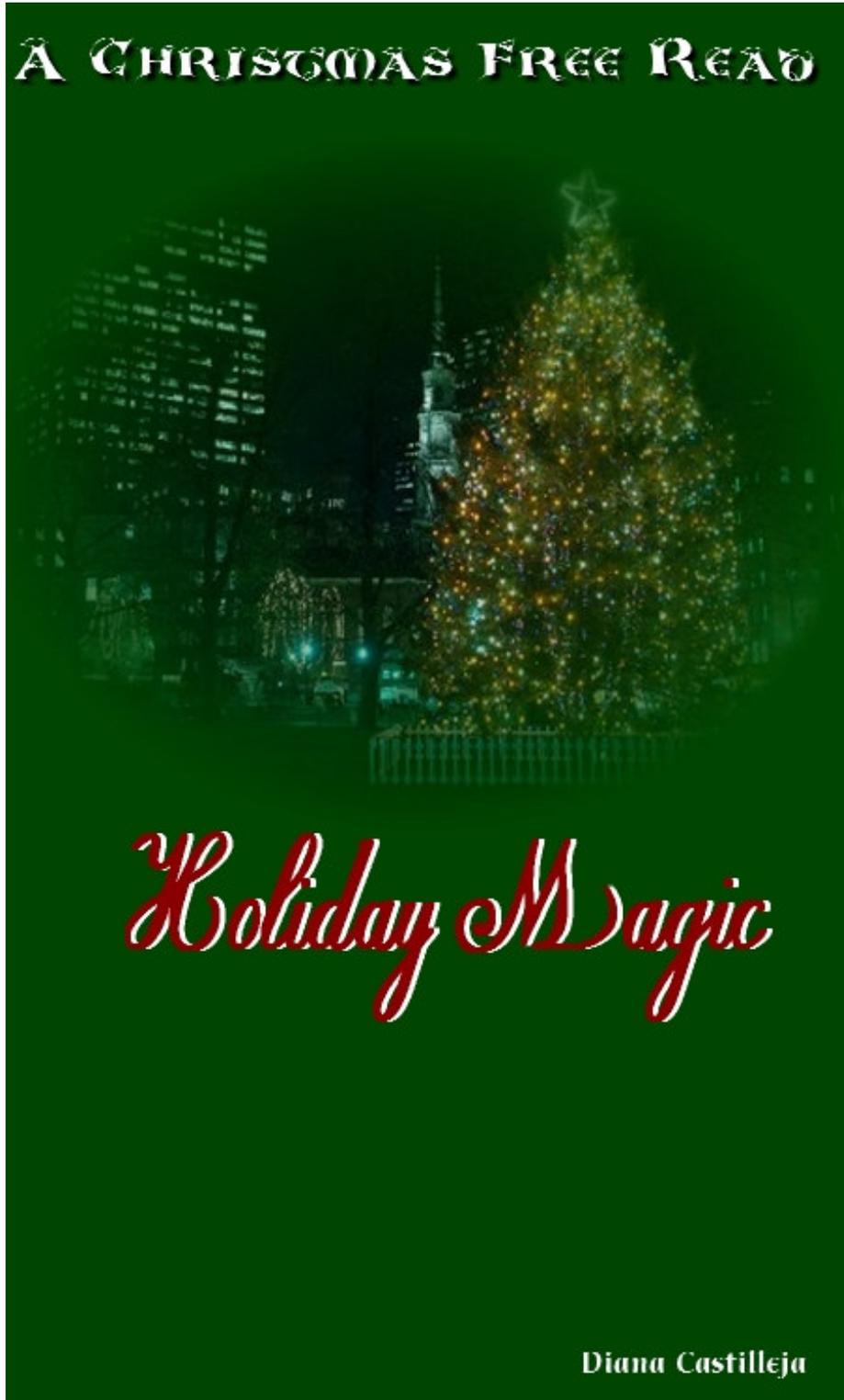


A CHRISTMAS FREE READ



Holiday Magic

Diana Castilleja

Lola Beckham is a hard working single mother, caring for her deaf son. Her ex-husband left her early in their marriage out of youthful ignorance and an inability to cope with a child with a handicap. She has managed, and over time, Bennie has regained a relationship with his father and his current wife and children. Lola is glad for the family Bennie has and is thankful that Rick has matured enough to share his twin daughters and life with his son. She only wonders when she'll be able to stop living as a statistic and find a man who can accept her and the responsibility of her life and son.

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By

Diana Castilleja

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Chapter One

Lola cracked the front door open. She blinked and gave a bleary eyed stare into the beaming face of her favorite friend. It was still pitch black outside. And cold.

“Morning, sunshine!” was Missy’s way too energetic greeting.

“Bite my ass,” she mumbled under her breath as she let the chain go. If it weren’t for the fact she expected Missy at oh-God-it’s-early, she wouldn’t have bothered to get out of bed. She closed the door and locked it. “Just remember. You promised me a gallon of coffee for getting up this early.”

Missy bounced on her toes. Lola ignored her jubilant attitude. “I promised you buckets of good coffee for coming with me,” she reminded Lola cheerily.

“Oh, yeah,” Lola sighed. She leaned over and stretched, her hair falling in disarray around her. She groaned as blood moved again. She stifled a yawn and pointed to her couch. “Sit. I need to regroup.”

Missy saluted, unable to hide her grin. “Where’s Bennie?” she asked, dropping her purse on the side of the couch.

“With Rick. He wanted him for the holiday since he’s taking Jules and the twins to Hawaii for Christmas.”

Missy shook her head. “He never would have done something like that for you.”

Lola just shrugged. She didn’t hold any hard feelings against Rick. Things just hadn’t worked out between them. “Jules comes from money. I’m sure she had as much say as he did about the holiday vacation.”

Missy nodded. “True.” She plopped down and held her wristwatch up. “Go. We’re burning daylight.”

Lola groaned. “The sun isn’t even up yet.”

Missy’s grin was wicked. “Then we’ll be first in line at the mall, and at the coffee shop,” she teased with a challenge in her gaze.

Lola threw up her hands. “I’m going.” She looked into Bennie’s room out of habit, and seeing his empty bed brought a lump up in her throat. No one knew how hard it was for her to let him go to his father’s for five days, and she would never say a word in complaint about it either.

Rick was getting better with Bennie’s handicap, and Bennie adored his half-sisters. Jules was really good with him and had mastered sign language for him. It had just been too much for Rick to handle a handicapped child. She didn’t blame him. It hadn’t been easy for her either. Or for Bennie.

He was nine now and the twins were almost five. They loved having an older brother, and it was good for all of them to accept one another. Bennie was a sweet, well mannered child, and while he knew he was different, he refused to let that stop him from doing things. She admired his bravery even as it usually made her want to run screaming for a safe, thickly padded room. It was a mother’s job to keep her young safe. Bennie loved to challenge the meaning of safe.

She dressed and made her time quick in the bathroom. She deserved a lot of coffee for doing this for her best friend. This was earlier than she even got up for work. And she was doing it to go shopping.

On the day after Thanksgiving. She swallowed a groan instead of her toothpaste, then pulled back her hair to make it easier to stuff into a hat.

She had little doubt regardless of how early they arrived, not all the stores were going to be open just because Missy decided to go shopping.

She grabbed her fluffy coat from the chair next to her bed and went back to the living room of her two-bedroom apartment. “I’m awake, but I won’t swear to much else until you IV me caffeine.”

Missy giggled and jumped up. “I got ya’ covered. I know just where we’re going first. And the car should still be warm.”

“Thank God,” Lola muttered when she popped open the door and was hit in the face with the bracing cold of winter. She wrapped the scarf over her head and blinked as a swirl of flurries shot through the breezeway of the apartments. “You so owe me for this,” she muttered at Missy’s back. Her friend just looked over her shoulder and winked.

“You are going to thank me before you are done. You have no idea the specials and sales the stores have for the early birds.”

“And I had no problem living in blissful ignorance either.”

Missy laughed again. “Come on.” She gave Lola a fast one arm hug. “It won’t be so bad. And you’ll be surprised with how much you can get done today.”

Lola shook her head, finally giving in to her friend’s enthusiasm. “Okay, Attila. Lead on and conquer.”

Chapter Two

Missy rose on her toes then dropped back repeatedly, waiting for the front doors to open as she sipped on her Mocha Grande. Lola sipped on her second, and could almost feel her brain come to life.

