

First Night

Kate Austin Jackie Barbosa
Diana Bold Shonna Brannon
Kay Gregory Sheryl Hoyt
Lyric James Leanne Karella
Michelle Pillow
Deborah Schneider



First Night

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

First Night

Copyright© 2009 Jackie Barbosa, Kay Gregory, Shonna Brannon, Lyric James, Diana Bold, Michelle Pillow, Deborah Schneider, Kate Austin, Sheryl Hoyt, Leanne Karella

Cover Art: Copyright© 2009 Leanne Karella

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Table of Contents

Twice Upon a Time by Jackie Barbosa	4
The Efficient Ms. Larrabee by Kay Gregory	11
Second Chances by Shonna Brannon	17
A Secret New Year by Lyric James	22
Never Too Late by Diana Bold	28
Haunted New Year by Michelle Pillow	34
A Winter Welcome by Deborah Schneider	40
Clean Slate by Kate Austin	45
Sweet Suffragette By Sheryl Hoyt	50
Snowbound by Leanne Karella	56

Twice Upon a Time

By Jackie Barbosa

London, December 31, 2009

If anyone had asked Lauren Sheffield why she *had* to be in Westminster Abbey on New Year's Eve, she wouldn't have been able to answer. All she knew was that a peculiar compulsion had taken hold of her since she'd watched a PBS special on the Abbey on TV during the summer. Though she'd tried to talk herself out of spending the thousand-plus dollars the trip would cost—there *was* a recession on, after all—in the end, she'd clicked the "Book It!" link on Travel-Rama.

Now, she stood in the center aisle of the cavernous cathedral, gazing up at the vaulted ceiling as the other worshippers who'd attended the Evensong service filed out around her. A few jostled her as they walked past, muttering unchristian sentiments under their breaths. She knew she was a rock in a stream, but a haunting sense of familiarity rooted her to the spot.

It wasn't *déjà vu*. She didn't feel as if she had experienced this particular event before. In fact, none of the details of the scene unfolding around her tripped her memory. Not the woman brushing by her in a gold lamé suit, obviously decked out for the New Year's Eve festivities that would soon be starting. Not the man in the tattered tweed jacket sitting in the last pew, his unshaven chin resting on his chest as he dozed, likely enjoying the last few minutes of warmth he would experience before morning. Not the cough of someone behind her, echoing off the walls along with the click-clack of people's footsteps as they made their way toward the open doors.

No, this wasn't that eerie, jarring sense of a moment in time replayed, but a calm, peaceful certainty that she'd been here before.

But that was impossible. Born and raised in a suburb of San Francisco, she'd never been further east than Reno in her entire life.

So why did her feet insist upon carrying her not backward to the exit, but

First Night

forward toward the altar? As if pulled by some magnetic force, she made a right turn and walked across the well-worn marble floor toward the south transept, where the area known as Poets' Corner was located. She'd already admired the memorials to England's most famous authors and philosophers, but now she stopped in front of a small bronze plaque, too insignificant to be noticed amidst the more elaborate, more famous monuments. On it were engraved the words:

HENRY DANVERS

1778-1810

For Lauren

Always and Forever

A shiver rumbled down her spine as she reached out to trace the deeply etched letters, the edges worn by the passage of time.

For Lauren? A coincidence, certainly.

But something about Henry Danvers' name and the dedication tugged at her heart. He'd been so young when he died—only thirty-two. Had his Lauren lived on for years without him or had she preceded him to the grave?

"Och, now, there's a story to break your heart."

At the scratchy, quavering male voice beside her, Lauren jumped backward, her cheeks flaming with guilt. She knew touching the plaques and monuments was against the rules.

An elderly, bearded gentleman, clad in black and wearing a white clerical collar, stood beside her. His eyes had the watery cast of advanced years, and his hair was more gray than white, but otherwise, he was a ringer for the English ideal of Father Christmas. He smelled faintly of pipe smoke.

Flustered, she said, "I'm sorry. I know I shouldn't have touched it."

He waved a hand. "Och, lassie, dinna fash yerself." His Scottish accent was so thick now, she thought he might be laying it on for an American audience. "It's after hours now, ye know, and I've never stood on ceremony, anyway."

She giggled. "That's an odd thing for a vicar to admit."

"Aye, it is," he admitted with a wry chuckle. "So, how d'ye know of Danvers? He's hardly a household name."

Lauren shook her head, a trifle embarrassed by her ignorance. "I've never heard of him before now. Who was he?"

"Only the greatest English poet no one knows. To tell the truth, I've always fancied he was better than Keats and, since he died just as young and tragic-like, it's a puzzle to me why he never caught on, but then, the world of letters wasn't any fairer then than now, I suppose."

First Night

Lauren looked back at the plaque, the exquisitely looped letters growing fuzzy before her eyes. For just a second, an image swam in her memory—sharp blue eyes set in a square face framed with curly brown hair, a lock of which fell into his line of vision as he dipped a quill into a bottle of ink and swirled words across an ivory sheet of parchment much too dear for them to afford.

Just as quickly, however, it was gone, fading like a reflection in water disturbed by sudden gust of wind.

“Who was Lauren?” she asked.

He smiled. “His one true love, of course, and his inspiration. She was a viscount’s daughter and too far above his humble origins—he was a washerwoman’s son of uncertain paternity—but she was determined to marry him anyhow. They eloped to Gretna, as couples did in those days when there was familial opposition to the union.” He shook his head, clucking his disapproval. “I fancy he’d have lived much longer if they’d stayed in Manchester instead of returning to London, but he thought the fact that he’d sold his first book of poems and found a wealthy benefactor would put him in her father’s good graces.”

But it hadn’t...

* * * * *

Henry tugged the voluminous white shirt over his head, revealing the defined musculature of his chest and abdomen to Lauren’s hungry gaze. Although they’d been married nearly six months now, seeing him like this—as God had made him—never ceased to feel new and thrilling.

But even the desire burgeoning deep in her body couldn’t loosen the knot of anxiety in her chest or thaw the chill in her bones.

“You mustn’t go tomorrow, Henry.”

He lifted the blankets and climbed into bed beside her, the warmth of his naked skin, as always, a surprise to her. Who needed a hearth fire when she could have Henry as her own personal radiator?

He pulled her close and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I must, as you well know.”

They had been over this territory more than a dozen times today, with each of them determined to have his way. Henry insisted he must protect his honor...and hers. Lauren didn’t care about honor as much as she did the lives of the two men she loved most in the world.

“Besides, your father won’t kill me,” he said with a confidence she didn’t share. “He only means to show he takes your virtue seriously, my love, and put a scare into the dandies sniffing after your sisters’ skirts. And you know I won’t

kill him.”

She did know. Henry would draw his pistol faster than her father and shoot deliberately wide, expecting the viscount to do the same. But as much as she wanted to believe her father would not deprive her of her beloved, she wasn't at all sure her outraged papa would be so forgiving. Viscount Sheffield had hated Henry Danvers from the minute he set eyes upon him, certain he was a no-good, no-account fortune hunter whose only interest in the eldest Sheffield daughter was her purse.

Nothing could be further from the truth, of course. It was Lauren who had pursued Henry far more than the reverse. From the moment she realized he shared her passion for words—and returned her passion for him—she had been relentless in her quest to prove she wasn't too good for him. It had taken more than a year to convince him, but she'd finally done it.

Only to have it lead to this—her father calling out her husband for a duel.

Henry trailed a path of nibbling, biting kisses down her neck. “I'm yours, Lauren. Always and forever. I'll always come back to you, my love. I promise.”

Tears clouded her vision, and a lump settled in her throat, but she smiled and nodded. Somehow, she believed him.

He made love to her then, with a tender intensity that spoke more eloquently than even his most delicious poetry. *I love you*, his body said. *I worship and adore you. I will never leave you.*

And so, when the following morning brought report of his death, even in her grief and devastation, she'd known it wasn't truly the end...but merely another beginning waiting to unfold.

* * * * *

“So,” the vicar was saying, “his book was published posthumously to great fanfare with the very dedication inside it you see on that inscription there. The Prince Regent liked it so much, he insisted on having the plaque installed here. But then Keats came along, and Danvers faded in popularity, and now he's long forgotten.”

Lauren blinked back her tears, her heart aching for her lost Henry...and for the Lauren of old. For, improbable as it seemed, she had no doubt that she *was* Lauren. And back then, she had truly believed in forever and always. Only it hadn't come to pass.

“What happened to Lauren?” she asked, her voice a hoarse whisper.

“Och, I'm afraid no one knows. Some say she died of a broken heart, others that she married a man her father chose and lived a long, if not necessarily happy, life.”

First Night

Lauren frowned. Neither of those rang true. She'd never spoken to her father again, of that she was sure, but neither had she died of a broken heart. More likely, she had gone to the continent or even to America. Perhaps she'd even been carrying Henry's child.

But then, in the end, it probably didn't matter. She and Henry had had their once upon a time and brief happily ever after two hundred years ago.

So much for always and forever.

* * * * *

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but you have to leave. It's almost midnight."

A hand shook Lauren's shoulder gently. She opened her eyes, blinking in confusion. A tall, lanky man in an orange janitor's uniform kneeled beside her.

"Huh?" She looked around the transept, frantically searching for the Scottish vicar. He was nowhere to be seen. "How can it be nearly midnight? I was just talking to this nice, elderly vicar..."

"Sorry, ma'am, I don't know. And I'm not sure how they missed getting you out after the Evensong service."

"The vicar," she repeated, still trying to shake her disorientation, "you must know him. He was just here. About my height, long gray beard, Scottish accent? Looks like Father Christmas without the red suit."

The janitor chuckled low in his throat. "Sounds like the Reverend James McPhee."

Lauren frowned. "Why is that funny?"

"Because he couldn't have just been here, ma'am. He was a vicar here from 1808-1840. You probably saw his portrait when you were on the tour."

She wanted to protest that she hadn't taken the tour, and anyway, she'd been wide-awake when the vicar approached her. But the janitor gave her no chance to explain. He reached down for her hand to help her up.

"Come on, ma'am. I'd be in a heap of trouble if anyone found out you were in here after hours. I'll see you out the side exit." He smiled as she took his hand and, stiff and sore, struggled to her feet.

Had it really all been just a dream? *Everything?* She turned around to look at the wall. The plaque memorializing Henry and Lauren Danvers was still there. At least she hadn't dreamed that.

The man ushered her gently through a series of back rooms to a door that opened onto the Thames side of the church. "If you hurry," he said as she walked out, "you'll be in time to see the fireworks."

Lauren nodded her thanks and walked down the narrow steps. She pulled her wool coat tighter against the winter chill, grateful that no fog had settled this

First Night

evening or she might have become utterly lost within moments. As it was, she could see the brightly lit tower of Big Ben and the river beyond. She made her way toward the main square to find hundreds of people ambling toward the riverbank.

Well, she had nothing better to do. She might as well ring in the New Year with the rest of London. She fell into step with the crowd, following without paying much attention to where she was going.

How on earth had she come to have such a vivid dream? And apparently about real people she had never heard of or seen in her life.

She couldn't believe it *had* been a dream. Everything about the experience had felt real, from the cold bronze to the scent of the vicar's tobacco to her memories of Henry. Surely, she couldn't have constructed those details from thin air. Could she?

"Oof!" Lauren let out the involuntary noise as she came to an abrupt halt against something solid. She looked up to find not an object, but a man.

One with sharp blue eyes, a square face framed by curly brown hair, a lock of which fell into his line of vision as he grabbed her by the upper arms to keep her from falling to the ground.

Lauren's heart bounced like a carnival ride.

"Are you all right?" His voice was just as she remembered—a steady, easy baritone—although his accent was a bit more refined than it had been two hundred years ago. He released her, his forehead creasing with puzzlement as he studied her face. "I say, have we met before?"

A secret smile curved her lips. *Not in this lifetime.*

"No," she said instead, "I've only just arrived in London today."

"You're sure?" he asked. He didn't look convinced.

She nodded, extending her hand. "I'm Lauren Sheffield. From San Francisco."

He took her hand, but instead of shaking it, he raised it to his lips in an old-fashioned, courtly gesture. "Henry Danvers." His breath over her skin sent a shiver of pure longing down her spine. "Would you think it odd if I said I have been waiting for you all my life, Lauren Sheffield?"

"Only if you'd think it odd if I said I know you have." Unable to resist the urge, she reached up and swept the stray lock of hair back up his forehead, a gesture she knew she had performed hundreds of times before.

They stood there in silence for several long moments, an island in the thronging sea of people who parted around them.

"Would you object terribly much if I kissed you?"

"I would object more if you didn't," she said with a grin, elation bubbling inside her.

