

CARA
COLTER



THEIR
CHRISTMAS
WISH COME
TRUE

Cherish

Cara Colter

Their Christmas Wish Come True

Аннотация

Forty days till Christmas...Can they open their hearts in time? Kirsten Morrison runs the Secret Santa Society and loves making others happy. Although she knows opening your heart can be painful, her secret wish is to find a special man to share Christmas with... Volunteering to wrap children's gifts isn't something Michael Brewster would normally do. But, facing his first Christmas alone, he finds himself on Kirsten's doorstep. As they work together, an undeniable attraction flares between them. Is a kiss under the mistletoe the start of their Christmas wish come true?

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Their Christmas Wish Come True

Cara Colter



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To my friend, Doreen Cardwell

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CHAPTER ONE

Forty days until Christmas...

THE doorbell ringing sounded like a cannon going off, the balls landing and exploding inside his own head.

Michael Brewster groaned, rolled over, pried one eye open and looked past an empty beer bottle, lying on its side, to his bedside alarm clock.

Six o'clock. Morning or evening? Morning. Who the hell would call on him at six in the morning? He pulled a pillow over his head, but the door chimed again, and then again. Groggily, grumpily, like a bear coming out of hibernation, he groped over the side of his bed, found a pair of jeans and pulled them on.

Bare-footed and chested, he stumbled down the hallway and threw open his front door. The bracing November air cleared his head, and he reluctantly bit back his temper.

His neighbor, Mr. Theodore, stood there, wizened as a little elf, looking impossibly cheerful given the early hour and the fact that the sky was a dark, leaden gray behind him, promising a grim day.

"Top of the morning to you, Michael."

With his head thudding and his mouth feeling as if he'd cleaned toilets with his tongue the night before, Michael wanted to snap at the old man and slam the door. But how could he?

Michael had recently moved back to the home he'd grown

up in, and Mr. Theodore was part of the treasured memories that had drawn him back here, to the house that still smelled of his father's pipe. Michael and his brother, Brian, had raided Mr. Theodore's garden and picked his carefully tended flowers for their mom. They had broken the branches of his crab apple tree while climbing it, and played Halloween pranks on him.

Despite that history, or maybe because of it, Michael had felt initial wariness when Mr. Theodore had approached him about working around his house. A carpenter by trade, Michael was financially in a position where he never had to work again.

Besides, by saying yes, would he leave himself open to being preached at? Mr. Theodore had always had an eclectic spiritual bent. He sang in his church choir, he was at ease discussing the Dalai Lama over the back fence. He usually had a book in hand of philosophy or poetry: Leopold, Thoreau, Frost.

But in his more honest moments, Michael wondered if maybe he'd actually said yes hoping his aging, well-read neighbor had an answer to the bankruptcy of his own spirit.

Everybody else seemed to have answers, theories about life and death and meaning, that they were, in Michael's opinion, much too eager to share.

Mr. Theodore, however, had given no advice. While Michael rebuilt front steps and installed new windows, Mr. Theodore offered only small talk—how to look after geraniums, which of the neighbors made the best chocolate chip cookies—and endless work. When one job ended at his aging house another magically

appeared.

But six in the morning? Mr. Theodore was pressing his luck.

“I was just wondering—”

Michael sighed inwardly, tried to guess. What hadn't he seen? What repair had he overlooked in Mr. Theodore's project-ridden house? Leaking roof? Dripping bathroom sink? Despite the hour, and a monstrous hangover, Michael was aware of feeling relieved. Something to do today, after all.

There was always something else to do, thank God. With nothing to do, Michael would surely be more lost than he already was, as lost as he had been before Mr. Theodore had come and knocked on his door for the first time and pulled him away from the perfect digital images of the huge plasma television set, the only purchase he had made with all that money.

Michael Brewster had not expected to end up unspeakably, unbelievably rich, at twenty-seven years of age. Had he ever dreamed it, he surely would not have seen it as a curse. But it was. And he would give all that money back in an instant if only—

“Christmas lights,” Mr. Theodore announced happily.

He must have registered Michael's confused look.

“Christmas,” Mr. Theodore said. “It's almost Christmas. Today is—” he consulted his watch for confirmation “—November 15. I always put up my decorations on November 15.”

But Michael hadn't gotten much past the Christmas part. Peripherally, on the edges of the haze he lived in, he must have realized stores were decorating for Christmas, that fall color was

gone and winter-gray had set in.

And yet, it felt as if he'd had no warning. Michael was swamped with feeling. Christmas? Already? How? For a shocking moment he could smell the tang of pine, and his mother's pies baking, his father's aftershave. He could hear his brother's laughter, the ripping of tissue...the sensation of loss and of loneliness nearly knocked him off his feet.

And the question that burned in him, that made him toss and turn at night, that made him pace the floor, that made him drink too much beer and stare for hours at a TV screen in an effort to shut it out, was suddenly right there on his tongue. He tried to bite it back but it felt as though the question was going to strangle him if he did not ask someone, say the words, finally, out loud.

"How will I survive?" Michael Brewster said. His voice seemed normal enough, but an icy wind picked that moment to howl, and to turn his voice into a desperate whisper.

It was as he thought, as he dreaded: there was no answer to that question.

Still, Mr. Theodore touched his arm, and he found himself looking into eyes that were blue and ageless and full of strength and compassion.

"Find someone in more pain than you," the old man said firmly, "and help them."

Michael expelled his breath. An impossible solution. No one was in more pain than him. No one.

He said gruffly, "Where do you keep your Christmas lights?"

As it turned out, Mr. Theodore kept his Christmas lights in his garage. As it turned out, he kept enough outdoor Christmas decorations to rival Santa Claus. There were strings and strings and strings of house lights, acorn wreaths for the windows and doors, an electric waving Santa and a complete set of reindeer for the roof. There were life-size models of Mary and Joseph, a lean-to stable to house them and a donkey, for the front yard.

Michael was wrestling with that two-hundred-pound donkey when Mr. Theodore appeared and handed him a neatly folded piece of paper.

“What we talked about earlier,” he said. He gave the plywood donkey a happy pat, as if the damned creature lived, which Michael had been beginning to suspect. Then Mr. Theodore shivered, looked at Michael’s bare arms, shook his head and disappeared back inside his house.

What had they talked about earlier?

With the first snow of the year falling, imperious to the Michigan wind most people would have found impossibly bitter, Michael glared at the paper. He needed a lifeline, not a quote from the Bible, or the Dalai Lama or Thoreau or whoever Mr. Theodore was currently fascinated with. Still, he curbed the desire to crumple the paper and throw it away unread. Mr. Theodore, after all, had not given him poetry, or Bible verses or Thoreau so far. Maybe there was something on this paper he could hold on to. He opened it with the rough impatience of a man afraid to hope.

