

*The 12 Days  
of Christmas*



*A Short Story Collection  
by the authors of the  
Passionate Critters Critique Group*

## **Passionate Critters - 12 Days of Christmas**

Copyright © 2011, Tina Vaughn, Moira Keith, Nina Croft, Robin Delany, Cynthia Selwyn, Clarissa Yip, Lori Sizemore, Bethanne Strasser, Silke Juppenlatz, Debora Dennis, Chelle Sandell.

Cover Art by Silke Juppenlatz

First electronic publication: December, 2011

<http://www.passionatecritters.org>

eBooks are not transferable. All Rights Are Reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews. The unauthorized reproduction or distribution of this copyrighted work is illegal. No part of this book may be scanned, uploaded or distributed via the Internet or any other means, electronic or print, without the author's permission.

### **AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

This book is a work of fiction. The names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the writer's imagination or have been used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to persons, living or dead, actual events, locale or organizations is entirely coincidental.



## *A HOME FOR CHRISTMAS*

*By*  
*Tina Vaughn*

The aging oak trim splintered as Teresa pushed in the last tack.

“Dammit.” She whispered a quick prayer of forgiveness. She hated cursing.

She arranged the pine garland to hide the dime-sized hole. Finally satisfied that no one attending tonight's party would be able to see the blemish, she turned to survey the rest of the room. From her perch on the stepladder she soaked in the scene – and smiled.

A twelve-foot tree in the corner glowed with flickering lights and silver tinsel. Above the soft melody of Christmas music, the roof creaked under the weight of last night's snow and lanterns sizzled. On each of the fifty crimson-draped tables she'd centered a polished silver oil lamp.

Teresa took a deep breath, the scents of pine resin and cinnamon tickled her nose and brought tears to her eyes.

As the only child of a Baptist minister, most of her Novembers and Decembers, until now, had been spent polishing pews and sanctuary woodwork with her mother's homemade furniture polish. To this day every time Teresa smelled vinegar she thought of Christmas.

“That's really disturbing,” she murmured as she rubbed the mound of her belly. Did little Nicholas or Holly have a sense of smell yet? She'd have to research that when she went to work at the library in the morning.

She glanced at the clock on the wall. She had just an hour before the party began. Jolene would be here any minute with the food. That would give Teresa just enough time to get home, get changed and get back.

There was a lot of *getting* to be done this time of year.

She wasn't sure what it was – maybe a noise or a movement – that caught her attention. She turned toward the door, and her breath exited her lungs in a violent whoosh, leaving her lightheaded. There stood Jeremiah, his broad shoulders filling the entryway, as equal parts happiness and anger filled her heart.

He'd come home.

She lost her footing, the stepladder rocked, tilted...

She didn't actually have time to panic. It just sorta happened. Dizziness, a flash of light, hot and cold...

“God, help me,” she whispered.

“Hell, woman.”

Suddenly she was on the ground, but she was standing, not sprawled on the scarred floor as she'd dreaded.

A big, muscled arm cradled her back while a giant hand pressed her face into the rough wool of a coat still carrying the chill of wind and dampness of blowing snow.

Her knees shook and her stomach quivered like a lime-gelatin wreath.

Seconds passed. Long anxiety-laced seconds in which she heard and felt, warm, reassuring, deep-voiced murmurings from the man who held her tightly. Tears burned her eyes and throat. It was the first hug she'd had since he left.

Where had he been? Why hadn't he called? She wanted to punch him in his square jaw or kick him in the shins. He was the only person in the world who made her feel so violent – or so good. She wrapped her arms around him and squeezed.

Tension drained from her muscles, and the shaking eased.

She leaned back. Well, as far back as he'd let her.

“Jeremiah? Jeremiah Roberts?” It was more question than statement, despite the fact he was right there and touching her.

“It's me.” He lifted an eyebrow. “Did you forget what I look like?”

Never. Even frowning, Jeremiah was the best-looking man she'd ever seen. Her heart jumped and lodged in her throat.

His eyes were as green as the pine tree in the corner, and his jaw was shadowed by stubble the same deep black as his hair. His cheeks were red from the cold and she almost reached up to touch them. Almost.

But, she hadn't seen him in – she automatically rubbed her stomach when the baby kicked – well, it seemed like forever.

It would be presumptuous of her, wouldn't it? To initiate such contact.

She settled for curling her fingers around the lapels of his coat. She didn't know whether to shake him or pull him closer, to laugh or cry.

Jeremiah stared down at her belly, then back to her face. His eyes were filled with questions that probably wouldn't pass his lips.

He'd never been curious about her, had always tried to avoid her.

Except for that once...



Teresa's confusion was as obvious as the giant ball of her belly pressed firmly against him. He reached and pulled a pine needle from her hair. Her pretty blue eyes widened and her mouth puckered. He almost leaned in to kiss her. But, shit, there was a baby between them. And that meant there was a man...

He dropped the pine needle on the floor. At her grimace he bent down and picked it up, shoved it in his coat pocket. The place was as pretty as a photo on one of those home-decorating magazines. Teresa had probably cleaned and decorated the room all by herself.

Everybody took advantage of her... including him.

She deserved better. That's one of the reasons he'd left.

Jeremiah might want her. She might want him, but what she *needed* was some nice, nine-to-five guy who opened car doors and bought her flowers and candy. Had she found one?

He searched for a wedding band. There was no way she'd be having a baby without a husband.

But her fingers were bare, as were her wrists. Her nails were short and plain. No bling for Teresa.

Of course, her beauty was God-given. She was an angel. Pale skin and blonde hair, all sweetness and goodness. Halo-bright.

Regret and jealousy burned a path from his gut to his throat, even as he exhaled in relief. So Teresa had a man, but they weren't married. Jeremiah still had time... for what, exactly, he didn't know. Because nowhere in his Teresa-inspired fantasies had he imagined a freakin' baby.

He rubbed his thumb over her cheek. She had the softest skin he'd ever touched. “You okay?”

Teresa glanced toward the overturned ladder then examined his face. “You mean right

now or since you've been gone?"

He ignored the disappointment, the accusation in her question. He'd stick with now. That's all he could handle.

"What the hell were you doing up on that ladder, anyway?"

*Why the hell are you pregnant?*

"It's just a stepladder." She adjusted her glasses and sniffed. "You scared me."

He scared himself. Just before he'd left town nine months ago...

His eyes automatically drifted to her belly. The old pink sweatshirt she wore was too tight, stretched so taut that she — oh, Jesus. There was no way in hell. No way.

"You look ready to pop." The words flew from his mouth and he cringed. He'd never had a bit of tact.

Teresa's cheeks flushed. She wiggled in his arms.

"I — I tried to call you."

"Call me?" He shook his head. "I don't have a cell anymore." He'd tossed that thing before he'd left town. Besides, where he'd been, he couldn't have it anyway.

"Oh." Teresa's cheeks turned bright red -- and he knew.

He dropped his arms and turned his back on her so she wouldn't see the panic stamped on his face.

Honest to God, his heart pumped faster, sweat trickled down his back and his throat closed up so tight he could barely breathe — the same reaction he'd had that morning nine months ago when he'd woken up with the worst hangover of his life, Teresa draped over him like a quilt and no memory of how she'd gotten there.

Well, that wasn't exactly true. He recalled one thing from that night — thinking he had no business kissing the preacher's daughter while his breath reeked of Jack Daniels.

He'd done it anyway and apparently a whole lot more.

He swiped his hand over his face and through his hair, counted to ten... stalling. Finally, he cleared his throat. "What would you have told me if I answered the phone?"

"I — Oh!"

At Teresa's painful exclamation he was at her side in an instant, his pulse a painful, pounding rhythm that made him woozy.

She was bent over, rubbing her belly.

She breathed in quick, loud pants, and when whatever was going on had passed, she looked up, her pale face tense with fear.

Her cold fingers curled around his. She needed him, and just like that, Jeremiah's panic faded.

"We're having a baby," she whispered. "I would've told you we're having a baby."

Time stopped. Teresa blinked up at him and Bing Crosby sang something about Christmas dreams and light and love --

"Jeremiah?" Teresa squeezed his hand. She might as well have been holding his heart. Actually, she already did. She just didn't know it... yet.

He kissed the top of her head and swept her up into his arms, where she belonged. "And I would've told you I'm coming home," he said.

### ***Tina Vaughn***

*Tina is a wife, mother and newspaper editor who enjoys writing contemporary romance.*

*"The world is full of dark, depressing news. When I read and write I want to know that my 'Once upon a time' ends with 'and they lived happily ever after.'"*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#)



## *FROST*

*by*  
*Moira Keith*

Of all the assignments I could've been given, this was the worst. It felt like a demotion. Had I pissed off the jolly old man? Don't know how I would have done it, but this was a shit detail. I leaned against the garland-wrapped railing and stared down into the mock winter wonderland—complete with fake Santa—in the mall's center pavilion below. It all seemed out of place in the sweltering heat of... wherever the hell I'd been dropped. Beam me up Scotty, I'd like to get the elf outta here.

I scanned the crowd of shoppers laden with bags and festively wrapped packages. They made searching for my mark difficult, but not impossible. It didn't surprise me that he stood near the mechanical reindeer and Santa's workshop. Even on the run, we still longed for familiarity. To not be the freak in the midst of humans. I didn't move in right away, wanting to admire the view I'd denied myself for the past year. Gorgeous, snow-white hair trailed down his back, metallic streaks of silver throughout, like tinsel woven through it. There was no mistaking Jack Frost—the man I'd avoided since the eggnog and unwrapping incident. So much beautifully lean and muscled naked elf, my cheeks heated at the memory.

Shoving the image from my mind was difficult, but I had a job to do. I made my way through the hordes of holiday shoppers and garish elf wood cutouts until Santa's throne was in sight. No Jack.

"Crap!" How could I lose him so fast?

"Why are you here, Holly?"

The voice came from behind me and I struggled to tamp down the shiver of pleasure that surged through me. I spun around and faced the man who'd had a starring role in my dreams.

"You know why I'm here, Jack." I couldn't meet his gaze. Didn't want to risk being swept away in those icy blue eyes that swirled and darkened when he was either angry or lost in the throes of passion. I'd seen both. If I had my way I'd see the latter again.

"No, I don't." His voice held a note of hope when he continued. "Tell me."

"On the job." Something kept me from coming out and admitting he was my target.

"I won't keep you then." Disappointment and bitterness lined his words and took me by surprise.

"What is going on with you?" Concern that he'd changed and may no longer be the man I fell for seized me. There was nothing between us. Not anymore. Just fragmented memories floating around as though trapped in a snow globe.

"Nothing. Must be a real step down from your usual detail. Tell Santa I'm fine, but I'm not ready to come back." He shoved his hands in the pockets of his crisp grey slacks and started past me.

I couldn't let him go. Allowing him to walk away would mean I failed. No matter what the history was between us, I couldn't let that happen. Without thinking, I grabbed his arm, leaned in close enough to smell the scent of cool pine-laced breezes wafting off his skin, and whispered, "I don't want you to go."

He turned his head slightly, his lips brushing against my cheek as he spoke. "Why?"

The slight contact wreaked havoc on my nerves and I began to tremble. He was so close. All I'd have to do is reach out and take him. But I couldn't. Doing so was against regulation.

He was my assignment. Taking him into custody and returning him to the North Pole was a direct order given by Santa himself. Giving in to my own wishes and desires was not an option.

“I...wrapping.” My voice sounded far off and distant. Like I was having an out-of-body experience. Around Jack, I always wanted to be present in body, at the very least. I started to hyperventilate.

“Oh.” A small, swirling pattern of snowflakes appeared to take form in the depths of his eyes. “Walk with me.”

He placed his hand at the small of my back, briefly brushing my handcuffs. “You were going to handcuff me?”

“Last resort only.”

“Really?” He pulled at my over shirt to reveal my gun and the corners of his mouth drew up in amusement “And this is purely an accessory?”

“Want me to shoot you?”

“Not if it’s filled with one of Doc’s tranqs. Wouldn’t want you to take advantage of me.” He chuckled as we walked through the crowd towards Macy’s.

“It’s no spiked eggnog.” I said, unable to keep the past at bay.

“Still equally as powerful.” With a wink, he maneuvered me into a corner.

I didn’t like feeling boxed in, my back against a wall. It did give me a good view of the area though, allowing me to plan my escape route if I should need one. Around Jack, I’d learned to be prepared for the unexpected.

With his hands splayed on the wall on either side of me, Jack rested his forehead against mine. “Why did you leave that morning?”

Of all the questions he could have asked me in that moment, that one caught me off guard. I couldn’t think while he touched me and his breath warmed my cheeks. “It was a drunken night of wild abandon—”

“And wrapping paper,” he interjected.

“Yes, and while it was fun, it was one night. It didn’t mean anything.” Or so I’d been trying desperately to convince myself.

“Didn’t stick around long enough to find out, did you?” He leaned in and pressed his lips gently to mine. It was only a sample of what I’d experienced that night, but oh, how good and familiar he tasted. Kissing Jack was like drinking a cup of peppermint cocoa in front of a warm fire. When he pulled away, I wasn’t ready to lose the intimate contact and I locked my arms around his neck, deepening the kiss.

When we finally separated, we were both a little breathless. I leaned back against the wall to steady myself.

Jack quirked an eyebrow. “Meant nothing, huh?”

“Well, perhaps it meant a little.” Handcuffs—my handcuffs—snapped around my wrists. Cold metal that sent a slight note of panic through me. Was the kiss, the walk down memory lane, all to distract me so he could make an escape? I couldn’t complain considering the reasons that brought me here. “What on earth are you doing?”

“You want to know a secret?”

“Can you tell me on the way home? I have to deliver Jack Frost to Santa’s doorstep on time. You wouldn’t want me to fail would you? Allow me to have an incomplete mission?” I batted my eyelashes at him.

“No. I tell you now or I don’t tell you at all.”

Stubborn man. I could ring his neck. “Tell me your deepest, darkest secrets, Jack.”

“In all the centuries I’ve been around, I’ve never asked Santa for anything. That is—until now.”

My stomach fluttered as if filled with sugar plum fairies and my throat was so dry I could

barely even swallow. “What did you ask for?”

“First tell me what you think of your assignment.”

“You’re joking, right?”

He shook his head. “Not at all.”

“No offense, but being dropped in lands unknown and dealing with this unbearable heat because you refuse to do your job is hardly my idea of a choice gig. And how are all these people supposed to enjoy the holiday without snow? You’ve abandoned your duties and now Christmas in upstate New York feels like mid-July! Do you have any idea how bland the tree in Rockefeller Square looks without a snowy blanket of white around it? Why are you laughing?” Suddenly, I started feeling uneasy. “You didn’t really leave Santa a note saying you were going on strike?”

“I did leave him a note, but nowhere did I mention abandoning my duties for the season. And while this is a nice place, it’s hardly New York.”

I looked around the shopping area. Taking in more than the winterscape that had been set up for Santa photos. I remembered palm trees lining the outside of the walkways as I entered the building. In the distance the sounds of the surf were faint but detectable. Add to that, Jack’s lack of surprise to see me here and—“This was a set up!”

“Let’s just say I must have been *very* good this year.” He leaned in and kissed me briefly. “Because I got exactly what was on my Christmas list.”



***Moira Keith***

*Moira spends her daytime hours as a typical 9-5 slave chasing the almighty dollar, and raising twin zombie sons. During her evening hours, she can often be found steeped in homework, watching an episode of the Walking Dead, or penning her latest novel. She is an author of urban fantasy with a romance kicker, a woman with a penchant for men in kilts, lover of shoes, and connoisseur of Guinness! In other words...Moira is a complete mess.*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)



*IN VODKA VERITAS*

by  
*Nina Croft*

“You’re late!”