“I know what I’m looking for, for Dad and Uncle Carl,” Missy said as she glanced at her watch again, ignoring the throng of the hundred or so crowd of people that had joined her outside the doors. “What about you?”

Lola kept her head down, to avoid the occasional brush of cold air over her ears. She’d left the scarf and hat in the car after they’d picked up their coffees, and it was only minutes until six. She wasn’t going to freeze in ten minutes of butt-biting cold.

“Jules said the girls are into Dora right now. I figured I’d get them something matching and something individual.”

“You’re sweet to think of that.”

Lola shrugged. “What about your mom?”

At the same time, they said, “Lladro,” and grinned at the jinx.

A gasp went up from the crowd surrounding them when the lot in front of the store and the doorway were suddenly brightly lit with Christmas lights sparkling off of huge neon ornaments hung from the roof. A Christmas carol began tinkling through the speaker system. Lola glanced at Missy, a grin beginning to take shape. “You ready?”

“Honey, I was born ready. To shop,” she said with a light joyous laugh and a blossoming smile.

Lola wrapped an arm through her friend’s. A surge filled her with energy that had as much to do with the coffee as the Christmas feeling in the air. The doors were opened by smiling employees wearing elf hats.

The hunt was on.

* * * *

“Gregory,” a voice called. He rolled his eyes, but turned anyway.

“Yes?”

He faced the aging woman in a red reindeer sweater and tightly permed white hair with calm patience. He had already become used to the blinking red nose on the animal since he had picked her up.

She held up two sweaters for his opinion. “I was thinking these would be nice for your Aunt Karen.”

He hid the light smile behind a hand, clearing his expression. She knew perfectly well her sister would adore either one. Aunt Karen literally drooled for cashmere.

Greg was with his mother on this shopping adventure to help her with the choosing and the carrying. She was nearing seventy and was finally beginning to get into the spirit of living again after her stroke. She walked with a mild limp and sometimes he knew her hand ached, but she didn’t complain. Not to him. She seemed to be doing really well for hitting the pavement so early.

“Aunt Karen will swear you knocked over a bank to get those for her.”

She pursed her lips at him and slipped the sweaters over her arm to hold onto. He watched as she became engrossed again in the racks, shuffling this and that as she shook her head or ahh-ed over the clothes. Greg wasn’t planning on doing any shopping today. This was just for his mom. She needed it. Even if she didn’t say it, he knew she did. She was smiling today, something she hadn’t really done freely in a long time.

It took a long time for her to smile again when his dad had passed. He didn’t want her to lose her enthusiasm just yet. Call him selfish, but he wanted her there for Christmas.

“Gregory?”

He blinked, coming out of his thoughts. “Hm?” He reached absently for the sweaters she had laid claim to.

“Are you still seeing Becky?”

This time the eye roll was impossible to hide, but she was pretending to be studying the clothes and didn't see it. “You know I'm not.”

She shrugged thin shoulders and Rudolph moved with her. “I thought you were thinking about getting back with her.”

He stifled the snort, but didn't hold back his explanation. “It's hard to get back with an ex-girlfriend who's engaged, Mom.”

She blinked owl wide eyes at him, then dropped them. “I'm sorry honey. I shouldn't have asked.”

He pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. “It's okay, Mom.”

“It's just,” she tried to say through a voice wavering with age. “Well, it's Christmas and even if I don't get to see grandchildren, I do want to see you happy with someone.”

He diverted the sigh. It was an old conversation. His sister had already blessed her with grandchildren. She went back to sifting through clothes, muttering names from a mental list a mile long.

She stopped abruptly. “I'm done here. Let's go to the toys.”

A brow shot up. “Toys?”

“I'm hard of hearing, not you.” She grabbed the sweaters from him. “Coming?” she asked over her shoulder, already marching down the store.

He shook his head and followed obediently. The toys were mostly being hunted by the over twenty-five crowd. Saner people than himself however, knew to stay in bed on the busiest shopping day of the year.

Greg picked up a soft teddy bear with a pink bow. He'd always wanted that one little girl, to watch her grow up and be a wonderful woman. To challenge and be challenged. To have the chance to threaten prospective dates. He set the bear down with a light sigh. Thirty-four wasn't ancient. He knew that. His mom was right. He needed his other half. He hadn't been looking, and hadn't been interested enough in his previous relationships to go so far as to make them permanent.

“I'm going to find something for your sister's boys,” his mother said as she dove into the mass of humanity and battery operated insanity.

Greg tried to follow, but even as slow as she was, he still lost her quickly in the packed aisles. He shook his head, then thought better of calling out. He wasn't eight, and she wasn't lost.

When he reached the end of the aisle, he stopped. An auburn ponytail was bobbing in silent concentration in front of him and if he moved, he was going to walk right over her. Her head was down, studying two Dora the Explorer packages. His recent thoughts of his own imaginary daughter had him speaking before he could bite his tongue.

“The one with the backpack and the map set,” he offered quietly.

She startled, looking up over her shoulder. Her caramel brown eyes were wide but softened as a genuine smile curved pink lips. “Thanks. I've been trying to make up my mind for a good half hour, I'm sure.”

He grinned. “Well, it is a little young for you,” he teased lightly.

She blinked in surprise, then chuckled. “Not me. Relations.”

“Oh my God! Lola!” Another woman came bouncing around the corner. “I got it! The last Elmo!” She was grinning in triumphant glee. “I had to beat some old woman out of it though.” A short-lived repentant look crossed her features with the admission.

“Old woman?” she asked.

“Yeah. In a really funny Rudolph sweater.”

Greg's stomach lurched. The other woman give an indignant glare down the aisle when she added, “That woman has a foul temper. I've never heard a woman who looked that classy swear so much.”

“Mom?” he whispered, stunned.

Both ladies blinked up at him, but he didn't wait. He turned the corner around the pair and spotted the sweater and its owner stomping back toward him.

Chapter Three

“Missy, please tell me you didn’t beat her out of that stupid doll?” Lola hissed.

“Well,” she said reluctantly. “I was faster!”

Lola shook her head, stifling the groan fighting to emerge. She was surprised when the woman in question stopped right at the man’s side and glared at Missy.

“So much for Christmas cheer,” the older woman huffed. The red nose on her sweater blinked as if in agreement.

“Mom. What happened?”

Mom? Stunned, she focused on the handsome man she had been chatting with.

“This...thief took it out of my hands.”

“I did not!” was Missy’s indignant squeal.

Lola faced her friend. “Missy, did you see her going for the same toy? Did you do something to make sure you got it first?”

Missy’s cheeks reddened. “I might have pushed a box in her way,” she said, avoiding all stares.

“Missy!” Lola cried, shocked and ashamed of her friend. “How could you do that?”

Missy drew in air and let it out, her shoulders sagging inside her jacket. “You’re right. That was awful.” She handed over the doll. “I’m sorry.”

Lola watched the other woman hesitate, then slowly grasp the box, the smiling Elmo oblivious to the tension. Her hand shook as her gnarled fingers tried to find a comfortable grip. A male hand reached for the box. “I’ll take that, Mom.” His tone was serious, but his expression was gentle.

“We’ll find something, Missy. It’s Christmas and this was your idea. No more fighting over toys,” she told her friend.

Missy nodded and looked at the older woman. “I am sorry. I just got too excited to have found one.”

Age-wise eyes crinkled. “It’s all right dear. No harm done.” She looked up into the watchful expression of her son. “Do you mind if I keep looking? I still have a few more to buy for.”

“Go right ahead, Mom. Just let me know if you need to take a break.”

Lola saw her spine stiffen. “I would have beaten her to it. I’m not that old!” She turned on a heel and marched back into the melee that was the toy department.

“I guess I have some more to find too,” Missy said a little forlornly. “I’ll find you in a few more minutes.” She turned and disappeared, too.

Which left Lola alone with the man, who was holding the Elmo, and a couple of sweaters. She cleared her throat. “Terribly sorry about that.”

He watched his mother disappear from view, then he focused on her. “It’s all right. I just wasn’t expecting that from her. She hasn’t been that lively in a long time.” A grin lifted one side of his mouth, creating a dimple in his cheek.

Brown eyes watched her from behind thin glasses, the lights of the store bringing a sparkle to their chocolaty depths. He stood a few inches over her, but the genuine warmth in his expression kept her from feeling nervous.

