone about to die.”

His firm lips tilted up at the corners. “A little turbulence isn't going to kill anyone.”

Of course *he* wasn't afraid. A camouflage print shirt hugged shoulders so broad they took up more than his fair share of the seat while the matching military issue pants strained across his thighs. Dark brown eyes held a depth of experience she couldn't begin to understand—and didn't want to. He probably ate terrorists for breakfast.

Overhead, the *fasten seatbelt* sign lit up, and a loudspeaker crackled. “This is your captain speaking. Looks like the weather is growing worse, folks. Please return to your seats and buckle up.”

“Worse? How can it get worse than this?” She bit her lip.

A hard, calloused hand closed over hers and squeezed before pulling away. “I'm sure we'll fly out of the storm in no time.”

A tingle of warmth shot through her. Though she generally followed the old adage about not speaking to strangers, talking might take her mind off her imminent demise. She hesitated, eyeing him from the top of his closely shorn head, past prominent cheek bones and a hard chin,

to the muscled forearms crossed over the newspaper resting on his lap. Though her seatmate was probably only a few years older than she was, late twenties she guessed, he didn't look young or harmless—anything but. Still, she needed a distraction.

“Are you in the army?”

“Marines.”

Not very chatty. She tried again. “Going home on leave for Christmas?”

“Going home, period. I just finished my second tour in Afghanistan. It was enough.”

“Oh.” The plane bounced, jostling her into those broad shoulders. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Putting yourself in harm's way for me.”

He shrugged. “I did what I was told, nothing more, nothing less.” The warmth in his chocolate eyes faded.

Whatever memories had surfaced obviously weren't pleasant. *Maybe I'm not the only one who needs a distraction.* Prying her fingers from the armrest, she held out her hand. “I'm Lacey Chandler.”

His grip was firm. Comforting. “Reece Hartman. It's nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Where's home?”

He hesitated a moment before answering. “My parents live in a suburb of Denver.”

“Yeah? So does my grandmother. That's where I'm headed. My mom and dad are on a cruise in Greece. They've been saving for it forever, and my brother is spending the holidays with his in-laws,” she babbled. She knew it but couldn't stop. The plane rocked from side to side then shook like a dog coming out of water. Her voice rose as she braced her feet. “It'll be just me and my grandma this year.”

His big hand covered hers again. “Take a deep breath and try to relax. We're going to be fine. Honest.”

Looking into those bottomless eyes, she almost believed him. Almost. “How can you be so sure?”

“Because I'm a pilot. I've flown combat missions in all sorts of weather. Storms like this one are nothing out of the ordinary.” He frowned. “The landing could be a little tricky, though, if the temperatures keep dropping.”

“I feel a whole lot better now. Instead of nose diving into a mountain, we’ll crash on the runway. That’s a much better option. Easier to identify the bodies.”

His laugh rolled across her senses and curled her toes.

“You’re a pessimistic little thing.”

“Nope, just realistic. Numbers don’t lie, and I have a feeling we’re about to become a statistic.”

“Numbers, huh? You don’t look like an accountant.”

She narrowed her eyes and forgot all about the pitching plane for about three seconds.

“What do accountants look like?”

“Old and boring, not young and blonde and cute.”

“Talk about a stereotype!”

Before she could fully launch into a lecture, the loudspeaker crackled. “Change of plan, folks. We have freezing rain in Denver, and they’ve closed the airport.”

Groans and the buzz of conversations erupted throughout the plane.

This can’t be happening. It’s Christmas Eve for God’s sake.

“Never fear, I have a plan B. We’re detouring to Cheyenne. That’s in Wyoming, people. Sorry for the inconvenience.” The speaker squawked and went silent.

“The guy’s a regular comedian.” Reece shrugged his shoulders and smiled, his teeth gleaming white against his tan. Slowly the smile faded. “It isn’t the end of the world, Lacey. You aren’t going to cry, are you?”

“Of course not.” She sniffed and blinked. “I’m just disappointed. It’s been a long day, and I know my grandma went to the trouble of making a big dinner.”

“The drive will only take a couple of hours, give or take, depending on the roads.” He glanced at the big, black watch strapped to his wrist. “It’s four o’clock now. Once we’re on the ground, you’ll call her and tell her you’ll be a little late.”

She nodded. They were silent as the plane bumped and jolted then slowly began its descent into Cheyenne. Gray clouds and flakes of snow streamed by the tiny window. Clutching the armrests, she closed her eyes as the engines roared. A warm hand closed over her clenched fist, and some of the tension drained out of her. When the wheels touched down on the runway, she sighed in relief.

“Safe and sound.”

Opening her eyes, she looked deep into his. “I guess I got my wish.”

“Oh?”

“We survived.”

A slow grin spread. “Told you we would.”

“A man of your word, I appreciate that.” She rose on shaking legs and pulled her carry-on bag from under the seat. “I won’t say it’s been a pleasure meeting you, Reece. More like an adventure.”

Standing, he brushed against her in the confined space and put a steadying hand on her back. Warmth coursed through her.

“I disagree. It *has* been a pleasure.” His eyes never strayed from her face. “Have a merry Christmas, Lacey.”

“You have a merry one, too, Reece.” With a final backward glance, she walked down the aisle and off the plane.

Have yourself a merry little Christmas...

The song blared through hidden speakers in the overheated airport lobby. Arms crossed, Reece leaned against a post and waited patiently while the customer in front of him questioned the rental car agent about the best route to Denver. Five years ago, he would have wanted to strangle the guy for holding up the line. The Marines had taught him the value of patience—and that there were far more efficient ways than strangulation to take out an obstacle in his path. Eventually the man moved away, and he stepped forward.

The agent’s eyes widened as her gaze moved from his face downward. The diamond stud in her nose sparkled beneath fluorescent lights, and fingers with black painted nails fluttered. “Do you have a reservation, sir?”

“No, I don’t.” He softened the blunt statement with a smile. “I’d like to rent a car, preferably something with four wheel drive.”

“Sorry, but we don’t have any left. Everyone upgraded when the snow started.” She tapped buttons on her computer and nodded. “Yep, the last vehicle on the lot that isn’t reserved is a midsized sedan. Will that work?”

Her voice, raised to be heard over the endless loop of cheery holiday music, echoed in the sudden silence before *A Holly Jolly Christmas* erupted from the sound system. Behind him, people grumbled and swore as half the line stampeded toward the other rental agency desks.

“I’ll take it.”

She started tapping buttons again. “Good choice. I’m pretty sure the competition is sold out by now, too.”

To his left, a thud shook the floor. He glanced over his shoulder and met Lacey Chandler’s wide eyed gaze. The color drained from her face, and she plopped down on top of the oversized suitcase.

“How am I supposed to get to Denver, then?”

The agent slapped a rental agreement on the counter and pointed. “Sign here. I’ll need to see your driver’s license and a credit card.” Her brows drew together as she looked up and frowned at Lacey. “You should have made a reservation.”

Her mouth opened, then closed, and her lips tightened. Reece admired her restraint. A moment later, the fight drained out of her, and her shoulders slumped. Compassion filled him.

“I’ll give you a ride if you like.”

Lacey regarded him with a mixture of suspicion and hope. She chewed her lip. “I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

“We’re both going in the same direction, and I’ll enjoy the company.” He handed over his credit card then turned to face her. “I know taking a ride from a stranger is incredibly stupid, but I swear I mean you no harm. You have my word.”

Troubled blue eyes regarded him for a long moment before she finally nodded. “I believe you.”

Relief surged through him. For some reason it was important he earn this woman’s trust. “Hold tight. I’m almost finished.” He glanced at the agent. “Aren’t I?”

She handed back his license and credit card. “A couple more details. Do you want full insurance?”

Sleet rattled against the sliding glass doors leading out of the airport terminal. “Sure, give me the insurance. Oh, and for the record, I’ll be dropping the car off in Denver.”

With an ill-concealed eye roll, she tapped on the computer again then pushed over a key. “Normally we like to keep our cars local, but since you’re a hero and all...”

Taking the key, he scooped up the paperwork. It wrinkled in his tight clasp. “I’m no hero. The real heroes are the men and women still over there—and the ones who’ll never come home.”

Turning sharply, he hefted his duffle bag. When he bent to grab Lacey’s suitcase handle, his palm closed over slender fingers. Their gazes locked.

“I can get it.” Her voice was soft, almost breathless.

“Call me old fashioned, but my mother didn’t raise me to let a woman carry a heavy bag.”

“It has wheels.”

He pulled it from her grip. “The principle still holds. Humor me.”

Smiling, she slung the strap of her carry-on bag over her shoulder. “A man should always listen to his momma. I’m not going to stand in your way.”

“I like you this way better.”

Her brow shot up. “Huh?”

“Feisty beats defeated every time.”

She skipped a step to catch up with him, then tugged the hood of her jacket over her shining blonde hair as they stepped through the sliding doors into a gust of wind laced with snow. “I’m not usually such a baby, but the day started out bad and only got worse. I’ve been playing catch-up since the moment my alarm went off.”

Glancing at the number on the rental form, he located the slot holding a boring, tan sedan. With a shrug, he popped open the trunk. “Sounds a lot more exciting than my day. Let’s hear all the details.” After dropping his duffle bag into the trunk, he eyed her oversized suitcase and then loaded it onto the back seat.

She slid into the passenger side and turned to face him as he shut the door. Cold air filled the car, and a gust of wind rocked it. The storm was growing worse. He wished again for a four wheel drive and thought of the Humvees he’d driven when he wasn’t flying over the mountains of Afghanistan. Nothing rocked those babies but a roadside bomb. Dragging his thoughts back to the present before misery could grab him by the throat, he smiled at Lacey. She was both sweet and sexy, a contradiction that made him wish he hadn’t promised to be a complete gentleman.

Turning on the engine, he adjusted the seat and mirrors and cranked up the heat. “Why did your day start out so bad?”

“A client demanded my attention at the last minute. I had to change my flight to a later one to accommodate him. We all know how well that turned out.”

He frowned. “A client needed his accountant on Christmas Eve?”

Those big, blue eyes blinked at him, and color crept into her cheeks. “I’m not an accountant.”

“But you said—”

“No, you assumed when I mentioned numbers.” She straightened in the seat and lifted her chin. “I’m a personal shopper *and* a math whiz.”

Warmth filled him, and it wasn’t from the still cool air blasting from the heat vents. He tried not to laugh as he pulled out of the parking lot but couldn’t hold back a chuckle. “Will you hit me if I tell you that you look more like a personal shopper than an accountant?”

Her smile took on an edge. “I might.”

“You know what?”

“I’m almost afraid to ask.”

“I’m glad our plane got rerouted. I’m thrilled they ran out of rental cars. Something tells me the next couple of hours are going to be the highlight of my week.”

The tires slid on the slush coated pavement of the freeway before catching. At the speed they were going, she’d be more than a little late for dinner. Not that they had a choice. Nor was she in a hurry to end their journey. Snow fell in big fat flakes to be slapped away by the wipers. Soft rock filled the car, a welcome change from holiday music, and warmth encompassed her.

For the first time all day, Lacey relaxed. Her gaze rested on Reece’s big hands, firm on the steering wheel. Not for one moment did she doubt his skill on the slippery roads. The man oozed confidence and competence.

His deep brown gaze shifted from the road to her face and back. “How long are you staying in Denver?”

“A week.” She snuggled into the seat. “I’ve been looking forward to getting out of L.A. and going home.”

“Home? Don’t you live in Los Angeles?”

She nodded. “Yes, but Colorado is *home*. It’s where I grew up, where all my strongest memories are.” She stared through the windshield at the falling snow. “I enjoy my job. I have a great roommate and lots of friends, but I don’t feel a connection to Southern California. Does that make sense?”

“Perfect sense.”

When he didn’t elaborate, she touched his arm. “Is Denver your final destination or a temporary stop?”

He winced. “Honestly, I don’t have a clue.”

“I’m surprised.”

His glance slid over to her again. “Why’s that? You don’t know anything about me.”

“You’re wrong.”

A dark brow shot up. “Oh?”

“I know you’re kind and considerate. I know you’ve experienced loss. It’s there in the lines on your face and the sadness in your eyes. I know you roll with the unexpected and make the best of it. Most of all, you seem like a man in control of your own destiny. That’s why I’m surprised you don’t have your future all worked out.”

A smile eased across his lips. “And here I thought I was a closed book.”

“Nope. You’re an easy read. I’m guessing you had a plan, but it got derailed.”

His eyes widened. “Are you sure you aren’t a psychologist—or a mind reader.”

“Nope. I just make a point of studying people beyond what I see on the surface.” A green highway sign flashed by outside the window. Still thirty miles to Denver. “What happened to change your plans?”

