

Christmas Escape

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Dedicated

To the Brave Men & Women of Our Armed Services

Chapter One

Most Christmas memories make me cringe.

Dad was a drunk who ranted and raved about not having any money to buy gifts. Yet, he somehow found extra bucks to splurge on whiskey. His temper flared at the mention of getting a tree, but on Christmas Eve, he always dragged in a straggly mess he found discarded at a tree lot.

While sweeping up pine needles, my mother would profusely thank him. My brothers would haul out the box of ornaments and strings of lights. No matter how careful they were, a glass blub would break setting dad into a tirade. “You ungrateful brats get to bed.”

Early Christmas morning, my brothers rushed to open the few presents my mother managed to buy. Unable to afford wrapping paper she covered the boxes in newsprint: comics for the kids, sports pages for dad.

In-between sips of his favorite libation dad repeatedly wished everyone, “A ### Merry Christmas.”

To this day, I hate cuss words, because they remind me of my offensive father. I walk out on movies after I hear a few swear word. I’ve thrown away heaps of books where the vernacular is laced with profanities, and I avoid people who limit their vocabulary by relying on four letter expletives.

When the boys opened their packages, they expressed their excitement. Playing their voices created a din. My father half in the bag joined in their games at least for a little while. Then he started getting rough slapping one boy on the side of his head, pushing another to the floor. The boys followed suit becoming rambunctious. Why they never learned is beyond me. Suddenly my father’s mood would change. Along with his foul breath, he’d spew out obscenities. His hands would reach for one boy his feet for the other. He usually pinned them down. My guess is he wanted them to realize what was coming.

He listened to them plead, “Please dad don’t.”

In slow motion, he’d pull off his belt. With all his strength he’d strike. At times, the boys were lucky and scrambled away. If they did, dad would hurl his wrath on my mother who was puffing on a cigarette passively watching.

At that point, I ran to my room, hid under my bed, and prayed he’d pass out.

It seemed other families spent the day in similar fashion. Through the thin walls of our tenement, I could hear familiar scenarios: a mother punishing a child, because a cheap toy broke; a father screaming at his children to be quite; a mother whining about spilt milk; a father threatening to beat the living daylights out of a kid because the dad couldn’t figure out how to assemble a toy.

Nowadays I dread the Christmas season. Fortunately, the accounting agency where I work closes for the weeks before and after Christmas. Adding my vacation gives me time to avoid all the fuss: no Christmas parties, no secret Santa, and no Christmas card exchange.

During the last few years, I’ve spent my Christmas escape in warm climates. This November I was heading for a plush resort in Scottsdale, Arizona. Its online ad boasted of sunny days with temperatures in the high seventies and low eighties. A delightful change from the windy cold Chicago I was fleeing.

While waiting to board a flight to Phoenix, I glanced around the bustling airport. Folks bundled up in winter gear were chatting, reading, texting, and talking on their cells. Not

wanting to lug a heavy coat to the desert, I wore a cardigan sweater under a light jacket. My eyes wandered to the large windows. A silvery plane taxied along the tarmac.

The cries of a toddler caught my attention. His young mother attempted to quiet him. She removed his snowsuit and cradled him in her arms. Her cooing voice suggested, "Hush Jonathan hush."

The boy squirmed, thrashed his legs, and screeched.

A gloved hand appeared from the seat behind them. An exaggerated high-pitched voice said, "Hi Jonathan, I'm Mitch. Want to play the counting game?" The glove slowly folded each digit. "One, two, three, four, five."

Entertained the toddler stopped crying and tilted his head toward the puppet, touched it, and giggled.

A ticket agent announced, "Phoenix Flight 397 is now ready for boarding."

Majority of the crowd stood.

I heard the young mother thank the puppeteer.

The man turned to acknowledge her. His intriguing face rugged, manly, and heavily scarred stunned me.

Chapter Two

Comfortably sitting in a window seat, I watched the long line of approaching passengers. I focused on one in particular. He was tall, had curly black hair, was wearing a parka, and walked with a slight limp. I noticed his left arm hung stiffly from his broad shoulder.

To my surprise, he slipped into the seat next to mine.

For a split second, our eyes met. His were deep brown and warm.

I smiled and introduced myself, "Hi I'm Lily."

"I'm..."

"You're Mitch the man with the counting puppet."

He laughed. "The oldest of four I've learned a few tricks to distract kids."

His right fingers wrapped around his left arm and gently placed it on the armrest between us. His left hand prosthesis almost looked real.

"Are you going home for the holidays?" he asked.

"No." Thinking my plan to escape would shock him I didn't elaborate. "What about you?"

"My sister Kate's getting married this weekend."

I exhaled relieved he didn't mention Christmas.

"During the last six months both she and my mom have talked of nothing else."

"Do you visit often?"

"I haven't seen them since..." He hesitated and patted his left arm.

I sensed he was uncomfortable. "I'm sure the wedding will be perfect and positive everyone will be glad to see you."

He shook his head. "They're going to be disappointed when I arrive solo."

I stared at him.

"They don't believe I'm happy."

"Why not? Sorry I didn't mean to pry."

Safety instructions from the flight attendant interrupted our conversation.

I fastened my seat belt. A few minutes later, the plane soared into the air.

Mitch kept talking. "Engaged to my college sweetheart I was shipped to Afghanistan where I sustained a few injuries and realized I wasn't really in love. Fortunately, she felt the same way. Since then I haven't dated...much. Do you live in Phoenix?"

"No I'm going to Scottsdale on vacation."

"Vacation from what?"

"I'm an accountant. What's your profession?"

"Actually I'm in-between positions."

I lowered my gaze in shame thinking with only one arm he wasn't able to work.

"I've successfully completed an air traffic controller course, got certified, and am waiting for an opening. Quite a change from ranching, but I think I'm going to love it."

"Did you grow up on a ranch?"

"Sure did. My family has a spread in Payson right in the heart of Arizona."

The flight attendant asked, "What would like to drink?"

We both ordered water.

He asked me, "How long are you staying in Arizona?"

"Several weeks."

“Wonderful. Then you’ll have a chance to visit our small town. This time of year it’s especially pretty especially if it snows.”

My head jerked back. “Snow in Arizona?”

“At 5,000 feet we get a few inches a year.”

During the next three hours and nineteen minutes, Mitch and I discussed an array of topics. He was extremely interesting and had a great sense of humor. If I hadn’t known about his injuries I would have thought he didn’t have a care in the world.

Chapter Three

The baggage section was teeming with travelers anxious to leave the airport.

Mitch scooted a luggage cart in my direction. "Couldn't find two, but we can share."

"Wait until you see how much luggage I have."

"No worries. I only have a duffle bag."

Just then, I spotted one of my colorful pieces. I reached for it. Mitch did too. His hand covered mine. A hot sensation shot through me.

He cleared his throat. "It suits you."

Unsure if he was teasing or complimenting me I didn't react.

"This airport can be a bit tricky," he said. "Are you renting a car or taking a hotel van?"

"A van."

Within minutes, Mitch retrieved my other three pieces of luggage and loaded them onto the cart. I followed him out the west exit.

The sweltering air assaulted me. Unconsciously I raised my hand and fanned my face.

"I thought the heat was why you came to Arizona."

All at once, a group of people surrounded us. Each person greeted Mitch and me with long hugs. A woman who resembled Mitch clutched my hands. "I can't tell you how much you escorting Mitch to his sister Kate's wedding means to me."

She stroked my cheek. Her nurturing touch almost brought tears to my eyes.

She shifted her gaze and peered at Mitch. "It's obvious you're good for my boy. I haven't seen him this happy in years."

I tried to think of a way to tell her the truth, but her words stopped me from speaking.

She lowered her voice, "Thank you for seeing beyond his wounds."

Mitch stepped between us. "Lily this is my mom Ann." He turned in her direction, "Mom I'd like you to meet Lily. She's an accountant from Chicago."

"Is that where you two met?"

"We met at ..." Mitch began. I nudged his right side.

"We met at a mutual friend's party," I lied.

"See Mitch your mother was right about socializing."

"Mom..."

"You can fill in the details when we get home. By the way, you and Lily will be staying at Ben's old place. I thought you would appreciate the privacy."

My cheeks were stinging and I knew I was blushing.

Mitch whispered in my ear, "You're a saint Lily. Right after the wedding you can go back to your real life."

His lips brushed my neck causing chills to travel down my spine. His intoxicating affect explained why I was acting irrationally.

Chapter Four

At the airport parking lot, seven of us piled into a dusty SUV. The rest of the group filled two pickup trucks. In the confusion, I wasn't sure where my luggage was.

"We're all going to the ranch for a barbecue. Wait 'til you sink your teeth into our beef. Guaranteed it'll be the best you've ever tasted," the man behind the wheel said. "Don't think we've been introduced Lily, I'm Mitch's dad. Everyone calls me Boss."

"Glad to meet you." Somehow, I didn't think this was the time to tell him I was a vegetarian.

"He's everyone's boss but mine," Mitch's mom said.

The group laughed. That was the last I heard from Mitch's twin brothers Eddie and Joe who were sitting behind us. I assumed they slept most of the way home.