Angela jumped, spilling coffee and half-eaten Christmas cookie over the desk. “Thanks,” she muttered.

“Guilty conscience?” Sally asked. She picked up the cookie and took a huge bite. “You know, I really thought that you would make an effort to be on time today.”

“I did. I always do.” It just never seemed to do any good; she was always late. So why should today be any different? Her mind came up blank. “I give up. What’s so special about today?”

“Didn’t you have something important to do this morning?”

“Did I?” A vague sense of unease stirred in the deep, dark recesses of her brain.

Sally regarded her with amazement, then smiled. “You don’t remember do you?”

“Remember what?”

Sally shook her head in mock disbelief. “Can you actually remember anything about Friday night?”

“Of course I can.” The lie rolled uneasily off her tongue. “It was the office Christmas party. I remember everything.”

“Everything?” The skepticism was clear in Sally’s voice.

“Absolutely.”

Sally stared at her for a moment. “You mean, you remember photocopying your bottom?”

“Of course.” Angela shrugged. “Didn’t everyone?”

“Good point.” Sally thought for a moment. “So, you remember telling Martin that he needs a lobotomy?”

Angela almost let out a sigh of relief. So far, not so bad. “Yes. It’s actually something I’ve been meaning to tell him for ages. Perhaps he’ll give it serious consideration. So,” she urged, “carry on then.”

“With what?”

“You know, your list of things that I remember.”

“Ha-ha. I knew it—you don’t remember. I knew you couldn’t, otherwise, you’d be scurrying around in a panic, or sitting under your desk with a bag over your head.” She stood up. “I’m going to let you stew for a while.”

Angela watched her go with a scowl on her face, then switched on her computer and pressed the new mail button.

*Dear Everyone,*

*I just want to apologize to all those I may have offended at the office Christmas party. It was NOT, (as most of you no doubt believe) the effect of too much vodka, but rather the effect of an absolutely gargantuan brain tumor (the approximate size and shape of a football), which spontaneously exploded on Saturday morning. I am now fully recovered, but flowers and chocolates are still welcome (especially chocolates).*

*Angela*

*PS Martin - I still think you need a lobotomy.*

But who to send it to? Better err on the side of caution, she decided, and selected the whole company. She was just about to press the send button when somebody spoke from just behind her shoulder.

“Angela.”

It was Jack, her boss. Six foot three of tall, dark, and handsome, all wrapped up in a designer suit. At least she could be pretty sure she hadn’t embarrassed herself there. Well, no more than usual anyway. She invariably turned into a tongue-tied moron, incapable of action or speech in his presence. Normally not a cause for celebration, but in this instance a definite improvement over the alternatives.

“Huh?” she mumbled.

He stared down at her for a moment, looked about to say something then obviously changed his mind. “I need last week’s numbers. Now.”



“I sent that email,” she said to Sally some time later, “and absolutely no-one, but no-one has brought me any chocolate. I need chocolate. And another thing, no-one will look me in the eye.”

“Kevin will.”

Angela glanced across the room, to where Kevin sat. He was in fact staring straight at her. When he caught her eye, he smiled and waggled his fingers.

“Not Kevin,” she said. “No way.”

“You want to have his babies.”

“I would never have babies with Kevin. Apart from his more obvious problems, he’s got red hair.”

“So have you.”

“Duh! That’s exactly my point. Red hair is carried on the recessive gene. Two red-haired parents and your children have absolutely no chance. Ginger babies. Even drunk, I would never do that to anyone.”

“Well, if it’s any consolation, I don’t think you seriously wanted Kevin’s babies. I think he was just a rehearsal. Like the others.”

The others? And a rehearsal for what? She glanced at Jack’s door, her feeling of unease intensifying. “Beam me up, Scottie,” she muttered under her breath. That gave her an idea, the perfect excuse. She clicked the new mail button again and started typing.

*Dear Fellow Human Beings,*

*I am not going to apologize for my behavior on Friday night, BECAUSE IT WASN’T ME. At some point prior to the party, I was abducted by aliens and my place taken by an alien double. I was released on Saturday, unharmed and this is now me. So I just want to reiterate - I DIDN’T DO IT (whatever “it” was.)*

*Angela.*

*PS Kevin—while there may be a totally deluded alien out there who actually wants your babies—I don't!*

But what was really bothering her, was that there had to be something worse. Much worse, if Sally's level of amusement was anything to go by.

"Sally, why are you doing this? You have to tell me if there's something I need to prepare for."

"Well, you did tell our managing director that his ex-wife looks like a horse and he's better off without her."

"Valuable advice."

"And..."

Angela stopped listening as her gaze snagged on something across the office. Jack was standing by the elevators, talking with the finance manager. She rested her head on her hand and stared at him.

"Yuk," Sally said. "You're drooling again. All over your keyboard. You know, I think it's probably time for another of those reality checks."

"But he's so perfect." Angela sighed.

"Angela," Sally said sternly.

"Oh, okay then. Reasons why Jack will never marry Angela: One—Jack only goes out with tall, elegant blondes who ooze sophistication. Angela has red hair, freckles and is only five-foot-one. In addition she has no breasts, no hips, and she dresses entirely from the children's department in Tesco."

"Good so far," Sally said, "but more needed."

Angela thought for a moment. "Two—Jack is witty, intelligent and intellectual. In his spare time, he goes to the opera. Angela, on the other hand, is scatty, loves practical jokes, and in her spare time she reads Marvel comics and Mills and Boons." She sighed. "Okay, that's enough, reality restored."



"Okay, I admit it," Angela said. "I do not remember." It was now afternoon, and she hadn't even been able to eat lunch. No chocolate *and* no lunch; at this rate she could starve to death. "So, have you tortured me enough? Are you going to tell me?"

"Well," Sally said, "you remember photocopying your bottom?"

Angela frowned. "We've already done that one."

"It was more a case of what you did with the photocopies."

"What did I do?"

"I'm not going to make it that easy, but what happens at three o'clock?"

Angela thought for a moment. "Oh God. The post. I've posted pictures of my bottom." She jumped to her feet. "What time is it?"

"Five to three, you should just make it if you run."

She ran, almost bowling Jack over as he emerged from his office. She arrived at the post room with seconds to spare and pushed open the door, panting.

"Bill, help me."

"Don't worry, your friend came round this morning. They're over there." He nodded to a pile of A4 envelopes on the desk. Angela went over and stared down at them. The top one was clearly addressed, in her handwriting, to the company CEO. She reached down with trembling fingers and opened it. Inside was a sheet of paper.

Across the top was written:

## *Happy Christmas and X my...*

Above a huge copy of a somewhat flattened bottom. It would have been unrecognizable except she had signed, "Love Angela" at the bottom. She rifled through the pile.

"My mother? Why would I send a picture of my bottom to my mother?" At least three had "Jack" scrawled across them. She sighed and picked up the pile.

"Thanks, Bill, I'm eternally grateful."

"Well, just don't tell me you want my babies because I honestly don't think you're going to have the time."

"No," she said, "probably not."



She pushed open the door with an enormous sigh of relief. Another day successfully negotiated. Another disaster averted. Was she a superhero or what? All the evidence was shredded, she'd actually apologized to Martin and she'd even explained the whole recessive gene theory to Kevin, though she wasn't entirely convinced he'd followed her reasoning.

A man was leaning against the wall outside the office. For a moment, she thought it was Kevin and almost ducked back inside. But it was Jack, and it looked like he was waiting for her. Her heart sped up and her mouth went dry. Oh God, had she missed one of those pictures? She came to a halt in front of him. Her lips wouldn't seem to work, and she had to force herself to speak.

"It's not my bottom," she muttered. "It's an alien's bottom." He frowned. Not the picture then. "Okay, it's probably best you forget I said that."

"Actually," Jack said, "I was wondering whether you'd like to come for a drink."

"A drink?"

"And a chat."

"A chat?"

"Yes, I thought we should talk about these babies..."

### ***Nina Croft***

*Nina Croft grew up in the north of England. After training as an accountant she spent four years working as a volunteer in Zambia which left her with a love of the sun and a dislike of 9-5 work. After a number of years wandering the world, she has now settled down to a life of writing and picking almonds on a remote farm in the mountains of southern Spain.*

[Website](#)



## ***THE GIFT***

***By  
Robin Delany***

*The Smith Bedroom, Dec 24, 12:05 a.m.*

Hattie lay on her side in front of Dylan, who draped a hand over her waist from behind. She kept her eyes trained on her bedside table and wiped at her watering eyes.

"I know we wanted to be pregnant by this Christmas, but it'll be okay, Hattie. We have each other, and that's all that matters." Dylan rubbed her hair, and his soft voice made another sob break from her throat.

"I know." She wiped again as fresh hot tears spilled over. "I should be happy for what we have."

After a year and a half of treatments and three failed rounds of *in vitro fertilization that had depleted their savings, they'd spent the last five months trying to face reality*. She was barren. *Barren*. What kind of a-hole came up with that ugly term? Like her insides were a desert, or something. She ran a finger along the ruffled pillowcase that she'd so often imagined a tiny form laying on, suckling at her breast, its little fingers wrapped around her big one.

Dylan kissed her cheek. "We may not have a baby, but we have a lot."

She stared at the ceiling, not wanting to see the ruffle, but really, it didn't matter. Everything brought her loss into focus these days. Was it considered a loss when you never had something in the first place?

"For the past five months, I've been trying to count my blessings. I really have." She held a hand up so he could see her fingers as she counted them off. "I've got a loving husband, a supportive family, and the career in journalism I'd always dreamed of. I know I've got a lot. More than so many others, in fact. I just can't make my heart accept what my head tells it." It didn't matter that she'd wanted a child far longer than her career. Or that she'd owned about fifty dolls as a girl and taken meticulous care of each one. She'd even made little outfits for her egg in Home Economics class.

"I know, sweetheart." He rubbed a knuckle down her cheek. "Try to sleep. Life is always a little harder when you're coming down with a cold. You'll feel more optimistic in a few days when it's passed and you have more energy."

"I think it's probably a mild case of food poisoning," Hattie moaned.

"That's the last time we buy sushi from a gas station."

She swiped at the last of her tears. "You can say that again."

"That's the last time we buy sushi from a gas station."

She giggled, and elbowed him playfully. "Go to sleep."



*The Smith Bathroom, Dec 24, 6:05 a.m.*

"I could loan you some money to try again," Mama said.

"After all these years of trying, I don't think there's anything left to do." Hattie sat on the

edge of the tub, one hand holding her cell, the other covering her eyes. Her whole body ached and she'd had strange vivid dreams that agitated what little sleep she'd gotten. What the heck was her brain trying to tell her by having a giant octopus chase her across a parking lot? Ridiculous. Yet she'd woken in a sheen of sweat.

"You can try it again. Did you ask the doc—?"

"I don't know. Look, I'm not feeling well. I have to go."

"What's wrong, honey?" Mama's voice pitched higher, the way it did when she was concerned. "Are you sick?"

Her stomach roiled. "I think I have food poisoning. I'm nauseous and tired, like Dad was that time he ate the mystery container in the fridge when you weren't home to make dinner."

"Ugh. I still can't believe he did that."

Hattie smiled, practically hearing the eye roll in Mama's tone. Her stomach heaved.

"I'll see you when your flight gets in." Hattie pressed a hand against her mouth.

"But Hattie—"

She dropped the phone and voided her stomach for the second time that morning. And it was only six. This was going to be a long Christmas Eve.



*The Smith Living Room, Dec 24, 12:05 p.m.*

Hattie cuddled with Dylan on the couch, picking at the bland turkey sandwich he'd made her.

"Now she thinks I'm dying of the plague."

Dylan laughed. "When you stubbed your toe, your Mama thought it was the plague."

"She's a little overprotective." Hattie tried to keep her mouth straight and failed. "She means well, but she's a diagnoser. During my childhood, I had ADD, PCOS, and any other syndrome with an acronym. By the time she gets here, she'll have my symptoms all figured into an official diagnosis and the pharmacy on standby with penicillin."

"I bet she will." Dylan's smile widened to show more of his teeth, and he tugged a strand of her hair. "So, what do you think I gave you for Christmas? What's your guess this year?"

She set the sandwich on the plate at her feet and leaned into him again, resting a hand on his stomach. "I'll bet it's a bowling ball. You've been wanting one all year. I bet you got one for me so you can use it when I say I don't want it."

He lifted an eyebrow. "And I bet you got the ultimate box set of *Sex in the City* for me."

"Wasn't that what you wanted?" she asked with wide eyes. "I swore it was on your list."

He smiled down at her and tweaked the tip of her nose. "You're the best thing in my life. You know that?"

"Of course I am." Hattie laughed, stretching to kiss him. "I love you, too."



*The Smith Dining Room, Dec 24, 6:05 p.m.*

*Thud.*

Hattie rubbed a hand over her face. *Thud, thud.*

She pushed away from the table and went to the door, pausing a moment before opening it to see Mama and Papa walking toward the house. Her stomach was rebelling again, but this time, it seemed, the rebels had pipe bombs and machine guns. Or at least pitch forks.

After hugs and kisses, hauling in bags and gifts, and an hour of work related small talk,

Mama stood. "I've discovered the problem."

Hattie sneaked a sly glance to Dylan. "Oh?"

"Yes, and I've got just the thing for you here in my bag." Mama walked to where her purse sat on the kitchen counter and opened it. It must be an herbal remedy, if she had it in her purse. St. Johns Wort? Noni juice, perhaps?

Mama drew a long box with a light blue cover and a picture of a pregnancy test. Hattie's mouth fell open and a stone dropped into her stomach.

"That's cruel, Mama. I'm sick, and I'm tired, and now you shove *this* in my face?" She thrust a hand toward the disgustingly cheerful blue cover.

Dylan came to stand next to Hattie and put his hand on her shoulder. Papa looked away as if unaware of the conversation, as he had during every fight she and Mama had since her childhood. Hattie frowned. How diplomatic.

"That's right, sweetheart. You're sick. You're tired. When I called at eight o'clock, you said the smell of the pot roast was bothering you, and when I called again at two-thirty, you yelled at Dylan to take out the trash before it made you—what did you call it?—ah, yes, before it made you hork. You're pregnant, dear. Now take the test."

Hattie couldn't even let herself wish it in the smallest part of heart. It had been too long, there had been too many 'no's to have a 'yes' with no help. To have a yes at all. She clenched her jaw to keep her chin from trembling. "Mother, do you know what the doctor told me on our last visit?"

Dylan stiffened at her side, and Mama shook her head.

"That's because I couldn't bear to tell you. He said we'd be better off looking into a surrogate, since my body wasn't inclined to accept implantation." She stormed to the cabinet and pulled out the brochure he'd given them, and threw it on the table. It skittered off the edge and landed on the carpet at Mama's feet.

Mama bent to pick it up, studying the cover image of a couple standing on either side of a pregnant woman with their hands on her belly and insipid smiles on their faces.

"I can't give you grandkids. It's not going to happen. Face it." Hot, angry tears rolled down her cheeks.

"All right, now you listen to me, Hattie Jane Smith. You will walk into that bathroom and take this test. If it says negative, I won't say another word." She shook the box and the test clacked around inside it. "But until then, I'm going to harp on this like the *cruel* mother I am."

"Fine!" Hattie scowled and snatched the box from her hands. "But after this, you'll never mention children to me again. Understand?"

Mama nodded, her chin lifting an inch. Hattie huffed and turned. From the edge of Hattie's vision, a smile lifted Mama's lips. The woman may have given birth to Hattie, but she would be the death of her one of these days.



