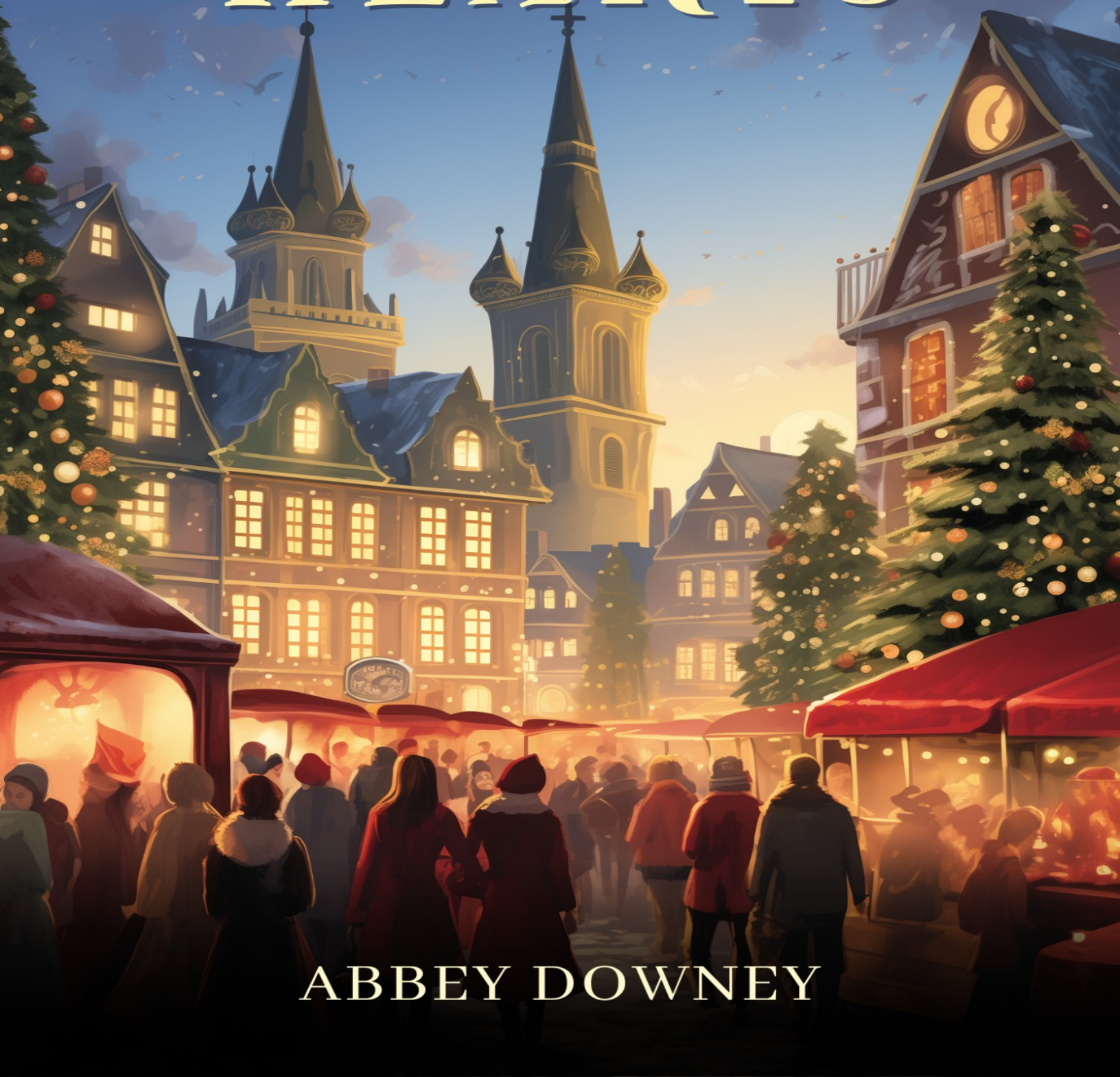


SWEET HOLIDAY ROMANCE SHORT FICTION COLLECTION

HOLIDAY HEARTS



ABBEY DOWNEY

Holiday Hearts

By Abbey Downey

A sweet holiday romance flash fiction and short story
collection

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

HOLIDAY HEARTS

First edition. March 17, 2026.

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No Better View

November 1924
New York City

Hazel marched down 59th Street, her Oxford pumps crunching through dry leaves that swirled on the breeze. Crowds of parade-goers rushed to claim the best viewing spots, all with overcoats buttoned tight against the late November chill. It was a thoroughly festive atmosphere for Thanksgiving Day.

The sidewalks along the parade route were filling up quickly, but Hazel had the perfect spot in mind, right on Columbus Circle by Central Park. With any luck, Harvey was already there holding a place for them. The reporter in Hazel couldn't stand to miss an event like Macy's putting on a parade that shut down six miles of New York City. Even if none of the other journalists thought it worthy of coverage, she knew it would make a great story.

Rounding the last corner, she came to a halt. Her perfect spot was already taken—by a cluster of uniformed firemen staring up into a tree at the edge of the park. Moving closer to the onlookers crowded around, Hazel spoke to a woman in a large straw hat. “What’s going on? What are they looking at?”

The woman didn't look away from the tree as she responded. “There’s a fella up there, I guess. They’re waiting on a ladder to get him down.”

Now there was a story. Stepping closer to the tree, Hazel secured her felt cloche hat with one hand and peered up into the branches. She could only see a pair of trouser-clad legs dangling from a sturdy branch. Easing through the crowd, delightfully broad shoulders came into view, straining against jacket sleeves while cradled around something she couldn't make out. Finally, she got a good look at the most familiar face; red-tinted beard, wide lips she loved to kiss, and bright blue eyes she could never stare into enough. “What on earth are you doing, Harvey Dunlop?”

His look of surprise at seeing her melted quickly into sheepishness. “Oh, hi, doll. I'll be down in a jiffy. I hope.”

“But why are you in a tree at all?”

Harvey squirmed, his strong arms flexing around whatever he held. Was that a bit of orange fur? Sure enough, a tiny face peeked out between his arms as he struggled to keep the animal from wriggling out of his grasp. A little voice behind her made Hazel turn toward a darling girl with a tear-stained face standing by her mother. “He’s getting my kitty.”

Harvey grinned down at them. “The kitten got scared by some jalopy backfiring and I saw it run up this tree. I thought I could go up a branch or two and save it. But it went a bit higher than I realized.”

After five years together, she really should expect this sort of thing. His soft spot for children and animals was one of the qualities she loved most about him. But, as endearing as it was that he wanted to save a kitten for a little girl, she would rather have Harvey safely at her side on the ground.

From the street, a blast of band music signaled that the parade was coming closer. Startled, the kitten nearly lunged from Harvey’s arms, causing him to stretch too far and slip halfway off the branch. The crowd, including Hazel, gasped as Harvey shot one hand out to grab the trunk at the last second. Visions of what might happen if he fell tore through Hazel’s mind. What would she ever do without him? He was the steadiest part of her life.

Before her imagination could get any more carried away, another fireman pushed his way through the crowd with a ladder. He positioned it against the tree while a man went to each side to hold it. Then he climbed up to take the kitten and complete the rescue.