I was on Mitch's left. Kate was on his right. She held his hand during the entire two-hour trip and talked almost incessantly about her wedding.

Mitch said, "Can't believe your big day is finally about to arrive."

"Are you going on a honeymoon?" I asked.

"We were until our truck's engine blew up. Chad and I decided to cancel our reservations and use the money to put something down on a new 4x4 extended cab. It's a real beauty."

The terrain changed from flat to hilly to mountainous. Desert plants faded into the distance and tall trees cast shadows on the narrow road. Gravel replaced asphalt. Ruts slowed our pace. A cloud of dust trailed behind. I peered out the window staring at cattle grazing and I shared my amazement, "This is the first time I've seen or smelled so many animals up close."

Boss said, "Looks like Mitch got himself a real city girl."

His wife commented, "No matter. I can tell she's a quick learner. Give her a few days and she'll be delivering calves. In a few weeks, with her accounting skills she'll turn the whole ranch right side up again."

He didn't respond.

"Sorry honey. I didn't mean to insult you."

"What are you talking about?" Mitch asked.

"Your mom and I didn't want to worry you, but things at the ranch haven't been going so well."

"What your father means is with the economy tanked our profits are shrinking."

"More like disappearing," Kate added.

"She's right son. Everything from fuel to feed has gone up, but with two major brands buying up the surrounding ranches we can't compete with their lower prices."

"I had no idea."

"I'd welcome your little lady checking our books. Maybe she can come up with a business plan. Heavens knows Uncle Pete is too tired to try. What do you say Lily? After the wedding will you give my ledgers a gander?"

"Not that I'd mind, but I wouldn't want to step on anyone's toes especially one of your relatives."

"Pete won't mind. For sure, he'd be pleased to get help."

Kate said, "In all fairness Lily, you should know we're not the only ones hurting. The Phelps place went clear under. The whole clan moved to Montana."

Her mother said, "Hush dear no need to go on so. Let Mitch and his girl enjoy their visit."

"What about Peggy?" Mitch inquired.

From the look on Mitch's face, I figured Peggy was someone important to him.

"Did she and Dan go too?"

"Are you kidding? That witch dumped him just like she dumped you. She's just not one to stick by her men during hard times. Back at her daddy's ranch again she's probably searching for another man."

"Kate I'm ashamed of you for bad mouthing an old friend." Her mother warned, "You be sure to be extra nice to her tomorrow at your wedding. And that goes double for you Mitch."

One of the boys piped up, "Rad. Peggy's coming to the wedding. She's always so much fun."

I wished I could disappear, dissolve into the trailing dust. What a fool I'd been for pretending to be with Mitch who probably along with his brother longed to be with Peggy.

Chapter Five

Boss turned onto a dirt road lined with scrub oaks. He stopped in front of a log cabin. I noticed our bags were on the small porch.

He said, "You two can get cleaned up. Walk over anytime, but don't be late for dinner."

Kate gave Mitch a kiss.

His mother said, "Lily, hope you find the simple accommodations to your liking. You need anything just holler."

I got out of the car surprised by the cool temperature. I walked to the porch, crossed my arms, wrapped my hands around them, and waited for Mitch who was chatting with his dad.

As Boss drove away, I pushed my bags to the side. Mitch stepped up on the porch and grabbed for one.

"That won't be necessary. I'm not staying."

"What do you mean? The wedding's not until tomorrow."

"I don't know what I was thinking when I lied. I hate being untruthful especially to such nice people. Besides without me here you can get reacquainted with Peggy."

"Are you kidding? It'll take all my energy just to be civil to that ..."

"If you didn't have feelings for her you wouldn't be angry."

"You don't understand. There's nothing like combat to help a fellow see things clearly. I made my decision to break up with her before the incident. I didn't get a chance to tell her, because she sent me a Dear John letter while I was in the hospital. She explained she wasn't the nursemaid type."

His sad expression made me melt. "I'm sorry."

"No need to be. Hope this means you'll stay." He opened the unlocked door, picked up two bags, and stepped back, "You first."

Decorated with antique furniture, embroidered pillows, and crocheted throws the room was inviting.

He said, "I'll sleep in here."

"This couch is much too small. I insist you take the bedroom."

"When you see the bed you'll know I wasn't being a gentleman."

I walked into the other room. It was tiny. A double bed hugged one wall. There was barely enough room to walk sideways next to the other wall.

"I usually climb over the footboard to get into it. Yet again you've saved me."

We both laughed.

"At least it has a bathroom right through there." He pointed to the other side of the living room.

I walked toward an archway. "If it's okay with you I'd like to shower before dinner."

"Sure I'll start a fire."

Although the water was warm, it couldn't wash away my icy concerns.

Chapter Six

Wearing Mitch's parka, which reached down to my knees, I walked with him toward the main house.

"Before we arrive, you should know I don't eat meat."

"Thanks for the heads up. There'll be lots of salads and veggies. As long as your plate's full no one will notice."

"I hope I can remember everyone's name."

He waved his right hand through the air. "Stop worrying."

Toward the west, I watched the sun slip behind a mountain. The sky darkened. Almost immediately, thousands of stars popped into view.

"What about your family?" Mitch asked.

I was glad the night concealed my expression. "My parents are dead. So is one of my brothers."

"Did he die in the service?"

"No. He overdosed on heroin. We didn't have a stellar childhood."

"And your parents, what happened to them?"

"My father was the drunk driver in their fatal car crash."

Mitch took my hand in his and said no more. His touch erased my sadness.

Through the dimness, I saw lights shining from the trees. Family members were milling about. Boss made an announcement, "Listen up everyone. Ann wants to say Grace."

Mitch's mom Ann said, "Let's all hold hands."

She looked around and nodded at Mitch. We joined the circle.

"I want to give special thanks for having all my children and many relatives with us." She bowed her head in silent prayer. When she raised it up she said, "Okay you can chow down."

On a long table draped with a white tablecloth were trays filled with ribs, steaks, and burgers. Following were bowls filled with coleslaw, potato salad, green salad, green beans, tomatoes, and mushrooms.

"Your mom's amazing."

"And so are you. Thanks Lily for doing me this huge favor. You can't image how good it feels to be with you tonight."

I was about to tell him it felt good being with him too when Ann approached. "You two come sit next to us. I can't wait to find out everything about sweet Lily. Mitch how could you keep her a secret?"

We joined Boss and Kate at a round table.

Ann kept talking. "If I had known about you we would've invited your folks to the wedding."

Mitch told her about my parents dying in a car accident.

Ann patted my hand. "Do you have brothers or sisters?"

"Just one brother Doug he's in the army recently stationed in Nevada."

"Well that's not too far. Let him know he's invited for Christmas welcome to stay for as long as he can. We wouldn't dream of the two of you being separated for the holidays."

"Thank you. You're very kind." Since I'd be leaving soon I saw no point in telling her I hadn't seen Doug in over a year."

Chapter Seven

Feeling awkward stepping inside the small cabin, I removed the coat Ann lent me and shivered. “Good night Mitch can’t wait to get under the covers. It’s cold in here.”

“Wait.” He put his arm around me. “I’ll make a fire. Would you like a sip of brandy?” He removed his arm, opened a corner cabinet, and pulled out a bottle and two small crystal glasses.

Soon the brandy, crackling fire, and Mitch’s presence warmed me. I sat on the floor in front of the hearth. Mitch leaned against the stone facade and slowly lowered his body. I feared it was painful for him to be in this position. “Would you rather we sit on the sofa?”

“No not at all. I’m comfortable right here.”

He stared at me as he sipped his brandy.

I returned his gaze. Mitch was exceeding handsome. His scars rather than distracting from his good looks added to his masculine appearance.

Mitch started talking. “I want you know I’ll wear a long sleeve shirt to bed. This way if you want to use the bathroom or kitchen during the night you won’t be grossed out.”

Initially I didn’t know what to say. I lifted my cup and took a sip. The smooth liquid slipped down my throat and loosened by tongue. “Why don’t you use your left arm?”

“Haven’t you noticed I don’t have one? I can’t believe my mother didn’t share the gory details of it being blown to pieces. Not that I’m complaining. After the horror of the moment I had no choice but to accept what is or isn’t.”

I picked up his left hand, “What’s this?”

“A useless joke.”

“This attitude doesn’t suit you.”

He didn’t reply.

“I’ve seen people move their artificial limbs.”

“Like Captain Hook?”

“What kind do you have?”

“I’d rather we didn’t talk about it.”

“Why not? I sense you’ve given up learning how to operate your expensive piece of technology.”

“I tried and failed Lily.”

“Maybe it would help if you had someone work with you.”

“I did. Went to physical therapy for a while, but just couldn’t get the hang of it.”

“Are you supposed to be doing exercises?”

“Yup.”

“But you don’t. Right?”

“Right.”

His real hand lifted my chin. “I appreciate you caring, but I’m content with things as they are.”

I could see I couldn’t reach him. I changed the subject. “What time’s the wedding?”

“Not really sure, but right after breakfast my mom will put us to work.”

“In that case I’d better get some sleep.”

Chapter Eight

At seven thirty in the morning, Mitch and I approached his family's two-story farmhouse. We stepped onto its wide wraparound porch. Mitch didn't ring the bell or knock. I followed him into the large dining room and sat next to Kate.