What was written there was a scrawled address at the east end of Washington Avenue. Michael recognized it as being in the rough part of Treemont, down by the old abandoned flour mill. Underneath the address was written a name.

Michael remembered their conversation from earlier. Find someone in more pain than you and help them.

As if, he thought cynically.

Still, the words printed untidily on the paper intrigued him. Pulled at him. The words said The Secret Santa Society.

Thirty-nine days until Christmas...

"I need an elf," Kirsten Morrison said into the phone, "and not the one you sent me last year. I shouldn't be fussy about a free elf? He got drunk and fell off the sleigh."

A shiver went up and down her spine, she told herself only because the front door had opened, letting that chill breath of November in.

"A shortage of elves? Oh, a shortage of volunteer elves. So, what would I have to pay for an elf who wouldn't get drunk and fall off the sleigh?" She said it as if she had money to spare for an elf, which she didn't.

"Five hundred dollars? Are you kidding me? That's robbery! What kind of person would rob Santa?"

She peered out her office door to see who had come in. There was no clear line of vision anymore. Once a small market, the

front part of her space was now crammed with toys. Sixteen tricycle boxes had arrived this afternoon and were practically blocking the front door.

Trikes that had to be assembled at some point, she made a quick mental note. That was still far down the priority list. She caught sight of her visitor and involuntarily drew in her breath, suddenly not sure it was the air that had chilled her.

He was a big man, maybe a hair under six feet, but with astounding breadth across the shoulders that he brushed snow from. He wore no gloves though winter had decided to arrive last night with a vengeance, and even peering past obstacles she noticed his hands.

Strong hands, capable hands. Hands that could make a woman aware that she was alone, and that there were things, no matter how fiercely independent she became, that she was just never going to be able to do.

He was that kind of man, all right. The kind of man who made a woman suddenly and acutely aware of yearnings she could manage to keep secret—even from herself—most of the time.

He was the beginning of a story that ended happily ever after. Gorgeous in a dark way: unruly hair the color of rich chocolate fell past his collar; whiskers roughened chiseled cheekbones, highlighted a chin carved by the gods, and framed a mouth with lips that were full and sensuous but unsmiling.

And his eyes! Lord have mercy!

They were a shade of green she had never seen before,

somewhere between jade and emerald, and they were fringed with a sinfully sooty abundance of lashes.

“Be there in a sec,” she called.

She turned from him, trying to focus on the business at hand. “Five hundred dollars for an elf! Where is your Christmas spirit? Oh! Same to you!”

She smashed down the phone, glared at it, but she was aware she was marshaling herself. Finally, she wove her way through the impromptu storage area the storefront had become. It was getting tight, and a few boxed dolls fell from the top of the last stack of toys she had to negotiate past before she could get to the tiny remaining space by the front door. Space filled by him.

He caught the toppling dolls before they hit the floor, moving with the smooth and effortless speed and grace of an athlete. It put him much too close to her, and she found herself having to crane her neck to look at him, at the same time as being enveloped by an aroma that was clean and crisp and utterly, intoxicatingly male.

Shoot, if he wasn't even more compelling to look at close up than he had been from a distance! Except for his eyes. This close to him, Kirsten could see something shadowed the green, like ice forming on a forest pond. She tried to name that something and failed. Whatever it was, it put the chill that had swept in the door with him to shame.

He looked at the dolls, both dressed in extravagant princess frills, and handed them to her as if they might burn his hand if

he held them too long.

“Thanks,” she said drily. She refrained from adding, As far as I know these dolls do not come in a model that bites big, masculine guys. Mores the pity, she decided.

“Somehow, you don’t look like you’re here to deliver a Santa list,” she said, when he didn’t volunteer what had brought him inside the door clearly marked The Secret Santa Society.

He didn’t reply. In fact, he reached behind him and shut the door, which was leaking cold air, with a snap.

“Oh.” Kirsten had been warned it was a rough part of town. She’d been told over and over to lock the door when she was in the building by herself. But what if someone came to deliver a list and the door was locked? Even one mom, turned away...she shivered.

Besides, the awareness she felt for this man that had appeared in her space was not of the fearful variety though certainly of the dangerous variety.

He was a man attractive enough to make a girl who had given up on fairy tales feel strangely threatened, as if a review of her belief system might be in order. It had been four years, after all...

“So, no Santa list,” she said, aware her cheer was forced, that she was fighting something within herself, “What can I do for you?”

He was watching her with the faintest interest touching his eyes, eyes that seemed deeper and darker the longer she looked at him, but no warmer. There was something in them that reminded

her of an iceberg—magnificently beautiful, but fearsome and remote, untouchable.

“I heard you were looking for an elf.”

She was not sure she would have been more shocked if he said he was looking for The Treemont School of Ballet. The words, faintly playful, did not match his eyes. His delivery was absolutely deadpan, and then she realized he had overheard her conversation. She waited for him to smile—to see if a smile would warm his gaze—but no smile was forthcoming. It was as if he could say the words that were tinged with humor—since he was obviously the man least likely to ever be mistaken for an elf—but somehow they couldn’t break through the ice that shrouded his eyes.

“Ah,” she said. “An elf. I’m in desperate need of one, but I’m afraid you’re the wrong size. No applicants over four foot eleven. Last year’s was four foot seven.”

She found herself holding her breath waiting to see if he would smile.

“But he got drunk.” He’d heard a lot of that conversation. Still no smile. Anyone who was not going to smile over a four-foot-seven drunken elf probably wasn’t going to smile about anything. It had the ridiculous effect of making her feel as if she had to make him smile, even though she was more than aware her belief system was on shaky ground, and she shouldn’t be testing its strength.

“He got very rude,” she said, ignoring the shouldn’t. “He kept

asking Santa to pull his finger.” In her eagerness to make him smile, she could feel that telltale hint of heat in her chest.

As a schoolgirl, Kirsten had been tormented by blushing. In more recent years, she’d been able to head off the embarrassing tide of crimson by thinking, quickly, of something—anything—else. For some reason the fish display at O’Malley’s Market provided some of the most powerful mind-diverting pictures. Trout, eye in.

“Sounds like a good reason to trade in for bigger elves,” he said. “Those small ones can be so unpredictable.”

“We’ve never had a large elf!” Rules. She found refuge in rules.

“Sorry to hear that—it’s probably an unfair hiring practice, punishable under the equal opportunities act.”

“Actually, I think it’s impersonating an elf that is punishable by something.” For some horrible reason the word spanking came to mind and for a minute she had to close her eyes and picture freshly filleted perch. When she opened them, she said, more weakly than she intended, “Forced ingestion of Christmas cake, egg nog and Christmas carols!”

Still no smile, but just a hint of something in those mysterious eyes, the tiniest spark of sunlight flashing across green ice.

