

The Roses of Prose Present

A Holiday to Remember

by

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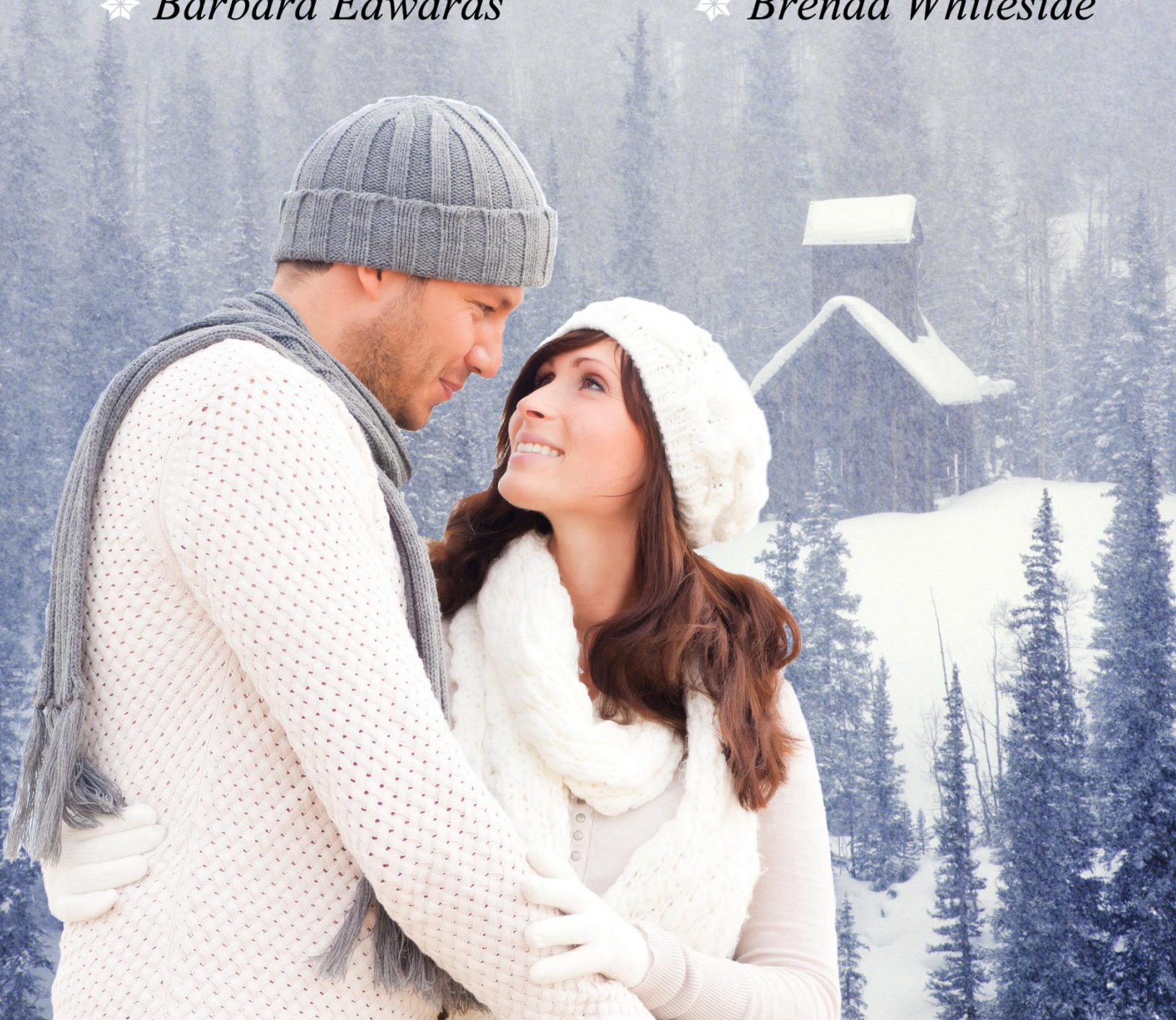
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Chapter One – You Want Me to Pump What?

by Jannine Gallant

Snow drifted from the leaden sky, huge flakes splattering against the windshield like squashed bugs. *Terrific*. This day just kept getting better and better.