“Is your friend always like that?” he asked a moment later.

Lola chuckled. “Yeah, Missy is very feisty. She loves the Holiday rush.”

“You’ve been friends for a long time?” He shifted his weight, looking out over the crowd.

That was when it occurred to her that he was asking because he might be interested in Missy. He was looking in the direction both she and his mother had gone in.

She turned to study a few more of the packages sitting on the shelf. “Yeah, for a long time.” She didn’t begrudge Missy the attention. Lola was a divorced thirty year-old with a child. She wasn’t a statistic in high demand. She was just a statistic. She swiveled to look at him and rested her weight on

a hip. “Look, if you want to get to know her, I’m not going to give you information that you can go and ask for yourself.”

His gaze widened then quickly smoothed as quiet laughter rose from his chest.

“You’re protective.” She didn’t deny it. “I wasn’t asking about her. She’s not the one I’m interested in.”

She felt herself stumble and she hadn’t moved an inch. “Me?”

He nodded. “Would you like to get a cup of coffee? The coffee shop is just down there,” he said, pointing toward the in-store snack stop.

She had finished her last one well over an hour ago, and could use some more go fuel. Her hesitation was brief. She nodded. “Sure.” She held out her hand. “Lola.”

“Greg,” he replied, wrapping her hand into his.

Chapter Four

Greg kept a hand on what his mother wanted, keeping pace with Lola until they stood in line.

“What would you like?” he offered.

“Something that can be used as a diesel fuel.”

He chuckled again. “I can manage that.” He juggled a few of the items in his hold as he reached for his wallet. When Lola slipped it all out of his arms and held it, he smiled. “Thanks.”

“No problem. If you’re buying, I can guard the Golden Elmo.”

He grinned at her. “Why don’t you go grab a table? Danish?”

“Oh, that sounds awesome.” He kept one eye on her to find her, while he made his order. Two large steaming cups of caffeine, and two danishes filled his hands when he turned from the counter.

“Breakfast of champions,” he quipped setting it all down on the table. He noticed she had been thoughtful and grabbed napkins, sugar and creamer.

“I’d settle for breakfast of the desperate.” Lashes lowered in bliss as she took a bite out of hers. “Missy hasn’t even thought of food yet, and...” She glanced at the wall behind the counter. “Good grief! We’ve been at this for four hours already! I swear, she is so going to owe me for this.” She blushed lightly. “Sorry. Not ranting. I’m not a morning person. I would have only been up two hours at the most by now. I’m pushing five this morning.”

“I know what you mean. Mom had to come out this morning. Like there wasn’t another thirty or so days of shopping time ahead of us.”

Lola shook her head, and the long ponytail of red and brown strands moved with her. She was pretty, with expressive eyes. They were the first thing that struck him. A warm glowing brown. They seemed to crackle with energy. He imagined her in a nice gown and with her hair done. He decided then she was going to be his date to the firm’s Christmas party.

He hadn’t even thought of going until that moment. It wasn’t like he usually went to business events. Yet the appeal of seeing her in an evening gown with her figure, nice curves from what he was able to see, was very strong. From the snug jeans to the sweater she wore, he knew she’d make his partners jealous if he arrived with her on his arm.

She slowly lifted a hand to her nose and brushed. Then did it to her cheek.

“Okay. Where is it? You’re staring at something.”

He coughed and lowered his gaze. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to stare.”

“Is it icing?” She brushed a napkin across her lips.

He shook his head. He sipped at his coffee, feeling the heat rise into his cheeks for being so plainly busted. He shrugged his shoulders and admitted his guilt. “Okay. I was staring. I was trying to figure out if you had a man in your life.” He pointedly looked at her bare left hand.

She leaned back in her chair. “Seriously?”

He nodded, hoping he wasn’t being too forward with her, but they both had people somewhere in the Christmas insanity waiting for them.

Lola paused, her hand curved around her cup, staring at nothing that Greg could see. “If you do,” he began, “I understand. I don’t know a single reason why someone as beautiful as you wouldn’t be with someone.”

Caramel brown eyes widened and blinked at him. Something he’d said had surprised her. A devilish glint appeared in them in the next instant.

“Actually, I do have a man in my life,” she said.

A sudden despondency washed over him. He knew she was too good to be true.

The simplicity alone, just running into her, feeling drawn to her, during this season of miracles. He sank back. He knew nothing in life was ever this simple. “I should have known.” He reached for the things sitting in a tight pile by his feet. “Thanks for sharing the coffee with me, though.” He gave her a smile trying to hide his real disappointment. “It was nice to just sit down for a few minutes.”

She reached out and stopped his gathering motions. “You didn’t let me finish.” Real laughter glowed in her expression. She lifted the hand that hovered over his to about her shoulder height from where she sat. “My man stands about this tall and still wears Spider-Man pajamas.” He sat frozen. And by her expression, he knew his next moments were going to be very defining in their immediate future.

He couldn’t hide the surprise though in his tone. “You have a son?” She didn’t look like anyone’s mother to Greg.

She nodded, and some of the warmth and laughter evaporated from her features. “He’s nine years old. He’s with his father this weekend.”

He let his grip on the sweaters loosen. A son. He felt her withdrawal almost physically when she stood. “Thank you for the coffee,” she whispered. “I need to get going.”

He stood too. “Wait.” She searched his face, wary and unsure. “I want to take you out.”

He watched her mouth pop open with surprise.

“Don’t look so surprised.” He smiled when she blushed again. He saw her relax, and he pressed on for the advantage. “A Christmas party. Say you’ll come with me.”

“But you don’t know me,” she said a little breathlessly.

“I want to take you out to get to know you.” When she still seemed indecisive, he reached for one of her hands. “Do me a favor and just nod, because my mother just spotted us and I will be going through the inquisition in about ten minutes.” He lowered himself to talk quietly into her ear. “At least she’s not doing the invasion of the Turks on me. She stopped next to the figurines.” He leaned back to look into the softest brown eyes he’d ever seen. “You don’t want to make me lie to my own mother, do you?”

She laughed, making that breathless sound again and it caused his heart to beat a little heavier.

“No, can’t have you lying to your mother. Okay, I’ll go out with you.” He saw her glance down at where he held her in his hand. He stroked the soft skin of her hand with a thumb then he released her. She had incredibly soft skin.

He wrote down his phone number for her, and waited for hers. He felt all of eighteen again, doing a number swap with a pretty girl.

“Just when is this Christmas party?” she asked him, scooping up her own presents to buy.

“In two weeks, on a Friday night. Is that enough warning?” he asked, aware some women needed months to find that perfect outfit. His Aunt was notorious for it.

She gave him a smirk. “I think I can manage to have myself in order by then. Formal, I’m guessing?”

He nodded, filling his own arms once more with cashmere and toys. “If you are open to the idea, though, I’d like to take you out between now and then. Nothing fancy,” he assured her. “In fact, if you want, you can bring your son. Just to get a little better acquainted.” *And so we have a chaperone and I don’t kiss you senseless.* He was a little surprised at how much he wanted to, with her standing so close, staring up at him.

“Oh. Thanks for the offer, but a babysitter might be the best thing,” she said, glancing down to study her load. “He’s shy around people.”

“I see.”

“Lola!” Her head snapped up at the disgruntled shout of her name. “Good God woman! I’ve been all over looking for you!”

Her friend had found them, and she wasn’t in the least shy about invading.

Chapter Five

By Thursday night, Lola had kind of forgotten about Greg's invitation to take her out. Not that she didn't want to go, but Bennie came back from his father's sick, and she just hadn't the time to think of much else.

When the phone rang, she was sitting on the couch keeping an eye on her son. His fever had finally broken and he was lying in his pajamas, wrapped up in a blanket on the other end reading a book.

Lola reached over and snagged the phone from her side table. Her head fell back with a plop. "Hullo?"

"Lola?"

"I was this morning. This evening is questionable."

She heard the male laugh and it took a minute for it to register who it was on the other end. Guys didn't call her. Not any in recent memory anyway. By the time her brain gave her the right information, he was talking again.

"That sounds like her, the Lola I met," he teased.

She fought to sit up, at least to not be close to oblivion on the back of the couch.

"Greg?"

"Hi," he said a little quietly. "I'm not bothering you, am I? You sound tired."

