

Twelve Days of Christmas

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Twelve Days of Christmas

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Partridge In A Pear Tree

by Kay Gregory

“Looking for something?”

Vanessa jumped. Her bulging canvas bag slipped off her shoulder and thudded onto the granite floor of the narrow passageway she had been certain would lead to a washroom.

“Yes,” she admitted, picking up the bag and swinging thankfully to face the owner of a crisp, English voice with a brisk ring of authority. “I’m looking for a bathroom. There doesn’t seem to be one.”

“A bathroom?” A tall male figure carrying a toolbox and dressed casually in sweatshirt and jeans, detached itself from the shadows and moved towards her. “I’m afraid our public rooms don’t run to baths. The ancestors were a primitive lot, you know.”

“Yes, but I don’t mean a historic sort of bathroom. I mean a—you know. A washroom.”

The man’s eyebrows lifted a fraction. “You—ah—you were planning to take a bath?”

Vanessa frowned. This big, nonchalant Englishman with the thatch of glossy brown hair seemed to find it amusing that a visitor to Cottonham Manor, ancient Sussex home of the Tarkington family, might be in need of modern plumbing.

“Of course I don’t want a bath,” she said. “Surely there’s a ... oh.” She paused. This might be another of those cultural confusions she’d been running into from the moment she flew out of Vancouver and found herself sitting next to a kindly English lady who offered her something called a sweet, which turned out to be candy.

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"Ladies' Room?" she said hopefully.

The big man grinned. "Ah. You must be American. You're looking for the loo."

Vanessa said she supposed she was if the loo involved plumbing, and actually she was Canadian.

"My mistake." His grin broadened. "Cottonham may have been around for a few centuries, but I promise you we're as keen on modern plumbing as you are." He gestured back the way she'd come. "Turn right, past the Christmas tree and you'll see it."

"Thank you." Vanessa hesitated, wondering what his connection was to Cottonham. He spoke breezily of 'the ancestors,' but he didn't dress like her idea of British landed gentry. "Do you—um—work here?"

"You could say that, yes."

"Lucky for me." She smiled.

"Mm. Very fortunate. Now if you'll excuse me, I have shelves to install."

"Of course." Vanessa nodded and retraced her steps down the passage.

Later, after locating the washroom, she found herself in a cavernous dining room dominated by one of the tallest Christmas trees she'd ever seen. The room contained an amazing collection of Sevres porcelain displayed in surprisingly dusty sideboards. Wow! Hard to believe that if the stories were true, all this had once belonged to her family. Maybe a day tour from London, where she was staying, hadn't been her best idea. There was so much to see ...

The website she'd checked hadn't been all that informative—as if the Tarkingtons recognized the need to advertise but weren't about to divulge more of their family business that they had to. Odd, though, that the outside of the ivy-covered manor was so imposing, while the inside presented this mildly dilapidated air. Had no one noticed it was in need of spit and polish?

She stopped to admire the design on a particularly lovely platter before moving on to another room featuring clocks.

The day was drawing in by the time she thought to check her watch. Help! Her bus! Had it waited for her? Anxious now, she scurried

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past a row of family portraits to open an oak door that looked as though it might be a way out.

It wasn't. She found herself in a dim, panelled room hung floor to ceiling with ancient weapons. The family arsenal through the centuries perhaps. Ian would have been fascinated.

Vanessa choked down an unexpected fullness in her throat. She didn't want to think about Ian. They'd planned to come to England on their honeymoon, but three months after their engagement, he'd gone on a business trip and come back married to a girl he'd met on a beach. That had been a year ago, and although Vanessa realized she'd had a lucky escape, every now and then memories of lost dreams came back to haunt her. Her family, knowing this, had sent her on this holiday in the hope that far from the man who had betrayed her, she would find her first Christmas without him easier to bear. They'd been right. The moment her plane touched down at Gatwick she felt the past fall away like dead leaves.

A slash of red caught her eye. She swung towards it, saw that it came from a jewel-encrusted dagger and put out a hand to touch it.

"Good grief!" exclaimed a voice from behind her. "It's you again."

Vanessa turned quickly. Standing in the doorway was the man who had directed her to the plumbing.

She gulped. "Sorry. I was looking for a way out. I seem to be lost."

"Sense of direction not your strong point?" The question was not unsympathetic.

"I'm afraid not."

He nodded. "Understandable. Cottonham is a bit of maze. I'm Jack Tarkington, by the way."

Oh. Not an employee of the Tarkingtons, but Jack Tarkington himself. The clothes and the toolbox had misled her. Evidently this not-so-stately home had a working owner. The website hadn't mentioned that.

"I didn't recognize you earlier," she apologized.

"No reason you should. I don't use my picture to advertise Cottonham. It's the house people come to see." He regarded her with a slight frown, as if something about her puzzled him. "And you are ...?"

"Vanessa. And I don't mean to be rude, but I have to catch my tour

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bus back to London—”

“Too late. It’s already left.”

Vanessa tugged at the neck of her sweater. “What about a regular bus?”

“Fraid not. We’re too far off the beaten track for buses. Or trains.”

Jack closed his eyes briefly. “Tell you what. I’ll ask Mrs. Crossingham, my housekeeper, to fix up a bed for you. We have a couple of rooms for stray bed and breakfast guests. I’ll drive you up to London in the morning.”

“Oh, there’s no need—”

“True, but I’d like to. I have an appointment in town at eleven so it won’t be any trouble. Besides, it’s the least I can do.”

Vanessa didn’t see why, but neither did she see any alternative.

“Thank you,” she said. “Very much. Only—my luggage is at my hotel ...”

“No problem. Mrs C. will fix you up with what you need.”

Vanessa nodded gratefully. Fifteen minutes later, a beaming Mrs Crossingham ushered her into a large, old-fashioned bedroom occupied by an enormous four-poster with a frayed brocade quilt.

“Nice to have a young lady here again.” she said. “Mr Jack can do with a bit of company. He’s been lonely since his sister married and moved away. Not that he’ll admit it. Works too hard, he does.”

“Does he?”

Mrs Crossingham nodded. “Has to. No one else to do it once his dad died. It’s not easy keeping up a house like this, you know.”

“I suppose not.” Vanessa thought of the dusty shelves and tattered draperies. “Couldn’t he hire people to help?”

“Can’t afford it,” Mrs Crossingham said darkly. “Not after his grandfather lost all that money on the stock market. His dad wasn’t much of a manager either. Mr Jack though—he loves Cottonham. Does his best, but sometimes I think he’d be better off to sell.”

Sell Cottonham? How ironic after what had gone before. Vanessa sank onto the bed, wondering why the thought of Cottonham in other hands should bother her. Yet it did.

When she went downstairs, she found Jack sprawled in a blue, wing-backed chair in the part of the house she’d been told was closed to the public. “Wouldn’t do to go to bed in one of the public rooms,” he’d

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explained. "I'd wake up surrounded by a bunch of visitors fingering the bed hangings and asking if I were part of the decor." He pronounced the word with an exaggerated drawl.

Vanessa laughed. Did he know how funny he sounded when he talked like that? She liked a man who made her laugh.

"Sherry?" he asked now, waving at a tray laden with the kind of glassware that fetched huge sums in antique shops back home.

"Thank you. But what if I drop one?" she asked.

He grinned. "Do you usually?"

"No, but I don't usually drink out of priceless glassware."

"It's not priceless. The priceless stuff is either sold or locked away."

"Sold?" Vanessa was shocked. How could he sell the family inheritance?

"Mm." Jack poured sherry into one the glasses and handed it to her. "You may have noticed that Cottonham has seen better days. And, knowing Mrs Crossingham, I expect she told you why."

"Yes." Vanessa attempted to suppress her indignation. "She did."

Jack wrinkled his forehead. "Why are you scowling at me? I'm not responsible for my forebears, you know."

Vanessa took a deep breath. "No. Of course not. Sorry."

He smiled. "You needn't take Cottonham's losses personally."

He had a nice smile. Nicer than Ian's. "I don't. It's just that ..." She stopped, searching for a way to explain her reaction.

Jack was leaning back in his chair studying her, not in an offensive way, but as if there were something he needed to understand.

"What's your name?" he asked abruptly.

"I told you. Vanessa."

"I mean your last name."

Vanessa pinned her gaze on her sensible shoes. She hadn't meant to tell him but ...

"It's Cottonham," she said. "Vanessa Cottonham."

"Aha! So I was right."

She looked up, startled.

"I had a feeling I knew you. Then just now it came to me that you resemble Ermintrude Cottonham, wife of the original owner. Maybe you

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saw her portrait in the hall?"

Yes, she'd seen it. But Ermintrude had been a beauty. Surely Jack was only being kind to a woman whose family had once owned his home. "I don't really look like her," she said.

"See for yourself." He stood up and held out his hand. "And while we're at it, you can tell me why you're here."

It seemed quite natural to put her hand in his. "Easy," she said, as they strolled towards the hall where the family portraits hung. "I came to see the house my great-great-great—or whatever great he was—grandfather lost to yours. It was a card game, wasn't it?"

"So I'm told. But these old family stories are never reliable."

"I suppose not. Though I expect my great-great-etc. did love gambling."

"So did mine, apparently. A vice inherited by his descendants—though the stockmarket's a more recent addiction. I'm sorry my ancestor took your family's home."

Vanessa shrugged. "It's not your fault." She would have liked to add that if anyone had to fall heir to the family manor, she was glad it was him. But that made no sense, so she held her peace.

"Mrs Crossingham tells me running Cottonham is hard work," she said instead.

"It can be. The alternative is to sell to a developer."

Vanessa stopped in front of a portrait of an ethereal lady in blue—the original Ermintrude Cottonham. She blinked. Those lovely dark eyes seemed to be sending her a message. Without pausing to think, she took a quick breath and said urgently, "You mustn't do that. You mustn't."

"Why not?" He sounded more surprised than annoyed.

Out of nowhere, an idea came to her. "You could run Cottonham as a hotel. You already do bed and breakfast."

Jack, who was standing behind her, took her arm and turned her towards him. His touch felt solid, comforting, quite unlike Ian's possessive grip.

"That wouldn't be a bad idea if I knew anything about running hotels," he said.

"I do though. I manage a small one in Vancouver."

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“You do?” She heard interest as well as hope in his voice. “In that case, let’s leave our forebears to their drinks—or whatever forebears do when we’re not looking—and you can tell me about it over dinner. I don’t know about you, but I think better on a full stomach.”

Vanessa laughed and agreed that she did too. But as they left the hall, and he grabbed her elbow to guide her to the right when she’d been about to turn left, she couldn’t help remarking, “It’s a good thing I don’t live here. I’d get lost for sure and no one would ever find me.”

“I’d find you.” Jack pushed open a door at the end of a short passageway that led into a small room overlooking the darkened garden.

Vanessa saw that beside the window a table with a white linen cloth was set for two. In the centre stood a delicate silver pear tree with a gilded partridge perched tipsily in its upper limbs. At the base of the tree, someone had placed a spray of red ivy.

Jack pulled out a chair, and she took her place at the table. “Would you?” she asked. “Find me?”

“Of course I would.” He sat too.

Something in the way he said it made her look up. Brown eyes met hers with a hint of rueful humour. “Though Canada is a long way away,” he added.

“Not that far.”

When he said nothing, only took her hand in his, Vanessa knew she was lost again—this time in a pair of warm brown eyes.

She made herself glance away, and for a fleeting second thought she saw the outline of a woman in a long dress standing by the door. She fancied the woman nodded and raised her hand in a gesture of approval. Then she was gone.

Vanessa shook her head. Of course it was only her imagination. She turned back to Jack to ask him if he was serious about opening a hotel.

He nodded. “Maybe. Once I’ve had a chance to think it over.”

“And if you did, would you consider hiring a manager to run it?”

Outside, the wind brushed the window like the whisper of a laugh and an owl on its way home swooped across the face of the moon. Jack leaned across the table, picked up a sprig of ivy and touched it to her cheek.

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"Only if her name's Cottonham," he said.

As Vanessa laughed and opened her mouth to reply, her gaze lit on the tipsy Christmas partridge. If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn he winked.

The End

About Kay Gregory

Kay Gregory is the author of 30+ novels, novellas and short stories. She lives on Canada's west coast, and is currently working on more short stories as well as a sequel to her women's fiction novel, A WOMAN OF EXPERIENCE.

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Two Turtle Doves

by Diana Bold

April Walsh wearily dried her hands on a faded dishtowel as she stared out the window at a broken fence rail. Her entire property seemed to be falling apart piece by piece. She added the rail to an ever-growing mental list of repairs, wondering where she would find the energy. Ever since her husband Robert's death in January, she'd struggled to complete the myriad farm chores he'd seemed to handle so effortlessly.

Deep down, she knew it was a losing battle. With Robert gone, it was only a matter of time before the debts and hard work overwhelmed her. Tomorrow it would be Christmas, but she had little to celebrate. Another holiday on her own, listening to the lonesome wind howl outside her door.

A pair of turtledoves settled upon the fence, and a reluctant smile curved her lips as the words to an old Christmas song drifted through her mind.

"Two turtle doves and a partridge in a pear tree..."

She put away the dishtowel, still humming the tune, only to see something else beyond the fence—a lone horseman, riding up the dusty road. Fear surged through her, and she rushed across the room toward the old shotgun leaning near the front door. A woman alone could never be too careful.

Opening the front door just a crack, she peered out, praying the stranger would continue past. To her dismay, he turned up the rutted path that led to her house. As he drew nearer, she realized something was tied to his saddle, bouncing along in the dust behind his horse. A plant of some kind? No. A tree. A small pine tree.

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Her gaze settled upon the rider. Though his hat obscured his face and a long, dark duster covered his body, something in his bearing seemed familiar. She lowered the gun, her fear fading. Her uninvited guest was her nearest neighbor, Jeremiah Decker.

He'd come by several times since she'd lost Robert, offering help in his quiet, kind way. Her foolish pride had made her refuse his assistance in the past, though several times she'd found her woodbin filled or the ice chipped off the horse trough and knew he'd taken pity on her.

She stepped out on the porch and pasted on a smile, determined to be friendly. She'd been mired in her grief for far too long, so used to her own company she'd nearly forgotten how to talk to people.

Jeremiah rode up in front of the house and took off his hat, revealing thick, golden hair and an attractive, rugged face. "Ma'am."

"Good afternoon, Mr. Decker," she replied, twisting her hands in her apron, suddenly wishing she'd taken the time to check her appearance. Goodness, she'd forgotten how handsome he was. Or perhaps she'd never truly noticed.

He swung one long leg over the saddle and dropped gracefully to the ground. "How've you been?"

"Fine. I've been fine."

His pale blue gaze swept the ramshackle cabin, but he let the lie stand. "I've brought you something."

"You shouldn't have," she protested automatically. "I have no way to pay you."

"I didn't ask to be paid," he chided. Turning, he knelt behind his horse and untied the small evergreen, lifting it for her inspection. "It's Christmas Eve, so I've brought you a Christmas tree."

"It's beautiful," she admitted, touched. He'd obviously chosen the tree with care, for it was full and perfectly shaped, perhaps three feet tall. "Thank you so much."

A tentative smile curved his lips, and she realized he'd expected to be rebuffed once again. "Would you like me to take it inside for you?"

She nodded and held the door open wide. As he crossed the threshold with his burden, a flutter of apprehension stirred inside her. Though he'd been nothing but kind, she didn't know him that well and

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was nervous to have him inside her house.

He glanced around, then took the tree to a small table near the window. As he put it down, she saw that he'd nailed a few pieces of wood to the trunk so that it could stand on its own.

"There." He brushed his hands off on his lean hips and turned to face her. "I've brought some popcorn for a garland, in case you don't have anything to decorate it with."

Tears filled her eyes as she realized that this virtual stranger was the only person in the world who cared whether or not she had a Christmas tree. His thoughtful gift overwhelmed her.

"Hey," he murmured, concern filling his voice as he took a step toward her and held out his hands in an imploring gesture. "I didn't mean to make you cry, honey."

She swiped at her eyes, embarrassed. "It's not you," she hastened to assure him. "You're very sweet. I'm just reminded that I have no one to share the holiday with."