“Now who is impersonating whom?” he asked. “I heard you claim on the phone you were Santa. An obvious lie. Santa would never think of cake, egg nog and carols as a punishment. Plus, no white beard, no belly like jelly.”

She was the one who smiled then, reluctantly delighted by this spontaneous, dangerous exchange with a most mysterious stranger on a dull, gray afternoon. She smiled until the exact moment she became aware, and acutely so, that he was inspecting her!

She realized she looked about as far from the heroine of a happily ever after kind of story as anyone could look. The warehouse section of the building, behind her office, could get cold and very dusty. She was wearing a faded brown skirt, warm tights, sensible shoes, a cardigan worn at the elbows. Her hair suddenly seemed horrible, and she wished she would have let Lulu, one of the volunteers, streak the mousy-brown to blond last week when the woman had practically begged her to let her do it.

“Kirstie” Lulu had said. “You’re twenty-three. You shouldn’t look forty!”

Naturally, now she wondered if she looked forty today! That, she told herself, was what a man did.

All of a sudden, a woman who had not been on a serious date in four years on purpose was worried about her cardigan and her hair color and was thinking, wistfully, of the donation of twenty-four shades of lipstick sitting, unopened, on her desk.

All of a sudden a woman who was pragmatic to a fault was thinking if Cinderella can do it, so can I.

“I can’t help it if your vision of Santa is limited,” she said, trying valiantly not to show how flustered her own treacherous thoughts were making her. “Around here, I am Santa. Or at least

the spirit of Santa. I make sure the kids in this neighborhood get Christmas gifts.”

“Even the most liberal of them must be shocked to find out you’re Santa,” he said.

He did not seem moved by her altruism. If anything, a cynical line deepened around his mouth. It annoyed Kirsten to realize that she wanted him, a complete stranger, to be impressed with her activities and accomplishments, probably because she knew her appearance had failed to impress him in any way.

“Well, they don’t find out. That’s why it’s the Secret Santa Society. We elect one of the volunteers to play Santa. The election is the highlight of our volunteer party.” Now she was giving him all kinds of dull information he couldn’t possibly want, and she was aware she felt aggravated and defensive.

Why? Because of the cynical downturn of his mouth? Because he was looking at her like she was a Goody Twoshoes?

Because she could have had her hair streaked and hadn’t?

It was time, obviously, to end this encounter.

“So, unless you’re going to sue me because I have no elf positions available, I have a lot of work to do.”

When was the last time she’d been this rattled by a guy?

That was easy. Her one and only serious relationship, her first year of college. James Moriarty. He’d pretended he liked her—no, was smitten with her—for a heady six weeks or so. He had really wanted help cheating on his math exam.

And then there was Kent, her brother-in-law—ex-brotherin-

law—pretending to be Mr. Boy-Next-Door, the perfect husband. But when the whole family had most needed him to be strong, what had he been doing? Playing footsie—and much more—with his secretary.

She shivered. And that was why she was sworn off fairy tales. Men, in all their thousands of guises, were never what they wanted you to think they were. Especially fickle would-be ones like this one: big, athletic, sure of himself, drop-dead gorgeous.

Though this man in front of her did seem to be without pretense, something so real lurking in the depths of those astonishing cold, hot eyes that it threatened her heart's armor. She tried to put her finger on it. Lost? No, not quite, though the very thought added an intriguing layer to the man who stood there dripping confidence and melting snow.

Predictably, he ignored her dismissal, "Even I'm not hardhearted enough to sue the Secret Santa Society."

Confirming what she already could see in the cast of his face. He was world-weary in some way. Cynical.

Not the jovial grandfatherly type who usually stopped by to volunteer.

"So, no available elf position," she said. She fully intended for it to sound like a breezy dismissal, but even she could hear the renegade regret in her voice as if she truly would like to give him a position even though a man like him would never really volunteer at an organization like this, and even though she had decided she didn't like him. Or at least didn't like what he was

doing to her. Then she blushed.

It came without the warning heat in her chest first, no time to ward it off with visual images of fresh fillets. When she blushed, her whole face went crimson, from jawline to forehead, like a red Christmas light blinking to life.

And then he did smile, finally, just a tease of one, a slight curl of lip, as if smiling might hurt him. The smile didn't have a hope of touching what was in those eyes.

"I can do other things," he said. "Besides be an elf."

"Like what?" she gasped. Ridiculous to ask. He had said it reluctantly and she had already decided she wanted him out of here. He was the kind of man who could hurt a woman—especially one like her—very badly. He could do it without half trying, and he could do it without looking back.

The smile was gone completely. He regarded her thoughtfully for a long moment. The moment stretched.

She realized, wildly, that she had left herself wide-open. Of course there were other things he could do and do well. The shape of his lips, for instance, suggested he would be an amazing kisser. All kinds of men would have jumped on the opportunity to let her know that, and all the other skills that she was missing out on, too.

But this man did not take the opportunity, thankfully, to flirt with her, even though he looked like a man who would be very comfortable flirting with women. Gorgeous women, who streaked their hair and managed to get some lipstick on every

day, and wore hip-hugging tight jeans instead of frumpy brown skirts.

Kirsten's flirting days, if they could be called that, were far, far behind her. And somehow, maybe because of that secret his eyes were trying to tell her, she suspected his were, too.

She thought he was not going to answer at all. And then he said, gruffly, reluctantly, "I guess that depends. Is there anything else you need done?"

Her thoughts were renegade. What woman could be in a room with a man like this and not think of all the things a woman alone would like done?

That little knot rubbed out of the tender place where her shoulder joined her neck, for starters.

She was stunned at herself.

Four years. Virtually a nun. Wanting it that way. The breakup of her sister Becky's marriage—a love Kirsten had unabashedly idolized—had broken something in Kirsten, too. Becky and Kent had begun dating just after the James fiasco, and just as Kirsten's own parents were ending their twenty-year union. Still a teenager, impressionable, hopeful, naive, Kirsten had transferred her need to believe in love—in forever—to Becky and Kent. Instead, in the end, they had reinforced her deepest fear: things that seemed strong could be so, so heartbreakingly fragile.

"Is that why you're here?" she said, not trying to hide her incredulity. "To volunteer?"

He hesitated, nodded. Sort of nodded, the slightest inclination

of his head. "I'm a carpenter by trade. Anything you need built?"

She sighed. Even if she took his offer more practically, there was so much she needed done. Sixteen tricycles to begin with. Of course he wasn't really here to help her, though there was nothing she could use right now like a strong, healthy man to unload trucks, to put heavy items up on high shelves. And a carpenter? Every year they built a sleigh to deliver gifts. It was built on top of the rickety flat-deck trailer in the warehouse. Every year she was amazed someone didn't get hurt, and that it didn't rattle apart.

But to invite a temptation like him into her space? This was her world. It was where everything was in her control—and she wasn't surrendering that for a better sleigh!