"I am. Bennie has been sick since he got home Sunday." Silence met that announcement. She knew he was having a hard time assimilating that she had a son.

They always did. His reactions when they had shared coffee had told her plenty. Her chances at finding the right man went out the window not long after they realized she had a child. Lola honestly hadn't expected to hear from him at all, so this was a nice surprise. She just wished she had the energy to show her appreciation.

When the silence stretched out, she told him, "It's okay Greg. I'm sure finding out I have a son wasn't what you were expecting."

"Hm? Oh, no. I'm still at the office."

She blinked at the clock. "It's seven-thirty. Or do you work odd hours?"

He sighed. "No. I had a problem come up on one of the accounts, and I just wanted to hear you."

She swallowed when her first attempt to speak sounded more breathless than usual. "Really?"

His voice sounded warm over the phone, low and enticing. "Yeah. I've been thinking about you since Friday. I wanted to see you, but until I get this blueprint done and the client happy... That's my life." She heard another sigh. "So, I wanted to call."

"This was really sweet of you," she said.

"It's just a phone call," he teased her lightly. "You want sweet, wait until I pick you up." His voice dropped seductively. "I still want to take you to the Christmas party. I just won't be able to take you out this weekend like I had hoped."

That was fine with Lola. She didn't want to leave Bennie with Missy until she was sure he was over his flu. "I understand."

"Good." He sounded relieved. "I don't like making plans and then having to ditch on them."

"What perfect world did you get raised on?" she asked, laughter in her words.

"Oz."

It was twenty minutes after she said goodbye before she realized she'd spent that much time on the phone with him, and most of the time she was laughing.

* * * *

"You have to try this one!" Missy pulled another dress from her closet. "This will look gorgeous on you."

"I'm not wearing that," Lola stated with a firm shake of her head. "It doesn't even have a back!"

She grinned in pure devilish enjoyment. “Exactly!”

“Missy,” Lola moaned, burying her face into her hands. “I can’t do this. I don’t have anything to wear and he’s coming in three hours.”

“We have three hours to turn Cinderella into the Prince’s fantasy then,” Missy shot back.

Lola shook her head. “It’s a date, not a seduction! Look, I’m going to get Bennie, call Greg and tell him I caught Bennie’s flu or something. I can’t do this!”

Missy firmly pushed her back down to the bed. “You will do no such thing. First of all, Bennie is fine. He’s over the flu, and the only thing you’re catching is butterflies.”

Lola stuck her tongue out at her best friend. “Fine,” she snapped. “What about this?” She pulled on the length of hair that fell over her shoulder. “This is plain brown wrapping.”

“Curling iron and the sterling silver hair pins I have.”

“And this?” she argued back, deliberately pointing at her face. “You know I’m no good with makeup.”

“Maybelline and me? We go way back,” Missy retorted with an enthused arm swipe. “Did you bring those sandal heels I told you to buy?”

In defeat, Lola nodded. “Yeah, they’re in the living room.”

Missy clapped her hands together and rubbed them with energetic glee. “Look out Gregory Ramsey. You are not going to know what hit you tonight.”

“That’s just what I’m afraid of,” Lola muttered.

She had never been so nervous in her life as when Greg called yesterday and asked where to pick her up for the party tonight. In a fit, she called Missy, who swept in to the rescue. Now Lola wasn’t so sure she’d made the smartest choice. Missy was having far too much fun at Lola’s expense.

She eyed the dress with trepidation. It not only had no back, it also had a short hem, a diagonal point that dropped to mid-calf and rose up to just above the knee on the other side. It was also deep red. Her eyes gaped wider.

“That’s not even a winter dress!” she cried.

“Nope, it’s spring, but you’ll be indoors. It won’t matter.”

Lola groaned and fell over backward on the bed where she sat. She was disowning Missy right after her date.

Chapter Six

A tap on the bedroom doorframe got both of their attentions. Her son stood there, his expression awed.

Bennie's hands spoke for him. *Wow! Mom...You're beautiful.*

Butterflies had multiplied but she still felt a sense of satisfaction in his praise. She touched her fingers to her chin. "Thank you, honey." She lifted her hand to the curls Missy had managed to coax out of her hair, wide looping waves, but her hand was smacked for even trying.

"Don't you mess with those. The pins will keep them in place if you don't mangle them first."

Lola glared at her friend in the mirror. "I won't." She bit her lip in the next instant.

Missy met her worried expression in the reflection. "Don't worry. It's a date. If you don't come here, I'll bring Bennie home in the morning," she added quietly with a wink to boost her nerves.

A knock on the front door announced her last chance of escape was gone.

"Would you answer that?" she asked Missy. "I want to tell Bennie goodnight."

Missy smiled and left. Lola brought him into the room and wrapped him into a quick hug, then caught his gaze. She knew he was reading her lips as much as her sign language. "You're going to behave, right?" He nodded quickly. "I won't be back before you go to bed."

His hands flew. *Mom, I'm nine. Almost ten. Jules and Dad go out on dates. Tina and Gina tell me about their babysitter.*

She bit back the smile, caressing his hair instead. "You're getting too big."

"Oh, mama," Missy breathed when she reached the doorway to lean against the doorframe with an awestruck gleam in her eyes. She looked over her shoulder toward the front door, speaking quietly. "Can I order one of him for Christmas morning? The man knows how to dress."

Lola giggled. "I'll see if Santa is working overtime this year." She ran a hand down the length of her dress. "Thanks for keeping him overnight and for letting me borrow this."

Missy waved a hand. "Dry clean it when you're done." She purposely moved out of the door. "Now go have some fun."

Lola took an unsteady step, but her next one was stronger. She cleared the hallway to the front of Missy's apartment and stopped short at what she saw.

Missy was right. Greg was undeniably handsome in a dark suit covered by a long black winter trencher. His hair was short, rich chocolate brown like his eyes. She could just make out the glimmer of snow flakes on his shoulders.

He had strong, classic features, framed by the thin silver wire glasses he wore. He looked like the boy next door type until he smiled. His entire face became animated.

"You look incredible," he whispered with a glowing appreciation.

"Thank you." Lola swallowed, wondering just how bad she was blushing.

Missy walked up with coat a coat on her arm. "Stay warm."

Greg slipped the coat from Missy and helped Lola shrug it onto her own shoulders. "Ready?" he asked.

Lola turned and gave a final blown kiss to Bennie. When Greg noticed him, he waved hello. Bennie lifted a hand in reply, then they were out the door.

* * * *

Street lamps were decorated with lit ironwork trees and wreaths, with long cords of lights stretched between the buildings. A light snow fell outside, but the inside of the limo was warm. Greg had even brought a blanket to wrap her feet into. She was sitting in stunned quiet wonder at the whole evening.

Discovering the limo at the bottom of the walk with the dozen sunset red roses waiting for her on the seat was making her feel a lot like Cinderella. Greg was being a perfect gentleman too, lightly clasping her hand as they approached the hotel.

When the limo stopped, the driver opened the door and Greg helped her out, only releasing her long enough to tag their coats.

“Don’t be nervous,” he whispered. “I know everyone, and they are an easy bunch to talk to.”

She gave him a bright smile. “I’m not nervous. I’m kind of excited really. I can’t remember the last date I was on.”

“I’m just sorry our first one is in a huge gathering.” He leaned down. “I could see taking you to a movie and sitting way up in the corner.” He gently nuzzled her neck, and a hot ache slid down her spine.

She arched a telling brow at him. “You still may get to.”

A jovial laugh and a slapped hand on his back brought him upright again. “Ramsey!”

“Clark,” he answered with an enthused handshake.

“So you weren’t kidding. You really are here this year.”

Greg chuckled and wrapped an arm around Lola’s waist. “But I swear, it’s not to see who does the lamp dance first.”

Clark laughed with the joviality of the season. “I think Nora has us all beat on that. Took her less than three drinks last year.” He winked at Lola and said, “So who is your lovely lady here? I don’t recall seeing her at the office.” He waggled thick graying eyebrows at Lola.

She relaxed further into Greg’s side, enjoying Clark’s cheery welcome. “Nope,” she answered first.

Greg smiled warmly down at her. “She’s my Christmas wish.”

“But it’s not Christmas yet,” Clark said.

Lola ignored the thrill his words gave her. Her first thought was that Greg was nuts. The second was the instant he realized Bennie was handicapped, it would be over. She had tonight, one night to believe it was perfect.