*The Smith Bedroom, Dec 25, 12:05 a.m.*

Hattie lay on her side in front of Dylan, who draped a hand over her waist from behind. She kept her eyes trained on her bedside table and wiped her watering eyes.

She sniffed and lifted the diamond bracelet he'd given her at the stroke of twelve. "We have to give this and your stereo to Mama for Christmas, you know. The insulated socks don't seem like enough anymore."

He kissed her cheeks. "Yeah, and we may have to get her a new car too."

She used a fingertip to wipe a tear from the ruffled pillow. "Don't go giving it all away."

We've got more than just us to think of now."

"That's right. We did it, sweetheart," he whispered, his breath tickling her ear as his palm rubbed her lower abdomen. "We got our baby for Christmas."

***Robin Delany***

*I have a fab hubby, 2 sweet babies, & I love 2 write romance, research, travel, read, & letterbox. I'm NOT trying 2 take over the world. Really...*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)



## MORE THAN A MIRACLE

by  
Cynthia Selwyn

*December 15th. Morning*

"Mommy! What is Santa doing to that man?"

Kelly stopped frosting the gingerbread house and peered under the table where her four-year-old daughter recently sat with a cache of stolen gumdrops. Shelby wasn't there; she was calling from the front room. Surveying the leaning gingerbread structure—more shack than house, really--Kelly sighed. "I don't know, honey. What is Santa doing?"

"I don't know. But the ladder just fell on them."

She dropped the frosting-smearred spatula and picked up her cell phone, then hurried to the front room. Shelby sat on one of the many moving boxes Kelly had yet to unpack. Out the picture window, she saw a man lying in the bushes, a plastic Santa atop him and a ladder across them both. Neither Santa, nor the man, were moving, but standing on the cement stoop and waving a dishtowel, her elderly neighbor stared at the man in horror—apparently too panicked to do anything else. "Come with me, Shelby," she ordered in a voice that made the child comply without question. She took the child's hand and together they went outside.

As they crossed the street, she could hear the woman shrieking, "*O-di! O-di! Madonna mia! Trey! O-di!*" in time to her dishcloth waves.

Kelly dialed 9-1-1 as they neared the man. "Shelby, go stand next to the lady," she told her daughter as she took in the scene. "This is Dr. Pierce. I need an ambulance."



Trey opened his eyes, wondering why his bed was so uncomfortable and who was lying on top of him. And why was he so cold? He struggled to move, but a soft, feminine yet commanding voice told him, "You've had an accident. Lie still. I'm trying to get the ladder off you. The ambulance is on the way." A woman's face loomed over his and his heart stopped. "Theresa?" His wife had died in Iraq; he'd buried her three years ago last Christmas and felt her loss every day. So what was she doing looming over him, a halo shining brightly around her head? "Am I dead? God, I've missed you, baby."

She frowned. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Fingers? Who cares about fingers? He smiled at her; she was beautiful to behold, even though her dark eyes were now as blue as the morning glories she'd loved. "I like what you've done with your hair."

She nodded. "Thanks. The ambulance will be here, soon." She looked up and spoke to someone nearby. "He'll be all right, ma'am. Don't cry."

Nonny. She was talking to Nonny. Trey closed his eyes and took a deep breath—or tried to, anyway. It hurt too much. Why was she talking to his grandmother? *Because I'm at her house. I was putting that stupid plastic Santa up next to the chimney. God, I hate that Santa. He's all faded.*

"I fell off the roof," Trey realized aloud. "I'm in the bushes."

"That's right." Theresa loomed over him again. His heart fell. Not Theresa. A woman, but not his dead wife. She gently touched his face. "I got the ladder and Santa off of you. He's been crushed, I'm afraid."

"Good," Trey said. The vibrant blue of her eyes held his own. He realized that he ached all over, but through the pain he felt something else, something connected to the woman whose gaze locked with his. It was...wonder.



"O-di!" Shelby muttered as one of Mrs. Natale's—*Nonny, she said to call her Nonny*—many grandsons knocked an ornament off the tree. He bent and picked it up amidst a wave of ribbing and more *o-di's*. He turned to Shelby and held the ornament out to her.

"Here, Princess. You want to put it back on the tree?"

"Up there." Shelby pointed to a high point on the tree and he lifted her up so she could hang the ornament on her chosen branch. "There."

"No problem." He put her down and turned back to his conversation.

Kelly shook her head. In the days after the ambulance had taken Mrs. Natale's grandson away, she'd somehow become enfolded in the familial embrace of this big, warm-hearted—and loud—Italian family. An only child herself, she'd always envied people with families like this and she couldn't deny Shelby the opportunity to experience it. Especially on Christmas Eve, when the entire Natale clan gathered at Nonny's for the traditional Feast of the Seven Fishes. She'd had to Google it after she'd agreed to attend the gathering.

There was other food, besides shellfish and salted cod balls and fried squid—*calamar'*, Nonny had called it. Cheese lasagna, salads of every description, fresh bread, cookies, cakes, pies. Shelby was so full of sugar, Kelly was sure she was going to have to detox the child for days.

Despite the house full of people and food, however, something was missing. Nonny had said that her grandson, Trey, would be there as soon as he got off from work. Kelly hadn't asked anymore, because she didn't want it to be obvious she couldn't stop thinking about him.

Something about Trey had touched her. It had been odd to feel her heart hitch and her stomach jump as he lay on a flattened bush under the squashed Santa and heavy metal ladder. But there was something in his dark eyes that pulled at her. It wasn't that he'd thought she was his deceased wife. She'd asked Nonny who Theresa was and was struck by the similarities between them; she'd lost James in Iraq three years before, as well. She'd wondered if that was what drew her to him but then realized she'd felt this pull even before she'd known the story of his lost soldier wife.

A ruckus broke out in the kitchen, a chorus of "heys" and "Merry Christmas" and "It's about time you showed up, you *chooch*" that made her pulse begin to race. Was it him? She made her way to the doorway to watch the family greet their missing member.

But Trey's dark eyes met hers right away, and the grin that spread across his handsome face made her breath catch and her knees grow weak. He pushed through the throng to stand before her.

"You're so tall," Kelly blurted before she could think. "I mean, you looked shorter lying in the bushes."

"And you're so beautiful." He laughed and brushed the back of his fingers over her cheek. The warmth of his hand left a trail of tingles on her skin. "Thank you for saving me the other day."

She shrugged. "I'm an ER doctor. It's what I do."

He nodded. "I'm an EMT. Which ER? I don't recognize you."

"We just moved here. It was an impulse decision. I wanted to be in a new place," she explained, pulling her gaze from his to take in his uniform. "You're a firefighter?" Her breath caught. Prior to going to Iraq to fight terrorism, James had been a firefighter.

"Yes I am." He lifted his hand for her to shake. "Company 12."

"Kelly Pierce. St. Joseph's Hospital." She put her hand in his; his fingers folded around hers and she trembled at the wave of emotion that washed over her at his touch.

"Hey." Trey's brother shouldered his way up to them. "That's how you're gonna thank the lady? By shaking hands? I'm ashamed to call you my brother."

Trey tightened his grip around Kelly's fingers. "Yeah, well maybe I'm a gentleman and not a *buttagats*, like you."

Joey said something that sounded like "Gee-drool," and punched Trey in the shoulder before holding up a sprig of mistletoe. He held it over them. "There you go. Now you can thank her for real and still be a gentleman, *stoonod*."

Trey looked down at Kelly—she laughed up at him, unoffended by his brother's suggestion. When he lowered his face so that his mouth hovered over hers, she stood on tiptoe to make their connection complete.

As soon as their lips touched, emotion so strong swirled around and through her; she clung to Trey in case she fell. She realized then, he hung on to her as tightly as she held him. Love, powerful—and inexplicable—swept over her. As if it were meant to be. And she knew that Trey Natale would be her husband—and she, his wife—for the rest of their lives.



*December 15th, one year later...*

"Thank you for coming with me." Trey blinked back tears as he placed roses on Theresa's grave. "It feels weird, in a way, but--"

"It feels right." Kelly finished the sentence for him, as she so often did. It was spooky how well they were in sync, often understanding one another without words as if they were telepathic. "I understand." She shrugged. "Besides, I wanted to visit James, today, too." Then her eyes narrowed and she frowned as she studied Theresa's stone. "She was killed today? I mean, on this date?"

Trey nodded. "I thought you knew. I said it was her anniversary."

"I thought you meant your *wedding* anniversary." Kelly looked up at him with wide eyes. "James was killed today, too."

"They died on the same day?" He shook his head. Too strange.

Kelly bent and read his dead wife's stone; she gasped and lifted her hand to her mouth. "She was in James' unit! They served together."

He gaped at her. Her unspoken thought hung in the air between them. *And died together.*

Suddenly, it all made sense. Her practically unplanned move to the house across from Nonny's. His accident with the ladder, though he climbed them every day in far more dire situations. Their unexpected attraction and the strength of their love. Trey and Kelly had called it their Christmas miracle...but as they gazed at one another, they realized it was more than that. It was a final gift from their soldier spouses who'd lived and worked and died together, a Christmas gift of love.

### ***Cynthia Selwyn***

*A trapped-at-home mom of three, freelance fiction editor and romance writer, Cynthia Selwyn has been married to the same man for nearly twenty years. If there's anything she knows about relationships, it's that humor can keep the love alive (or at least on life-support).*

*Cynthia started writing at the age of six and has been writing since then. She writes for Breathless Press, where she hopes to earn enough money in royalties to support her coffee habit. Her goal with each book is to bring a smile to her readers' faces and love to their hearts, by writing a sexy story with a touch of magic. Her e-books, romantic comedy, Dog-Gone But Not Forgotten and eroticas, In the Cards and Naughty Can be Nice, can be found at [Breathlesspress.com](http://Breathlesspress.com) and Amazon.*

*She invites writers and readers to reach her at [cynthia@author-wise.com](mailto:cynthia@author-wise.com)*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)



## Last Snowy Encounter

By  
Clarissa Yip

“Just one time, I swear.”

Cole eyed his wife warily. As much as he loved her, the crazy ideas she came up with drove him nuts. If she wasn't the hottest decorator in town and didn't belong to *him*, he would have quickly turned tail and ran. But then, that wouldn't be very manly of him. He glanced down the steep slope. They stood at the top of Death's Peak. It was their spot—the one spot she'd run to when she wasn't happy, but also the one place she'd wreaked havoc on him. He'd ended up in an ambulance, after the many times she'd accidentally tripped him down the hill.

He sighed. “Can't we just do this at home?”

Maddy settled her hands on her hips and glared at him. “No.”

Cole pulled her into his arms and hid his irritation. “You remember what happened last time we tried this.”

She gazed at the night sky. “There are no trees above our heads this time. No snow will fall on us. Put up the tent and let's do *it*.”

*It* as in fulfilling her fantasy to make love outdoors.

“Let's just go back to the house where it's warm and I'll build us a fire.”

She shook her head and pouted. “This is my Christmas wish. I want to do it here.”

*Damn. The lip.* She knew he couldn't resist her pout. Shoving a hand through his hair, he looked around. “What if someone shows up?”

Maddy snorted. “Everyone is home celebrating Christmas. Besides, we did our family duties already.” Her eyebrow lifted. “What? Are you chicken?”

His eyes narrowed. “I'm just worried about you.”

“Don't be. I'm pregnant, not disabled.” She patted her slightly rounded belly.

He bit his inner cheek. The bigger her stomach grew, the stronger those hormones struck. Trudging over to their belongings, he started to assemble the tent. Last time they'd tried this, snow had fallen from the branches and covered their naked bodies. Lovemaking suspended.

Who would have thought his spunky wife had such fantasies?

Once the tent was set up, he made sure the portable heater was on and lantern lit, before holding the flap open and turning to Maddy. “Done. Get in.”

Maddy hopped up off the tree stump and grinned. “About time!” She took two steps and slid backward. Cole quickly closed the distance, but not before she'd already fallen. At least the ground was fluffy with a fresh layer of snow. She glared at him, and he tried to keep from laughing. But mirth struck him as he clutched his stomach. Falling was natural to Maddy.

“The baby!” Maddy gripped her belly. Cole stopped and instantly went to her side.

“Are you okay?” He squatted down. She gave a soft moan. Fear and guilt instantly grasped him around the throat. “Is it the baby? Maddy, answer me.”

She peeped at him with a grimace. He cursed. He should have watched her more carefully, and here he was laughing at her. What type of man did that make him? He swallowed hard when she kept her head bowed. Four months into her pregnancy, he shouldn't have allowed her to talk him into bringing her out here. Just as he started to slip his arms under her knees and around her shoulders, Maddy mused snow into his face.

He froze then sputtered as he jumped up, spitting the cold out of his mouth. Settling his hands on his hips, he towered over her, glaring. She sat gripping her sides, giggling. *Damn wench.* “That wasn’t funny.”

“That’s what you get for laughing!” She held out a hand and he pulled her up.

“You could have been hurt. The baby could have been hurt.”

“Then you shouldn’t laugh at me every time I fall.” Maddy huffed.

“Then stop falling.”

“It’s your fault. You know how clumsy I seem to get around you. It probably wouldn’t matter even if we’re dating or ninety years old.”

Cole grinned. She did have a tendency to be klutzy around him. Only him. And it’d better stay that way for a very long time. Brushing the snow off her back, his hand lingered over her butt. He loved touching her ass. He wasn’t much of a butt man, but Maddy’s cute bottom always drew his attention, especially when she wore her black stiletto boots and sashayed around him like....

He swung her up into his arms and strode to the tent. “Let’s do *it*.”

Maddy yanked the hair at his nape, and he grunted. “Now, you’re being vulgar.”

“*You* wanted to make love out here.”

“I said in the snow.”

“You’re crazy, woman. It’s the tent or nothing.”

She pouted.

“Stop that. You know I’d give you anything, but no way am I going to risk getting you sick.”

With a sigh, she brushed her lips against his jaw as he allowed her to slide down the length of him. “I know.”

He cupped her bottom, pulling her close against his groin. No matter how many times they’d made love, he’d never get enough of her. Keeping an arm around her waist, he lifted the flap of the tent. “Get in and show me your goods.”

Maddy giggled. She bent and started to maneuver into their temporary sleeping quarters. He gave her butt two pats before she disappeared inside. Sticking his head in, he frowned. The space was smaller than he anticipated. He should have grabbed the bigger tent from the lodge, but in their haste, he’d taken whatever was available. All thoughts fled as Maddie smiled seductively and slowly released the buttons on her coat.

Inch by inch, silky pale skin was revealed along with her black satin camisole. She shrugged off her jacket and slipped out of her jeans then sat demurely in her top and panties. She crooked one finger at him, and he was lost. Quickly shedding his oversized coat, he crawled into the tight space. His head hit the roof, but he managed to get his coat off.

Maddy helped him with his shirt. His elbow struck a metal bar. He ignored it and kissed her the moment he got his shirt off. Her fingers attacked his belt and unbuttoned his jeans as he searched for the hem of her camisole. Softness met his palms, and he slid his hand under, lovingly patting her stomach before closing over her breasts.

“Get these off. I want to see you.” Maddy tugged insistently at his jeans. He sat and she climbed over him, settling her legs on either side of his thighs as he tried to push his boxers and jeans off. She dug her fingers in his hair and continued to kiss him. He loved the taste of her—fruity and sweet. Her strawberry scent wrapped around him, drugging him as always.

Once he kicked his clothes away, he settled his hands on her hips and worked the satin top over her skin. They parted for a split second when he’d pulled her camisole off and threw it over his shoulder.