"I don't have anyone either," he told her softly. "What do you say we pop that corn and string that garland together? I know you're still missing your husband. I lost my wife three years ago, and the ache hasn't gone away. But maybe we can be friends. Maybe we can help each other stave off the loneliness for a little while."

His words hung heavy in the room, a little frightening, yet oh so tempting. She hadn't known that he'd lost a wife, and her heart instinctively went out to him. "I can make dinner," she offered tentatively. "If you'd like."

He smiled, and a deep dimple creased his lean cheek. "I'd like that a lot, Mrs. Walsh."

"April," she corrected with a shy smile of her own. "You can call me April."

"Well, April, I'd be honored if you'd call me Jeremiah."

For a few moments, they just stared at each other. For the first time since Robert's death, a glimmer of hope flared inside her. Why shouldn't she spend Christmas Eve with her handsome neighbor? It would be far better than spending the evening alone, lost in her grief and memories. And Christmas was supposed to be a time of hope, wasn't it? A time of

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new beginnings.

"I'll be right back," he promised, ducking back outside. As he strode for his horse, she rushed to look in her pantry, hoping she had something worthwhile to feed him. Luckily, there was still half of a peach pie, but she had no meat, nothing she could serve for a Christmas dinner.

Crushed, embarrassed, she turned, only to find him reentering the cabin, his arms laden with foodstuffs. "I took the liberty of bringing my dinner with me," he told her. "I hoped you'd allow me to stay, and I didn't see the point of letting this all go to waste."

Her eyes welled with tears once again, but she blinked them away as he set out what appeared to be a feast. He'd obviously put quite a bit of thought and effort into his visit, and she felt guilty for all the times she'd turned him away.

"It looks wonderful," she managed. "Just like Christmas should."

He gave her another swift smile. "While we wait for the food to warm up, we can string the garland." He passed her a glass jar full of popping corn, and then gestured to a small basket of berries. "Yaupon Holly. We're lucky the birds didn't eat them all."

"Yes," she murmured. "We are lucky."

For the next half an hour, they worked in companionable silence. He brought in some wood and built up a fire in the stove, and then she popped the corn. Before long, they were sipping cider and sitting at her table, stringing white and red garlands. As they stained their fingers with berry juice, they got to know one another.

How fulfilling it was to actually have someone to talk to. She'd missed having a man in the house, had forgotten how good it felt to relax and not worry about all the dangers lurking beyond her front door. Her small house stopped feeling like a prison, and once again started to feel like a home.

"I've never thanked you for all the help you've given me this year," she told him during a lull in the conversation. "It meant more to me than I can say."

He leaned back in his chair and met her gaze. "I would have done more, April. I've hated the thought of you living out here all alone."

"Foolish pride," she admitted. "I've been so determined to make it

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on my own, but it's so hard. If I lose the farm, I'll have nothing."

He frowned and set aside the berries, giving her his complete attention. "Don't you have any family to turn to? Someone who could come and help you make a go of this place?"

She shook her head. "Robert was the only family I had."

Reaching out, he covered her hand with his own. "You don't have to be alone. I'll help you if you let me."

His hand felt so warm, so strong—callused, yet gentle. His blue gaze was filled with admiration and tenderness, reminding her that she was still a woman, and that he was asking for far more than permission to help out on the farm. Perhaps she'd always known he felt this way, but this was the first time she'd really allowed herself to see it.

She twined her fingers with his, letting him know she understood and wasn't completely opposed to the notion. It would take some getting used to, but for the first time since Robert's death, she could imagine a future without him. The thought was both frightening and exhilarating.

He squeezed her hand and gave her a slow smile. "I think it's time to decorate that tree."

"I think you're right." Heat rushed to her cheeks as she gathered up the garlands and got to her feet, her whole body tingling with awareness of the man beside her. He towered over her, his broad shoulders straining against the fabric of his blue chambray work shirt. There was a small tear on his right elbow, she noticed. She would offer to fix it for him.

Working together, they wound the garlands around the little tree, until the entire thing was swathed in red and white stripes. As they stepped back to admire the end result, April was filled with a sense of peace and pleasure.

"It's beautiful," she whispered. "I love it."

When she would have turned back to the table, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into his arms. He gazed down at her, a world of promise in his honest blue eyes. "I'm glad you like it. I hoped you would."

She stared up at him, her heart pounding in her chest. It felt so good to be held this way she couldn't work up a protest. Christmas was a time of new beginnings, she reminded herself. "Merry Christmas, Jeremiah."

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He cupped her cheek, his touch unbearably gentle. "Merry Christmas, April."

The End

About Diana Bold

Diana wrote her first book in elementary school, and has been writing ever since. For the last ten years she has been seriously pursuing a writing career, while also juggling a full time job as a police dispatcher. She has won or finaled in over a dozen writing contests, including RWA's Golden Heart. She lives in a small Colorado town with her wonderful husband and three teen-aged boys.

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See How They Run...

by Kate Austin

Three blind mice...

See how they run...

Jenn popped herself in the temple—again—trying to get the damned song out of her head. But it wouldn't go.

Ever since she'd seen the first road sign announcing she was almost there—*Brest, 50 kilometres*—her wayward mind had been singing of blind mice. She knew it didn't make sense. If anything, she should be singing about breasts or chickens, but that's what had come to mind, and that's what wouldn't let go.

She was sick of this trip, sick of the mice, sick of—well, she was sick of pretty much everything. Ever since her Gran had insisted she travel to Brest on a moment's notice, Jenn's life had deteriorated into a place where singing Three Blind Mice seemed normal.

The flight to Paris was a disaster—three hours late leaving and Jenn stuck in a middle seat, because she'd had to book at the last minute, between a snoring drunk and a football-player sized businessman juggling a laptop, an iPhone and two stress-relief balls. She hadn't slept the night before, Gran waking her every hour with another list of instructions. Now she was in this tiny Renault, driving to Brest to find the sisters her Gran hadn't seen for almost fifty years.

She didn't know what had triggered Gran's anxiety—the holiday season?—and it hardly mattered. She would do anything for her Gran, up to and including this trip over nine time zones on the third day of Christmas. Damn, she thought, that's why the mice. Though now she was

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here, she wondered if there had been some other way to find the sisters. A private detective? An internet search? A few phone calls?

Because Jenn was pretty certain that if they weren't in the house they'd all three grown up in, her chances of finding them were slim. Her French was laughable despite having grown up with Gran. Her skills as an accordion player were legendary; her other skills? Nominal at best.

Anyway, here she was, less than an hour from her destination and willing to do her best. She checked—again—to make sure her cell phone was charged. She'd promised to call the minute she arrived, though Jenn planned to wait until she had some news. Gran wasn't much on accurate time keeping, hence the wake up calls every hour during the night.

Welcome to Brest.

The sign—in French, of course—translated easily, even to Jenn's tired and untrained eyes, and she heaved a sigh of relief. She wasn't sure she could drive another mile. She pulled over and took the map from her bag. She couldn't sit long, she'd fall asleep, but hoped the roads were as clearly marked as the hotel.

Because Brest was a mystery to her—as much a mystery as her Gran's sisters.

* * * * *

Her Gran, Madam Celeste Francoise Annalise Berthaulme, had been Jenn's salvation as a child. She had fed her, clothed her, made sure she got to school on time and properly accoutered. She had found a woman who would teach Jenn the accordion the week after Jenn had fallen in love with the instrument.

Gran made Jenn's life as normal as it was possible to be with a mother who lived in another world and a father who had died when she was a baby. Gran, her only son gone and buried, had transferred her love to her granddaughter and had replaced both parents—carefully, completely, perfectly.

So here Jenn was, tired to death and sitting on the side of the road in the far west of western France. She'd never been to France, though she'd often suggested the trip to Gran.

See How They Run... – Kate Austin

“Let’s go to France this year,” she’d say as they began their planning for their summer vacation. “I’d love to see where you grew up.”

Gran would hum and haw and pretend to consider it. But in reality, Jenn knew that for some reason—a reason she couldn’t figure out and Gran refused to reveal—her grandmother did not want to go back to France. She missed it, though, that was obvious.

It was obvious in the music she played, leaning heavily to French lounge singers like Piaf and Aznavour; it was clear in the art in her room, posters of Monet’s garden and photos of the Eiffel Tower; and even more obvious in the food she cooked and the wine she drank. Jenn hadn’t realized any other country made wine until she turned nineteen and could go into a liquor store for herself.

Jenn shook herself out of her memories and back onto the side of the road. She checked again her Google map. The hotel she’d booked—the Lion D’Or—was two blocks away from her Gran’s childhood home and, according to the map, a straight shot from where she sat.

The map was right.

Jenn arrived at the hanging sign of the golden lion fifteen minutes after she’d finally managed to shake off her exhaustion enough to safely navigate the city streets. Brest wasn’t the town her Gran remembered, it was a city. A big city.

The jet lag rolled over her like a tsunami the minute she closed the door to her room. She dropped her bag, ripped off her worn-way-too-long clothes and fell into bed, promising her face and teeth and body a darn good wash in the morning.

* * * * *

The croissant and café au lait revived Jenn just enough to kick start her conscience. She pulled her cell phone from her pocket and dialed the number she knew better than any other.

“I’m here,” she said when her Gran answered the phone with her usual brisk “*Oui?*”

“And?” Gran was a woman of few words.

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"I'm on my way to find the house."

The silence in return spoke volumes.

"I only got here late last night, and I needed to get some sleep. It's only eight o'clock here, Gran, and I didn't want to go barging in before daylight."

Silence again.

"I'll call you as soon as I know anything."

"*Bien.*"

No time to say goodbye, the click as adamant as Gran had been about her trip to France. She had tried to convince Gran to come, to see about the great-aunts—her brand-new, never-before-heard-of great-aunts—but she did neither.

Jenn walked out of the hotel into the cold, bright sunshine and turned left—*à gauche*. The house, number 122, was two blocks from the hotel, and she took deep breaths as she strolled, as slowly as she could without stopping, toward her Gran's past. Her Gran's secret life.

The house was painted a brilliant canary yellow with carnelian red trim to match the window boxes spilling over with geraniums in spite of the winter air. Jenn, a closet painter, wanted to sit down across the street and paint this perfect house. Now, more than ever, she couldn't understand why her Gran had left and why she had never returned.

She steeled herself to climb the worn steps and knock on the door at the top of them. Her first attempt, tentative and light, brought no response. Her second, two or three minutes later, worked better.

The door was thrown open. Jenn smiled at the...not an old woman. Not her Gran's sister. But a man, a beautiful man. Her dream man.

He wore jeans and sneakers and a scowl.

"*Oui?*"

Jenn knew how to respond to that, she'd been doing it all her life. She pulled out the set speech she'd practiced all the way across the Atlantic. "My name is Jenn Berthaulme. My grandmother, Celeste Berthaulme, lived in this house as a child."

He looked at her, sizing her up as she had him. He said nothing.

Jenn knew how to respond to that as well. "I'm looking for her sisters, my great-aunts. Their names are Berthe and Jeanne. Do they still

See How They Run... – Kate Austin

live here?"

Jenn crossed her fingers behind her back. If they weren't here, she had no idea what to do next. She'd have to go to the town hall and try and decipher the death certificates or something. Or she'd have to hire a private detective—in *French*—and get him to find them. She closed her eyes and hoped for a miracle.

She got one.

He spoke with an accent, though not a pronounced one, as unlike as possible as the thick, difficult to decipher English her Gran spoke even after all these years. His accent was lyrical, soft and sexy.

"My name is Daniel Bourdain. Your great-aunts are my landladies."

Jenn breathed a silent sigh of relief. She did not want to be related to Daniel Bourdain, at least not by blood. She grinned at him.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For speaking English. For telling me that Berthe and Jeanne are still alive and still at this house. If they weren't, I had no idea what to do next and my Gran would flay me alive if I came home without news of them."

He grinned back at her and gestured her into the hallway.

"They're out shopping right now, but they should be back..." He glanced at the clock on the wall. "...within an hour or so. Will you have a coffee with me while you wait?"

* * * * *

The great-aunts returned and made a huge fuss over Jenn once they got over their astonishment. And they spoke English, Gran's English, easy for Jenn after so many years of practice.

Jenn offered her cell phone for their call to Celeste, but they said, "Wait. Wait until tomorrow. We will call her tomorrow."

They shooed her and Daniel out of the kitchen for a walk around the town. "Bring her back for dinner," they told him. "Stop at the wine merchant and none of that cheap watered down wine. Only the best for

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family.”

“You don’t speak French?” Daniel asked as they wandered down to the waterfront.

“I tried, even went to a French immersion school, but I don’t have an ear for language. What ear I do have is for music.”

He grabbed her hand and pulled her across the crowded street into a narrow alley. “Then you’ll love this.”

A tiny bar, six tables and the smallest stage Jenn had ever seen. An accordion player sat on a stool. Next to him, a smaller stool holding a glass of red wine.

The hours until dinnertime passed in a moment—Saeed, a Persian friend of Daniel’s—had been in Brest for almost forty years, and he played the accordion like an angel. Or a djinn, he told her. She promised to return for the next four days—the four days until she had to be home for a concert of her own.

“Come back tomorrow and play with me,” Saeed said.

Daniel grinned at her, and she grinned back. Playing the accordion was a snap compared to the rest of her life right now.

* * * * *

Three nights later, three *dinners* later, bottle after bottle of fabulous wine later, and Jenn knew no more of why her Gran had left and stayed gone. The great-aunts hadn’t spoken to Gran nor to Jenn about it and all Jenn had been able to say when she spoke to Gran each night was, “They’re going to call.”

She felt Gran’s restlessness, but Daniel and Saeed and the great-aunts and the wine coerced her out of her anxiety and into relaxation. Daniel had already promised to visit in February, and Saeed was embarking on a world tour that would take him to within two hundred miles of Jenn and Gran. She had the dates—both of them—in her Blackberry.

The last night. Daniel was coming back to the hotel with her, she’d said goodbye to Saeed, and she now sat at the dining table with the great-aunts, hoping they’d finally call Gran, at least say something.

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"She's our baby sister, you know," Berthe murmured.

"We miss her every single day," Jeanne added.

"But she asked us not to call, asked us to think of her as dead. We couldn't do that." Tears stood in Berthe's eyes. "But we did respect her wishes not to call."

"We always knew where she was. We knew when Michel died. Berthe wanted to call her then, but I said *non*." Jeanne shrugged. "She had been adamant about it, and I did not want to make her unhappy."

"Why?" Jenn asked, asking more than she could articulate.

Berthe's smile was sad. "The usual reasons. No husband, a baby, a scandal. Back then, this was a very small town. Now?"

"Now," Jeanne said. "It no longer matters."

Jenn smiled at the two of them, their faces so like her Gran's. "Now," she said, "it won't matter."

She smiled again as she pictured her Gran at this table with her sisters, pictured her at the church down the road, pictured her at the wine store arguing over vintages with the old man behind the counter. She pictured her in the room at the top of the stairs, the one that still held her communion dress and the gold necklace she'd received for her sixteenth birthday.

And while Gran was in Brest, Jenn—and Daniel—would be traveling the world. Merry Christmas, she thought. The merriest of all Christmases.

The End

About Kate Austin

Kate Austin is a multi-published author with Harlequin's women's fiction line – Next. Her eighth book – *Seeing is Believing* – about a woman who sees death in photographs, was published in October and is a RT Reviewers Choice award nominee. Her next book, *The Losers' Club*, will be out in trade paperback in January 2010. Her first piece of literary erotica – *Dreamer* – will be online in December Spice Briefs. www.kateaustin.ca

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Birds Of A Feather

by Leanne Karella

Rick gripped his laptop case handle with both gloved hands and hunched his shoulders against the frigid wind. Burying his chin in the collar of his pea coat, he stood across the street from Fuzzy Friends, freezing his toes off, getting up his nerve to go into the store.

The lights were still on, and he could see Mary moving about inside, the bright fluorescent lights throwing stark whiteness through the windows onto the darkened street. Part of him hoped she'd have closed down early due to it being Christmas Eve and all, but there she was. He had no excuse not to go in and see her, ask her the question that had burned inside him for weeks.