First Night

He lowered his head and touched his mouth to hers just as Big Ben struck the first bell of midnight and a volley of rockets launched into the air. But the awestruck *oohs* and *aaahs* of the crowd couldn't entice Lauren to draw away from her own personal fireworks show. When Henry finally broke the kiss, they were both breathless and flushed with heat despite the chill.

"Wow," he murmured, resting his forehead against hers. "I've missed you, my love. But I did promise you always and forever."

And so it came to pass that, twice upon a time, they lived happily ever after.

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 www.jackiebarbosa.com.

Several of her novellas are available for purchase at www.cobblestonepress.com and her Regency-set novella anthology, *Behind the Red Door*, was released by Kensington Aphrodisia in June of 2009.

The Efficient Ms. Larrabee

By Kay Gregory

The Efficient Ms Larraby, we always called her. She was administrative secretary at Bouvier's of London where my friend, Shayla, and I worked in Ladies' Wear. Lorna Larraby, the glue that held Bouvier's together, kept the office running smoothly as soap. Crises were not permitted in Lorna's world.

Madam Bouvier, the owner, had inherited the business from her husband, whose real name was Bodger according to her correspondence from the bank. She left the day to day running of the shop to Lorna so that she could spend her time fawning over customers she considered upper-crust—never mind that the society she aspired to existed more in her imagination than reality.

"Your Ladyship has an important figure," we once heard her say to Lady Fitz-Jones, an outspoken customer from the country who was addicted to lime green trouser suits and canary cardigans. "That ensemble might have been made for you."

Since Lady F-J was trying on sober black and white at the time, she said, "Rubbish. Don't butter me up. I'm fat—and I'll take the lime green."

Madam Bouvier said, "Yes, of course, Lady Fitz-Jones. The perfect choice."

Lorna, who always wore navy blue skirts and crisply clean white blouses, quietly unmuddled Madam's muddles, solved any staffing problems and even, on one occasion, placated a furious customer who maintained that the hat she'd bought for her daughter's wedding had shrunk by the time she got it home. The customer was one of mine. Hearing the commotion, Lorna emerged from her office and said, "I'll see to it, Jemma. Please don't worry, Mrs Oakley. We'll stretch it for you on our hat stretcher, shall we?"

When I followed the ever-resourceful Lorna into the back, she had the hat over her knee and was pulling determinedly on the brim.

"It'll never work," I whispered.

"Certainly it will." Lorna stopped pulling for a second. "It's merely a

First Night

matter of convincing the customer that her needs are being met."

She always spoke like that, with a kind of Victorian decisiveness that seemed out of place in modern England. But of course she was right. Mrs Oakley was delighted with her newly "stretched" hat."

Lorna never seemed to have boyfriends, though she was only a few years older than Shayla and me. I didn't understand it since I'd recently announced my engagement to my boyfriend, Mike, and was filled with the euphoric enthusiasm of the newly in love.

"Don't you ever plan to get married?" I asked Lorna one late summer's day in the lunch room.

"I was engaged once in my teens." Lorna tapped a spoon sharply on the grey arborite table and gazed fixedly at the yellowing strip of Green Park grass that was visible from our window. "A mistake, I'm afraid."

I gaped at her. Shayla, overhearing, hustled a customer into the next department and hurried to join us. "But that doesn't mean you can't try again," she said. "I thought I was in love lots of times before I met Luke." Luke was Shayla's current passion, though no one expected him to last.

Lorna, who was never at a loss for anything, for once looked confused. "I'm not certain I was in love," she said. "I was too young. My fiance was a neighbour and my parents disapproved because of our ages."

"But you didn't stay too young," Shayla objected.

Lorna smiled primly. "No, but we agreed to wait, and he moved away, and then my mother fell ill, and ..." She shrugged. "Time passed. Somehow we drifted apart."

"And you've never met anyone you wanted to marry since?" I wondered if she was valiantly concealing a broken heart.

Lorna concentrated on stirring her tea. "Not really."

Hm. Not broken then, but surely a little bruised.

Madam Bouvier poked her head round the door at that point, putting an end to our questions because Lorna at once went to fetch the letters she'd typed before lunch. No letters were ever left to be signed the following day. Not with The Efficient Ms Larraby in charge.

Shayla and I looked at each other. "She's unbelievable," I said. "Do you think she's actually a robot in disguise?"

"That might explain it," Shayla agreed, giggling.

I'd meant to make her laugh, but suddenly it didn't seem so funny. There was no crime in being organised, and if the truth were known, Lorna probably needed love as much as the next person. She'd once told us that as the only daughter of elderly parents, her childhood had been spent mainly in the company of books. She hadn't been complaining either, just matter-of-fact.

First Night

The next day I told Shayla we ought to find a man for Lorna.

"She wouldn't know what to do with one," Shayla said at once.

"We could teach her."

"Teach Lorna? She wouldn't let us."

"We haven't tried," I pointed out.

In the end Shayla agreed to give it a try. "It might be fun," she admitted.

I didn't explain that it was meant to be our Good Deed of the Month, and not necessarily fun. "Rodney Sykes in Accounts," I suggested. "He's quiet and he doesn't have a girlfriend."

"All right," Shayla agreed. "He might be her type."

He wasn't. When we finally persuaded Rodney to join the three of us in the lunch room, he barely spoke to Lorna and spent most of the time staring at passers-by on the street or chatting to Shayla—who promptly forgot about Luke.

So much for Rodney.

"What about John Whatsisname in Menswear?" I suggested.

"You mean the blond god?"

"Mm. He is rather yummy, isn't he?"

"Forget it. You're engaged."

I sighed. Being engaged wasn't as amusing as it had been. For one thing, Mike had become altogether too cosy with a receptionist in the hotel where he worked. For another, he never wanted to go out and have fun any more and I was tired of watching TV with his parents.

"I know I'm engaged," I said grumpily. "But Lorna isn't."

So we invited John Whatsisname to the pub after work one chilly autumn evening along with Mike and Rodney, who had become Shayla's latest obsession. Not that it did her much good since he always politely avoided her advances. The snag this time was that Lorna said she was busy and couldn't come. John came though, and I discovered his last name was Morgan. He turned out to be nice as well as blond. Just as well, since at the last minute Mike invited his receptionist to join us.

The next day we broke off our engagement. Three weeks after that I started going out with yummy John.

Lorna remained efficient, oblivious to our machinations on her behalf and contentedly unattached.

Shayla and I continued to present men for her selection but they never worked out and eventually we ran out of ideas.

"We might as well give up," I said one day towards the end of November, after Lorna had firmly declined an invitation to the Christmas dance I was attending with John and a group of friends. "I think she'd rather have a date

First Night

with a book.”

Shayla shrugged, then hearing Madam’s footsteps approaching from Notions, hustled off to smile perkily at a customer inspecting cardigans. The customer was dressed in canary and brown tweed.

“Good afternoon, Lady Fitz-Jones,” she began.

She didn’t get any further because Madam Bouvier, hearing a title, bustled in to see to her ladyship herself.

Lady F-J didn’t look too pleased, and when Lorna happened to pass through carrying an armful of files, she told Madam testily that she’d changed her mind and only needed a pair of gloves. “Miss Larraby can help me,” she added. “She and that nice young man in Accounts have been very helpful.”

Madam, shocked, started to object. “Oh, but—”

Lady F-J, ignoring her, took Lorna’s arm and swept her off to Gloves. “Silly woman,” we heard her mutter. “Come along, my dear. You can help me with the parcels I left with the young man in Accounts. I’m most grateful to you for introducing us. Rodney, isn’t it? I had a splendid chat with him about a mistake in my bill.” She chuckled. “Turned out the mistake was all mine.”

“I’m glad you were able to solve your small difficulty,” we heard Lorna murmur soothingly as they passed out of earshot.

Back in Ladies’ Wear, Madam Bouvier was rumbling around searching for a target for the wrath she couldn’t direct at Lady Fitz-Jones.

Shayla and I promptly attached ourselves to likely customers in pursuit of Christmas finery and stayed attached until Madam moved on to the next department.

Some weeks later, with the Christmas rush over and the new year fast approaching, I stepped into the lift after work to discover Lorna and Rodney were there before me. Rodney looked stiff, as if his collar were too tight, and Lorna—cucumber cool, unflappable

Lorna—was blushing. Actually blushing. The colour suited her, made her look younger and almost pretty.

What was going on here? Surely Lorna hadn’t turned into an Other Woman. Rodney was still Shayla’s latest project, wasn’t he?

He cleared his throat. Lorna clasped her hands over her purse and stared at the buttons on the lift.

“Going somewhere?” I asked, as though it wasn’t obvious.

“Only for a quick cup of tea ...”

“I’m seeing Lorna to the Tube ...”

We reached the bottom then and I said goodnight and ran for my bus. I couldn’t wait to tell Shayla in the morning.

“Oh yes,” she said, carefully casual and busy with a shipment of silk

First Night

scarves. "I heard they were friendly."

I didn't entirely believe she was as indifferent as she wanted me to think. "Don't you mind?" I asked. "I thought you had your eye on Rodney."

"Not any more. He told me I ought to balance my cheque book. And pay my bills on time. I've decided to go back to Luke." She became even busier with the scarves.

It was New Year's Eve before I managed to buttonhole Lorna in the lift as we were leaving for home and asked her if she'd enjoyed her tea with Rodney.

She smiled sedately. "Yes, very much, thank you."

Hmm. I hesitated, then decided to press on. "So Shayla and I wondered if maybe you two are—well, an item," I said, knowing it was none of my business but anxious to find out if our plotting had somehow succeeded.

"An item?" She raised her nicely-shaped eyebrows. "I suppose you might say that."

"Might I?" I asked eagerly.

She nodded, then added unexpectedly, "We're going for a New Year's cruise on the Thames tonight."

I blinked. "But that's amazing. So are John and I."

"Really?" The lift thumped to a stop, and Lorna fidgetted with the neat silver bracelet on her wrist as we made our way towards the exit. The floor was crowded because everyone was leaving at once, and when we came to a forced stop in Cosmetics, Lorna took a long breath and seemed to make up her mind. "Actually I've known Rodney for years."

"Years ...? But you said ..." I gaped at her as a startling idea hit me between the eyes—and someone's umbrella stabbed me in the ankle. What *had* she said exactly? That she'd been engaged once, only it hadn't worked out because of her parents.

Oh-h! Could that be it?

"Is Rodney the one you were engaged to?" I blurted, sidestepping a second umbrella.

Lorna gave her bracelet another brisk twist. "Actually, he is. We met again when he came to work here. But we decided not to mention it in the shop."

Oh. So Shayla and I had had nothing to do with it. I might have known. Lorna wasn't the type to need help. She was the Efficient Ms Larraby, after all. I choked back any lingering disappointment and asked, "So what made you decide to tell me now?" No point being tactful. Besides, I was too anxious to know. My newfound love for John had turned me all romantic again.

Lorna's smile was sheepish. "You guessed we're together and—well, Rodney and I are getting engaged again and I had to tell someone." She sighed. "Office romances aren't very professional though, are they?"

First Night

"Or efficient," I said, before I could stop myself.

"Quite so."

I wanted to laugh, but when I saw the light in her eyes and the unusual softness of her smile, all at once it wasn't funny.

"Happy New Year," I murmured, meaning it. "So—when's the wedding?"

Lorna came to a halt as we finally reached the big doors leading to the bright lights of Piccadilly. "We're not sure," she admitted. "There's been some confusion over the church and the catering and—oh, this and that."

Confusion? Lorna? "Oh, you must be in love!" I exclaimed.

Lorna, looking startled, admitted that she rather thought she was.

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*.

www.kaygregory.com

Second Chances

By Shonna Brannon

"I can't believe I let you talk me into this, Karen." Christie Johnson stared at her reflection and the white silk dress her best friend—make that former best friend—had forced upon her. The last thing she wanted to be doing was going to some party on the beach for New Year's Eve. She'd left New York and come to St. Lucia to get away from this type of scene and to forget that she was thirty-five and starting another year alone.

"Believe me, you'll thank me for it later." Karen Nelson had a Cheshire cat smile on her face as she turned away from the mirror.

Christie knew that smile all too well. It meant Karen was up to something or knew something that Christie needed to know before it got her into trouble. It was the same look she used to give Christie in high school right before they'd land themselves in the principal's office.

"Besides, you look gorgeous in that dress." Karen busied herself with putting Christie's makeup back in its case.

Christie didn't feel gorgeous at that moment. All she felt was anxiety over whatever Karen was keeping from her.

"What are you up to, Karen?" She turned and locked her hands on her hips, foot tapping in impatience. "Don't give me that all-too-innocent look. I've known you too long not to know when you've got something up your sleeve. Spill it."