I remarked, "You look so relaxed."

"Well I'm not. There's still a ton of stuff to do."

"How can I help?"

Ann responded, "After you have a bite you can join me in setting all the outside tables. As soon as the beautician arrives, Kate needs to get her hair and make-up done. Hopefully, we'll finish in time for me to get fussed over too."

Hours flew by. As if waving a magic wand Ann transformed their front yard into a fantasy world of white lace and tulle. The silver sparkled. Velvety rose petals glistened with dewdrops. Fabric covered the chairs and candles encased in glass globes graced the tables. I imagined the heat lamps glowing to keep the area warm.

Ann gave me a quick hug. "You're a great worker. I don't know what I'd have done without you."

"It was a treat to see you create this elegant ambiance."

"Thank you dear. Hope you don't mind, but I'd like to ask you another huge favor." She gave my arm a gentle squeeze. "With the wedding frenzy I haven't done any Snowflake Ornament shopping."

"What's that?"

"Each year Gila County Supervisors list children's ages and wishes on paper ornaments, which hang on a tree in the courthouse lobby. I blindly pick several ornaments and enjoy shopping for the little ones. With all our out of town company I don't see how I'm going to ... What I mean is could you and Mitch get a few gifts?"

My automatic response almost flew from my lips. *Absolutely not! I don't do Christmas!*

She must have sensed my ire. "I can understand you want to spend all your vacation time relaxing with Mitch. Please forgive me for asking, but these children need you."

Her sweetness shamed me. "Of course I'll be glad to get a few gifts. It'll be fun to have Mitch, who loves children be my consultant."

"Thank you my dear. I'm so glad you agreed to definitely stay through Christmas."

"What? That..."

"She cut me off. "Before our church service on Christmas Eve you and Mitch can pitch in and cook dinner for the homeless." Ann glanced at her watch. "The caterers can take over from here."

It was impossible for me to conceal the truth any longer. "There's something I must tell you."

"Me too," she said. "None of the children know 'cause we didn't want to upset them before the wedding and the holidays. I won't go into details, but his doctor said this maybe their dad's last Christmas." She patted my hand.

"I'm sorry Ann."

"Now dear you can understand why I want to spend every precious moment with him. You being here will make it easier on me and Mitch too." She led me to the living room.

“Looks like it’s all set for the ceremony.” The furniture was gone replaced with rows of gold chairs.

Before I could say another word, Ann dashed up the stairs into Kate’s room. I had to rush to keep pace. I stood in the doorway. Kate looked radiant in her wedding gown.

“My beautiful little girl I’m going to miss you.”

“Mom I’m not going far.”

The beautician said, “We’re almost done here Ann. By the time you’ve showered and dressed it’ll be your turn.”

“I’d better get ready too.” I left the room, went downstairs out the door where Boss all dressed in a suit was sitting on a rocking chair. “Just the man I was hoping to see. I haven’t been able to get a cell signal. Would it be possible to use your phone?”

“None of us get cell service up here so feel free to use the house phone anytime you’d like.” He rose, opened the front door, and pointed to a door down the hall.

In the privacy of his den, I called the resort and jotted numbers on a slip of notepaper.

Chapter Nine

Relieved to find the cabin empty I slipped into the bathroom and emptied my cosmetics on the small counter. Hoping steam would remove wrinkles from my fanciest dress. I hung it on the doorknob while I showered.

When I stepped into the living room, Mitch greeted me with a cat whistle. “You’re a knockout. I’ll be the envy of every guy at the wedding.”

“You look pretty sharp yourself.”

“Let’s get out of here before I decide to keep you all for myself.”

I folded Ann’s coat over my arm and headed for the door.

“Wait. I thought you might like to sign a card for Kate and Chad.”

“Definitely.”

He handed me an unsealed white envelope.

I removed his card and feeling a hint of guilt, read his touching inscription. After adding my own, I slipped it back in the envelope and tucked it in his jacket pocket as I said, “It’s for their eyes only.”

Mitch reached for my hand. “Shall we?”

The afternoon sun barely warmed my face, but Mitch’s light touch ignited an inner passion heating my body.

As we approached the front yard, our stroll abruptly ended. Mitch dropped my hand to greet the guests. Aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends each in turn embraced him. When a statuesque redhead purred, “Sure do miss you, babe.” I knew it was Peggy. In her next breath, she introduced her date. “I’d like you to meet my fiancé.”

Mitch nodded. He started to move away. “Please excuse me.” He squeezed through the crowd.

I followed, but soon lost sight of him. I was walking toward the house when I heard him call, “Lily, Lily there’s someone I want you to meet.”

I turned in the direction of his voice. Just for an instant, his head stuck out above the others. Then it disappeared.

When I reached him, Mitch was crouched down speaking to a man in a wheelchair.

He motioned me to come closer. “Lily, this Parker. We’re friends from way back.”

I lowered my body and reached for Parker’s extended hand.

“Best friend a guy could ever have.”

Mitch cleared his throat.

“Does she know about our college glory days as football stars?”

“Mitch hasn’t told me much about himself.”

“No matter, from what I’ve heard you two are good together.”

A petite blonde joined us. “Great to see you Mitch.”

“Hi Cindy, this is Lily.”

I rose and shook her hand.

“I’m Parker’s wife.” She rubbed his shoulders. “We’d better go inside. I think the ceremony’s about to begin.”

Parker pushed forward saying, “Later guys.”

Mitch sat in the front row his mother on his left and me on his right.

The pianist played Wagner’s “Wedding March”. The group stood and turned.

I watched Kate escorted by her dad slowly walk down the aisle. She was beaming. When she reached Chad, her father's tender kiss made my eyes tear.

While I was happy for her, I felt a wave of sadness wash over me. Why hadn't my dad loved us? Why didn't he live long enough to change his heart? Why did my brother have to go to his grave feeling empty and alone?

Trying to dispel my sorrowful thoughts, I focused on Kate and Chad as they exchanged vows sharing endearing words.

Mitch took my hand and my sadness melted away.

Chapter Ten

I stepped onto the porch and gazed at the front yard. Hundreds of strung lights like stars twinkled and cast a shimmering glow.

We sat with Parker and Cindy.

Parker asked Mitch, "Did you tell her we were in the Corps together?"

Mitch was silent.

"If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be here today. He literally gave his arm to save my life."

Mitch snickered. "If it wasn't for me you'd never have joined the Marines."

"Yup, that's true. When neither of us jocks got drafted by a profession team you suggested we join up."

"Not my best idea."

"You're wrong pal. I was lost, drinking too much. Couldn't handle the disappointment. You were brutal telling me we didn't have enough of what it took to be pros, but reminded me we each had lots of other talents."

"Soldiering wasn't one of them."

"We both have medals that say different. Besides, I had a great time becoming a genuine hero. And I'll never forget you were there for me every step of the way. Listened to me complain in boot camp, stopped me from playing cards with sharks, rescued me from barroom brawls, and pulled me away before I was blown to bits."

"If only I acted faster and grabbed you seconds sooner." Mitch lowered his head.

Parker raised his voice, "Look at me." He waited until their eyes met. "Don't feel sorry for me just because I lost my legs. The way I look at it, at least I once had them and had enough talent to play ball, dance, and swim. Some people aren't so lucky. Maybe some young guy has my talents right now. Maybe he'll work harder. Maybe he'll go pro. As for me, I have a list of talents. No matter how long I live, I'll never be able to use them all."

Mitch reached over and hugged Parker.

"Enough sentimentality for one day. Why don't you dance with your girl?"

As Mitch and I approached the dance floor, I noticed Peggy and her fiancé kissing.

The dance floor swelled with couples. I wrapped my arms around Mitch. He held me close with his right arm. I looked up at him enjoying his dreamy expression.

As we swayed to the music I told him, "You're a good dancer must be the athlete in you."

He chuckled. "You're too kind."

Suddenly, Peggy and her beau bumped into us.

As if neither her fiancé nor I was there Peggy said, "This could've been our wedding."

Mitch replied, "I'm sure we're both happy it isn't."

"I'm not so sure. Anytime you want to talk just give me a call."

Mitch gave me a squeeze. I wondered if he was being affectionate or excited by what Peggy just said.

I was about to ask him when he stopped dancing and started to walk away. "Let's give Kate and Chad, their card."

We waited in line as the newlyweds received congrats from their audience.

Finally, it was our turn. After exchanging hugs, Mitch said, "Please open it now."

Kate pulled the card from its envelope. “Wow,” she exclaimed handing it to Chad. “Everyone listen up.” She waited for quiet. “My brother Mitch and his lovely girlfriend Lily gave us along with lots of cash weeks in the honeymoon suite at the 5-Star Princess Resort in Scottsdale.”

The guests applauded.

As we headed back toward our table Mitch said, “I can’t let you give my sister such an extravagant present.”

“Why not?”

“You hardly know her.”

“Actually I’m only being practical. I already prepaid for my room. While I’m staying here I thought it silly to waste all that money for nothing. Fortunately, the hotel was kind enough to switch my reservations to the honeymoon suite for a shorter time frame.”