Besides, she found it hard to believe he'd come here to volunteer. He just wasn't the type. No, he'd taken a wrong turn somewhere, and decided to amuse himself at her expense for a few moments.

In a fairy-tale world, he would be the answer to unassembled trikes and a safe sleigh for Santa. In a fairy-tale world he would be the answer to everything including the fact that sometimes in the night she awoke and felt almost weak with loneliness.

But she had learned the brutally hard way there were no fairy tales, and a woman was wise to be totally independent, to rely only on herself.

She folded her arms firmly over her chest.

What was it, lingering just beneath that ice in his eyes, that made her think something else was there? Something that you

could trust with your secret burdens?

Something that would break your heart in two more likely, she warned herself.

As if her heart wasn't already broken in two. Hers. Her sister's. Her brother-in-law's. Her nephew's. A world that had seemed so strong, a vow that had seemed unbreakable, gone in one second.

She turned back toward her office, remembering the relative safety of all her pressures, not wanting to dwell on things broken, a category this man seemed like he might fit in. She had no time for an encounter like this one, nor was she brave enough to find out exactly what his offhanded offer might mean.

"I have to find an elf," she said, dismissing him, yet again. "And fifty kids' winter jackets would be nice. That's what I need done."

There. That should be enough to scare him off.

Then again, he did not have the look of a man easily scared. Silence. She glanced back at him. He had not moved, there was a little puddle on the floor where the snow was melting off of him. He was wearing a black leather jacket, worn, and not warm enough for today, and jeans with a hole clear through the knee, not a day to be showing bare skin, either.

Rather than making him look poor, the old jacket and the worn jeans had a certain cachet.

She realized she was looking at a man who didn't care—not about what he looked like, not about the cold, maybe not about anything at all.

He was exactly the kind of man her mother had always warned her about. But then that was one of the illusions she'd had to leave behind. That her mother knew best.

Her mother, who couldn't glue her own marriage back together, her mother who had approved of Kent for Becky... Kirsten shook her head, looked away from him, troubled, looked back in time to see him nod, once, curtly. He turned and disappeared back out the door, leaving another frosty wave in his wake.

She was aware of craning her neck to see where he went, but the snow was still coming down hard, and he disappeared into it with a phantomlike quality, as if maybe he had never been in the first place.

She frowned. She wasn't quite sure what had happened there. "Strange encounter of the weird kind," she said, shrugging it off and moving back to her office. She looked at her calendar. Thirty-nine days!

Way, way too much to be done, and not nearly enough time left to do it. She had not one second to spare on thinking about green eyes like those ones. What was in them? Loneliness. No. Aloneness.

Closer. The aloneness of a man who had seen hell, she decided. To feel sympathy for him, to be drawn toward the mystery in those eyes would be the most dangerous thing of all.

Not one second, she chided herself. The door opened again, and she whirled back, disgusted that she wanted it to be him.

But it wasn't. It was Mr. Temple, the neighborhood postman, only these days he wasn't just delivering her mail.

"Those Johansson kids are poor. They don't expect nothin', they don't even hope. Imagine those poor little mites not hopin' for anything. I told them to just pretend it could happen."

"And?" she said.

He passed her a note, a glint in his eyes, her most enthusiastic researcher, neighborhood spy and conspirator.

It had the boys' address on it, she recognized it as a particularly dilapidated apartment on Fifth Street. Hans wanted a bike. Lars wanted a basketball.

"Got it," she said, and for a moment she felt the weight of these new wishes that had been entrusted to her. It didn't matter that there wasn't enough money or time. Every year it seemed she would run out of both, and every year miracles happened. A few more phone calls, a few more letters, a few more radio shows. Besides, it was always a relief to get requests that could be fulfilled. She had a file—the Impossible Dreams File—of ones that could not.

"I've got something else for you, Kirstie." He held it out with pleasure.

She couldn't believe it. "Where on earth did you get this?" she asked, taking the catalog reverently from him.

"I'd tell you," he kidded, "but then I'd have to kill you."

It was the Little in Love Special Christmas Catalog. Only those who had reached the tier of Serious Collector of the

precious figurines received it, and Kirsten was fairly sure she would never be one of those. Currently she ranked on Tier One, a Little Fan. On the tiny salary she was paid here, she could manage only one new figurine a year. Including gifts, and the odd find at a secondhand store, Kirsten now owned twelve of the hundreds of figurines that were available.

Little in Love was a collection of hand-painted porcelain bisque figurines that artist Lou Little had created in the 1950s. All the figurines were of a young couple, Harriet and Smedley, and depicted delightful scenes of their love. Little had captured something that captured hearts: innocence, wonder, delight in each other, and he never seemed to run out of material.

Trying not to appear too eager or too rude, Kirsten scurried back to her office and shut the door. She opened the catalog with tender fingers and gasped.

In an astonishing departure from tradition, the new Christmas collectibles were called A Little History and showed Harriet and Smedley in different times in history: here he was a World War I flying ace, leaning out of his plane to kiss Harriet goodbye, here he was as a pioneer building a Little house, Harriet looking on.

Then she saw it. A Knight in Shining Armor. She thought it was the most beautiful Little piece she had ever seen with Smedley, visor up, astride a magnificent white horse, leaning down to kiss Harriet's hand.

She looked at the price, winced and mentally filed the piece—everything in this catalog—in her own impossible dreams file.

Reluctantly, she put the catalog away. She would take it home with her and pore over the pictures later.

Really, the catalog should have been more than enough to sweep that other encounter right from her mind. So she was amazed, and annoyed, that it had not. Her mind kept wandering from the bookkeeping tasks. Not that engrossing, but as the Secret Santa Society's founder and only paid employee, one of her biggest responsibilities. Rather than Smedley on horseback proving a distraction to her afternoon, it was eyes as coolly green as pond ice that she kept thinking of.

"And that is why you don't even deserve to be a Serious Collector," she reprimanded herself firmly.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN Michael Brewster headed back out the door of The Secret Santa Society it was snowing harder. The office was on the mean end of Washington, most of the storefronts boarded up, shadows in the doorways. He noticed a man huddled in the doorway next to her building. Waiting for an opportunity to slip through that door and help himself?

She had paper taped over her own windows, probably to keep kids from peeking in at all her top-secret activities, but from a security point of view it would have been better if she left the windows unblocked.

Michael gave the man a look that sent him scuttling.

It was not the kind of neighborhood where a woman should be working alone—especially not with every available space in the made-over store stuffed with, well, stuff. Teddy bears, MP3 players, trikes, dolls in cellophane wrappers, including those embarrassing two that had fallen into his hands.