Finally, Harvey was standing safely next to her, and she could breathe again. As the girl got her kitten back and the scene cleared, Hazel threw her arms around him, soaking in the feeling of his solid chest pressed against her. She’d had a moment of fear she might not get to experience that thrill again. “I’m sure glad you’re safe.”

He worked one arm free from her grasp and ran his hand up and down her back as he let her hold him. His voice was low and rough. “Sorry I scared you.”

By the time Hazel dragged her attention away from him, the last parade float was nearly out of sight, heading along the route toward 34th Street. She watched it disappear with a groan. “Look, Harvey. We missed the whole parade. It took a lot of convincing, but Jenkins promised me a front-page spot if I got a good story about it.”

Without letting go of her, Harvey slid one hand into his pocket. He withdrew it and held a ring out toward her. “Hazel, I know you didn’t get the story you wanted today, but maybe a lifetime of me loving you will make up for it. Will you marry me?”

Stunned, Hazel had to let his words sink in. But there was no doubt about her answer. Harvey was her forever, she knew it long before the possibility of losing him to a fall from that tree. Once again, Hazel clung to him, her heart pounding for a different reason now. “Yes, Harvey. Of course, yes.”

She pressed her lips against his, the heat from his body dispelling any chill from the November air. Harvey’s arms wrapped around her, lifting her slightly off the ground as he met her kiss full-on. She had no idea how long they remained there but jostling from passersby finally broke them apart.

His eyes glowed with satisfaction. “Well, fiancée, if we hurry, we might get to see the end of the parade at Herald Square.”

Shaking her head, Hazel pushed up on her tiptoes to start another kiss. “This is the best view I’m ever going to get. I don’t want to miss a moment of it.”

The End

Christmas on Display

A Christmas short story

Chapter One

November 1895

Indianapolis, Indiana

Iris Wyett watched the faces of the three men sitting across the polished wooden table from her with damp palms hidden deep in the folds of her gray wool skirt. She attempted to keep her lips turned up the right amount for a pleasant, professional smile, but she could hear the not-quite-hushed discussion about her presentation all too well. They were not enthused.

But Iris needed them to be. If she was going to move forward after not one, but two failed engagements, it was going to be through a career, not another disastrous courtship. She had a good eye for arranging things in pleasing displays and all the electrical and mechanical knowledge she'd picked up from her father over the years. There was no reason she couldn't design a window dressing for the Christmas season that would bring every department store manager in town rushing to hire her for next Christmas.

No reason except for the three unconvinced men in front of her.

The conference room of Roland's Fine Department Store was dark and masculine, with heavy wood panels lining the walls and no windows to let in light. It fit the appearance of the men she was meeting with. The oldest, Mr. Harvey Roland, turned from his colleagues to find Iris watching and had the grace to look a bit sheepish when he realized she could hear them. He cleared his throat, and the other two returned their attention to her, as well.

Mr. Roland had founded his store as a much younger man, and the rumor around Indianapolis was that he was planning to retire after this Christmas season. His thin gray hair was slicked back with no hope of a single strand ever flying free thanks to the pomade he'd slathered on it. But his eyes were still clear and sharp, and he looked at her with more kindness than the other two.

On the left sat the store manager, Mr. William Tremont. Mr. Tremont had small, suspicious eyes and a mouth that looked as if it was stuck in a constant scowl. He made no effort to hide his criticism of her window design idea, disapproving of every element, even down to the name, “Christmas Comfort.”

While Iris was certain how those two felt about her proposed design, the man in the middle was more difficult to pin down. The head of the home goods department, Mr. Elias McCann, kept his expression blank, empty of any emotional response. He hadn’t so much as quirked a lip at a single one of the fantastical elements she’d included. Not the mechanical children opening gifts, the rotating Christmas tree, or even the twinkling stars that she hoped to have floating across the darkened top of the display. Younger and fitter than the men on either side of him, Mr. McCann’s somber brown suit accentuated broad shoulders and set off his dramatic black hair.

But that hair was the only thing about him that Iris would describe as dramatic. Now with his attention on her again, Mr. McCann narrowed the brown eyes that had seemed to pull her in while he listened to her explain the various parts of the display. He ran one hand over his clean-shaven jaw as if contemplating his next move in a chess game.

Then he addressed her in a voice as smooth and deep as the velvet she planned to line the ceiling of the display window with. “Miss Wyett, I’m not certain this is the right design for Roland’s. We need the Christmas window display to be perfect. We can’t take any chances that something might not work, and your design, while ambitious, is filled with mechanical elements that introduce the risk of malfunction.”

Yes, that was exactly the way Iris had planned the window, filled with awe-inspiring mechanical features. “There’s no risk, I assure you. They’ll work. Every one of those mechanisms is in working order in my shop at this exact moment.”

A slight stretch of the truth, but Iris could feel her chance slipping away. If she couldn’t secure this contract, all the inheritance from Great-Aunt Molly that she’d poured into her tools and supplies would be gone, and Mother would have every reason in the world to return to thrusting suitors on Iris. She would lose her chance to prove to both of her parents that she was good for something besides getting married.

No, the window would work. She’d studied and practiced under her father’s tutelage for too long to believe there was any chance her creations would fail. It didn’t matter that Father had refused to let her work in his shop since the day

Mother insisted Iris needed to start looking for a husband. This was Iris's destiny, not being tethered to a man who only cared about what she could provide for him.

So she met Mr. McCann's contemplative gaze straight on and waited.

The other two men shifted in their seats after a minute had passed in silence. Finally, Mr. Roland adjusted the cuffs of his gray wool jacket and looked at her again. "Miss Wyett, I must be completely honest. We haven't had any other proposals for the display that come anywhere near to the quality of yours. While we have reservations, it comes down to the fact that most of the town's window dressers are vying for the displays at Huffman's. I feel we may not have any other choice."

That was not at all the glowing approval she'd hoped for. Iris felt the atmosphere in the room shift as the other two geared up to argue. Mr. Tremont huffed a bit, while Mr. McCann shook his head. "Mr. Roland, I don't think—"

"You might have suggested this display, Elias, but I'm making the decisions here. Given the recent issues we've had with damaging rumors and leaked information, this project must be completed with the utmost secrecy. That includes everyone in this room. The only person who is allowed to see any part of this display until it's revealed to the world is Miss Wyett. Do you understand me, gentlemen? Miss Wyett?"

Mr. Tremont agreed almost before Mr. Roland finished speaking. Iris considered the caveat for a moment, but she had no reason to argue with his request, even if it did seem unnecessary. Mr. McCann, however, regarded her with an inscrutable expression while they all waited for him to assent. Finally, he squared his shoulders and gave his employer a curt nod. "If you insist, sir. Miss Wyett, I suppose the contract is yours."

Iris's heart thumped hard in her chest. It was actually happening. She wouldn't have to return home and explain another failure to her family. Mr. McCann raised one finger into the air, halting her joy. "However, if even one element doesn't work, the contract will be void. We expect this to put Roland's back on top as the most desirable shopping experience in Indianapolis, and faulty mechanics cannot be the cause of embarrassment for us. Do you understand?"