His fingers tightened around the steering wheel. “My fiancée sent me a Dear John letter a month before my tour was up. Apparently she fell in love with someone else while I was gone.” He shrugged. “Not that I blame her. Long distance relationships are a bitch in the best of circumstances. Knowing your fiancé is getting shot at and might never come home is the opposite of best.”

Anger started as a slow burn in her chest and crept outward. She fisted her hands in her lap. He might act like having his life turned upside down and his feelings thrown back in his face wasn’t a big deal, but she didn’t believe him for a minute.

“I know you’re too much of a gentleman to hit a woman, but I’m not.” She pulled a notepad from her purse and waited with pen poised. “Give me her address.”

Laughter, rich and deep, echoed through the car. “Sonya probably has six inches and thirty pounds on you.”

“I’ll still kick her butt. My parents made me take self-defense classes before I moved to L.A. They worry about me in the big, bad city.”

Reaching across the center console, he patted her leg. “Small but mighty. Are you afraid of anything?”

It took a moment to gather her wits. His warm hand through the fabric of her pants left an indelible impression on her thigh. She swallowed. “That one’s easy. Flying.”

He grinned. “Ah, your terror in the face of a little turbulence is explained.”

“Okay, tough guy, what’s your biggest fear?”

His expression hardened. “I’ve already faced it. What Sonya did doesn’t even come close.”

His tone told her he didn’t intend to elaborate, and she wouldn’t dream of intruding on his privacy. They were quiet for several minutes, letting an Eagles’ tune fill the conversational void, but the silence wasn’t uncomfortable. Lacey’s eyelids drooped. A muttered oath had them snapping open. Red taillights flashed in the evening gloom. The car slid as he braked but came to a stop several feet short of a big pickup.

Her heart settled back into a normal rhythm, and she let out a breath. “That was close.”

“Close is a bullet creasing your neck and barely leaving a scar. I wouldn’t consider a hiccup in traffic close.”

She stared at him as he eased the car forward. “Did that happen to you?”

Pulling back the collar of his shirt, he uncovered a red welt across his neck. The pulse at the base beat strong and steady.

Her stomach clenched, and she breathed through her nose. “I’m glad you aren’t going back.” The words rasped in her throat, hard and hurting. “I know we just met, but...”

He touched her hair in a gentle caress before returning his hand to the steering wheel. “Thank you for caring.”

“Why wouldn’t I?”

In the distance, the glow of city lights glimmered along the horizon. They were almost to Denver. Anticipation mixed with regret, filling her with confusion. Christmas Eve was a time for family and tradition. She was going home to her grandma, and Reece would spend the holiday with his parents. They were nothing more than strangers whose paths crossed by chance. The hollowness inside grew as he left the freeway and followed her directions into a quiet neighborhood. Lights decorated the houses, glowing with Christmas cheer. When he pulled into her grandmother's driveway, she sat still in her seat, staring at the illuminated tree shining through the living room window. The porch light welcomed her home.

"I guess this is it." She bit her lip.

When he touched her cheek, she turned to face him. The warmth in his eyes set her heart beating in a fierce rhythm.

"Is that what you thought, that I'd just drop you off and drive away?"

Her shoulders lifted in a tiny shrug.

"You can't get rid of me so easily."

"No?"

"Not a chance. My parents live maybe five miles from here. Seems likely I'll swing through this neighborhood on my morning run."

She pressed a hand to her chest. "I make a mean cup of coffee, and my grandma's cinnamon rolls are to die for. After a five mile run, you'll need sustenance for the return trip."

When he smiled, all the joy of the season filled her with happiness and hope.

"This isn't the end, Lacey. It's just the beginning. When I boarded that plane, I had no idea I truly would be going home."

#####

If Wishes Were Fishes

by [Alison Henderson](#)

She had just one wish for the holidays. The same wish she'd wished every December for the past five years.

Please bring Ben home for the holidays.

What was it Grandma Berta used to say? If wishes were fishes, the sea would be full. When Marlee was a little girl, she'd wondered what that meant. Now she thought she understood, but she still couldn't give up hoping.

She tucked an errant red-gold curl behind her ear and leaned forward to peer out the multi-paned bay window at the front of her yarn shop, A Stitch in Time. It was only four o'clock in the afternoon, but heavy, gray December clouds hung low over the small harbor of Porter's Landing, Massachusetts. It would be dark soon, and she could almost taste the coming snow. It looked like they were due for the first white Christmas in several years. She shivered beneath her thick fisherman's knit sweater and hugged her arms around her middle. Snow wouldn't be so bad if Ben were here. As a kid, she'd tagged after him and her older brother Matt when they went sledding down Murphy's Hill or built a fort in Barnum's Wood. Any adventure was better with Ben along.

The three had grown up as tightly linked as Matt's corny magician's rings. She'd barely noticed her feelings for Ben changing until suddenly she was a sophomore in high school and the boys were seniors. By then, every girl in the school had the hots for Ben Granger, and Marlee Farrow was no exception.

But so much had changed since high school. The links had shattered. She hadn't seen Ben in more than five years, not since the awful day of Matt's funeral. Five days after the funeral, Ben had left town without a word and joined the Navy. He hadn't been back since.

Her eyes stung, and she squeezed them tight to stem the flow of tears before it started.
Stop it. You should be stronger by now.

Even after all this time, the pain was still raw.

Marlee swallowed the lump forming in her throat. Then she sniffed and pulled a tissue from the pocket of her jeans and dabbed her nose. If only ... but recriminations served no purpose. All young men believed in their own invincibility, and Matt and Ben had been no different.

“Marlee, can you take a look at this and see if you can find the mistake? I don’t know what I’ve done.” With a half-frown of good-natured confusion, Evelyn Barlow held up a small, misshapen red stocking. Despite her lack of experience and skill, Evelyn was one of the most enthusiastic members of the Knit Wits, a knitting club that met at A Stitch in Time every Thursday afternoon.

Marlee took the sock and quickly spotted the error. “It looks like you dropped a couple of stitches, but I think I can fix them.” She deftly recaptured the errant loops on the small metal needle then handed it back to Evelyn.

“Thanks so much, dear. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Never get that darned ornament finished, that’s for sure.”

It was hard to be certain who had muttered the comment, but Marlee suspected Helen Markuson. The Knit Wits were a pretty congenial group, but as the oldest member, Helen felt she’d earned the right to speak her mind, and in true New England fashion, did so without reservation.

“How are we coming along, ladies?” Marlee glanced at the members seated in a circle on plain wooden chairs surrounded by cubbies filled with colorful yarns of every description. As the only knitting shop within twenty miles, A Stitch in Time was popular with both tourists and locals, so she maintained as broad an inventory as possible.

“I’m done,” Helen replied, holding up a cheerful gingerbread man. Her gnarled fingers were still so quick she’d already added the face and buttons.

“Almost there,” added Mary Duckworth. “I just need to crochet the hanger for my snowman.”

On cue, the seven remaining Knit Wits displayed their nearly-complete creations as well. This year, the club had voted to donate ornaments for the Christmas tree at the hospital. After the holiday, they would be free to any patient who wanted to take one home.

“It looks like we’re ready for refreshments,” Marlee said. “Who wants eggnog?” Hands flew up.

“I’m supposed to be watching my cholesterol,” Helen grouched.

“I can always fix you a cup of tea.”

“Hold on,” Helen protested. “I didn’t say I didn’t want eggnog, I just said I wasn’t supposed to have it.” Her eighty-two-year-old eyes twinkled. “You won’t tell Dr. Grimes, will you?”

Marlee laughed and crossed her heart. “It will be our secret.”

Forty-five minutes later, the finished ornaments were packed in a box and the Knit Wits were gathering their coats and knitting baskets. “See you all at the party at the hospital tomorrow,” Evelyn called over her shoulder on her way out.

Marlee followed the chattering gaggle and locked the door. As she crossed the uneven old brick street and headed for home, a familiar hollow feeling swelled in her chest. The ache had been building for days despite her best efforts to banish it. She loved A Stitch in Time and the Knit Wits, but she wanted more. Most of her high school friends had traded the quiet of Porter’s Landing for the excitement of the city years ago. A few came home for Christmas, but it wasn’t the same. She missed her family. And although she might not admit it out loud, she missed Ben.

Her parents had moved to Boston after Matt’s death, too grieved by the never-ending reminders of their loss, but Marlee couldn’t leave Porter’s Landing. It was home and where she needed to be. After Grandma Berta died, she had moved from the big, square captain’s house with its widow’s walk on the roof that had sheltered her family for two centuries into her grandmother’s tiny shingled cottage covered with climbing roses.

She snuggled deeper into her raspberry mohair muffler and pulled her hat lower as she made her way down the street that ran parallel to the rocky shore. It wasn’t snowing, but the wind had picked up, tossing whitecaps on the water. Her cottage was only a couple of blocks away, a cozy refuge from the worsening weather, but for some reason she wasn’t ready to go home yet. Her restless feet carried her toward the lighthouse on the point.

Since the early nineteenth century, Porter’s Landing had been tied to the sea. It had begun as a whaling village then later switched to cod, and a small fleet of fishing boats still left the

harbor most mornings in search of the daily catch. Generations of Farrow women had waited, sometimes in vain, for their men to come home from the sea, and Marlee was no different.

Ever since Ben had left, she'd come to the old red and white striped lighthouse whenever the loneliness closed in, to stare out to sea and think of him, wondering where he was and how he was doing. The building itself was locked and no longer in use, but the ground-level observation deck was still open. When she reached it, she leaned forward, resting her arms against the metal railing. The clouds overhead had morphed into an angry gray mass.

She repeated her plea like a mantra, as if that might increase its chances of reaching the right ears. *Please bring Ben home for the holidays.*

The summer after graduating from college, he and Matt had come home for a couple of weeks of fun and relaxation before launching into the world of grownup responsibility. Her heart twisted when she remembered them together: tall, strong, tanned, and laughing. They'd taken her father's small sailboat out past the shelter of the harbor into open water when the skies darkened and a sudden squall blew in. Even though a fishing trawler was within hailing distance, the high winds and waves had swamped the small vessel before help could arrive. The fishermen managed to pull Ben out, but Matt was lost. She would never forget the agonizing hours before the Coast Guard found his body the next day.

Marlee pounded her fist against the railing. How could Ben have left town without speaking to her? Didn't he understand how much she needed him, how much she needed someone to share the pain? Healing was so hard when you had to do it all by yourself.

She dropped her forehead against her hands and allowed the tears to fall.

"Marlee?" A deep voice interrupted her misery.

She lifted her head a couple of inches. She must be hallucinating.

"Marlee, it's me."

Slowly, she straightened and turned.

"Ben?"

He took in her watery blue eyes and the pert little nose that was nearly the color of her scarf. Either his memory was rusty or Marlee Farrow had changed, big time. She was far more

beautiful than he remembered. Her eyes narrowed, either in anger or suspicion, and he realized she was waiting for him to respond. “Yeah, it’s me.”

Her expression remained guarded. “What are you doing here?”

He deserved her cold reception and then some. He just had to get through this and say what he needed to say. Then he could finally close this chapter of his life and move on. “I thought I might find you here. I tried your house, but no one was home. Then I remembered you used to like to come to the lighthouse.”

She shifted her gaze to the wind-whipped waves. “It soothes me.”

Ben rammed his hands deeper into the pockets of his pea coat. “Even in this weather?”

“Yes.”

She wasn’t making this easy, but she had no reason to. He forged ahead. “I need to talk to you.”

She still refused to look at him. “Go ahead. I’m listening.”

He needed to be able to sit down with her, to look her in the eye. “Can’t we go somewhere, I don’t know...warmer? There must be a coffee shop in town.”

She pushed back the sleeve of her coat and glanced at her watch. “The Java Joint will be closed by now. It’s two days before Christmas, you know.”

He knew all too well. “There must be somewhere else.”

Marlee hesitated, and he could almost see the wheels turning. “I guess we could go to my house,” she said. “I moved to Grandma Berta’s old cottage a few years ago.” She stepped back from the railing and headed toward the path to the harbor.

Ben caught up in two long strides. “My mom told me.” She shot him a quick glance, and his gut clenched at the flash of pain in those lovely blue eyes.

“Funny. She never told me a thing about you.” Marlee squared her shoulders and marched ahead.

An ache grew in the pit of his stomach as he stared at her straight back and swinging stride. *Because I asked her not to. I wanted to disappear from your life. You deserved to forget me.*

Neither spoke on the short walk to her house. Ben waited on the tiny porch as she fumbled for her key then opened the crimson door. “Come in,” she said. She unwound her scarf and hung it on a peg by the door, along with her hat and coat.