"I don't know what you mean." Karen stopped what she was doing and took several steps toward the door connecting their suites. "I've got to hurry and get ready myself or we'll be late. Uh...I'll talk to you in a bit." Just like that, Karen disappeared through the door.

Christie shook her head. What was she going to do with that girl? Karen's specialty was getting them into trouble, leaving Christie to get them out of it. Before the night was through and the New Year rung in, she'd bet every dime she had that she'd be sweet talking their way out of some fix Karen had managed

First Night

to get them into. Sighing, she rolled her eyes, grabbed her matching silk handbag, and headed through the door to Karen's suite. She only hoped whatever "fix" Karen got them into it didn't land them in jail.

* * * * *

Christie stared across the crowded beach. A warm breeze blew across the sand, lightly tugging at her dress. The scent of the ocean, crisp and clean, wrapped around her in a calming embrace. As much as she wanted to relax and enjoy the evening, she just couldn't. What did she get herself into? As soon as she and Karen arrived, Karen disappeared into the ever-growing crowd and never reappeared. Every once in a while, Christie caught a glimpse of her deep red hair as she flirted with every guy there, but she never came back.

Letting out a breath she hadn't even been aware she was holding, Christie headed toward the bar set up on the beach. The bartender pulled himself away from the blonde he'd been ogling long enough to ask her what he could get for her.

"Vodka on the rocks, please." She was going to need the stiff drink in order to get through the night. That was, unless she could sneak away without Karen noticing. Heck, she was probably too ensconced in her sexcapades to notice anything beyond the man she was after at the moment.

The bartender set her drink down in front of her and took the money she held out, then moved back to his blonde groupie. What was it about New Year's Eve that made everyone desperate to seek out anyone just so they didn't have to spend it alone? Shaking her head at the ridiculous notion she couldn't spend this night alone, as she'd originally planned, she downed her drink and decided to sneak out of the party fray and back to her room.

She hadn't gotten ten feet when she felt a hand on her arm, tugging her to a stop. *Crap!* Couldn't she catch one break?

"What?" Turning around, she expected to see Karen standing there. Instead, she gasped as her gaze locked on a pair of the bluest eyes she'd ever seen. Eyes that were all too familiar. Eyes she'd once gotten lost in. Eyes that belonged to the reason she wanted to spend the holiday alone in the first place.

"Nick!" This couldn't be happening to her. In all the places he could have turned up, why here? Why now? "What in the world are you doing here?"

"I'm here for you." His eyes got that soft glow in them that always used to turn her knees to mush. Who was she kidding? It still had the ability to reduce her to a pile of jelly.

Once her mind registered what he'd said, she couldn't have been more surprised if a snake had popped up and bit her on the butt. Taking a deep breath,

First Night

she jerked her arm out of his grasp and tried unsuccessfully to ignore the tingle of desire his touch left on her skin.

"Well I came here to get away from you, and that's just what I'm going to do." She turned and stalked back toward her hotel. She groaned when she hadn't gone more than a couple feet before he stepped in front of her.

"You can't get away that easily. We need to talk, honey." He held his hand out to her. "Karen didn't go through all this trouble to get me here for you to ignore me."

What the crap was he talking about?

"What do you mean Karen got you here?" Oh, she was so going to kill Karen. She knew she'd been up to something, but she never would've guessed in a million years it had been this. Of all people, Karen knew how much Nick hurt her when he walked away from their relationship. She'd been head over heels in love with the man and he'd abandoned that for what? God only knew. He'd never given her a reason for leaving. It was as though he'd turned his feelings off like a faucet.

"Karen found me after we split—"

"Don't you mean after you walked out on me?" She couldn't hold back the anger that threatened to overwhelm her.

He had the decency to wince as if she'd slapped him. "I can see why you'd see it that way." He clasped her elbow in a gentle touch and steered her away from the party. "Can you please let me explain myself? I owe you that much."

On one hand, she was curious what would've compelled him to dump her the way he had. On the other hand, she wanted nothing more than to slap him, tell him to go to hell, and walk away just like he had. She wanted to make him feel every bit as hurt as he'd made her feel. But that wouldn't solve anything. She knew that. If nothing else, letting him explain why he did what he did would give her a sense of closure. Maybe then she could move on.

"Fine. Let's go to the hotel and we'll talk there where it's not so loud." Not giving Nick any time to respond, Christie turned and walked off. The ball was in his court now. If he really wanted to explain, he'd follow her. If not, then she'd not lost anything and she'd given him the opportunity.

Christie couldn't help the way her heart leapt into her throat when Nick walked into the lobby of the hotel. She couldn't believe seeing him still got to her like this, but she guessed her reaction shouldn't surprise her. He'd always had the ability to turn her knees to mush. In spite of everything, she still loved him. She could strangle herself for feeling this way though. She should hate him, or at the very least, avoid him like the plague.

"Thanks for agreeing to hear me out, Christie." Nick sat down on the sofa beside her. "Please just wait until I'm finished before you respond."

First Night

"Okay," she agreed, but she knew it would be difficult not to interrupt. He'd hurt her so badly. She only hoped that whatever he was about to tell her was the truth and not some made up crap just to get her back.

"When I met you, I felt an instant connection. I found myself completely drawn to you. It was as if some outward force was pulling me toward you. Don't get me wrong, it was the most amazing feeling, but I thought I had to analyze it." He paused and turned to face her. "I always seem to overthink everything."

His silken blonde hair looked as though he'd threaded his fingers through it many times. She remembered well the feel of his hair as she'd clutched it in her own hands when they'd made love. She gave herself a mental shake to get her thoughts back on the current conversation. She didn't need them to stray into territory best left unexplored.

"Things got so serious between us so fast my head was spinning," he continued. "I didn't know which end was up anymore. You were always in my thoughts, my heart was overwhelmed with all the feelings I was experiencing for you. I was just so confused about it all and afraid of getting hurt myself, that I made the biggest mistake of my life and walked away from you."

Tears stung her lids as everything he was saying brought the pain back anew. She could only nod at him as she swiped at her eyes.

Getting down on his knees in front of her, he reached for her hands. "Baby, I know it may not mean much, but I'm so sorry I hurt you like I did. I never wanted to hurt you. I was just afraid of my own feelings and of getting hurt. I've never loved someone as much as I loved you. As much as I still love you."

She so wanted to believe him. Wanted everything he was saying to be true. But what if she decided to give him another chance and he walked away again? She didn't think she could survive that kind of hurt again. It was almost too much to bear the first time around. Then on the other hand, if she didn't give him—give them—a chance, she'd spend the rest of her life wondering *what if*. She didn't really want to feel like that either.

"Baby, the past few weeks, I've come to realize just how much I need you in my life. I don't want to live without you. I can't bear it." Reaching into his pocket, Nick pulled out a small, black velvet box. He opened it and held it out to her. "I'm not going to ask you to marry me. Not yet anyway. I want this ring to symbolize the promise that I will ask you. I want you to be able to trust in my love again. To trust in me again. I know I don't deserve it, but I want you to give us a chance." Reaching up, he ran his thumbs over the tears she hadn't even been aware she'd been crying.

The protective wall she'd put around her heart while she'd been vacationing on St. Lucia shattered into a million pieces. She so wanted to let him

First Night

back in. She wanted to give them that chance. She didn't want to spend her life regretting her decision if she didn't give them that chance.

Vaguely, she heard the countdown going on outside as everyone reached one and started celebrating. She allowed him to pull her into his arms for a hug and said, "Yes. Let's take it one day at a time and see where it leads."

He pulled back and smiled before lowering his head and bringing his lips down over hers in the most tender kiss she'd ever experienced. Awareness tingled across her skin and she longed to show him just how much he truly meant to her. She reached and grabbed his hand, tugging him toward the elevator.

"Why don't we go back to my room and start the New Year out right with a celebration of our own?"

His smile lit up the whole lobby. "I'll follow you anywhere, baby."

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 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 4 kids.

www.shonnabrannon.com

A Secret New Year

By Lyric James

"Come on. You promised."

Lauren Mitchell gazed through the mirror behind her to her best friend and rolled her eyes.

Callie jabbed a finger at her. "You promised you'd go."

"Damn. All right. I don't want to go. But I'm going," she yelled after her.

"It's New Year's Eve. Why in the world you want to remain stuck in this house is beyond me."

So she didn't want to be reminded. That's why. She didn't want to see cheerful faces or happy couples. Lauren wanted to sit at home and be depressed.

"The time for wallowing in your own self-pity is over. A new year dawns. It's time to celebrate," Callie bellowed from her bedroom across the hall.

Why did that woman always have the uncanny ability to read her mind? She yanked her black pantsuit out of her closet and dressed. Back in the mirror, she concluded she was dressed precisely how she felt. Black spirit. Black heart.

"Please tell me you're not wearing that."

"I don't have anything else."

Callie, in a cute red skirt and matching cashmere sweater, crossed the room to her closet and began to pull out item after item. Her blonde hair bounced with every movement.

"I can't wear any of that." And though she hated to admit it, "I've gained fifteen pounds in the last year."

Hanging all but one back up, Callie walked towards her, her indigo blue eyes sparkling. "You bought this last month, didn't you?"

It was a jade halter dress with tiny gold flecks all over it. "I bought it on a whim."

A whim she thought *might* put her in the holiday spirit and entice her to go out and live again.

She lifted the tag. "You don't spend ninety dollars on a whim."

First Night

"Yeah, yeah," Lauren said, and snatched the dress from her.

"Oh! I have the cutest gold sandals you can wear too," she said, grinning, and rushed out of the room.

"I'm not walking around in a pair of stilts."

Callie glided back into the room on her own pair of death traps and handed her a pair of shoes. "It's only for a couple of hours. When you sit down you can slip them off."

Lauren tied the strap of the halter around her neck and sat, put on the sandals, then hobbled back to her mirror.

"You look perfect. You should wear your hair up too."

"I look fat."

"No you don't. Even with the fifteen pounds you still have a cute figure. I'd kill for your ass."

"Uh huh. Sure." She pulled her hair up in a twist, grabbed a gold clip off her dresser, and clipped it over her hair.

"Here. Put these earrings on."

Lauren looped them in her ears, applied a fine sheen of gloss over her lips, and stood back.

Callie smiled at her. "You look fabulous. Now turn around and close your eyes for the final touch."

Lauren narrowed hers but closed them anyway. She felt a fine mist of spray that smelled like jasmine sprinkle over her exposed skin.

"Now, turn around and look."

On her caramel colored skin was a fine sheen of gold speckles.

"See, you look beautiful," she said and grabbed her hand. "Now, let's go before you change your mind."

* * * * *

Standing outside the Irish pub about to freeze to death, Lauren glanced up. "I thought we were going to a New Year's Eve party."

"We are."

"But everything is green."

Callie pulled the door open. "And your point?"

Lauren paused just inside the entry. "Amazing."

"I know."

"It's a cross between St. Patrick's Day and New Year's Eve," Lauren murmured and handed her coat to the guy just inside the door who gave her a ticket and a name tag to put her name on. "It's Saint New Year," she said and laughed.

First Night

There were still two Christmas trees in opposite corners. But instead of Christmas decorations, they had green clovers on them and green lights. Lights also rimmed every window, the long mirror behind the bar, and around the bar itself. Every table had a green tablecloth with a sheer red runner over it with Happy New Year sparkling over it. And to top that off, there was a guy walking around in a leprechaun suit.

It was definitely Saint New Year.

Callie handed her a box. "Here. Take this."

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's your secret New Year exchange gift. Every girl had to bring a gift for a guy. You're supposed to mingle, pick one guy, and then give it to the one you want to get to know better."

Lauren pulled Callie back by her elbow. "Are you crazy? You did not tell me any of this."

She grinned. "If I did, you would've never come."

"You're damn right." Lauren turned back toward the door. "I'm leaving."

"No. Lauren, don't go. It's been a year. You've mourned that relationship long enough."

That stopped her. She whirled around as tears began to prickle in the back of her eyes. "That's not fair."

Callie took Lauren's hand and pulled her off to the side. "No. What isn't fair is my best friend moping around for the last year over a guy who never deserved her in the first place. It's time to move on. It's time to let it go."

Lauren jerked free of Callie's grasp and walked to the bar. "I need a drink." She sat on a stool and signaled the bartender. Callie smiled at her. "The only reason I'm still here is because you drove. Otherwise..."

"I promise. It'll be fun."

"You owe me."

* * * * *

Later, Lauren sat in the corner of the pub at a table partially hidden by a ficus tree, sipping on the same glass of wine she got from the bartender two hours ago. She wasn't a drinker, but at least it gave her something to do besides twiddle her thumbs.

"You're hiding."

She jumped. When she looked up, her tongue stuck to the top of her mouth. She was staring into the most gorgeous pair of crystal blue eyes she'd ever seen in her life. And the face that surrounded them made her gasp.