He glanced to his right, then his left. The street was empty, most of the small businesses darkened. The streetlights glowed through the swirling snow as updrafts and downdrafts made the white fluff move but never let it touch the ground. The few cars parked along the boulevard looked abandoned. Cold. Empty. Like him.

Not empty, Rick. Just lonely.

His eyes watered from the frigid wind, and his cheeks felt as if ice crystals formed on them—in them. He licked his lips, then regretted it when he feared the moisture would freeze his mouth solid.

Now or never, Ricky boy. He sucked in a deep breath, then coughed when his lungs rebelled against the icy air. He stepped off the curb onto the silent street and strode across on numb feet to the front of Fuzzy Friends. Not letting his trepidation talk him out of it, he gripped the handle and pushed open the door.

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Heat tainted with the earthy smell of animal food assailed him, and he sighed in relief as the tiny bells over the door tinkled his arrival, competing for dominance with the myriad of chirping, singing birds.

"Shut the door! *Shut the door!*" Mary yelled from somewhere within the store.

Rick slammed the door shut and pressed his back against it, his heart thudding too hard against his breastbone. From her shout or the fact he'd entered her domain once again, he wasn't sure.

"Damn it. *Dammit,*" she said as she popped up from behind the counter. "I'm sorry, Mr. Callier. I lost four finches, and I can't find them. I meant to turn the Closed sign."

"Oh...uh..." She'd lost her finches. He shifted his laptop case to his other hand and rubbed his gloved fingers against his side, trying to regain some feeling in them.

"Ack! There's one!" She rounded the countertop and moved with such grace across the store, dodging a bin of squeaky dog toys, headed for a rack filled with *How To Care For* books. "Damn!"

A tiny bird flew from the top of the rack, flitted across the store, and disappeared behind a shelf of pet carriers.

A smile twitched Rick's lips as he watched Mary chase the miniscule bird. He thought maybe she'd like some help—not that he knew anything about catching birds—so he set his laptop on the floor, pulled off his gloves, and shrugged out of his jacket, which he gently laid over the bin of squeaky toys.

"Bawk. Mr. Callier. Cute Butt."

Rick swung around and stared wide-eyed at the green parrot standing on a wooden perch next to the front counter. It was Mary's personal pet, not for sale, but he'd never before heard the bird speak.

Had it just said what he thought it said?

The parrot bobbed up and down as if dancing. "Baby blue eyes. Baby blue eyes."

Rick pushed his glasses up his nose. He had blue eyes. Why was it—

The bird let out a wolf whistle. "Mmm. Hot stuff!"

"Lothario," Mary said as she stepped from behind a row of shelves

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holding a tiny bird in each hand. "Shut up."

The bird bobbed up and down some more. "Shut up. Shut up. Whaaaa. No abusin' the bird."

Rick pulled his attention from the parrot and focused on Mary as she carefully put the two escapees in a cage. Her face was flushed, her jet-black hair, usually pulled into a tidy bun, messy and falling around her shoulders in shiny, silky waves. He licked his lips. His palms itched to touch that hair, to run his fingers through it, to pull her close and kiss those full lips.

"Don't mind the bird," Mary said, and her cheeks darkened a shade, her big, chocolate-colored eyes avoiding his. "He's, uhm, not been himself lately." She latched the door on the cage and turned, but she still didn't make eye contact with him. "Is there something you needed tonight, Mr. Callier?"

He swallowed the lump that jumped up from his chest to choke him. *If you don't have any plans, would you like to have dinner with me? I'm alone tonight, and thought if you were, you'd like to spend it together. Share my turkey TV dinner with me? I have two.* He chickened out yet again and reached into the bin of squeak toys. "I thought I'd get Spot a Christmas gift."

Just then, Lothario decided to pipe up again. "Mr. Callier. Sexy butt. Baby blue eyes. Makes me hot. Phew."

Mary glared at the parrot, her face and ears flaming with embarrassment. The damn bird had decided, after nearly eight years, to start talking. Like a child who spouts complete sentences when they've never done anything but babble, Lothario had begun repeating everything she said. Whoever used *birdbrain* as a putdown didn't know Lothario, because he knew just the right time to repeat every embarrassing comment she'd ever made. She prayed Mr. Callier would believe the bird was...what? Attracted to him?

Then his words registered, and she melted a little bit. He was the sweetest man she knew, and he was sexy as all get out. "That's so nice of you, going out on a night like this to buy your puppy another toy." She spotted another finch perched on the edge of the fifty-gallon fish tank just to Mr. Callier's left. "Don't move."

Birds of a Feather – Leanne Karella

He froze.

She walked toward him, close enough to get a whiff of musky cologne. He always smelled so good, so clean. The fact he looked just a little rumpled added to his appeal. Always professional in his long-sleeve button down shirts and slacks, but a little wrinkled, his tie a little skewed. She edged past him and slowly approached the bird on the fish tank.

Carefully, slowly, she lifted her hands and trapped the bird between her palms. She let out a sigh of relief and headed toward the cage. Three down, one to go. Although, chasing down a few birds was nothing compared to the time twenty baby hamsters got loose.

"There's one over there," Mr. Callier said, and his deep voice made her close her eyes for just a moment, savoring. He came in at least once a week, sometimes twice a week, and bought something for his dog, Spot. He watched her with eyes that showed interest, but he'd never bothered to ask her out, though she'd tried to flirt with him. He came in, purchased a dog toy or treat or bag of food, and left. All she knew was that he owned a border collie named Spot, and she only knew that much because he'd bought a book on the care and handling of that specific breed.

"Mary?" he said, his voice so soft. Possibly the first time he'd ever used her name.

She turned and looked at him. He hadn't moved from his spot near the counter. "Hmm?"

He pushed up his sexy, wire-rimmed glasses then pointed across the room. "There's another bird up there on the hamster cages."

Right. Catching finches was the task.

"Mary. Mary. Mary," Lothario said in a bad mimic of Mr. Callier's voice. "Another bird. Another bird."

"Bird's gonna be Christmas dinner if he doesn't shut up," she muttered as she headed across the store to catch the last of the wanna-be free-range finches.

A soft chuckle caught her off guard, and she almost tripped over her feet. A tingle ran up her spine, and a shiver sent goose bumps over her skin. Wow. That was a nice sound.

Once she had the bird in hand, then in the cage with the other three, she turned back to Mr. Callier. "So," she said as she headed behind

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the counter, passing close by him again and taking another deep breath of his manly scent. "Will the toy be all for you tonight?"

He laid the ribbed blue ball on the counter and glanced around the shop. Then he nodded and reached into his back pocket for his wallet.

Come on, she thought. Say something more. Anything.

He laid a five on the counter next to the ball, and disappointment speared her chest.

She rang the purchase on the register and handed him his change, letting her fingers brush his as she did so. A tingle raced up her arm, and she wanted to repeat the motion, to touch him more.

He stilled and stared at the bills in his palm. "Thank you," he said, his voice soft.

She bit her lip and prayed he'd say more. But, as usual, transaction finished, he was ready to leave. He turned and lifted his coat from the bin where he'd placed it just a few minutes before.

He shrugged into the dark gray wool, then took a pair of black leather gloves from his pocket, replacing them with the dog toy. He kept his back to her as he buttoned the coat. He paused after he pulled on the gloves, as if contemplating something, but he said nothing. He picked up his laptop case from the floor and moved toward the door. Stopping with his hand on the doorknob, he glanced at her over his shoulder.

"Have a merry Christmas, Mary," he said in that low, sensual voice.

"You, too, Mr. Callier," she replied, even as a deep sadness swept over her.

She and Lothario would head home as soon as she'd made sure all the animals had enough food and water for the next two days. Her Christmas wouldn't be so merry. She had no one to share it with except her annoying, mimicking parrot.

The bell over the door tinkled as Mr. Callier opened it.

"Bawk! Cute butt. Bawk! Cute butt."

Mr. Callier stopped and turned back, his beautiful blue eyes narrowing on Lothario. Then he looked at her, an amused little smile on his lips. "I see now where he got his name." Then he went through the door, and the bell rang as the door shut with a soft click.

Mary's breaths came fast. She had a horrible feeling, if she let him go... She rounded the counter and sprinted for the door, jerking it open so fast the bells clanged and the finches fluttered in their cages with annoyed cheeping. "Mr. Callier," she called.

He stopped on the snowy sidewalk and turned back. "Yes?"

The wind whipped her hair across her face, and the cold air made her shiver. "Do you have plans for tonight?"

He took a couple steps toward her. "No."

She sucked her lip between her teeth and gripped the door tighter, nerves jangling inside her along with the shivers. "Would you and Spot like to have dinner with me and Lothario?"

His gaze slid away, and he slowly shook his head.

"Oh. Okay." *Stupid, stupid, stupid.* She backed into the store and closed the door, leaned her forehead against the cold glass, and sighed. *Of course not.* She was just the pet shop lady. Why would someone like him want to spend time with her?

A knock right by her face made her jump. When she looked up, Mr. Callier stood just on the other side of the window. She opened the door and backed up.

"Spot can't come," he said as he stood across the threshold, his cheeks ruddy from the wind.

"Okay." A flare of hope shot through her. "That's okay."

"Spot doesn't exist."

She frowned.

"I made him up."

"Uhm...why?"

"So I had a reason to come in here and see you."

A slow smile spread across her lips. "Oh... Oh!" She let out a laugh, grabbed the front of his coat, and hauled him into the store, shutting the door and blocking out the icy air.

Mr. Callier chuckled again, the sound shooting straight to her heart.

"I'm a little shy," he admitted, his cheeks darkening a bit more than produced by the cold.

"Me, too," Mary admitted, gazing into his bright, baby blue eyes.

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"But I don't really want to spend Christmas alone."

He shook his head. "Me either."

She ducked her head and smiled, nervous and unsure of what to do or say next. Soft, cool leather touched her cheek, and she looked up. He cupped her face between his palms.

"I'm glad one of us had the guts to say something."

She grinned at him, went up on tiptoe, and hugged him, something she'd longed to do since the first time he came into the shop.

This just might be the best Christmas ever.

The End

About Leanne Karella

Award-winning, best-selling author, Leanne Karella, received her first romance novel from her sister when she was seventeen. From that moment on she was hooked and started penning her own. She strives to gift her readers with heroes and heroines they can fall madly in love with, and a storyline that brings them together under the best—and often most impossible—circumstances.

She credits her success to her tenacious family who never let her give up on her dreams, and her husband's quiet support she needed the most. A proud (and often homesick) Alaskan, she now lives in Lower Mainland British Columbia with her daughter and Canadian husband.

Also check out Leanne's sensual romances written under pseudonym, Anna Leigh Keaton

www.leannekarella.com

www.annaleighkeaton.com

www.incognitoseries.com

Rings of Gold

by Michelle M. Pillow

She'd sliced up his Christmas tree.

Ryan Anderson had expected retaliation in some form. A guy didn't just cross a woman with a sword, especially if that woman was Molly Shanahan, 2012 Olympic women's fencing hopeful. She'd been born with the glint of a gold medal in her eye. Ryan blamed her father. Mr. Shanahan had hung the Olympic five ring flag all over Molly's room as a child. Even now he heard her five year old voice reciting the meanings of those rings to herself, "Passion, faith, victory, work ethic, sportsmanship."

Ryan grew up on the edge of Molly's world and knew the pressures she faced. As a child, his parents encouraged him to put his hyperactive energy into something constructive. His mother had a coupon for fencing lessons and the rest of his life was history. With five sons cared for by a widowed mother, the Andersons didn't have enough money to continue the lessons. But Ryan had shown an aptitude for the sport and Mr. Shanahan offered him a deal. If he came to the Shanahan mansion and practiced with little Molly every day, Mr. Shanahan would not only supply Ryan with all he needed but he'd pay Ryan's mother a monthly stipend. That is how he met Molly and why he too was an Olympic hopeful.

Ryan walked carefully around the mound of evergreen branches filled with broken glass ball ornaments and sad bits of cut tinsel garland. All that was left standing was the trunk, shaven haphazardly by the edge of a sword blade, and the small tin star he'd put on top. A sick feeling washed over him. Molly wouldn't have used one of her antique swords to

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do this and her foil, like all the competitive weapons, had a dulled blade and flexible maraging steel that would make cutting down branches hard. Ever since Vladimir Smirnov died during the 1982 World Championships in Rome when a broken sword went through the mesh of his mask, guidelines on weapons had become strict.

“Damn it!”

Ryan ran through his small apartment to his bedroom. His practice épée rested on the middle of his bed, right where he’d left it. Even in the dim light streaming in from the street outside, he saw the nicks and scratches along the three-sided blade. Those had been there from years of use. His collection of swords was nowhere near as impressive as Molly’s, but he did own one very expensive, very sharp broadsword modeled after those from the Viking era. It was the only piece in his collection heavy enough to do the job.

“She didn’t.”

In disbelief he went to the wall where the broadsword hung on display. A piece of evergreen clung to the hilt. How could she have done this? Was she really so mad at him for having a dream of his own? For wanting to be more than Molly’s practice dummy?

Grabbing his coat, he marched out of the apartment building and into the snow-filled Wisconsin night. It was about time he gave Molly Shanahan a piece of his mind.

* * * * *

Molly glared at her reflection in the gilded mirror. Even after a long jog through the snow and a hot shower, she still felt like screaming. If she didn’t scream, she’d cry. How could he do this to her?

Okay, so she ‘might’ have overreacted a little, but Ryan had been so proud of his first tree in his first home and she wanted to hurt him like he hurt her. Besides, he knew she had a temper especially in the month before a competition—even a small one. In fact, he knew more about her than anyone else in the world. Growing up, she hadn’t been allowed many friends. Her father felt them to be a waste of time. She had acquaintances, associates, teammates and coaches. She had doctors,

lawyers, managers and servants. And she used to have Ryan Anderson.

As if summoned by her anger, a loud bang sounded on the door to her room. She jumped up from her vanity and grabbed the front of her robe. Without waiting to be let in, Ryan threw open the door and marched inside. Cold flushed his cheeks to an angry red and he panted for breath as if he'd run the mile from town to her family's estate. None of the servants would have thought to stop such a permanent fixture in the Shanahan home, even one who looked half crazed with his tousled brown hair and piercing green eyes.

"The broadsword, Molly?" he fumed, slamming the door shut behind him. "Really?"

"I bought it," she defended, holding the robe tighter. This wasn't their first fight, in fact far from it.

"For me. You gave it to me." He tugged at his coat, throwing it on the ground. The broad set of his shoulders drew her attention. Ryan owned more t-shirts than anybody possibly needed. She often gave him a hard time about it, but in truth she thought him sexy in the tightly fitted material. "It was a gift."

"It was a loan that you never paid back," she countered.

"I beat you at poker. The loan was paid." He waved his hand at her, dismissingly. "Regardless of the owner, you shouldn't have broken into my apartment."

Molly's heart fluttered in her chest. Didn't he know the effect he had on her? Why couldn't he see it? Her desire for him only made her temper worse because he didn't return the favor. "You should learn to lock your door."

Ryan strode across the large bedroom, passing her king sized bed to block her escape from the room. "I could have you arrested. Everyone in town knows who you are and they saw you leaving my building."

"Go ahead. I'll be out before they even process me." She gave a nervous laugh. Molly didn't like being cornered, not because she was scared so much as she couldn't seem to catch her breath when they were alone and not focused on practice. Reaching to the shelf that lined her wall, she pulled the Spanish foil from its wooden display and pointed it at him, keeping him back. "You should know. It wouldn't be the first time

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the cops were called on us.”

“Now you’re going to ruin that blade?” Ryan crossed his arms over his chest, completely unconcerned by the threat. “After all the hours we spent polishing?”

“Will you hand me that one over there?” Molly gave him a small smile and batted her lashes, trying to make him break his irate composure. Normally it worked, but not tonight.

“If only to save a piece of history,” he answered, backing away. Slipping two foils out of a wall display, he tossed one in her direction and held the other at the ready.

Molly caught the thin sword easily. She lunged forward and beat her sword to the weak part of his, knocking it aside in challenge. “You should know that I didn’t ruin the broadsword. I had gardening sheers. I only put that piece of evergreen on there to mess with you. Like I’d really hurt a sword.”