He stepped into the compact living room and waited. He felt as out of place as Gulliver in Lilliput. If he reached up, he could probably touch the ceiling without extending his arm. The cottage was one of a long row that had been built for nineteenth century sailors' widows...or in this case, maybe a hobbit. Marlee, however, seemed perfectly at home in the diminutive space. She headed toward the kitchen, which was little more than an alcove off the main room, filled an old copper kettle at the deep farmhouse sink, and put it on the small gas stove to heat.

"Is tea all right?" she asked.

"Anything hot sounds great."

"You might as well sit down." She gestured toward the round table draped with a vintage flowered cloth that must have belonged to Berta.

He pulled out one of the sturdy ladderback chairs and sat, trying to remember the words he'd crafted and rehearsed over the past few weeks.

She pushed a bright red pottery mug with hand-painted holly wreaths toward him and took the seat across the table. "All right. You're here. You said we needed to talk, so talk."

Ben wrapped his hands around the mug and stared at the rising tendrils of steam. He'd thought of this moment for months, but now that he was with her, his mind went blank.

"Ben."

Her voice was softer, less angry now. When he raised his gaze, he saw pain in her eyes, but also a hint of wistfulness.

She nodded. "I agree. We do need to talk. Since you don't seem to want to start, I will. I've missed you."

Guilt turned the knife. "I've missed you, too, Marlee."

"We used to be so close—you, and me, and Matt."

He stared down at his hands. "I know. But after what happened, I couldn't face anyone, especially you."

"It was an accident, Ben. No one blamed you."

He glanced up. "They should have. I blamed myself. I still do. I should have done more. I was weak, and I panicked." Anger and regret churned in his stomach.

Marlee looked thoughtful. "Could you have saved him?"

He'd asked himself the same question a thousand times. "I don't know, but I should have tried harder." He slammed his fist to the table hard enough to rattle the mugs. "Matt was my best friend, like a brother to me, and I let him die."

"The Coast Guard said the storm was too strong. There was nothing you could have done. In fact, you're lucky you didn't drown, too."

"For a long time, I wished I had."

"And that's why you ran away and joined the Navy?"

He shrugged. "I had to get away. I didn't care what happened to me. I thought it would be fitting if the sea took me, too."

She took a long sip of the cinnamon-scented tea then sat back in her chair. "You haven't been home in five years. Why are you here? Why now?"

"I had to see you, to tell you to your face how sorry I am about Matt's death." His voice dropped. "I owe you that much."

"I always knew you were sorry."

"I needed to say it."

She reached across the table and gave his hand a quick squeeze. "And I needed to hear it. So what's next?"

He tried to read her emotions in her expression, but her features gave nothing away. "My tour is up, and I've left the Navy."

"Have you come home to Porter's Landing for good?"

"I don't think so." He shifted in his chair and glanced out the window. A few flakes drifted past the pane, highlighted by the streetlight on the corner. "I don't know."

"What are you going to do now?"

"A buddy has offered me a job as a mechanic in his garage in Newport News, Virginia. I might take him up on it."

"Is that what you did in the Navy? As I recall, you were a bio major in college."

He shook his head. "I was a medical corpsman working mostly in physical therapy."

"That sounds rewarding."

His mind flashed to some of the desperately injured, but determined, young men and women he'd worked with. "It was."

Marlee finished her tea, set her mug firmly on the table, and met his gaze head on. “I have an invitation and proposition for you.”

Ben’s heart skipped a beat. “What’s that?”

“Meet me at the hospital Christmas party tomorrow afternoon at three o’clock.”

“I don’t—“

She held up her hand. “No excuses. Most of the village will be there, including your mom. She comes every year. I’m sure she’d love to have an escort.”

He thought of his mother and all the Christmases he’d missed. If he was making amends, she deserved more from him, too. “Okay. I’ll be there.”

Marlee closed the door behind Ben and rested her forehead on the back of her hand. *You did it. You saw Ben Granger again, and you didn’t cry.* Two fat tears rolled down her cheeks.

Over the years, she’d thought up dozens of things she wanted to say to him, from angry accusations to pleas for attention, but when she finally got the chance, she’d said none of them. Those things had been all about her, about her feelings, her loss. As soon as she saw the pain and self-blame clouding his dark eyes, her concern for her own feelings had melted away. She’d spent five years brooding over personal hurts without truly considering what Matt’s death must have meant to Ben. Maybe it was a Christmas miracle, but seeing him again had loosened the chains binding her to the past. Now, she needed to find a way to return the gift.

A Stitch in Time was closed the next day for Christmas Eve, so Marlee spent the morning baking a double batch of Grandma Berta’s famous German Chocolate Cookies for the party that afternoon. She sifted and stirred, chopped and baked until the heavenly aroma filled the house. When the kitchen became too warm, she opened a window to share the scent with passersby on the sidewalk.

A little before three o’clock, she stacked the cookies and loaded them, along with the box of knitted ornaments, into her car and drove up the hill to the hospital. When she turned into the parking lot, Evelyn Barlow and Mary Duckworth pulled in behind her in Evelyn’s trusty old Toyota. They popped out and Mary took the box of ornaments, while Evelyn balanced two big plastic containers.

“What did you make this year?” Evelyn asked Marlee as they picked their way across the thin layer of snow covering the parking lot.

“The usual—Grandma Berta’s German Chocolate Cookies. What about you?”

“I experimented—*anise flavored Snickerdoodles*. It’s no good to let yourself get in a rut, you know.”

Marlee grimaced. Evelyn was no better at baking than she was at knitting. *Anise flavored Snickerdoodles*? However, she had to admire the woman’s attitude. She charged through life cheerfully seeking out new challenges. Some succeeded and some didn’t, but she seemed to take every experience in stride.

Like most of the town, the dark brick hospital was well over a hundred years old. It had been remodeled inside to keep up with the demands of modern medicine but still retained a few charming features of the original building, such as the large parlor where the annual holiday party was held. When Marlee followed Evelyn and Mary through the heavy wooden double doors, she saw several of the other Knit Wits already at work making punch and arranging the cookie table. A few patients had gathered, and others were making their way down the corridor, helped by nurses.

The party had started years ago as a way to lift the spirits of children who were forced to spend the holidays in the hospital, but soon older patients joined in decorating the tree and singing carols to the accompaniment of the tinny old piano in the parlor. Eventually, it became a tradition for the whole town. For one night, the doctors even relented and allowed cookies for everyone who was able to eat them.

While she unpacked her cookies onto the big silver trays, Marlee glanced around to see if Ben and his mother had arrived. He’d better show up as promised, or she would drive to his house and drag him out. But first she had to find Dr. Wiley. An idea had been percolating in her brain since last night.

Thirty minutes later, the party was in full swing. The ornaments hung from the tree, music filled the air, and half the cookies had disappeared. She’d managed to corner Dr. Wiley for a short chat, and now all she needed was Ben. Where was he?

A finger tapped her shoulder from behind, and she jumped.

She spun around to find Ben and his mother. Angela Granger offered a tentative smile, while her son’s expression remained sober.

“It’s nice to see you, Marlee.”

“You, too, Mrs. Granger.” Marlee shook her hand. She didn’t remember the deep creases marking Angela’s skin and the hollows beneath her eyes and cheekbones. Ben’s absence had taken a toll on her.

“I told you I’d come,” Ben said.

She raised her gaze to his, searching for a clue to his thoughts. “Yes, you did. Thank you.” His eyes remained a dark mystery. She turned to his mother. “Why don’t you get some punch and a cookie, Mrs. Granger? I know Evelyn would love to show you the ornament she knitted this year. I’d like to borrow Ben for a minute, if you don’t mind.”

Angela smiled and patted Ben’s arm. “I’ll see you later, sweetie.”

Marlee watched her make her way through the crowd to join Evelyn and several other Knit Wits at the punch bowl. “You mom’s glad to have you home.”

I’m glad to have you home.

Ben frowned. “I should have come sooner.”

“Maybe you weren’t ready.”

His frown eased, and a smile teased his lips as he met her gaze. “How did you get to be so wise? You were just a kid the last time I saw you.”

“It’s been a long time. I’m not a kid anymore.”

“No, you’re not.”

The warm undertone in his voice kindled a corresponding heat in her middle. She reached for his arm. “I have a surprise for you.”

Ben raised his brows but allowed her to half-drag him across the room to where Dr. Wiley sat talking with a young man in a wheelchair.

“Dr. Wiley, this is Ben Granger.”

The older man stood and shook Ben’s hand. “Glad to meet you. Marlee tells me you were a corpsman in the Navy.”

Ben shot her a skeptical glance before replying. “Yes, sir. I’ve just finished my tour.”

“She also tells me you worked in PT.”

Ben nodded.

“Any experience with spinal cord injuries?”

“Yes, sir. Between combat injuries and accidents, I’ve pretty much seen it all.”

“Good. There’s someone I’d like you to meet.” Dr. Wiley stepped back and gestured to the young man beside him. “This is Mark.” They shook hands. “He’s just about the age you were when you left Porter’s Landing. About a month ago, he was hit by a drunk driver and lost the use of his legs. We hope it’s temporary, but only time and hard work will tell.”

Ben smiled at Mark. “It isn’t easy and it isn’t fun, but don’t give up. I’ve seen amazing things happen.”

The doctor nodded. “You know, you might be able to help Mark with his recovery. We’re short-staffed in PT and could really use an experienced therapist. Would you be interested?”

Ben slowly turned to Marlee. “Was this your idea?”

Heat rose in her cheeks, and she lifted her chin a fraction. “You said you weren’t sure about your plans. I wanted you to have plenty of options.”

“You don’t have to decide right away,” Dr. Wiley added.

“Thanks, I’d like to think it over for a couple of days.”

The doctor clapped him on the shoulder. “No problem. The new year’s a good time to start a new life.”

“Yes, sir.” He turned. “Marlee, could I speak to you in private?”

Uh, oh.

She summoned a brilliant smile. “Of course.”

Ben took her hand in a firm grip and led her to a spot near the doorway, away from the crush of partygoers.

Every nerve in her body jangled. “Now before you say anything,” she began.

He slid one arm around her, pulling her close, and raised a finger to her lips. “Hush.”

She stilled and scanned his face. He looked different, lighter, as if a crushing weight had been lifted. His eyes held a new spark.

“I want to thank you.”

“Mmm. You’re welcome, I guess.”

He leaned forward and pressed a soft kiss to her forehead. “Thank you for being you, for interfering, for caring about me.” He kissed the tip of her nose.

“I’ve always cared about you.”

“I care about you, too.” He pulled her closer and tipped his head up to glance at the sprig of mistletoe dangling from the arched opening above their heads. “The doctor was right; the new

year is a good time to start a new life.” Then he bent his head and met her lips in a kiss filled with all the promise and hope the holidays could offer.

####

Mistletoe Wish

by [Christine DePetrillo](#)

*To anyone who's ever been afraid
to ask Santa for something really special...*

She had just one wish for the holidays. That wish involved a remote for the Universe in which she could fast forward directly through this damn holiday.

Most Wonderful Time of the Year?

Bleck.

“More like Most Miserable Time of the Year,” Katherine Graves grumbled as she waited in a long line of cars carrying people all dying to get out of the overstuffed parking lot at Seaford Crossings. She’d had to elbow through an ocean of shoppers to finish buying gifts for her parents and sisters who weren’t even going to be around for Christmas. They’d all decided to go on a Caribbean cruise for the holiday. Of course Kat had been invited to join them, but she’d be the only single person. The only one without a spouse.

The only one who was apparently unmarriageable.

Her parents had been happily hitched for a million years, and her two sisters—both younger, *gasp*—had tied the knot in a lavish double ceremony three years ago. Their husbands were romance novel gorgeous and doted on Jessi and Ariana as if they were royalty. It was cute at first, but got sickening real quick. Kat swore she had an allergy to seeing such lovey-doveyness.

So while her entire family was off sunbathing on a white sand beach, she was freezing her ass off in Rhode Island and battling aggressive shoppers hungry for a deal.

“This is what you get for waiting until December 23rd, dummy.” Kat squeezed the steering wheel of her little purple Mazda and growled in frustration over the lack of movement in traffic. She swore she’d spent at least forty years creeping toward the shopping center’s exit and it still didn’t seem any closer.

She flicked on the radio, but quickly snapped it off when “The Twelve Days of Christmas” blared through the car’s speakers. She needed twelve days of adult beverages just to make it past Christmas. With a mountain of snow forecasted, empty shelves at the grocery store, and her tiny house where she’d spend the holiday completely, utterly alone, this was definitely shaping up to be the Worst Christmas Ever.

Kat’s cell phone chimed in her purse, and she reached over her purchases to locate her handbag. After digging past her wallet, a half-eaten package of gummy bears, peppermint lip gloss, and something sort of sticky, her fingers closed around the phone. She yanked it out and glanced at the screen.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hiya, Kitty Kat. Where are you?”

I’m imprisoned in a never-ending parade of cars. Send food.