Maddy tugged at his hair, rocking against him as he kneaded her breasts, weighing them, loving them. They’d grown larger with pregnancy. The areolas were darker in color. He loved the little changes in her body as she blossomed with their child. Five more months and

they would finally welcome their baby into the world. *He* was going to love Five Oaks as much as his parents did.

Bending down to sample her sweetness, Cole caressed her stomach before closing his mouth over her nipple. Maddy moaned and drew him closer, rocking against his groin. She tugged at his hair as he laved circles around the erect bud.

“I love when you do that,” she murmured.

He bit her gently, then kissed the spot and moved to her other breast. His hands slid over her hips to cup her butt, holding her flushed against him. The friction added to his desire. His head swam with each motion, each sensation. Frustrated with the satin barrier between them, he gave a quick tug, and the flimsy panties fell apart.

Maddy grinned and then gripped the sides of his face, kissing him. His tongue twirled with hers, her sweetness easily seducing his senses. Sliding from under her, he maneuvered her onto her back. He bumped his head on the top metal bar of the tent. Frowning and aggravated with their tight quarters, he settled himself between her legs. His eyes raked over her beauty and his annoyance slipped away. Her glow wrapped around him like a warm blanket, and he jerked her against him.

Nibbling along her jawline, he moved lower, trailing his lips across the smooth expanse of her chest. Maddy whimpered as his fingers found her. Wet and hot. She lifted herself on her elbows and peered at him with hooded eyes. The desire in her gaze flickered heat throughout his body. Control slipped the moment her tongue ran across her bottom lip.

Tugging her legs to hug his waist, he rubbed against her cleft. Her arms circled his shoulders, knees pressing into his sides. He leaned in to kiss her, but Maddy pushed at him. He frowned.

“Fire!” Maddy wriggled under him.

He held her tighter and tried to kiss her, but she gave him a shove. He didn’t budge. No way was she backing out now. It was her idea to make love out here. “Baby, you are hot. That won’t ever change.”

“No, fire!” She pointed to the corner.

Cole whipped around. *Damn*. Smoke rose from Maddy’s camisole. It had landed on top of the heater. His head hitting the roof of the tent, he grabbed his jacket and started to beat the blasted thing. Cursing aloud, he glanced at his wife to see her laughing, clutching her own coat to her chest.

Once the heater was off and the destroyed satin tossed aside, he settled back in defeat, bumping his head against the metal bar holding up the tent. Maddy slid her arms into her coat and grappled around for her jeans.

“You’re right. We should go home.”

He sighed. Lovemaking suspended. Again. He just couldn’t win.

Maddy leaned over and placed a kiss on his lips. “I know. My crazy idea. But I’ll make it up to you.”

His eyebrow lifted.

“When we get home,” she quickly added.

Stifling the urge to growl, he reached for his clothes.

“Next time, we’ll grab the larger tent, so you fit, big guy.”

He smiled. She said “next time.”

Hope wasn’t lost.

### ***Clarissa Yip***

*Contemporary romance author, Clarissa Yip, leads a life of adventure and mischief. Constantly on the run, she’s always hanging out with her muse, plotting the next best story, and looking for anything that will fuel her imagination. Besides being an avid reader and*

*writer, Clarissa enjoys scrapbooking, video games, immersing herself in addictive TV shows, and engaging in anything that will challenge her mind. A lover of food and languages, she also loves to try new things. Her dreams involve finding the ultimate way of sharing her world with yours. From the Hawaiian island of Oahu to the beautiful season-changing New York, you never know where she'll be.*

*Please join her as she ventures to the unknown as she weaves her stories, escape to exciting adventures across the country, and shares the view of the world through the eyes of a writer.*

[Website](#)



## LAST CHRISTMAS

by  
Lori Sizemore

Daphne Howard drove back into her hometown and nearly turned around and left again. She actually stopped at the post office, but Mrs. Lawrence spotted her and waved hello. Then it was all over—her family would know she'd actually made it before she got back to the edge of town limits.

Why couldn't this be the year that the big blizzard hit? Why couldn't there be a little snow on the road? Anything so she could call her mother and say, "Sorry, can't make it!"

When Daphne pulled into the long driveway, she counted nearly a dozen cars. With three brothers and even more aunts and uncles, that wasn't surprising. Unpleasant, but not a surprise. She'd just have to deal. It was only tonight and tomorrow, Christmas Day. Then she was out of here.

Daphne let her used sunshine yellow convertible roll to a stop behind her brother's minivan and her aunt Tillie's SUV. She could do this. In less than five minutes, she'd carted in the box of presents and hugged every warm body within the two-story farmhouse. All except her parents.

Mama was first. She elbowed her way through three boys a foot-and-a-half taller than her, their picture perfect wives, and Daphne's seven nieces and two nephews. Big families—that was the Howard way.

Mama grabbed Daphne tight and whispered, "I've missed you so much, baby girl."

Daphne bit the inside of her bottom lip to keep the tears from spouting. If she started now, she'd be a goner by the time she saw her dad.

The front door opened and closed behind her as she inhaled the vanilla scent that would always be her mama. Cold air swooshed across them. A smile etched its way across her face in anticipation, but a bit of scolding, too.

Daphne's dad had just come home after a mild heart attack. He should be resting, not out blowing leaves or whatever he'd been doing.

But, when Daphne turned, it wasn't her dad standing there with big, brown eyes, staring her down. *Josh*. Daphne glanced at her mother, who gave a guilty little half-smile and avoided her gaze.

She'd left this house, in her wedding dress, one year ago exactly tomorrow... and her mother had invited the man she'd left waiting at the altar for Christmas Eve dinner?

Everyone stopped to stare at her. At the both of them, really. Even the kids seemed to hush their chatter when they saw Josh appraising Daphne from across the room.

Daphne did the only thing a mature, rational woman could do—she walked out, just like she did a year ago.

She found her dad upstairs in her parents' room. She shut the door behind her and leaned against it. Her dad struggled to sit up, his hair tousled from a nap.

"She is a crazy lady," Daphne mumbled.

"Your mom? Tell me about it."

"What? Why?" Daphne shook her head and crossed to her dad. She'd been standing at the door, guarding it, while her poor dad tried to stand. She was some daughter. "Daddy, let me help you."

He waved her away. “I hate being sick. Your mother treats me like a child. ‘Don’t eat that, get some exercise, lie down, take your medicine.’ It’s enough to make you... Daph?”

Daphne settled down on the bed beside him. “Yeah?”

“Is that why you left?”

“What?” She couldn’t stop wondering what Josh could be doing, just downstairs, right now.

“That’s exactly what your mother does to you. Not the being sick part, but hell. She picked your wedding day. And your dress. And your major in college. Is that the reason?”

“Maybe a little. But Mama only does it because she’s afraid of losing you.” Daphne eyed her dad suspiciously. “Did you set me up?”

“Are you kidding? She’s driving me nuts. I’m not going to defend that. So what’s wrong?”

“She invited Josh. I can’t believe she invited Josh. For Christmas. At the house we were supposed to get married in. *At Christmas.*”

“She’s still close to him, baby.”

“You’re defending her.”

“Meh. I’ll pay you fifty bucks if you go get me a bacon cheeseburger and sneak it in.”

“Not a chance.”

“You’re a good girl, Daphne Anne.”



Daphne marched back downstairs with determination. She wouldn’t let a little bit of awkwardness turn her into a child hiding from the mess she’d made. She’d just walk up to Josh and... um... apologize and then... Well, she’d figure it out.

She approached Josh, who held her youngest niece on his hip. Daphne opened her mouth, but nothing came out.

Josh raised his eyebrows expectantly and then, apparently, decided to take pity on her. “You look beautiful, Daph. Merry Christmas.”

Just then, Mama came over and took the little girl from his arms. “I’m sure you two would like some privacy. You probably have a lot to talk about.”

Daphne leveled a gaze at her. “Mother.”

She glanced around the room at her family only to realize every person in the room stared at the two of them. “This is going down as the second worst Christmas of my life.”

Josh stepped past her, taking her hand, and pulled her to the door. He paused there and looked from face to face. “You know, I love this family. I loved the idea of being part of this family. But y’all really need to get over the whole ‘taking care of Daphne’ thing. She’s been a grown woman for a while now. Mrs. Howard, all of you—with all due respect—let her live her own life. Go back to making eggnog or making babies, or whatever you people do around the holidays, but let her do her own thing.”

Daphne stared up at Josh in disbelief. Where had this man been a year ago? The two of them were practically trampled by her family’s beliefs about how things should be.

Come to think of it, where had she been? It sure wasn’t anymore his responsibility than hers to stand up to them.

“Josh?”

“Yeah?”

“I think my mom’s right.”

“You what?” Josh examined her like she’d spoken in some foreign language.

“She’s right, we need some privacy. We need to talk.”

Daphne opened the door, stepped out onto the porch, and inhaled the scent of pine trees and snowflakes in the winter air. “Come on,” she said and led him to the old swing that hung from the big tree out back.

She sat down on the swing and patted the seat beside her. “I need to show you something.”

Josh settled onto the seat next to her then ducked his head to look up at her from the side.

“Here.” Daphne pulled the worn piece of paper out of her pocket and smoothed it on her jeans.

“What is it?”

“Look.” She held it out until he took it. “It’s an advance. I finally sold one of my stories to a magazine. It’s not much, but—“

“This is incredible. You did it.”

Josh kissed her, surprising her. His lips captured hers and her heart started to race.

When he pulled back, the cold winter day felt like a sweltering day in the middle of summer. “I really missed kissing you,” she murmured.

He stood and said, “Wait right here. I have something to show you, too.”

In only a couple of minutes, he came jogging back to the swing, a magazine in his hand.

He held it out to her and her hands shook as she flipped through the travel magazine. Glossy pictures, write-ups about local activities. Except it wasn’t local to anywhere she’d ever been. “Um, so... Alaska?”

He gave a shake of his head. “Page seventeen.”

Daphne took her time, reading through the article about a small festival, with ice and snow and hot... wait. Something looked familiar here. “Did you take these pictures? Oh, my God. You? How?”

“My new job. I travel, snap pictures, and get paid for it. I’m going in a few days to Times Square for New Year’s Eve.”

“I thought you wanted to work for the newspaper.”

“Yeah, well, I thought you wanted to live and die in this stupid town.”

“You mean you didn’t want to stay here and have fifteen babies and visit my parents twice a week for dinner? Seriously?”

Josh knelt on the cold ground in front of her. “Only because I thought it’s what you wanted.”

Daphne considered their engagement. The way her mother had swept in and planned everything. And Daphne had been too afraid to say boo to her about it. “Oh, God. I ruined our lives.”

“They’re not ruined yet.” Josh slipped her hands in his, warming them. “You want to go spend New Year’s Eve in Times Square with me?”

“You could forgive me after I just left you here?”

“I think we can do things right, this time. What do you say?”

“Merry Christmas and happy damn New Year, baby. Kiss me!”

### ***Lori Sizemore***

*Lori loves happy endings, coffee, and techie gadgets. She writes contemporary romance with a dash of humor. The coffee she takes with a little cream.*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)



## LETTERS FROM HOME

By  
**Bethanne Strasser**

To me, Christmas is about a promise. The promise of new love. The promise of new life. The promise of eternal happiness.

This story is for anyone in need of a good, old-fashioned promise. May this Christmas season be filled with Love.

*Dear Isabel,  
Two months, three days and six hours until you come home. (No, I'm not counting)  
Yesterday, I walked past the school and it reminded me of when I first saw you. You might not remember me because you were scolding some bully for picking on a little kid. I always wondered what set you off. You were bigger than life, long hair flying, mouth running—in Spanish! I had no idea what you were saying, but it didn't even matter. I think that's when I first fell in love with you...*



Isabel Rodriguez dropped the well-worn letter into her lap and stared through the tinted window of the crowded bus.

He loved her? The idea of someone loving her made her stomach twist. She rubbed a hand over her heart. Her secret admirer wanted to meet. On Christmas morning, no less, but after twenty-four letters—two for every month of her deployment—she wanted the discovery. “Although, if he knew me at all,” she muttered under her breath, “he’d know I was going to church with my family.”

The passenger next to Isabel—in her Christmas vest, bright green and red with Rudolf knitted on one side and Santa on the other, shifted, looking at her with a questioning frown.

Isabel cleared her throat and smiled, “Sorry. Just thinking out loud.”

...just thinking that when she found out who’d made her fall in love with him without even telling her his name, she was going to kick his butt.

The bus pulled into her home town of Red Bluff and stopped on the corner of Elm Street and Main.

Cold air washed over her as she stepped down into Northern California’s December mist. The driver pulled her duffle from the cargo bay, and she thanked him.

“No. Thank *you*, miss.”

She smiled and shook the hand he offered. “Merry Christmas.”

“Welcome home,” he added then waved before driving off.

“Eesabel!” An oh-so-familiar voice echoed from the church parking lot, strong and clear—or just plain loud. Heels clattered over the cold cement and jangling sounds of bracelets filled the air like bells in a Christmas song.

At first braced for impact, Isabel relaxed in her sister’s arms, the worry of tomorrow falling away.

“Maria, girl,” she scolded. “You need a jacket.”

“Never mind that. How was your flight home? Did you have to stay long on base before they set you free?” Maria looked her over—head to toe. “You lost weight again. Oh, but it’s so good to see you.”

Isabel cringed inside. It seemed with every deployment she lost a few too many pounds. “I’m just glad to be home. Where is everyone? No balloons? No band? Not even a roll of ticker tape for my return?”

“Very funny. We know you too well. You would be tempted to use your M-16. Come on. Mom says to stop at the church and light a candle. Then we’ll go home.” Maria hooked her arm through Isabel’s with a pregnant pause before she continued, “Have you gotten any more letters?”

“He wants to meet.” Isabel still didn’t know what to think of it. A secret admirer? It was weird... yet romantic—for a deprived soul like herself. “Christmas morning.”

The answering sigh was expected and familiar. “Have you figured out who he is?”

She threw her bag in the back of the car with a shrug and climbed in. “No. I’ve thought about it, but in the end, something stops me from really trying. Is it wrong to just enjoy the conversation and the attention?” It had been a long time since anyone had pursued her. “He’s kind, smart, funny. He likes kids and wants a large family. Of course, I’ll have to convince him otherwise about that.”

“Ha ha. You love us.” Maria tapped a finger on the steering wheel. “Just one guess, though. You have to have at least one guess.”

“You want to gossip,” Isabel accused with a laugh. “I don’t know. If I knew, I might not be so taken.”

“So you *are* attracted. I do hope he’s young and good-looking” She wagged a finger in her direction. “He could be fat.”

Maria’s reality check made Isabel smile. “Love handles won’t matter as long as he has a brain and a heart.”

The neighborhood passing by—the Christmas lights especially—drove home the absoluteness of her mission completed. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

Straining her neck to see down River Road as they crossed it, she wondered if Zack was back yet. She missed having him to talk to like they’d been able to do while she trained at Fort Benning.

“Well, you won’t go alone.”

But, Isabel had every plan to go alone. Good Lord, she didn’t need an audience to watch her make a fool of herself.



“Can I get you something to drink, Isa? Gin and tonic? Or perhaps a beer?”

“Isabel,” she corrected her new, *old* friend with a smile. “No, thank you. I might fall over. How about a glass of punch?” She put a hand on Phillip’s arm. A gentle squeeze had his eyes lighting up like her mother’s Christmas tree in the corner of the living room. He was a nice guy. Nice. And she wondered if he was the one. Her heart hadn’t fluttered when he approached her earlier, and after all the letters, she was certain there would be something—a

spark of recognition.