"Can I hide with you?"

First Night

He wore a pair of tailored black pants, a royal blue cashmere sweater with a crisp white shirt underneath, and carried a beer in his left hand. No ring.

"Ummm...sure," she squeaked.

He came around the table and sat beside her. "My brother and his friends dragged me out here tonight."

"M-mine did too." She couldn't string together a coherent thought in her head. "I mean. My best friend dragged me out too."

"Well," he said, sticking out his hand to her, "I'm Jordan."

Lauren gazed down at it, not sure whether she should shake it or start nibbling on his flesh. He looked just that yummy. She decided on the former and took his hand. "I'm Lauren."

"Nice to meet you. And since we were both dragged here, why don't we make the best of it and keep each other company."

Okay, Christmas was like...six days ago. Was this a belated present? Had she really been that good of a girl this year? "Sounds like a plan to me."

He smiled.

She melted.

This night was turning out all right after all. He leaned back, sexy and comfortable, and rested his arm behind her on the booth. Goodness, he smelled good too, sandalwood and cinnamon.

Her hands shook, so she set her wine glass down and placed them in her lap, not sure what to say. She hadn't been on a date or had a regular conversation with a man, outside of work, in over a year.

"So, you want to tell me about yourself, or do you want me to go first?"

He seemed so relaxed. But of course, he should be. He was gorgeous. Women probably flocked in his direction. Talking to a strange woman in a bar probably came naturally to him.

* * * * *

Jordan couldn't believe he'd actually worked up the nerve to approach her. He'd walked up to her, sat down, and started talking as if it was something he did every day. When truth be told, nothing was further from the truth.

If it hadn't been for his sister's little make-over, he'd still be in a pair of dull brown pants, a pair of glasses perched over his nose, and his white lab-coat. He had to admit, he didn't look half bad. Contacts and a fresh haircut did wonders for him. But even with the new wardrobe, he still felt like a nerd on the inside.

However, when he saw her walk in the door, air stalled in his chest. She was beautiful. Absolutely breathtaking. He'd been watching her for the last two

First Night

hours, unable to work up the nerve to talk to her. His brother caught him staring at her on more than one occasion. The last time, he threatened to go and talk to her himself.

So, he'd chugged back a shot of tequila, something he never drank, grabbed a beer, and took the short trek from the bar to her table. And now, here he was, sitting right next to her, unable to come up with one word to say about himself.

"Why don't we start with the basics then," he said. He took a sip of beer to wet his dry mouth. "I'm twenty-seven. I have one sister and one brother. Both parents still living and still married after thirty years."

"Oh, that's wonderful," she said, smiling at him. "My parents are still married too, thirty-two years next June."

Jordan turned in his seat so he could face her, he couldn't get enough of looking into her pretty face. "What about you?"

"I'm twenty-six. I have one brother, older."

Something still wasn't right. He couldn't put his finger on it. She wasn't repelled by him. Maybe he just needed to release the nervousness jogging around in his stomach. He'd never been the type to play games, nor was he remotely good at it. Why not just be honest with her and just see what happened.

"Does this seem awkward to you?"

Relief seemed to appear on her face. "Oh, man, I thought I was the only one."

A slow song he loved came over the jukebox. "How about this? When a New Year dawns it's all about resolutions, right? Setting a goal, doing something new, meeting a new challenge."

Again, she gave him a spine tingling smile. "That's right."

"If I tell you one honest thing, one truth, will you do the same?"

Her gaze widened, zooming all over his face. "I think I can do that."

"Okay, here goes. I had to work up the courage to come over here and talk to you. I've been watching you since you walked in this place."

Astonishment crossed her features. "Seriously?"

He nodded his head.

"When you came over to talk to me, I couldn't believe it. I thought to myself why would this gorgeous man possibly want to talk to me."

Jordan looked down at himself. "I don't always look this way."

She gave him a look of incredulity.

"If you'd seen me yesterday, I would have had on a pair of brown slacks, brown shoes, and ugly brown glasses." He motioned toward his head. "And my hair was down to here."

"Incredible."

First Night

"My big sister gave me a make-over."

"I thought women only did that to themselves."

"Nope, men do it too."

He took her hand. "I was really nervous about coming over here to talk to you. Even though I look like this on the outside, the guy who usually wears the nerd gear is still on the inside. But there's just something about you that calls to me, and I had to come over here and talk to you. I couldn't let the entire night go by without at least giving it a chance."

There. He said it. All he could do now was wait and see what happened.

Lauren laid her other hand over his. "Well, I'm glad you did. Because my truth is that I haven't dated anyone in over a year." She looked down at their intertwined hands. "I was hurt, really bad. Actually about this time last year, and that's why I dreaded coming here tonight. I didn't want to meet anyone. I didn't want to see a happy couple. I just wanted to be alone in my misery." Her gaze swung back up to his. "But I'm glad I did. Hold on a minute."

She turned around and picked something up behind her. A smile on her face, she handed it to him. "My friend didn't tell me this, but every woman was supposed to bring a gift, a type of secret Santa gift, but I suppose it's a Secret New Year present instead. I want you to have it. We were supposed to mingle around and then decide, except, I didn't do the mingling. It's supposed to be for the guy you want to get to know a little better. I want that guy to be you."

Jordan took the small package wrapped in bright red wrapper with a green bow.

"I'd love to spend the New Year getting to know you."

A slow smile bloomed over his face. Jordan stood and pulled Lauren up with him. The worry he had about approaching this beautiful woman, vanished from his mind.

"Would you like to dance?"

"I'd love to."

He led her to the dance floor and wrapped her in his arms, whispering in her ear just as everyone else in the bar began yelling the count down to the New Year. "I would love to spend the New Year getting to know you too."

"Happy New Year, Jordan."

"Happy New Year, Lauren."

The End

About Lyric James

A lifelong love of romance novels led Lyric James from reading them, to writing her own. Lyric is a middle school librarian, is married to her own hero, and supervises the lives of three busy children.

www.lyricjamesbooks.net.

Never Too Late

By Diana Bold

Is it too late?

Kellie Davis stood in her luxury suite at the Hotel Monteleone in New Orleans, staring down at the crumpled note in her hand. That was all he had written when he'd sent her the plane ticket, room reservation, and instructions on where to go tonight. He hadn't even signed the note. Not that he'd had to. She'd known his handwriting, even after all these years.

Is it too late?

She honestly didn't know the answer to that question. Once upon a time, she'd assured him she would wait for him forever. But forever had already been five years, and she'd given up on him long ago.

When the package had arrived, her first reaction had been anger. How dare he do this to her? How dare he come back into her life, just when she'd become accustomed to the thought of living without him? Then she'd dissolved into helpless laughter.

He couldn't have called her up and suggested they meet for coffee. *Oh, no.* How very like him to make the grand romantic gesture. To send her tickets to meet him a thousand miles away, in New Orleans, for New Year's Eve.

The bastard. He knew her so well. He'd always been able to read her like a book. Of course he knew she loved New Orleans, and that New Year's Eve was her favorite holiday. *A time for new beginnings...*

She glanced at the clock, then nervously checked her reflection in the mirror one last time. What would he think when he saw her? When she'd arrived at the hotel, there had been a dress box on the bed. The black, beaded evening gown, cut low in both the front and back, was probably the sexiest dress she'd ever donned. Elegant, but just the slightest bit slutty—she had no doubt he'd picked it out himself. Her dark hair was pulled back from her face, swept up in an intricate knot, because he'd always liked it when she wore her hair up. Her brown eyes sparkled with excitement and fear, and her cheeks were flushed with

First Night

hectic color.

Memories overwhelmed her. They'd met a dozen years ago, as coworkers. Friendship had quickly blossomed between them, though they were both married. The friendship had grown and deepened, until he had become the most important person in her life. As both their marriages had disintegrated, she had begun to realize how compatible they were, how much she loved him.

When she'd declared her feelings, he'd been hesitant, but had admitted that he felt the same way about her. They'd begun a highly emotional affair, talking and kissing for hours, planning a future together. But he'd never actually made love to her, and the more she'd pushed him to leave his wife, the more distant he'd become.

In the end, she'd given him an ultimatum, only to have him choose his wife. Devastated, she'd quit her job and tried to move on. She'd divorced, and gone back to school, but she'd never gotten over him. Those years she'd spent with him had been the best time of her life. He'd made her laugh until she cried. He'd made her feel young and alive. He'd loved her for who she really was, and she'd always been able to be herself around him.

Is it too late?

Though her heart raced at the thought of seeing him, and what this invitation must mean, she wondered if she could ever trust him again. He'd broken her heart in a million pieces. Could there really be a new beginning for them?

Well, one way or another, she was about to find out.

* * * * *

Promptly at nine PM, Kellie arrived at the Riverview Room atop Jackson's Brewery. The elegant ballroom, with its floor to ceiling windows and spacious outdoor terraces boasted views of the Mississippi River, the French Quarter, and the Vieux Carre. She felt out of place among the sparkling, dazzling crowd who filtered in around her. This was the first black tie event she'd ever been to. Surely everyone could tell she didn't belong here.

His instructions had simply requested that she be here at nine. She had no idea where she was supposed to sit, or when he planned to meet her. She wandered around uncertainly, searching for that one familiar face.

Her cell phone vibrated, startling her. She fumbled to remove it from her tiny beaded purse, where it nestled among her lipstick, breath mints, room key, and ID.

A text message. Meet me near the escalators.

She took a deep breath and headed back the way she'd come, teetering a

First Night

bit in her ridiculously high heels. As she approached the escalators, wondering which side of them he'd meant, he was suddenly there beside her.

"You came," he murmured, sweeping her into a fierce hug before she'd had a chance to catch more than a glimpse of him. "I'm so glad you came."

Despite her misgivings, she melted against him, nestling her head against his chest and simply breathing him in. His crisp, masculine scent brought back a thousand stolen moments. She'd always felt safe in his arms, as though she'd come home. That hadn't changed. They fit together perfectly.

He held her so tight, as if he never wanted to let her go. Someone trembled, but she wasn't sure which one of them it was. Perhaps both of them. Tears stung her eyes, and she pressed her mouth against his throat, feeling his pulse thundering beneath her lips.

"Oh, Billy," she whispered. "I missed you so much."

He pulled slightly away so he could gaze down into her face, his blue eyes alight with love and tenderness. "I missed you too, baby. Not a single day passed when I didn't think of you."

Then why didn't you come for me sooner? The question hovered on the tip of her tongue, but she managed not to ask it. There would be time for that later. For now, she just wanted to look at him.

The years hadn't changed him. His blond hair, thick as ever, still obeyed him with the military precision of his German ancestors. His rugged face was clean shaven except for a neat mustache, and his six foot tall frame was still slim and trim beneath his elegant black tux.

"You look amazing." He'd been sizing her up as well, and he suddenly spun her in a neat circle in order to see her from every angle. She laughed, feeling every inch the enchantress. He'd always made her feel beautiful, despite the extra weight she carried. Billy was one of those rare men who truly loved and appreciated women. He could find something lovely in nearly everyone.

"I love the dress. It's perfect." She made a helpless, sweeping gesture to encompass the extravagance of the Riverview Room. "All of this, it's just so much more than I ever expected."

"It's no more than you deserve," he assured her. "Shall we join the party?"

She let him lead her to the incredible buffet, where they had their choice of petit filet, trout almandine, or roasted breast of chicken. They found a table for two in a secluded alcove and spent the next few hours talking, eating, and drinking champagne.

The years seemed to fall away as they talked, and she found herself letting go of the anger and hurt she'd nursed for so long. He was still her best friend, still the man of her dreams, and all that mattered was that he was here with her tonight.

First Night

As if in tacit agreement, they spoke only of the good times, of the positive changes they'd both managed to make in their lives during the years they'd been apart. She didn't press him for details of his divorce, because she knew he'd tell her when he was ready.

As midnight approached, they explored the terraces, oohing and aahing over the incredible views of the city and the river. Revelers filled Jackson Square and the French Quarter, looking like industrious, brightly colored ants far below.

As they gazed down at the gorgeous spires of the St. Louis Cathedral, he moved behind her and wrapped her tightly in his arms, sheltering her from the cool breeze with the warmth of his body.

"Warm enough?" His voice was soft and sexy in her ear, and her whole body hummed with suppressed desire.

She nodded, too emotional to speak.

"I should never have let you go," he admitted. "For months after you walked away, I picked up my phone a dozen times a day, wanting to call you, to beg you to come back."

"I did the same thing," she whispered. "It killed me to leave you. You were all I ever wanted."