“Just leaving Seafield Crossings,” she said instead.

“Bet you regret that decision.” Her father chuckled.

“You’re a mind reader, Dad.” She rolled her eyes up to the ceiling of the car, noted a piece of red lint stuck there, picked it off, and tossed it down by her feet. These were the things you noticed when you were trapped in your vehicle with no end in sight.

“Did you buy me something wonderful?” Her father was always like a kid around the holidays. He’d don the Santa hat, pass out candy canes to absolutely everyone, and decorate the lawn in a Walt Disney World fashion. There were lights, music, and last year he even added a snowman who recited *‘Twas the Night Before Christmas* whenever you crossed its path. It was all pretty tacky, but seeing how delighted it made her father always made Kat smile. Her mother had to use every tactic available to get the man to go away at this time of year. Maybe Kat would go by the house to see the set-up he had on a timer while he was gone.

If you ever get out of this abominable parking lot...

“I got exactly what Mom told me to get you,” she said.

“The cordless reciprocating saw with the forty different blades?” Her father’s voice had risen in excitement.

“No, the fifteen piece stainless steel cookware set. You know, for all those dinners you’re going to cook now that you’re retired.” She threw a look over her shoulder at the reciprocating saw box in the back seat and grinned. Teasing Dad was one of the small joys in life.

Her father whined into the phone. “Aw, c’mon, Kat. I don’t want pots and pans.”

“We’ll have to let Santa decide then. Something tells me there’s a black mark next to your name.”

Her father laughed, and suddenly Kat wished she’d gone on that stupid cruise. What was she going to do all alone over the next few days?

“I’ve been a perfect angel. You can even ask your mother.”

Kat heard the phone change hands then her mother said, “He actually has been an angel, Kat. I think the drinks with little umbrellas are doing wonders for him.”

Her parents sounded so...so happy. Why couldn’t she be like that?

“Are you having a good time?” she asked. *Stupid question.*

“The best. Wish you were here, Katnip. You should have come. There are a lot, and I mean *a lot*, of nice looking young men on this cruise. I showed your picture to one of them last night, and he said you were the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen. He liked that you were a school social worker too. Should I give him your number?”

Oh, good God. Her mother was *not* scoping out potential mates for her in the Caribbean, was she?

“Kat?”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah, give him your number?”

“Umm, no, Mom. Please don’t.” If she started going out with guys her mother had hand selected for her, she’d have to do something drastic.

Like drink poison.

“He’s awfully cute. I saw him by the pool this morning, and you should have seen the abs on him.” Her mother whistled.

“Still, I’ll pass. Thanks.” Kat popped a red gummy bear into her mouth and imagined it screaming for mercy as her molars pulverized it. Why did she want to be that gummy bear right now?

“Okay. Your call, sweetie. Oops. Your father and the rest of the family are dragging fingers across their necks telling me to cut this short. We’ll call you again on Christmas morning. Bye-bye, Katnip.”

Her mother was gone before she had a chance to say good-bye. Kat shut off her phone and dropped it back into her handbag, stealing another gummy bear in the process. Could a person survive on nothing but gummy bears? Looking ahead at the motionless traffic, she thought she just might get an answer to that question today.

Then, miraculously, it happened.

The car in front of her rolled ahead a whole fifty feet! Kat let up on the brake and closed the distance.

Ah, sweet victory.

It felt amazing to move even that small distance. She hunted for another gummy bear, craving an orange one this time, when...

BANG!

Kat jolted forward when the nose of the car behind her slammed into her back bumper.

“Son of a bitch!”

Her eyes immediately went to the rearview mirror. What kind of a moron would hit her in barely moving traffic? Unfortunately, the driver in the car behind her was looking down to his lap, a ball cap covering his head.

Stupid punk. He was probably texting his parole officer.

She threw her car into park and nearly kicked open her door. She marched to the car behind her, ready to use every foul word she knew. It was damn frosty out and snowflakes were already falling. She just wanted to get the hell home and put on her pajamas, but now she'd have to call the cops and go through all the nonsense involved when some ignorant ass hit your car.

Happy Friggin' Holiday.

The other driver opened his door, and when he stepped out of the car, Kat skidded to a stop, her black boots sliding a bit on the wet road.

“Kat? Kat Graves?” He smiled, and Kat remembered everything that came with that smile.

“Well, look who doesn't know how to drive a car? Reade Collins.” Kat put her hands on her hips and gave him a disgusted once-over.

Reade knew that look. He'd seen it before. Didn't especially care for it.

But still...Kat Graves is standing right here.

He almost couldn't wrap his mind around that notion. The fact that she was still magazine cover beautiful didn't help to clear his head any either. Black leather boots traveled up her long, jean-covered legs. A copper-colored ski jacket covered her torso, and a fluffy scarf looped around her neck. A neck he remembered smelling like peaches from lotion she used to make. He hadn't been able to eat a stupid peach without thinking of her. Damn annoying.

Wavy, blond hair fell about her shoulders under a knit hat. Her cheeks had a healthy blush, and her eyes were a bottomless blue. She resembled an advertisement for winter fun. She'd always looked amazing no matter what she was wearing...or *wasn't* wearing.

God, it had been at least ten years since he'd seen her. It felt like longer.

"How have you been?" He took a step closer, pulled off his ball cap, and ran his fingers through his floppy black hair. He hoped he didn't smell too heavily of garlic or salmon from the restaurant where he was head chef. With any luck, the fragrance of tiramisu had chosen to stick with him instead.

"I was great until some idiot banged into my car." She gestured a gloved hand toward the crinkled bumper of her Mazda.

Shit.

"I'm sorry, Kat." He walked past her to inspect the damage more closely, not that there was a damn thing he could do about it here in the middle of a shopping center. His buddy, Tom, could take care of it at his garage just up the street.

"I guess your attention span has not improved." Kat folded her arms across her chest. "I mean really, Reade, we were basically *parked* and you hit me."

Yes, and thanks for the reminder of my stupidity and incompetence.

This was not the reunion with Kat he had pictured many, many times in his mind. He looked like a fool. Not a good start. Not at all.

"I said I was sorry." He held up his phone. "My brother was in one of his emergencies and...oh, never mind." He exhaled and a cloud of vapor trailed out of his mouth. The temperature was dropping fast, and those falling snowflakes were picking up speed. His gaze went to the flakes that had settled momentarily in Kat's hair. They went well with the icy look she was giving him right now for hitting her.

Why didn't I take some tiramisu home with me tonight?

That would have definitely defrosted Kat. If he remembered correctly, the first time she'd eaten his tiramisu, she'd nearly had an orgasm.

A horn beep made both of them jump.

"Look, let's avoid the police ordeal and holding up this traffic, okay? The damage isn't that bad. I'll pay for it to be fixed. You know where Tom Westin's garage is?" He pointed toward the exit and to the right.

"Yeah."

"If we get out of here in the next millennium, pull into his place. I'll be right behind you."

"Not too close behind me, please." She pointed a finger at him, and though he was supposed to feel as if he were in trouble, that finger had a magnetic pull instead. He wanted to race toward it, let it touch him as it had so many years ago.

He held up a hand as if taking an oath. "I promise to pay attention."

She let out a puff of breath indicating she didn't believe he was capable of paying attention. Little did she know. Now that he knew she was the driver in front of him, all he'd be able to do was pay attention. He didn't plan to let her out of his sight.

Not again.

She may have looked at him like he was completely brainless, but he wasn't going to let that stop him. He loved a challenge.

After what seemed like hours of staring at the back of Kat's head and keeping a light foot on the gas, Reade pulled into the lot of Tom's garage next to her car. A good dusting of snow was on the ground now with a guarantee of more on the way. Good thing his parents were in Florida for the winter or else he'd have to rush off and plow their driveway. With that obligation out of the picture, he was free to...to follow wherever the night may lead him. And he had some ideas on where he wanted to be led.

"Pull her into the bay!" Tom hollered as soon as Reade got out of his car.

Kat gave a thumbs up that she'd heard Tom and did as he'd said. When she got out of the vehicle, Reade had this instant urge to stand right next to her.

So he did.

She cast him a sideways glance, no trace of those sexy grins he had enjoyed when they'd spent nights together.

“Hey, Tom,” Kat said, throwing her arms around the man.

Wait a minute.

At Reade’s raised eyebrows, Tom said, “Kat is my wife’s cousin.” He kissed her cheek.

“I see.” *I’d much rather see her hugging me.* This would have been way easier if he hadn’t looked down to his phone in the car. *Damn Kevin to Hell for calling me.* His brother was getting a karate chop to the neck for this one. Maybe two.

If Reade hadn’t hit Kat, but saw her in one of the stores, perhaps they would have had a cordial chat, followed by a lovely dinner, and ended up rolling around naked like in the good old days.

“What’s the trouble?” Tom angled his head toward Kat’s car.

“I tapped the bumper,” Reade said.

“Tapped?” Kat whirled around to face him, and his heart beat double time over the full force of her arctic gaze. “It was more than a tap.”

“It was not. I barely touched you.” Now he was a little too close to her. You know, within slapping range. He took a half-step back.

“My bumper looks more than *tapped* wouldn’t you say, Tom?”

Tom put his hands up in a time out gesture. “Okay, kids. Let’s not get all riled up.” He followed Kat to the rear of the Mazda and smiled. “Gonna have to side with her, Reade.”

“That figures.” Who in his right mind would side against Kat? “Can you fix it?” He jammed his hands in his coat pockets to keep them warm and to keep them from pulling on one of Kat’s damp curls.

“Of course I can fix it.” Tom kneeled to get eye-level with the damage.

“Right now?” Kat interlaced her gloved fingers and held her joined hands under her chin in a begging manner.

“No. Not right now.” Tom ran his grease-covered index finger over the bumper. “I’ll have to order paint from the manufacturer to get rid of these scrapes.”

Kat groaned.

“Hey, what did I tell you?” Tom said. “You had to have a purple car, and now that special order silliness is biting you in the patoot.”

“Aw, shut it, Tom.” Kat cuffed him on the bicep. “I love my purple baby.” She pressed herself against the driver side of the car in an embrace.

This was the one and only time Reade wished he were a little purple Mazda.

“Let’s see. With tomorrow being Christmas Eve and Christmas right after that…” Tom twitched his lips to the left then right. “I’m afraid I won’t have the paint until the 26th or 27th at the earliest.”

Kat turned a sub-zero glare on Reade, and his insides should have frozen up solid, but instead he felt all melted. Even a furious Kat Graves was something to behold.

“I’ll bring the car back after the holiday then,” she said through clenched teeth. She threw herself into the driver’s seat with an exasperated sigh, and something inside Reade snapped. If she started her car and drove away, that’d be it. They’d managed not to bump into each other all this time. He’d probably never see her again.

He grabbed Tom by the oil-stained shirtsleeve and yanked him down to the bumper.

“What the hell are—”

“Shhhh.” Reade clamped a hand over his buddy’s mouth. “Tell her she can’t take the car. It has to stay here.”

Tom pulled Reade’s hand away and whispered, “What? But the car is drivable.”

“Dude, no, it isn’t.” He opened his eyes real wide, hoping to communicate psychically with Tom. “Help me out, will you?”

“Oh, gotcha, but you’re going to owe me, big time. I’m thinking full filet mignon dinner with dessert.”

“Anything you want.” Reade jerked Tom back up to standing as Kat started her car.

“Whoa, whoa!” Tom waved his hands, and Kat shut off the engine.

She rolled down the window and stuck her head out. “What’s the matter?”

“Well…” Tom shook his head and made a few humming and hawing sounds. “Thing is, Kat, the dented bumper seems to have put your tires out of line.” He dropped to the floor and snaked himself underneath the car on his back. “Could be your brakes have been compromised.”

Oh, he’s good. Reade almost believed what Tom had said. From the wrinkle between Kat’s brows, he could tell she was buying it too, and if she hadn’t suddenly become an expert in cars, this could work.

“Are you saying I can’t have my car back?” She got out of the vehicle and met Tom and Reade at the bumper.

Tom shimmied back out and shook his head, giving Reade the quickest of glances. “It wouldn’t be safe, Kat. You’d better leave it here until I can properly inspect it.”

“Wonderful. Just wonderful.” She paced away, and Reade thoroughly enjoyed how her jeans showcased her perfect ass. “Well, can you give me and my gifts a lift home, Tom?”

“Ummm, I could do that,” Reade said. *Bait launched.*

Slowly, Kat’s eyes focused on him. She stared at him for a few seconds then looked back to Tom. “I’d really rather have you take me, Tom.”

Bait tossed back. Damn.

“Can’t.” Tom shook his head.

Kat tapped her booted foot on the cement floor. “Why not?”

He shifted his weight from one foot to the other. “Kids are expecting me to help them decorate the tree. I’m already late.”