Isabel side-stepped into the alcove, out of the way of all the traffic—family, friends, and strangers. Exhaustion blurred the edges of the celebration as the last four days of processing and travel caught up with her. She needed just five minutes against this wall to get her second wind, because if there was one thing the Rodriguez family knew how to do well, it was celebrate. Holidays, holy days, first communions, weddings, even funerals.

Food would pour out of the kitchen as if it was the last day on earth. Drink would flow and music would resound through the rafters. She loved it. And hated it. The family joke was that she'd joined the Army to be alone. There could be a grain of truth in that.

A hand settled on her shoulder and she jerked away.

Zack Benson raised his hands in surrender. "Whoa. Slow down killer."

Isabel scowled. "Oh, it's you."

A long time ago, they'd been like siblings. Now, not so much. Now, she had an urge to fix her hair and stand up straighter. Those she could ignore, but the racing of her heart gave her away as it had since that summer after graduation.

*He was her friend nothing more, like a brother.*

"If Phillip's bothering you, I could take care of him."

"You better not," she demanded, horrified at the thought of him running off a potential love match and just as horrified that he noticed her awkwardness. "You've done enough for me in the past, thank you very much, Zack. I won't have you messing with this."

"A love match, eh?" Zack held up a plate of food.

"I didn't say that." Her frown caused a headache right between her eyes. She grabbed a piece of broccoli and dipped it.

Zack brushed a finger across the paper sticking out of her shirt pocket and left a trail of warmth across her collarbone.

Maybe the doctor was right about needing more rest. She blinked away a touch of lightheadedness. Yes, that was it—fatigue.

She'd carried the letter for months. As proof that someone on God's green earth wanted her. Maybe Phillip? "He works with the fire department—an investigator, and he's very nice. He likes children." *As a matter of fact, he has two of his own.* That hadn't been in the letters.

She wanted children, though.

"You look like hell, Isabel. You need food and sleep in that order, not some idiot who writes sissy love notes and offers you beer when it's obvious you're about to fall over already."

Tears tickled the back of her eyes. She was tired. And irritated by the whole mystery. Chinese torture, that's what it made her think of and she wanted to scream. "Don't call him an idiot."

Zack was always being over-protective.

"*Mija, amor.*" Her mother approached and interrupted, putting an arm around her and giving Zack a hard look. "Go find something to do besides tease my daughter."

Zack winced. "*Los sientos*, Margaret." He waited a heartbeat. "And Isabel."

Phillip strode through the crowded kitchen toward her and a sound must have escaped, because her mother tsked. "Don't get caught up in something that isn't real, Isabel. You don't even know if he's the one."

"But, he *could* be the one, Mamá." Her voice faltered and the room spun.

Phillip was standing over her with a punch in one hand. The silly grin on his face turned to worry. "Isabel?"

Isabel opened her mouth to respond. Nothing came out. Lightheaded, she frowned. A chair. She needed a chair.

Her mom's lovely face came into sudden, sharp focus. Her lips were moving, but it was

as if someone had muted a television. Beautifully tapered fingers snapped at someone behind her.

“Miguel!” Zack called to her dad. But, his strong, commanding voice faded.

“I’m so sorry,” Isabel whispered as someone wrapped arms around her, and she slipped into the sweet, blessed oblivion of darkness.



The letter, which had been in her pocket last night, was gone. She threw back the covers of her bed, frantically searching, and dumped the contents of her dresser drawers. Gone? After all this time? She couldn’t believe it.

She wanted to cry.

Maybe it was a sign. She’d held onto it for so long. Maybe God was telling her to put aside false hopes. She sighed. That’s what her mother had said, anyway.

After rushing to get out the door, Isabel drove to Ayer Park with a pounding heart and sweaty hands. She hadn’t been this nervous since...well, ever. There wasn’t even a car in the parking lot. Isabel shut off her car and got out. A breeze cut through the trees, and she tightened her coat, tying it off in front. She slipped her hands into leather gloves and stuffed them in her pockets.

After years of playing in the park as a kid, the stone path was familiar under her feet.

God had allowed her a good night’s sleep followed by the most gorgeous sunrise she’d seen since leaving Afghanistan. There was eternal promise in the blazing colors and it lifted her hesitant mood as she took the last turn in the path and followed it toward the row of trees along the river bank. A figure stepped into view.

Someone *was* there.

Slowing, she caught a glimpse of dark hair and a jean jacket—she knew that jean jacket. And a jaw line, smooth and square. She would recognize it anywhere. Her heart fell.

*Oh no.* What had he done? A fire started under her feet and she steamed closer. That son-of-a-gun. She did *not* need his protection any more.

“Zachariah Edward Benson!”

He turned, watching her approach with hooded eyes.

“You sent him away, didn’t you?” She stopped short in front of him and pummeled him with her fists.

“Isabel,” he growled, trapped her in a grip and gave her a little shake.

Her teeth chattered closed. And she stopped. “Who was it?”

“Back to your old fighting self, I see.”

She stomped her foot and looked him in the eye.

All argument fled at nervousness shimmering in his blue eyes. Not just nerves. Longing. “But...”

“I have something for you.” He fumbled into the front of his jacket and pulled out a piece of paper.

“My letter!” Isabel grabbed it from him and smoothed out the roughened edges. “How did you? I mean, when...”

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and shrugged a shoulder. “I took it last night after carrying you up to your room.”

“You? Oh,” she breathed. “I’d thought...”

“Um, do you think you might finish a sentence?”

She shook her head slowly and really looked at him again. The spark of humor in his eyes. The slightly crooked nose, broken during combatives during training together a few

years ago. Maybe it was okay that he'd scared the letter writer away. She already loved him. Letters from a stranger could not mean as much as what she was feeling right this minute.

Isabel grabbed the letter by each side and started to rip.

"What are you doing? Stop," Zack exclaimed and stole the paper back from her grip.

"Don't you see?" she questioned, stepping closer to him and reaching for his hand. "It doesn't matter anymore who was here."

His brow rose and, with a chuckle, he handed the letter back. "Read it."

A touch of sadness stole over her as she let go of love that could never match what she'd had right here all along.

*I can't wait to see you on Christmas morning.  
Stay safe. I'm praying for you.*

What? Her gaze flew to Zack then back to the letter. Her heart pounded ferociously against her sternum, and a laugh bubbled out.

A line had been added at the bottom of her letter.

*P.S. It's me.*

***Bethanne Strasser***

*Mother of FIVE smarty-pants and married to her Love for twelve years, Bethanne spends her time writing stories that always--without a doubt--end happy.*

[Website](#) | [Facebook](#)



## FALL FOR LOVE

by  
**Silke Juppenlatz**

Renee tugged on the fir, guessing the height while she checked the branches. It was a pretty tree, and it would fit her tiny living room.

“Don’t get that tree.”

She turned to see who’d murmured the advice, but saw no one. “Excuse me?”

“It’s lousy for holding needles.” The voice came from behind another tree. “Don’t buy it.”

“I’m not taking advice from a Christmas tree.” Renee chuckled. “I think you might be telling me fibs, so I take you home with me and get you out of the cold.”

An answering chuckle sounded through the branches, then a man stepped around the tall tree -- and Renee’s mind went blank. Holy crap. Adonis was alive and kicking, and giving Christmas tree advice.

Adonis winked at her, an amused smile on his lips. “Hey, if it gets me fed, I might just come home with you. I never pass up turkey, especially not if I don’t have to cook it.”

Renee couldn’t get over the laughing deep blue eyes in a face that belonged on the cover of a magazine. He was about half a foot taller than her. Strong and well built, with long legs encased in denim and a torso covered by a sheepskin jacket, he looked as sturdy as an oak. Unruly dark hair surrounded his face. He reminded her of a Viking she’d once seen -- only this guy would give her sigh-worthy painting a run for its money. Where did they make men like him?

Wait a minute. Had he just invited himself to dinner?

Ignoring his comment, she smiled back. “So why shouldn’t I get the fir? It’s pretty.”

“Your fir is a spruce. A Norway Spruce, to be exact. It’ll drop all its needles on the floor if you so much as sneeze.” He took the tree from her, lifted it, and dropped it on its stump. A rain of needles dropped out of it. “See?”

“Oh.” No, that wouldn’t do. She lifted the label on the tree. “But it says here it’s a fir.”

“Mislabeled.” A boyish grin lifted the corners of his mouth.

“All right, not that one then.” She looked around the lot. “What do you suggest?”

He took her hand and led her to a bluish tinged tree. “This one wants to come home with you.”

Renee was still recovering from having a large male hand engulf hers and stared at the tree without really seeing it.

“Your hands are icy, Renee. Why aren’t you wearing gloves?” He took her other hand and held them in his.

She’d forgotten them, but the warmth from his hands more than made up for it. Wait. “How do you know my name?”

He flashed another of those cheeky grins at her. “I know everything.”

“Really.” Despite loving the feel of his hands on hers, she tugged them away and shoved them into her pockets. Everything inside her cried out to snatch his hands back, and not just for the warmth. Damn. What was going on with her? “You’re Santa and you know I’ve been naughty?”

A sad look entered his eyes as he looked at her. “You haven’t been naughty.”

No, she hadn't, and judging by that look -- he knew. "Who the hell are you?"

"Not Santa."

No shit. He certainly didn't look like Santa, or she'd be pushing kids aside for a chance to sit on his knee. And other places. Renee blushed. God, what was she thinking? "How *do* you know my name?"

He shrugged. "I just know."

Was he some kind of freak stalker? Like she didn't have enough of those already, what with Brian watching every move she made. Renee pushed the thought of Brian's obsessive behavior aside. She wouldn't think about him. Buying her first tree was supposed to have been fun, now it had turned into something sinister instead. She touched the branches of the tree he'd led her to, just to stop herself from reaching for him. The urge was there, and she couldn't explain it.

"Renee, I won't let him hurt you," the stalker said, taking her hand again. "I promise."

Was he reading her mind? Renee yanked her hand back. "All right, mister. Who are you, how do you know my name, and why do you know about Brian?"

"I'm Maceiriell."

She'd never heard such a ridiculous name and didn't recognize it either. "Go away, Mr. Maceiriell. You're creepy."

He took a step back, clearly offended. "It seems I don't know everything, after all."

"Must come as a shock."

Those beautiful eyes cooled and he turned to walk away. "I didn't know you were so mean."



Renee stared after him, feeling as if she'd just kicked a puppy. He had no right to be offended. What woman would trust a stranger? Especially one who seemed to know far too much about her? She dragged the heavy pot-grown Blue Spruce to the checkout and paid for it, cursing the stalker for landing her with one of the most expensive trees on the lot.

The lot owner helped her strap the spruce to her car and told her how to look after it. Why on earth had she taken some stranger's advice on a tree? All she'd wanted was a pretty, not too tall, not too short, tree. Now she'd ended up with something a lot more permanent than she'd wanted.

Renee parked outside her house and contemplated getting the tree inside. Somehow. It was too heavy for her to lift, and she didn't want to drag it off. It would either scratch the car, or crash to the ground and break, and she'd end up doing this all over again. She should have gone with the one she'd initially picked. There'd be none of this hassle now.

"Need a hand?"

Renee spun around to find her stalker leaning against the hood of her car. "How... what...?"

The cheeky grin was back. "Magic."

Seriously? She stared at him, half believing it. "All right, how did you really get here? And more to it, how do you know where I live?"

His smile became even more endearing. "I told you. Magic."

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"So do you want help? I feel responsible, since I told you to buy this tree." He came around the car. "It seems fair that I help you get it inside."

Inside? Into her house? Was he serious? "What makes you think I'll let you in? I don't know you from Adam."

His expression became thoughtful. "I know Adam. Nice man, but he can hold a grudge with the best of them. Still hasn't forgiven Eve for that apple thing."

Cute, real cute. "Are we talking about the original, as in, first man in the Bible, Adam?"

"That's him. You know him too?" A curious look followed.

Jesus, the guy had a screw loose. "Of course I don't know him! How could I? He's fictional, a metaphor of some kind."

"Oh."

Something was off about him, but Renee couldn't put her finger on it. Some kind of escaped lunatic? Was he dangerous? "What did you say your name was?"

"Maceiriel. You can call me Mac."

"All right, Mac. Who are you? I mean, really?" She untied the rope holding the tree to her roof, not paying attention to the back. "You know entirely too much about me, and I'm pretty sure we've never met before."

"Watch out!" Mac rushed toward her.

"Wha--" The tree slipped off the roof, taking her down with it. Mac knocked her sideways into the grass, a split second before the tree could bury her beneath branches and the sturdy pot.

She pushed at the weight on top of her, but it wouldn't budge. Not the tree. Mac. Finding Mac on top of her, his face a mask of confusion, was somewhat disconcerting. For a brief moment all she could do was lie there, stare into his blue eyes, and feel every inch of his hard body against hers. The shocking truth was...she didn't mind.

He brushed a strand of hair out of her face. "You're very pretty, very soft. I didn't know it felt like this."

Renee swallowed hard. Pretty? Soft? Okay...it was a welcome compliment, considering she wore more clothes than an arctic explorer, but still...she didn't know this guy. "Would you get off me, please?"

"Of course." There was a certain reluctance in his voice, and he didn't move. His gaze drifted across her face and became pensive. "So soft."

"Uh, Mac? Let me up?" She pushed against his shoulders. "Kinda uncomfortable here. Not to mention wet."

Mac blinked. Slowly, as if her words had no meaning for him. God, the man truly had the most kissable lips she'd ever seen. She wanted a taste so bad, it tied her in knots. Without thinking, she lifted her head and kissed him.

He sucked in a sharp breath and jerked at the same time. His eyes were wide and shocked, staring at her as if he couldn't comprehend what she'd just done.

*That went well.* Renee blushed to the roots of her hair. She'd *kissed* him. Good grief, what had she been thinking? "I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me. If you let me--"

He placed a finger on her lips to cut her off. "Would you do it again? It was...it...was..." He sighed. "Please? One more time?"

*Hell yeah.* Never mind they were lying in the grass in front of her house, giving her neighbors reason to gossip for the next twenty years. She could just picture them whispering about Renee Collins doing the wild thing with a man on her front lawn. Oh yeah, plenty of ammunition -- and she didn't care. Not while the sexiest man she'd ever met asked her to *please* kiss him. She arched up and kissed him. His sharp intake of breath and the sudden rigidity of his body told her he liked it. His moan of pleasure sent her pulse racing. Renee waited for him to take charge, but he didn't. He responded, his lips nibbling more than they were kissing, but he neither deepened the kiss, nor did he take over.

Renee pulled back, amazed by the pain-pleasure grimace on his face. His eyes were closed, and his breathing had become erratic. For all his beauty, he looked as if he'd just experienced his first kiss. Which, of course, was nonsense. No man who looked like him

would go through life without ever having been kissed.

"It's...I never knew...I understand now," he whispered.

Mac opened his eyes and smiled so beatifically, her heart jumped into her throat and lodged there. Wow. No one had ever looked at her like this. As if she were heaven on earth.

"Mac? Can we get up now? My neighbors will think--"

"Yes." He bent down and stole a quick kiss before rolling off her. "Yes."

She let him help her up, still wondering why he acted as if he'd never been kissed before. They got the tree inside -- well, Mac did, refusing to let her help -- and put it up in the living room. Renee stood back and admired the beautiful spruce. It had been a good choice, despite the cost and hassle.

"It's lovely. Thank you for telling me to pick this one."

"You're welcome." Mac eyed the box of decorations. "Can I help? I've never decorated a tree before."