The weight of their high expectations threatened to crush Iris, but she let a deep breath fill her lungs while pushing up her chin, trying to project confidence. "Of course. Nothing will go wrong, I assure you."

After shaking hands with each of the men on the sides—reluctantly with Mr. Tremont—Iris extended her hand to Mr. McCann. His warm fingers enveloped hers, rough calluses scratching against her skin and sending tingles up her arm. How strange. She'd never felt such a jolt from the touch of any of her suitors, not even the two fiancés she'd had. It reminded Iris of the sensation after touching a live electrical wire.

Craning her neck a bit to look into his eyes, she found him watching her with parted lips as if he, too, felt the shock. Not that it meant anything if he did. Mr. McCann seemed to dislike her from the first moment she'd stepped into the meeting room, whether because she was a woman or for some other reason she couldn't be sure.

Filing the odd moment in the back of her mind where it wouldn't distract her, Iris left the meeting room and followed a secretary to her desk where they completed and signed a contract. Then a shopgirl took her to the window she was to dress so she could take measurements.

On the way out of the store two hours after entering, Iris paused to examine the window from the outside, as she had many times before. Back then, she'd only been able to dream of the day her designs would fill a space such as that. Now, she was on the precipice of putting those dreams into motion. As she'd promised the gentlemen about her mechanical creations, she wouldn't allow anything to go wrong now.

Chapter Two

Elias must have walked past the display window at the front of Roland's thirty times during the past week. Before Miss Wyett began her work, clerks had covered the inside of the window with brown paper that had been decorated with handwritten sentiments designed to build excitement in the public passing by. On the inside, heavy black curtains blocked the window from the view of shoppers inside the store. They were attempting a level of secrecy never before seen at Roland's.

And it seemed even Elias wasn't trusted enough to be let in on it.

For him, this display was about more than encouraging a Christmas rush. Roland's needed to become competitive with Huffman's once again, or the store wasn't going to survive past Mr. Roland's retirement. While the rival stores occupied buildings opposite each other on the same circular road in downtown Indianapolis, they couldn't be more different. Roland's had lost too many customers already to the other store's flashy advertising and questionable tactics. Elias wanted to uphold the good reputation of Roland's as a trusted provider of quality products, and he needed to increase their business. He could only pray it was possible to do both.

If he had any hope of doing so, however, those dratted rumors would have to stop. No one knew where they were coming from, only that Huffman's seemed to know exactly what Roland's was going to do before they did it. When Roland's planned a sale, Huffman's somehow always started a better one first. When Roland's attempted to roll out a new advertising slogan stating, "Roland's offers the best," Huffman's had run an ad the day before claiming, "When you offer the best, it speaks for itself."

And the rumors were worse—the fabric in the dry goods section was inferior, the ready-made clothing fell apart when worn, the cosmetics made

women sick, toys had injured children. The list of untruths about Roland's went on and on. With no evidence of who was starting them, suspicion had fallen on the newest employee who had access to inside information—Elias.

But the truth was, Elias had loved the department store since he first stepped foot inside a year ago, desperate for a job and willing to take anything. In the time since he'd come to respect Mr. Roland, and he wanted nothing more than to see the store succeed. But now he was in danger of losing the only thing he'd ever been passionate about.

Elias's curiosity over the display window began to get the better of him. Its location in his department meant he couldn't help sneaking a glance at the curtains every time he walked the floor to check on his employees. But he never saw so much as a hint of movement, even though the clerks confirmed Miss Wyett came in every day.

He wasn't sure how much he trusted her. She'd seemed capable enough when she presented her display ideas, but she was so...pretty. No, beautiful. Captivating. How could such a lovely young woman be skilled enough to do the kind of mechanical and electrical work such a display would require? As much as he wanted to ensure she hadn't duped them, Elias would not break Mr. Roland's trust by peeking, though. He was already so close to losing what he'd worked hard for. He could keep his inquisitiveness at bay for a few weeks.

On the first Monday in December, Elias was making a sweep of his department after closing, before he left for the day. No one else was on the main floor, giving him the freedom to pause next to the curtained window and contemplate how much Miss Wyett might have accomplished in the week since she'd started. He thought he was alone, so the muffled thump and pained groan from behind the curtain startled him. The moment he stepped closer to find out what happened, a human figure tumbled through the fabric and straight toward him.

On instinct, Elias's hands shot out and caught Miss Wyett under the arms before her back hit him. She craned her neck to look at him upside down, spearing him with blue eyes a man could get lost in. "I'm so sorry, Mr. McCann. I got my foot tangled in the fabric. At least I didn't pull down the entire curtain. Just lost a great deal of my dignity."

Elias hadn't seen Miss Wyett since the meeting several weeks ago, so he was taken aback all over again at how beautiful she was as he helped her settle on her

feet. Today she wore the same gray skirt as when he'd first met her, this time paired with a green and red plaid shirtwaist that matched the festive season.

When she raised an amused eyebrow, Elias realized he was staring. He shook himself out of his runaway thoughts. This woman was currently an employee of Roland's Fine Department Store, and they needed her window display to revitalize their reputation and sales. Letting himself drown in her beauty was not an option.

Stepping over a pile of velvet on the floor, Miss Wyett began rolling a length of red ribbon around her hand and smiled. "I hope I wasn't too loud in here. I thought everyone had left for the evening."

It took a great deal of effort, but Elias managed to pull himself out of an unexpected daydream in which he held the delicate hand that was now stacking the roll of ribbon with the others. "Not at all. I heard a thump. Are you injured?"

A tinkling laugh erupted from her full pink lips. "Not at all. I bumped my head while tinkering with the rotating tree again. Then when I stood up, I tripped and would have fallen, if not for your timely presence. There's not a scratch on me."

In his effort not to stare at her, Elias's gaze ended up following her gestures toward the window, taking in her work for the first time. She'd covered the sides of the space in what looked to be canvas hand-painted with the kind of design one would find on wallpaper. Another canvas with the same design was folded in the corner, probably to serve as a backdrop once they took down the privacy curtains.

In the front, next to the glass, Miss Wyett had put together a scene right off of a Christmas card. Two three-foot tall paper-mâché children stood next to a bare evergreen tree. As Elias watched, the boy figure reached out toward a lone wrapped gift box that sat in front of him as if he was going to grab the present. Then he returned to his original position. After a pause, it started all over again.

While the effect was quite charming, Elias was more delighted when he noticed the garments both figures wore. "You used ready-made clothing from the store?"

Miss Wyett came to stand close beside him. A glance in her direction revealed a pretty flush accompanying the light in her eyes. "I do hope that's not a problem. The shopgirl who showed me the space didn't know what items you wanted to feature, so I've chosen a few myself. I can always change them out for

something else if you'd rather have the window filled with gloves, or books, or —”

Elias rested his fingertips on her arm to stop the flow of words. But the action went wrong when she looked up at him again, this time from so very close by. He was almost certain he smelled peppermint on her breath. And he definitely spotted a spray of charming freckles across her nose and cheeks. “They’re perfect. I think using the figures to display our clothing is the most logical choice.”