Oh, pulling the kid card. Brilliant! Time for bait relaunch.

“Again,” Reade said, “I can take you. I do have a valid driver’s license.”

“Shocking, considering the way you drive.” She angled a foot at her damaged bumper.

“It’s snowing harder,” Tom said. “Just let him take you, so I don’t have to feel guilty.” He gave her pleading eyes, and her shoulders slumped in what Reade hoped was defeat.

“Fine.” She stomped to her car, ripped open the back passenger door, and collected her bags.

Bait accepted!

“Thanks, man.” Reade clapped Tom on the back.

“Happy Holidays, friend.” Tom pantomimed cutting into and eating a hunk of steak then turned toward his office. “I’ll give you a call when your car is all set, Kat. Merry Christmas.”

“What’s so damn merry about it?” Kat mumbled. She came to stand in front of Reade with her arms full of purchases. When he didn’t move, she said, “Are you going to help me with these or what, Prince Charming?”

“Oh, yeah.” He immediately took her bags and dumped them into his trunk.

You’re slicker than this, man. Get it together.

Kat waited at the passenger side of his car for him to unlock the door. When he did so, he accidentally brushed up against her, and they both froze. Was he the only one who felt that electric shock zip through his body?

“Let’s go,” she said, though something had thawed in her tone.

Thawing was good. Reade could work with thawing. Some mistletoe wouldn’t hurt either.

He slid in behind the steering wheel, and soon they were pulling out of the garage’s parking lot. “Are you hungry?”

“I have gummy bears in here somewhere.” She pulled off her gloves and shuffled around in the purse on her lap.

“Gummy bears aren’t dinner, and I know you haven’t eaten, because you were in that shopping center traffic as long as me.”

“Does that mean you don’t want any of my gummy bears?” She held up the package and shook the remaining bears.

He held out his hand if only to get a part of him onto her side of the vehicle. He hated gummy bears, but he’d consume an entire army of them if it meant her fingers might touch his palm.

“What color?” she asked.

“Don’t care.” *Didn’t they all taste like plastic?*

“You were always so passive. No opinion on anything.”

“Ouch. Look, maybe I’m not the same guy you knew in the past, all right?”

A flash of anger whipped through him. Okay, he’d broken up with her when he went to Europe to study cuisine ten years ago. Okay, he’d dented her bumper an hour ago. Couldn’t she forgive and move on? In both cases, he hadn’t intentionally meant to hurt her. In fact, the break-up was meant to give her some freedom. He hadn’t wanted her to sit around waiting for him and besides, he’d asked her to come with him first.

“Us ending wasn’t all on me, Kat. I wanted you to come to Europe.”

She pointed to the left when they came to an intersection. “And what was I supposed to do, Reade. Paint on the banks of the Seine while you pursued your career and mine sat stagnant? That wouldn’t have been fair. Breaking up was the right thing to do.” She popped a gummy bear into her mouth.

“If you agree, why are you giving me a frigid shoulder tonight?”

“Because you busted my wheels and…” She shrugged and stared out the windshield.

“And what?”

She turned to look at him and said, “You’re still flippin’ gorgeous.”

She wanted to bite back those words, but it was too late. His lips had already turned up in the most adorable way, making his entire face extremely...kissable.

“Gorgeous?” He popped the yellow gummy bear she’d given him into his mouth. The motion of his lips hypnotized her as he chewed. God, it was easier to be angry with him when he was just a memory. “I could say the same about you, Kat. You’re even more beautiful than I remembered, and trust me, I pride myself on not having forgotten a single detail about you.”

Shiver and swoon. Shit.

“So, are you hungry?” he asked again.

Good God, yes!

“How about you cook me that omelet thing you used to make? Remember it?” What was she doing? She was supposed to be going home to wrap presents she wouldn’t be delivering until next week when her family came back. She was supposed to be alone tonight.

She was supposed to be mad at Reade Collins.

“I remember. I can make you something far more complicated than that now.”

Kat shook her head. “No. I’ve tried to recreate that omelet and can’t do it. I want the recipe.”

Reade laughed. “So you missed me then?”

“I missed your cooking.” She looked out the windshield as he navigated through the steadily falling snow. What do you know? He actually was a good driver.

“Well, I’m mature enough to admit, I’ve missed you, Kat. A lot.” He turned onto Swan Pond Road.

“You still live here?” She’d always loved his little house with the waterfront view. They’d spent so much time hanging out on Adirondack chairs by the pond, sharing beers, laughs, kisses...and more. She’d talked herself into believing he had never returned from Europe. Never once drove by his street. Avoided it actually.

“Yeah. I’m head chef at Italia down in Providence. This house is close enough yet far enough, you know?”

Kat nodded. Italia was Providence's most expensive restaurant. Her salary didn't allow for meals there, but she'd read reviews about it. All of them were positive. None of them had mentioned the head chef's name. Had she known...

"Guess that time in Europe was worth it." She unlooped her scarf. The heat in Reade's car must have been really pumping. Yeah, that was it.

"On some accounts it was worth it." He glanced at her with sad hazel eyes. "On some accounts, I'd do it all differently." He sighed. "What about you? What have you been up to?"

"I'm a social worker at Old Creek Road School in Seafield. Been there for about six years. It's good work. I moved into a house about five minutes from the school."

"You always did hate to drive more than three miles from your home." He pulled into his driveway, a single light by the front door illuminating falling snow. It sparkled like fairy dust, and Kat wondered if there wasn't some magic afoot as the car eased into the garage.

"I still like having a driver." She gathered her handbag, her hand on the passenger door.

He stopped her from getting out just yet with a hand on her forearm. His fingers were strong and warm through her coat, and her insides felt as if someone had let loose a flock of birds, their wing feathers tickling as they flew around.

"It was my pleasure to be your driver tonight." He smiled, released her arm, and got out of the car.

She followed him inside the house, closing the door behind her. Once inside, Reade turned around suddenly and backed her up against the door with a hand on either side of her shoulders. She'd forgotten just how tall he was, how his body always seemed to fill a room, how he constantly smelled of something just delicious.

"I have to kiss you." His voice was a low whisper, almost a growl, as his eyes combed over her face.

"You gotta do what you gotta do." She gripped the sides of his open jacket and pulled him down to her level.

When their lips met, that same fire they'd shared ten years ago exploded. Coats, shirts, shoes, jeans, lacy underthings, and boxers fell to the hardwood floor in the kitchen and hallway, all the way down to the bedroom.

Naked and perfect, Reade scooped up Kat in muscled arms and gently deposited her onto the bed. He crawled up the length of her, and she quaked with need, with molten desire for him,

only him. Kissing a trail along her neck to her shoulder then to her mouth, he brought back everything that had made them so right for each other, made them soul mates.

“Oh, Reade...” She pushed herself up against him, felt his wanting, mirrored it.

“I’ve dreamed of this moment, Kat. No one has ever made me feel like this. No one but you.”

“Good.” She grinned and what they made together while the snow fell silently outside could only be described as love. A love returned. A love rekindled.

When they finally collapsed in a heap of entangled limbs, soft caresses, and lingering kisses early Christmas Eve morning, Reade twirled one of her curls around his finger. “I should have slammed into your bumper years ago.”

She laughed and poked him in the stomach. He squirmed away but was back snuggled against her in an instant.

“There were probably easier ways to get back to this.” She dropped a kiss on his forehead as he burrowed even closer, his cheek resting on her shoulder.

“Like some mistletoe maybe?” He raised his head to look at her. “I was wishing for some when we were leaving Tom’s garage.”

“Looks as if your mistletoe wish came true without the mistletoe.” She turned to wrap her arms around him.

“Best Wish Ever.” His arms slipped around her waist and gathered her close, possessed her, claimed her.

Best Holiday Ever.

Kat Graves had only one wish for the holiday. That wish involved a remote for the Universe in which she could pause this moment for an eternity.

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The Penguin Killer

by [Vonnie Davis](#)

She had just one wish for the holidays—for her new neighbor to drop dead.

Okay, so maybe that wasn't the most charitable, jolly-holly sentiment, but the man was slowly driving her insane. Since Zack Romano moved into the other side of her duplex, her quiet existence had evaporated. The man was simply too big, too friendly, and too boisterous. If he invited her over for one more of his weekly family get-togethers, she'd scream. His family, which had to include half the town, was just as loud as he was. She was seriously thinking of having their common wall soundproofed.

Vanessa Baker snatched several bags of groceries off the passenger seat of her car, turned toward the sidewalk leading to the brick duplex, and groaned.

Her wacko neighbor had done it again.

She rolled her eyes. *Where* had nutso found the room?

He'd added another blown-up decoration to his ever-growing menagerie of inflatable lawn ornaments. His half of their postage-sized front yard was a mish-mash of cheap holiday embellishments. She eyed his newest addition and gritted her teeth so hard her jaw ached.

Someone please tell me what an air-filled heart held by a bear has to do with Christmas.

Weren't the half-dozen angels singing the same chorus over and over sufficient for yard decorations? Or the three deer with their heads bobbing out of beat with said angel music? There was the eight-foot-tall snowman next to the six-foot Santa. Wasn't that enough?

Her gaze slid to the green, blow-up, evil-looking Grinch with eyes that glowed yellow in the night, and she groaned. Beside it, Santa wore shades and rode a motorcycle. Animated elves worked at a toy bench and a gaggle of blow-up penguins marched along the sidewalk. Inflatable candy canes and round ornaments the size of basketballs hung from his half of the porch roof. Dozens of strands of lights were strung around every porch pillar, window, and across his half of the roof to highlight Santa in his sleigh pulled by six reindeer.

What an ugly looking mess.

Thank goodness there were only twenty-seven days remaining in December. Their house had to be the joke of their Southern California neighborhood. Was it any wonder traffic had picked up on her once quiet street?

She carried her groceries up the wooden steps to the porch and smiled at her simple and tasteful pine wreath with its red bow decorating her front door. Evidently Mr. Decorate-Every-Inch had never heard the adage *less is more*.

After putting away her groceries and changing clothes, Vanessa hurried back outside to tackle the large box in her trunk. The salesman at the hardware store had groaned and grunted when he loaded the carton containing five-foot high wooden bookshelves. Seeing him struggle worried her. Frankly, she hadn't given any thought to how heavy the box would be for her to drag inside her home.

In years past, her ex-husband handled the heavy work, but Dave and his dark moods moved out last Christmas Eve. With all that followed—learning he moved in with a woman he met online and took with him all of their savings—she was more than happy to see this year limp to a close.

Twenty-twelve had nearly destroyed her.

Perhaps it had.

The giggling Vanessa her friends all loved had been replaced by a crabby, cynical, complaining woman. At the top of her New Year's resolution list was "find the giggling Vanessa again."

Maybe by next October, she would.

She unlocked her trunk and contemplated the best way to remove the large carton and get it inside to her living room. How difficult could it be? She wrapped an arm around the box and pulled, hoping to hug it to her side.

It barely budged.

Shoving the sleeves of her sweatshirt up to her elbows, she put every ounce of her strength into the job. By the time she'd tugged and pulled enough of the carton out of the trunk to allow gravity to upend it onto the street, she was sweating. Then she bent, put her shoulder to it, held her breath, and lifted the heavy item on an exhale and a loud grunt. Vanessa staggered under

the weight across her shoulder. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. The unmanageable carton weaved her back and forth. For a few seconds, all she could do was stagger.

She made it up the step of the curb to the sidewalk, nearly dropping to her knees with the effort. Her thigh muscles quivered with the strain of the weight, and she gritted her teeth.

"Come on, Vanessa, you can do this."

Thank goodness the walkway was only ten feet long. She tried not to think of the four steps to her porch.

A loud rumble roared down the street, and her stomach clenched. Her neighbor's behemoth truck—big and loud just like its owner—swerved to the curb. A door squeaked open.

"Nessa! Don't. I'll carry that in for you."

How many times do I have to tell him my name is Vanessa? She turned to inform him she didn't need or want his help. The sudden movement threw her load off balance. Arms clasped around the box as she fell backwards. Her spine slammed on the hard ground. A loud pop sounded as the box thudded across her face. Pain exploded in her nose and head.

"Nessa! My God." Knees pushed into her side. "Here, let me get this off you." Zack lifted the box off her as if it were no heavier than an armful of tinsel.

Wet warmth flowed over her lips.

"Oh, Sugar, looks like your nose is broken." Strong fingers moved from the bridge of her nose to its tip. The pain made her eyes cross. "Hold on, let me get my first-aid kit."

His heat was gone, and running footfalls sounded on the concrete. Slowly the spinning stopped, and she blinked to bring things into focus. Was her face smashed? She gingerly fingered her forehead, nose, and cheeks and grimaced when she pulled back a blood-covered hand.