Right now, she'd let him do most anything. He intrigued her. She still had no idea where he'd come from and how he knew about her, but it didn't matter. For some reason she trusted him not to hurt her, and he seemed to get more enjoyment out of being allowed to pin baubles on a tree, than a three year old kid.

A loud knock on her door made both of them turn. Mac's expression darkened. "Don't open the door."

"Hey. This is *my* house." Renee headed out of the room to see who had knocked. The moment she saw Brian on her doorstep, his dark hair immaculate as usual, she wished she'd heeded Mac's request. All of a sudden Brian's suited and booted attire seemed pompous, and she much preferred jeans and a sheepskin jacket. "What do you want?" Brian tried to get inside, but she blocked the doorway. "I asked what you want. I didn't ask you inside."

"Ah come on, Ren. I just want to talk." Once more he tried to get around her.

Talk? Paw her, insult her, or threaten her, more like. "We have nothing to talk about. Go away. It's over."

Anger sparked in his eyes and he glared at her. "It is not over. You are mine. Now stop with this nonsense and let me in."

"No." Renee tried to shut the door, but his foot prevented it. "Move your foot."

"You're acting like a spoiled brat. I didn't do anything wrong, and you only have yourself to blame." Brian shoved at the door.

"You had sex with other women! How the hell is that my fault?" Renee struggled to shut the door, or at least hold it so Brian couldn't come in.

"You weren't exactly forthcoming in the bed department. I had to go somewhere else for it."

"It's *over*, Brian! Quit bothering me."

"I'm not--" His gaze fixed on something behind her. "Who is *he*?"

Renee turned and relaxed her grip on the door, giving Brian the opportunity to storm inside. The two men stared at each other, only Mac didn't look in the least concerned, while Brian seethed with rage.

"What are you doing here, with my woman!" Brian snarled at him.

"She doesn't belong to you. She belongs to herself." Mac looked straight into Brian's eyes. "You want to leave her alone. You want to find someone to love, someone who will love you back. Renee is not that woman."

Brian blinked and his jaw slackened.

"You can still redeem yourself. If you keep going down the path you chose up to now, you will never gain forgiveness for your sins." Mac placed his hand on Brian's shoulder. "Do you understand?"

"Yes." Brian nodded. He turned and shot a sheepish smile at Renee. "Sorry, Renee. Take

care of yourself and be happy.”

*Be happy?* Usually it was *Go to hell*, not *Be happy*. Renee could only watch, her mouth open, as he walked out of the door without a backward glance. When he'd disappeared around the corner, she turned back to fix Mac with a confused look. “What just happened here?”

He shrugged. “You saw what happened.”

“I saw, but I don't believe it.” She glanced outside to where Brian had disappeared. “What was that? Some kind of hypnosis? You do Jedi mind tricks?”

He smiled innocently. “I just made some suggestions. It is up to him to heed them.”

“Well, damn, Mac. Can you suggest to my boss that he should pay me more money?” Renee chuckled.

“No.” Mac shifted uncomfortably. “Please don't say *damn*.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Apparently she'd offended him. “Shall we go and finish the tree?”

“Sure.”



“I like this. It's fun.” Mac tossed tinsel on the tree. “Shame it's nearly finished. I enjoy helping.”

“Next you'll tell me you want to help me bake cookies.” Renee clipped a silver icicle on a branch and stood back. “Wow. It looks amazing!”

“You're baking cookies?” Excitement lit his eyes.

“Not tonight. I'm baking them tomorrow.” She grinned. “Let me guess. You're a sucker for cookies.”

“Never had one.”

*Never had a cookie?* Renee gaped at him. “Seriously? Do you want one?”

Something flashed in his eyes, and for a moment she thought it was panic. It made no sense that innocent chat about cookies would provoke such a reaction, so she dismissed it.

“I shouldn't.”

That did it. The hope in his eyes, coupled with an expression of curiosity, was hard to resist. She grabbed his hand and dragged him into the kitchen. “Sit. We're fixing this never-had-cookies thing. Right now.”

Pulling out the container with the remnants of the Christmas cookies she'd baked last week, she watched him. He looked as excited as a kid. Where had he been, to never have had a simple cookie? He looked about thirty, and she couldn't imagine he wasn't capable of walking into a bakery and picking some up for himself. So *why* had he never tried them? Clearly he wanted to.

“Here. Those are almond cookies. They are better fresh, but it's nothing to sniff at a week later, either.” She held the tin out to him.

Mac pulled the cookie out and turned it in his fingers. “You made this?”

“Yes.”

He bit the corner off and chewed slowly, savoring every crumb. His gaze lifted to hers, and he smiled. “Wonderful.”

Renee laughed. “All right. You can come back tomorrow to bake cookies.”

“I can?”

“Yes.”

“I'll be here.” He rose to his feet. “I should leave now. Thank you for letting me help. It was fun.”

Renee watched him walk out, still puzzled why he seemed so odd. Good God...she'd kissed him. A complete stranger -- and she wanted more.



A loud thump at the door made her sit bolt upright in her bed.

*Not Brian again, please.*

It remained quiet for a while, so she relaxed again. The cold draft from the window made her shiver and she got up to close it, casting a cursory glance outside to make sure nothing was going on.

Spotting a dark shape on her doorstep made her blood freeze in her veins. The way the figure was crumpled there in the shadows made it difficult to see if it was man or beast, but she was certain whatever it was...needed help. Renee dragged her bathrobe on and, unable to find her slippers, rammed her feet into a pair of hiking boots. She tied the laces with shaking fingers, then headed down the stairs.

She turned the porch light on before cracking open the door, and a cry escaped her lips when she recognized Mac, a puddle of blood beneath him. "Mac! Oh my God, Mac, you're bleeding. What happened?"

He lifted his head and smiled. "I fell."

She tried to see where the blood was coming from. It looked like it was pouring from his back, but she wasn't sure. There was blood everywhere. "Can you get up? No, wait, I'll call an ambulance."

"No. Don't. It'll be all right." He struggled to his feet.

"You need a doctor!" Renee wedged her shoulder under his arm and guided him inside to a chair. "Sit. I'll get help."

"No, Renee. It will heal. It's not so bad."

She helped him get the soaked jacket off, stifling a cry of shock when she saw his back. There were two large holes either side of his spine. "Not so bad? Are you nuts? If Brian did this, I'll gut him."

"Brian didn't harm me. My brothers removed my wings."

His *wings*? "What?" Renee knelt down next to him. "Mac, you're confused. Try to remember what happened."

"I told you. I fell."

Those injuries weren't from a fall, she was certain. It looked like someone had tried to gouge out his shoulder blades. "Who attacked you?"

"No one. It had to be done. It is always done." He lifted his hand and stroked her face. "Don't worry. They'll grow back. They always do."

He was delirious. And he needed a doctor. "I'm calling an ambulance. You don't know what you're saying."

Mac caught her hand. "I fell. I did it so I could be with you. My brothers told me not to, but I wanted you more than heaven."

Renee stared at him. Wings. Heaven. He'd never had a cookie. He'd never been kissed. He'd sent Brian away with just a few suggestions. Her jaw slackened. "You can't be...You're not...?"

Mac cocked his head to one side. "Can't be what? In love with you? I am. It feels wonderful."

Renee stared at him. It wasn't possible. He *couldn't* be an angel, and yet everything he'd done and said pointed at it. "You're an angel?"

"Yes."

“That’s how you knew...stuff?”

“Yes.”

“And you’re in love with *me*?”

“Yes.” Worry etched deep lines into his face. “I’ve said too much, haven’t I?”

Or not enough. “I didn’t see wings.”

“I hid them. They would have drawn too much attention.” His gaze lifted to hers. “They won’t be white anymore, when they grow back.”

She’d kissed an angel. Had she caused this? “You fell because of me?”

Mac drew her closer. “Not *because* of you. Never that. I fell *for* you. It was my decision to leave, and I did.”

*I wanted you more than heaven.*

Hadn’t she wanted someone like him? She’d prayed to meet a man who would treat her with kindness, who’d make her laugh, and who’d love her above all else. Renee let him pull her on his lap and snuggled close. “You won’t regret it.”

### ***Silke Juppenlatz***

*Silke grew up in Germany and is used to things going bump in the night -- and it wasn't always the acrophobic cat, or someone hitting their head on a low beam on the ceiling. She writes paranormal romance, usually at night, and blames Anne Stuart to this day for all her ambitions and strange stories, after reading one of her books.*

*These days the only thing going bump at "oh-dark-thirty" is her -- usually when she smacks into the sofa while creeping to the kitchen for another cup of coffee.*

*When she is not writing, you can usually find her somewhere in the Surrey countryside, come rain or shine, on the back of her dapple gray Paso Fino, Oscuro.*

*Silke likes to hear from her readers.*

*Feel free to [contact her](#) via her blog at <http://www.evilauthor.com>, follow her on [Twitter](#), look her up on [Goodreads](#) or become a friend on [Facebook](#) and [G+](#).*



**MUFFINS AND MISTLETOE**  
**A Starlight Hills Christmas**

**By**  
**Debora Dennis**

"This is wrong, and I will not be a part of your schemes."

Elizabeth "Bitty" Crane kept her back to her husband, pretending she didn't hear him while she filled the display with her freshly baked muffins. She'd already planned her defense knowing his old-fashioned attitude would have him protesting her latest idea.

George leaned over the counter of the *Little Bitty Bake Shop* and blocked her retreat to the kitchen. "I know you heard me, Bitty. You've gone too far this time."

"I haven't *done* anything. Sometimes fate just needs a helping hand. And, when it comes to the Starlight Hills Preservation Society, any fundraising is good fundraising. So pipe down and move out of the dark ages."

George grumbled under his breath as she scooted around him with her empty tray.

He trailed her into the kitchen, like a bloodhound latched on to a scent. "Auctioning men off to women is just wrong. If a man is interested in a woman he asks her out—it's that simple."

"It's all in good fun and will raise money we need to restore the Gallagher Movie Theater." She paused to touch his arm and went in for the kill. "Don't you believe in our cause, George?"

His brow furrowed with her well-played, guilt-ridden line. It wasn't often in their thirty-three years of marriage she'd resorted to guilt, but this time it was necessary to get him on board. If the women in this town had to wait for the men to do all the asking, they were in big trouble. Their son, Jimmy, was no exception.

George stared her down and tried to look stern, his caramel-brown eyes narrowing. "Did the rest of your committee agree to this?"

"In fact, it was almost unanimous." Bitty nodded and began loading her gingerbread muffins onto the empty tray, leaving two to be hand-delivered to Corinne Mackenzie.

He folded his arms across his chest and shook his full head of thick black hair. "It's the *almost* that concerns me."



Corinne Mackenzie rushed up the steps of Town Hall, anxious to get out of the cold. Once inside, she stomped the snow off her boots while she did a quick scan of the area for any sign of Jimmy Crane. Then she came to her senses. Of course, Jimmy wouldn't be here. He'd been avoiding her. She knew it. The whole town probably knew it too.

Determined not to let their break up ruin her holiday, she pushed him out of her thoughts and focused on the woman coming to greet her, bakery bag in one hand and a wide smile on her face. Between them, fresh pine roping hung from the arched entrance to the main hall, fragrant trees stood tall at each side and glistened with tinsel, white lights and red glass ornaments. Festive and magical at the same time. She pulled off her gloves with a relieved

sigh, giving the scents of Christmas a chance to surround her.

"Good morning, Corinne. Fresh from the oven. I know how you love them warm."

"You do know my weakness, Mrs. Crane." Taking the offered bag, Corinne tried not to think what a wonderful mother-in-law Bitty Crane would have been. Then she thought about her waistline and decided she was better off without the permanent supply of the woman's irresistible carbs.

On the other hand, maybe it was all those carbs that gave Bitty her boundless energy. Always bobbing here and there, dark brown curls framing her cherubic face, her blue eyes perpetually filled with mischief. Corinne had to give the woman credit. If it wasn't for Bitty, the annual holiday gala might never be the most talked about event of the season it had become over the last few years.

Bitty took her by the elbow and led her over to the stage. "There's been a slight change in set-up plans and so much to do before the gala tonight."

"That's why I'm here," she said with a slight giggle as she ripped apart a muffin and then popped a bite-sized morsel of gingerbread heaven into her mouth. Decorating would also keep her mind off Jimmy and her biggest mistake since the spray-on tan in her senior year of high school had turned her skin fluorescent orange.

"The rest of the ladies will be here any minute, but we need to move these tables off to the side to make room for the—oh good, Jimmy, you're here!"

"You said it was an emergency."

The sound of his voice pinged along her spine, up to the base of her neck, and she shivered. Before her mouth went completely dry, she swallowed the remaining bits of muffin and hoped she didn't choke. Could there be a more embarrassing way to die than to choke to death while praying for the love of your life to save you with some good old-fashioned mouth-to-mouth?

While she tried to catch her breath, he walked up beside her and Bitty. After a cursory nod in her direction, he faced his mother. "Okay, you've got me and my tools for the next four hours. Then I have to help Dalton at the Miller house. So, what's this idea of yours?"

He wore jeans, a plaid flannel shirt in shades of green that opened to a white t-shirt underneath. The irresistible urge to touch his arm made her fingers twitch and her palms sweat. Knowing he'd pull away was the only thing that stopped her. She caught his sideways glance and he quickly turned his attention back to his mother. Deep in conversation, he pushed a hand through his thick brown hair, which only doubled her desire to move closer and brush the stray lock off his brow.

She was miserable and she only had herself to blame.

Jimmy and Bitty talked and laughed, but Corinne didn't hear a word. She nodded and smiled, but her eyes never left Jimmy's face. They could be discussing the gala or making fun of her new haircut—she'd never know. Whatever his words, his voice soothed the ache in her heart, if only for a few minutes.

He was thinner than he'd been the last time she'd seen him, a day's growth of beard covered his jaw line and was it a hint of sadness she caught in his eyes? Had it been three weeks since they'd last spoken, three weeks since those lips had touched hers?

The next thing she knew a box of ornaments and fresh greens had been thrust into her arms. She blinked to clear her daydreaming vision to focus on Bitty and her detailed directions.

"Don't forget to hang the mistletoe in the doorway," she said with a wink.

Sometime in the last few minutes, while Corinne had been busy zoning out to her own thoughts of Jimmy's lips on hers, the other committee members had arrived. They were busy moving tables and covering them with bright red tablecloths. Festive Christmas music filled the hall; the ladies began to sing as they worked. She just didn't have it in her to even hum

along.

In what seemed like only minutes, the hall was shaping up to be a winter wonderland. Candles, poinsettias and fresh pine centerpieces adorned every table, gold and silver decorations glittered from the ceilings. With her last decorations hung, she pulled the mistletoe from the box and found herself searching for Jimmy.

The only man carrying two-by-fours, with a tool belt jingling at his waist, he wasn't hard to find.

"Can we talk?"

"I'm a little busy here, Corinne."

She moved to the opposite side of the platform he was building, hoping to make eye contact. "I guess that's why you haven't been returning my texts or my calls?"

"Yeah, well, it's a busy time of year."

He pulled a nail from his belt and hammered it into the wood between them with a thud. Tears welled up along her lashes, threatening to spill over and for the first time in weeks, she didn't try to stop them. Jimmy needed to see them; he needed to see that he wasn't the only one in pain right now.

"Jimmy, I didn't think I was ready. I thought you'd understand that I was only asking for time-"

*Bang.* He hammered in another nail and then his narrowed eyes met hers across the platform. It might have been the reflections from the Christmas lights blinking around them, but she thought she caught a tear on his lashes too.

His jaw clenched and then he leaned toward her. "You needed time to decide if you wanted to be my wife? Seems to me that would be something you'd know in your heart. You shouldn't need time to think about it."