Chapter Eleven

Next morning dreams of Mitch filled of my waking head. Covered with a handmade quilt resting on comfy-pillows I languished in bed thinking about this remarkable man. Finally, I forced myself to rise. When I entered the living room, Mitch was sitting in an armchair reading.

“With all your partying last night Mitch, I’m surprised to see you ready this early.”

“Guess you really don’t know me yet.”

“Guess not.”

“I learned a few things about you though all good I should add.” He winked at me.

“Can’t imagine how I can repay you for being my charming date.”

“To start with, while I shower you can go to the main house, have breakfast, and get your mom’s car.”

“No can do.”

“Ugh?”

Mitch pointed to his arm. “I can’t drive.”

“Oh I see.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Parker told me it’s legal for you to drive as long as you master basic control of your new hand.”

“What does he know?”

“I’ll pretend you didn’t say that.”

“Guess I’ll just wait outside while you get ready.”

“Before you leave I’ve thought of a way you can even the score between us.”

“Okay, name it and your wish will be granted.”

“Starting right now you’ll do your arm exercises.”

Mitch grimaced, “Although I’ve been tricked a deal’s a deal.” He rummaged through his duffel, pulled out a notebook, and walked toward the door

I saluted him. “Way to go Marine.”

An hour later, I was inching along in Ann’s AWD SUV. “Driving your mom’s car on this rugged road is making me nervous.”

“Heck you’re doing fine. You should see how some folks take these turns racing the whole way.”

“Well I hope they’re not out today.”

He chuckled. “The good news is it’s a private road. The length of it is on our land.”

“How much property does your family own?”

“A little over 2,000 acres is all.”

When we arrived in Payson Mitch directed me to the courthouse. A decorated Christmas tree dominated the lobby. Paper ornaments shaped liked angels dangled from branches.

“Take a few,” he suggested.

I turned one over and read a name. I tried another and another until I found a boy’s name.

“Let’s see.”

I showed it to Mitch. “Aren’t you going to take any?”

“Yup, after you choose.”

“I chose five boys ages two to seventeen.”

Mitch glanced at my choices. Then, he chose five of his own.

Once outside again I looked at crisscrossed strings of Christmas lights suspended above the wide street. Colorful flags, depicting Santa and his elves, hung from street lamps. A few store windows were flocked with artificial snow. I couldn't avoid the majority painted with Christmas scenes or holiday greetings. Most of all I disliked the blaring Christmas music. “Seems like every singer cut a Christmas album.”

“That's 'cause most folks celebrate Christmas.”

I wanted to scream I don't, but kept my thought to myself.

We walked along until we reached a toy store.

Mitch seemed excited. “Can't tell you how many hours I gazed through this glass while imagining playing with lots of the merchandise.” He pressed his nose to the windowpane.” His right hand pulled me closer. “What would you like, little girl?”

I stepped back. “Nothing.”

“Hold on a sec. Before we go inside I insist we switch ornaments.”

“Oh no I like mine.”

“Why didn't you choose any girls?”

“I wanted to buy things I thought my brothers would've liked. Things they didn't get when they were growing up.”

“What about you? Did you get everything you wished for?”

“After awhile I stopped wishing stopped hoping.”

“Here take these. Buy girl stuff.”

“To be honest I think it'll be too painful.”

“Like me doing my arm exercises.”

Getting his point, I exchanged ornaments.

Chapter Twelve

Next day the air was cool and damp. Cloud cover hid the sun giving the earth a grayish tint.

With Mitch in the passenger seat, I sat behind the wheel of a pickup truck hoping it wouldn't rain.

"Here scoot this pillow under your..." Mitch waited for me to readjust my position.

"The visibility is great, but I've never driven a truck before."

"Piece of cake."

I turned the key and to my surprise, the massive vehicle drove like a car. We passed the bunkhouse. Two men splitting wood stopped their work to wave, but I dared not remove my hands from the steering wheel.

"How often do your parents bring supplies to the homeless shelter?" I asked Mitch.

"I don't know. I haven't lived with them since I graduated from high school. But I'm sure they always donate warm clothing, blankets, and a whole steer every December."

I swallowed a lump of shame and shared, "Hopefully their generosity makes up for my parents' selfishness."

"Everyone gives what they can in their own way."

"Not my folks. They were too busy taking to even think of giving."

"Do you miss them?"

"I miss the opportunity of them one day being different."

Suddenly, a deluge fell from the sky making it impossible for me to see.

Mitch reached his right hand over his body and flicked on the windshield wipers.

"Better."

"Yes but what about the dirt road?" Won't it turn to mud? Won't we get stuck?"

Mitch laughed. "You sure do worry a lot. The dirt's hard packed. It'll take more than a sprinkle to soften it up."

He was right. Although the rain didn't let up the road seemed solid.

"As we approached the homeless shelter, I decided I would ask someone who worked there to park the truck. However, when I turned into the driveway Mitch directed me to pull up to a large bay door. "You stay put while I get a couple of guys to help us unload."

Disregarding his advice or the rain, I stepped outside and untied the ropes, but left the tarp in place.

Within moments, the bay door opened. Mitch and two young men were standing inside a garage. Together we removed various sized boxes from the back of the pickup and piled them in the garage.

"Where do you want the meat?" I asked.

One man answered, "Bring it into the kitchen. It has to be sorted before we can freeze it."

I carried several boxes into the shelter. Women and children greeted me.

"It's beginning to look like Christmas," one woman dressed in tattered clothes sang.

A few of the children shouted, "Merry Christmas."

I couldn't help but reply, "Merry Christmas."

One little girl wearing clothes a few sizes too big took my hand. "We're making presents. Want to come see?"

I followed her into a larger room filled with old sofas and mixed matched chairs. She led me to a long table stacked with pinecones. “We’re making wreaths. Want to help?”

She was so adorable I couldn’t refuse. I watched her making a form by weaving wire into a circle. I attempted to do the same.

“We’ve been collecting the cones since October. Didn’t know what we’d do with them until the wire factory gave us these spools.”

“How long have you lived here?”

“We don’t. Nobody does. This way we all get turns staying during the cold months.”

Her cheerful nature made me want to cry. I realized how lucky I was to have grown up living in an apartment with heat, running water, and clean sheets. I realized how fortunate I was to have food everyday never feeling hungry. I realized how ungrateful I was for all my parents provided.

“My name is Lily. What’s yours?”

“Really? Mine’s Jasmine. Wait ‘til I tell my mom I met another flower.”

“Jasmine what would you like for Christmas?”

She shrugged her shoulders. “A nice dinner I guess.”

“Certainly there’s a special gift you’d like.”

She paused. “You’d probably laugh if I told you.”

“Promise I won’t.”

Again, she paused perhaps wondering if she could trust me.

“There was something actually two things I wanted, but my mom said I was being greedy wanting so much. She also said my reason for wanting those things was silly so I stopped wanting them.”

“What were they?”

Jasmine came close and whispered her secret desires in my ear, “I want a doctor’s kit and an anatomy book. ‘Cause when I grow up I want to be a doctor.”

I tried to hold back my tears, but one slipped down my cheek.

Jasmine gingerly brushed it away as she said, “You might be allergic to pitch from the pinecones ‘cause your eyes are watery.”

“You young lady are exceedingly wise.”

Chapter Thirteen

By the time we left the homeless shelter, the sun was shining. Mitch suggested, “Let’s stop and get a few decorations.”

“For your mom?”

He laughed. “My mom has enough holiday stuff to open a Christmas store. I just thought you’d like to decorate the cabin in your own way.”

“I don’t decorate.”

He shook his head. “Before it snows, while we can still get around easily we’d better cut down a tree.”

“There’s hardly enough room for us in the cabin. Where would we put a tree?”

He chuckled. “You sure do have excuses to escape Christmas, but I’m cutting one down with or without you.”

I wondered how he’d manage using only one arm. “Maybe your brothers can tag along?”

“Nah. One swipe of the ax and we’ll have a perfect one for our tiny home.”

At the store, while I tried to tune out the Christmas music, Mitch sang along in a loud voice. In-between songs he asked, “What’s your favorite?”

“I don’t have one.”

Rows of glistening objects dominated. “I can’t imagine all this merchandize selling.”

“Come back next week and the shelves will be empty.”

He stopped moving, pointed to tree toppers. “Would you like a star, an angel, or...?”

A childhood memory flooded my mind. “I always wished we had an angel.” I reached up to the highest shelf and picked up a box containing one. I stroked her white velvet gown and felt a tingle of anticipation. Her wavy brunet hair reminded me of mine. Her porcelain face with delicate features epitomized beauty. Even under the harsh fluorescent lights her halo of spun gold twinkled.

I started to return her to the shelf, but Mitch took the box from my hand and placed it in a shopping cart.

“She’s lovely,” he said.

Words flowed from my lips. “I can envision my angel on top of our tree. Beneath her like an extension of her gown, tiny white lights will illuminate the tree. Branches will bob with snowy ornaments. Miniature white poinsettias will peek through the greenery, and streamers from a gold ribbon bow will twirl down its center.”

Determined to duplicate this image, I scoured the shelves until I located exactly what I wanted.

When the shopping cart was full, I asked Mitch, “Do you think we’ll have enough?”