Zack settled on his knees next to her again. "Some people bleed more than others when their noses break. Don't be alarmed." His voice was calm and authoritative as he snapped on latex gloves. Cool alcohol wipes were gently pressed across her face.

"Ith my noth broken?" My God, was that *her* voice? Why was she speaking with a lisp?

He was shining a light in her eyes. "Good retina response." Chocolate eyes lowered to within inches of hers, minty breath swept across her face, and a lock of dark, wavy hair fell across his forehead. The corners of his mouth twitched as if he were trying not to smile. "And, yes, Sugar, your noth is broken. I'll do my best to set it so it's still pretty and straight."

"Thet it? No!"

Zack gave a nonchalant shrug. “Set might be an extreme word. I’m just going to make sure it’s straight.”

Fingers slowly pressed into her nose. More stars exploded behind her eyes. “Don’t touch my broken noth.” She batted away his hands.

“Do you want to be called ‘witch’s beak’ for the rest of your life?”

“Witheth beak? Ith it that bad?” What would her students think? She could just hear her eighth grade math students calling her names and laughing at her. Still, did this yay-hoo know what he was doing? “If my noth needth thet, I want a profethenal to thet it.”

He tore open a paper packet and removed two gauze cylinders. “I’m an EMT. Believe me, I’ve handled worse than a broken nose.”

EMT? Was that why he charged out of his house at all hours? Not that she was one to notice or watch his broad shoulders move with an easy grace when he ran.

He shoved the gauze up her nose.

More fireworks exploded in her head.

“Ow! You big thithead. You hurt me on purpoth.” Her one hand tightened in a fist. If he hurt her again, she was going to belt him.

Those brown eyes of his held humor. “Thithead? Sugar, we don’t know each other well enough for such intimacies.”

“Thop calling me ‘thugar.’”

“Can’t.” His fingers were more gentle now. “It’s part of my plan. Maybe if I keep calling you Sugar, you’ll start getting sweet on me.”

“Yeah, right.”

“Do you have pain anywhere?”

“I think my back might be broken. I heard thomething pop when I fell.”

Zack’s hands stilled. “Are you in pain?” His dark eyebrows furrowed. “Move your fingers for me. Good, that’s good.” He shifted to her feet and wrapped his hands around her sneakers. “Push your toes into my hands. Excellent. Now your heels. Good, good.” His fingers slowly worked their way up her legs, probing, exploring.

“Thop feeling my legth.”

“I’m checking for broken bones.”

His hands squeezed her thighs, and she shot him a dirty look. “You’re coping a feel, you thex fiend.”

“Are you enjoying this?” His gaze swept to hers.

“Thertainly not.” *Well, maybe just a teeny-tiny bit.*

“Then I’m not copping a feel. When I do, you’ll enjoy it. Believe me.” His hands swept over her ribs in an expert manner.

“You pompouth jerk. You are tho full of yourthelf.”

“And you’re so cute when you’re miffed about something. Which I gotta admit is most of the time.” Evidently satisfied she had no broken bones, he rolled her slightly and peered under her back. “I found the source of the popping noise.”

“Oh?”

He heaved a sigh. “Yeah, you killed one of my penguins.”

To Vanessa’s surprise, Zack scooped her into his arms and carried her up the steps to her half of the duplex as if she weighed no more than a gnat. “I’ll get you inside and put some ice on your face. You know you’re going to have two big shiners from the box’s impact.”

“Thinners? You mean black eyeth?” *No, please, no!* She had school tomorrow.

He stopped at her door and peered down at her. Those brown eyes of his danced with humor. “Yes, black eyeth.” He shifted, raising his knee to help balance her as he reached to open her door.

Her pride stung. “I don’t enjoy being made fun of.”

His boots clomped on the wooden floor in her hallway. “I’m not making fun, Nessa. What I’m trying to do is lighten your mood a little. You take everything so seriously. Just once, I’d like to see you smile.” He settled her on the sofa, tugged her grandma’s afghan off the back of the couch and covered her. “Be right back. I’m going for ice packs, aspirins and my tool box. I can see you’re not up to putting the bookshelves together tonight.”

“You’re right. I’m not. Thankth for your help.” She sighed, thinking of how she’d never have gotten out from under that heavy box. “And for taking care of me, too.”

“That’s what neighbors do, isn’t it?”

“I thuppoth. Tonight ithn’t turning out like I’d planned. I wath going to make candy later, for the old people at the thivic thenter.”

“Yeah, I saw your name on the sign-up sheet down at the center. Boxes of homemade chocolates and knitted scarves for the senior citizens, if I recall correctly.” His dark eyes locked on hers, making her uncomfortable. “I’m playing Santa at the community party and giving out presents to the kiddies. It’s nice doing things for others, isn’t it?”

When she nodded, the movement of her head made her stomach lurch. “We do too much for children at Christmas, we forget the older people. If only we did things for each other all year round.” She almost smiled. That was something the old Vanessa would have said and believed with all sincerity, not the grumpy Vanessa who’d lived in her heart this past year.

Ten minutes later, she lay with a sack of frozen peas over her face, peeking out from under the Green Giant on the bag to watch the giant on her living room floor, methodically positioning every board and hardware item across the carpet. She tried not to focus on the way his jeans hugged his thighs and butt. In fact, her hands itched to cup his mighty fine behind. Surprised at her lustful thoughts, she pinched her eyes shut.

“Those aspirins taking care of the pain?”

“Uh-huh.” They weren’t taking care of the desire though. She hadn’t thought of a man in *that* way in a year. Why now? Why him?

“What do you like on your pizza?”

“What?” She lifted the bag of peas to look at him. He held his cell in one large hand, his gaze focused on her. Was he inviting himself for dinner? The man was putting together her shelves. The least she could do was feed him. “I could cook.”

“After what just happened to you out there? Nonsense. You need to rest.” One dark eyebrow rose. “Pizza toppings?”

A shudder of awareness sashayed through her system. Oh my, those piercing eyes of his and the way they studied her. It was almost as if he could see right into her soul. “Ah...mushroom and extra cheese.”

Zack dialed and joked with the person on the other end of the line. “You want my order or not, you degenerate slime ball?” His laughter, loud and booming, just like him, ricocheted off the walls. “Give me an extra-large pizza. Heap everything on one half and mushroom and extra cheese on the other.” He lifted a shoulder and forked fingers through his hair. “Yeah, I’m sharing it.” His gaze swept to hers and a slow, sexy smile made her insides flutter. “That’s for me to know, buddy. It’s someone I’ve been trying to charm for a while.”

She jerked the bag of peas off her face, her eyes narrowed at his insinuation.

He winced when he saw her expression. “How’s it goin’ with her? Ah...not so good.” He picked lint off his flannel shirt in a self-conscious gesture. After he gave the person on the other end of the conversation her address, he snapped his cell shut.

She rose on her elbows, her head pounding with the effort. “Who...who were you juth talking to?”

Suddenly he was very busy. A broad shoulder lifted, a tell of his discomfort. “Ah, my cousin, Vinny.”

“Great, my life ith juth like a bad movie.”

“Hey, that was a great flick. Ever see it?”

She pressed the peas back over her face and laid back against the pillows. “No.”

“I’ll bring it over some night, and we’ll watch it together.”

“No.” She was not letting this man into her life.

Evidently he chose to ignore her reply. “I see you haven’t decorated for Christmas yet.”

“I have, too. Thee my pointhetta on the coffee table? And my tree in the corner?”

He snorted. “That’s not a tree. It’s a plastic branch with tiny look-a-like ornaments clinging to it for dear life.”

“Ith a tree. I thupoth you’ve got a giant one in your houth, juth dripping with ornamenth.”

“Damn straight.”

She peeled back the bag of peas and shot him her school teacher glare.

He cleared his throat. “Ah...yes, ma’am, I do.” He gifted her with his sexy smile again, and she slid the bag of peas over her mouth so he wouldn’t see her smile in return.

“Where do you want the shelves?”

The empty box of pizza sat on the coffee table, along with four empty beer bottles. A mellow feeling had invaded Vanessa’s cells. She sat in the corner of the sofa, the afghan over her legs while she knitted the final rows on her last red scarf for one of the senior citizens.

“Againth that thmall empty wall to the right of the doorway.”

“You got it, Sugar.”

She didn’t even tense at his calling her Sugar. As he’d assembled the shelves and they’d shared a pizza, they’d spent time talking. Somewhat rough around the edges, he had a charming way about him. He contained a special depth, which surprised her.

The muscles bunched across his back as he lifted the shelves and positioned them in the center, just like she wanted. “Perfect.”

And the shelves didn't look bad either.

“Will you fill this big thing with books or family pictures?”

“Bookth. Maybe a picture of my grandma. She raithed me.”

His phone chirped. “Yeah. Whoa! Whoa, calm down. Speak slower, Maria.” The wall clock ticked loudly while he listened to the caller. “Where do you think she went?” He ran his fingers through his hair. “Okay, I’ll go find her.” He snapped the cell shut. “My teenaged niece is driving my sister nuts. I need to go play the strict uncle.” Tossing his tools into his toolbox, he glanced her way. “You going to be okay here alone?”

“I’m alone here every night.” After all, she wasn’t helpless.

He moved beside her, bent over and ran fingertips down her cheek. “You’re welcome at my place anytime.” Then darn if he didn’t wink at her. “Take care of yourself, Penguin Killer.”

Her front door closed, and her house returned to its normal, quiet size. He had a way of filling it with his essence so the walls shrank inward to envelope her. Her lonely place was warmer with him in it—or was it simply her frozen heart that felt warmer?

When Zack knocked on Vanessa’s door the next morning, he wasn’t sure how he’d be received. She was a moody somebody, yet something about her appealed to him in a big way. The woman was wound so tight, he had an itch to unwind her to see what lay beneath her prickly exterior.

Her cheating ex-husband had hurt her badly. She had a force shield around her thicker than the Great Wall of China. Yet last night, she’d opened for him—and smiled. Lordy, but her smile was a heart stopper. After he’d gotten back from taking his sullen and defiant niece home to his sister, he’d tossed and turned in his bed, wondering what it would take to make Nessa laugh.

Now he wasn’t so sure she’d even answer his knock.

Nessa’s door creaked open, and tear-filled hazel eyes greeted him. She wore baggy sweatpants and a long-sleeved t-shirt. Her long, brown hair, normally worn in a tight bun of some type, hung over her shoulders in soft curls. But it was her face that tore at him. It was almost completely black and blue; even her lips bore a bluish tinge.

“Morning, beautiful.” Really what else could he say? Bruised or not, the woman was gorgeous in his eyes.

She looked away and blinked. Her chin quivered.

Before he thought it through, he enveloped her in his arms. “It’ll be okay, Sugar. The bruises are only temporary.”

“I look awful.” She burrowed into him, which felt incredibly good.

He rested his chin on top of her head. “You’re not going to work today?”

She shook her head.

“I’m off, too. I worked a couple double shifts over Thanksgiving so a co-worker could go visit family out of state. He’s taking over for me today.” Jason hadn’t been too happy when he called in the favor owed. But when Nessa didn’t leave for work at her usual time, he thought she might need him. “Get your coat and we’ll go out for breakfast.”

“Like thith?” She pulled back to look up at him. “No way. I look like I was in thome cheap barroom brawl.”

“Come on. I’ll take you to my place. I’ll make you whatever you want. Eggs. Pancakes. French toast.”

“Frenth totht?”

He took her hand and kissed it. “Yeah, Sugar. Frenth totht. Come on.” He waggled his eyebrows. “I’ll even show you my ornaments.”

The corners of her mouth twitched. “Let me put on thooth.”

“And cover up those pretty pink toenails? No way.” He picked her up and carried her to his side of the house and perched her on a bar stool at the counter between the kitchen and dining room. “Talk to me while I cook. Coffee? Or would cold juice feel better on your lips?”

“Juith, pleath.” She huffed out a breath. “I hate thounding like thith.”

He set a glass of juice in front of her. “It’s only temporary.”

Her gaze swept to his large tree in the corner of his dining room. “Wow, thath a big tree.”

He walked around to her side of the bar and leaned against it, folding his arms over his chest. “What can I say? I like big. I turn into a kid at Christmas. My whole family knows what a holiday nut I am, and they buy me stuff. Ornaments. Garland. Yard decorations.”

“Oh, tho that explainth it.” She sipped her juice in dainty amounts.

“What? My little outdoor display?”

Her hazel eyes swept to his. “Little?”

He laughed at her prim response. “I like big. Well, except for women, then I like prickly.” He bent and kissed the top of her head. “Prickly with beautiful, hazel eyes. Guess I better make you that French toast I promised.” He turned, but stilled when fingers coiled around his arm.

“Ith that how you thee me? Prickly?”