It never snowed in Georgia. Well, almost never. The thought of balmy days lounging beneath a magnolia tree had been the main reason Candy Wright had deserted the slushy streets and frigid temperatures of Manhattan to spend the holidays with her old college roommate. That and the fact that she'd been forced to close *The Wright Way*, her advertising agency, for seven excruciatingly long days. When she'd suggested forgoing the traditional week off, her senior staff assured her morale *would not* be improved by such an action. If their incredulous expressions were any indication, the result would be a full-blown insurrection.

She glanced down at the glowing gas pump on the gage of her rental sedan and bit her lip. If she didn't stop soon, she'd find herself stranded. Up ahead, the vague outlines of buildings appeared through the gloom. *Thank heavens*. It didn't look like much of a town, just a wide spot in the road with a gas station. Maybe she could get a cup of coffee while they filled her tank. Both she and the car needed fuel for the drive ahead. She pulled up before the pumps and opened the car door. A gust of cold wind, damp with snow, slapped her in the face. Huddling into the soft folds of her cashmere sweater, she hurried across the oil-stained pavement, detoured around a big yellow tow truck parked smack in front of the building, and entered the convenience store attached to the open garage bay.

Bad coffee beat no coffee at all.

The swinging door slapped shut behind her. A dark haired, pimple-faced teen sat on a stool behind a counter cluttered with racks of candy bars and bags of chips. She headed for the coffee maker and poured dark liquid into a Styrofoam cup. Adding a packet of sugar, she carried it to the counter.

"Can I pay for this with my gas?"

The boy snapped his gum. "Sure, but the pump ain't runnin'."

Taking a deep breath, she held back a sharp retort and spoke in a level voice. "It will be as soon as someone pumps my gas."

"Lady, we don't pump the gas. You do."

Every other gas station she'd stopped at in small towns provided old-fashioned full service. Why did this one have to be modernized? Maybe she could sweet talk him. "It's snowing."

"Yep."

She took another breath. The kid probably wasn't a Mensa member. "Surely someone here can pump my gas. For a tip?"

He snorted. "Ain't no one here but me and Mitch."

It seemed obvious the boy wasn't going to get off his butt. "Maybe this Mitch person can do it."

Behind the teen, the door opened, and a man stepped through from the garage bay. He reminded Candy of the guy on those old Marlborough billboards, broad shoulders beneath a denim jacket and long legs encased in faded jeans. Little lines fanned out from eyes the color of a summer sky. His hard jaw, covered with a day's growth of stubble, was set at a stubborn angle. Firm lips curved in the barest hint of a smile as he regarded her from beneath overlong sandy blond hair. She guessed he was in his early to mid thirties, maybe a couple years older than she was. A hottie to be sure, but as different from the men she occasionally dated as a no-tell motel was from the five star accommodations she favored.

"Did I hear my name?"

The boy grinned. "This lady, here, wants you to pump her gas."

Candy watched his gaze skim over her, from the top of her mink brown hair pulled back and fastened with a gold clip, down the length of her moss green sweater to the short skirt beneath, ending with a study of her black leather boots with three inch spike heels. He rolled his eyes.

Angry heat crept up her neck. Turning on her heel, she spoke over her shoulder. "Forget it. I'll do it myself."

"Hey, don't be in such a rush. I don't mind pumping your gas."

Pride urged her to march out the door, but the snow falling steadily convinced her otherwise. "I would appreciate it. I'm not dressed for a snowstorm."

"You don't say."

Gritting her teeth, she watched him walk toward her car. Jeans had rarely looked so fine. But a superb ass didn't make up for a sarcastic personality. She sipped the steaming coffee and made a face. The motor oil in the rack by the grimy window probably tasted better.

A few minutes later, the boy said, "Your tank is full. With the coffee, it comes to \$52.50."