Even he could hear the husky tone his voice had taken on. To counteract the embarrassment of that unexpected reaction to her nearness, Elias looked around again. “Remind me what else the display will do when it’s done?”

Perking up, Miss Wyett gestured toward the other child, a girl. “Betsy here will raise the lid off a box. I’ll decorate the rotating Christmas tree with small items from the store that should entice people to walk in and buy one. I’ll use some other merchandise to make it appear to be a homey parlor. And then the twinkling stars will float across the top. That’s the only element that I haven’t tested, yet.”

Something in her tone caught Elias’s attention. “Is there a problem with the stars? Nothing can fail, Miss Wyett. It has to be perfect.”

She waved off his concern in a way that only increased the clenching in his stomach. “Oh no, of course there’s no problem. I need to figure out how to keep the wires from the electric lights from tangling when the stars move. It’s nothing serious.”

Elias craned his neck to look at the pile of tiny light bulbs in the corner. “Those lights will move?”

Miss Wyett bounced on her toes. “And the tree will be lit while it’s rotating. It will be a fantastical, glowing wonderland in here.”

“And you know how to do all that?” Elias couldn’t help running his gaze up and down Miss Wyett again. She looked every bit a well-to-do lady, albeit a practical and sensible one. It was difficult to believe she could create strings of electric lights and mechanisms to make the figures move all by herself.

A scowl twisted her face, but didn’t make her any less lovely. “You doubt that I’m capable of it? What, do you think there’s a little trickster in here spinning straw into gold overnight for me?”

She pressed her fists to her hips and arched one eyebrow and it was all Elias could do to hold back a chuckle. “I can assure you I don’t believe

Rumpelstiltskin comes in and pieces together wires, no. I was curious where you learned to do all this.”

Miss Wyett’s expression softened. “My dear father. He worked for Mr. Edison, you know. Then we moved here, and he began creating all sorts of wonderful mechanical and electrical pieces for people around town. He taught me everything he knows, mostly because I insisted from the time I was tall enough to see the top of his workbench.”

A vision flashed in Elias’s mind of a tiny Iris Wyett peeking up over a workbench and grabbing at tools, determined to figure out what they did. It brought a smile to his lips. And smiling felt good. With his parents both ill and dependent on his care, Elias had found very little to smile about recently. He’d been intent instead on making himself indispensable to the success of Roland’s. The store was all he’d had for the last year. Maybe he should take up a hobby again, something to bring a little joy to his life. Wasn’t celebrating the birth of Christ about that very thing—joy?

Elias glanced up to find Miss Wyett watching him with a soft smile of her own. “It’s quite satisfying to make you smile, Mr. McCann.”

Her wondering tone buried its way into his heart, sticking there in a way that told him he would relive this moment in his mind for some time to come. Before she could do anything else endearing, Elias backed toward the curtains, groping behind him until he grasped the fabric. “I should finish locking up for the night. Don’t stay too late, Miss Wyett.”

And then he ducked away, praying that he hadn’t gotten mixed up in anything that would jeopardize his future at Roland’s.

Chapter Three

There were only two days left until the scheduled unveiling of the Roland's store window, and Iris was in big trouble.

The mechanisms were all going wrong. The wires for the star lights kept tangling and now the children's movements had become jerky and rough. The project was becoming a potential nightmare. And to top it all off, there was Mr. McCann—Elias, as she now called him.

After the day when she'd hit her head and Elias first saw the display, he began stopping by every evening at closing, not entering the window area, but waiting outside it until she was ready to go home. While he said he felt better making sure she made it to the nearby electric streetcar stop safely, they always ended up talking for much longer than it should have taken to walk there. In those stolen moments, while Elias ambled at her side, in no hurry despite the cold winter air, they discussed everything from their childhoods to their hopes for the future to their shared love of the bakery down the street.

In short, something was growing between them, and it was every bit as magical as the display she was creating.

Iris could sense reluctance in Elias, though. He was a good, honorable man who treated the store employees with impeccable professionalism. It would be easy to believe that he was trying to hold himself to that standard with her, as well. At least, she prayed nightly for that to be the cause behind it, not that he wasn't as drawn to her as she found she was to him.

It seemed silly, with two failed engagements hanging over her past, but Iris wasn't as opposed to romance as she'd thought the first time she walked into Roland's. Or it might have just taken the right man to revive her hopes for marriage.

However, with time counting down, Iris had to force herself to focus on her work instead of a potential dalliance. If she let Elias down with this window dressing, it might also damage whatever romantic possibilities existed between them. She refused to be the cause of yet another doomed romance. And that wasn't even to mention the new burning desire to make Elias proud and help him succeed in his goals for the store.

But with every passing moment, those longings only turned into heavier weights that made Iris's fingers fumble with a wire that kept coming loose and caused her to almost drop one of the children when she turned it over to check the mechanism. She couldn't afford such clumsiness.

She paused to take a deep breath, praying for calm amid the pressure that threatened to overwhelm her. Her gaze fell on the Christmas tree, reminding her of Mary, the young woman chosen to carry and raise Jesus. That pressure must have been far more than Iris faced now, no matter how important her dreams seemed at the moment.

When she felt more in control, Iris stepped toward the electrical wire she'd run from a nearby light fixture to test the strung-together lights for the stars one more time. But the dratted wires twisted around, catching her foot and bringing her crashing down upon them. Tiny crunches signaled that many of the small glass bulbs broke under her weight. One shard dug into her palm, which had pressed hard against the floor to stop her fall, and she gasped at the pain. Why couldn't Elias have been there to catch her this time?

Sitting in the mess with her hand bleeding and glass everywhere, Iris finally lost control completely. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she closed her eyes against the catastrophe surrounding her. Knowing the store was open and customers and employees alike roamed mere feet outside the curtain, Iris tried to hold back the weeping, but she couldn't quite silence herself.

As a sob constricted her throat, the heavy black curtains whipped open, and before she knew what was happening, Elias was kneeling beside her. She tried to warn him about the glass, but her words came out in a jumble that he didn't seem to understand. Instead, he reached for her hand, examining the cut. "What on earth happened, Iris? Are you hurt?"

It seemed she was destined to inspire him to worry about her physical safety. Unable to pull herself together enough to speak sensible words, she shook her head and gestured around at the carnage. Elias's fierce expression softened a bit. "You fell on the lights?"

Nod.

He gathered her close, the sensation of his strong arms enveloping her erasing the lingering pain from the cut on her hand. She'd dreamed of his embrace in recent days, and now the solid warmth of his chest made her want to stay there forever.

But there was still a disaster to face.

Iris pushed back a little, although she hated putting distance between them. "I made you a promise, Elias, and I'm not sure now that I can keep it. I'll have to rewire all the lights, and the children haven't been working right. I'm not sure how I'll get it all done before the deadline."

Elias reached up to smooth back loose strands of her hair, the light, gentle touch at odds with his once again intense expression. "I'll help you. Tell me what I can do, and we'll get it done in time. Together."

Together. That sounded so lovely. For most of her life, Iris had felt as if she was fighting everyone around her to achieve things on her own. She knew her parents loved her, but they didn't have the same dreams for her life that she had. Her faith in God was the only thing that kept her from feeling completely alone. What would it be like to have someone in her life fighting with her? Someone who was on her side?