"You were always so certain, always so willing to throw everything away just to be with me. You love so fiercely, so completely. You were constantly chipping away at the walls I'd built around my heart, never taking no for an answer." His arms tightened convulsively, and he pressed his lips to the top of her head in a sweet, tender kiss. "You scared the hell out of me, Kellie."

"How did I scare you?" He'd always seemed so sure of himself, so in control. She'd never guessed he'd had doubts.

"I knew that you'd never accept less than everything I had to give. With her, I'd become so used to phoning my love in, to pretending to be something I wasn't, and I was so afraid I'd disappoint you. I feared that deep down I wasn't the man you wanted me to be."

She turned in his arms, staring up at him with her heart in her eyes. "I know you, Billy. I know you better than I know myself. And the one thing I know for certain is that you could never disappoint me."

He shook his head. "I've already disappointed you. I wasted so many years that I could have been with you trying to fix something that was already irreparably broken."

"You had to try." She attempted a smile, but knew she failed miserably. "I understood that it wasn't in your nature to give up. I never should have put you in that position."

"Let's not waste any more time talking about the past." He waved a hand at the city below them. "We're in one of the most romantic places in the world,

First Night

on a night when everything seems possible. Just tell me, baby. Am I too late? Do you still love me even a little bit?"

She stared at his beloved face, happy tears stinging her eyes, realizing that this was the moment she'd waited her whole life for. She held up her thumb and forefinger, separated by just a small space. "A little bit," she told him, the gesture having always been a private joke between them. "Just this much."

A broad grin broke out across his handsome face, and he crushed her tightly against him. His mouth descended upon hers with all the passion and hunger that had always existed between them, and she lost herself in kissing him.

When she finally came back to earth, fireworks were exploding all around them, over the river and down in the square below. The broad strokes of color lit up the sky, bathing them in sparkling light.

"I'll never leave you again," he promised. "You're my heart and soul. The love of my life. Happy New Year, baby. "

It's not too late, she thought with wonder, as he kissed her again. *It's never too late when you love someone.*

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 finished in over a dozen writing contests, including RWA's Golden Heart. She lives in a small Colorado town.

www.dianabold.com

Haunted New Year!

By Michelle M. Pillow

Nowhere, Oklahoma

Aunt Susan had always been a little eccentric, from her fast cars and reckless driving, her numerous seedy businesses and even more numerous marriages, to the sprawling three story mansion on the hill. It had been commissioned and designed before the turn of the twentieth century by a friend of an ancestor. The designer had died the day the last stone was set—or so the story went. Helen's great-grandfather moved in the next day. There was speculation as to whether or not foul play was involved due to money owed the designer, but nothing was ever proven.

Now, homeless, jobless, manless, Helen Gettsman didn't have a choice but to open the dusty old mansion, a drafty shadow of what it had once been, and make herself at home. She hadn't been back since her Aunt died, leaving it to her in a will. The money attached to the house drew enough interest to cover taxes each year and little else. Helen had hoped the place would sell. It didn't. Buyers wouldn't even go inside.

She had no desire to live in Nowhere, the aptly named ghost town of a place, with a population of eighty three—if the decades old sign was to be believed. But what choice did she have? The economy was in the toilet, her apartment building was sold by a bankrupt landlord, and her boyfriend of three weeks dumped her. No surprise on the last one. He wasn't really a keeper, more like a placeholder.

Outside, snow covered the ground, resting heavy on treetops and shrubs like the props of a postcard photo shoot. Aside from the rare trail of animal tracks, the snow lay untouched. Inside, the house looked as it must have been upon building, though age and wear had taken its toll. Only a few modern advances had been added—electricity, updated plumbing, and radiant heat. Pictures of her ancestors and their friends lined the walls and fireplace mantel.

First Night

She'd studied their faces, not recognizing any of them. There was one man who'd captured her attention in his old fashioned clothing and happy smile. The house was being constructed behind him and on the back of the frame she read the words, "Henry Gregory, Architect, 1909."

Now, as she sat huddled on the musty couch, staring at the radiant heat vents encircling the bottom edge of the walls, she wondered if she'd made the right decision. The pink frills of her aunt's robe smelled of bourbon and cigarettes, but it was warm and counteracted the cool draft leaking in from the old windows. There were no neighbors, no television, no cable to hook a television to should she unpack hers.

But if there was no television, where exactly were the soft voices coming from?

Helen had been hearing them all day—giggles and whispers, floorboard creaks and groans. At first, as she unpacked, she was able to ignore them as the unfamiliar sounds of a new home. Though now, as she noticed candlelight flicker on the wall, she wasn't so sure. She'd heard urban legends of people living in the walls of old homes.

Wait. Candle? She didn't light any candles. Twisting on the couch, she looked over her shoulder. The light flicker was gone.

"Probably just a trick of the evening light on the snow reflecting in the window," she said, the sound of her voice odd in the quiet place. She began to hum softly, keeping the silence away.

"There. See."

Helen paused, listening hard. "Hello?"

No one answered. Did she really expect them to?

"What the hell did my aunt do out here all day? It's no wonder she stocked enough liquor to fuel a frat party." Helen stood, hugging the robe to her chest as she made her way through the house. This was one heck of a way to spend New Year's Eve. Shuffling her feet, she went toward what she thought of as the wall of liquor. Nearly every known brand had been crammed into the pantry shelves. "No champagne? Fine, how about, um, this?" She pulled out a half empty bottle of bourbon. "We'll toast to Susan. Seems fitting considering this is my new life."

The liquid sloshed as she stepped toward the cupboard to find a glass. The floor creaked behind her and she swore she heard a soft giggle. Helen turned, looking carefully into every shadowed corner within her eye line. Nothing. No one. Giving a nervous laugh, she muttered, "Stupid drafty house."

She reached for a glass.

"Drafty? This design is..." This time the voice was louder and decidedly male.

First Night

Helen gasped, dropping the glass. It crashed on the floor, breaking into several pieces. “Who’s there?” Though she waited for what had to be several minutes, nobody answered. Laughing nervously, she cleaned up the broken glass and threw it away. She kept a cautious eye on her surroundings, even peeking out the window to see if there were tracks in the snow. The sun had begun to set, casting shadows on the ground.

Carrying the bottle under her arm, she wandered into the dining room. The long table hardly seemed fitting for a household of one. Above her head was a chandelier with frozen glass droplets raining down. Just as she looked away, the light fixture moved, the glass droplets tingling lightly together. She chuckled, almost feeling relief. That had to be one mystery solved. The draft hit the fixture and caused a noise.

She set the glass down and poured a tiny bit. Sniffing the liquor she wrinkled her nose. Heady and strong, it burned her nostrils. Knowing she might regret it, she tipped the glass back and drank. Fire burned down to her belly and she coughed, hacking at the unexpected pain.

“Just wait.”

She gasped for breath, turning to grab the bottle to put it away. When she reached for the glass, she saw it had been filled to where she’d had it before. “What the...?” The burning had subsided some, but she still tasted the drink. She leaned over to look under the table. Nothing. Overhead the chandelier clanked.

Leaving the glass where it was, she backed out of the dining room. “It’s official. I’m going crazy.” She walked toward the living room intent on plugging in the old radio she’d seen earlier. Helen turned the knob, gliding the dial over the stations. All of them seemed to be playing old songs—waltzes and big band music. Then, finally finding the faint strains of a country song, she turned up the volume. Just as she was stepping away, big band music blasted her from behind as one station seemed to take over another’s airwaves. She jumped at the loud beat of horns and instantly turned the volume back down.

At first, she just listened, letting the songs flood together. Then detecting a vaguely familiar beat, she found herself swaying around the room. She began to kick, stepping back and forward with circling hands to reenact the days of the flapper. The frills on the robe bounced.

The radio signal fuzzed and a voice said, *“What is that?”*, before the music once more took over. It fuzzed again and another voice was answering, *“I haven’t seen anything like that before.”*

Helen paused. The conversational tone didn’t seem like a radio show. Was she getting cell phone signals? Curious, she went to the radio and turned the dial.

The music faded but didn’t disappear. The talking became louder.

First Night

"I do not think she is a good fit for us," a woman said.

"I think she's pretty," a male voice answered. He had a thick British accent and the deep timbre of it made her toes curl.

"Pretty?" A nauseatingly disgusting laugh followed the woman's incredulous question. *"Common, you mean."*

"Modern," the male corrected. Helen leaned closer, wondering who they were.

"Wait, is she listening? She knows!" the woman gasped. A cold, stiff breeze hit Helen's back and she heard the unmistakable sound of footfalls running out of the room.

Helen jumped back and let loose a small scream. There was no denying the tingling of her flesh or the sound of running feet. She held her arms tight to her stomach, not daring to move.

"They plan to greet you at midnight."

Helen made a small noise of fear. Was the British man talking to her? She didn't want to look.

"Susan has spoken very highly of you. She says you're the last of your family line. It's too bad really. Your family has always been kind to us."

"Susan?" Helen whispered. Then, closing her eyes tight, she said, *"This is not happening. You're sleeping. You're drunk. You're—"*

"Drunk after that small drink? Not quite, Miss Helen."

"You're sleeping," she told herself.

"This will go so much easier if you calm yourself. You will not be harmed. You're the new caretaker." Footsteps sounded, boots on wood, and she swore they moved around the room with the voice. *"I don't remember Susan being like this."*

"Susan was crazy," Helen said, before catching herself.

"Ah, so you are listening to me!"

"Go away."

"I can't." The man's tone was droll. *"I live here."*

"Isn't there a light? Shoo, get out of here, go toward the light." She relaxed some, though she still wasn't convinced she was lucid. *"There's, ah, good, um, things in the light."*

The man laughed, the tone slightly mocking but mostly humored.

Helen finally managed to open her eyes and look toward the sound. Her pulse quickened. A transparent figure leaned against the doorframe, a crooked smile on his lips. His dark dinner jacket, white shirt and dark tie looked turn of the twentieth century Edwardian style. Laced up leather boots and a felt Bowler hat with rounded crown completed the look. He reached for the hat, holding it before him by the crown, to reveal brown hair and even browner eyes. She stared through his chest, seeing the other side of the room.

First Night

He glanced behind him as if to see what she stared at and chuckled. "I assure you, I'm really here." This time when he spoke, his voice sounded fuller, solid. "In fact, I've been here for some time."

"You look like that picture of the architect," she said.

"I am that architect," he answered with a slight tilt of his head, "Henry Gregory."

"Henry Gregory is dead."

"Yes, I am. Exactly a hundred years ago come midnight." He brushed his hand absently over his suit. "I think the years have been kind if I do say so myself."

Was it her or was the house colder? Hearing faint laughter in the other room, Helen frowned, looking past him. "What is that?"

"It's almost time." His body faded until it disappeared and she frowned.

"Time?" she repeated, taking a step toward where she'd seen him. She rubbed the bridge of her nose and shivered. Had she gone completely mad?

"For the party," he said, this time from right behind her.

Helen gasped, jumping slightly.

"It's almost time for you to meet your wards." He motioned toward the doorway he so recently vacated.

"My wards?" Had someone told her that morning she'd be talking to a ghost, she would have laughed in their face. It wasn't that she didn't believe, just that she didn't believe them to be so... forthcoming.

The man leaned closer and she felt a cool tingle on her face. He was handsome and his eyes were kind. She shivered, automatically reaching to touch his face to see if she could feel him. Her fingers fell through his cheek and he closed his eyes briefly. Her hand tingled and she withdrew it, hesitating midair.

Somewhere in the house a loud clock chimed the midnight hour. She stared at him, watching as his features filled in. His smile became full and his eyes solid. Her hand moved forward to his cheek once more. This time, she felt him, still cool but as solid as flesh. Before she could ask about it, she heard a loud cheering, as if a crowd of voices suddenly erupted in the dining room.

His hand captured hers. "Come. Meet your family and their friends. They're all here, generations of them come to celebrate the new year."

Helen jerked her hand away as he tried to pull her with him to the door. "But, I'm not dressed. I'm..." She shrugged out of the pink frilly robe, hating the fact that she wore pajama pants and a t-shirt.

He just smiled, grabbing hold of her once more as he whisked her toward her strange new future.

The End

About the Author

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, and a Brava Novella Contest Finalist.

Readers can contact her through her website www.michellepillow.com.

A Winter Welcome

By Deborah Schneider

"She's a fine figure of a woman, Sam. I will say that."

Samuel Calhoun nearly spit out his cigar. Robert coughed, and tried to hide his grin at his friend's response. He'd likely shocked Sam with the comment, because while Calhoun was a great admirer of the female form and known to dally with a woman once in a while, Robert was more subdued when it came to romancin' the ladies.

"I was beginning to think you were beyond any interest in the fillies," Sam commented as he sipped his black coffee.

Robert leaned his chair back and considered the lady serving a weary group of travelers on the other side of the dining room. She brushed back a curl that fell into her face before pouring the exhausted looking woman at the table a cup of coffee.