“Follow me. There’s something else we’ll need.”

“Of course, we’ll need a skirt.” Along the way, I spotted a white on white embroidered one and grabbed it.

When I reached Mitch, he was staring at a crystal nativity. Within a stable, Mary and Joseph were gazing at their hallowed babe. Sculpted figurines—three wise men, a shepherd, two sheep, and a cow---surrounded the Holy Family.

“Do you like it?”

Overwhelmed by emotion I merely nodded.

Chapter Fourteen

Soon after driving through the gates of his ranch, Mitch directed me to turn off the rutted road onto a dirt one. We slowly inched up the bumpy muddy trail into a wooded area. I stopped the truck and glanced around.

“See something you like?”

“I think so.”

Mitch went to the back of the truck, opened a silver toolbox, and pulled out an ax. “Show me.”

Amongst a cluster of taller trees, I pointed to a sapling.

“Good choice. This little guy has no place to grow.”

With one whack, Mitch cut it down.

We each grabbed an end and carried it to the truck.

An hour later, Mitch and I started decorating.

At sunset, a chill swept through the cabin.

Mitch made a fire. Within minutes, the tiny space felt warm and cozy.

“Looks like, we’re in for a cold night. Aren’t you glad we brought home takeout?”

We sat by the crackling fire feasting on Chinese food.

I stared at our tree. Atop the coffee table, it pointed toward the vaulted ceiling. It glowed, twinkled, and shimmered. Next to it, the nativity scene glistened in the soft light.

“Mitch thanks for today.”

“I enjoyed it too.” He placed his hand above my head, reached over, and kissed my cheek. “Don’t be angry. It’s a tradition.” He showed me a sprig of mistletoe.

Wishing he’d kissed me just because, I felt a bit disappointed.

Chapter Fifteen

While I made a fruit salad, Ann prepared pancake batter. I asked, “Do you always cook like this?”

She chuckled, “Oh, no. Usually Boss and I have cereal or toast. In the past, if Boss wanted a big breakfast he’d drive down to the bunkhouse. Now he just smells bacon and gains weight.”

I poured maple syrup in a glass pitcher, warmed it in the microwave, and brought it and the fruit into the dining room.

Mitch and his dad were discussing the ranch.

Boss faced me. “You’re just the lady I need. Do you think you could look over our books today?”

I glanced at Mitch who didn’t offer any advice.

“Are you sure you’d like me to see your confidential records?”

“Yup, I’m positive. It’s about time a real account looked things over.”

Ann brought in the pancakes and sat down.

“I took a taste. “Mm good and they’re so fluffy.”

“Next time I’ll share my secret.” She turned to Mitch. “Son, did you tell Lily about Tonto Natural Bridge State Park?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “It has the largest travertine bridge in the world.”

“I’d love to go see it.”

“Mitch will take you in the spring. Won’t you dear?”

I wondered if I’d still be seeing Mitch in springtime.

After breakfast Mitch, Boss, and I went to Boss’ office. It was a large cluttered space.

Boss ushered me to his desk. “Take a seat.” He pointed to stacks of paper. “Bank statements, ledgers, tax returns, monthly receipts if you need anything else, just let me know.”

“I’m impressed. Looks like you’ve been through a few audits in your day.”

“While you’re busy here I’d like Mitch to have a chat with our foreman.”

I delved into his records losing track of time. Hours later, Boss and Mitch returned.

“Well?” Boss asked.

“I’ve only had time to skim the materials, but I’ve discovered a few things.”

“Like?”

“It appears you’re been overpaying the federal government and a few banks as well. Your returns were prepared using old tax tables. Also, I’m wondering about why you haven’t refinanced your mortgage and operating loans. The interests you’re paying are much higher than the going rates.”

Boss scratched his head. “I don’t understand? Pete’s a fine bookkeeper.”

“Is he a CPA?”

“Nah. He’s strictly old school: an honest hardworking fellow. He used to do the books for lots of folks in these parts, but now I’m his only client.”

“Looks as if, he applied old time accounting to a modern day ranch.”

“Maybe he’s right about wanting to retire. Maybe it’s time for him to go out to pasture.”

“While you’re here would you help me find a replacement?”

“Be happy to.”

Chapter Sixteen

Saturday evening Mitch's family and the ranch hands caravanned to Payson. The streets were crowded and it took a while to park all our vehicles.

Ann asked me, "Have you ever seen an electric light parade?"

"No this will be my first."

"There are fifty entries including merchants, private folk, and charities."

When the music started, I watched the first float coming down the street. Through the darkness, a comical animated Santa winked and shouted, "Ho, ho, ho. Merry Christmas." Next was a red and green train, piled high with toys. Each successive float seemed to outdo the previous one. There were floats filled with deer prancing in the air. There were floats with snowmen, snow queens, and snowmobiles. Some made me laugh. Others were more serious depicting nativity scenes. Still others were more commercial advertising locale services.

I scanned the crowd noticing people of all ages. Even in the dimness, I could see their joyful expressions. While I joined them in clapping and saying, "Ooh and ah," I felt exhilarated.

"Did you like it?" Ann asked.

"It was magical."

She gave me a hug. "It's been a Payson tradition for a long time."

As we walked toward her car, we came face to face with Peggy.

"Hi," she said. "Where's Mitch? I have exciting news for him."

Mitch along with his brothers joined us. "Here I am. What's up?"

Peggy wrapped her long arms around his neck. Her ruby lips kissed his.

I couldn't see if he returned her kiss, but I noticed he didn't push her away.

"After seeing you at Kate's wedding I broke off my engagement."

I wondered why she shared this private information in public.

"Now it can be like old times again." She gave him another kiss. "Want to celebrate at our old haunt? Surely you remember our outrageous nights at the Ox Bow Saloon."

Mitch moved back causing Peggy to stumble onto his chest.

"Shall we go?" I asked Ann.

In way of response, she laced her arm through mine.

From behind us, I heard Peggy's sultry voice. "What'd you say? Let's really light up the night."

"I already have plans."

"Oh, I see. You're with the whole clan. I understand. Call me when you can get away."

All my elated feelings dissolved. I wished I could disappear into the dark night giving Mitch a chance to reconnect with his former lover. I wished I could be at the resort escaping both Mitch and Christmas.

Chapter Seventeen

The next morning I told Mitch, "I'm spending the day with your mom. We're going to town to buy Christmas cards. When we get back, we'll write to service men and women."

"That'll please the lucky few who'll receive your messages. Cards and letters from folks I never met meant a lot to me especially when stationed far from home close to the enemy."

"My reason for helping her wasn't exactly altruistic. I thought it'd be good for you and me to have time apart. Just because I accepted your mother's invitation to stay until Christmas doesn't mean you have to be my sitter. Go see your friends or do whatever."

"Now that you mention it there're a few things I'd like to do on my own."

His words pierced my heart. Without looking at him, I bolted out the door.

Ann all bundled up in a winter coat, hat, scarf, and gloves, was waiting for me on the front porch.

"Am I late?" I asked.

"No no. Mitch called to say you were on your way."

I followed her into the garage.

"Can you drive, dear?"

"Sure," I said.

Once we were on our way, I asked, "How's Boss doing?"

"Happy you're taking me to town."

"Mitch is glad to see me go too."

"I doubt that. He made a point of saying he'd work on the cards with you tomorrow. Good thing 'cause Boss has a doctor's appointment and I'm going with him to Phoenix."

"Have you heard from Kate?"

"She called to say they're having a splendid time. No surprise those two always enjoy each other's company."

"When did Kate and Chad meet?"

"Just like Mitch and Peggy they were childhood friends, high school sweethearts, and college lovers."

Her words assaulted my heart.

"The difference between the two couples is Kate and Chad never broke up 'cause they never had reason to. Neither of them intentionally hurt the other. Kate and Chad have always been best friends, kind, caring, and loving, which leads me to believe they'll live happily ever after."

She sighed. "Peggy hasn't been good for Mitch. She plays games with men toys with their egos. Even as a youngster, she hurt Mitch and other boys too. I don't believe she loves herself enough to love someone else. Her mother has mental problems takes all sorts of drugs always neglected Peggy. Her dad won't divorce the woman, but hasn't been faithful to her either. Poor Peggy never received their full attention. In the past, she spent lots of time at our place. As if she were one of my own, I grew to love her. Boss and the kids do too. But when I see her cat claws reaching for Mitch my mother's heart is torn. Despite how much I care for Peggy my instincts to protect my son always win out."

"Maybe she gives Mitch more than she takes."

Ann shook her head. "Everything Peggy does is strictly for Peggy. Sadly, no matter how much she has it's never enough."

Although I envied the times Peggy shared with Mitch, I pitied her for sabotaging their happiness.

Ann continued, “At the parade Peggy tried to pounce on Mitch. She expected him to leap into her clutches.” Ann patted my arm. “Being in a relationship with you stopped him from falling into Peggy’s trap.”

I wanted to tell Ann I meant nothing to Mitch. I wanted her know I was merely a stranger to him. I longed to confess I was a fraud.

“I can see you genuinely care for Mitch and I’m exceedingly grateful.”