“But trees are no problem?” Ryan recovered, returning to en garde position.

“You’re the one who taught me about pranks. Remember the frog you put in the punch bowl during my sweet sixteen? Or how about when you shaved Snowball to look like a tiny lion?” Molly lunged, forcing him to step back. Even though the tips had been rounded, she was careful not to strike him. “Before you came along, I was a little princess.”

“You were and still are a spoiled brat. Whatever you want daddy will get for you. Well, not me. I’m not for sale, not anymore.” Ryan countered with a series of moves, forcing her to jump up on the bed. The familiar clang and sweep of metal rang over them as he pursued her. “Why the hell do you think I left? I have my own dreams, Molly, and they don’t include being your little servant boy anymore.”

Molly hesitated as Ryan executed a simple move. She didn’t block it and the blunted tip of his blade bumped her unprotected arm. Yelping, she dropped her weapon and grabbed her arm.

“Damn it, Mol.” Ryan instantly went to her, trying to look at what he’d done.

“I never treated you like my servant boy.” She dropped her hand. At most, it would be a bruise. The robe wasn’t even cut. “How could you

leave without telling me? You know I can't survive here without you."

"I don't want to be your crutch," Ryan whispered, seemingly satisfied that she wasn't too badly injured. He didn't let go as he looked into her eyes.

"Is that why you asked me out to dinner only to sneak out of the house while I waited like an idiot for you to show?" She bit back a tear. When Ryan asked her out, she'd thought it was a date. Her heart had sang for joy that something more might happen between them, only to be run through with disappointment when he left her waiting, humiliated and alone in a special dress she'd bought just for him.

"I didn't want to go. Your father asked me to pack up and leave. He said he'd find you a new partner, one that ensured you stayed focused on your dreams."

"He told me you quit." Molly glanced at the hand on her arm, liking the contact. The warmth of him radiated over her and she wanted to grab hold of him. "He said you wanted to focus on your own Olympic dream and thought I would only hold you back." She met his gaze. "Why did he ask you to leave?"

"Because I wanted there to be more between us than those five rings." Ryan glanced at the wall, to the Olympic flag. He backed away from her and grabbed his coat off the floor.

"There is. You know there is. We're friends. We've always been friends, despite the pranks and the jokes and the constant bickering." She didn't want him to leave. When he went this time, it wouldn't be to a room down the hall where he'd lived since moving out of his mother's house after high school.

"I want there to be more than friendship. I can't live down the hall from you anymore, Molly." Instead of putting the coat on, he reached into the pocket. "After the World Championships and the Olympic gold medals are all over with, I want there to be a reason for us to be together. I want this, Molly." Ryan held up a gold engagement ring, simple and perfect. "I want to know that I'll always have you."

"Ryan?" She began to shake, tears coming to her eyes.

"Your father asked me to leave because I, out of respect for all he's done for my mother, asked him for your hand. I planned on meeting you

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right after. He said no and forced me to pack up. But I don't care what he wants. I want to know what you want because I love you. You are my dream, Mol, not some gold medal. You and only you."

Molly blinked, thankful for her throbbing arm. It proved she was awake and this was real. Hardly able to speak, she whispered, "Yes, I'll marry you."

Ryan grinned as he slipped the ring onto her offered finger. Flinging her arms around him, she pressed her lips to his like she'd dreamed of doing for years but had been too afraid. She clung to him as he lifted her up and walked toward the bed. The weight of the ring on her finger meant more to her than any number of rings hanging on her wall. Loving Ryan didn't mean she had to stop her other dreams, it only meant the dreams would be worth having because she'd have him to share them with.

The End

About Michelle M. Pillow

Michelle M Pillow, *Author of All Things Romance™*, is a multi-published, award winning author writing in many romance fiction genres including futuristic, paranormal, historical, contemporary, fantasy and dark paranormal. She was the winner of the 2006 RT Reviewers' Choice Award, nominated for the 2007 RT Award, a Brava Novella Contest Finalist and a PAN member of RWA. She co-hosts a weekly radio talk show, Raven Radio, which was recently mentioned in Romantic Times BOOKreviews Magazine.

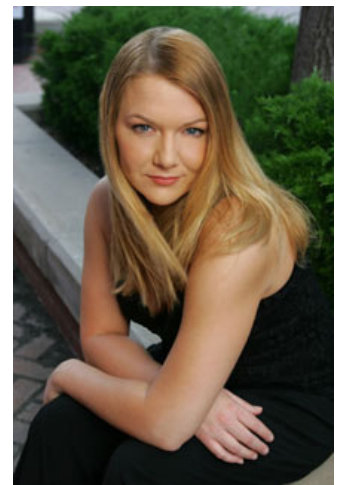
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King, King, Goose?

by Mandy M Roth

King Najarni stood outside the thick wooden door, his palm pressed to it and his head bent. He pushed his shoulder length dark hair back from his face. "Tara, allow me to enter."

"No," she said, her temper still evident.

He sighed. When he'd taken a human as his mate—his wife—he knew the road of marriage would not always be a smooth one. Tara was so different from the females of his realm. They were mild, meek even, always ready and willing to serve their husbands. Tara was strong willed, often setting him in his place, regardless of who was around. He would have her no other way.

"I have already said I was sorry," he pushed. "I only wanted to give you what you speak of so often—a real Christmas." The holiday was not one celebrated by his people so he knew little of it. He'd sent two of his advisors along with six of his finest warriors to the human realm to gather what would be needed. They'd returned with several wagons full of materials and other items.

His servants had spent the greater part of two days preparing the hall for the event and Najarni spent equally as long keeping his wife occupied in their bedchamber so as not to spoil the surprise.

When he led her to the hall and the music began to play, he thought his wife would perhaps grant him a look at her beautiful smile. One he never tired of. She had done so right up to the point she spotted the strange creature his advisors had returned with. It was caged and spent most of its time hissing and flapping its large wings. When Najarni informed her it was to be part of the feast, the only reward he was given

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was a look of horror before she stomped on his foot, deemed him to be a giant, mean, oaf and then ran to their chambers, where she still remained.

"Tara," he whispered.

"I'm not coming out," she spoke with brutal deliberation. "You're a tyrant."

"Because I wished to give you a feast to celebrate a time of the year you hold dear?" He saw not how he could viewed in such a manner when he only wished to please her.

Opening the door, she made an odd noise before peeking out at him. Her green eyes danced with fury. "Because you ordered Roger's death."

Roger?

His brows met. "I know no Roger and ordered no such death."

"The goose," she snapped.

"I know no goose and again, ordered no such death."

She pinched the bridge of her nose. "The creature in the cage. The one you want to serve me for dinner."

Understanding came to him and he knew he was in trouble with his wife. An insipid grin slid over his face. "Ah," he paused, "you wish no harm to come to The Roger?"

She blinked and stared up at him through hooded lashes. Her red hair framed her heart shaped face, making the blue of her eyes stand out more. "You mean the goose?"

"Yes, that is what I said. The Roger. Are they not the one in the same?"

Tara's lips trembled and he was unsure if she was on the verge of tears or laughing. When customs from the human realm came up in discussion, she often found humor in his questions or responses. He wasn't sure why.

"Promise me you won't hurt Roger," she said, tugging at her lower lip.

He watched the action intensely, wanting to steal a kiss but knowing better than to try when she was in her current mood. "You have my word." He put his arm out to her. "Come, we shall enjoy this Christmas gathering."

She slid her arm through his and put her head to his upper arm. They made their way through the castle, to the great hall and the moment they entered, all persons present stopped what they were doing and bent their heads, honoring the arrival of the king and queen. Najarni glanced over the crowd. "I hereby decree that no harm shall befall The Roger."

His guards shared confused looks.

He pointed to the creature in the cage. "That is a Roger. It is not to be harmed. You are to protect it with your lives."

Tara hid her laugh behind a cough and held tight to her husband's arm. There was no point in explaining again that Roger was a goose. Not a Roger. Once Najarni made his mind up about something, it was incredibly difficult to change it.

His men nodded in understanding and he waved a hand dismissively in the air. The festivities continued, though this time, a guard took a position near the cage, standing in a protective manner.

She grinned and shook her head.

When she'd first found herself in a realm that felt more like a dream than a reality, she'd been terrified of the men who could change forms at will. They possessed wings when they wished it to be so, though theirs were much more dragon like than bird like.

They were a fierce breed of powerful warriors who could put any human male to shame with just how amazing they looked. What they lacked in manners they made up for with loyalty and their ability to love. And there was no question in her mind that her husband loved her. He was one of the proudest and most headstrong males of his kind, yet she had but to bat her lashes and he'd fall over himself trying to make her happy.

Getting used to life without her cell phone and mp3 player had required an adjusting period but after being married to him for nearly three years, she knew he was worth living without the modern comforts of the human realm.

Najarni nodded to one of his advisors and several of his trusted guards stepped forth, standing in front of one of the many Christmas trees now adorning the vast hall. Candles and flowers decorated each one and the scene reminded her a bit of illustrations from times long past in the

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human realm.

The men cleared their throats as the advisor nodded.

"They have worked on this for many moon cycles, my love," Najarni said, caressing her inner arm. "They went in search of traditions from your world this time last year."

She waited with baited breath as the men she knew could kill in the blink of an eye began to sing a Christmas carol. She smiled and it quickly faltered when the lyrics took a rather odd turn. They blatantly grabbed themselves while singing about how jolly their bells were. They then jingled them.

Tara gasped, her cheeks flaming red. She yelped when they came towards her—still singing and holding themselves. "What are they doing?"

Najarni beamed with pride. "They are caroling. They told me these carolers often follow people. I believe they are attempting to follow you, my love."

They continued to come and she stepped behind her husband. "Stop them!"

"Why?" he asked.

She shook her head. "They're, umm, not doing it right."

"Cease!" he demanded.

The guards stopped so suddenly that one ran into another and a domino effect began. The end guard fell backwards, bumping the tree nearest him. Candles tipped and the tree ignited within seconds. Tara didn't need to be told they hadn't watered the tree. She could tell by how quickly the flames engulfed it.

Men hustled about, making a chain and passing buckets of water. They worked quickly and efficiently to douse the fire and keep it from spreading.

Najarni tapped his foot, giving them all a hard stare. "I do not recall reading of a fire in any of the materials you brought me regarding this Christmas celebration." He opened his mouth to say more but was cut off when the goose hissed, charging right at them both.

Tara laughed at the sight of renowned guards trying and failing to catch a moving goose. The guard who had been near the cage, watching

over Roger, was running as well. “My lord, you said no harm was to come to The Roger and with the flames, I worried it would... I released him.”

The goose turned, put its wings out and went at the guards. This time, they appeared to be on the defensive. The entire scene was hysterically funny. She laughed so hard tears came to her eyes. The guards who had been charged with caroling, began again, sounding more like drunken fraternity brothers inventing new spins on old songs than they did anything else.

She wiped her cheeks and hiccupped. “Najarni, where is it they learned to carol?”

He thought upon it and nodded. “Ah, yes, one of them mentioned something about *Saint Nick’s Naughty and Nice Roadside Bar*.”

She snorted and bent her head, still laughing.

The goose ran past them and more men joined in, attempting to catch it.

Her husband glared at a guard who pulled a dagger from his waist. “The Roger is not to be harmed.”

Slowly, the guard sheathed his dagger and slumped his shoulders like a scolded child. “Yes, my lord.”

Najarni looked down at his beautiful wife and noticed tears upon her pale cheeks. He touched one and lifted her head to face him. “You are upset with this. I am sorry.”

She smiled and held his hand tight to her face. “This is perfect. It’s the best Christmas ever.”

“Truly?” he asked, shocked to his core.

She went to her tiptoes and he bent, his mouth capturing hers. The kiss was heated. He was about to lift her in his arms and carry her to their bedchamber when something pinched his backside—hard.

Spinning quickly, he found The Roger there, its head moving at him again as it hissed. Najarni’s eyes widened. “Wife, The Roger bit me in the backside!”

She howled with laughter.

He made a move to snatch it by its thin neck when the very guard he’d just reprimanded for drawing a dagger cleared his throat and shook his head. “No harm is to befall...”

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Najarni's nostrils flared and his body coiled with anger. "I know what the decree is! I am the one who issued it!"

"Husband," Tara said, dragging his attention from thoughts of pummeling the guard to kissing her.

"Yes, my love?"

She laced her fingers through his. "I love you."

"And I you," he responded before bending and scooping his wife into his arms. The Roger came at him again and he hissed back. It stopped in its tracks and drew its wings in, appearing fearful.

Tara laughed more. "Ohmygosh, you managed to scare a goose with that menacing glare of yours."

He smiled and nodded to his men. They quickly gained control of The Roger and saw it safely to its cage once more. Najarni carried his wife to their spot at the large table. "Merry Christmas, Tara."

She kissed him gently. "You too."

The head of his guards approached and bent his head, holding out a package to Tara. Najarni held his breath, watching as she opened it slowly. When she pulled out the items, she turned several shades of red.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

Her blue gaze slid to him as she held up two objects and their red string of sorts. "It's lingerie."

He waited to hear the part about why the gift was wrong. "The men acquired these from the very place they learned the carols. I believe the owner of the establishment said all of his females had ones such as this."

She leaned over, whispering to him what the items were—in depth. He stared out at the men who had traveled to the human realm. From their expressions, they knew damn well what they were for.

He stood and pointed at them. "I will see to it that you all..."

Tara tugged on his arm and smiled up at him. "You'll sit down and enjoy Christmas, my love."

He sat quickly and kissed her. Yes, he most certainly would enjoy Christmas with her and next year, he would avoid having any Rogers in attendance.

The End

About Mandy M. Roth

Mandy M. Roth grew up fascinated by creatures that go bump in the night. From the very beginning, she showed signs of creativity. At age five, she had her first piece of artwork published. Writing came into play early in her life as well. Over the years, the two mediums merged and led her to work in marketing. Combining her creativity with her passion for horror has left her banging on the keyboard into the wee hours of the night. Mandy lives with her husband and three children on the shores of Lake Erie, where she is currently starting work on her Master's Degree.

To learn more about Mandy, please visit www.mandyroth.com or send an email to mandy@mandyroth.com. For latest news about Mandy's newest releases subscribe to her announcement list in Yahoo! groups. [http://groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/Mandy M Roth](http://groups.yahoo.com/subscribe/Mandy_M_Roth).

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Seven Swans A-Swimming

by Sheryl Hoyt

London 1902

"Isabelle, dear, pour some more tea for Lord Pemberton."

Isabelle Simpson smiled sweetly at her mother while clenching her teeth so hard she feared she might crack a tooth.

A marriage had been arranged for her and apparently it was settled without so much as a by-your-leave to her or any regards for her feelings. The Earl of Avonmore wasn't a young man, nor was he a particularly attractive man. Actually, she was being generous with that observation. Lord Pemberton would turn the stomach of even a street whore. The fact of this particular thought entering her head would shock not only Isabelle's mother, but most likely everyone she knew.

However, it didn't change the reality of Lord Pemberton being her betrothed and a lecherous old man to boot. This was the third time she refilled his bone china teacup and the third time he'd pinched her bottom. She could even swear she heard him cackle with glee this last go around.

The unfortunate truth of the matter was Isabelle was an heiress with a mama who aspired to become one of the ton and therefore possessed no qualms about marrying her only daughter off to the first titled gentleman to offer.

"Don't worry, Isabelle, dear," her mother had confided to her daughter the night before. "Lord Pemberton won't last but a few more years. All you need to do is produce an heir quickly then once he's passed on, you will have no more worries. You'll still be young and pretty with

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your father's blond hair and green eyes, and will catch yourself another gentleman in no time."

"And what if he lives a long, long life, Mama?" Isabelle asked calmly. She'd inherited her father's intelligence and reasoning abilities as well as his coloring.

Although Papa had been one of the richest men in England, he'd not been born a peer, and had placed all of his aspirations for rank upon his only daughter.

Mama simply clucked at Isabelle's astute observation that her betrothed might not die soon enough. The more important thing to consider being Lord Pemberton was willing to overlook the lowness of Isabelle's birth in exchange for her fortune in order to save his estates. Besides, he was very well connected which of course was paramount.