She was the kind of woman who made a guy feel protective. Maybe it was because her clothes had been baggy, that she had seemed tiny and fragile. Still, even with the lumpiness of the dress, she hadn't been able to totally disguise slender curves, a lovely femininity that might make her very vulnerable at this desperate end of Washington. And it wasn't as if she would have the physical strength to protect herself. Her wrists had been so

tiny he had actually wanted to circle them between his thumb and pointer finger to see if they were as impossibly small as they looked.

And those eyes! Intensely gray, huge, fringed with the most astonishing display of natural lash he had ever seen. Her eyes had saved her from plainness.

Something about her reluctantly intrigued him—maybe the fact that she so underplayed her every asset.

What was she thinking, being alone with all that stuff in this neighborhood? Was she impossibly brave or simply stupid? Still, you had to give it to someone who was shopping around for an elf. There were probably special angels who looked after people like that.

He frowned at the thought, renegade and unwanted. He, of all people, knew there were no special angels, not for anyone. So he had obeyed Mr. Theodore. He'd come to this address thinking he was going to find someone in worse shape than him.

It obviously had not been her.

She had not been beautiful, not even pretty, really, unless he counted her eyes. He thought of them again—luminescent, brimming with a light that could almost make a man forget she was wearing a sweater just like the ones his granny used to knit. Her hair had struck him as hopelessly old-fashioned, but for some reason he'd liked it. It was just plain light brown, falling in a wave past her shoulder, no particular style.

She was one of those kind of girls he remembered only

vaguely from high school—bookwormish, smart, capable...and invisible. She was not the kind who pretended fear of spiders or dropped her books coquettishly when a male of interest was in the vicinity. She did not color her hair blond or paint her lips red or have fingernails that left marks on a man's back, her lashes would not melt when she cried.

In other words, she was not the kind of woman he knew the first thing about.

Nor did he want to, though that fleeting thought of her fingernails and his back made him shiver, which was startling. He had not reacted to a woman in a very long time. He had probably never reacted to a woman who was anything like her: understated, intelligent, pure.

Women, he reminded himself, took energy. He had none. It was that simple.

And a woman like that one manning the Secret Santa Society office would take more energy than most because despite her plainness, those multifaceted eyes made him suspect a very complicated nature. Deep. Sensitive. Intelligent. Funny.

It annoyed him that he was even thinking of her. His assignment, if he could call it that, was to find someone in worse pain than himself.

Not Ms. Secret Santa, obviously, hunting for elves and brimming with faith that her good deeds alone could protect her from this neighborhood.

But there were kids out there who needed jackets, and the first

true cold snap of the year had arrived. He wondered what kind of pain it caused a parent who was not to be able to buy a jacket for a child who was cold.

Not worse pain than his own, different pain than his own.

Maybe that was why Mr. Theodore had sent him, knowing there would be something here to keep him distracted as Christmas approached. Christmas, a time of family. A time of pain for families who had nothing.

And for a guy who had nothing instead of a family.

He drew his breath in sharply, forced himself to focus. It was one day at a time, one step at a time, one task at a time. Right now, his task was fifty jackets and an elf. Michael shook his head like a boxer who had been sucker punched.

It seemed like the most unlikely lifeline, but it was the only one he was being offered, and if he didn't find something to give a damn about, and soon, that question was going to burn a little deeper into him.

How will I survive?

His world gone. Nothing left of it. The snow swirled around him, and he realized he should be cold, but he didn't get cold anymore. Twice a year, he'd given up carpentry. The whole family put their lives on hold and headed to Alaska for the crab fishery.

After surviving six hours in the icy, gray waters of the Bering Sea, Michael did not get cold anymore. Or really ever warm, either. He was stuck in a place where it was neither hot nor cold.

Purely a place of survival.

He focused on the task at hand, just as at Mr. Theodore's house he focused only on what was in front of him: broken stairs, a rotten window casing, a leaky faucet. There were many ways to shut off the human mind. He stopped at the nearest phone booth. Most of the telephone book was gone, but his righteousness was being rewarded today. The clothing section of the yellow pages was intact.

But then he realized he wasn't quite sure what he wanted. Big coats or small coats? Boys or girls? What about babies? Styles? Sizes?

He glanced back down the street. He could go ask her exactly what she wanted, but he didn't want to. He found himself wanting to surprise her, because it had been clear from the look on her face she had no expectations of him at all. She didn't even think he'd be back. Maybe didn't even want him to come back, which was not the normal reaction he got from women.

And he still had that option, of not going back, of leaving that strangely engaging encounter one hundred percent behind him. Looking at coats some little kids needed might make him feel something, in fact he felt jumpy thinking about it. How could he do an assignment like this and not be touched in some way? It was a fact the crafty Mr. Theodore had probably already considered!

Didn't Mr. Theodore know that if the dam inside of Michael ever broke open, the torrent would be dangerous and destructive, wrecking everything in its path?

No. He could not go shopping for coats. But, on the other hand, fifty kids without coats? He swore under his breath, and the word came out in a frosty puff that reminded him how cold it was getting. Michael realized he could not not go shopping for coats.

He said the word again, and realized it was not an appropriate word for an emissary of the Secret Santa Society, not even an unofficial one.

Michael looked again at the pretty much demolished phone book and guiltily tore out one of the few remaining pages, the one that listed coats on it. And then he tore out the preceding one, as well, the one that listed clowns. Clowns were related to elves, weren't they?

Guilt, he thought with surprise. That was a feeling of sorts, the first one he'd had in a long time.

Unless he could count what he felt talking to Ms. Santa back there.

Not actual warmth, but a remembrance of warmth. A remembrance of what it was to want something. What had he wanted? He frowned. To connect with her. To share a little normal, everyday banter with another human being. He'd liked making her blush. It had been amusing.

It had been a long, long time since he had felt even the smallest shiver of interest in anything or anyone. So here he was less than an hour into his mysterious assignment, and having feelings sneak up on him.

But was it going to be enough to save him? Or would it destroy what was left of him? He decided to have a little tiny bit of faith, and realized with a sigh that was another concept that had been foreign to his world for a long, long time.

Well, he thought, if a man starts messing with the spirit of Santa, some surprising things were going to happen. That was a given.

He found the address he had ripped out of the phone book. It was in a different world than the office of the Secret Santa Society, part of a brightly lit strip mall that housed upscale factory outlets on the edge of a neighborhood where the houses started in the half-million-dollar range. The Christmas displays were up in the windows, and lights blinked cheer against the colorlessness of the day.

He entered a store called West Coats. More Christmas: a tree decorated totally in white, updated versions of carols blaring from a public address system. He hated this.

Then he was nearly bowled over by a salesclerk who was exactly his type. Blond, tall, willowy, her lipstick a perfect match for her fingernails, a red Santa hat at a jaunty angle on her head. Her tag said her name was Calypso.

The woman at the Secret Santa Society had not been wearing a name tag. He realized he had not asked her name. He bet it would be a good, sturdy, practical name like Helen or Susan or Gwen.