“I see you as wounded. Emotionally dead, trying to find your way back to the land of the living.” He tucked two fingers under her chin and tilted her face toward his. “We’ve all been there, one time or another. Some can bounce back with little effort. Others need more time.”

“I feel loht. Like Dave took a part of me when he left. I can’t them to get beyond it.”

They’d talked about both of their failed marriages last night over pizza. He told her how his ex decided her career was more important than having children. Nessa’s restless husband found love elsewhere. Evidently the man’s promise to be faithful held no permanency.

“This part of you he took, maybe another man could replace that part with something stronger. Something that makes you happier.”

She sucked air, and her eyes widened.

Whoa, man, you’re moving too fast here. Play your cards close to your vest, as grandpa says. Scare her, and she’ll probably run back to her place in her bare feet.

Vanessa took sick time from teaching for a week while her face slowly returned to normal. Zack’s attentions continued, much to her surprise. Two or three times a day, he’d text her something comical or surprisingly tender. In the evenings, they would either visit his family or stay in to watch a movie and share a pizza or Chinese.

One night they’d watched *My Cousin Vinny*, and she’d laughed at how Zack had most of the lines memorized. When he stood and mimicked Marisa Tomei, stomping her foot as she ranted about her biological clock ticking...ticking...ticking, Vanessa nearly rolled off the sofa in hysterical laughter. She—Vanessa, the sour woman she’d become—was slowly returning to her old self, someone who laughed and joked and saw only the good things in life.

To his credit, Zack kept things light. He’d hold her close during a movie or entwine his fingers with hers as they walked into his mother’s or sisters’ homes, yet nothing more. Well, except for those mind-numbing goodnight kisses, which she relived over and over. Even so, she

was impressed with the respectful way he treated her and also with the little ways he surprised her. The other teachers were still talking about the red and white carnations in a penguin planter he'd had delivered to the school.

Slowly the darkness that had moved into her soul when David left lightened and morphed into a pale rainbow, its colors turning more brilliant every day. Was her next-door neighbor the reason? Or was time merely the healer it was touted as being?

Yesterday after she got home from work, Zack opened her car door, extending his hand to help her out. He planted a warm kiss on her lips. "Hey, Sugar, how was school today?" As usual, he'd jogged out of his half of the duplex when she eased her car to the curb. His loud, boisterous welcome home was quickly becoming an important part of her day.

"I swear the kids get more rude with every passing week." One girl had called her a bitch today. A boy had thrown her trash can against the chalkboard.

He slung his arm over her shoulders and walked her to her front door. "Thank goodness the kids have a teacher like you. I know you care about them. And I'm sure they can sense it too, deep down."

"They take a toll on me. Right now I could go to bed and sleep till noon tomorrow." They stepped onto her porch, and she removed her mail from her mailbox. Two catalogs, a bill, and what appeared to be a Christmas card. She slipped a finger under the flap of a green, oblong envelope to pull out the card. "I'm afraid I'm headed for teacher burn-ou..." Her stomach clenched, and her vision field narrowed to a pinpoint on the picture of her ex-husband standing behind a woman, his hands splayed over her very pregnant belly.

A wounded cry clawed its way free from her clenched jaws.

"What is it?" Zack read over her shoulder. "Dave and Brittany Baker? Your ex? Your ex had the gall to send you a Christmas card with a picture of his pregnant wife on it?" Many expletives followed. All of which she agreed with and doubled in her livid mind.

Twin tears plopped onto the glossy picture.

He turned her around. "No, Nessa. No tears. Not for him."

"I begged him to start a family." She pounded a fist against Zack's chest. "Begged him."

"Just think, if he'd agreed, you'd be raising that child alone. If a fantastic woman like you couldn't make him stay, a child couldn't either."

"Why? Why wasn't I enough for him?"

Zack glanced away for a beat before narrowed eyes focused back on her. “You have a choice here. You can let him control you. Cry and get all depressed again over his deliberate attempt to hurt you.” He placed his hands on her arms. “Or you can rip that thing up and not give it another thought. Is he worth controlling your life?”

More tears fell.

Zack's voice lowered. “Are you going to give him more importance than what's happening between us? Because I won't compete with another man.” His forehead wrinkled in question, and his lips narrowed with annoyance.

Her stomach tensed. What if she lost him over this? She couldn't bear it. “No. No, I'm not.”

“Then don't let him hurt you or come between us.” His hands cupped her face and pulled her to him. “We've got something special growing here. The power of it is getting stronger every day. Tell me you feel it, too.”

He was right. She'd been happier since the day she'd killed his penguin than she'd been for well over a year. “You make me happy, Zack.” She kissed his jaw and rubbed her cheek against his. “You're very important to me.”

A loud sigh rumbled from his chest. “Your best revenge is to lead a happy and healthy life and not give him a second thought.” His fingers sifted through her hair. “Your best bet is to be with me.” His forehead touched hers. “I don't want to lose us. You mean too much.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “You're a good man, Zack Romano. It would take twenty of him to measure up to you.”

Vanessa read the text and laughed.

Joleen, one of the science teachers at the middle school, leaned across the table in the teachers' lounge. “You seem happier these last couple weeks. Want to share that text you're giggling over?”

She glanced at her friend and smiled. “*Hey, Penguin Killer, I can't wait till I play Santa at the civic center tonight. Wanna come sit on my lap?*”

“Penguin killer?” Joleen's eyes widened. “Was there a special meaning behind those flowers he sent you?”

“Long story, but I fell on one of his inflatable penguins two weeks ago and popped it. The man loves to tease.” Although he hadn’t been teasing last night. A warmth spread through her body. No, last night he’d made love to her with slow deliberate moves and sweet words of praise. She’d never experienced anything like it.

This morning she woke to a text on her phone. “*Look outside.*” She hurried to her bedroom window, and her heart stuttered before flipping over and sighing. Zack's bear, holding the inflatable heart, had been moved to her side of the yard and faced her house rather than the street—an obvious private message.

“Vanessa. Vanessa!” Joleen snapped her fingers in front of her face. “Where were you? I have to say, I’m glad to see you act like yourself again. You’re smiling more. Laughing often. Are you and Santa getting serious?”

Were they? They’d taken their budding relationship to the next level last night. The man was very important to her—his larger than life persona, rough edges and all. He was like a big teddy bear under his boisterous exterior. Tender, caring, affectionate. She smiled. *Very affectionate.* He was so different from any man she’d ever known.

“I think we are. Zack knows I’m gradually coming out of a depression. We’re moving cautiously, getting to know each other.”

Joleen dipped her head toward Vanessa’s cell. “So, how are you going to answer him?”

“Now you don’t think I’m sharing everything, do you?” She winked and keyed in, “*Will Santa have a special present for me?*” She pressed “send” and smiled. Having someone in her life again felt good. Although everything about this man felt like more...*more* exciting, *more* fulfilling, *more* comforting.

Her cell chimed to indicate an incoming message. “*Oh, Sugar, you have NO idea.*” She laughed out loud. After last night, she did have an idea, and the idea appealed to her very much.

A few hours later, she stood behind the refreshment table at the civic center, pouring punch for the senior citizens and watching Zack handle the long line of rambunctious kids. He laughed and teased in typical Zack style. Hugs were plentiful as he handed out gifts. He really did have a caring heart. Hadn’t he helped her through some rough times?

“Oh, young lady.” Zack’s dark eyes riveted on her. He beckoned with his finger. “You want to come tell Santa what you want for Christmas?”

Adults in the large room clapped and hooted.

The heat of a blush sauntered up her face as if to announce to the whole center she was embarrassed. She shook her head.

He tilted his and motioned to his lap, his slow, sexy smile causing delightful sensations in her belly and further south.

Oh no, not in front of everyone.

“Oh, is Santa taking older kids now?” One senior lady patted her silver hair. “I sure wouldn't mind sitting on his lap. Have I got a list of wishes for him.” She winked at Vanessa. “Did you knit a scarf for Santa like you did all the senior citizens here?”

“No. No...I...ah...” Her gaze swept around the now quiet center. Everyone was watching her, waiting for her to go to Santa.

“Go on, now. Go give that cute-looking Santa a Christmas thrill.” The older woman jerked her head in his direction.

Vanessa walked toward the sexiest Santa she'd ever seen. His grin widened as she got closer. Feeling all eyes in the center on her, she sat on his lap. “I'll kill you for this.”

He leaned in and whispered in her ear. “You nearly killed me last night, Sugar. Now, tell me, what do you want from Santa this year?”

Warmth seeped from his body into hers. His hand made slow, circular movements on her lower back. Brown eyes, like melted chocolate, studied her.

Was she rushing things? A long sigh escaped. “A promise.”

He tilted his head as if to examine her remark. “And what would that promise be?”

“That I can sit on Santa's lap again next year.”

A large hand cupped her neck and brought her face near his. “Bet on it.” Warm lips touched hers for a heart-stopping moment as the party attendees cheered. He pulled back and removed a wrapped gift from between his leg and the side of the chair. “Santa has something special for you.” He extended a gold foil-wrapped box.

She fiddled with the red ribbon. “Am I to open it now?”

“Yes.”

Her heart pounded in her ears as she unwrapped the gift. Inside the box was an ornament with two penguins standing next to a Christmas tree. Across one penguin was painted *Sugar*. *Zack* was on the other one. At the base of the ornament were the words, *Our First Christmas Together*.

She smiled through a veil of happy tears. "I love it."

"And I love you, Sugar. I have since the moment you killed my penguin and for darn sure since the moment you smiled at me." He twisted a strand of her hair around his index finger, a shy expression tensing his face. "I know you need to take things slow. I'm good with that."

Vanessa placed her palm to his fake beard. "I'm good with that, too." She leaned in and kissed her dream Santa, the man who helped carry the old Vanessa back to the land of the living.

#####

Wishes Granted, Wishes Denied

by [Margo Hoornstra](#)

She had just one wish for the holidays. The same wish that had continued to be denied. Until now.

Inside the modest little house on Parker Street, five doors down from the courthouse, Hanny Cooper sat in the old wooden rocker unmindful of its endless creak, creak, creak as she moved slowly to and fro. Frail hands, gnarled tributes to years of hard work, rested serenely in her apron-covered lap.

One by one, the lights of surrounding houses blinked to darkness as the town of Winslow tucked itself in for the night. Unable to sleep, Hanny imagined so many children in bedroom after bedroom, lay with wide-eyed expectation of Santa's upcoming visit.

A lone candle made of red plastic and white glitter radiated its dim artificial light through Hanny's front picture window. Golden Christmas garland, draped by her unsure hand, adorned the weathered railing of her porch.

Swaying to a stop, she flexed tight shoulders in an effort to ease the ever present pain. At one time it was so easy to do her chores. But now the stiffness crept in like a wounded animal unwilling to give up its bed and made her body hurt so bad she could hardly stand it. The discomfort had been like that before and gone away, yet now it stayed.

She followed the ache in her mind as it traveled down her arms to settle in thin fingers where the tips of them throbbed with each beat of her worn heart.

“Hanny!”

Her head raised in alarm as a voice she didn't recognize called to her from out in the yard.

“Hanny, where are you?”

Another time, she might have welcomed the sound of her name in the quiet. Not tonight. Tonight she wanted to be alone with her wishes. If she stayed very still and made not one peep in response, they might give up and leave her be.

It could be Franklin.

Her head rose a bit at the possibility. Not a day went by when she didn't think about her one and only true love.

But, I must be careful. Franklin had warned her about believing in strangers. He'd always protected Hanny, proclaimed that taking care of her was his esteemed pleasure, born of an everlasting love.

A contented smile graced thin lips as memories of her darling Franklin, warm and comforting and true, began to twirl and loop in her mind.

"The house is smack dab in the middle of downtown, here on Parker Street." Franklin jumped out of the old, low-slung roadster he'd borrowed from his dad and circled around to help Hanny step down from her side. "But it needs a little work."

Not yet glancing toward what her soon to be husband had warned was a somewhat dilapidated structure; she looked up instead into the loving gaze shining back at her. Eyes bright with anticipation changed to apprehension as he pulled her hands into his.

"It needs a lot of work," he admitted, dropping his gaze but not the hands he held so tight.

"But nothing you can't handle," she assured him, linking her arm in his as he guided her toward the tiny, but somehow appealing, clapboard-clad house. As usual, Franklin was right. The house was badly in need of quite a few replacement boards, new shutters and an overall coat of paint. "Or, we can't handle together."

"Together, Hanny. Yes. Together." He stopped walking and turned to gather her into his arms. "We can do anything together."

Strong, sure hands came up to frame her face, and for the space of a heartbeat she expected, and wanted, him to kiss her. Which she knew he would never, ever do. Not here. Franklin was too respectful to subject her to public displays of affection. Though they were long engaged and would be married the very next month, standing in even a partial embrace in broad daylight was scandalous enough. And just a few doors down from the courthouse to boot.