"I own up I ain't no man whore." Robert said, never taking his eyes off the mature, voluptuous woman as she swirled though the dining room.

Sam laughed. "Nope, I don't believe I could ever accuse you of that. Far as I can recall, you hardly ever visit the sportin' gals, which maybe isn't natural but I've learned to live with your peculiarities."

Robert snorted. "Particular ain't exactly the same as being peculiar. I don't fall in bed with every calico queen we stumble across just to ease an itch. I guess it takes more'n a scrap of petticoat to hold my interest."

Sam nodded. "A man of high ideals and exacting standards. I admire your fortitude, Robert."

He raised his coffee cup in salute. "Wish I could say I'd emulate your behavior but I can't make promises I don't intend to keep."

The woman waiting on tables sailed across the room. Her dark brown eyes sparkled as she lifted the coffeepot and nodded at the men. "Can I interest you gentlemen in some more?" Her cheeks were bright red spots of color, and the heat of bustling around the room made the dark black hair sprinkled with

First Night

silver highlights curl around her friendly face.

"What's your name, darlin'?" Sam asked.

She quirked an eyebrow at him and dimples appeared at each corner of her shapely mouth. "I'm Harriet Parmeter, the proprietor of this hotel. And if you're askin' so's you can come courtin'—don't waste your time on pickin' flowers for me." She leaned toward Sam and winked. "I'd rather have some good whiskey instead!"

Both Sam and Robert roared at her spunky response as she poured their coffee then whirled to the table next to them. They watched as she chatted with her customers, brought orders from the kitchen, whisked dirty dishes off the tables and then set them for new customers.

"It appears she's in need of some help," Sam commented.

Robert blew on his coffee, lifted his gaze to watch Harriet Parmeter for a moment then shrugged.

"Appears so."

Sam was silent, then nodded. "An extra pair of hands around this place would be a big help to Mrs. Parmeter. I expect she'd be willing to take on some help, if the offer was put to her right."

Robert sipped from his cup slowly and took his time as he considered his partner's comment.

"I s'pect so, what with the town growin' and her business bein' brisk, especially on a night like tonight. Everybody for miles around wants to be in town for the New Year's celebration." He put the four legs of his chair back onto the floor. "Mayhap I'll go ask the lady about employment."

Sam didn't have time to object as Robert scraped back the chair and rose to his feet. He slipped through the door of the kitchen with a silent, easy gait.

Harriet Parmeter leaned into the oven of the cast iron stove and Robert was met by her round, shapely bottom as she balanced herself to remove a pan. He stopped to take a deep breath. In his opinion, a woman's ass was one of the loveliest sights on God's green earth. If the woman was a full-figured and mature creature, the pleasure was intensified a thousand times for him.

Harriet straightened, turning to put the skillet of cornbread on the table behind her. Her eyes opened wide and a strawberry blush crawled up from her ample bosom to tinge her cheeks when she noticed Robert standing behind her.

"Ya nearly scared me outta my skin, Mister." She made a noise of disapproval. "Customers ain't allowed in the kitchen." She snapped a linen dishtowel in his direction. "Scat! Get yerself back in the dinin' room and I'll be out shortly."

Robert shifted from foot to foot and held his hands behind his back. He wasn't good at talking - that was Sam's job. But if they were ever going to

First Night

succeed at their new assignment, he'd have to find a job that gave him access to miners, travelers and gossip. The dining room of a hotel seemed like the perfect solution. Not to mention the establishment was owned by Harriet Parmeter.

He nodded. "Beggin' your pardon, ma'am, but seein' as how you're so busy and all, I was wonderin' if you'd have a job for someone like me." He swallowed, reluctant to look away from the soft brown eyes staring back at him.

Harriet frowned. "I ain't got no horses to buck-break or cows needin' to be punched. Most of what I need done around here is emptyin' slop pails, scrubbin' floors and haulin' wood." She sniffed. "All the men I've hired have run-off soon as they got a poke for minin' or somethin' better came along."

Robert nodded. "I understand, and I ain't plannin' on stayin' in these parts much beyond next spring. But I could be a good help 'til then."

Harriet was quiet as she put her hands on her hips and sized him up. He blushed as her gaze swept down from the top of his head to the toes of his boots. He wondered if she was going to ask him to open his mouth so she could see his teeth. He almost neighed and fought the urge to stomp a foot.

"You might do, if you ain't afraid of hard work. I can't pay much but I'd give you a room to sleep in and three good meals every day."

Robert nodded. "That sounds fair."

"What about your handsome friend out there, he lookin' for work too?"

He shook his head. "I'd say he's more interested in searching for business opportunities."

Harriet snorted. "Gambler?"

"Sometimes," Robert answered. "But he's got some education and a bit of money. "

Harriet grabbed a knife and started slicing the cornbread. "What's your name?"

"Robert Holcomb," he said as he removed his woolen coat and started to roll up the sleeves of his linen shirt. "I'll just start washin' up in here right now if you don't mind."

Harriet loaded a tray with plates and balanced it across her arm. "I ain't gonna argue with you, Robert. We got a dinin' room full of hungry folks in town for the big doin's tonight and I believe in makin' hay while the sun shines." She slipped out the door.

Robert took a tin pan to the reservoir of hot water on the stove and filled it. He returned to the sink and pumped some cold water in it, then grabbed the bar of soap and rubbed it in his hands.

He could hear Harriet's bright, cheerful laughter through the door, and he smiled. So far, he'd seen no sign of a Mr. Parmeter, and he felt a jolt of awareness that hit him without warning. If Harriet wasn't a widow, it was going to be a real

First Night

temptation to rein in his desire to make her one.

It was many hours later, after washing a ton of dishes by Robert's estimation, that he slowly climbed the stairs to the room Harriet had assigned him earlier in the evening. Despite the late hour, the street outside was still filled with the celebration for New Years. The Chinese rockets had been lit hours ago, but men were shooting off their guns as they yelled out their greetings and stumbled through the streets. There were a lot of drunks out there, Robert concluded, and not being a drinking man he had no desire to go out and join them. His bed was looking pretty good right about now. He might not be able to fall asleep, but he could get his boots off and stretch out.

"Get your hands off me you son-of-a-bitch, or I'll give out a yell that'll bring the roof down."

Robert paused when he recognized Harriet's voice coming from one of the rooms at the end of the hall.

"Ain't nobody gonna hear you with that racket out in the street," a deep voice drawled. "You know you want it, woman, so stop fightin' me."

It was all the reason Robert needed to dash up the stairs. He could hear a crash from behind the door and then a muffled thump. He didn't bother to knock; he kicked at the door and stumbled into the room.

A man lay sprawled across the bed and Harriet Parmeter brushed crockery across the pine floor with her foot. She looked up as Robert stood in the doorway with his gun drawn.

"Damn drunks cost me more in pitchers than they're worth!" She turned to glance at the man and then shrugged her shoulders. "I'll charge him an extra dollar tomorrow for the trouble."

"You can put that gun away, Mr. Holcomb, no need to shoot anybody tonight." A smile played across her lips. "I do appreciate you comin' to my rescue though - you're a regular hero, ain't you?"

Robert blushed as she closed the door behind her before leaning back against it. She seemed to see him, really see him, for the first time since he'd walked into the kitchen.

"You worked hard tonight and I never heard a word of complaint," she paused to consider him more, "no cussin' neither, which I sure appreciate."

She stepped closer and Robert didn't move. He could smell her cinnamon, coffee and honey scent and he inhaled deeply. She smelled like warm bread from the oven, sitting by the fire with spiced cider comfort. Harriet Parmeter smelled like home. Her rosy lips formed a sweet smile and his heart thumped against his chest.

She lifted up on her toes to grasp his chin gently. "Happy New Year,

First Night

Robert," she whispered before putting her lips on his. He felt frozen to the spot, as if the howling North wind had brought a blizzard into the room. He was too surprised to respond; too afraid she'd pull away from him if he so much as grasped her around the waist to pull her closer. Finally she leaned away from him, a flirt of a smile on her lips and a sparkle in her eyes. She turned to go to her room. Robert felt like his boots were stuck to the floor. He needed to say something but his mind was blank.

"Mrs. Parmeter," she turned with one hand on the brass doorknob.

"I believe we're in for a special New Year," he paused to look down at his feet, knowing his neck and face were probably red as a ripe apple. He finally looked up to see a delighted smile on her face.

"I . . . I, appreciate you taking me on and giving me work," he said.

She cocked her head at him like a curious crow sitting on a fence post. "There's more to you than most folks can see, Mr. Robert Holcomb, it's gonna be interestin' to figure you out!"

When she finally closed the door to her room, Robert grinned.

"If you only knew, Mrs. Parmeter," he said softly as he passed her room, "if you only knew."

The End

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" was 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.

www.debschneider.com

Clean Slate

By Kate Autin

What falls outside my window is neither wet nor men, the two things you might expect to find falling from the sky in San Francisco.

It's not that I didn't expect this, after all. That's why I'm here on New Year's Eve, but still. It surprises me. Astonishes me. And I can't seem to convince myself to open my window and join the thousands—tens, maybe hundreds of thousands—of people ridding themselves of the past year.

I *need* to be done with 2009.

I'm ready to be a year older, ready to turn middle-aged. I believe I'm ready to celebrate the transition, and I've chosen San Francisco for the big event.

I read about this New Year's Eve phenomenon when I was desperately trying to distract myself from the mess my life was in. I worked harder than I'd ever worked, but that wasn't enough. I trained at the gym religiously—and when I say religiously, I mean as if I were a nun in a cloistered order. That didn't occupy enough of my mind.

I needed something else to fill my time, and I did it by reading every minute I wasn't otherwise occupied by something that precluded me having a book in my hands. I didn't read in the car; I listened to books on tape. I didn't read at work; I was so busy it wasn't necessary. I read on the treadmill or the bike or the elliptical trainer. I read every single free moment. And when I say *every* moment, I'm not kidding.

I kept books and magazines next to my bed so that the minute I woke up—whether in the middle of the night, which happened often, or in the morning after a few restless hours of sleep—I could reach out and immediately immerse myself in someone else's story. I kept newspapers and newsletters in the bathroom, things I didn't mind dropping into the tub if I was lucky enough to fall asleep for a moment. I kept my netbook with me at all times, and I made sure that my WiFi was the best I could buy so I could always connect to some

First Night

website with stories for me to read.

Looking back, the whole year seemed a bit obsessive on my part. Okay, I admit it was more than a bit obsessive. It was the craziest I've been in my relatively crazy life.

And it wasn't even my fault. At least not most of it. I reacted badly but *he* drove me to it. And yes, it's pathetic, but it took me over a year to get to a place where I could figure out how to put him behind me. I should have known better, I should have dealt with it better, but let me tell you, at my age, losing the love of your life isn't over in two weeks or when you meet the next boy at the roller rink or the coffee shop. It's a big deal.

A *very* big deal.

So here I am in San Francisco, in a room in the Renoir Hotel overlooking McAlister Street. This is the biggest city I've ever seen, and the noisiest by a long shot. This is my first hotel room, my first airplane ride, my first trip away from my hometown. I've lived all of my life on the flat plains in the middle of the country, where I grew up worrying about tornadoes rather than earthquakes.

I had always wanted to travel, but it took an emotional earthquake to get me to leave the plains. Maybe I should be grateful to him. Maybe, I think, it's possible that I'll get to gratitude later on tonight. Maybe I'll be able to move on after the ritual. After all, that's what I'm here for.

I take a sip of the champagne I've ordered from room service and once again lift the silver cover off the plate of chilled seafood the operator suggested I try with it. I have strawberries and a bowl of whipped cream on the table, and a plate of cheese and sourdough bread in case I'm still hungry after I eat everything else. I have another bottle of this very expensive champagne waiting, unopened, in the ice bucket.

Impossible as it seems, the noise outside my window swells, becoming even louder. It sounds as if I'm sitting in the heart of the high school football field, it's Friday night, the team is playing for a playoff berth, and every person in town is screaming around me.

I'm almost scared to open the window and let the noise in. But another glass of champagne gives me enough courage to lift the old-fashioned pane up and stick my head out.

The air is salty and damp, but warm, maybe thirty degrees warmer than home. I take a deep breath, then another. It feels clean. *I* feel clean.

My room is on the third floor right next to the rickety iron fire escape. I look over to make sure I know what to do and where to go if there's a fire alarm sometime during the night.

There is someone sitting on the tiny landing. He's wearing a tuxedo

First Night

without the bow tie, and his dark sleek hair is streaked with silver at the temples. I can't see his face; he's resting it on his forearms, which are resting on his knees. He looks miserable.

He looks like me.