Staring into Elias's eyes, she could begin to imagine how marvelous that might feel. "It's going to take a miracle, even with both of us working on it."

A slow grin spread across Elias's face, stealing the breath right out of Iris's lungs. "Then it's a good thing Christmas is known for its miracles."

They both stood, brushing off bits of glass and stepping over the mess until they were clear of it. Iris tasked Elias with finding a broom and getting the glass off the floor while she began the arduous job of removing the broken bulb bases and wiring in new ones. Once Elias finished sweeping, Iris showed him the mechanisms for the children and demonstrated how to clean and oil the gears.

While they worked, Elias cheered her up with tales about what holidays had been like over the years in his large family. As an only child, the tales of his four brothers and one sister fascinated Iris. She could hardly imagine what it would be like to live in a house with six boisterous children. But his recounting of Christmas hymn sings with his sister at the piano and other holiday traditions brought a pang of longing to Iris's heart. She paused in her work to glance sideways at him. Maybe someday, if her mistakes didn't ruin things between them, she would get the chance to experience a Christmas with his family.

The thought brought a flush to her cheeks that flustered Iris all over again. She laid the strand of wires and bulbs in the corner with the others. "It's getting late, Elias. I don't want to keep you. I appreciate your help so much, but I'm sure I can handle the rest tomorrow."

Elias set the figure he'd been working on back in place. "Nonsense. Any work on my desk can wait a day or two. This is important to you, so I'll be here to help first thing in the morning."

Warmth spread through Iris again, almost sweet enough to bring tears to her eyes. He hadn't said the window was important to the store, but that it was important to her. Still, it was a risk for him. "But you'll be in trouble if Mr. Roland finds out you've seen the display, won't you?"

A sardonic half-smile lifted one corner of his lips but didn't warm his eyes. "I'm already on the suspect list of those who might have started the rumors about the store. How much worse could peeking make it?"

Her face must have revealed how much it pained her to see him so matter-of-fact about such a travesty because his eyes softened and his smile grew more genuine. "You don't have to worry about that. I haven't done anything wrong, and I'm holding onto hope that the truth will come out in the end. I'll face Mr. Roland if it comes to that. I want to be here to help you."

How could she have ever thought he disliked her? And how could Mr. Roland suspect him of any wrongdoing? Anyone who got to know Elias learned that he was as steadfast as could be. And now, that loyalty was directed toward her. Realizing that, Iris could only nod as they prepared to leave the store for the night, certain tears would break free again if she tried to speak.

As he'd promised, Elias stepped through the curtain to join her in the window area almost before the sun rose the next morning. After greeting her with the warmest smile she'd ever seen from him, Elias didn't even wait for instructions. He took little Betsy and got to work cleaning the mechanism.

They went about their tasks in silence while the sounds of the store opening for the day filled the air. Employees called out cheerful greetings and the bells on the cash registers began ringing with each sale. It didn't take long for Iris to grow so focused on her work that all the noise faded into the background.

Without warning, the curtain closing them off from the store whipped back, much like when Elias found her the day before. Iris jumped, startled out of her work. This time, though, it wasn't as sweet an interruption. Mr. Roland and Mr.

Tremont marched into the cramped space, the former with a frown and the latter with a smirk. Iris glanced at Elias, who had gone pale.

Mr. Roland glanced around at the mess inside the display window. “Miss Wyett, we gave you explicit instructions. This window dressing was to be a complete secret from everyone—including Mr. McCann. I have my reasons for that expectation, and you took it upon yourself to disregard them.”

Before Iris could muster any explanation, Elias stepped between her and the other two men, as if to shield her from them. “Mr. Roland, this is my fault. I came in because I thought she was injured, and after that, there seemed to be no reason why I couldn’t help her complete the display. Please don’t terminate her contract because of my actions. I promise you, I’m worthy of your trust. I love Roland’s and I want this project to bring back all our customers. I would never compromise it.”

Peeking around Elias’s broad shoulders, Iris glanced between the men as they faced off. Mr. Roland looked thoughtful and Elias contrite. But Mr. Tremont looked...angry. Immediately, Iris pieced together what was going on. Stepping around Elias, she waved off his protests and confronted the two executives herself. “Mr. Roland, can I ask you something?”

Chapter Four

Elias's first instinct was to push Iris back behind him. He knew how it felt to take the full brunt of Mr. Tremont's wrath, and he would do anything to protect her from that unpleasantness.

But with her shoulders squared and her chin raised, Iris Wyett looked as if she could take on a charging bear—and win. So Elias remained silent behind her, letting her stand up for herself but at the ready to defend her if needed.

Iris tilted her head to one side while she examined Mr. Tremont. "I'm curious who told you that Elias has been helping me, Mr. Roland."

Clearing his throat, the older man stuttered over his words for a moment. "Ah, well, it was Mr. Tremont, here."

"And who suggested that even Elias couldn't see the window before the reveal? Overseeing the displays in his department is part of his job, after all. It seems as if that was an ill-formed idea. What if I had made a terrible mess of it and no one knew until it was shown to the entire town?"

Elias almost stepped forward then, arguments against the possibility of her ruining anything on the tip of his tongue. But he held back, beginning to see where she was going with her line of questioning.

Indeed, Mr. Roland heaved a sigh as he answered. "It was Mr. Tremont, as I think you already know." The older man turned to Mr. Tremont, who looked a bit panicked. "William? Did you arrange all this to cast Elias in a bad light?"

Mr. Tremont's face screwed up into a hateful sneer. "And why shouldn't I? I've worked for you for over a decade. Then this young upstart comes in and changes everything, but that only makes you start talking about promoting him to vice president. Vice president! In training for your job, I'm sure."

Mr. Roland glanced over his shoulder toward the unseen store floor as Mr. Tremont's voice rose higher and louder. "Lower your voice, please. We can't have

this situation reach our customers. Let's move to my office and discuss it."

But Mr. Tremont dug in his heels. "No, I won't be placated again. The promotion should be mine. Since Mr. McCann arrived, the store has lost customers and profits have plummeted. Doesn't that mean anything?"

Elias finally stepped up to stand next to Iris. He was close enough to her in the small window space that he felt her fingers brush his hand, hidden behind her emerald-green skirt where the others wouldn't see it. With his heart warming, he faced the two men. "Mr. Roland, I assure you, the falling profits aren't due to anything I've done. I love this store, sir. I want business to flourish. That's one reason why I've been helping with the display. I think it has the potential to turn things around for us. But I don't know how the problem could have been my fault, in the first place. I've never said a single negative word about Roland's."

Mr. Roland tilted his head, raising one hand to settle under his chin while he regarded Elias. But Mr. Tremont stepped right up into Elias's face, pushing one finger forward as if he had to physically direct his anger somewhere. "Isn't that the problem? You haven't been able to find the source of the rumors that have kept customers out of Roland's these last few months, so you can't help fix it. Well, I guarantee you won't, either."