“Lola Beckham, meet Clark Johnson. He’s one of the firm’s partners.”

“Nice to meet you.” He gave her a warm handshake.

She followed at Greg’s tug. “Let’s go shake it up.” He tilted his chin toward the crowd further in the room. Several in the crowd stopped him to say hi, calling him Ramsey, or Mr. Ramsey. Only a few called him Greg.

As they strolled along, she saw the winter wonderland decorations throughout, paper-maché snowflakes, and glitter adorned ornaments hanging from the ceiling. There was even a large Christmas tree in the corner of the room with wrapped packages under it on a bed of white.

They ate at the catered tables, sipping on champagne. Lola couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so relaxed. Or had this much fun just being with adults. Everyone was gracious and she found she could carry a conversation that didn’t have to start with “do your homework”.

“So, you know I’m an architect,” he said, talking quietly while they slow danced on the hardwood floor. Shadows moved with them in the low lighting. “We never did get to talk about what you do.”

“Just a secretary. Nothing flashy.”

“In what field?”

“I work for the SixField Music Studio.”

He nodded. “Good place to work?”

“I’ve been there for more than six years.”

She spotted a playful grin lurking on his lips. “Meet anyone famous?” The grin was matched by a glow in his gaze.

“Not really. Just a few people really.” She closed her eyes as if thinking really hard. “What was her name? Oh, now I remember. Reba McEntire.”

He froze on the dance floor. “You met Reba McEntire and you didn’t know who she was?”

She tapped his shoulder, laughing at his reaction. “Of course I knew who she was! She’s very sweet and has that lilting twang in her voice no matter what she says.”

He shook his head at her. "You have a wide playful streak. I'm going to have to be careful around you." He pulled her a little closer. She felt the way his hands shaped her bare back in the dress and loved every caressing touch. "You look so beautiful tonight." He lowered his head to breathe those words into her ear. "You have no idea how many times I pictured how you would look tonight, and you blew all my fantasies out of the water."

She leaned back in his arms. "Greg. Do you hear yourself? We hardly know each other."

"And all I did was tell you I'm attracted to you," he whispered against her neck. "It's Christmas. Believe in miracles with me."

Then he kissed her.

Chapter Seven

Greg had been trying all night to not think about when that first kiss would happen. This one. Lola was unique, fun, beautiful, and trying to be a good date was killing him.

The second she walked into the front of her friend's apartment he knew he would be tested tonight. The sexy gown, the curve of her hair; he'd been lucky he found his voice to speak.

He was saying things and thinking things that were just out of character for him. He loved the holidays, believed in the magic of Christmas. Yet, to feel so drawn to her after just meeting, it wasn't typical. And they really didn't know each other, but that wasn't stopping him from wanting to kiss her.

Lola had been in his thoughts everyday, and in more than one dream. Now he was going to have her kiss to dream about too.

The kiss surprised him and he knew by the tentative pressure she was responding with, it was a surprise for her too. He cradled her a little closer and her hesitation seemed to evaporate. A light moan rose between them. He thought it might have been him. Her lips didn't just look soft, they were silky. He couldn't resist, and sucked her bottom lip into his mouth. This time, the slight whimpering moan definitely came from her. His breathing turned haggard at the low sound.

He released her slowly, still swaying to the sound of the ballad surrounding them. Her eyes lifted to his and his heart almost stopped. He absolutely loved her eyes.

"I'm going to get another one of those before I take you home," he warned her quietly. There were too many people there from the office to kiss her the way he really wanted to.

"I'll be sure to save one for you," she told him. He grinned at the breathlessness in her voice. "This is a really nice party. Does your office do this every year?"

"Usually. We have a summer picnic too and give the kids a lot to do."

"Sounds like a great company." She settled against his shoulder and he held her close.

He nodded. "I've enjoyed it."

"And you're a partner? That must put you pretty high up on the roster."

"I'm kind of important." He left the answer vague. He wasn't ready to tell her just how important he was to the company. That information eventually led to how much he was worth, and this evening was going too well to bring that up yet. He'd never brought it up with his last girlfriend, and he was sure Becky wouldn't have cared, but they hadn't connected where it counted.

He'd felt connected to Lola since that first stare. He just wasn't sure yet if it was one-sided or not. She seemed to be having a good time, and he knew he was. For now he was going with the flow.

"You said Bennie is nine?" he asked, wanting to know more about her.

"Yeah, and he reminded me tonight, he's almost ten. They grow up so fast anymore."

"What grade is he in?"

"The fourth."

"He looks a lot like you," he told her.

She lowered her chin, a bashful expression coloring her cheeks. "Thanks. I always thought he looked more like Rick, but I think that's just because they are both guys."

He nodded. "Could be. My sister looks so much like my mother, it's nauseating. They're both beautiful women. Well," he added, "Mom was in her day."

"She's a character all right, your mom. Did she get all of her shopping done?"

He spotted the light of laughter in her eyes. "Yeah, a lot of it. I'm surprised she lasted as long as she did. She hasn't been very active lately. I guess the Christmas spirit got to her too."

She snuggled in a little closer. "It seems to be contagious," she whispered quietly.

"Hey you two," Raney said, laughing lightly. "The music stopped."

Greg lifted to look at his secretary. "Spoilsport." He pulled Lola up close to him and introduced them. "This is my secretary, Raney, and the real whip-cracker of the company."

"And don't you forget it," Raney said, shaking hands with Lola, winking at Greg.

“You’ll never let me,” he grumbled good-naturedly. “She’d like to have us all believe the company would implode without her.”

“It would,” she said, as though it weren’t even debatable. “Definitely. In fact, that’s why I needed to talk to you. When did you want to do the bonuses? I have them ready for those that are here tonight, or I can hold them all until next week.”

He tried to give her a “not now” look as soon as Raney started, but it was totally missed. Or ignored. Efficiency was her middle name. The bonuses were usually given out to whoever showed up to the Christmas party every year. His attendance this year for more than a quick hello and a slap on the back for the group, was what was different.

He rubbed the side of his nose, pushing his glasses up. “Give out the ones who are here tonight,” he answered. “I’m sure they’ll appreciate it.”

“Thanks boss,” she said cheerily and sauntered away.

Chapter Eight

“Boss?” Lola echoed. “Just how high up are you?”

He gave her a lopsided grin. “High enough to make decisions when no one else is around,” he replied. But she noticed there was a withdrawn note in his answer. It matched the wary reticence in his tone when he’d spoken to Raney and a few others in the room.

“Greg?” She slipped around to stand in front of him, capturing his attention with a hand on his chest. “I’m getting the feeling there’s something you aren’t comfortable with me knowing. If you are married, so help me, I will-”

His low laughter stopped her momentum. “No, I’m not married. I’ve never been either.”

That was a small relief. “Is it because I have been? Because of Bennie?”

He shook his head quickly. “No.” He shook his head again when she tried to speak. “I will tell you. In time. This is our first date. Right?”

“Right,” she agreed.

“Are you having a good time?” He swept her back up as the music started again. It appeared that most of the people who were there were willing to leave her and Greg alone while he was on the dance floor.

“I’m having a wonderful time.” She barely kept the sigh out of her voice at the truth of that statement.

“I am too,” he whispered seductively into her ear. The sensation sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine.

How bad was it to take one night and live? To enjoy herself for the moment? The real question was did she want to take a chance to see if there would be another day, another night to enjoy Greg’s wit and gentle humor?

Lola’s experience with her previous dates had been less than encouraging. There were a few men she’d felt attracted to, but not many. Greg on the other hand, was melting her to the floor with his heated looks and light, caressing touches. And Lord help her if he flashed that dimple one more time.

This was only their first date, she reminded herself. Even if it did feel like the eighth grade dance in the gymnasium, she was having a great time, slow dancing and learning about him.

“Can I tell you something?”

She peeked up at him, spotting his grin and the slightly worried glint in his dark gaze. “Is this one of those, ‘tell me and I promise not to hurt you’ kind of things?”

That low chuckle floated from inside his chest. It was so not fair. He even had one of those low, sexy laughs. “That is exactly the kind of ‘thing’ this is.”

She leveled a put-upon look at him. “I’ll do my best for restraint.”

His grin grew and she felt him relax beneath her touch. “You threw me for a loop when you said you had a son.”