She paid with a credit card and took a five dollar bill out of her wallet. After signing the receipt, she left the store, dropping the cup of coffee in the trash can by the door. Blinking against the falling snow, she approached the man scraping snow off the windshield of her rental car and held out a hand with the folded bill in it.

"Thanks, I appreciate the help."

He stared down at her. "How about I give you a tip instead. This storm is supposed to get worse. Highway patrol is advising motorists to stay off the roads. There's a motel about two blocks up the street. Get yourself a room for the night."

Blood pounded behind her temples at his *big strong man is smarter than the dumb little lady tone*. When her male colleagues spoke to her that way, she wanted to... She closed her eyes for a moment and shoved the five back in her purse.

"I'm afraid I have a plane to catch."

"In Atlanta?"

She opened the car door. "That's right."

His gaze drifted to her bare left hand. "Let me guess. You went home to your family for Christmas, and your boyfriend is chomping at the bit, waiting for your return. No man is worth risking your life. Change your flight."

"If I were you, I wouldn't quit my day job. Your fortune telling skills are pathetic."

A wide grin stretched across his face, revealing even white teeth. There was something familiar about that smile... She shook her head. The man was a complete stranger. He probably looked like some bit actor she'd seen in a movie.

"Well, at least I won't be the one scraping you off the pavement. My shift's nearly over."

She raised one brow. "I don't understand."

He jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "I drive the tow truck."

It figured. "Thanks for the vote of confidence." She slid onto the car seat and slammed the door. Pulling out of the gas station, she glanced into the rearview mirror. Mr. Hottie Mitch Whoever stood with his arms crossed over his chest, watching as she drove into the blinding snow.

Chapter Two – The Winding Road
by Jerri Hines

Candy tried her cell phone again. No service. Which was worse? Being stranded in the middle of a snowstorm or having help arrive in the form of an arrogant tow truck driver. *Go away.*

But the flashing lights grew closer.

She sucked in a breath. *I can deal with this.* Glancing through the fogged up window, she couldn't make out much except the flashing yellow lights growing brighter in her rearview mirror.

The truck pulled to a stop behind her. A door swung open, and a husky masculine form emerged. It was him. Okay, she admitted feeling a certain amount of relief. The snow showed no sign of letting up. She was stuck on a dark country road...alone. Her cell phone had no reception.

Just her luck. In the middle of nowhere, and her knight in shining armor arrived in a tow truck. God only knew how he'd found her.

Her plan to wake up in her own bed in New York had taken a detour when her car skidded off the icy road. Her hands hurt from her panicked grip on the wheel. Her legs still trembled from the car spinning like a crazed toy top. Her life flashed before her eyes in those brief moments. The last thing she needed to hear was *I told you so.*

Neck craned, her gaze followed him as he walked up to the side of her car. The snow swirled around him as he knocked on the window. With the greatest reluctance, she clicked the button to lower it.

"You okay?" he asked, leaning down to eye level.

Looking up into his simmering blue eyes, she felt anything but okay. She pushed back her unruly hair and nodded. "It's Mitch, right?"

"Yeah, Mitch...Johnson."

"It was only...no one has treated the roads yet...I hit a patch of ice and skidded into the bank." Annoyed at the flustered quaver in her voice, she fumbled for words. "Do you think you could help me back onto the road? The plow should be by soon..."

"Lady, you do realize you're in Georgia. There aren't any snowplows in Elridge. Haven't seen this much snow in more than twenty years, certainly not in the ten I've lived here."

He stepped back and opened her door. "Let's get you out of there."

The wind whipped through her as she stepped into the snow. Turning her head against the blast, her body fell back. Two strong hands caught her. In one swift movement, he swept her into his arms.

"I can walk," she protested.

"Not in those boots."

She didn't argue, and her grip tightened on his jacket. Amazement at the warm, sultry feeling encompassing her left her speechless. She'd never been carried. For that matter, she couldn't remember ever feeling so safe in anyone's arms. What that said about her love life...

Before she had time to dwell on it, he helped her up through the driver's side door of his truck. Ducking, she slid onto the seat.

And froze. Two enormous dark eyes stared at her. A scream choked in her throat.