Elias stood stunned under the force of Mr. Tremont's considerable wrath. But then Iris's calm voice cut through the tension. "And how can you guarantee that unless you know the source yourself, Mr. Tremont? Does that mean you've been concealing the solution all this time to discredit Elias?"

Mr. Roland moaned. "William, no. After so long, you would hurt my store to get ahead? I would have taken care of you, even if I didn't promote you to vice president. Now you've broken my trust."

Still standing right in Elias's face, Mr. Tremont paled as the truth he'd accidentally exposed sank in. He whirled around to face Mr. Roland. "Sir, it's not how it seems. Please, let me explain."

Holding the curtain open, Mr. Roland gestured for Mr. Tremont to precede him out. "We'll take this conversation to my office, William. Elias, Miss Wyett, please continue with your fine work. I look forward to seeing the window in working order tomorrow."

Then they were gone, leaving the curtain swishing back into place in their wake. For a long moment, Elias and Iris stood stock still, not speaking as they considered what had happened.

A little chuckle from Iris finally broke into Elias's tumbling thoughts. By the time he glanced her way, it turned into a full-fledged giggle of relief. She clapped a hand over her perfect pink lips, but he could still see the amusement spilling into her eyes. Despite the uncertainty of what came next for him at Roland's, Elias found his lips tilting up in a responding grin.

Iris drew a long, deep breath, enough to halt her laughter. She turned to face Elias, and he tried not to get distracted by the pretty flush on her cheeks or the charming way the twist of her hair had tilted askew. She looked straight up at him with luminous eyes. "Elias, the mystery of the store's troubles has been solved and if we can get it working, this window is sure to spark the return of Roland's popularity. Do you still want to help me complete it?"

The vulnerable tremble in her voice melted Elias. He leaned forward to plant a soft kiss on her forehead. It was all he dared do in the store, even if they were hidden in the window, but he intended it as a promise that many, many more kisses would follow when the time was right.

When he pulled back enough to see her face, her lips had parted, and her eyes shone like a cool winter twilight. "Iris, I want to help you with anything, anytime. My hands are yours."

Along with his heart, but there would be time to express that later.

Grinning, Iris jumped into action. "You have no idea how much that means to me, Elias. Now, let's make this window the marvel of Indianapolis."

It took the entire day, but by the time dusk fell, Elias and Iris had gotten both figures in working order, managed to mount the twinkling stars on the rail system that would move them along the ceiling, and hung the canvas backdrop that would replace the dark curtain in separating the window from the store. A light snow had started to fall when they parted ways at Iris's streetcar stop. As he watched her ride away, Elias comforted himself with the knowledge that he had plans for his future with her, and it would be time to put them into motion soon enough.

In his office the next morning, Elias wasn't quite sure what to do with himself. He wanted to let Iris handle the finishing touches herself so that the resulting display would be entirely hers, with only a little behind-the-scenes support from him. It wouldn't do for anyone to give him the least bit of credit for her fine work and copious skills.

The paper in the window would be pulled down at six o'clock that evening when it would be dark enough for the lights to draw attention but also early

enough that plenty of onlookers would be out and passing by the window.

But he missed her.

For most of the day, Elias sat at his desk and attempted to get through the paperwork that had piled up while he'd helped Iris. In the afternoon, Mr. Roland came in to explain his discussion with Mr. Tremont the day before. Once Mr. Roland confirmed Mr. Tremont's part in starting the rumors and giving someone at Huffman's information, the store manager had been released from his position. Mr. Roland even apologized to Elias for putting so much stock in what Mr. Tremont had said about him.

But that redemption paled in comparison to finally standing outside of the Roland's display window with Iris that evening. Last night's light, dry snow had coated everything in sparkling powder and the street was busy with shoppers strolling along and workers heading home, just as they'd hoped. On the corner, a Salvation Army brass band struck up a bright rendition of "O Come, All Ye Faithful."

There wasn't a great deal of fanfare to the moment, with only Elias and Iris standing outside with Mr. Roland while several clerks removed the paper from the window. But that lack of spectacle meant Elias could slide his fingers around Iris's hand without worrying about anyone thinking he was unprofessional. When she squeezed his hand in response, Elias felt he could take on anything the world decided to throw at him. A grand future was opening up before him and he couldn't wait to bring Iris along at his side.

Chapter Five

Iris wished she could draw more than warmth from Elias's hand as it cradled hers. She could use some courage and anything else that might calm the fluttering in her stomach.

One piece at a time, the store clerks made slow progress pulling the paper from the inside of the window, starting from the top. Bit by bit the design she'd painted on the glass came into view. She'd made it look like the window of a charming old house, with a painted wooden frame and muntins creating a grid through which on-lookers could see what appeared to be a cozy parlor.

As more paper came down, Iris finally got an outside view of the mechanical children reaching for the wrapped gifts under the rotating tree. The simulated room contained several small tables and a tasteful assortment of keepsakes and housewares, all items that were for sale in the store. She'd pulled back the lid of one large box to reveal a beautiful gown and matching gloves draped inside. An open hat box displayed Iris's favorite piece from the millinery counter.

And there, hanging above it all, were the delightful little twinkling stars, dancing in motion as she'd imagined they would.

Iris, Elias, and Mr. Roland watched the display in silence for a few moments, until a woman behind them gasped and dragged the friend she'd been walking with up to the window. "Jane, would you look at that darling hat? I must have one."

The two women marched straight toward the store entrance and disappeared inside. Mr. Roland turned to Iris with a slow grin spreading across his worn face. "Miss Wyett, I couldn't have asked for a better endorsement of your work. Thank you for what you've done here. It has exceeded my expectations. I hope to see your work in this window again after the holidays."

With a fond pat on Elias's shoulder, Mr. Roland passed them and returned to the store. Elias pulled Iris's hand up to tuck it into his crooked arm and began walking down the snow-covered sidewalk. "Let's enjoy this festive moment, shall we?"

Despite wondering what he was up to, Iris complied. She'd learned enough about Elias McCann that week to know she could trust him completely. He led the way across the street into Circle Park, which sat in the middle of the ring-shaped street that had become a coveted spot for stores and businesses. They perched on a bench with a beautiful view straight down Meridian Street to the Capitol Building. The evergreen garlands and wreaths that adorned it sparkled under the new electric streetlights.

Elias twisted his torso to face Iris and once again took her hand in his. "Iris, I'm worried."

Her heart constricted, immediately losing the glow of Christmas festivity. "About what?"

A slight grin lifted one corner of his lips, putting her back at ease. "That I won't know what to do without an excuse to see you every day."

Iris laughed, delighted when he joined in. She'd thought him so sour and staunch at first—that he didn't like her one bit—but she'd realized that was only because he'd been carrying the weight of undeserved suspicion. Now that the truth had been revealed, he was a different man, a charming, funny, warm man. A man she might easily fall for. She couldn't help but notice he'd even donned a green plaid tie, very different from his usual blacks or browns and reminiscent of the fabrics she liked to wear during the holiday season.

He glanced down at their joined hands, the humor dropping away. "Could I call on you at home, then?"