"Would you like a glass of champagne?" The words surprise me as much as him, I think.

He raises his head and eyes as stormy grey as my first glimpse of the ocean glare at me.

"Why would I want that?"

"Because I've got two bottles in my room, and if I drink them both myself I'm going to be sick. And that's no way to start the New Year. Especially this one."

I can't believe I'm talking this way to a complete stranger, especially one who looks as sophisticated as this man. But I'm in San Francisco, I've just had two glasses of champagne, and I've already been through the worst thing that could happen to me. Being rejected by someone I don't even know? A snap compared to what I've already been through.

I pull my head back in through the window, grab the bottle and the second glass, and crawl through the window to join him on the landing.

"Here," I say, pouring champagne into both glasses. "You might as well join me."

He shakes his head, and I wait to see what he's going to do. It's even noisier outside the window, but I'm getting used to the roar, and it's kind of fun. Everyone's screaming, throwing firecrackers, and waving bottles. They're all dressed up, and it's obvious they've all got somewhere to go.

I examine my feelings and realize I don't envy them a bit. The black shroud I've been wearing on my heart is gone. Poof! Just like that. And I'm having a good time sitting on this landing with a stranger.

I smile.

The champagne buzzes in my veins, as does the freedom, and I have no trouble saying just what's on my mind. "I'm from the Midwest. This is my first time in San Francisco. Is it always like this?" I throw out my arms to encompass the noise and the crowds, the hills and the sea air.

"How would I know?" he growls.

"You're not from here?" I laugh when he growls again, and pour more champagne into both glasses. "I guess not."

"Why would I be staying in a hotel if I lived here?"

"Umm, because it's New Year's Eve?"

We sip at the champagne and quickly, more quickly than I expected, the bottle is empty.

First Night

"I'll get the other bottle," I say and turn to go back in through the window. I check the clock. Whatever happens, I don't want to miss the big moment. This time, I lean out the window with the champagne bottle and pass it to him. "Hold this." I go back and grab the food and my daytimer and pass them out through the window.

"Is that it?" he says. "You sure you don't want to bring your laptop and your briefcase?" The sneer in his voice is personal, so I don't respond.

Instead, I pass him a napkin and lift the cover off the seafood. Even cold, it smells like the ocean. I lean into it and take a deep breath. I sense he's watching me, but I truly don't care. I take another breath and then grab a crab leg.

"I've never had crab," I say, struggling with the shell, biting at it and cursing the sharp edges.

This time, his laughter contains nothing except humor.

"No kidding. Here, let me do that for you. It's easier if you use the crackers."

His hands are deft as he wields the crackers and peels the shell away from the meat inside. He hands it to me, our fingers touching for the first time. I shy away from the jolt of sensation I feel, but he won't let me pull too far.

He touches the sweet crabmeat to my lips. "Try this. It's almost as sweet as you are."

I feel the color heating my cheeks, but I bite into the soft crab, the juice dripping from my lips onto his fingers. He licks at them and then goes back to the plate, this time peeling a shrimp and lifting that to my mouth. Then he picks up a dark purple shell and pulls it apart, exposing an orange mussel. He rips it from its bed and offers it to me.

I must be in heaven. Nothing, no one, nowhere has ever felt this good. I think of the past years, and I discard them, one by one, ignoring the pain they caused me, and enjoy this moment.

"Did you bring yours?" I ask, holding up my daytimer. "If you didn't, you can share mine."

He reaches behind him to the sill of the window into what I assume is his room. He returns with a large leather-bound book. The pages are edged in gold, matching the gold letters embossed onto the cover. It doesn't say anything as normal as *diary*, *daytimer* or *datebook*. Not even the more elegant *journal*.

The book was obviously made for him. It bears only a name—*Michael Graeme Wheatley*—and the year. 2009.

We turn together and watch as the fireworks begin, as the people in the street below begin the countdown. I hand him my daytimer, and he hands me his leather-bound whatever-he-calls-it.

First Night

I look at him as I open the book, and he nods.

I reach for January 1, 2009 and I rip it from the book, leaving gold threads dangling behind. He does the same with my daytimer. No gold threads in my book.

We rip through January, then exchange some pages, until I'm holding half of his January and he's holding half of mine.

He grabs me and kisses me as the clock begins to chime twelve. I lift my head and watch as showers of white fall from the windows above us.

I shred January and rain it down onto the street. I watch Michael do the same. We exchange books and rip months from whatever book we happen to be holding, shredding and throwing until 2009 is completely, finally gone.

I drop both covers inside my window and turn. Michael is waiting for me, his arms open.

"Happy New Year," I whisper as his lips meet mine. And I know it's going to be a good one.

The End

About Kate Austin

Kate writes women's fiction, magic realism, paranormal and erotica. She writes short fiction, poetry and novels. She's had dozens of stories and poems published over the years and her eighth book—*Seeing is Believing*—about a woman who sees death in photographs—was published in October 2007. She has published nine books since 2005. Kate blames her mother and her two grandmothers for her reading and writing obsession—all of them were avid readers and they passed the books and the obsession on to her.

www.kateaustin.ca

Sweet Suffragette

By Sheryl Hoyt

"5...4...3...2...1...Happy New Year!"

The shouts and whoops intermingled with the explosions of Chinese rockets and champagne bottles being popped. The crowd moved in waves around Cameron and she went with them, allowing herself to be caught up in the moment. She had imbibed in a few glasses of the sparkling wine already and her head was spinning a bit. At eighteen years old, this was the first real formal event her parents had allowed her to attend into the wee hours of the night. It was now 1910, the year all her dreams would come true. That is - if the Washington State legislature would just hurry up and pass the law that would give the good women of the northwest a vote.

Cameron was thinking these pleasing thoughts and enjoying the delicious feeling of floating above the ground that the champagne produced when she was suddenly caught up into warm strong arms and pulled into an embrace not altogether proper, but not altogether unpleasant either. Before she could muster an objection, warm soft lips came down on hers and she couldn't help but respond. She gripped strong, muscular shoulders and sighed at the gentle way the masculine mouth softly nipped and massaged her mouth. Her blood seemed to come to a gentle boil and she longed to press herself more fully to the hard form that pressed down on her feminine curves.

"Ah Cameron, you tease me now," the man pulled away only for a moment then swooped back in to claim her lips again. But this time he demanded more from her, sweeping his tongue into her willing mouth.

Using every last ounce of fortitude she could muster, Cameron pushed hard against the firm chest, gasping for breath as she looked up into her nemesis's handsome face.

"Kirkland Brownstone, you should be ashamed of yourself." Cameron tried to look offended and not aroused, although the warmth spreading through her limbs could not be ignored.

First Night

She assumed she had failed miserably since Kirkland was staring down at her with a bemused half grin, and he did not look sorry at all. No, he looked quite as he always did. Excessively handsome with his slightly too long golden brown hair and chocolate brown eyes with lashes any woman would kill for. His strong chin and the dimple that showed up on his left cheek when he laughed were enough to make any reasonable girl swoon. If only he wasn't the bane of her existence, she might have allowed him the liberties he so often begged of her.

But Kirkland was not to be tolerated. He was the archenemy of the cause most dear to her heart and she would not allow her physical reaction to him to sway her from the very reason she lived and breathed. First and foremost, Cameron Avondale was a devout suffragette. And as long as Kirkland wrote his ridiculous anti-women's rights column for the Post, she simply could not abide his attentions.

When they first met on July 6th, 1909 at the Alaska-Yukon-Pacific Expedition, it was officially Suffragette Day, dedicated to women's rights. Important leaders of the cause had come from all over the country to attend the 41st Annual Convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association. And Cameron had rubbed shoulders with such notable leaders as Lucy Anthony, niece to the great Susan B., Fanny Villard, Pauline Perlmutter Steinem, and even Alice and Henry Blackwell.

Cameron sighed in pleasure just remembering the momentous day.

But then Kirkland had utterly destroyed her happiness in the excitement of the events. He had flirted with her and wooed her and tricked her into talking to him about the cause and then used her words against the movement in one of his arrogant, distasteful, opposing viewpoint articles.

Cameron vowed never to speak to him again, even though every time he came near her, the blood rushed hot through her body and her imagination ran wild imagining intimate scenes of passion shared in secret. But it was an impossible situation. She could never really care for a man who completely disdained a woman's right for equality. No, it was simply not meant to be.

Since that summer day almost six months ago, Kirkland had persisted in his pursuit of her. This was not the first passionate and disconcerting kiss they'd shared. There had been several. And none of them could ever be forgotten or dismissed easily.

"Who is your friend?" Mr. Avondale, Cameron's father, came to stand by his daughter's side. "I don't believe we've met."

"He is not my friend," Cameron insisted with an indignant lift of her chin.

"Kirkland Brownstone," Kirkland said, extending a hand to Mr. Avondale.

"Are you Max Brownstone's son?" Cameron's father asked, sizing up the

young man.

"Yes sir," Kirkland responded, respectfully. "My father is right over there." He pointed in the direction of the dancers and waved.

An older gentleman, tall with silver hair and a robust form waved back and started toward them. At his side was a lovely woman in an exquisite turquoise, silk gown who was obviously Kirkland's mother. Although she had some grey in her hair, it was mostly the same golden brown as her son's.

At the same time, Cameron's mother approached the group. Cameron and her mother were nearly identical except in age, with their sleek black hair and deep blue eyes. Slim but well formed womanly figures and both dressed in the latest style of black beaded gowns. But where Mrs. Avondale had an underskirt of gold, Cameron's was a rich shade of blue that nearly matched her eyes.

Kirkland bowed deeply to Cameron's mother. "Now I see where your daughter gets her beauty," he murmured, kissing Mrs. Avondale's outstretched hand.

"What a charming young man," Mrs. Avondale commented, allowing Kirkland to hold her hand a moment longer than was proper.

"Oh for pity sake," Cameron growled under her breath, crossing her arms under her breasts.

Kirkland heard her and winked in her direction, grinning and displaying that delicious dimple again. Cameron mustered all her self control in order to keep from stamping her foot in frustration. How could such an insufferable man be so unbelievably charming?

"Is this the young lady you've been telling us about?" Mr. Brownstone asked his son after introductions had been made.

Stunned by the revelation, Cameron stared at Kirkland with her mouth open. He had told his parents about her? Didn't he understand she could never be with a man who so completely believed in the opposite of what she had been fighting for since she was just a girl?

"Yes, Father. This is Cameron and she's a leader in the fight for women's rights." Kirkland turned his attention back to her and his look was so obviously one of adoration, Cameron was momentarily speechless.

"Well, then I can only imagine that the task I assigned you has not improved Miss Avondale's opinion of you." Max Brownstone laughed heartily then turned to Cameron's father to explain his odd statement.

"As you know, being the editor in chief and owner of the Post, I wanted to give equal time to both sides of the argument for and against women and the vote. None of my reporters wanted the dubious task of taking the opposing side for some reason, especially with the annual convention being held here in Seattle. So, my son stepped up to the plate for the paper and took on the task. He's done

an admirable job considering he doesn't believe a word he writes in his column. You should see the letters he gets from women all across the state rebuking him for his odious opinions."

Max slapped his son on the back with pride, "After the legislature meets in November, I'll let him write whatever he wants. I think he's proved his value as a possible editor-in-chief."

Cameron nearly swooned. She was quite certain she should not have another glass of wine, but took one from a passing waiter nonetheless. This eye-opener was really too much to take in the company of her mother and father and she needed to get away from their curious stares before she did or said something she was certain she would regret.

"Pardon me," she murmured excusing herself, and walked quickly away from the laughing group.

Cameron blindly headed for the doors leading out to the freezing cold veranda. She had no wrap, but she didn't care. The cold would help her muddled mind sort through this new revelation.

Kirkland was by her side moments later wrapping his evening jacket over her shoulders.

"Why didn't you tell me?" she cried, losing the battle to control her voice and the sob that threatened to burst forth. "How could you?"

"I didn't think you'd believe me," he said. "Would you have?"

"No," Cameron admitted, calming down only slightly. "But you've made a fool of me, all the same. How can I forgive that?"

"But that was never my intention," Kirkland protested, putting a hand under Cameron's chin and lifting her gaze to meet his fathomless chocolate eyes.

She could see the truth reflected there. He was sorry he had hurt her. But still, it was humiliating.

"When I first met you, I couldn't believe my luck." He turned away to pace a few feet then came back and looked deeply into Cameron's eyes. "Here was this beautiful, intelligent woman who had so much to say about a cause that she believed so strongly in. Yes, I wrote that article quoting you and I wrote an opposite opinion. But you are wrong if you think other suffragettes were upset with you. On the contrary, they were furious with me! You should see the letters I got after the Post published that column. My father almost pulled me from the duty completely because it was so unpopular. But I told him that I would persevere. The paper was getting attention, good or bad. Archie, who writes the pro-suffragette column, hardly gets any attention. Who knows why, but for some reason people enjoy the conflict."