He pulled out another nail and the hammer easily found its mark with another bang. Her whole body stiffened with the vibration and the room suddenly got quiet. All eyes and ears were on them.

"Can we go outside for a few minutes and talk about this?" She wanted to beg, wanted to reach out and run her fingers over the flannel encasing the muscles of his arm. Most of all, she wanted to lean into his embrace and ask him to forgive her for being scared and not taking the leap of love he'd offered.

He dropped his hammer on the stage and shoved his hands into the front pockets of his jeans. "Three weeks ago I would have gone anywhere you asked. Time changes things, doesn't it? Well, I don't have time right now to guess at how you feel."

With a nod of his head in her direction, he picked up his hammer and walked away. She swallowed the lump in her throat, wiped the tears from her cheek and yelled after him, "Stop being so stubborn, Jimmy. What's it going to take? A neon sign for you to understand that I'm telling you how I feel?"

Corinne stood there and watched his retreating back until he disappeared behind the stage curtains. Bitty's arm snaked around her shoulder and she dangled the sprig of mistletoe in front of her face.

"Sometimes you have to show a man you mean business."



Jimmy Crane couldn't remember the last time he'd been this embarrassed. He'd agreed to build the catwalk down the center of the room never guessing he'd end up walking it himself. Now, he stood behind the red curtain while his very own mother introduced him and planned to auction him off in her "Stud Muffins and Mistletoe" fundraiser!

He should have known something was up when she insisted he wear a tux tonight.

"Ladies, get your checkbooks out for our first bachelor of the night, my adorable son, James Thomas Crane!"

For two horrified seconds, he stood rooted to the floor behind the curtain, his heart thumping to the beat of the music. Strobe lights criss-crossed the stage; whistles and hoots filled the room. He was going to have a serious talk with his mother when this was all over.

He thought about sneaking out the back door, but he'd have to get by the oldest member of the Starlight Hills Preservation Society. With her hands on his back, eighty-five year old Mrs. Dempsey leaned into him and whispered, "Show 'em what you got, Jimmy, it's for a good cause," and then she shoved him out onto the stage. At least she didn't swat him on the ass.

The women in the audience were on their feet, but he couldn't imagine any of them paying money for a date with him.

"Turn around, Jimmy. Don't be shy," his mother called from the podium to his left, as if it were perfectly normal to pimp your own son. "And ladies, he's a handyman, he'll bring all his tools on the date."

The double entendre met with hoots from the women and groans from the men. He had a really bad feeling about this.

"A hundred dollars."

*Corinne.*

He couldn't see her, but he knew her voice. Someone else bid a hundred twenty-five and then Corinne was there—directly in front of him, raising her hand. "One hundred fifty."

There she was, all dressed up in her red velvet dress with its plunging neckline, he found himself stepping closer to the edge of the stage. The single strand of pearls he'd given her last Christmas circled her neck and her long sandy hair was swept back off her face. Seeing her this morning had been torture. It had taken every ounce of strength he'd had to keep from pulling her into his arms and kissing her senseless.

The sight of her tears nearly undid him. He'd been kicking himself all day for walking away. Why did he do that? Pride or insanity? Those were the only two reasons he came up with, and he wasn't proud of either one. Now here she was, bidding on him—showing the whole town she was ready to be his wife.

"Two hundred," shouted Melody Miller.

The two women stood arm to arm, jockeying for position.

"Three hundred."

*What was she doing?* Corinne didn't have that kind of money.

Melody elbowed her out of the way, shaking her hips and thrusting out her more than ample chest. "Four hundred."

Corinne teetered on her high heels and Melody inched closer to the stage. He'd swear she hip-bumped Corinne right into the lap of Lance Baldwin. And Lance, leech that he was, quickly wrapped his arms around her and whispered something in her ear.

Jimmy's blood boiled in his chest, down to his fingertips. He tried to stare out across the stage and strobe lights to give Lance a warning gesture. Punching a man in the face at the holiday gala would definitely have the town talking all winter.

"Five hundred for Jimmy, and Lance, let me go!"

Beautiful and strong-willed, that was his Corinne Mackenzie. His. In that moment, he didn't need to think, didn't need time for his wounded heart to forgive her. He simply needed Corinne in his arms. Now.

Without a second thought, he walked straight to the edge and jumped to the ground.

As he hauled Corinne from Lance's arms he heard his mother knock her gavel to the podium to declare Corinne the winner of the first bachelor auction of the night.

For one second he allowed himself the pleasure of looking deep into her green eyes, glistening in the bright lights and filled with tears of love. The bare skin on her arms brushed like silk against his fingertips. The scent of her perfume made him hungry to feel her body against his.

He pulled her up close and sealed his lips against hers. All satin and warmth and a hint of gingerbread on her breath—Corinne Mackenzie was worth waiting for.

The Starlight Hills Preservation Society might be five hundred dollars richer, but from where he stood, under the mistletoe with the woman he loved—Jimmy Crane was now the richest man in town.

\*The End\*



***Debora Dennis***

*Debora writes romance - all types of romance! Her tastes vary from the paranormal to romantic comedy and everything in between. Believing variety is the spice of life, her website changes frequently to appease her creative spirit! She freely admits to being a caffeine and chocolate addict and loves to talk about romance writing with anyone who'll listen. Her latest release, *A Knight in Her Arms*, was released August 3rd. Visit her website for me details!*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#)



## MISS SCROOGE

by  
Chelle Sandell

“Seriously?! You pick today, of all days, to break down?” Evangeline Scroggins, Angel to her friends and family, pounded the steering wheel of her late nineties model sedan. “Just make it to the office and I promise I won’t dump you at the scrap metal yard.”

She knew it was probably time to either trade in or put some major money into an engine overhaul, but that would mean dipping into her savings or opening up her pocketbook. Maybe she could find a mechanic willing to put another bandage on the car so she could squeeze a few thousand miles more out of it.

The sedan sputtered and coughed before the engine went silent. Without power steering, Angel manhandled the car off to the side of the dark country highway. She popped the latch to open the hood and cautiously opened the door against the blowing snow.

“Lovely. You could’ve at least waited until this snow storm passed.” She grumbled and held on to the door frame to keep from busting her butt on the icy pavement.

The sub-zero air and snow blowing up her long skirt made her think twice. Why was she looking under the hood? She knew the basics but anything beyond that was foreign to her. Angel left the hood up and inched her way back into the sedan.

She hoped her flashing hazard lights would encourage someone to stop and help, otherwise she was doomed to miss her meeting. A meeting she insisted on having before the holidays using a breach of contract threat. Christmas holiday hype was being pushed to the max because of the commercial value. Department stores were laughing all the way to the bank. Although her loan company usually saw an increase in business, Angel didn’t believe in allowing her customers to become overextended so she wouldn’t have to spend more in labor costs to collect overdue accounts.

Headlights cut through the blanket of heavy snow and reflected in her rearview mirror. She rolled her window down wide enough to fit her gloved hand out to wave down the slow moving vehicle. Brake lights flashed as the newer model truck slowed and pulled in front of her disabled car. A heavily bundled bulk emerged from the truck. Maybe this wasn’t such a good idea. With her luck her supposed rescuer would be a highway robber or serial killer.

“If anyone up there is listening...I promise to be a really good girl if this person doesn’t murder me.”

Before she could get the window rolled back up, a large hand emerged through the snow and tapped on the window. A face framed in a dark stocking cap and scarf followed and she jumped, realizing it was too late to escape her fate.

“Hello? Car trouble?” The muffled voice was deep and masculine.

Now what? It was do or die time. “Um, yes. I think it could be my fuel pump. I had it in the shop a couple of weeks ago but thought I could put off the repairs another month or two.”

“Let me take a look. Stay warm and it’ll just take a second.” The voice was familiar. *No, it couldn’t be.* Grandmother Marston mentioned recently he was stationed in Afghanistan until next summer. And he was the last man on earth she wanted coming to her rescue.

The car shook for a moment and she wondered what the heck he was doing. Angel squeaked when his face unexpectedly popped up against the window. Beau Marston’s gorgeous green eyes stared back at her. *Oh, boy.* Her heart pounded.

“Hey, Angel.” His crooked grin caused her stomach to do some serious flip-flops. “I didn’t recognize the car under all that snow and ice. I can’t fix it out here, but you can ride into town with me and I’ll send someone from my shop back to get it.”

Why did she have to run into the only honest mechanic within a fifty mile radius? Good news for her tight budget, but it was bad news for her pride.

The jerk was grinning at her and acted like nothing had ever happened between them. She fought the urge to refuse his offer. Unfortunately she had to make her meeting.

At least she wasn’t going to end up dead on the side of the road.

“I’ll be right there.”

He disappeared behind the curtain of snow. Angel dropped her forehead on the steering wheel. The last time she’d spoken with Beau was four years ago when he told her the wedding was off. A couple of months later she’d heard he’d been shipped off to boot camp.

He was the closest thing to family she had since her father died and her step-mother had kicked her out. Maggie had not been happy when the loan company had been handed to her alone. Angel was devastated when Beau walked away. She hated to give him the satisfaction of knowing she needed his help for anything. Even if it meant handing over money from her savings to a stranger to get her car repaired.

Angel grabbed her purse and briefcase and took a deep breath. Maybe he’d have the music blaring and they wouldn’t have to talk. She made the short trek through the sharp wind and stinging snow pellets. The door flew open as she reached out and she was flooded with warm air as she dumped herself and belongings in the truck.

Beau leaned over moving her briefcase so she could have more room for her feet, his face inches from her chest. Angel restrained herself from running her hand through his long hair to push it out of his eyes. She was flooded with the memory of his silky hair brushing against her bare skin as he explored every inch of her.

“Could you turn the heat down a bit, it’s pretty warm in here.”

He looked up. The gold flecks in his green eyes mesmerized her, but when he smiled she choked, coughing like a complete ninny on what could only be drool.

“You ok?” He frowned and pounded her on the back.

“I’m hot.” Why couldn’t she form a legitimate sentence around this man?

He chuckled. “I’ll turn the heat down. I turned it up because I thought you’d be freezing from sitting in that cold car. How long have you been stuck?”

“Not long. But I have a meeting I can’t miss.” She turned to stare out the window so she wouldn’t have to look at him. She could actually think and talk without being a complete idiot as long as she wasn’t distracted by those eyes. That is until she took a deep breath and the familiar woody scent she’d loved about Beau overwhelmed her. “Can you drive any faster?”

“As fast as the slushy roads will let me.”

She knew he was smiling by the tone of his deep voice. Angel couldn’t help herself and looked over her shoulder only to torture herself with a glimpse of his grin. “I’m sorry to be so pushy but I’m paying extra to have software installed before Christmas. If I’m not there the guy may leave.”

“Same old Angel. You’re still working as hard as ever, I see.” The smile disappeared and was replaced with a grimace.

The awkward silence in the truck reminded her of their conversation when Beau had finally called off the wedding. His words ringing in her ears. He’d accused her of abandoning everyone and anything that wasn’t related to the loan company. She’d allowed her hurt and anger to push her into working harder and doubling the profits two years before her goal date.

She couldn’t contain the urge to explain. “This isn’t just about me. But the new accounting system will free up several employees from working overtime.”

“You mean you’ll be able to cut back on labor costs by letting someone go,” he replied, shaking his head. She could almost feel the disappointment dripping from his voice.

“What are you doing here?” Why was she being haunted by him and what could’ve been if she hadn’t put everything she had into turning her father’s company around.

“My service was up with the Marine Corp and Gram needed me. The man she had running the shop after Pops died was ready to retire. I bought the land off of the highway and started building a couple of houses for Gram and I. You know how independent she is. She refused to stay with me so at least this way I can keep a close eye on her.”

“You bought the land we looked at where we were planning to put our house?” She couldn’t breathe. He was going through with their plans without her.

He glanced at her but looked back to watch where he was going. “Yeah. I didn’t think you’d still be interested or fork over that kind of money. The guy wouldn’t budge on his price.”

Angel loved that piece of land. She drove by occasionally just to see if it was still for sale. She’d loved their dreams for the future. But it all fell apart when Beau called it off and left for Afghanistan. They’d both made their choices. Angel’s just happened to mean she’d probably end up a spinster with a house full of cats. Was that what she really wanted?



After what seemed like forever, they pulled into the parking lot next to her building. The sidewalks would be icy since she’d cancelled the lawn service that usually kept it cleared year round. At the time it seemed like a waste of money. But they’d already had one employee hurt from falling. She should call first thing Monday morning and arrange another service contract. It was definitely cheaper than a worker’s compensation lawsuit.

“Thank you for the ride. Just call and let me know how much I owe you. I’ll have someone bring me over to the shop before you close.”

“I’m not opening up the shop today, Angel. It’s Christmas Eve. I want my employees to spend it with their families. I’ll take the tow truck and get your car to see what I can do.”

“I hate for you to go to any trouble.” She pulled her stuff off of the floor without looking at him. There was no reason to explain why she felt she wasn’t worthy.

“I’d do it for anyone.”

And he would. He’d take the shirt off his back if she told him she was cold. That was just Beau. And so not what she’d become. He’d made a point of that in his goodbye speech years ago.

“Yeah, well, thank you.” She shut the door without waiting for a reply. She couldn’t face that hurt again. Maybe she could get a couple of guys from the office to go pick up her car when it was ready.



Angel opened the oversized oak door and heard the familiar squeak. That was another call she needed to make. It wouldn’t hurt to have a few things upgraded around the ancient building. She walked into Christmas music blaring in the office and her employees standing around drinking coffee. She walked over to the portable CD player and twisted the knob until the volume was off. She turned to find everyone standing completely still. Her half-brother inched his way through the crowd.

“Merry Christmas, Angel. I was beginning to get worried, you’re never late. You really

need to get a cell phone. I let the IT guy in your office so he could start the install. He thinks he can have everything set up in a few hours. I told the employees they could bring pot luck food to share at lunch.” His rambling distracted her long enough that when she looked over his shoulder to tell everyone they had work to do, heads were down and fingers were tapping on keyboards.

“That’s fine. Um, I have a few things to take care of but we need to meet before lunch.”

“Sure. Just buzz my phone when you’re ready.” His normal cheery disposition was gloomy. His smile had always reminded her of their father when he used to patronize her. They were lucky as children to have such an accommodating, doting father. But when it came to business he was a rabid control freak. He’d started grooming her from an early age to take over eventually because he’d always thought Ted didn’t have a backbone.

“Look, Ted. I know it’s Christmas Eve but we have financials that have to be processed before closing year end. If you don’t think you can get your team to focus then maybe we need to rethink your supervisor position.”

“You don’t get it, do you? These people aren’t just employees, they’re our neighbors, Angel. Even though the pay is low, they show up everyday and give you everything they’ve got because this business is the most stable thing they’ve got and it keeps a roof over their heads. It feeds their children.” His eyes were bloodshot and he looked exhausted. “I got a call from Katie this morning. Doc Jacobs got the blood work back on Jamie. My baby has Leukemia. And since our company doesn’t offer insurance, there isn’t a treatment available we can afford because they insist we pay for it up front. But I’ll make sure everyone gets back to work as soon as lunch is up and they’ll stay until it’s time to clock out.”

His explosion caught her off guard. He’d never so much as batted an eye when she gave him instructions or direction. She was floored by his news. Jamie was only four years old. The toddler she remembered was so full of life with blonde curls and rosy cheeks. How could he be facing such a horrendous disease? How could Ted stand there and blurt out that kind of diagnosis and calmly go back to work?