"I need fifty kids' coats," he told Calypso, who leaned way

toward him and gave him a look at the top of her lacy bra. Red, to match her hat. The surprising thing happened: not one vision of her fingernails and his back, no matter how hard he tried to conjure it.

“Fifty coats!” She giggled and blinked her heavily madeup lashes. Considering how he was freshly aware of wanting to connect, he was now aware of not wanting to connect with her in more than a businesslike way.

Somehow, painfully, he managed to pick out fifty children’s coats. He wanted practical coats that would keep them warm and survive snowball fights and the making of forts and snow angels. He picked out coats in as many different sizes and colors as he could find. He tossed onto his growing stack a few little sleeping bags with hoods, which Calypso cooed over and called bunting bags.

And at the last minute, hesitating, he chose three little pink princess jackets with fur collars and cuffs on them. They felt in his hands the same way those dolls had—foreign, fragile, too delicate. He knew they were totally impractical. And yet he could not put them back.

“There,” he said, “Done.”

“What do you want all these coats for?” Calypso asked.

He was afraid if he explained his mission it would just bring more cooing, so he only shrugged.

“I can get you a discount if it’s for a charity,” she said.

“No, it’s okay.” He was aware as he passed her his credit card

that this was the first time he had enjoyed one single cent of all that money, huge state-of-the-art plasma television set included.

She insisted on helping him carry the coats out to his car, even though he tried to discourage her.

“Oh,” she breathed when she saw the car. “A Jaguar.”

He saw his appeal to her had just intensified. Once upon a time, he would have played that for all it was worth. He had a sharp memory of all the times he and Brian had cruised in this car...

“It’s my brother’s car,” he said abruptly.

With his car so stuffed with coats he could no longer see out his back window, he was aware Calypso was still standing there, hugging herself against the cold. All those coats and she hadn’t put one on?

She was waiting for something, so he said, “I don’t suppose you’d know where I can find an elf?”

She popped her gum and settled a hand on a cocked hip. “Ooh,” she said playfully, “I wouldn’t have figured you for kinky.”

For some reason he thought of another woman. And her blush. A woman who probably wouldn’t use the word kinky with a man even if she’d known him for fifty years, never mind for a little over an hour. A woman who probably wouldn’t know the difference between a Jaguar and a Honda Civic.

A red fingernailed hand—an exact match for the hat and bra—was laid on his jacket sleeve.

"I'm available for dinner," Calypso announced, her voice sultry and her made-up eyes inviting.

She was exactly the kind of woman he'd always gone for. A girl who knew how to have a good time and who knew exactly how the game was played. If he was really going to start connecting again, if he was really ready, Calypso would be a safe way to do it.

Again, he thought of another woman. One who wouldn't have announced she was available for dinner if she'd gone four days without food.

And suddenly he found himself wondering if she was.

He wanted to find out if her name was Anne or Mary or Rose. Surely, for fifty jackets, she'd surrender her name. He couldn't wait to see her face when she saw the pink ones with the silly collars.

"Thanks for all your help. Sorry, no, I'm not available for dinner."

"How about your brother?" she said, running a covetous finger over the sleek blackness of the hood detail.

He did not risk evoking her sympathy by telling her his brother was dead. He forced a smile, but he felt like a wolf, baring its teeth in warning. "He isn't available, either."

She took it in stride, a woman who knew men were just like buses—another one would be along in a few minutes—winked at him and walked away putting lots of swish in it.

Michael put the car in gear and started driving back across town. Rush hour had begun with a vengeance, the still thickly

falling snow not helping. He found himself in a tangle of cars on West Washington, glaring at his watch, thinking, She'll have gone home by the time I get there.

The traffic finally started moving, inching along through the streets made treacherous with melting snow. He reached for the heater, turned it up a notch.

And then his hand fell away, and he contemplated what he had just done. Why had he turned up the heat? The windshield was clearly defrosting adequately.

When he focused, sure enough, there it was. The tiniest shiver along his spine. He realized he was feeling something. Cold. He felt just a tiny bit cold. He'd been getting warnings all afternoon that something was in movement. The guilt over tearing the pages from the telephone book. Enjoying spending the money on the coats. The desire to connect with her. Now this.

The shiver was already gone, and he deliberately turned the heat back down. He wasn't ready to feel anything. He certainly wasn't ready to go invite some woman he barely knew—he didn't even know her name, for God's sake—to have dinner with him.

He could send the coats to the Secret Santa Society by courier tomorrow. He could find her a damned elf without ever seeing her again, without immersing himself any further in this dangerous world that would make him feel.

He slammed on the brakes, slid, used the power of the slide to yank on the wheel and do a complete U-turn, dramatic, worthy of Hollywood. Horns honked their outrage. He didn't care. He was

heading away from the Secret Santa Society as fast as he could!

Because his side and rear windows were nearly completely blocked with children's coats, he heard the siren before he saw the lights. Michael looked in his side mirror and sighed. The red and blue lights were flashing right behind him, and when he pulled over, the police car did, too.

The cop was not in the Christmas spirit. "That turn back there was illegal—even if you could see, which you can't." Out came the ticket book. And then he looked more closely at Michael's cargo.

"What is this? You rob a store?"

It would be so easy to say yes, and see where that led.

"You got a receipt for this stuff?"

Michael passed him the receipt.

"Okay, so you bought fifty kids' coats. What's up with that?"

The cop didn't look like he was in the mood for the none-of-your-business that Michael wanted to give him. In fact, the man was trying very hard not to look as cold and miserable as he obviously was.

Suddenly it seemed like it was the right thing to do to let him know good happened in the world, too. It wasn't all drunks hitting their wives and kids, dope dealers on the corners, asses doing U-turns.

"The coats are for the Secret Santa Society." Michael offered it up reluctantly, the man who least wanted to be seen as a do-gooder.

The ticket book was snapped shut and replaced in its upper pocket home, beside a name tag, Adams.

“You were delivering them?”

It seemed hopelessly complicated to say he had been delivering them, then decided not to deliver them, at least not personally, so Michael only nodded.

The policeman looked at the clogged road. “Washington’s always like this at this time of day. Were you going to try Wilmore instead?”

Michael decided for honesty. “Actually I was thinking maybe I’d just go home, make the delivery a different day.”

Adams frowned at the traffic, then brightened. “Emergency delivery to the Secret Santa Society. Follow me,” he ordered. His whole face and body language changed. He was thrilled to be part of something good.

So, that’s what happened, Michael thought, when you fooled with something as powerful as Santa. He was now headed, under police escort, directly toward a place that moments ago he had decided he was not going. He pondered, uneasily, how much of his life was now going to be out of his control.

Then he reminded himself that thinking life was in your control was the largest of illusions anyway.