With her heartbeat stepping up to a more rapid pace, Iris swallowed hard. What if she allowed Elias to pursue her and this courtship fell apart as the others had? At least with the other two men, she hadn't cared for them. She wasn't certain she could stand losing Elias now that she'd gotten to know him.

But when he met her gaze again, she saw the same worry reflected in his deep brown eyes. He wanted her in his life as much as she wanted him in hers. That would make all the difference.

Iris leaned forward to place an all-too-brief kiss on his cold cheek. "I would be awfully upset if you didn't."

Their laughter once again mingled in the cold air, and Iris rested in the hope that this Christmas gift was one she would get to treasure for a lifetime to come.

The End

A Christmas Rescue

December 21, 1901
New York City

Annabeth Nichols rushed into her spot behind counter number four at one minute before nine. Once there, she let out a quiet sigh of relief. The last shopgirl who wasn't at her post when the store opened was fired before the day was out. Her aunt and uncle—and the many street children they provided a home for—needed her salary too much for her to risk the same fate. The F.A.O. Schwarz Toy Bazaar might have exacting standards, but it was a clean, safe place to work. And that meant the girls had to try all the harder to keep their positions because there was always someone waiting to replace them.

The store manager, Mr. Lowen, unlocked the door and all the girls jumped into action. After several hours, Annabeth stepped out from behind the counter where she'd finished wrapping a lovely wooden train only to collide head-on with a customer. Gasping, she found her hands pressed against a solid male chest for support, his warmth seeping into her very bones. Annabeth stepped back, looking up as an apology formed on her lips.

But it died before she uttered it. Amusement made his deep hazel eyes twinkle and wide lips tilted upward in the most appealing way. He looked for all the world like he knew he'd essentially taken her breath away. "Forgive me, please. I find I'm rather lost here, and it's made me careless. Are you injured?"

From across the store, Annabeth caught Mr. Lowen staring daggers at her, bringing her back to her senses. He was always looking for reasons to fire girls. She straightened her ruffled white apron. "Not at all. Can I help you find something?"

Scanning the shelves filled with brightly colored toys, he blinked several times. "Only if you can discover what I'm looking for first because I haven't a clue. I'm quite lost in a place like this. Perhaps you could rescue me."

A genuine smile tugged at Annabeth's lips. "Well, who are you buying for?"

The man went still before giving a halting answer. “Several children. I... honestly, I don’t know them well.”

A chill washed over Annabeth. They occasionally got male customers trying to quietly buy gifts for children their wives didn’t know about. Was this another rich man who wouldn’t honor his marriage vows?

But then her customer rolled his shoulders as if to rid himself of a persona he didn’t want to bear. “I can trust you to be discrete, can’t I? I feel as if you would understand.”

Annabeth heard the distinct shuffle of Mr. Lowen’s shoes as he passed by them on his rounds of the store. His pointed expression made it clear that she was expected to make this customer happy. She swallowed her discomfort for the sake of her aunt and uncle. “Of course.”

The man leaned close and lowered his voice, the sharp scent of his cologne throwing her mind into a spin. “There’s a home for orphaned children I know of, run by a wonderful older couple who barely have enough money to feed themselves, much less all those extra mouths. Yet they still take in more children than their house can fit. I believe there are fifteen of them right now. I intend to provide them with a Christmas they’ll never forget.”

Annabeth’s heart fluttered, her breath catching at the exact description of her precious, generous aunt and uncle. “Do you mean Mr. and Mrs. Floret, on Oak Street?”

Delight lit his features. “I do. You know them?”

Smothering a relieved giggle so he wouldn’t think she was laughing at him, Annabeth handed him a stuffed bear from the shelf next to her. “They’re my aunt and uncle. I know just what those children would love.”

Without hesitation, he spent the next hour following Annabeth around the store as they worked together to choose—at his request—a pile of gifts for each of the fifteen children. She balked at first, unsure how generous he could truly afford to be. But the man aimed the most disarming lopsided grin at her and added another porcelain doll to the pile. “Never mind the cost. I’m prepared to cover any amount to make this a magical holiday for those children.”

Wrapping the gifts with several other girls, Annabeth convinced herself men this wonderful didn’t spend their time with shopgirls. He would be gone from her life as soon as the purchase was complete. All too soon, she and her customer led the way outside to a waiting carriage as several young porters balanced stacks of packages behind them. Once everything had been loaded, the man stopped

Annabeth before she could return to the store. “You’ve been so helpful and kind, and I never even introduced myself. I’m Matthias Ashby.”

Annabeth’s mind stuttered to a halt. Matthias Ashby? The most eligible—and richest—bachelor in New York City? No wonder he hadn’t batted an eye at the cost of the gifts. Realizing she hadn’t responded she roused her mind from the shock. “Annabeth Nichols. Thank you for what you’re doing for the children.”

Wistfulness filled Matthias’s eyes as he smiled at her. “It feels a small thing when their lives are so hard. I only wish I could get to know them so next time I can choose gifts myself.”

Realizing this might be her only chance to spend more time with her new favorite customer, Annabeth hesitated. Could she be a modern woman who took charge of her romantic life? She drew a deep breath and let the words spill out. “Perhaps you can if you join me there for dinner tonight while delivering those gifts.”

To her relief, Matthias took hold of her hand and pressed his lips to it in the most ridiculous courtly gesture. Annabeth’s heart fluttered once again. It was becoming a habit with Matthias around. He sent her another gorgeous smile before climbing into the carriage. “Until tonight, then, my rescuer.”

The End

With Love, Your Santa

December 15, 1915
Santa Claus, Indiana

A blast of cold wind slammed the post office door against the wall, startling Percy Meyer out of his task. He dropped yet another letter addressed to Santa Claus with the others and looked up as fellow postal clerk Celeste Willis removed her feather-adorned hat with deft fingers and hung it on a hook behind the counter, along with her coat. “Have we made any progress with the responses yet?”

Percy had to shake his head. “Not even a little. Every time I finish a stack, the next delivery brings more. Mr. Martin has created a crisis.”

Sliding into the chair next to his, Celeste paused with her gaze on him. “Good morning, Percy.” She leaned close and her soft lips met his in the briefest kiss, one that made him long to throw workplace caution aside, wrap his arms around her, and kiss her thoroughly.

Instead, he handed her a letter from the desk. Eagerly, Celeste tore it open and read the childish scrawls aloud. “Listen to this. ‘Dear Santa, I only want one toy for Christmas. Something the children in the war don’t need. Thank you kindly, Henry.’ How darling. It’s no wonder Mr. Martin wants to respond to every single child.”

Mere inches from touching Celeste’s smooth skin, Percy’s heart thrummed the same rapid beat it had all morning as he waited for their shift at the post office to start. In truth, he’d been waiting for this moment since the first time he called on Celeste at her family’s home two months ago. Today she would find a special letter, addressed to Santa but meant for her alone. As long as everything went smoothly.

For the next hour, they skimmed letters and wrote replies. Their boss, postmaster James Martin, had started responding to letters addressed to Santa Claus last year, and already post offices around the country were forwarding bags

of them to their little southern Indiana town. It was a great deal of extra work for the clerks in a season that was already busy, but Celeste liked to point out that it was more rewarding than their usual mail sorting by far.