Kirkland shrugged his shoulders, scuffed his foot on the ground and shyly reached for Cameron's hand. "Can you ever forgive me? I promise that I'll write

First Night

a glowing article about your perseverance and dedication as soon as the vote is over.”

“Oh Kirkland,” Cameron said with a long sigh, “I’m so mad at you I could just stomp on your foot! You should have told me. Even if I hadn’t believed you at first, you should have kept on trying to convince me. I’ve spent six months of wanting your attention but hating it at the same time.”

“You want my attentions?” Kirkland asked sounding hopeful and moving a bit closer to her.

This time Cameron did stomp a foot. How could he be so obtuse? She turned away from him, hoping he wouldn’t walk away, but needing a moment to compose herself. It had been a monumentally informative evening so far and if their relationship was to continue in the direction it seemed to be going, she needed to clear her head with a few deep breaths.

“Cameron,” Kirkland whispered softly in her ear, moving up close behind her. “I have strong feelings for you that I cannot deny. I don’t want to deny them. I want us to be together.”

She turned slowly around and looked up into those mesmerizing eyes. “I have feelings for you too,” Cameron admitted, albeit reluctantly.

Kirkland smiled that infuriatingly adorable smile, reducing her defenses to nothing, and leaned down to kiss her. Cameron could not resist.

Sighing in pleasure she welcomed his embrace and gladly gave herself up to his passion. At first his kiss was soft and sweet, nipping and touching with feather light precision, making her moan, wanting more. Kirkland obliged her and deepened the kiss, pressing open her mouth and using his tongue in a way that sent shivers of delight through Cameron to warm her down to her toes.

Much to her disappointment, he pulled his mouth away from hers, but kept his arms wrapped snugly around her small frame.

“Darling Cameron, I’m madly in love with you and your passion for your cause.” He sighed and pulled her close, tucking her under his chin. “Let’s go inside where it’s warm. Then I’d like to ask your father for permission to marry you.”

Cameron gave him a hard shove, struggling out of his embrace. “Shouldn’t you ask me first?” She thrust out her chin defiantly and placed her hands on her hips, tapping one foot in irritation.

Kirkland looked stunned at first, then he realized his mistake and fell to one knee. “I forgot for a moment that the reason I fell in love with you was because you are unconventional. Dearest Cameron, would you do me the honor of becoming my wife and my equal partner in life?”

Cameron relaxed and smiled coyly at Kirkland. He was finally behaving in a manner that would suit her. She threw herself into his arms and held him

First Night

close.

“Oh Kirkland, I love you too. And as long as our vows do not contain the words “obey” I will marry you.”

Kirkland laughed at her declaration of independence. “I wouldn’t dream of having it any other way.”

He kissed her with unbearable sweetness one last time before they returned to the festivities to share their joy with their families.

Cameron had to admit, 1910 was beginning to look like it would be the best year ever.

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 and makes her home in the Cascade foothills near Seattle.

www.sherylhoyt.com

Snowbound

By Leanne Karella

Randall Barnes sat in the dark, sprawled on the sofa, a glass of Crown Royal balanced on his flat stomach, staring at the fire leaping and dancing in the fireplace of his new home.

The power had gone out three hours before, the phone line gone dead a little over two hours ago, while he'd been leaving a Happy New Year message for his sister and brother-in-law. Snow fell in fat, swirling flakes outside, quickly piling up to over a foot, taking down power lines, obviously.

This is what he got for moving to Alaska, he supposed. At least there wasn't wind and snowdrifts like back home in New York during a blizzard, but the pressing silence was enough to drive him to drink.

He took another swallow of his Crown and sighed as warmth spread down his throat to his belly. He wasn't ready to call his move to Fairbanks a mistake, he loved his job as history professor at the University of Alaska, but dang it, relocation hadn't accomplished his first objective...

To forget.

He swiped his hand over his face and then closed his eyes, trying to force himself to fall asleep. Damn good thing he bought a house with a wood burning fireplace, or he'd freeze by morning. He'd stacked enough wood by the hearth, and outside on the porch, to get him through the next day or two without venturing across the yard to the wood shed. He'd called for a plow to come in two days, hoping the snow had stopped by then. And to save him a few bucks so the plow didn't drive all the way out to the middle of nowhere where he lived on New Years Day and charge him double or triple.

With a sigh, he set his glass on the coffee table and rolled onto his side. He should have taken someone up on one of the many invitations to New Years Eve parties. He might be snowed in with company if he had, not here alone with his thoughts.

A thump on his porch had his heart jumping as he surged to a seated

First Night

position. He'd had a moose walk right up to his back door a few weeks back. Having giant moose eyes staring in through the window when you step into the kitchen for a cup of coffee wasn't the eye-opener he preferred first thing in the morning, especially since morning was still as black as pitch this far north in the dead of winter.

A soft bang on his door, and he stood. Who the hell would be out in this weather at this time of night? He glanced at his watch, turning slightly so he could see the face in the firelight. Eleven-thirty.

Another muffled *thump, thump, thump* to the door. "Anybody home?" a feminine voice called.

He hurried to the door and jerked it open.

"What are you doing here?" they said in unison.

"I live here," Randall said as he stepped aside, and grabbed Stephanie Woodman by the arm of her puffy thigh-length coat and pulled her inside. She shivered, her legs were bare, and her winter boots were covered in snow. "What are you doing out in this storm?"

She made a face as she stepped into the house just far enough so he could shut the door behind her. "I'm sorry, Professor Barnes. This must seem weird. I had no idea you lived out here." She slapped her gloved hands together as if trying to warm them. "My car broke down. Could I possibly use your phone to call my brother to come get me?"

Stephanie worked reception at the university's museum, where he spent much of his free time. He loved the place, and she'd been a wonderful tour guide. She was about his age, and pretty in a soft, underspoken kind of way.

"Sorry, phone line's down. No cell reception out here, either."

Her shoulders slumped. "Damn," she whispered.

"Why don't you take off your boots and jacket and get warmed up by the fire?"

She tucked her bottom lip between her teeth for an instant, then nodded and pulled off her black stocking cap. Her long brown hair frizzed out at the sides from the static, but he could tell it had been done up pretty before she'd been forced to bundle up.

"Thanks." She shook her head and peeled off her gloves. "I've been walking for what feels like hours. My car died, and so I was waiting for someone to come along so I could hitch a ride, but then a snow plow came instead and buried my car, and me in it." She glanced up at him through her long, thick eyelashes. "Kind of glad you live here and not some weirdo. You're the first house I could see from the road."

"How do you know I'm not some weirdo?" he asked, surprising himself with the teasing comment, which made him frown.

First Night

Her soft laughter erased the frown from his face though. "Right. You're a freak." She winked and unzipped her coat, revealing a very short, very body-hugging, very sparkly black cocktail dress. "I heard about the Christmas dinner you and Professor Perkins put on for the singles who had no place to go."

He shrugged it off. When he'd decided not to go back to New York for Christmas, he'd suggested it to another unmarried professor that they put on a dinner for the students who didn't have anywhere to spend their Christmas. They'd hosted sixty-seven kids, cooked eight turkeys, four hams, and God only knows how many pounds of potatoes. It had felt good. Necessary. Took his mind off what was missing in his life.

Stephanie dropped her jacket, hat and gloves on the floor right in front of the door, then stepped out of her snow boots and headed for the fire. From the back, the body-hugging dress looked even better. Low in back, showing off her nicely flared hips and tight, round behind.

He looked away.

"Would you have something a little warmer I might put on?" she asked.

When he looked back, she had her back to the fire, rubbing her arms.

"Yeah. Hold on." He made a beeline for the bedroom to find something big and concealing for her to put on.

* * * * *

Stephanie couldn't believe she'd literally stumbled across Randall Barnes' home. She'd been on her way to a New Years Eve party, in a snowfall she knew she shouldn't be driving in. The weather hadn't contributed to her breakdown, though, her stupid old car had just given out on a hill. It'd been stupid, but she hadn't wanted to spend New Years Eve alone another year.

She'd had a crush on Randall since the first day he'd walked into the museum and had asked if someone could give him a tour. He was a beautiful man, tall and lean with just the right amount of gray at his temples to fit the scholarly formula. She'd been quick to give him a tour herself, not handing the duty off to one of the other employees. Since then, he'd spent countless hours in the museum, sometimes just sitting and staring at the exhibits. He always seemed a little lost, a little sad, and though she'd tried to make small talk with him, he didn't seem very good at it. And he certainly hadn't seemed interested in her.

Randall came back into the living room carrying a pile of clothes. "Here," he said as he handed them to her. "The socks are new. Just pulled them from the package. I have a propane stove, not electric, so I can heat up some water for...uh...I guess all I have is coffee."

First Night

She smiled at him and took the stack of gray cotton and flannel. "That'd be great. Thanks."

Without another word, he left her again, going through a door which she assumed led to the kitchen.

He still didn't seem all that interested, even though they were alone. And he seemed somewhat agitated to have her in his home. But hey, at least she wasn't alone on New Years Eve, right? She laid the clothing on the sofa. The flannel shirt she pulled on right over her dress. It hung longer than the dress. Then the gray sweatpants five sizes too big. She pulled the drawstring as tight as she could. Then she sat down on the sofa and pulled on the thick, long, tube socks.

A few minutes later, Randall returned, carrying a steaming mug in one hand, and a plate with a cup of milk and bowl of sugar in the other. He set them all on the coffee table in front of her. "You need anything else?" He shoved his hands in his pockets and loomed over her.

She glanced at the glass of brown liquid sitting next to the coffee, then lifted it and sniffed. "A little of this in my coffee?"

He shrugged. "I'll get the bottle."

"No, this is okay." She tipped a small blob into the mug. "Thank you, Professor."

"Randall—Randy. Call me Randy." He sat down on the other end of the sofa from her. Perched on the edge of the cushion as if ready to bolt if need be. "Where were you headed tonight?"

"Randy," she said softly as she picked up the steaming cup and held it below her nose. "Jessica Yardly, you know her? From the museum?" When he shrugged, she went on. "She was throwing a little party tonight. She lives about ten miles farther up Chena Hot Springs Road from here."

"You uh...looked really nice."

Warmth spread through her, but not from the sip of coffee. "Thank you."

Randy stared at the fire, then got up and threw on a couple of logs from the heap of chopped wood near the hearth.

The silence was going to kill her, she was sure, and since they were alone and he couldn't exactly ignore her, she asked, "Why didn't you go home for the holidays?"

He shrugged and shoved his hands back into his pockets. "Nothing really to go home to."

She stood up and went toward him, holding the warm mug between her palms. "No family?"

"Parents are socialites. Prefer to spend Christmas and New Years with their friends. My sister and her husband are somewhere in the Caribbean this

First Night

year, I think.”

He seemed to refuse to make eye contact with her, instead staring at the mantle over the fireplace. She turned her head and looked, and saw a picture of a pretty blonde woman and a little girl.

“That your sister?”

“Wife.”

Her heart stalled and a lump came to her throat. He never wore a wedding band. He’d never mentioned...

He did look at her then, and there was no mistaking the lost soul inside those eyes.

She swallowed hard. “Your little girl?”

“They’re both gone. Almost two years. Car accident.” A wrinkle appeared between his brows. “It’s why I moved here. To get away from the memories. I guess that doesn’t really work, huh?”

She slowly shook her head. “No.” Her heart ached for him. No wonder he never smiled, always looked so lost. He was.

His watch beeped twice. He pulled his hand from his pocket and stared at it a moment before he said, “Happy New Year, Stephanie.”

She set her mug of coffee on the mantle, next to the picture of his beautiful wife and daughter, then went up on tiptoe, using his shoulder as a handhold, and kissed his cheek. “Happy New Year, Randall. May it bring you happiness and peace.”

He moved so fast, she nearly yelped. In an instant, his arms were around her, his face pressed to the curve of her neck, his warm breath against her cool skin.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him in return.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he murmured against her neck. “If only for the moment, I’m glad you’re here.”

She took a quick, shallow breath and ran her hand over his head, his hair as silky as it had always looked. “I’ll be here whenever you need me, Randy. That’s my New Years promise to you.”

As the fire popped and crackled and the snow fell silently outside, Randall Barnes realized that as hard as he’d tried to close himself off from life, life had a way of finding its way in. As an anthropologist, he’d always known that man wasn’t meant to be alone—they sought other humans for companionship. It just took a little longer to convince his soul. And though he wasn’t sure what tomorrow would bring, being held by this sweet, beautiful woman on a cold, dark night was possibly the best way he could spend this New Years Eve.

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