"That's Major. He won't hurt you as long as you don't try to take his seat. He likes the window. Don't touch anything. I'll take a look at your car."

Touch anything? She couldn't move! He'd left her alone with a dog, a huge dog. No, it was too big for a dog. A wolf. He'd left her alone with a wolf. She jumped when the door slammed shut behind her. Heart pounding, she glanced sideways at the animal. Where had she heard to never look a dog straight in the eyes? His ears weren't back; his hair wasn't raised. The large, brown canine gave her a goofy grin. Was he actually smiling? He thrust his head toward her.

Oh, my God, I'm going to die!

The door flew open. "Not good news. Your front axle is bent. You won't be going anywhere anytime soon."

Candy leaped against his snow-covered chest.

"Whoa there. Easy, lady. The worst Major will do is douse you with his slobber."

Was he kidding? Did he really not know he'd left her with a...a...monster?

Mitch hopped in and scooted her over into the middle, close to the brute that didn't move, guarding his spot by the window.

"See? A big teddy bear. He's a lab. Most labs are docile, friendly sorts, and Major is no exception."

"Sure, friendly."

"You can let go of my arm."

She released her hold. Heat crept up her neck. "I'm sorry." She took a breath. "Thank you. I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't come along. But..." She took another breath. "Any idea how I'm supposed to make my flight? Do you know someone who can give me a ride to Atlanta?"

A cocky grin emerged, and gorgeous blue eyes gleamed with suppressed amusement. Was he laughing at her?

"Look, lady—"

"Candy," she offered.

"Look, Candy. I realize you're experiencing tunnel vision at the moment, but you need to look at the larger picture. You like to be in control. Don't like to be told what to do. But let me give you a couple of facts. Your car is inoperable. There isn't a rental place for miles. I'm one hundred percent positive there are no flights leaving Atlanta. Not tonight. Even if you could make it to the airport, which you can't, you'd be stuck. No one in their right mind is out driving in this. We don't sand the roads around here, nor do we have snowplows.

"You're lucky I headed home when I did. Right after you left the station, the electricity went out. The phones lines are down, and we have crappy cell reception under the best of circumstances."

Her blood pressure rose. No one spoke to her like that. Ever. She couldn't let people talk down to her and expect to run a successful business. Oh, Lord, were those tears welling in her eyes? Another unwritten rule: never let anyone move her to emotions. A sign of certain weakness. She'd learned that lesson a long time ago. The weak didn't succeed. And she wanted—no, needed—to succeed.

"Just take me back to that motel you mentioned. I won't bother you further."

"Afraid I can't do that."

"You're kidding, right? This is a joke?"

"No joke, lady. With all the wind, snow, and ice, a huge tree fell a couple miles back, right after I passed. Lucky it didn't hit me. We won't be going back to Elridge tonight. Fulton is another twelve miles up the road, and it's even smaller. Doesn't have a motel."

Candy stared at him, fear edging down her spine. "Then what am I going to do?"

"Only thing to do now is get out of this weather. I'll hook up your car and get it off the road. There's no point in towing it anywhere until I can take it back to the station. My house is up the road a ways. It's not fancy, but you'll be warm and dry. I give you my word, as soon as the weather clears, I'll take you to Atlanta. Now, it's been a long day."

He didn't say another word, just put the truck in gear.

Chapter Three – What to Do With a Princess
by Christine DePetrillo

As Mitch reached over to crank up the heat in the tow truck, Major jumped into the space behind the seat. The sound of Candy's teeth chattering stopped when she sucked in a breath. She scooted toward the passenger door, pulling at her skirt, which didn't seem capable of covering those amazing thighs. Thighs Mitch had already felt as he'd carried her to the truck. Thighs that, despite the cold wind, had been warm against his hand. Thighs that led up to a tight bottom and a slim waist.

As Mitch hit the brakes a little too late to avoid a fallen branch, the truck skidded. It jerked as he drove over the debris. *That's what you get for over-thinking her thighs, jackass.*

He tightened his fingers on the steering wheel and reached to turn on the radio. Again, when his hand came near her, Candy flinched.