Isabelle cried and begged at first, but Mama threatened to send her to a convent and strip away her inheritance if she didn't obey. For Isabelle, who despised even going to church on Sunday, living in a convent would have driven her mad.

So, here she sat pretending to be an obedient daughter, her bottom quite sore now from Lord Pemberton's pinches, and her mind set to alter her future. But how? And with the wedding set for two weeks from Sunday, she didn't have a lot of time to get herself out of this muddle.

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"Mr. Simpson is quite insistent that we need to hurry. His daughter's wedding is set for the Sunday after Christmas and it's barely two weeks away." Cassiopeia Blakemore muttered to herself as she tossed down a few more Tarot cards to see if there was help there.

Cassie ran two businesses concurrently. One was an employment agency for down on their luck ladies of quality, and the other was a tearoom where she disguised herself as Madame Lou and gave séances and private Tarot card readings. As a medium, she'd discovered she possessed a special knack for matchmaking. Currently, the dearly departed Mr. Simpson was requesting her assistance in finding a proper husband for his daughter, Isabelle. It seems he felt quite guilty for having

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demanded she marry a peer and now, from the grave, he wanted to ensure Isabelle's happiness and not his misguided aspirations.

Cassiopeia's young psychic friend, nine year old Alice, was staying with her for a fortnight while her newly married mama and step-father were on their long delayed honeymoon. However, Alice was starting to annoy her with her constant humming of the Twelve Days of Christmas, singing only the line "seven swans a-swimming" over and over and over again until Cassie thought she would scream.

"Alice please, I cannot concentrate on finding the spirit representing the gentleman who will be Miss Simpson's perfect mate."

"But Mrs. Swan is trying to tell you," Alice insisted, continuing with her humming. "...seven swans a swimming...hmm hmm hmm..."

"Who is Mrs. Swan?"

"Mr. Swan's mama. She says he needs a nice pretty wife and she likes Isabelle." Alice kept humming and singing. "And, he wants to have a Christmas party at his house. Number 7 Mayfair, but he doesn't know how to begin and his housekeeper is not very helpful."

Cassie laughed, "Oh Alice, does your mother know you are still talking to ghosts?"

"Mama pretends not to notice. It makes her nervous. But she knows she wouldn't be so happy with my new Papa if it wasn't for the spirits helping out."

"Well, we'd better find Danny and deliver some broadsides now that we know who our fated couple is." Cassie's younger brother had the unique ability to slip her advertisements into an individual's pocket without them noticing, a very handy skill for her particular trade.

* * * * *

Marcus Swan, a gentleman and MP was sitting in his club contemplating the brandy in his glass. He was to have a Christmas party in less than two weeks and he didn't know where to begin. He was about to ask one of his married friends if he could borrow one of their wives to help him. Amazingly, though, he was reaching into his coat pocket to slip his gloves inside and discovered a notice had somehow made its way

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there. It was an advertisement for an employment agency that hired out ladies of quality to help run affluent households.

What an odd coincidence, Marcus thought. And yet, it was precisely what he needed. He tossed down the rest of his drink and headed off to hire a lady of quality to help him throw a proper Christmas party.

* * * * *

Isabelle questioned her own sanity as she struggled with her satchel and looked for the address on the notice. She'd made the decision while being groped by Lord Pemberton. Her mother felt that as an engaged couple, they could be allowed to spend a few moments alone and the disgusting man took full advantage of the situation. He'd shoved Isabelle against the wall of the parlor and pressed his slobbering stinking mouth to hers while painfully squeezing her breasts and trying to lift her skirts. At that moment, Isabelle decided her inheritance be damned, she was running away.

That night she packed a few items, and set off to find a place to hide. A young lad spotted her immediately and demanded to protect her through the dangerous London streets. She was grateful and pressed a few coins into his surprisingly clean hand, then was taken aback when he pushed a flyer into hers.

"My sister can help you," he whispered, disappearing at the door of the boarding house.

So here she stood at Number 15 Tottenham Court Road wondering what she would do next. Her future couldn't be more uncertain.

The imposingly tall gentleman with dark, windblown hair, and chiseled features who was leaving the establishment didn't see her, but she flushed hot none-the-less. Isabelle was hardly a schoolgirl, but for some reason this man sent her senses reeling and she was glad he was heading in the opposite direction and she wouldn't be forced to exchange pleasantries.

"Miss Simpson, I presume?" Cassie Blakemore pulled Isabelle into her office and pressed a hot cup of tea into her hands. "I know exactly

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where you can disappear for a few weeks until after the wedding date.”

“How did you know?” Isabelle asked, confused by this pretty dark haired young woman with the piercing blue eyes.

“I have my ways,” Cassie said coyly. “All you need to know right now is you’ll be safe. My client needs your assistance to plan his Christmas party, and as he has no wife or female relatives to arrange things, you will step in. Mr. Swan at number 7 Mayfair is expecting you this evening. Please don’t be late.”

For some reason Isabelle trusted this strange woman completely. She couldn’t explain why, but Isabelle swore she could feel her father’s comforting presence and she was reassured this was the right thing to do, crazy as it seemed.

At the appointed time and place Isabelle presented herself. She was shown to Mr. Swan’s study and nearly swooned when she saw it was the same man who’d sent her senses reeling earlier in the day.

He stood to greet her and when he smiled, Isabelle could feel her insides turn molten.

“Miss Simpson,” Marcus said then just stared at the young pretty woman who was to help him plan the upcoming holiday festivities. She glowed beneath his regard and he felt a tightening in his belly that he’d not had for a genteel woman ever. This simply wouldn’t do. He couldn’t be panting after her for the next several weeks. He needed her to arrange the party, not serve as a distraction. But for some inexplicable reason he didn’t send her away as his intellect demanded.

“Please, have a seat,” he offered. Walking around his desk he pulled out the chair for her and couldn’t resist leaning down and smelling her hair. Jasmine. Marcus rushed back around the desk and sat before he embarrassed himself.

“Well, Mr. Swan,” Isabelle began, “what kind of party are you hoping to plan?”

“Please, call me Marcus. And may I call you Isabelle?” Her name rolled off his tongue so sensuously he knew he wouldn’t be able to stand when she left the room.

He drew out their conversation as long as possible so that he could get control over his raging passions. Silently, he berated himself the entire

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time for putting this apparently virginal young woman under his control when he should be sending her running from the house. But he just couldn't. He wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. Maybe she would reveal herself to be as vapid as all the other well bred young ladies he knew and he would grow bored with her.

Later that evening, Isabelle lay in bed in the suite of rooms provided for her in Mr. Swan's, no, Marcus's house. She was strung so tightly she felt certain she would crumble into a thousand pieces at any minute.

The man was so handsome she felt utterly breathless in his presence. Thank goodness she'd had the forethought to write down his instructions, because frankly, she couldn't remember a word he'd said tonight. Only that staring into his chocolate brown eyes had made her melt with anticipation. Of what, she could only imagine, but it was enough to keep her up most of the night tossing and turning in abject physical misery.

The next several mornings, Isabelle breakfasted alone. She spent her days going over plans for the party and making necessary purchases and preparations. She barely saw Marcus, but could feel a shiver go up her spine when he was watching her. But then he would disappear quickly and she could only hug herself in anticipation of when they would speak again.

* * * * *

Marcus couldn't stand another minute of watching the enchanting Miss Simpson taking over the running of his home with such a natural grace it seemed she belonged there. He had decided he would have one sweet taste of those full pink lips and then send her away. It was all he could do or otherwise go mad.

"You requested my presence?" Isabelle asked shyly, not quite meeting his eyes.

Marcus groaned, turning to shut and lock the study door. Briefly he leaned his forehead against the mahogany panel before turning back to Isabelle. Her eyes grew wide and he knew his passion for her was obvious

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in more ways than one. But she didn't back away or appear frightened. In two strides her bottom was pressed to his desk and he was pulling her into his arms.

Isabelle didn't struggle or protest. This was what she'd longed for and dreamed of. Licking her lips, she tilted her head up and Marcus moaned as if in agony before claiming her mouth with his. He was demanding at first, then gentled as she responded completely to his caresses. Liquid heat spread through her limbs when he lifted her to the desk and spread her legs wide. As he pressed himself to her length and caressed every inch of her body, she arched into him, exposed and willing.

Finally, Marcus broke the contact, panting and cursing to himself. "I'm sorry, Isabelle. I can't seem to control myself with you," he panted, pulling her off the desk and pushing himself away. "I'll check into my club and stay there until the party."

"No!" Isabelle cried. "Marcus, please I can't breathe when you are near me, but I don't feel alive when you aren't around. I want this. Please, I've never been so happy before."

Turning, Marcus stared at her. "If we do this, I can't promise you anything more. I'll make some provisions, but I won't offer marriage."

Isabelle bowed her head and bit her lip, thinking about the consequences of what she was about to agree to. But she did agree, nodding her consent.

And that was all it took. Within seconds it seemed she was being divested of her clothing while having every inch of her skin touched and kissed and caressed until she couldn't take another second of the joyful torture. The pain when he entered her was brief and the ensuing explosion of exquisite sensation obliterated even that from her memory.

Floating back to earth, Marcus heard Isabelle sigh with satisfaction and he wondered at the feeling of utter possessiveness engulfing him. The thought of any other man ever so much as thinking about doing this with Isabelle created such a rage in his chest that he couldn't breathe. He'd been wrong. Completely so. He would never be able to let her go. She was his forever.

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“Ah, another happy ending,” Cassiopeia Blakemore, matchmaker extraordinaire sighed when she received the marriage announcement. Marcus Swan and Isabelle Simpson were secretly married on Christmas morning. And although Mrs. Simpson was disappointed, she’d also been relieved after having a rather frightening nightmare of a specter of her dead husband who’d declared Lord Pemberton the devil.

The End

About Sheryl Hoyt

Sheryl has been writing off and on for over fifteen years and has five completed manuscripts, all historical romance. Three of her manuscripts have placed in contests. The book she spun this story from came in Second Place in the PASIC Book of Your Heart contest in 2005. She’s contributed to RWA newsletters and had an article published in Romantic Times Magazine. She has two naughty cats and a wonderful husband. She works in the financial field makes her home in the Cascade foothills near Seattle.

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The Milk Maid's Merry Christmas

by Shonna Brannon

Emily Stone cursed as she stomped through the new fallen snow, pail in hand, across the yard of the Circle 8 Ranch to the milking barn. Last night's brief snow storm had left five inches of the white stuff behind. She pulled her coat tighter around her. Why couldn't things ever be easy? Ever since her parents had died six months ago and she'd taken over their dairy farm, she'd had nothing but trouble. First, she'd lost two milk cows, and now the stupid milking machine had broken down. With no money to fix it, she'd had no choice but to milk all the cows by hand twice a day.

What next?

She'd just sat down on her milking stool when the crunch of tires on snow signified someone driving into the yard. Leaning back, she peaked around the barn door to see a man in an expensive gray suit getting out of an equally expensive Lincoln SUV.

When would she learn not tempt fate by questioning it?

The man in the suit pulled his sunglasses off and glanced around the yard, his breath crystallizing in front of him as he took in her meager farm. The wind whipped through his dark brown hair. When he caught sight of her watching him from the barn, he headed her way.

She started milking Bessie as she tried to will away the knots tightening in her stomach. Please let Mr. Tall, Dark, and Incredibly Hot be lost. Don't let him be here to make my day even worse.

"Ms. Stone?" His deep voice echoed through the milking barn and sent shivers up her spine that had nothing to do with the icy wind outside.

Turning around, Emily came face to face with the clearest blue eyes she'd ever seen. His firm, sensuous mouth remained in a perpetual frown,

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making her wonder what he'd look like if he smiled. The smooth lines of his face begged to have her run her fingertips along their masculine planes. Dang, he was hotter than a summer in Arizona. It felt as if the wind had been knocked out of her, and it was a minute before she found her voice enough to speak. "Y-yes?"

He reached into his breast pocket and pulled out an envelope and a business card. "I'm Drake Levinsworth, and I work for the IRS." He held out the documents for her. "This is for you."

A sense of dread sank like a rock into the pit of her stomach as she stared blindly at the envelope he held toward her. The longer she stared, the more impatient the man seemed to get.

He glanced at his watch, gave her an I-don't-have-all-day look, and shook the plain envelope toward her.

Sighing, she took it, holding it between her thumb and finger as if it contained the plague inside. "Look, my time is as valuable as yours, and if you want me to read this thing, then you are going to have to help me milk."

The look of shock on his face as his mouth fell slack was almost comical. Before he could protest, she took his arm and tugged him toward her milking stool. "Sit there. Bessie will let you know if you are doing it wrong. Just watch out for her back hoof if you are."

"Look, lady—" He shook his head and tried to stand up.

"You might want to remove your jacket and roll up your sleeves. Wouldn't want you getting your expensive suit dirty." She stood behind him and tugged his jacket down his arms, throwing it over her shoulder. "While you work with Bessie, I'll just step over here and read this...umm...letter."

Emily bit back the urge to giggle at the ridiculous picture Drake made sitting on a milking stool in his business suit. He was so out of his element it was laughable, and she almost felt sorry for him as he stared at Bessie as though she were an alien from Mars.

Almost. But given he'd probably brought her more bad news, her pity didn't rise very high.

"Come on, Mr. Levinsworth. You act as if you've never seen a milk cow before."

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He scowled at her. "Of course, I've seen a cow before." Turning back around to face the cow, he said, "Just never quite from this angle."

"Well, then get to milking. She's not going to milk herself, and around here, milk is money."

She moved away from him and Bessie and opened the envelope with shaking hands. She prayed that it wasn't bad news, but then why else would the IRS send someone to hand deliver the envelope's contents to her. The Internal Revenue Service wouldn't know good news if it jumped up and bit them on the butt.

Bracing herself for the worst, she withdrew the folded paper inside and opened it. Her gaze scanned over the words on the paper, trying to make sense of them. No! They were going to take her farm from her. The only thing she had left from her parents. This couldn't be happening to her. She couldn't have read that right. It had to be a mistake.

"What's this supposed to mean?" She did her best to keep the tremor of fear from her voice, but she didn't think she quite succeeded.

Bessie must've sensed her distress and kicked out, knocking the bucket of milk over and spilling it all over Drake's suit. Served him right for freaking her out this way, especially so close to Christmas.

He jumped up, cursing every cow from here to Timbuktu and glared at her.

"Don't look at me that way. You're the one who didn't watch out for her hoof." She couldn't help but thank Bessie as he swiped at the milk soaking through his pants leg.

"Why are you so shocked?" He indicated the letter in her hands. "You owe the government money, and since you've refused to pay so far, they've decided to take the one asset you have to cover it."

"Well, the government sucks. And how was I supposed to know I owed them money? I just took over the running of the farm." She huffed and stalked off toward the house.

"Then the former owners should've informed you about the debt." His presence dogged at her heels as he followed her inside the house.

"The former owners were my parents, and they're both dead." She grabbed the dishtowel on the refrigerator handle and threw it at him as she headed to the roll top desk her father had called an office.

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The arrogant IRS man thought he had an answer to everything. She fought back the angry tears burning behind her eyes. The nerve of him to come into her home and tell her it wasn't going to be hers for much longer. He had to be wrong. Had to be.

She was digging through the mountains of unopened envelopes when Drake came up behind her.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." His warm breath fanned her hair from behind as her hand fell on an envelope with the IRS logo in the corner.

She sniffed and picked it up, her heart shattering when she saw the truth of the amount her father was in debt. Sinking into the chair in front of the desk, she swiped at the tears now freely falling down her face. "That's because you didn't care to know. This is the last thing I have left from my parents, and now you want to take that away from me."

A look of pain crossed his face then disappeared as he took a deep breath. "Look, I truly don't want to take your family home. Especially not during the holidays. I was just doing my job." He sat down on a footstool near her. "Is there anything you can do to come up with the money, or anything that you know of that can offset some of the debt?"

She shook her head, not trusting herself to speak. She was going to lose everything and there didn't seem to be a damn thing she could do about it.

Merry Christmas to me.