Reading the caution in her eyes, he released her then again grasped her hand.

“Oh, I love you so much, Hanny.” Bringing her palm to his lips, he stopped to look around. “I can’t wait until you become my wife.” He gave the hand a reassuring squeeze, pressing palm against palm, skin on skin together in a way that held a promise of much more love to come.

“Nor can I.”

As they knew they could, Hanny and Franklin had fixed up that quaint little place, together. Where they resided for a very long time, forging a happy life full of precious memories.

Up until the day Franklin had to leave.

Bringing tentative fingers to her chin, Hanny thought hard but couldn't recall exactly why. Doc Harley had tried to explain it to her once. Even now, she could see the kind old doctor's face, awash with sympathy as he spoke. But the precise words coming from his lips, or what they meant, escaped her. Oh, it had been so long ago, she had forgotten.

At the sudden sound of metal scraping metal, the recollections vanished. Her now trembling fingers moved to cover her mouth as she listened to the bolt on the kitchen door slip slowly from its shaft. With her eyes tightly closed, she shrank back against the rocker and wished with all of her heart she could disappear.

“Hanny!” The voice seemed angry with her, so it couldn’t be Franklin. “Don't play games with me, girl. I haven't the time.”

She guessed disappearing wasn’t going to work; she would have to answer.

One hand cupped her mouth. “Over here.”

“Hanny!” The voice, a woman’s voice she should know, spoke from beside her. “I've been worried about you, Hanny, so I decided to come to see you tonight, even though it's late.”

Scowling in concentration, she tried so hard to identify the speaker. She must be careful. She must heed Franklin's warning.

Oh, Franklin, where are you? She cried out, but only in her mind. *I miss you so.*

“Hanny.” First softly, then more insistent. “Hanny!”

Her eyes slowly opened, and she gasped as she recognized her younger sister.

“Margaret!” Relief flooded through to her bones as she clapped her hands in glee and gave into a wide and grateful smile. “You've come to spend Christmas Eve with me! How grand! It will be such fun. We'll have a party like always. Like we used to!”

“I really don't have time to stay,” Margaret began, unable to meet her sister's eyes. “George is out in the car. We're on our way home from Cindy and Herb's. I tell you, that man our daughter married leaves a few things to be desired.”

“Would you like coffee? Hazelnut or plain?” As if she hadn't heard this visit would be short, Hanny rose to head for the kitchen. Hands moving as swiftly as the pain would allow, she laid out a package of cookies and set two plates on the table.

“Margaret, look at the tree.” The high pitch of excitement entered her voice as she lifted a thin arm toward the bare living room. “Isn't it beautiful? Just like the ones Papa used to bring home.”

“But there isn't==,” Margaret began. “That's nice, Hanny.” She nodded automatically, though concern etched the corners of her eyes and drew down her mouth. “Now don't fuss on my account.” She watched her sister bustle around the large kitchen but didn't get up to stop her.

“It's no bother,” Hanny assured her. “Margaret,” she continued as she set a pot of coffee on the stove top to boil.

“I can't really stay, Hanny.” Margaret pulled her coat more tightly around her as she perched on the edge of a kitchen chair. “George is ready to go home. The children were particularly rambunctious tonight.”

Hanny set two spoons on the table then came to sit across from her, expectation lighting her gaze. “The children,” she said, a low reverence in her tone. “I haven't seen them in a long time. I'll bet they've really grown.” She shook her head as if to ward off some distant sadness. “A very long time.”

Margaret averted her eyes. “Well, yes, they have all gotten bigger over the years. They're still just as difficult to handle as always.” She raised her voice as if that would give some authority to an argument she seemed to have with herself. “And loud. We'd have taken you with us, but I know how the children tend to upset you so. George can hardly stand it himself, and he's their grandpa.”

Hanny grimaced as she listened very carefully to the lengthy explanation, remnants of a smile disappearing from her mouth. “You know best, Margaret,” she replied softly, reaching across the table to lay a hand on her sister's arm. Then her smile returned and she leaned forward. “Do you remember years ago at Christmas, the time George and Franklin came calling?”

You were so taken with George, and so wanted me to meet his good friend Franklin. Mama and Papa had gone into town and we were home alone?”

“Land, yes.” Margaret threw her head back then sat forward and nodded. “We had found all the presents Mama had hidden, and we were just peeking inside the wrappings when we heard the horses coming into the yard.”

Hanny picked up the story as she rose to walk over to the stove. “We put everything back and scrambled downstairs just as Papa brought the boys into the hall.” She set the coffee pot on a hot plate in the middle of the table and sat down again. “We acted as cool as you please, as if we'd been leisurely working on our samplers all afternoon.”

“Those were the days, weren't they, Hanny?” Margaret laughed.

“That was the day,” Hanny murmured, her voice trailing off as her mind made space for memories of the very day she was first introduced to Franklin Cooper.

“You remember Franklin Cooper,” an animated Margaret had informed her older sister. “He was two years ahead of you in school.”

Though she would never, ever say such a thing out loud, and certainly not to Margaret or George, Hanny did well remember. Though they'd never said much to each other beyond hello, she'd harbored a crush on him for more years than she cared to admit.

“How do you do, Miss Carlson? Hanny?” A warm hand had taken hold of the one she offered while kind eyes took possession of her heart. “It's nice to finally, and officially, meet you.”

And, with those words and that touch, Hanny had fallen in love for sure. It had been that swift, and that easy, to begin her life-long romance with Franklin Cooper. Their nation had been at war then, the war to end all wars it was being called, and Army Staff Sargent Franklin Cooper was home on leave.

Never had a man been more handsome all spiffed up the way he was in his full dress uniform and hat. He carried himself with a distinctive pride and sense of purpose far beyond his twenty-some years. Franklin told her he was proud to go to war, serve his country, and protect those who stayed home.

She'd been thrilled when he asked her over to his parents' house for dinner the very next evening. His mother had cooked a full five course turkey dinner. Because, she said, Franklin had missed having Thanksgiving with his family the month before.

As it turned out, Franklin missed Christmas with his family that year, too, when his leave cut short and he was called back early to his unit.

“But I need him too,” she’d softly wailed into her pillow, crying herself to sleep on Christmas Eve.

She was too heartbroken to get up early as she always did, to share Christmas morning with her parents and younger sister. Franklin could get hurt fighting in the war and might not come home to her again.

Even though he’d promised.

Despite her frets and fears, Franklin came safely back to Hanny exactly seventeen months after he left. Maybe a little surprised, yet immensely pleased, to find she was still there for him upon his return. She would have waited longer, she told him the night he proposed, forever if she’d had to.

“I love you, Hanny, but you know that, don’t you?”

How often had she heard him say those precious words? Say them with eyes shining in a way which made words unnecessary. Of course Franklin loved her. He showed his love every day of their life together. Showed it in the quiet way he held her as she cried when they learned she’d never be able to give him a child, to make them a family.

“You’re the only family I’ll ever need, sweetheart,” he’d murmured as he pulled her close. He went on to assure her with other endearments she’d barely heard. Endearments drowned out by her sobs of desolation. Endearments she didn’t need him to say to know they were true. In the end, being wrapped in the comfort of his arms was enough. He was all the family Hanny needed, too.

Franklin proved his love to her night after night during their marriage when he drew her into his embrace and made love to her with great desire and even greater care.

“See, you are all I need, Hanny,” he’d tell her afterward, cradling her body against his and brushing the passion soaked hair back from her temple. “You’re all I ever, ever need. You and the endless love you bring to me.”

“Christmas shopping for the children was such a trial for me this year,” Margaret continued. “Not that I’m complaining, but their wants and needs are always so specific, you know.”

“What?” Hanny glanced up and blinked. Looking across her kitchen for a moment, she got up to fetch a couple of coffee cups. Placing one in front of her sister, she kept one for herself. “Margaret,” she whispered her voice low and serious, “Can you keep a secret?”

“Yes, Hanny.” Margaret cast her a smile which didn’t quite reach her eyes. “I believe I can.”

“This time he's coming, you know. I'm just sure of it.”

“Who, Hanny? Who's coming?”

“Franklin.”

Margaret stared into her cup.

“He will be here shortly. Sooner than you think,” Hanny proclaimed with a quick nod of her head.

“Yes, Hanny,” Margaret answered finally.

“Now that you're here, I'd so much like for you to stay. I know he'd like to see you again, too. If only for a moment...”

“Of course.” A look of hopelessness flashed across the younger woman’s face. “I...I'd like to see him, too. Someday...”

“Is something wrong, Margaret?” Hanny asked, searching her sister’s eyes. “You sound sad.”

Margaret only fidgeted with the gloves on the table next to her handbag.

“I know, Margaret.” Once again Hanny placed a hand on her sister's arm. “This may be hard for you right now, but, please, for my sake, try to understand. This is something very special.”

“I'll try, Hanny. I surely will try.” Margaret stared into her sister's earnest face. “I'll try,” she said again then squared her shoulders. “So, Hanny. What have you been doing with yourself lately?”

“Oh, I've been very busy. The house needed cleaning and I wanted my things ready. You know. It's best to have things in order when you go away.” Margaret raised her head in surprise, but her sister was already on her way across the kitchen. “Let me show you the dress I plan to wear,” she called over her shoulder.

Hanny disappeared into her bedroom for a moment and returned carrying a large white box.

“Look here, Margaret, isn't it beautiful?” She pulled the blue cotton dress from its wrappings. “Won't Franklin just love the color?” Shaking fingers smoothed the small white collar.

Margaret remained silent. The dress held tightly against her, Hanny danced slowly around the room.

“That's very nice, Hanny,” she said then cast around as if desperate to change the subject. “You should come over to our house tomorrow for Christmas dinner. I'll have George pick you up,” she added quickly.

Hanny made no answer as she caught her reflection in the mirror by the door. “Should I wear my hair up?” she asked, gathering the thin strands into a pile at the back of her head. She turned to face her sister, her voice urgent. “Yes, I think I'd like to wear my hair up. Remember that, please, Margaret.”

“I'll remember, Hanny,” she said softly, a sad cast hovering around her eyes. “I'll remember. Oh, Hanny,” she breathed then shook herself as if to push off a suffocating despair.

“Don't be sad, Margaret. Please don't be sad.” Settling the dress back into its wrappings, she left the top off the box then returned to her chair.

A horn blast cut through the resulting silence and Margaret stared toward the door with a blank look, until a new sense of purpose took hold of her expression.

“Well, I must leave,” she stated firmly as she stood. “George is waiting.” Despite the words, she lingered to cast a gentle gaze toward her sister before turning to collect her things.

“If you must,” Hanny replied. Taking Margaret's arm, she walked her to the door. “I understand. As you said, George is waiting.”

“I'll see you tomorrow.” Margaret leaned in to kiss a wrinkled cheek. “For dinner.”

“Well...no, Dear,” Hanny began, but found herself alone. Sweet tears glistened in her eyes as she shrugged feeble shoulders. “No matter. There will be time enough later.”

She returned the pot to the stove then carefully cleared the table, shaking her head when she saw Margaret's refreshments remained virtually untouched.

“That Margaret,” she chuckled. “She always did eat like a bird.”

Reaching to clear one last spoon, the task became enormously overwhelming as fresh pain assaulted her fingers. The dishes grew heavy as she carried them to the sink. Slowly,

deliberately, she eased them onto the counter then inched her way to the nearest chair, releasing a thankful sigh when she sank into its support.

Where she remained. Just until she regained the strength to prepare for bed.

Out in the yard a playful breeze rattled against the window. Eyes suddenly alert, Hanny watched as it darted among the treetops then slowed to lead barren branches in a graceful dance. Stray leaves, still whole despite winter's slaughter, jumped and skittered by in accompanying rhythm.

As the gentle sounds faded away, a tiny smile crept across thin lips. Breaths coming in labored rasps, she let her head fall back and suddenly recalled the very first time she walked through the kitchen door of this house with her new husband as if it were yesterday. Especially the way he turned to secure the lock behind them.

With patient expectation, she watched that same door now, no longer afraid as a faint sound, like the shiver of silver bells in the wind, sang in her ears.

Then he was there, framed in the moonlight. Her beloved Franklin.

Moving into the room, he extended his hand toward her. "Are you ready, Hanny?"

She smiled and grasped anxiously with outstretched fingers.

"I've missed you so, my love." She rose from her chair. "I'm ready."

A gentle hand, warm, firm and sure, closed around hers. "Shall we go then, Sweetheart? Together?"

"Yes, my love," she whispered as a sense of peace edged out all remaining fear and pain. "Yes, my love. Together."

Outside the first joyful sounds of Christmas could be heard as the people of the little town of Winslow awoke to greet the holiday.

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