She stopped dancing on the spot, her arms feeling leaden around his shoulders. “Oh.” It was her worst fear. Her arms started to slide free and a chill walked over her skin.

Not that she blamed him. He didn’t mind that she had been married, but having a son was something else altogether. It usually was. She’d hate to find out what he thought about his hearing impairment.

“I see,” she whispered.

He reached for her hands, cradling them into his chest, capturing her from escape. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.” She avoided his questioning glances.

“I still want to meet him. For more than a wave.”

She snapped her head up to look at him. “You do?”

“Of course I do.” He seemed genuinely confused. “Why wouldn’t I want to meet him?”

“What you just said,” she stumbled. “I thought...” She felt less sure about it now.

“You thought,” he prompted. He pulled her arms back up again and if she breathed too deeply, she would feel his entire length up and down her front. It left her aware of just how close they were. “You’re very protective of him.”

She swallowed and nodded. “I am. Rick left us before he was a year old.”

He froze in place at that admission. “Seriously?” She nodded again. “So what did you think I meant?” Instead of dancing more, he gently steered her to the side of the room near the tree and some quiet shadows.

She kept her gaze fixed on the buttons of his suit. “That because I have a son, you aren’t...don’t...” Shame filled her as she realized how quickly she had jumped to that conclusion. Not all men were the same. Not everyone hated that she had a child. And by his expressions, she knew she had been unfair. His next words proved it.

“Oh, I’m very,” he whispered, leaning over to breathe against the skin of her neck. “And I do. Definitely.” The words flared over her until the skin that had chilled, warmed with the blatant tone of promise. “I meant you don’t look like anyone’s mother.” His hands moved, forming around her waist a little tighter than any other first date in memory. “You’re beautiful.”

She felt when he brushed a soft kiss to the side of her jaw and her knees trembled in reaction. Standing close to the fragrant tree, the soft twinkle of the colored lights buried like hidden treasures in the branches swirled in her vision. They brought back his words from earlier. His Christmas wish. Believe in the magic of the holiday.

When he gently drew an earlobe into the warmth between his lips, she let her lids drift shut. She wanted to believe.

Chapter Nine

“Let me walk you to the door,” Greg said, lifting his arm from behind her shoulders as the chauffeur opened the rear door for them. She peeled away the blanket he insisted she use even though her feet weren’t cold any longer.

“I’ll be fine, Greg.” She peered into his dark eyes and felt herself leaning forward without thinking about it. His lips brushed to hers, a light sip and her heart sped up.

“I’m walking you to the door.”

Was his voice a little deeper? His eyes a little brighter behind the sheen of light reflected from his glasses? She nodded, unable to deny him.

He slid out and held her hand in his as she emerged. She smiled at the sharp dressed driver and he touched his hat in answer.

“I’ll be right back, Jess.”

“Yes sir,” the driver replied. He closed the door and walked back around the front to wait in the warmth of the car for Greg.

“I hope we didn’t keep him out too late,” she said, tipping a shoulder behind her.

“He was at the party. Everyone in the company was invited.”

She gave him a wide eyed look. “You get a limo ride from a company car?”

He leaned down to whisper, “I had an important date to impress.”

She couldn’t help herself. She giggled. And she couldn’t even blame the champagne. “I’m impressed.”

Greg let out a whooshed breath. “I worked hard all night to hear you say that.”

She felt her own smile growing in proportion to his dimple. She’d heard they were suppose to be sexy. His was the first one to make her a believer.

He slid a hand beneath the edge of her coat and brought her closer, flush to his body. “Remember that kiss I was going to get?”

She nodded at the low hum of his voice on her ear, still floating on the euphoria of a truly wonderful evening. He’d stolen a few tender caresses and light brushes, but she had a feeling the kiss he was talking about was something completely different. Just the thought of it made her breathing hitch hard in her chest.

The white paper wrapped around the red roses he’d given her earlier crinkled when she flexed her fingers as she lifted her arms around his neck. He dipped and teased her lightly, causing her to shiver with more than the cold drafts of the late night air.

When he finally claimed her lips, she moaned softly at the heat, the tender pressure. It had actually been more than two years since her last deep, lost in the moment kiss, but she thought she remembered how to do it. He shifted his weight and demanded a little more, a hungry kiss that was quickly melting her into his embrace.

She guessed by his reaction, that what she remembered was right on the mark.

He groaned, a low sound of passion when he lifted from her. She blinked, finding him watching her. A snow flake fluttered down to land on his nose. She giggled again when he crossed his eyes to find it.

He smiled, and she obliged him by gently wiping it away with her thumb. “I guess that’s my cue to say goodnight.” He gave her the best puppy-dog look she’d seen in a long time, possibly even to rival her son’s. “I want to see you again.” His low spoken words created a white fog in the cold air.

“I’d like that.”

“Sunday? We can go have a nice lunch. Have you finished all your Christmas shopping?”

She resisted the groan. No she hadn’t. Wait, was he offering to go shopping? It wasn’t her favorite past time, but she knew it was more of a plague to avoid for men.

“I’ll see if Missy’s available to watch Bennie.”

“He’s welcome to come along.”

The sincerity in his voice was disarming, but she wasn’t ready to tell him about Bennie. She knew she was being selfish and distrustful. But after only one date?

“That’s all right, Lola. If you don’t think it’d be a good idea, if he’s shy around strangers, then we’ll do it another time.”

Which as good as told her he wasn’t as interested as she’d wanted to believe. He was being kind with the invitation. She loosened her arms and pulled her small purse free to find her house key. “Thanks, Greg. I’m sure Sunday will be fine.”

He tipped her chin up, his gaze searching. After a moment’s silence, he nodded.

“I’ll pick you up here. Is that okay?”

“Sure.”

He leaned over and brushed her lips once more, then waited for her to walk in and close the door behind her.

Chapter Ten

Lola gripped the steering wheel, her hands so tight, her knuckles stood out, white. It was the only indication of the remnants of anger and fear for Bennie. He was fine now, but that didn't help her or keep her from reliving the drama of her morning.

The snowfall had been thick all weekend which wasn't a bad thing. Except Bennie had gone out to the back hill with some of the other kids and had been sledding. On anything they could put their ice-cold butts on. His ride of choice had been an old trashcan lid, minus the handle. Someone had cut it off long ago, so now it was an aluminum frisbee.

She had watched when he'd gone out, seeing all the cardboard. Knowing several of the kids personally, she thought no one would convince Bennie to take such a risk. She wished he had thought a little harder on it himself.

Now, he was paying for his lack of common sense. His leg was wrapped in a cast and his crutches leaned between their seats in the car.

She saw him from the corner of her eye, watching the passing of the landscape as they returned to the apartments. He'd been apologizing since the minute she'd raced to the hill to find him crumpled against a tree, dazed and in pain. His leg was broken.

One wrong turn, and he could have done far, far worse.

She shook away the mental image of the white faced boy who'd been sent to get her. The sheen of the ice-smooth snow top. Bennie's twisted body.

Lola let out a breath. Kids will be kids. Bennie was no different. He was only one of the many who would be hurt. But that argument didn't help her feel any better.

He gave her a whipped dog look when he shifted to move from the car in front of their door.

"It's okay," she signed. She smiled. "I have your medication." He nodded, then huffed and frowned until he was out of the car, with her by his side.

"I'll get you something to drink and you can rest for the afternoon." She lowered her hands when he nodded again. Their apartment was the most welcome thing she'd seen all day.

Closing the door on them both, she completely missed the dark Audi that crawled passed her doorway.

* * * *

Greg paused, unsure if he'd be welcome. Watching Lola and Bennie disappear into her apartment, he could absolutely forgive her forgetting their date. He'd tried calling several times, and when he'd begun to worry, he guessed just driving by wouldn't alarm anyone.

What he saw soothed his fears, but it confirmed what he knew of her protective nature. And the why behind it.

Bennie was deaf.

He pulled around to park behind another building to think in private for a few minutes before he decided what to do for his next move. He rubbed at his chin absently.

He shook his head when he remembered her words. Rick had left when Bennie was still a baby. Her ex-husband hadn't been able to adjust to a handicapped child. He was surprised at the heat of anger that rose at the man's decision. Whether from cowardice or inability to adjust, he'd left Lola to raise Bennie alone. Her ex had only in recent years made an effort to bond with his son.