Standing up, Drake put his hands beneath her arms and lifted. The shock of his touch rushed through her like a bolt of lightening, sending sparks shimmering everywhere. The darkening of his gaze told her he felt it too. She dropped her eyes to look at his lips and wondered what they tasted like. He lowered his head toward her, and she darted her tongue to moisten her mouth in anticipation of a kiss...that never came.

He cleared his throat and eased her down on the stool he'd been sitting on then took her place at the desk. "I-I'm sure if we made some sense of these papers, maybe we'd find something to help you out."

His gaze darted everywhere but at her. Of course, why would a well-to-do man such as Drake be attracted to a lowly farm girl like herself?

Her face burned with shame, and she looked down. "I wouldn't

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even know where to begin."

Reaching out, he lifted her chin to meet his gaze and allowed his fingers to linger longer than necessary. "Please, let me help you. It's the least I can do after springing those documents on you."

All she could do was nod as she stared into the endless abyss of his blue eyes.

"Where did your father keep his books?" He dropped his palm and rummaged through the mountain of papers on the desk.

"In the bottom left drawer." She reached at the same time he did, their hands entangling with each other on the drawer handle. Her heart hammered in her chest as she jerked hers back into her lap. "Th-they're in the bottom under all that other stuff."

They spent several hours going over all the books and all the unopened envelopes to no avail. The mild hope that there would be something in those papers and books to save the farm she loved so dearly dwindled down until it extinguished into a puff of smoke. It was useless to fight it anymore. She was going to be homeless for Christmas, the holiday her mother had made so special for her growing up.

She glanced at the small, decorated tree in the corner, and her eyes welled once more. I'm sorry Mom and Dad. I've failed.

"So how long do I have to get out?" The thought of selling Bessie and the other cows broke what was left of her heart. She'd loved those animals like they were family. Heck, they were the only family she had left.

He reached out and caressed her face. "I'm so sorry. I wish there was something here that would help you." Compassion for her situation softened his gaze.

She nodded against his palm. "I know. Thanks for trying. It's more than most would've done." Sighing, she got up and moved to the kitchen. "I need to go finish milking the cows. If I don't, they'll be in pain later."

He remained silent as she left the house and headed back to the barn. Once she'd reached the safety of the milking area, she allowed herself to feel all the pain and sorrow of losing everything. Her body shook from the force of it as she rested her head against Bessie's shoulder.

"I'm sorry, girl. I've not only failed my parents, but I've failed you,

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too.” Taking a deep breath, she settled in to milking the girls. It was the only thing she knew to do to get her mind off the truth sitting in her living room.

She was on her third cow when Drake came running out of the house waving a paper at her, a smile splitting his face from ear to ear. “I found it! I think I’ve found your solution.”

The jubilant look on his face sparked her glimmer of hope back to life. Dare she hope she’d get to keep the farm after all?

“Your father donated every dime he could spare to all kinds of charities.” He shoved the page at her that had been torn out of one of the ledgers her father had kept.

She stared down at her father’s masculine scrawl. “What does this mean?”

“It means that the amount he donated would take care of three-fourths of your back taxes. If you can come up with the last little amount, you can keep the farm.”

She figured it in her head and was surprised that it only equaled the amount of one cow if she sold it. She could do that if it meant keeping the farm.

A sense of triumph filled her heart, and she jumped up and threw her arms around his neck, planting a kiss right on his lips. Realizing what she’d done, she pulled back instantly. “I’m sorry.”

His smile grew even wider if possible. “I’m not.” He lowered his mouth toward hers. “It looks like it’s going to be a Merry Christmas after all.”

The End

About Shonna Brannon

Shonna Brannon has been writing since she was a teenager, but really took it seriously in 2004 when a personal tragedy showed her how short life really is. She finished her first book just short of a year later. She

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is the mom of three beautiful children with another one on the way. In her spare time she enjoys reading contemporary and paranormal romances with the occasional mystery or horror thrown in. She lives in the country in Northeast Alabama with her own hero, Randall, and their 4 kids.

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Nine Ladies Dancing

by Jackie Barbosa

There were nine ladies dancing.

The tenth, Emily Beaufort, sat in a straight-backed, unpadded wooden chair against the wall of the ballroom, watching nine gentlemen whirl their partners across the shiny parquet floor. She tapped her foot softly in time to the music, refusing to indulge in maudlin reflection at the familiarity of her predicament.

Once again, Emily played the wallflower.

But it wasn't so bad, really. After all, she had two left feet and was prone to dizziness. Moreover, none of the three eligible gentlemen in attendance at Lord St. Germaine's house party interested her in the slightest.

As they spun in front of her, she catalogued each nobleman's faults as a means of distraction.

Lord Trendell might have ten thousand a year, but he had very little hair and rather less brains. The woman who married him would be wealthy enough to buy gowns by the dozen and jewels aplenty, but her dinner conversation for the next thirty years would be relegated to the only topics upon which her husband could carry on an informed discussion. As far as Emily could make out, those topics were limited to the weather and...the weather.

By contrast, Sir Thomas Darby possessed a full head of hair and a capacity for entertaining repartee, but he was fifty if he was a day and had three adult children by his now-deceased wife. Emily supposed he was handsome...for a man old enough to be her father, but marrying a man

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who was not only old enough to be her father but had children her own age simply did not appeal.

Mr. George Hawthorne should have been perfect husband material. He had good looks, youth, wealth, and reasonable intelligence. Unfortunately, he also had breath so malodorous it could have created perfect ringlets more ably than a curling iron.

Of course, Lord St. Germaine himself was meant to round out the field of unattached gentlemen, but he had not made an appearance since the guests had arrived on Christmas Eve for the twelve-night house party. His sister, who now twirled about the dance floor in the arms of Emily's father, had explained that her brother had taken a chill and that she would be acting as hostess until he recovered, hopefully before Epiphany arrived and the guests returned to their own homes.

In truth, Emily rather hoped Lord St. Germaine would remain abed until well after she and her parents had quit Featheringale Manor. Viscount St. Germaine was a mysterious figure at best and a menacing one at worst, depending upon whose account of the facts one believed. London rumor held that he had joined the army despite being heir to his family's title because he had a hot temper and a taste for violence, and that he had been abruptly discharged from that same army several years later on account of the same. According to the gossips, he had proven incapable of directing either vice exclusively upon the enemy.

Emily had no reason to disbelieve the veracity of the stories she heard, for since leaving the army, he had never come to Town. And that was most peculiar behavior for a titled gentleman. It implied, at a minimum, some shameful fault he preferred to keep hidden from Society.

No, she had no interest in coming face to face with Lord St. Germaine. Certainly, some of the girls were featherheaded enough to imagine that a man with a dangerous past would be dashing and debonair. Not Emily. She had no interest whatever in meeting some hulking brute of a man...

"Pardon me, but is this seat taken?"

Emily jumped at the sound of a masculine voice to her left. Absorbed in her own mental meanderings, she had quite forgot her surroundings and certainly had been unaware of anyone approaching her.

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Of course, she had no reason to expect anyone to approach, save perhaps a servant. All of the guests were accounted for on the dance floor.

Save one.

Swallowing a lump of anxiety, she turned to look at Viscount St. Germaine. Had she not been sitting down, she might well have slumped to the floor in a dead faint. Not because her worst fears were realized, but because his appearance so completely controverted them.

He was neither the monstrous beast of her fevered imaginings nor the dashing, debonair roué of her friends' hopeful fantasies. It was difficult to be sure from her seated position, but he seemed taller than average and also thinner, though that might have been a trick of the narrow fit of his coat at the waist relative to the broadness of his shoulders. His face, too, was thin if not gaunt, a fact which made his regular features--cleft chin, straight nose, brown eyes--appealing in a way she couldn't quite explain but that made her want to smooth away the pain she saw there.

And the pain, if she had to guess, was physical. As he stood before her, he leaned heavily on an ivory-handled cane, favoring his right leg. His eyes widened inquiringly, and he lifted the cane and pointed the tip toward the chair.

Emily realized belatedly that she had been staring at him for a very long time, and her cheeks burned. "Yes, of course--I mean, no--" she babbled, then finished, "That is, no one is sitting there, Lord St. Germaine. Please, do sit down." She made a sweeping gesture toward the empty chair, feeling the world's greatest ninny.

"Thank you, Miss Beaufort." He took two limping, labored steps before turning around and lowering himself onto the seat.

While he settled himself, two thoughts impinged upon her consciousness.

The first was that it was quite inappropriate for her to be speaking with a man to whom she had never been formally introduced, let alone sitting beside him with their legs nearly touching. The heat radiating from his body warmed her skin through the layers of her green velvet gown and soft muslin petticoat.

The second was that, despite their lack of introduction, he knew her

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name. And though it made perfect sense that he would know the names of all the guests at his own house party, since he had not met a one of them in person, he could not possibly know she was Miss Emily Beaufort and not one of the three other eligible young ladies who had been invited to attend.

And yet, somehow, he did.

Curiosity made her brain itch so badly, she wanted to scratch her head. Though it was wholly improper to make conversation with him, she could not prevent the question from popping out of her mouth.

"Begging your pardon, my lord, but how did you know my name?"

"The same way you knew mine, I expect." He smiled and gave her a conspiratorial wink.

The playful expression had a profound effect on his countenance, transforming it from somber and slightly sad to radiantly handsome. Emily's heart bounced oddly in her chest and her cheeks warmed again, though the sensation spreading through her body was nothing like embarrassment.

"And what way is that?" she asked.

"Process of elimination." He nodded toward the dance floor. "Everyone else is dancing."

"But it was easy for me," she protested. "I have met everyone but you."

His lips twitched at the corners, as if he were suppressing a chuckle. "And I know my guest list. With my sister's help, I invited four young ladies and their guardians to this little soiree. Four young ladies whom my sister believed might be willing to overlook my...defects and consider me a suitable husband."

"What made her pick me?" As soon as the question was voiced, Emily clapped her hand over her mouth. She hadn't meant to say that aloud.

Drat her infernal inability to keep her own counsel! She was forever saying things out of turn, speaking her mind when she ought to keep her opinions to herself. Her mother had warned her on more than one occasion that her loose lips would be the death of her hopes of making an

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advantageous match. No gentleman wanted a wife whose discretion could not be counted upon.

But rather than taking offense as she anticipated, this time he did laugh. A rich, warm, throaty laugh that made her skin tingle with pleasure. Who would have fancied a man of St. Germaine's reputation would have a sense of humor?

Emily's, according to her mother, was somewhat overdeveloped.

The viscount arched an eyebrow in mock dismay. "Are you telling me you are not the young lady my sister described as kindhearted, quick-witted, and prone to making the most inappropriate observations at the most inopportune times?"

She gaped for a moment. If she wasn't mistaken, she had just been simultaneously flattered and insulted in the politest of fashions. Moreover, since she could not deny the obvious truth that she had a tendency to put her foot in her mouth, she could hardly protest against the flattery.

He had cornered her quite neatly and cleverly.

Grinning, she shook her head. "That is not at all well done of you, my lord. Surely, you could not have discerned anything about the state of my wits, my heart, or my discretion after less than thirty seconds in my company."

"True," he averred, "but it would be rather difficult to miss the red hair and hazel eyes. Frances mentioned those, as well."

This admission rather deflated her. Not only did most people notice the red hair and the freckles that went with it, they rarely saw beyond it, either. Emily herself tended to disappear behind her too-bright hair--and, if she were honest with herself, her too-big mouth.

"I see," she murmured.

A moment's silence descended before he gestured toward the dance floor again with the tip of his cane. "Why are you not dancing?"

Emily's eyes widened. Surely the reason was as plain as the aquiline nose on his face. "There are only nine gentlemen and ten ladies."

The viscount shrugged as if this were of no consequence. "It is a country dance, Miss Beaufort. An extra dancer is easily accommodated."

He had a point. Indeed, both Mr. Hawthorne and Lord Trendell

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had urged her to join in, but she had declined...because she didn't want to be a fifth wheel, because she didn't want to encourage either gentleman's attentions, and because...

"The truth is, I don't care that much for dancing. All the twirling about makes me quite ill."

"Indeed? It would appear we have something in common, then."

"You don't care for dancing?" Oh, drat! She'd done it again. Of course, he didn't care for dancing. Not with that limp. A war injury, she supposed, and likely the reason for his discharge. Not, as the gossips would have it, some character defect on his part.

Fortunately, he only nodded in response to her second indiscretion in as many minutes. "I am quite fond of it, actually. Unfortunately, my leg is not so enthusiastic."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have...that is, I should have realized." She cast about, desperate to change the subject as she felt her cheeks warming. They'd soon be tinged bright red to match her hair if she didn't find something else to talk about. She fancied her skin was roughly the shade of a ripe cherry when she at last hit upon another topic of conversation. "I trust you are fully recovered from your illness, my lord."

He blinked. "Illness?"

"Your sister said you had taken a chill and could not join us until you recovered."

"Oh, that." His husky chuckle washed over her. "That is Frances's polite way of referring to what happens to my leg when the weather turns cold." He pressed his palm against his upper thigh, massaging the spot pensively as he spoke. "She doesn't like to mention the injury, you see. Thinks it may put young ladies off if they know there are days in winter when I can scarce get out of bed, much less twirl around the dance floor."

Impolitic as always, Emily couldn't help watching him as he kneaded his muscles, something he apparently did without conscious thought. She found it hard to imagine this man--handsome, intelligent, masculine--being so badly disabled that he could not get out of bed. Somehow, the realization made the horrors of war real to her as they had never been before. And she wanted, more than before, to soothe away his pain.

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His lips twisted into a wry smile. "It isn't very dashing, is it?"

"I think it is terribly dashing," she retorted, a fierce emotion burning in her gut. She couldn't bear the idea that he held his injury, which he'd sustained protecting England from Napoleon, against himself. "You were very brave to go to war when you didn't have to."

He shook his head. "No, I was young and foolish and thought fighting the French would be filled with honor and glory and fame."

"And it wasn't?" she asked softly.

"Oh, there was honor and glory and fame for some. But mostly it was a dirty, uncomfortable, and brutal business. One no proper young lady should be asking questions about."

"I'm not exactly the most proper young lady, I'm afraid. I always ask questions I shouldn't and speak out of turn. But you knew that already."

"And it is why I was pleased to find you playing the wallflower tonight, Miss Beaufort. I fancy none of the others would even have deigned to converse with me without an introduction. We should have been sitting here, side-by-side, studiously ignoring one another until the set ended and we could meet with proper supervision."

At that very moment, the music ended and the dancing couples broke apart.

Lord St. Germaine rose to his feet, appearing much more agile than he had when he sat down. He thumped his cane twice against the floor. The low drone of conversation that had been audible when the music ceased was cut short.

"Jonathan!" Lady Frances Jones-Drew exclaimed. "You are recovered."

The viscount nodded. "Indeed, I have quite warmed up. So much so, I believe I am up to a waltz."

Emily gaped as he set the cane against the chair and extended his hand to her.

"Miss Beaufort, will you do me the honor?"

"But...but...you can't...and I don't."

He laughed. "I can...when I am warm enough, and I find I am quite warm after our conversation. But only in very slow, easy circles."

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Her eyes widened. "Slow, easy circles?"

He captured her hand and pulled her to her feet. "Precisely." Turning toward the small orchestra, he said, "A slow waltz, please."

Hand in hand, they walked to the dance floor. He still favored his right leg, but the limp was less pronounced than it had been before.

"You do know how to waltz, Miss Beaufort?" he asked as he placed one large, warm hand at the small of her back. Prickles of pleasure raced up her spine.

"Yes." She placed her free hand on his shoulder as if to prove the truth of her claim.

"Good." The music swelled, fueling the delight burgeoning inside her. "Ready, begin," he whispered near her ear as he took his first step forward.

Oh yes, she was ready to begin.

And now, there were ten ladies dancing.

The End

About Jackie Barbosa

When Jackie isn't trying to be a writer—and even when she is—she's a happily married mother of three who makes her living writing technical training materials for the software industry. She lives with her family in Southern California, where she was born and raised. She holds a BA in Classical Studies from the University of California at Santa Cruz, and an MA in Classics from the University of Chicago.