She was right I cared for him. Heck. Truth was I was falling in love with him. “He’s a great guy easy to like.”

“And you’re a wonderful woman easy to love.”

Chapter Eighteen

Mitch entered the cabin after midnight. Although my light was out, I was awake wondering where he spent his day speculating where he spent his evening.

During the wee hours of the night, I must have fallen asleep. I woke at nine. I tiptoed into the living room. I glanced at Mitch wrapped up in a quilt. His eyes shut.

“Good morning,” he said startling me. “Have you looked outside?”

I turned and peered through the window. How could I’ve passed it without seeing the snow? A thin layer of white covered the path, dusted the trees, and rested on the porch steps. Tiny flakes were falling from the sky. Mesmerized by the view I didn’t hear Mitch come up behind me.

He draped his right arm over my shoulder. I turned round and gave him a hug.

He stepped back, walked away saying, “Sorry for offending you. Sorry you got to see me this way.”

As he retreated into the bathroom, although he was wearing a long sleeve tee shirt I could see the absence of his left forearm.

I followed him, but he slammed the door shut. “Mitch, wait. It’s okay. I’m fine.”

He cracked the door open and peeked his head out.

“Sometimes I forget it’s gone. Sometimes I can swear I feel my hand touching stuff.”

“Come on out of there.”

“You sure?”

“I’m sure.”

He slowly walked toward me his eyes staring into mine.

I stepped closer. My hands cupped his elbows. I stood on my toes, and kissed each of his cheeks. I was about to kiss his lips when thoughts of him spending the day and evening with Peggy stopped me.

Without any emotion I said, “I think this morning would be a good day to help you with your exercises.”

He embraced me. His right arm covered my back. His left upper arm gave me a squeeze. A bolt of passion surged within me. My heart raced. My head swooned. I wanted Mitch, but knew he wanted Peggy. The thought of her sobered me bringing me back to reality.

“How do we start?”

“First you promise to go horseback riding with me this afternoon.”

“We have cards to address.”

“You don’t know how to ride, do you?”

“No I don’t and I’ve never been fond of big animals.”

“Guess each of us fears new experiences.”

I knew he was right. Yet, I persisted, “But it’s snowing.”

“Horses like snow. Lucky for you it makes them slow down.”

“I can see you’re not going to give up. Therefore, I agree.”

He rustled my hair. “That’s my girl.”

I silently wished his words were true.

Chapter Nineteen

The snow fell, the fire crackled, and Mitch exercised.

I wasn't really needed. All I did was count repetitions. He didn't moan, groan, or complain, but I noticed his strained face, and sweat dampening his shirt.

At noon, we left the cabin. By then the sun was shining.

"The snow is melting."

"Sure is. Let's pack a picnic and go for a ride."

The house was empty. "It seems strange for it to be this quiet."

We stepped into the kitchen. I opened the refrigerator. Mitch opened the freezer. When I knelt down to sift through the vegetable drawer Mitch slipped an ice cube down my shirt.

I screamed, turned, and pounded his chest.

He hugged me. "Thanks for this morning."

"You have a funny way of showing appreciation." I slipped out of his embrace and started making tomato sandwiches.

He leaned over my shoulder and said, "Along with the toasted bread, lettuce, and tomato I'll have some bacon. My mom always keeps cooked strips in the freezer."

I put out my hand blocking him. "I'll get it. You can't be trusted in there."

By the time we reached the stables, the snow had vanished. We stopped at a corral. Two horses stood side by side. Their heads lopped over the fence. One was tall, sleek, and chocolate brown. The other was stocky with splotches of white against its tan body.

As Mitch approached, they lifted their heads. The bigger one kicked his front legs high in the air and whinnied.

Mitch grinned. "I'm happy to see you too, Jabbar." He faced me. "Jabbar's my horse from way back. His name means mighty."

I stared at the majestic creature. "Seems appropriate."

"Once upon a time it wasn't. When I got him he was just a colt and quite sickly."

Jabbar rubbed his massive head against Mitch's shoulder.

Mitch slipped his hand under Jabbar and scratched his belly. "One morning I tagged along with my dad. While he delivered a side of beef to the main house, I ran to the stables. This little guy was lying down in a stall. I crawled under the gate. Only his eyes moved. They seemed too big for his little head. I petted him, whispered in his ear telling him I wanted him with all my heart."

"A few minutes later, my father arrived. 'I knew I'd find you here.' He said, 'Time to go.'

"The rancher who was with him informed us, 'Vet says this one won't make it. I'll have to take him out of his misery this afternoon.'

"I was young, but I caught his drift. 'Can I have him mister. Promise I'll take good care of him.'

"My father spoke up, 'I'm willing to pay.'

"'Would hate to cheat you, Boss, even if he lives he'll never be strong.'

"The men settled on an amount and the weakling came home with us. I named him Jabbar." Since it was summer vacation, my dad let me spend my days and nights at the stable. On top of a makeshift bed of straw, I'd curl up next to the colt listening to him breathe. Even on the days when Jabbar didn't open his eyes, every few hours I filled my mom's basting blub

with water and dripped cool liquid into his mouth. One night I thought he stopped breathing and I started to weep. My tears fell on his nose. Maybe they tickled him, because he opened his lips showing his white teeth. From then on, he improved. By the last week of the summer he stood on his own feet and grazed in the pasture.”

“And the other horse?”

“That’s Santos. He’s a mustang and really is a saint.”

Santos gently nuzzled his head into my shoulder making me laugh.

Mitch said, “You’ll have to help me saddle up our ponies.”

“This should be fun. I don’t know the first thing about...what you call it?”

“Tack.”

Together we bridled the horses. Put blankets and saddles on their backs.

“You’re a patient teacher,” I told Mitch.

“Shucks t’was nothing.” He grabbed me by the waist and heaved me up in the air.

“Time to saddle up darlin.”

He gazed up at me. “Press in with your knees. Santos will do the rest.”

I followed his instruction and the horse carried me around the corral.

“You stay here & get to know Santos. I’m going for a short ride with Jabbar.”

Mitch mounted his horse. The two were a good match both handsome and strong. I watched them ride slowly at first. Then like a falling star, they streaked down the hill and vanished.

Chapter Twenty

I spent the next morning with Ann. Flour, sugar, butter, vanilla, and other ingredients lined the long kitchen counter.

“What would you like to make?” she asked.

“I’ve never baked before.”

“Only way to correct that situation is to choose a few recipes and have fun.”

I looked through her file. “Sugar cookies look easier than some others.”

She nodded.

“I always wanted to make gingerbread boys and girls, but they sound complicated.”

“We could use both.”

I measured dry ingredients in one bowl, poured in liquids, and mixed until I made dough. While one ball chilled, I tackled the next recipe. Although there were more steps the end result was similar. I placed another ball in the refrigerator and glanced at Ann. She wasn’t following a recipe. Nor did she measure any ingredients. “Wow I’m impressed with your skills.”

“Learned from a fabulous cook. Kate insisted on me writing things down.”

“I’ll have to thank her.”

I rolled out dough cut out stars, angels, and Christmas trees.

Ann tasted a scrap. “Mm that’s good.”

While trays sat in a hot oven, I cleaned bowls and utensils getting ready for my next batch.

Ann tapped me on the shoulder. “It sure smells good, which tells me it’s time to take them out of the oven.”

I removed the trays noticing the timer still had three minutes.

“Try one,” Ann suggested.

I broke one in two and gave her a piece.

After one bite she said, “Great job.”

I silently agreed.

“How did Boss’ doctor appointment go?”

“Okay, ready to decorate your cookies?”

I painted faces, suits and dresses on my gingerbreads. I sprinkled cinnamon and sugar on my stars. I iced the trees adding colorful ornaments. And, I accented my angels’ wings with silver candies.

“Is it beginning to feel like Christmas Lily?”

Just then, Mitch entered the kitchen.

“Hi ladies the heavenly aroma led me straight to you.”

Before I could look up, he reached down and grabbed a cookie. He took a sizable bite. “Fantastic!”

Ann admonished, “There’re not for you so scoot. We’re boxing them up and sending them overseas to your buddies.”

“Thanks mom.” He kissed her cheek while picking up a few more cookies.

“Lily when you’re finished here let’s go for a ride. I’ll get Santos and Jabbar ready.”

I nodded.

Ann asked him, “How come you didn’t join us today?”

“While I enjoy baking Mom really I do, I know you don’t enjoy me messing up your kitchen.”

I wondered if he was being truthful. I wondered if he had spent the day with Peggy.

Chapter Twenty-One

I joined Mitch at the corral. Both horses saddled and ready to ride. I assumed one of the ranch hands helped Mitch cinch the straps.

“Did you bring your bathing suit?”

“I did, but on this chilly afternoon I’m sure not going to wear it.”

“You can put it in my saddlebag.” Mitch helped me get up on Santo. Then he mounted Jabbar.

“I don’t think I can ride as fast as you. What if we get separated?”

“We’ll walk them, but if you lose me Santo knows the way home.”

“Wonderful,” I said expressing my doubt.

Traveling at a leisurely pace gave me a chance to take in the majestic scenery of rolling hills with snow-capped mountains in the background. The path narrowed leaving the tall ponderosa pines behind. We rode through dense chaparral and I wondered if the brambles hurt the horses’ hoofs. The terrain became steep.