Greg knew he wasn't in that same category as her ex. Even though he wasn't ready to label his feelings as deeper than liking her, he did want her to know he could be counted on. That he wasn't the type of guy she seemed to want to protect not only Bennie, but herself, from. In a flash of insight, he thought he knew just how to do it too. It was going to take some serious work, but if he was right, then it would all be worth it.

First, he needed to excuse himself from his date with her, without her knowing he'd seen them. He dialed her number on his cell phone and waited for her to pick up. When she did, he wasn't at all

surprised at her breathless answer, or her frazzled tone. She always sounded breathless to him, a low sultry sound that made his body react. The frazzled part was easy to understand. He tried to hide the grin in his voice, afraid she'd misunderstand.

"And how's he doing now?" he asked after she rattled off the particulars of their morning, along with effusive apologies for missing their date.

"He's laying down in bed, reading comics, with his foot on a pillow."

He heard the sound of running water, and envisioned her running a hot bath. He wanted to join her. He reined in his thoughts. This wasn't the right time. He got back on track with the conversation. "No other damage then?"

"Only his ego, I think," she replied with a chuckle.

"How are you doing?" His eyes flicked toward her building wishing he was with her instead of sitting in his car in the blustery cold of winter. He'd leave as soon as he was sure she was fine. He hated talking on the phone and driving. Bad habit.

"I'm fine. Some hot tea and I'll be better."

He closed his eyes, the dream-vision vanishing. Tea, not a bath. He swallowed the sigh. He didn't know how to explain it, but Lola was tying him into knots.

"All right then. If you need anything, call me. I'll be busy for the next few days, but I can be here if you need me. We'll go shopping when things settle down. You two get some rest."

"Greg?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for checking."

The soft sound of her goodbye made his head fall back and he exhaled a deep breath. He'd never had it happen like this, but the question mark over his feelings was definitely disappearing.

Chapter Eleven

Missy curled up on Lola's couch, sipping hot chocolate while Bennie played a video game on the TV in front of them, propped up against a chair to keep his leg straight. The remnants of Chinese takeout cluttered the living room table. "So, how's it going with Greg?"

Lola lowered her gaze to her own mug. "I'm not sure. He's called almost every day just to see how we're doing, and if Bennie's doing all right." Lola felt the warmth on her cheeks and prayed Missy wouldn't point it out. No such luck.

Missy gave her a slow appraising stare. "Oh my. And he's obviously the devil for doing it by your expression."

She sipped at her cocoa instead. She'd been very touched by his attention. She just wasn't sure what to think of him, or his attention.

"Well, he hasn't asked me out again, or anything. It's almost as if he's being nice, but not wanting to have anything more to do with me."

Missy nodded. "You think Bennie's leg might have cooled him off?"

"I don't know what he thinks of Bennie. He says he wants to meet him, but, it's like he's hesitating."

"Does he know Bennie's deaf?"

Lola shook her head, ashamed that she hadn't told him after almost two weeks of conversations and one incredible date.

"Well, maybe he really is just giving Bennie some time to heal before he takes you shopping. Did he sound like he still wanted to take you out again?"

"He mentioned it a day or two ago."

Missy waved a hand. "There you go! A man does not offer to shop. It's not in their genetics. He's interested," she decreed with a smirk.

Lola's brow shot up. "You really think so?"

A knock on the door startled Lola, but Missy went on as if there wasn't an interruption.

"Absolutely. He's calling, so he knows you're still here. He's considerate of Bennie's leg."

Lola's hand was on the knob, about to look out the peephole. "But what about his hearing?"

Missy's expression softened. "Do you think he's that shallow?" She shook her head, blonde curls flying in affirmation. "I don't see it. He's not Rick. He sounds sweet to me." Missy's grin turned evil and suggestive all at the same time. "Go for it. He's a hottie."

Lola busted out with a sharp laugh. "Oh, Missy!" Her next words were caught in her throat when she opened the door without looking first. "Greg!" she squeaked. A hot red heat filled her cheeks.

He was grinning. Oh God, had he heard any of that?

"Hi," he said with a pronounced hesitation. "I wanted to stop by. I didn't know you had company. I should have called first."

Missy had jumped from the couch and stood nearby, blocking an easy view into the living room. She waved a hand. "Not a problem. I'm not company. I'm family."

Lola rolled her eyes. "The kind that doesn't ever leave," she bit out over her shoulder.

Missy smirked at her glare. "Nope. And I don't stay quiet either."

Lola groaned, but felt a smile on her lips when she heard Greg's chuckle, his lowered voice raising a warmth of a different sort. "It's nice to see you again, Lola." He looked around the front room with a quick glance and frowned. "Where's your tree?"

"I haven't had time," she admitted. It was on the agenda for that weekend.

"Come on," he said. "I know the perfect place."

"Now?"

He shrugged. "If you can. Bennie can come, but I understand if you don't want him out with his leg."

“I can stay for a while,” Missy interrupted. “I have time, and it’s not late. Go get it. It’s not even that cold out.”

“You sure?” she asked over her shoulder with another glare at Missy. Her friend had evidently chosen the opposing team’s side.

Missy yanked Lola’s coat from the chair. “Go. I’ll tell Bennie where you went.”

“You don’t want to tell him yourself?” Greg asked, a slight frown between his brows.

“We won’t be gone too long, right?” She edged closer to the door, promising herself she’d tell Greg the truth.

“No,” he answered, shaking his head.

“He’ll be fine. He adores Missy.”

Greg didn’t look convinced, but she didn’t give him the time to argue as she jumped into her coat and Missy shut the door on them.

Greg held her door on his car. “An Audi? Are you sure you want to toss a tree on top of this?”

“I have a blanket in the back. I got mine a few days ago and never took it out.”

“Oh, okay.” She slid in and buckled the seatbelt. Lola was surprised when he turned onto the highway, though. “Where is this place?”

“Not too far, but they have the best.”

She nodded. “Thanks for doing this. I was going to get ours in a few days.”

“No problem.” He slid her a heated wink. “It gave me an excuse to see you again. I’m sorry I’ve been so busy the last two weeks.”

She ducked her head a little, hoping he didn’t see the blush his looks were causing. “I understand.”

It was odd, feeling like she was the only person he was thinking of when they were together. And by their past conversations, he thought of her a lot even when he wasn’t with her too.

It didn’t take long to reach the tree lot and park. Her gaze fell on the tall and lush trees under the blaze of the floodlights. “These are beautiful.”

“I get mine here every year. Half the proceeds support the Humane Society.”

She swung around to look at him. “Really? That’s very honorable.”

He shrugged, the shoulders of his jacket moving with him. He stepped out in front of her, and she couldn’t help taking a look at the way his jeans formed to his tight rear. Dimples and a nice butt. She was in trouble. Heat rose into her cheeks when he glanced back at her. “Coming?”

She nodded, her voice long gone.

Chapter Twelve

Greg hadn't expected her to let Bennie come, but her quick exit, more like an escape, hurt. The last two weeks, he'd been studying hard, working like a demon to learn sign language. It was a blessing for him that he was a fast learner. He didn't know enough, not near enough, but it was a start.

He wondered when she was actually going to tell him the truth about her son. He'd been taking it slow, a day at a time to win her over, and while the tree was a spur of the moment idea, he was going to run with it. He'd thank Missy later for all but shoving her out the door.

He pulled one up to stand, stamping it on the snow packed ground to fluff the branches. "What about this one?"

She walked up and inhaled the pine smell, her eyelids closing. "I love this one," she murmured.

"You can't judge a tree by smell," he teased her. "You have to taste the bark."

Her eyes popped open and he tried to keep his expression even, but when she blinked and grinned, he laughed too.

"Very funny." She sparkled when she laughed.

Greg propped the tree up again and he dusted his hands off. Laughter and voices floated around them as they looked at a few more, eventually choosing a tree that would fit in her apartment.

She seemed relaxed until they reached her apartment again. He caught her casting glances at him.

"What's the matter?" He turned off the car next to the curb at her door and faced her.

Lola smiled, a tremulous attempt at best. "I really appreciate this," she said quietly.

He shrugged. "My excuse. And it was fun. Haven't had much this month."

She blinked as if surprised and he leaned toward her. She smelled faintly of something fruity and he couldn't resist stealing a quick kiss. He felt her turn into the pressure and he lifted a hand to cradle her chin.