Jackie has been telling stories since before she learned to write—just ask her mother! You can visit her online at <http://www.jackiebarbosa.com>. Several of her novellas are available for purchase at <http://www.cobblestonepress.com> and her Regency-set novella anthology, *Behind the Red Door*, will be released by Kensington Aphrodisia in June of 2009.

The Winter Lord

by Deborah Schneider

"Trouble" the parrot chirped.

Madison watched as Mrs. Farrington's thin lips drew down into a disapproving frown.

"I'm afraid Bonaparte is right, your record here at the Shady Lawn School for Ladies of Quality seems to have been filled with, um—difficulties."

The woman removed her spectacles to tap her finger on the papers lying on the surface of her desk.

"This last episode forces me to make an extremely tough decision. It gives me no pleasure to tell you, Miss McCloud, that you have been expelled from our school. I do not expect you to return to us after the Christmas break."

Madison felt her world tilt sideways. She'd expected to be disciplined in some way, to receive the usual lecture followed by a stiff penance of no social events or extra-curricular activities.

She never expected to be expelled from school for demonstrating the finer points of rolling your own cigarette to several girls from the senior class. Of course, she hadn't anticipated that Holly Langford would be silly enough to drop the cigarette when it was passed to her and start a small fire in the stables.

Certainly Madison shouldn't shoulder the entire blame for the incident. There were three other girls involved.

Although when Madison considered the situation, she realized one of the girls was the daughter of a scion of New York society and the other

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two were from old-money, Main Line families.

Apparently the daughter of a Senator from a wilderness state was considered the most expendable of the group. Her expulsion was most likely to serve as a warning to the other members of her class. It was clearly intended to keep the young women passive, ladylike and out of trouble.

It wasn't her father she feared anyway, but her sister-in-law, Sinclair Readford McCloud. This was her alma mater, and she'd pulled many strings to get Madison accepted here in the first place. Sinclair would not be happy to hear about this latest in a series of escapades. Even less so because it would result in Maddie's return home to Ghost Horse Gulch in disgrace.

The Headmistress sighed deeply and a sympathetic look crossed her face.

"I admire high spirits in our young ladies, Miss McCloud. You have demonstrated the highest grades in mathematics, Latin and History." She glanced down at the papers on her desk again.

"But our deportment teacher indicates you have performed poorly in her class."

Maddie remained silent, despite her strong inclination to argue that choosing the best linens for a trousseau wasn't exactly an intellectual challenge. Not to mention how unnecessary etiquette was on a cattle ranch in Montana.

"If you could, ma'am, I'd like to tell my family about this in person. I'm leaving for home tomorrow morning and I'll be there before Christmas. Could you refrain from sending them a telegram until after the holidays?"

Mrs. Farrington turned to glance at her parrot, as if she expected him to answer the question. Finally she nodded in agreement.

"I've already made arrangements for a chaperone. Mrs. Franklin will meet you at the station. She's traveling to visit her daughter in Seattle."

As Maddie rose to leave the room, she heard a soft cough behind her. She turned to find the Headmistress standing.

"I believe you'll discover your own path, Madison. You have

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intelligence and strength of character. Once you manage to control your youthful impulses, you'll find a good husband and make a brilliant marriage. I'm sure of it!"

Maddie closed the door quietly behind her and wrinkled her nose in disgust. "How dreadful that would be," she whispered.

* * * * *

"How long will it take for us to get to Montana?" Mrs. Franklin smoothed her dark woolen skirt then folded her hands carefully in her lap. The older woman appeared to be as nervous as a calf on branding day.

"Nearly ten days, and I feel I should warn you, taking the train is fast but most uncomfortable." Maddie adjusted her fur muff. "I hope you wore woolen stockings and quilted petticoats. That stove down at the end of the passenger car won't provide much heat."

Mrs. Franklin blushed at the mention of unmentionables. "Shush," she implored. "There's a gentleman coming towards us."

Maddie glanced up to find her gaze clashing with a pair of stormy gray eyes. The man was young, with the polished mannerisms and fashionable garb that marked him as a gentleman of means. He nodded at the two women as he proceeded down the aisle to take the seat behind them.

"All aboard!" The conductor called, and a few minutes later the final passengers shuffled down the aisle to take their seat.

"Telegram for Mr. Billingsley," the conductor called as he strode down the aisle, looking at the people seated on both aisles.

Maddie was startled as she recognized the name and tried to twist in her seat to see if her neighbor from Montana might be on this train. She was shocked to see the stranger seated behind her raise his hand to signal that the telegram was for him.

She stared at the man for a few moments, to his amusement and her chagrin. Maddie felt a strange stirring in her lower belly as the man gave her a slow, languorous smile. She finally realized she was being rude and turned back to her companion.

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Mrs. Franklin had taken out her knitting and was engrossed in making what appeared to be a woolen sock. The steam engine lurched forward and the cars moved out of Broad Street Station.

Maddie and Mrs. Franklin chatted languidly as the train chugged towards St. Paul. They'd change trains there and take the Northern Pacific to Havre. Finally a small spur line would take them into Ghost Horse Gulch. Before Christmas Day, Maddie would be reunited with her family.

"I beg your pardon, ladies."

Maddie glanced up to find the gray-eyed stranger standing next to their seat. He'd removed his hat and she could see his hair was thick and a bit long, as it brushed the stiff high collar of his shirt.

"I hope I don't presume to be too bold, but I've only just arrived in your beautiful country. I hoped I might introduce myself." He leaned forward in a small bow.

For the first time in ages, Madison McCloud was at a loss for words. The man sat down across from them and extended one gloved hand.

"My name is Evan Billingsley. How do you do?"

Maddie blinked. "What?" She knew her response didn't sound very clever, but she was perplexed.

"Billingsley, from England. I'm pleased to make your acquaintance Miss...?"

"Billingsley?" She repeated and he looked amused.

"That's my name. Might I know yours?"

Maddie finally shook herself. "I apologize, I'm Miss McCloud. I don't mean to appear so startled, but one of our neighbors in Montana is named Billingsley. I suppose it's a common name in England."

"Actually, not as common as you might imagine." He smiled, and Maddie admired his lovely firm lips and perfect white teeth.

"Is it possible you're acquainted with my Uncle and namesake? He lives in a small town called Ghost Horse Gulch." He grinned again. "Quite an unusual name, don't you think?"

Maddie relaxed. "Wait until you see the town." She grinned back at Mr. Billingsley. "I know your Uncle well; he's a good friend of our family and a kind and generous man. He actually gave me my first pony after I,

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um, well after my family experienced a most difficult time.”

Mr. Billingsley looked delighted. “Then you must tell me everything about this town and my Uncle. I’m on my way to visit him and I’m anxious to make a good impression. He has always been something of a hero to me.”

Maddie nodded. “He’s one of the kindest souls I’ve ever known and an expert rancher. My brother sets a high standard for his good opinion and he believes Lord Billingsley to be top-notch in the cow business.”

Mr. Billingsley chuckled. “My father would be appalled to hear him described as such, but to be honest—I’m delighted.”

They chatted through the afternoon, as Maddie told him the story of how her sister-in-law came to town to visit her Aunt, was mistaken for a soiled dove and escaped by climbing out the window of the local sporting house and falling into her brother’s arms. Well, technically Sinclair fell onto the back of Jefferson’s horse, but Maddie felt her version of events was much more romantic.

When the train pulled into the station to stop for dinner, Mrs. Franklin grasped her arm and they excused themselves to visit the ladies lounge. She chattered non-stop about Mr. Billingsley.

“This is such a coincidence, him traveling to the same town you are going to.” She had a dreamy look in her eyes, and Maddie realized that she was quite smitten with the young Lord they’d visited with all afternoon.

“Can you imagine, his family is descended from Knights, and they actually have a castle in Scotland.” Mrs. Franklin looked like she was going to swoon.

Maddie shrugged. “A pedigree is not the most important thing. I believe there are better ways to judge a man.” But, she felt a twinge of guilt that she’d never addressed Billingsley by his title. Actually, he’d never even shared the honorific.

When they returned to their seats after dinner, Billingsley excused himself to the rear platform to enjoy an after dinner cigar.

Mrs. Franklin settled a quilt around her legs and in a short time was fast asleep. Maddie decided to take this opportunity to talk privately

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with Mr. Billingsley.

The cold wind whipped her thick velvet lined cape around her legs as she closed the door to the platform. The glow of a cigar faintly lit the handsome features of the young man standing there. She slid to the railing of the platform and put her gloved hands on the edge.

They were silent for a few moments before Maddie turned to face him.

"I came out to apologize to you, Mr. Billingsley. I'm afraid I'm been a bit too familiar in addressing you. I haven't given you the respect you deserve and I hope you know I'm very sorry."

He tossed the cigar over the edge of the platform and turned toward her. "I've enjoyed our conversation immensely and I've not taken any offense to your form of address." He took a step closer to her and Maddie felt her heart beat faster. He was standing so near to her, as she inhaled his masculine scent of tobacco and bay rum she once again felt that strange flutter in her belly.

"In fact, I'd much prefer you call me by my Christian name, and discard the perfunctory title.

He towered over her, his eyes dark with something she couldn't recognize, but that made her feel hot and flushed.

"Evan?" She whispered.

The wind was cold and the night glowed with a thousand stars above them. He stepped even closer and touched her cheek gently.

"I've never met anyone like you before, Miss McCloud. You're innocent yet tantalizingly sensual. You intrigue me."

Evan slipped an arm around her waist to pull her closer and she knew she should turn away from him. This was far too familiar and forward an action for a gentleman. She should return to her seat inside. She should, but she felt as frozen as the landscape rolling by them.

He put a finger beneath her chin and tipped her face gently up toward him. Maddie knew what he intended, and despite the fact that it was most improper, she couldn't turn away. He was a temptation she couldn't seem to resist.

With a touch as light as a snowflake, his warm lips covered hers. Maddie felt the chill of the night disappear and a red hot sizzling heat

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whip through her. She lifted her arms to encircle his neck, pulling him closer to her. Their bodies entwined, leaning into each other, seeking warmth and comfort.

Finally, Evan lifted his lips from hers and he took a short step away. He grasped her hand and held onto it firmly.

"I beg your forgiveness, Miss McCloud. I hope I haven't offended you, but I simply couldn't resist stealing a kiss."

Maddie swallowed and licked her lips. She could see a dark flare light his eyes as he watched her tongue slowly move across the edges of her mouth.

"Madison," she finally said.

He grinned. "Madison, a delightful name for a beguiling woman".

She fumbled with her muff and blushed. "I've been out here too long, I should get back to my seat."

He nodded at her. "To avoid too much speculation, perhaps we shouldn't go back inside together."

"I think you're right, but I doubt Mrs. Franklin will notice how long we've been out here. She was snoring loudly when I left."

Before she could open the door, Evan lifted her gloved hand to his lips.

"I've longed to see the American west since I was a child. Making your acquaintance was not only a lovely coincidence, but I believe you are part of my destiny."

He kissed her gloved hand tenderly, then released her to go back inside.

Sliding into her seat, Maddie glanced out the window to see a smattering of snowflakes falling in the moonlight. She still glowed from her encounter with Evan and she smiled as she whispered to herself. "My destiny."

The End

Twelve Days of Christmas

About Deborah Schneider

A lifelong love of American history led Deborah Schneider from teaching high school to writing novels. She won the Molly award for “Most Unsinkable Heroine” from the Heart of Denver chapter of RWA. Her first book, “Beneath A Silver Moon” was a finalist in the New Historical Voice Contest in 2000 and was published in 2001. Her newest book, “Promise Me” will be released in 2009. Deborah is employed by one of the busiest library systems in the US. She lives in the shadow of the Cascade Mountains in the beautiful Pacific Northwest.

Frozen Pipes, Warm Heart

by Brandi Broughton

“What do you mean you can’t make it?” Sara stood stunned that her assistant of two weeks would even suggest such a thing. She’d hired the college student to help meet the holiday rush, but she should’ve known something like this would happen.

Dough squished between her fingers as they curled into fists and she listened to the excuses over the phone, which she held pressed to her ear with one shoulder. Coughs and words of apology peppered her ear.

“I feel awful—”

I bet you do.

“But I just can’t make that long drive in my condition. The roads are pretty bad, and my boyfriend says it’d be really bad for me to expose my lungs to the cold right now.”

Her boyfriend...

Sara closed her eyes and counted to ten to calm her growing frustration. Okay, the temperature had dropped drastically as this latest front moved in, but forecasters weren’t predicting a blizzard, just a bit of snow, and that had stopped about an hour ago.

She frowned. “You said you could put in the overtime. I was counting on you.” Otherwise, she wouldn’t have accepted two extra catering orders so late in the week.

She had to complete the meals by tomorrow morning so they could be delivered in time for her customers’ holiday meals. Her customers counted on her for more than a home-cooked dinner. Sara’s hard work, headaches, and hassles in her own kitchen freed up the hosts to spend quality time creating family memories without stress or messy kitchens.

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As a single businesswoman without a close-knit family of her own, it was a sacrifice Sara willingly made to make ends meet. She was the proud owner of her own business and valued the chance to be her own boss, prove that she had what it takes to succeed...alone.

It hadn't been easy, but the holidays provided the boost needed each year to keep her Hearth and Home Catering service out of the red. She didn't have the fancy industrial-sized, state-of-the-art kitchens. She'd never had a huge staff either, choosing instead to hire part-time helpers to meet fluctuating demands. But her small company was more than a dream come true. It had also enabled her to recover from a devastating divorce that had initially left her with feelings of insecurity and despair.

"I know, but—" More coughs erupted from the phone's earpiece.

"Never mind. Get well," Sara said, suspecting the girl would make a miraculous recovery after Christmas. "I've got work to do."

She hung up, unwilling to waste any more precious time listening to the young girl's excuses.

Sara drove her fist into the dough. She'd just have to do the job all by herself. Alone.

She'd gotten used to spending Christmas alone, but what choice had she had? After she caught Phillip with his hands up his secretary's skirt at a corporate holiday party, the season of "Good Tidings" held little appeal for her, even if she now used it to her financial advantage.

Immediately after Phillip's infidelity, she'd cleaned out her closet, filed for divorce, and moved out. That had been three years ago.

Three tough years. But she'd made it. She owned a house—well, half a duplex in a neighborhood of older homes, but it was still home. She had a successful catering business that kept her busy and the bills paid. What more could she want?

She walked over to the sink to wash her hands and fill a pot with water so she could put a couple dozen eggs on to boil. She'd need them for deviled eggs and cornbread dressing.

A turn of the faucet and...nothing.

No!

* * * * *

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Jake's breath whitened the air as he bent to stab his shovel into a snowdrift across his sidewalk. With a strong heave, he cleared another few inches along the concrete path in front of his half of the duplex.

The snow had stopped a while ago without reaching the dire levels forecasted on TV, so the chore of clearing it was not too bad. Yet, the temperatures had dropped lower than anticipated.

His nose and cheeks—and lungs—caught the brunt of the frigid air, but even with thick gloves and an extra pair of socks inside snow boots, his fingers and toes were far from toasty.

He glanced at his neighbor's walkway still white with a layer of soft flakes.

Maybe he should...

He looked at Sara's side of the house. The lights in the kitchen were on as he suspected they would be. She was a hard worker, that woman was.

And so serious all of the time.

A pretty figure and a cute nose had caught his eye when she'd first moved in a few years back. A prickly, guarded demeanor had made him keep his distance since then, but she had softened some over that time.

She was friendly enough whenever they crossed paths, and he knew she lived alone, so he'd kept an eye on her to make sure no one gave her any problems. He'd tried to be a good neighbor.

He tossed the last of the snow from his sidewalk onto the lawn and headed for her walkway.

With frozen hands and sore back, he bent to clear her path as well. It was Christmas Eve after all. Why not help her out, even if she wasn't the type to ask for it?

* * * * *

How in the world was she supposed to cook without water? Sara crawled out from under the kitchen sink and headed for the phone. Nothing seemed to be out of the ordinary with the pipes, but what did she know? She was no plumber.

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She dug out the phone book and thumbed through it looking for ads for plumbers. A glance through the kitchen window told her the sun had set, and someone was tossing snow into her yard.

“What in the...?”

She set the book down and leaned over the sink to look outside.

Jake.

Her heart melted.