Her positive outlook was what first made Percy fall in love with her.

It was high time he expressed his feelings, at least according to his mother, who adored Celeste. And she was usually right. So, when Celeste was occupied with writing another response, he slid an envelope out of his jacket pocket and under the next letter on her stack.

His breathing turned shallow. She would read his words of love in mere moments. Would she tell him she loved him too? He couldn't bear the thought that she might laugh in his face, although his dreams had been haunted by that image the last few nights.

The door clattered open, swinging back with windy force again. They both looked up to see Mr. Martin shaking off the winter cold as he pushed the door firmly shut. "Well, my two Santas are hard at work, eh? I appreciate your help, although I feel terrible for asking you to do so much."

Celeste smiled her gracious, room-brightening grin. "I enjoy getting a glimpse into the hearts of these wonderful children. It's more work than usual but not a burden at all."

Before Percy even quite knew what was happening, Mr. Martin cheerfully swooped past on his way to his office, brushing a pile and sending letters all over the floor and under the desks. He and Celeste laughed as they cleaned them up, but Percy couldn't move. Where was the letter for Celeste? There were hundreds of envelopes here. If it ended up on the bottom of a pile, it could be days before they got to it.

Mr. Martin finally retreated to his office. Celeste glanced at Percy. "You look like you've seen a ghost. What's wrong?"

My carefully laid plan is in shambles?

He couldn't say that out loud, but his mind went blank. Realizing Celeste was still waiting, Percy swallowed hard and tried to smile. "I remembered I haven't bought you a Christmas gift yet. Is there anything special you want?"

That must have explained his dismay well enough. Celeste returned to sorting letters on her desk. She listed a few items she'd admired while shopping recently, and Percy tried to form a new plan as he tore open a few more children's letters.

"What's this?"

Celeste's voice was hushed, drawing his attention back to her. In her hand was the paper filled with his handwriting. She'd found it, after all. Now he just had to see how she would respond.

As he waited, she read the words he'd spent hours perfecting over the last few days, her lips soundlessly forming the words. He mentally followed along, cringing when she reached the closing he'd thought so clever last night. With love, your Santa.

The clock on the wall ticked along as an eternity stretched out with no response from her. One hand covered her mouth while her gaze remained glued to the paper. He had to know what she was thinking. "Celeste?"

Without warning, she launched herself into his arms, nearly knocking him out of his chair in the process. "I love you too, Percy. So much. This is the most romantic thing I could ever imagine."

Then her lips met his, this time no brief greeting kiss. He slid one hand into her hair and the other along her back as their lips entwined. He kissed her as thoroughly as he'd wanted to earlier until both of them were breathing hard.

Finally, he pulled away from her. "You mean it, Celeste? You love me, too?"

With her emerald eyes glowing brighter than the most brilliant Christmas tree, the love of his life nodded. "I do. And your love is better than any Christmas gift Santa could deliver."

The End

Prince Charming's Return

Grace Bennett happened upon the wrought iron greenhouse with ten minutes to spare. Going from winter cold into the warm, damp air immediately made the heavy satin gown cling to her skin. Why her daughter, Kara, had picked a regency masquerade for her annual New Year's Eve party was beyond Grace's understanding. The 1820s estate venue was a nice touch. The authentic duchess-inspired dress was not.

Digging her cell phone out of a pocket sewn into the high-waisted dress, Grace held it up like a flashlight. A distracting flashlight, as it vibrated three times in a row and displayed Kara's name twice, followed by Rich's. She put the phone away. No matter how dark it was, she refused to stare at her ex's name for the last few minutes of the year.

Even if she did miss him.

Silence enveloped the greenhouse, contrasting the excessive volume in the ballroom across the garden path. Through the glass door, she could see swirling skirts and coat tails as guests stumbled through the old-fashioned steps Kara's dance instructor friend had tried to teach earlier in the evening. Eight minutes to go. Grace removed the mask Kara insisted everyone wear and took a deep breath of relief. She'd finally found some solitude.

A stroll around the greenhouse, surrounded only by the smell of dirt and growing things, would be a much better way to end a terrible year. Grace turned from the door and headed toward the path running around the right side, only to collide with a solid male form. She reached toward him when she heard his

deep groan, cursing the clumsiness that seemed to be coming with middle age. “I’m so sorry. I thought I was alone. Did I hurt you?”

It was dark enough she couldn’t make out any features around his mask, only a tall outline wearing a long jacket and topped by something shiny. A crown? Kara called it a fairy tale ball, but was he actually dressed as Prince Charming?

“Just a crushed toe, nothing that won’t heal.” His voice was cheerful and rather familiar, lifting Grace’s mood. He must be one of the regulars Kara always invited to her events.

“Well, I guess it’s what you get for hiding in the dark during a party.”

His chuckle warmed her even more than the humidity. “I could say the same for you.”

Grace peeked at her phone again before moving toward the door, only half-hoping he would get the point and leave her alone. “It’s four minutes to midnight. Don’t you want to get back inside, so you don’t miss the countdown?”

He followed her, standing close enough that his arm brushed against the puffed sleeve of her dress. “Nope. Too much going on in there, at the moment.”

Grace leaned against a support post. “No kidding. Can you believe I got talked into a blind date on New Year’s Eve? The last thing I need to start off a new year is a near-stranger trying to kiss me. I’m too old for that nonsense.”

She heard him shift and it sounded like he was facing her now. “Oh, I’d hardly call you old, Grace.”

Yes, he had to be someone she’d met before. But the heavy air muffled his voice and she couldn’t place it. “And how would you know? We’ve probably met, what? Three or four times?”

In the ballroom, guests were starting to gather in the middle of the dance floor. She checked the time again. One minute to go. Her companion laughed as his hand slid over to cradle hers. “Oh, we’ve been much closer than that.”

Grace froze. She knew that touch. “Rich?”

“Sorry, Grace. I stepped out here to call you and then, low and behold, you appeared. I didn’t want to scare you off before I could talk to you. To apologize for not trying harder to work things out.”

Grace kept her eyes on the ballroom, even as she longed to stare at him. She'd been thinking about him all day, wishing they had another chance to sort through the problems that had separated them last year. And now, here she was, facing that opportunity.

Even from their secluded spot, Grace could hear the countdown start in the ballroom.

Ten, nine, eight.

Rich leaned close. "I don't want to make things awkward, but maybe you'd like a New Year's kiss on the cheek? A promise of what could be this year if you'll give me a chance to prove myself."

Seven, six, five.

Her heart thumped in time with the countdown. "You really want to try again? We have a lot to work on."

Four, three, two.

"You're worth it."

One!

Grace turned her cheek and let him press his lips against her skin. The sweetest hope swelled in her heart. Echoing the rest of the guests, his whisper was only for her. "Happy New Year, Grace. Here's to another beginning."

The End



Abbey Downey started writing inspirational romance stories during naptime when her kids were babies and found she couldn't stop. She is the author of the Adventurous Hearts series from Wild Heart Books, with the new Headliners and Heartstrings series releasing soon. Abbey also works with Spark Flash Fiction producing a quarterly digital publication that contains love stories under 1000 words.

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