Sirens were nothing unusual for this neighborhood, in fact they played in the background, a noise Kirsten blocked out as easily as elevator music. There had been a rush of volunteers earlier, but

they had all left at suppertime and now she was alone. Happily she pulled her catalog closer. Love in a Little House on the Prairie, was a wonderful piece, too. Not as good as Knight in Shining Armor, but—

The siren wailed, demanding attention, and suddenly the inside of her office was strobed in red and blue. Curious, she set aside the catalog and went to the front window. She peeled back a corner of the paper they used to keep curious kiddies from speculating what Santa might be up to this year.

A car, low slung, black and sexy—she thought it might be a Honda—was pulled over right in front of her office. To her practiced eye the car did not look like the more souped-up models the drug dealers favored.

And then the siren and lights were cut. The cop got out of his car and the driver got out of the sports car.

Him!

What was he doing back here? Uncharitably, Kirsten found herself hoping he was getting a ticket.

For being too good-looking and too sure of himself and for driving a car like that—a car that said he was sexy and sleek and way out of the league of a girl whose idea of excitement was poring over a catalog of porcelain figurines!

“You have to want to play to be in a league,” she informed herself sternly. And she didn’t. Okay, so she had moments of weakness, like this afternoon. That was only human. But generally she was extremely disciplined at keeping the larger

picture in mind: love was fragile and easily breakable and not to be trusted.

She told herself to go back to her catalog—the only kind of love she planned to invest in. Instead, she found herself watching, unwittingly fascinated, as he walked back to the policeman with utter confidence. Even she, who had never been pulled over in her entire life, knew you were supposed to stay in your car. That rule surely applied doubly in this neighborhood. Having a gun pulled on him and being yelled at should take a bit of that masculine swagger out of his step!

But he didn't get a gun pulled on him, or get yelled at. No, he and the policeman seemed to be best of buddies. She sighed and realized even with his hands up and a gun pointed at him, he would have been the same. He was one of those most annoying men who carried something—some certainty—deep inside himself. It showed in the ease with which he was engaged in conversation with the policeman. Not intimidated. On firm footing, knowing himself to be equals with anyone.

The cop did appear to be writing him a ticket, which he took without glancing at, and put in the pocket of that same leather jacket. He didn't appear cold, though night was now falling and the temperature was dipping. The cop was shifting from foot to foot, and had his shoulders hunched against the cold.

The radio in the police car went off and the cop jogged back to his car. Moments later the siren was wailing and he was gone. And he was leaning in the door of his car, filling his arms

with...coats.

He staggered toward her door, and she had to run out in the snow and grab one of the jackets before it fell off the huge heap in his arms. The coat was pink, with fake fur trim, absolutely adorable, a coat a man like him could not possibly have chosen.

She raced back in ahead of him to clear a spot on a table.

“Set them here,” she said breathlessly.

He set the coats down—at least twenty of them—and for a moment she simply stared. He had not brought her old secondhand junk, but brand-new winter jackets. From West Coats, no less, and in every shape and size and color. The price tags were still on them.

“I’ll get the rest of them,” he said.

“The rest of them?”

“You said fifty.”

Some emotion clawed at her throat so big she thought it would choke her. Thankfully a flash to halibut worked on all kinds of feelings!

By the time he came back, and dumped another armload on the table, Kirsten was feeling quite composed, as if people delivered fifty brand-new West Coats jackets to her all the time. Unfortunately, on the very top was another pink jacket, trimmed at the collar and cuffs with fake fur, and she had to think of the sockeye salmon to get her feelings under control.

“Okay,” she said, finally, folding her arms against the emotion she was still wrestling with, “who are you?”

He stuck out his hand. "Michael Brewster."

She took it and felt a shiver of awareness so strong it nearly took what was left of her breath away. She saved this one for moments just like this: the live lobster tank.

"Kirsten Morrison," she managed to stammer, visualizing like crazy.

"Kirsten," he repeated slowly. Was that surprise in his voice?

It seemed so unfair. How dare he be this good-looking, this self-assured, and kind, too? For a girl who worked with Santa, she was realistic to a fault about what life was really like. What men were really like. Treacherous, like James, or worse, like her brother-in-law, who had seemed like the boy next door. The man least likely to have an affair with his secretary.

Thankfully, when she looked in Michael's eyes, she was not sure it was kindness she saw. In fact, she was almost certain it was not. Sadness?

No, bigger than that. Something had happened to his soul.

"So, what did you get the ticket for?" she asked abruptly, trying to think of anything except his soul, and his lips and his hands and the way snow was melting in his thick dark hair.

"Ticket?" he looked puzzled. "Oh. It wasn't a ticket." He reached into his pocket. "A check. For the pink jacket. Or another one like it. Officer Adams insisted. I had him make it out to the Society."

Kirsten stared at him, took the check that he proffered.

"There's a phone number written on the back. His union

or something. He said if you called, they'd probably make a donation."

It wasn't bad enough that he was so good-looking it hurt? He had to be a miracle worker, too? He could conjure jackets and checks out of thin air? If he really found an elf, then what? There wouldn't be enough lobster tanks in the world to protect her! Her resolve was being tested, that's what.

No matter how many jackets he could find, this man in front of her was not a prince. Life was not a fairy tale. There was no happily-ever-after. Her parents had not made it, Becky and Kent had not made it, there were toads disguised as princes, like James Moriarty, everywhere.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, aware she sounded far from grateful.

"You asked me to. Fifty coats. I haven't been able to locate an elf yet."

"Did they give them to you?"

"Give them to me? The coats?" he sounded genuinely baffled. "No."

"That's the why," she said tenaciously. "Why would you buy coats for a complete stranger?"

"Well, I didn't buy them for you," he said, which put her in her place, a warning that it was only a matter of time before a guy like this put a girl like her in her place. "I bought them for kids who need them."

She could see he simply didn't intend to tell her the why

that she wanted to know, which was what had motivated this astonishing show of generosity.

“You’re telling me you bought a coat that looked like this?” She glanced at the table, unfolded an arm to point at the princess jacket. “Three coats that look like this?”

He ducked his head, scratched the toe of his boot against the floor. “I was scraping the bottom of the barrel,” he said gruffly. “That’s all they had left when I reached forty-seven.”

How could she know he was lying? She barely knew him! She didn’t know him at all! She had no gift for telling when men were lying! She had believed in her brother-in-law long after her sister had given up. Didn’t she still sometimes wish Kent would come through? Be the man she knew he was? Chase down her sister, beg her forgiveness? Hadn’t she hoped, long after her parents’ breakup, that it was all a mistake and they would be reunited?

She shook off the thought roughly, recognizing her weakness for fantasy. A man like the one in front of her did that. Made a woman long for tradition, stability, and for men who did not lie.