“Hold on tight,” he shouted, as Jabbar appeared to slide down the embankment.

Lucky for me, Santos took a different approach. Rather than going straight ahead he turned to the right took a few steps then switched left. He repeated this pattern until we reached level ground. Vegetation became sparse and the ground beneath us sandy. I heard the rush of water and could see Mitch waiting ahead.

As Santos ambled forward, I saw two parallel limestone walls. Aquamarine water flowed in-between.

“What do you think of our gorge?”

“Pretty impressive. Do cattle come here to drink?”

“Not exactly at this spot, but close by. I’ll take you there another day.” He waved his arm through the air. “Follow me.”

We zigzagged through brush until Mitch announced, “We’re here. Can you get down by yourself?”

I answered by dismounting. “Should I tether Santos?”

Mitch took my bathing suit from his saddlebag and handed it to me. “No. We’ll let them roam. They’ll probably go get a drink and a snack.” Mitch reached for my free hand and led me to a cluster of wispy trees. “Close your eyes.”

I followed his instruction and let him tug me forward.

“Okay, open them.”

I was standing before a steaming pool.

“It’s fed from an underground hot springs. I’ll keep my eyes closed while you change.”

“What about you? Aren’t you coming in?”

“No.”

While I changed, I realized he couldn’t wet his prosthesis. I stepped into the pool and submerged into the soothing water. “Mitch you have to join me. I’m ready to see you...”

“How can you be when I’m still horrified by the sight? There’s no way to prepare anyone to view my deformity.”

“Mitch...”

“Lily don’t you get it. People turn away when they notice me limping. My facial scars shock them and my artificial limb as if it were catching terrifies them.”

I stood up and splashed toward him. “Well I’m not people. I’m not them. I’m me and I think your scars give your face character. Your limp is hardly noticeable. Most of all, your left arm represents your heroic soul.” I reached him and raised his chin stroked his cheek with my wet hand. “You’re too brave to pass up these healing waters.”

“I didn’t bring a suit.”

I glared at him. “Your shorts will do.” I turned back toward the pool, stepped into the water, and slinked into its depths waiting for Mitch to join me.

His first splash set my heart on fire. I didn’t move. He slithered beside me and embraced my back with his left upper arm. An electric current shot through me. I turned to face him. His lips smothered mine in a rapturous kiss.

He said, “You’re the best Lily.”

“You’re pretty darn nice yourself.”

“Daylight’s slipping away. We’d better head back.”

As he rose, I couldn’t help but see his washboard torso. “And you’re in great shape.”

“Right, except for a few missing and broken parts.”

“Cynicism doesn’t become you. Besides, isn’t this the season to count your blessings?”

“It’s a busy time. In fact, I need to hitch a ride from one of the hands tonight, go into town, and visit a friend for a few days.”

I waited for an explanation, but Mitch didn’t elaborate. All the way back to the stables one name repeated in my mind: Peggy.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Although I missed Mitch, I enjoyed spending the next few days with Ann. She was consistently in a cheerful mood. Together, we boxed cookies, finished writing Christmas cards, wrapped gifts, and delivered packages to the Courthouse.

A few days before Christmas, we drove into Payson with the truck loaded with empty feed barrels. Ann explained, "Today's Toys for Tamales at Gerardo Firewood Café. First we'll do a little shopping fill the barrels, drop them off at Gerardo's, and feast on his fabulous food."

By now, I was accustomed to seeing holiday decorations and hearing Christmas music. Yet, when we pulled into the restaurant's parking lot, I was amazed at the display. Between stationary scenes, animated reindeer winked, lights flashed, inflated snowmen bobbed up and down.

The café was crowded. While we waited for a table, we sat at the bar and sipped margaritas. A few gulps of the tasty drink, made my head buzz.

Ann told me, "I'm excited about meeting your brother Doug."

I hoped the alcohol would give me the courage to be honest with her. "There're a few things you need to know before he arrives."

She tilted her head giving me her full attention.

"Our family home was the opposite of yours. Unlike you and Boss, our parents were selfish. They put their passion for alcohol and cigarettes before their children's needs."

She rested her hand over one of mine. "Did you know I grew up in an orphanage?"

"No."

"That's where I met Boss. We were there for different reasons. Me. Well when I was a baby, a pastor's wife found me on the steps of their church. Boss never met his dad. He came to live at the institution when his mother died. He was six."

"I'm so sorry. How did you learn to be loving, giving, caring parents?"

She laughed. "In a quest to give our children all we missed we've made lots of mistakes. Just ask any of the kids. They'll tell you I can be controlling at times."

"From what I've seen your love always shows through." I took a deep breath. "I admire you Ann too much to go on pretending." I took a long drink. "I'm not Mitch's girlfriend. We met on the plane."

"Lily neither Boss nor I believe in coincidence. We lived in the same orphanage for a reason. Things happened ugly things. I helped him and his love saved me from my destructive self. Anyway, I don't think you met Mitch simply by chance. You two belong together. I can tell."

I wanted to believe her. I hoped she was right, but I couldn't dismiss the fact Mitch was spending his days and nights with someone else.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Christmas Eve morning, starry eyed and romantic, Kate and Chad returned from their honeymoon. Boss, Ann, and I were looking at their wedding pictures when Doug knocked at the door.

“I’ll get it,” I said.

He was dressed in fatigues. Seemed thinner, but more grown up. I hugged him. “It’s good to see you.” I held him tight glad he returned from combat unharmed.

“Getting your invite was a nice surprise,” he said.

I felt awkward knowing it was Ann’s idea not mine. I ushered him into the living room.

“Come on son,” Boss motioned Doug to take a seat. “I’ll introduce you.”

“First let me get you a bite to eat,” Ann said.

Just then, the twins came barreling down the stairs.

“Good to see you up and about,” Boss began. “Oh, heck might as well move to the kitchen while your mom fixes as brunch.”

Doug piped up, “Ma’am let me help. I’m good at peeling potatoes.”

Everyone was laughing when Mitch entered the kitchen. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

I watched him slapping each brother on the back, shaking hands with Doug, waving at Chad, embracing Kate, kissing his mom’s cheek, and greeting his dad. There was something different about Mitch. His eyes danced with expectancy.

From across the room he threw a kiss. Wondering if it was really for me, I turned my head from side to side. No one was there.

The morning was enchanting. We ate, talked, played cards, and sang Christmas tunes.

“Sorry to break up the party.” Ann announced, “We’d better get going to town. There’re lots of hungry mouths to feed.”

I sat in the back seat of Ann and Boss’ truck. Doug was on my right Mitch on my left. As if I didn’t exist the two men talked to each other nonstop. They started out exchanging boot camp stories, but quickly switched subjects. If we hadn’t arrived at the homeless shelter I think they would’ve covered topics from apples to zebras.

I helped carry supplies into the kitchen hoping to see Jasmine, but neither she nor her mother was there.

I placed gifts under the Christmas tree searching for Jasmine, but I couldn’t find her. I asked the director, “Is Jasmine here?”

“Didn’t you hear the news? Her mother found a job. They’ve moved into an apartment.”

“That’s great.” Of course, I was happy for them, but sorry I hadn’t given Jasmine her gift.

We along with lots of other volunteers pitched in to make a turkey Christmas dinner with all the trimmings.

I started to rinse the trays, but Ann stopped me. “Another crew will be arriving to clean up.” She took me by the hand and led me into the reception room to say our good-byes.

Folks shook our hands, hugged us, and thanked us for the delicious meal.

“Merry Christmas,” a young voice said.

I spun round and saw Jasmine standing there with a wrapped package.

“I’m delighted to see you and congrats on your new home.”

“Thank you. We came to help clean up, but I wanted to be sure to see you and give you this first.” She handed me the package.

“Just a sec. I have something for you too.”

I raced to the tree, scanned the presents, picked one up, returned to Jasmine, and gave it to her.

“You open yours, first,” she said.

I ripped off the paper and gazed at a wooden box painted red. On its lid, pieces of pinecone formed a heart. “I love it. I’ll put it on my dresser fill it with my jewelry. Every time I see it I’ll think of you.”

Jasmine’s mother came to her side. “Mommy Lily likes it and look she gave me this.” I watched her unwrap my presents. She opened the doctor’s kit, picked up and twirled each medical tool.

Her face glowed illuminating dark spaces buried deep within me.

She torn the tissue paper from the anatomy book and shouted, “My wishes came true.”

I told her, “You’re going to be a great doctor.”

I glanced at her mother expecting her to disapprove, but she surprised me by saying, “I believe you will Jasmine.”

Mother and daughter embraced.

Sharing their happiness removed stale sadness from my heart.

Chapter Twenty-Four

When I thought the day couldn't get any better it did.

Holding lit candles, we joined a procession, and filed into a small chapel. In front of an altar, one shining star illuminated a manger. All eyes were on the babe. We sang Christmas carols rejoicing his birth.

Throughout the service, I leaned into Mitch's shoulder. He gently pressed his thigh against mine. Events leading to this moment paraded through my mind. I knew I loved Mitch with all my heart.