With a numbness threatening to overwhelm her logical thought process, Angel walked back to her office to touch base with the IT technician and decided to make some calls. She refused to allow hysteria to take control. If Ted could go on as normal, so could she. It couldn’t be that bad, could it?

She reached up to touch her cheek. Jamie had patted her lightly the last time he’d visited their office and wandered back to where she was working. His sweet baby voice questioning why she hadn’t been over to play with his new train set.



A while later, she was startled when Ted opened the door to the back office she’d escaped to so she could make some calls. His expression guarded. “Hey, I hate to disturb you. But did you know Beau is back in town? He’s here and says he has your car. Why didn’t you tell me you broke down on the way to work?”

With all of his problems, Ted was still worried about her. He was constantly inviting her to spend time with his family and she’d always made excuses. He’d even asked her repeatedly to spend Christmas day with them. It’s not that she didn’t want to. Being around his boisterous, loving family reminded her of what she gave up.

“Tell him I’ll be right with him. I need to grab my checkbook.” She glanced at the clock amazed that it was already noon. She opened her desk drawer to pull out her purse.

“No need,” Beau replied, filling her doorway. “I had the part lying around and it didn’t take long to repair. Merry Christmas.”

“Oh, well, um. Ok. Are you sure?”

“Ted says they have eggnog and fudge in the conference room. I’ll let you buy me a drink and we can call it even.” His grin lit up the office. He had a way of making her heart dance when he entered a room. The anger she’d held onto for so long seemed so insignificant now.

She pulled her wallet from her purse and started toward the door. “You’ve got to let me pay you something. You can’t afford to fix everyone’s car for free.”

“I get plenty of business to pay the bills. I make it a point to pay it forward when I can for all the people that helped Gram and our family when my parents died. And they were there for her when Pops died and I couldn’t get home for the funeral.” He reached out to tuck a strand of hair behind her hair. “Gram told me how much you did to help her.”

“I didn’t do much. Just took her some food because I knew she wouldn’t make time for herself to eat. All I could really do was direct all the people bringing her food and flowers. It looked like she was a little overwhelmed.” Angel backed away to give herself some breathing room. She was sure he could see her heart pounding furiously.

“She was. She still is a little lost without having to take care of Pops. She keeps harping on me to give her some great-grandbabies.”

The thought of Beau having the babies they’d dreamed of made her heart just about jump out of her chest. Something must’ve come loose because Angel could swear it dropped into her stomach instead. “Three.”

The look in his eyes and raised eyebrow told her that he remembered.

“So they won’t be lonely and always have someone to play with if the other was mad at them,” he said quietly, raising his arm above her, and she realized he was holding a piece of mistletoe. “I’ll even settle for a kiss.”

His soft spoken promise calmed her racing pulse. She leaned against him and lifted her head to look into his eyes. “I don’t want to be the cat lady everyone pities.”

“You don’t have to be,” he said as he lowered his head to gently brush a kiss against her lips. He pulled her against him. “It’s said to be the season of miracles.”

“I pray you’re right. I’ve had some time to think today about a lot of things. How it used to be between us and how empty my life is now. Life is too short and fragile to waste it chasing a dollar. I want the kids and the house on the hill we dreamed about before I became obsessed with the financial side of our dreams. I thought if I built up the business it would provide for our future. But I don’t want that future if it doesn’t include you.” She closed her eyes. Angel was afraid she’d misunderstood his intentions and didn’t want to face the pity in his eyes.

Beau’s soft touch lifted her chin up, prompting her to look at him. His beautiful green eyes shone with the love she’d craved for years after he left home. “I’m willing to see where things lead if you think you’re ready to make that happen. Can you put the same dedication into building a home and family now?”

“I have something I have to do first.” She reluctantly stepped out of his arms.

He nodded as if he understood and followed her into the conference room where the employees had gathered. Voices trailed off as everyone turned quietly, expecting her to scold them for not working.

“If you’ll please stop by Anne’s office in payroll before you leave, I have a little bonus for you guys. And we’ll also be adding insurance to your benefit package. I appreciate all of your hard work and dedication to Ted and I. You guys are free to go after you eat and when we come back from Christmas holiday, Ted will be taking on more of a management role in the company.” Angel turned to look up at Beau as he stepped up behind her and put his arm around her shoulder. “I may be taking some time off before long.”

Well wishes and holiday cheer erupted around the room. Beau squeezed her shoulders

and stepped back as Ted pulled her into a bear hug.

“You won’t regret this. I’m glad to see you happy again,” Ted whispered in her ear. “The invitation is still open for Christmas.”

“I wouldn’t miss spending time with you and your beautiful family. We’ll work together to use all of our resources to get Jamie the treatment he needs to fight back.” She hugged her brother and felt a lightness in her soul she hadn’t had in years. “I hope it’s ok if I bring a guest?”

Her brother glanced back at Beau. “He’s not a guest, he’s family.”

***Chelle Sandell***

*Chelle Sandell is an aspiring romance author...and hates talking about herself in the third person. Her chaotic adventure in life includes two rowdy boys, her very own cowboy hero, and a very spoiled Blue Heeler cattle dog that loves to herd everyone around the house. And cupcakes. Lots of cupcakes.*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)



## SECRET SANTA

By  
Moira Keith

“Crap!” Dakota rolled over and hit the alarm. Calming Bridezilla hadn’t gone well last night. Watching her best friend turn from cool as a cucumber, into a hysterical harpy, had shot her nerves. She was convinced that getting married around a major holiday was suicidal. Hell, it had taken half a bottle of Merlot just to help her fall asleep.

A quick shower, conservative up do, a dusting of light make-up, and she was out the door in record time. Perhaps the day wouldn’t be so bad. She approached the candy apple red Mustang and groaned when she saw the flat tire. “For Pete’s sake!”

This was not happening. Today of all days.

“Ms Schaeffer?” A security guard climbed out of the patrol cart.

“Saw the flat tire while making my rounds. Thought you might need some help.”

After a brief exchange, the tire was changed and she was on her way. The coffee shop just around the corner from her work knew exactly what she liked and she drove through for her vanilla soy latte. She purred as the warm liquid slid down her throat. Perhaps her Secret Santa left her a little something in her office. That would put a much needed smile on her face, because the way her day was going, she’d be lucky to survive the rehearsal.

She pulled into the parking garage under Ulterior Motives Marketing. Climbing out of her car, she spotted Ethan Nash, the guy she secretly longed for. Dakota balanced the coffee in her hand along with her briefcase and, as she closed the car door, spilled the hot liquid all over her. “Damn it!”

“Everything okay?” Ethan rushed over and took the briefcase from her.

“No. Just a crappy day that seems determined to not get any better.” She looked in the window at the driver’s seat. “Fantastic. I locked my keys in the car.”

“Ah, chin up.” He pulled out his phone and called a car service. “No it’s not my car. I was a passenger in the vehicle. Yes, carpooling is a good thing. Thanks.”

Ethan dropped the phone into the pocket of his black pressed slacks. “Someone will be here in thirty minutes. They’ll call when they get closer.”

“Thanks.” She took back her things and they walked in to the office building.

“So why the rough morning?”

“Overslept.”

“Too much late night television huh?” He smiled and she felt her cheeks flush.

“More like too much Bridezilla.” She turned away from him. “Thanks for the help.”

“No problem.”

When lunch rolled around, her day seemed to be on the upswing. Car keys were back in her purse. Work was caught up. Boss wasn’t upset over the tardiness.

Still, she was disappointed there’d been no package from her Secret Santa. Maybe the mystery person was having a rough day as well.

The streets were wet and crowded. The hustle and bustle of holiday shopping was at a fever pitch. The clock was ticking down and people were feeling the pressure. She’d already gotten several calls from her mom, upset Dakota wouldn’t be home for Christmas. The chance she’d catch a flight home after the wedding was slim to none. Christmas! What a dreadful time to be maid of honor. No time for the normal Christmas traditions or truly

feeling the magic that surrounds the holidays. Oh well, she thought as she stepped up to the corner and waited for the light to change. A truck sped up just as the light turned red and doused her in muddy water.

She sank onto the bench behind her and buried her face in her hands. Could she crawl back in bed and start all over again? Or at least sleep through until her best friend's wedding had passed? As if she needed any help killing off her hopes for reciprocating attraction, Ethan's cologne permeated the air around her. Now? How is it he found her now? *Mud girl chic* was not the fashion statement she wanted to make to anyone, let alone him.

"Here. You look like you could use this."

A cup of warm, lovely, rich, energizing coffee slid into her view. She took it, still staring down into her lap.

"So the bad day continues huh?"

"Understatement of the year." She glanced at him.

"Dakota, you look like hell."

"Thanks. You really know how to cheer a girl up."

"Can't show my sensitive side in public. I'd have to turn my man card in." Ethan chuckled, sat next to her and leaned back against the bench. "You could make this look work. It is casual Friday after all."

That made her smile. His sense of humor might have been slightly warped, but his timing was always impeccable.

"You're giving me far more fashion credit than I deserve. My idea of casual Friday is jeans, a tank top, and flip flops. Not exactly company dress code."

"Now, the Dakota I know would find a way to make do." He winked and his baby blues twinkled with a mischievous glint. This man was trouble...at least where she was concerned. "See you later, Dakota Schaeffer."

Dakota watched him walk towards the café and disappear through the doors. Oh if only she had a fairy godmother who felt generous around Christmas time. Her phone buzzed in her purse and she pulled it out and glanced at the display. A text flashed across the screen.

*Better get moving. Only thirty minutes left for your lunch break.*

He was right. Not a lot of time, but enough. With time and options limited, she went to her car.



Ethan watched her through the café window, feeling very much like a perverse voyeur. He needed her to leave the bench. If she didn't then there was no way he could get into the used bookstore on the other corner without her seeing him. Two years of friendship and conversations, he was finally ready to make his move. Only it couldn't be small. One thing he'd learned about her—she needed a little variation from the norm.

Too bad he didn't get to the bookstore before it closed last night. Otherwise this morning might have looked up a little for her. If even just for an hour or two. He sent off the text message and waited. Dakota got up from the bench and hurried off. Perfect. He rushed across the street and had the package wrapped and ready for delivery.

"Whatcha got there?" Dave, a fellow advertising executive, caught up to him at the main entrance to the office building.

"Last minute Christmas shopping."

"For the girlfriend? I thought you guys broke up."

Dave was worse than a girl. Knew as much of the office gossip as any of the women in the company ranks.

“We did. This is for a friend who needs a little cheering up.”

“Cool. You sure you want to go to that wedding thing tonight? Boys and I are going to hit the clubs pretty hard tonight.” Dave started dancing, though it looked more like a seizure.

“No way. My buddy would kill me if I didn’t show.”

“Your loss man.”

Ethan breathed a sigh of relief as he watched the man leave. A glance around the lobby confirmed there were no witnesses, and he dropped the wrapped package into the interoffice mail before heading up to his office.



“Dakota, we got another one here. Little later than usual though.” Kate, the company mail clerk, set the package on her desk.

“Thanks.” Dakota admired the wrapping, her mood improving with the promise of what hidden treasure lay within the box.

“I’m dying to know who it’s from. Will you share all the details when you find out?”

“Not likely.” She couldn’t take her eyes off the reflective embossed red paper.

“You are no fun.”

“Just don’t want to feed the gossip hounds. You ladies do very well without help.”

Dakota dropped her purse into the bottom drawer of her desk and slid the package to the side. There would be no unveiling in front of Kate.

“Speaking of gossip, what’s with your clothes?”

“The outfit is purely the result of bad luck.” Without glancing at the woman, she flipped the monitor back on and typed in her password.

“Whatever the reason, you look great.”

“Thanks.”

“Well, I hope Secret Santa turns out to be worthwhile. Lots of ladies are quite envious of the special gifts you’ve been getting.” There was a slight note of jealousy in her voice.

“Merry Christmas Kate.” Dakota said, trying to casually dismiss the woman, though the sentiment was heartfelt.

“Merry Christmas. See you when you get back from vacation.”

The woman left, closing the door behind her. Dakota slid the package back to the center of her desk. The red paper reflected the light from her computer, casting a pretty stream of patterns across the dark wood surface it sat on. The clue wasn’t in the wrapping though and she slowly slid the bow off and lifted the lid of the box. Nestled in black tissue paper was a worn leather bound copy of the works of Edgar Allen Poe. Who could possibly know she liked Poe? She glanced up, looking through the glass window to see if anyone was watching her—hoping that maybe her Secret Santa would be waiting to see her reaction with anticipation. No one seemed too concerned with her. She returned her attention to the book and carefully opened the cover. A typed note was inside.

*Tonight, at O’Shaughnessy’s Tavern, five p.m. if you want to find out who I am.*

Right before the rehearsal and dinner. It would be close, but the tavern was just down the street from the restaurant. She could make it work. Her phone rang and she glanced at the caller I.D. She sighed. The phone kept ringing and she picked it up. “What now? Cake emergency, dress, or flowers?”

“More of an M.I.A. best man.”

“What do you want me to do about it Alex?”

“Find him for me. Before the rehearsal. If he’s not there, Sam’s going to go ballistic.”

Her best friend sounded on edge. “I don’t even know what he looks like. How am I

supposed to find him Alex?"

"I don't know. He's probably holed up in a damn pub somewhere."

"Deep breaths. Everything's worked out so far."

"You're right. Don't be late okay?"

"Not on your life."



Ethan sat in the bar, twisting a paper napkin between his fingers. He dropped it on the table, staring down at the bits of white fluff he'd crumbled onto the surface. She might not show. After all, the rehearsal dinner was tonight and he could make the reveal there, but it wasn't the right place to do such things. Tonight was about Sam and Alex, this moment though...this brief hour before dinner was all his.

He saw her enter, still in the same cocktail dress she'd put on after the mud fiasco. The blotchy patches on her chest revealed how nervous she was. She strolled over to the bar and talked to the bartender for a moment. The man smiled at her, handed her a Guinness and a note. She read it then turned around with the beer in hand, stopping for just a moment when she saw him. Puzzlement settled over her, but she came and slid into the empty seat across from him.

"Hey Ethan, what are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same thing. Don't you have a rehearsal dinner to go to?"

"Yes, but..." She leaned back in the chair and glanced around the bar.

"But what?"

The small clutch she'd set on the table began to vibrate and she slid her phone out of it. "Sorry could be another wedding emergency."

"Price you pay for being the maid of honor huh?"



Dakota stared down at the display, then back up at the man sitting across from her, then at the display again.

*I never pegged you as a fan of Poe, hope you liked it. Ethan*

"What?" Her mind raced with a million questions and that was the best she could say? "I mean... you are the Secret Santa?"

"Disappointed?" He asked as he slid out of his chair.

"No. I'm feeling a lot of things right now; disappointed isn't one of them."

"Good to know." He flashed that wicked smile at her and she felt a million butterflies take flight in her stomach. "Well, you can tell Alex you've found the best man and we are heading towards the rehearsal. After which, you will agree to spend the rest of Christmas with me."

"Now why would I do that?" she asked.

"Because after years of Christmases filled with nothing special, I'd really like to spend this one with the person who's become my best friend over the last two years—the woman who manages to creep into my thoughts when I least expect it."

She stood and slid her hand into his outstretched one. "Guess there's still a little Christmas magic to be had after all."

**Moira Keith**

*Moira spends her daytime hours as a typical 9-5 slave chasing the almighty dollar, and raising twin zombie sons. During her evening hours, she can often be found steeped in homework, watching an episode of the Walking Dead, or penning her latest novel. She is an author of urban fantasy with a romance kicker, a woman with a penchant for men in kilts, lover of shoes, and connoisseur of Guinness! In other words...Moira is a complete mess.*

[Website](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Facebook](#)