And yet she knew that was a lie about the coats. How could there be such a thing as a nice lie? And how could she fight the monster of tenderness that threatened to swamp her as she thought about this big, self-assured intensely masculine man buying such adorable coats for three little girls he had never met and probably never would meet?

She turned back to the jackets to hide the tears that stung at her eyes at the total collapse of her defenses. That was the

problem when you pulled out the lobster tank too early in the game.

“Brand-new,” she whispered. “Do you know how often these kids receive a brand-new jacket?” She caught sight of one of the price tags. The jacket was down-filled. That price times fifty?

So, she could add rich to his growing list of attractions. Except when she looked at him, she did not get the impression money gave him any joy. She did not get the impression anything gave him joy anymore.

A joyless liar. How could that possibly be so attractive?

“I don’t know what to say,” she stammered.

“How about that you’ll go have dinner with me.”

She shot him a look, looked away. It was obvious the invitation had taken him almost as much by surprise as it had her.

And she knew she couldn’t go have dinner with him.

Because he was the kind of man a girl like her could fall for, and fall hard, and it was all downhill from there. She would build a fairy tale around him, he would wreck the ending.

There is no happily-ever-after, she told herself angrily. Still, saying no was about the hardest thing she’d ever done, because a little voice inside her was saying, well, what about happy until?

“Oh,” she said, and each syllable was a torture. “I can’t. Sorry. Not possibly.” She waved vaguely at her stacks of toys. “Tricycles that need to be assembled.” Just this morning that had been on the bottom of her priority list! How a man like him could change things!

She thought of the catalog in her office, how she should be longing to get back to Harriet and Smedley, and wasn't.

She glanced at him again and saw that she had astonished him. He was not accustomed to being on the receiving end of a no from anyone of the female persuasion obviously! It made her slightly glad she'd been able to spit out the rejection! So, she said it again, just to see his astonishment deepen.

"No," she said. "I can't. Santa does not date. Not until after Christmas."

Shoot. Was she leaving a door open?

His mouth twitched. "I'm not sure I would have called it a date," he said drily.

And her moment of pleasure at having surprised him disappeared. Of course he wouldn't call it a date! Anyone looking at him could tell he didn't need to go and buy fifty coats to get a date. Anyone looking at him could tell he didn't date girls like her.

He dated girls who had pierced belly buttons and tiny diamond studs in their noses. He dated girls who were unselfconscious about rips in the derriere of their jeans. He dated girls who had gotten implants as their high school grad presents. He dated girls who were gorgeous, and self-assured, and who most definitely did not blush!

Even knowing she was the kind of girl he never dated, she felt the pull of the fantasy. What if she did say yes? What if over candlelight dinner she made him laugh and surprised him,

and he found her so deep and rich in spirit that it made her totally irresistible despite the brown dress, worn sweater, lack of streaks?

What if he saw the princess under the Cinderella dressing?

As if.

Insane thoughts, a flare-up of the child she had been at nineteen, before her nephew had been injured, the first broken link in a chain of events that led to the breakup of her sister's marriage. That breakup had left her stunned, confirming what her parents and James had already taught her, the lesson she had chosen to ignore. The very thing she had longed for most in the world—love—could turn back on you like a sharpened sword and pierce your heart.

Before that, despite evidence it was foolish, Kirsten had clung to the belief that she was a Cinderella of sorts, and that someday a prince would come who would see straight through the lack of breast implants and derriere-exposing jeans to who she really was.

"Well," she said brusquely, "Thanks. It was an amazing thing for you to do. I'm not sure why you did it, but I appreciate it. Now, I have a ton of work to do, so goodbye, Mr. Brewster."

He looked as if he hadn't even heard her. He moved by her and took one of the trike boxes down from the stack. He studied the drawing on the side of the box.

"You're telling me you know how to assemble this?" he asked.

She bristled! He was obviously used to a different kind of

woman! One who worried about her fingernails and had never touched an Allen wrench or a crescent wrench in her life.

Of course, Kirsten had never actually assembled one of the trikes, though she had put together lots of other toys.

Still, honesty prevented her from claiming she knew how to assemble the trike.

“I can read directions,” she said regally.

He yanked open the box, rifled through it, handed her the directions.

There were two pages of incomprehensible drawings, all clearly explained...in Japanese.

Her lips twitched, then she snorted, and then she laughed. She looked up to see the faintest smile toying at the edges of his lips, probably because of the snort!

“How about if we order a pizza?” he said, “and work together on the trikes?”

“Mr. Brewster—”

“Michael.”

“I don’t even know you.”

He pondered that for a moment. “Are you scared of me?”

Terrified!

“Do you want me to fill out an application? You can do a security check. I’ll come back tomorrow.”

It was the coming back part that terrified her.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she said stiffly. She meant about him coming back tomorrow.

“It’s not ridiculous. You should be checking out people who come to work here, even volunteers.”

“I’ve been doing this for a long time without your help, thanks!”

“Hey, no need to get prickly! I was just trying to look out for you.”

Which was her weakest point. She had grown up believing someday someone would look after her, forever, the way her father had looked after her mother. When her parents had divorced, she had been able to cling still to her dreams—though now they had been slightly tattered. Becky had found the most special man in the world, the baby had come and their love seemed to do nothing but become stronger and better.

And then it had all fallen apart. One second. A little boy in front of a car. A world shattered. A psychiatrist would have a field day with the fact Kirsten’s interest in the fragile porcelain figurines had coincided with the breakup of something that had seemed stronger than steel.

“Hey,” he said softly, “I’m offering to put together tricycles, not a peace agreement for the Middle East. Don’t look so worried. You want a reference? You can phone my neighbor. That’s who told me you might need help. Mr. Theodore.”

“Mr. Theodore’s your neighbor?” she said. “He sent you?”

“Suggested maybe I drop by. How do you know him?”

“We belong to the same book club.”

“Book club. Whoo boy, I should have seen that one coming.”

“Is there something wrong with girls who belong to book clubs?”

He actually grinned. “Yeah, they generally aren’t dancing on the pool table at closing time with a rose between their teeth.”

She should have been insulted, but it was a moment she had waited for without realizing she waited. That grin lit something in his eyes. For a moment she saw that there was fire trapped in all that ice. It glittered, wicked and warming.

She forgot to be insulted. His face, unhampered by grimness, was youthful and boyish and hinted at someone he had once been—full of mischief and laughter, easygoing charm.

“So, why exactly did Mr. Theodore send you looking for me?”

Something shuttered in his eyes, the moment was gone much too quickly. He shoved his hands in his pockets, shrugged. “I happen to have some time on my hands.”

Yikes! How much time? And why would a healthy-looking young man have time on his hands to give to an organization like hers? Why wasn’t he working? Involved with his own family at this busy time of year? But something told her, anxious as she was to find a flaw in him, not to ask. Not to press him. Not right now.

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