I reached over and took Doug's hand. I whispered, "Glad you're here."

"Me too."

At the conclusion of the celebration while leaving the church, we sang "Silent Night". I followed Mitch into the vestibule and joined him in wishing folks Merry Christmas.

"Hi buddy," Parker said. He was standing resting his arms on two canes.

Mitch saluted him, "Looking good, Marine."

I nodded and addressed Parker and Cindy, "Merry Christmas you two."

Parker lifted one cane in the air. "Mitch thanks for this great gift."

I didn't quite understand what he meant, but quickly remembered Mitch saved Parker's life.

Mitch asked, "Will you be stopping by tomorrow?"

"No can do," Parker replied.

"It's my fault," Cindy added, "I want to show Parker off to my family and friends."

The crowd was thinning out.

Parker waved his cane. "Catch you later."

Hand in hand, Mitch and I walked to the truck.

I told him, "Parker's inspirational."

"Sure is and so are you." He embraced me, lowered his head as if to kiss me when the twins Eddie and Joe came up from behind him laughing.

Mitch turned into them and light heartedly punched their arms.

They reciprocated by pounding him.

Mitch raised his right arm covering his face and chuckled. "Stop ganging up on me."

Eddie said, "Admit it you're no match for the dynamic duo."

"I know. I'll never be as smart as either of you guys. Mom brags about you every chance she gets."

"Sure, sure, in another life," Joe complained. "She rags on me for every little thing."

"Me too," Eddie added.

"What's crazy is you're both majoring in the same subject."

Doug joined us and said, "Guess that's what identical means."

By now, the family surrounded us and everyone laughed.

I reached up and tossed Doug's wiry hair. "Always loved your sense of humor, bro. Even during hard times you could make me smile."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Next morning, I rubbed my eyes, opened them, and took a deep breath. It was Christmas.” I was in love and Doug was safe. I walked to the window and watched snow flurries drifting down to the ground. I clapped my hands applauding the perfect scene.

I stepped into the living room expecting to see Mitch, but he wasn’t there. A note on the bathroom door read:

L. Got up early to start cooking Christmas breakfast—a family tradition. M.

I showered, dressed, gathered up gifts from under our tree, and headed for the main house.

When I reached the porch, Eddie opened the door and yelled, “She’s here. Can we eat now?”

I placed my gifts with many others under the shimmering tree before going in the dining room.

Ann sat at one end of the table. Kate was on her left.

Ann pointed to the chair on her right. “Come join us. The guys always serve up Christmas breakfast.”

“Yup. They never fail to surprise us.”

Mitch wearing a Santa’s hat and an apron carried out a tray of sliced ham. “Sorry Lily.”

Doug followed with a quiche in each hand. “These are vegetarian.”

Eddie brought in pitchers of pomegranate juice. Joe carried a pan of roasted potatoes. Boss placed two baskets filled with crescent rolls at each end of the table.

While Eddie passed a tray of biscuits, Mitch trailed behind holding a bowl of peppery gravy.

Ann waited for the men to sit. “Let’s hold hands. I have an announcement to make.” She waited for us to bow our heads. “Seems like your dad’s decided to stick around for awhile; he’s been staying on his new diet putting his cholesterol back in the normal range.” Overcome with emotion she sniffed. “Let’s silently say Grace.”

Mitch’s left hand picked up my right one. This was the first time I’d touched his artificial fingers. They curled up over mine and gently squeezed. Mitch’s exercises were paying off. Tears welled under my closed lids.

Boss broke the spell. “Dig in.”

Without letting go of his hand, I turned to Mitch. “I think I love Christmas.”

He grinned, “That proves ‘tis really the season of miracles.”

“Indeed.”

Although the rolls were cold, the quiche was running, and the potatoes burnt I knew I would fondly remember this special meal.

“Don’t you ladies move we men are on KP duty,” Doug said.

Kate, Ann, and I retired to the living room. Kate raved about the Scottsdale resort. In no time at all the men joined us to exchange presents.

Like kids, they ripped wrapping paper scattering it over the room. Ann and Kate slowly untied ribbons, and placed bows aside to save for next year. With apprehension, I waited for each family member to open the gifts I gave. I was pleased by everyone’s reactions especially Doug’s.

“Sis after all these years I can’t believe you remembered.” His eyes sparkled.

He didn't mention the many years of asking for a baseball mitt, but never getting one.
"Can't wait to break it in."

Doug didn't mention the Christmas he finally expressed disappointment for not getting a glove. Our enraged father tore up Doug's entire baseball collection shouting, 'That'll teach you not to be greedy'.

I handed Doug another box.

"What's this?"

"Open it and see."

"Oh no!" He fingered the assortment of cards. "How did you ever find these? If I'm shipped overseas again, promise me you'll keep them for me."

"Of course."

Laughter filled the house as everyone expressed genuine appreciation for the many presents. Mitch and I had decided to exchange gifts privately in our cabin later in the day.

I was straightening up the living room when the doorbell rang. "I'll get it." I said.

When I opened the door, Peggy laden with gifts greeted me, "Merry Christmas. Thought you'd be gone by now."

I stammered, "Merry Christmas."

"Where's that guy? I have a special gift for Mitch. After the last few days and nights together hearing him talk I wouldn't be surprised if he doesn't pop the question."

My heart sank. My suspicions were correct. Mitch spent lots of time with Peggy.

Her eyes widened. "Oops. There I go shooting off my big mouth."

She squeezed past me.

My sorrow was so heavy I felt cemented to the floor. I tried, but couldn't move.

I heard the group welcome her.

Then Doug spoke up. "Folks I've got to go. It's a long drive back to the base."

Everyone started talking at once.

His rose above the others. "No matter how hard I try I won't be able to thank you enough."

Again, voices mingled until I heard Doug's say, "Everyone, stay here. I'll go say good-bye to Lily and be on my way. Hope to see you soon."

"You're always welcome," Ann said. I imagined her giving him a hug.

"Or come up and see us at school. We can always make room for another body in our tiny apartment."

Doug approached. "Sis I've got to be going."

As we embraced I said, "I need to go to town. Can I ride with you?"

"Sure but the markets are closed. Besides how will you get back?"

"I'll explain en route."

While Doug went upstairs to gather his belongings, I walked to the cabin. Threw my clothes into my suitcases, and hauled the pieces out front.

A few minutes later, Doug pulled up, got out of his truck, and put my suitcases in the bed.

Once we were on our way he said, "Thanks sis for this wonderful Christmas. I never dreamed it could be like this?"

"Me neither."

"Love you sis."

"Love you bro."

“Then tell me what’s wrong.”

Tears slipped down my cheeks.

“Sis, remember you used to say I could share anything with you. When I did, you’d listen to me cry, hug me, make me feel better. Now it’s your turn to talk.”

“I need to get away from Mitch who’s crazy about Peggy.” I sobbed. “Why did I think I could count on love? All I want is to be back in my office where I can count up dependable numbers.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Snowdrifts clung to sections of the road slowing our way. Absorbed in my sorrowful thoughts I didn't notice a truck pulling up behind us.

"Sis looks like we've got company."

"Probably a few ranch hands going to town to celebrate. Let them pass."

"Will do." As soon as the road widened Doug pulled over to the side. The truck passed us and made a sharp right blocking our way. Through the snowy veil, I couldn't identify the vehicle.

Doug got out of his truck.

I followed wondering what was wrong. To my amazement, Mitch still wearing a Santa's hat, jumped out of the driver's side.

As he approached, I told him, "Congrats on being able to drive." I couldn't bring myself to comment on his engagement to Peggy.

Ann and Boss stepped out of the truck.

Boss shouted, "Our boy's something. Peggy sure surprised us by bringing over his updated driver's license."

Ann chimed in, "Guess she, Cindy, and Mitch worked with Parker. They all helped him walk. She and Cindy drove them to town to get DMV driving evaluations."

Another vehicle approached. Kate, Chad, Eddie, and Joe joined us.

"Where's Peggy?" I asked.

No one answered. Had she said no to Mitch's proposal? Had she broken his heart again? Were they going into town to help him drown his sorrow? As much as I didn't want to lose him to another woman, I couldn't bear thinking of him suffering. I shut my eyes and hoped she would change her mind.

Mitch rested his hands on my shoulders. Despite knowing he loved Peggy, my body longed to hold him.

A breeze whispered through the trees punctuating the silence. Snowflakes drifted between us.

Mitch stared into my eyes. "I heard from the FFA about my air traffic controller position. I've been assigned to an airfield in Florida."

He reached in his jacket pocket and pulled out a red velvet box. Mitch knelt down on his knees in the snow. "From the moment we met you've brought joy into my life convincing me you're my forever love."

While holding the box in his left hand he flipped the lid open with his right one. An exquisite diamond glinted in the light. "Lily, will you be my bride?"

My heart beat with happiness. I gave Mitch my answer by covering his delicious mouth with mine.

The End

About the Author: E.B. Sullivan is a clinical psychologist who loves to write fictional tales. Check out her website: www.ebsullivan.com. Her published novels *Different Hearts* and *Bloom Forevermore* and her novellas “Christmas Guardian Angel” and “Spotlighting Crime” are available on Amazon.com.