The man always seemed to know just what to do to bring her to the brink of tears.

Despite her giving him the cold shoulder or seldom saying more than, “Hi,” in passing, he proved to be a kind-hearted neighbor. And her only true friend, not that she’d ever admitted it.

Jake was a good man, but she’d thought the last man she’d entrusted her heart to had been a good guy, too.

Unlike Phillip with his smooth charisma, Jake never put any flashy moves on her, never even asked her out—not that she ever gave him much of an opportunity. Where Phillip had a white-collar flair, Jake was blue-collar strength and kindness. Still, as handsome as Jake was, Sara’s guard went up whenever he was around. She feared if she ever let him in, she’d fall hard for the man, and her heart couldn’t survive another failed relationship.

Better to go it alone, she told herself for the umpteenth time.

She peered out the window. Another shovel full of snow flew across the lawn. She sighed, fighting the tug to her heart.

In the summers, Jake mowed her side of the lawn whenever he did his, supposedly because his riding lawnmower couldn’t make such tight turns. An excuse she might’ve believed if he hadn’t also refused to take her up on offers to pay him.

Now, when he should be spending the holidays with family somewhere or partying with friends, he was outside in the cold night air shoveling her walkway?

She tightened her lips and turned from the window.

Lifting the phone off the hook, she dialed the number to the first plumber on the page.

After two rings, a recorded message informed her that the

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company was closed for the holidays.

With a frustrated growl, she slammed the phone down and eyed her car keys on a hook by the door. Should she buy some bottled water to get by?

Would stores be open this late on Christmas Eve?

Uneasy concern beat in her chest as she peeked outside through the kitchen window once more.

* * * * *

Jake straightened to his full height of six feet with a slight groan and a deep puff of air.

All done.

He turned to head back inside where warmth awaited when golden light beamed across the lawn.

Sara stood in her doorway, an apron offering the only extra layer to the pink T-shirt and jeans she wore.

"Merry Christmas, neighbor," he said with a smile, hiding the unfathomable embarrassment he felt at being caught doing a good deed.

"Hi. Does your faucet work?"

He blinked, strolled up the walk. "Yes," he answered, wondering what this was all about. "Why? Are you having problems?"

Worry marred her pretty face as she bit her lip and dropped her gaze. "I don't have any water, and it's Christmas Eve. Everything is closed. The roads are terrible, my assistant called in sick, and I have two holiday dinners to finish tonight." Deep blue eyes lifted to meet his. "I'm sorry to ask, but...can I borrow some water?"

He bit back a chuckle. He didn't want to laugh and make her slam the door in his face. He wanted to smile, though, because that had to be the most words she'd spoken to him since the day she first moved in next door.

"Why don't I check your pipes first?" He propped his shovel against a porch post.

She hesitated, but then let him in.

His first sight of her home, all cozy and clean, told him everything

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he needed to know. She took pride in her home. He smiled. *Her cold façade hid a warm heart.*

"The kitchen is this way," she said.

"Actually, the problem is most likely in your basement," he suggested, removing his gloves and goose down coat.

"My basement?"

He nodded. "With the recent temperature drop, my money's on frozen pipes. It often happens in older homes like this one."

"Oh."

"Unless you've insulated them?"

She shook her head. "It's never happened before."

He shrugged. "Last couple of winters have been mild, but this one..." He let his words drift off and waited for her to show her the way. "Is it just your kitchen sink? Or have you tried the bathroom?"

"Oh!" She went straight to the hall bathroom, but returned seconds later shaking her head. She showed him to the basement where a quick inspection of her pipes proved his suspicions correct. The exposed pipes along the outside wall were frozen.

"Do you have a heat lamp?" he asked.

"No." Worry wrinkled her brow.

"No sweat. I have one. Be back in a sec." Jake retrieved the lamp from his place and had it set up a few minutes later.

When he left the basement, he found her in the kitchen bent over the oven door and checking on a turkey. The aroma of herbs and spices made his mouth water. The sight of her round backside made him smile.

"All set," he said.

"Oh!" She jolted and faced him.

"Shouldn't take long." He walked into the kitchen.

She wiped her hands off on her apron. "Thanks, for fixing the pipes and the...for shoveling my walk."

"You're welcome."

A moment of silent regard settled between them.

"You didn't have to do that," she said, shyly avoiding his gaze. "I...I would've got to it tomorrow."

"I know. I wanted to do it." He stepped closer, noticing the blush

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on her cheeks and wondering whether the oven or his presence caused it.

“Well, I, better get back to, um... You must have plans for tonight. I’m sorry—”

“No plans,” he said softly. “Anything I can do to help?”

Her gaze finally met his. “What?”

“You said your assistant called in sick. Consider me your Christmas elf.”

She giggled. “You’re too tall to be an elf.”

He grinned then shrugged. “Handy helper then.”

“You don’t have to—”

He touched a finger to her lips. “I want to.”

Warm breath bathed his finger. He brushed her soft bottom lip before dropping his hand to his side.

“I’d love to spend Christmas Eve with you, if you’ll let me.”

She stared at him, the worry that marred her expression before nowhere to be found.

“What do ya say, Sara?”

A slow smile brightened her face and warmed his heart.

“I’d like that, Jake.”

The End

About Brandi Broughton

Brandi’s mother introduced her to the world of fiction when she bought Brandi her first Nancy Drew book and later let her raid her own stockpile of romance novels. That started a collection of books, which continues to grow to this day, much to her husband’s amusement. Or is that dismay?

Brandi’s father inspired a fascination for imaginative and entertaining stories, and the drive to go for her dreams. Both her parents, married more than 40 years ago, and her paternal grandparents, married 75 years—yes, 75 years & counting!—are the reasons Brandi is a hopeless

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romantic.

She began writing at age 2 with a piece of chalk. Her first written word was TREE, and she has no idea why her family actually remembers that? Since then, she embarked on a writing career that led to an award-winning stint as a television crime reporter, and later as an editor for the computer broadcasting industry.

Meanwhile, her private book collection continued to grow, driven to new heights by her love of romantic fiction. Her first manuscript began with a simple idea and quickly grew into a 98,000 word Time Travel Romance. That manuscript won 3rd place in the first contest she entered. She's been putting her ideas to paper ever since.

Brandi lives with her husband, son, a salt & pepper schnauzer who believes he owns the place, and a tabby cat who knows she does.

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A Different Drummer

by Suzanne Macpherson

Travis climbed into the strange Plexiglass enclosure that kept his drum set audible but muted during the Trinity Presbyterian Church Sunday services. It was a good thing he wasn't claustrophobic. The other musicians gathered on stage to set up and tune. He checked his kit and knocked around a bit to warm up. These days the old boring hymns were gone and contemporary music packed the pews with a younger crowd. Hey, it was a regular paying gig and he got to practice with a band, even though he wasn't sure there actually was a God. Because God had never done his family any favors, that was for sure.

But who cared what he believed? It helped Travis pay for his Montana State tuition to be doing two services at the mega church, and he could even walk to the gleaming modern structure from his off-campus apartment. Besides he'd have his teaching degree finished by the end of the year and be out of here. No reason to stay in Bozeman, he could teach music in any college in the state.

A half-hour later the Right Reverend Burr's booming voice echoed through the sanctuary cuing the band up for their normal Sunday pattern. Welcome, announcements, special centering music, which was usually some old geezer from the choir singing what Travis called a "throwback" inspirational number, accompanied by a single acoustic guitar or the piano.

The kids usually stayed until right before the sermon, and instead of a pre-sermon hymn they got to groove to Jesus rock, and go out singing. Travis was pretty amazed at the vocal talent among the younger

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high school kids and he always took the time to tell them after church.

Sure, some of the sermons bored him out of his gourd, and he wanted to do a little *babump-bah* drum hit to emphasis some of the Reverend's more radical statements just to expose their over the top underbelly, but he didn't. There was no doubt the sword of justice would be swift and cruel if any of the band members dared to step in the way of Rev. Burr's freight train of a sermon. No room for rebels around here. Amen, brother.

Travis kept the rhythm rolling throughout the service this morning. He always thought of drummers as the foundation of the music. Everything else just layered itself over the drum line. He grooved his way through a number about divine love, and then an upbeat gospel piece that was his favorite style.

As the music came to an end and the Reverend got revved up, Travis looked over the congregation to see who was there. Or more specifically, if *she* was there: the dark haired girl with the sad eyes. He'd been watching her for six months, since last June. Seemed like whenever she bowed her head the huge iron and wood chandeliers shone down on her like holy light. She seemed to be praying so very hard. She didn't used to do that. He remembered one Sunday she'd worn a light blue summer dress and her dark eyes had danced with what he'd defined as quiet joyfulness.

She looked to be about his age, maybe twenty-three or four. He'd heard from Mike, the lead guitarist that she'd been engaged, and there had even been a wedding on the organist's schedule, with a possible gig for them at the reception.

Something must have happened though, because her name, Vivian Garcia, had been crossed out. The Garcia/Mendez wedding had definitely not taken place. Luis Mendez, who used to sit beside Vivian in church back in June, was nowhere to be seen now that it was December. Travis had gone back home to visit his grandmother for July and August so he wasn't sure when that guy had faded out of the picture, but he knew his heart was aching for her.

She looked pale today in her soft white ruffled blouse, brown sweater and brown wool skirt. Her hands were folded in front of her as

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they prayed, and she had a brown satin headband on that pulled her beautiful wavy hair away from her face. She had no makeup on at all and there were red blotches under her eyes. Something about her struck Travis in the heart. She reminded him of his mother before she'd . . . died.

Travis almost missed his cue because he was lost in thoughts of Vivian. They launched into the post-sermon "wake up" music which was a combination of the brass ensemble, the organ, and a touch of the contemporary quartet, meaning, himself the drummer, Dave on bass, Mike on lead, and Lisa on keyboards. Mike was like-sixteen, but he must have spent his entire puberty practicing the guitar because The Mike Man had talent. He also had a burning fire of religious fervor that added that special touch to his vocals. Dave was about eighteen, and Lisa was probably the same. That made him the freak at twenty-four.

They played a jazzed up version of "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" while the donation plates were being passed around. Lots of folks were up on their feet singing and clapping like a regular revival meeting. But when Travis stole a glance at Vivian, she was gone.

That's when Travis noticed the old man sitting on the same pew. He was on his feet, singing loud, clapping hard, and had his groove going pretty well. His white hair was a shock of straight-up-ness, and his scrubbled face had a neatly trimmed goatee beard. The dude was no Santa, that was for sure. He might be one of the homeless guys the church let in for a meal on Sundays. His clothes were old and worn, but his spirit was still bright.

After the choir had sung the last Amen and the parishioners filed out to head for their much deserved coffee and cookies, the band started winding patch cords and wrapping things up. Travis stepped out of the Plexiglass enclosure and scanned the room for Vivian, hoping she'd returned. Maybe she left before he'd seen her.

But all he saw was the old man, who walked down on stage. "Hey fellas, nice playin' today," he said. He had a southern accent Travis couldn't place, although he'd traveled the whole bottom basin of the United States with his mom chasing after her stormy ten year relationship with a musician that ended up with her accidental pregnancy that created him, and ten years later her "accidental overdose of prescription drugs."

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He always closed his eyes when he had that thought, just for a second. The accent had reminded him. He hated that.

“Who taught you to drum like that?” he asked Travis.

“My dad. He was a drummer back in the eighties. Disco dad.” Travis could hear an edge in his own voice. It wasn’t this guy’s fault he’d had a bad childhood. He might actually say that his disappearing dad gave him a talent that later came in handy, but hadn’t stuck around to see that happen. His grandma had always supported his talent though, banging away in the basement on a rented kit till he finally earned enough to buy a good one himself by playing high school dance gigs.

Gabe grinned at him. “I used to play some. Jazz, mostly. Mind if we jam? I haven’t laid a stick to the skins in quite a while, but I bet I’ve still got it.”

Travis looked at the guy like he was nuts, which he probably was. Then again, what harm could it do?

“Travis,” he introduced himself and extended his hand.

“I know. Gabe. Back atcha.” Gabe shook his hand and Travis noticed that tremor that elderly folks sometimes get.

“Now how do you get into this box anyhow?” Gabe asked. “Secret entrance,” Travis answered. He swung the side panel open. “Hey guys, Gabe here is going to jam with us for a few minutes. Are you up for it?”

Mike was first to throw Gabe a high five and declare the jam open. He stuck his cord back in and tuned up. A few groans went out but everyone was always up for musical interaction at the heart of it.

Gabe was a small man in his holey old blue sweater and faded jeans. He didn’t have trouble making it through the hatch and slid right behind the drum kit like he was born to it. He banged around for a while and Travis figured maybe Gabe had realized he didn’t have it anymore.

The brass and wind ensemble guys stopped putting their instruments in cases and wandered over to watch. Travis felt bad for the guy.

But after a few minutes that beat got better. And better. Then it transformed into something amazing. That old Gabe dude set a beat that caught every player in the sanctuary’s attention— a hot number Travis

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particularly loved, *Sing Sing Sing*, by Benny Goodman, with the best drum solo ever, made famous by Gene Krupa.

The trumpet guy, who Travis had always considered as good as it gets, wet his lips and dove in. The rest of the trumpets caught up, then the trombones and the clarinet section. Gabe's amazing riffs kept up steady and pretty soon the joint was *jumping*. Nothing did it like that number, and these old guys from the church orchestra seemed to come alive before Travis's eyes.

The sheer stamina of executing the Krupa drum solo was even hard on Travis, but Gabe seemed to get better and better. A ray of afternoon sunlight pierced through the stained glass window and lit up Gabe in the "drum box" like a spotlight.

Travis was transfixed. He stood back in the wide aisle of the sanctuary and watched.

Suddenly he felt a hand on his shoulder. A soft, female hand. He turned to find Vivian standing behind him. There were tears in her eyes.

"I can't believe I'm hearing this music. My fiancé used to play his grandfather's old records for me. He taught me to dance to big band music. This was his favorite," she laughed.

"What happened?" Travis asked, without thinking. A long pause passed between them.

"Luis was killed in Iraq in June. We were supposed to be married in August. He got called up early."

"I'm so sorry," Travis said softly.

"I think he sent me a message today." Vivian began to sob, and just then the song changed to a slow ballad called *Taking A Chance On Love*. Gabe was using the brushes on the cymbals and it sounded like the original Ethel Waters recording.

"You see," she continued, "I didn't think I could go on anymore. I came here today to talk to you. I've seen you watching me sometimes. Then I lost my nerve. I was over in the small chapel crying. Then I heard the music."

Travis, in a very uncharacteristic move, reached out to hold Vivian's hand. "I'm glad you came back. Let's go have coffee across the street at the café and talk, okay?"

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Vivian wiped her eyes. "Yes, I'd like that. Travis, right? But first I want to thank the old man. He sat next to me and told me to come back after the service and talk. He told me all about you and said he knew your mother."

Travis turned around swiftly toward the stage. The drum kit stood silent, except for a slight tremor in the cymbals. The Plexiglass box was empty. Gabe had vanished. The church was silent now except for the orchestra packing up their instruments. Travis walked quickly over to the trumpeter. Vivian followed him.

"Did you see where the old man went?"

"What old man?" he replied.

"The drummer— the guy that just played that Benny Goodman with you, and finished with a ballad?" Travis pointed toward the empty drum booth.

"What have you been smokin' man? "

Vivian took his arm. "Old clothes, white goatee?"

"Yeah, exactly!"

"Maybe he was only here for us, Travis. Do you believe in miracles?"

Travis stared at Vivian. "I'm trying to sort all this out in my head."

"Maybe your head isn't where to sort it out," she touched his chest and he felt his own heartbeat quicken.

* * * * *

Gabe watched Travis help Vivian into her brown wool coat, retrieve his jacket from the side of the stage, and take her hand again. Together Travis and Vivian walked arm in arm out the side door of the church into the bright December sunlight.

Gabe flipped his golden drumsticks in the air and caught them in one swift movement, then spun a roll on the drum for emphasis. Set over.

The End

About Suzanne Macpherson

Rita Nominated author of seven novels, Suzanne Macpherson lives in the Northwest. She is currently at work on a young adult novel, a new adventure for her.

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