No woman had ever made him feel the way Lola made him feel. Although ache was a better word of the moment. He wanted to kiss her longer, hold her closer. He wanted her. Period.

Greg let her go slowly, watching her eyes drift open. In the dimness surrounding them, he could just make out the golden hue of their lighter brown color, warm, inviting. And glowing with a desire he wanted to hold onto for a very long time.

He sat back instead. "You ready to take the tree in?"

She nodded, then hesitated. He saw her tense, her gaze falling to the floorboards of the car. He watched every emotion as it flickered across her features. He almost held his breath, waiting.

There was uncertainty in her expression when she faced him again. "There's something you need to know," she said, almost whispering. "My son, is..." She swallowed. "Is deaf."

Her eyes passed his and he thought he saw a shadow of defeat in their depths.

"Are you ashamed of him?" He lifted his fingertips to her chin again, knowing she wasn't. Her protective streak and the less than stellar past with her ex-husband was what was pushing her fears.

"God no! He's the best son I could've ever wanted."

"Then why were you so scared to tell me?" he prodded tenderly.

"Because no one but me wants him," she said. She turned from his hold, but not before he saw the growing shine of unshed tears in her eyes. "And I really like you," she whispered.

"You do?" His hand froze in mid-reach. He hadn't been expecting that. She nodded. He pushed his hand into her hair. "Hey. I don't care." She shot him a disbelieving look. "Well, I do, but not the way you think." He smiled tenderly at her. "Come on. Let's take the tree in. I want to meet him."

"You're sure?"

Her hand hovered over her seat buckle. He pulled her firmly toward him, his lips steady right above hers. "Yes."

Lola had been going back and forth all night. She needed to tell him, she wasn't ashamed. She loved her son, but Greg was so damn nice. Handsome. A gentleman. She really liked him. She'd be devastated if Greg didn't like the reality of her life.

She hadn't been sure how much she liked him, until that moment. Well, only if she didn't count the kiss right before this one. She'd never felt such tenderness in her life.

Except right minute, passion was fogging her mind as much as she was sure they were fogging the windows. It boggled her mind the depths and differences that this one man possessed. And right at that moment, he was telling her in no uncertain terms that he wanted as deeply as she did.

She curved into the heat of his mouth, moaning a little when he slipped an arm around her to bring her closer still. Little gasps of air slipped between them.

When he finally let her go, she knew that what she had categorized as 'liking' was growing deeper still. She took a deep intake of breath. Slow down, she warned herself.

A warmth lit his face when she looked up at him and she almost let herself throw away her own warning.

"Let's go inside," he said. "I don't know about you, but if we stay out here, I'm going to be reliving some very interesting teenage fantasies."

A knowing laugh rose up and she nodded, releasing the seat buckle to slide out of the car.

Chapter Thirteen

Lola swung the door in, unable to hide the smile on her lips. Greg had snuck a couple more kisses untying the tree and now he was helping her carry it in. For payment, she'd offered hot cider and by his grin, she knew he was staying, cider or not.

"Wow! That's huge," Missy exclaimed, leaping to her feet to stand in front of Bennie.

The motion struck Lola for the first time. Was Missy just as protective as she was? She'd never really noticed before. Lola swallowed to hide the thankful dampness in her eyes. Missy was a friend she was never going to lose.

Lola nodded in answer, breathing deeply to recover her voice and to try to sound like herself. "Greg knows this great lot down the highway. They had beautiful trees."

"I'll tell you where it is," he said trailing in with the base of the tree and shutting the door.

"Great!" Missy nodded then looked right at Lola.

She knew immediately what Missy was waiting for. Lola rarely brought anyone home, and men had been non-existent for so long, that it was a surprise for Greg to have shown up unannounced and even more for her to let him stay.

"I told him," she said without preamble. Even saying it, she felt two feet tall. She was not ashamed of her son! She wasn't, but it seemed she had turned cynical. Missy nodded, but didn't move from in front of Bennie. "He wants to meet him, Missy," she added with meaning. Missy's blond curls bobbed with the snap of her head as she looked from Lola to Bennie and back again.

The tree moved behind Lola and she remembered to help stand it up against a wall.

"Between the two of you," Greg said, unzipping his jacket, "You'd think I was an axe murderer."

Heat suffused Lola's face. "I'm sorry," she said.

He put a hand on her arm instantly. "Don't." He curled her hands into his. "You see, I understand something about you already. You'll fight for your son, and nothing short of God himself will stop you. I love that about you."

Lola gasped softly.

"Now, let me meet him, because a lot of my Christmas depends on him. Please?" he asked.

She almost melted on the spot, the heat and tender caring in his eyes warmed a spot she'd forgotten about. A spot that resided within her heart.

Missy leaned over and tapped Bennie on the shoulder to disturb the game he had been playing. He set it down and gave his full attention to his mother.

She lifted a hand to him and he stood to join them, hobbling carefully on the crutches. Lola knew he was use to having Missy around and wasn't concerned by her, but she saw the looks he gave Greg.

The last boyfriend she'd had, hadn't exactly been receptive to Bennie. When it came down to it, he hadn't been a real winner at all. She relaxed the building tension in her stomach with effort.

She didn't get the chance to start the introductions though.

"Hi, Bennie." Greg's voice was clear even though his movements were a little stilted. "I'm new at this but I wanted to meet you. I'm Greg." He motioned a 'g' sign next to his eyes. It didn't take Lola long to figure out the motion was the connection to him and to his glasses. It set him apart as unique. She pinched her lips to keep them from trembling.

Hi. I'm Bennie, he motioned back, making a 'b' over his heart.

"The child of my heart and soul," Lola managed, watery and with growing tears, motioning the words to Bennie. That was his unique connection to her and always would be.

She didn't hide her conversation from her son when she asked Greg, "How did you know? How did you learn?"

"Help me when I screw up," he asked. "I want him to know too. He should never be excluded between us."

Lola nodded, barely hearing the quiet click of the door as Missy slipped out. Her heart was pounding too hard to hear much of anything beyond what the man before was saying, and not saying.

"I'm sorry," he began, watching both her and Bennie. "I saw you the Sunday I was supposed to pick you up to go out. You had just gotten home with Bennie from the hospital. I saw you talking to him."

Her mouth loosened a little. "So you learned all of this in two weeks?"

"I had a very good reason to," he whispered. He faced Bennie and a look of concentration brought his eyebrows together. "I said my Christmas depended..." He stumbled, trying to think, and she laid her hands on his.

"Tell me."

He flipped her hands into his, holding her tightly. "That it depended on him, because it does."

Bennie's hands moved. *How?* He looked uncertainly at his mom.

"How?" Greg echoed. "Because I want to spend Christmas with you. And with Bennie, but only if he's open to having me."

Shock hit Lola. "This is fast." It was a squeak.

Greg shook his head. "Christmas. We'll take it slow, like we have been. I want to know you, know him. But I had to meet him."

She nodded. Dazedly she turned to her son, slipping her hands free after a hard squeeze from Greg's. "Bennie? Do you think you could like Greg? Get to know him?"

Are you crying because you're happy or because you're sad? he asked with the forthrightness of a child.

"Because I'm very happy," she answered.

And he likes me? Bennie gave Greg an uncertain look.

Lola's voice was stilled on her lips when Greg covered her hands with his to hold them before himself again. He smiled at Bennie. "Yes, Bennie, I like you. And I like your mother." He winked at Lola, and whispered. "I've been working on that, making sure I had that much right."

Lola laughed again, a sensation filling her that felt remarkably like emotion of the warmest and deepest kind for the man before her.

"I'll work on this, but I'll need some help," he said.

"We can do that," Lola said, giving words to her son's movements.

Bennie held out his hand to Greg. And smiled.

About the author:

With more than half a dozen ebooks currently to her credit and her first print book released in 2008 to rave reviews, Diana Castilleja has kept busy since she started writing professionally in late 2004.

Diana currently resides in central Texas with her husband and son. When not focusing her energy on her family and her writing, she loves to travel and haunt bookstores. She's lived in several states across the south and midwest, as well as traveling to Mexico. With moving every year or changing schools since the fourth grade to her sophomore year, she learned reading was a fast escape. The freedom to read about anything and everything has fueled her adult imagination. She is most likely currently sitting at her desk, having it out with her keyboard writing her next book.

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