"Relax. This isn't...where are you from?" He eased the truck forward as a bluesy guitar tune wafted from the speakers.

"Manhattan." Candy lifted her chin a bit as if being from New York gave her superiority.

If she only knew.

"This isn't Manhattan. Folks here help each other. We're looking at blizzard conditions. You need a place to stay. I have a place for you to stay. I'm not going to hurt you."

"I'm not afraid of you." The indignation in her voice left no room for anything else in the cab.

"Then why are you plastered against the door?" Mitch pulled his eyes off the road to glance at her. She looked like a twitchy rabbit cornered against a fence, but he sensed a tiger hidden behind those huge, hazel eyes. Did the cat want to purr or bite his head off? He wouldn't make any sudden movements, just in case.

"If you haven't noticed," she gestured toward Major's head jutting over the front seat, "that beast of yours has a saliva control problem. I do not want drool on my sweater." Candy wrapped her arms tightly around her waist.

Mitch reached a hand back and patted Major's head. He couldn't believe the dog had given up his window seat. He must like their passenger.

"Don't listen to her, buddy. She's just a city girl who thinks wildlife is best viewed through a television screen."

"You really are terrible at reading people, aren't you?" She moved a little closer so she could put her legs directly under the heat pumping into the truck. "As it happens, I grew up in the woods of Vermont. I had more dirt under my fingernails than most of the boys and loved catching bugs, toads, and snakes."

"Not dressed like that you didn't." Mitch gestured to her spike-heeled boots. What possessed someone to wear shoes like that in the winter?

She shrugged. "A girl has to grow up at some point. Can't run wild through the forest forever."

Why the hell not? It sounded like a perfect lifestyle to Mitch. Very similar to his own. Well, the one he'd fashioned out of necessity, anyway.

They drove with only the music filling the truck. Major, apparently not taking Candy's insult personally, had fallen asleep behind the front seat. When Mitch stopped the vehicle in his snow-covered driveway, the dog popped his head up and barked. He pushed a wet nose into Mitch's ear, then turned toward Candy.

She held up a hand. "Don't even think about it." She opened the passenger door.

Major scrambled into the front seat, ignoring Candy's shouts as he bounded across her lap, and hopped down into the snow.

Mitch bit his bottom lip, trying desperately not to laugh. When Candy turned fiery eyes his way, he couldn't hold it in any longer. He laughed for a good twenty seconds before wiping his eyes.

"Your animal ruined my skirt. That's funny to you?" She indicated tiny pulls in the expensive fabric.

He had clothes that looked far worse, and he certainly preferred his faded jeans and T-shirts over stuffy business suits and offices and meetings and...his chest tightened thinking about all the crap he'd left behind.

"Major would offer to buy you another, but he's short on cash at the moment." He motioned to the open passenger door. "Hang on a second and I'll shovel a path to the door."

He climbed out of the truck while Major barked at something in the backyard. Mitch grabbed the shovel he'd rested against the front door before leaving for work in the morning. At least someone had listened to the weather reports and made sensible plans. If Miss Manhattan had taken his advice and shacked up in the motel, he wouldn't be freezing his ass off shoveling a path for her majesty right now. He wouldn't be faced with the prospect of having her spend the night in his home. His castle. His refuge.

Something told him she would be less than impressed by the accommodations. She had *VIP Treatment* written all over her, and Mitch didn't consider anyone VIP material. At the heart of it, people were just people. No one was any better than anyone else. Everybody had the same potential. Every life had worth. This was where he and his father had disagreed. Repeatedly. When his throat tightened, he pushed the thought aside like he always did.

"It's freezing out here," Candy called from the truck.

No shit, princess. He couldn't feel his fingers, and snow had seeped into his work boots, icing up his ankles. He just wanted to get inside and take a hot shower. Alone.

Mitch cleared the rest of his narrow path and bowed before Candy, still seated in the passenger seat. "Your Grace." He thrust out an arm, indicating the path was now ready to accept her.

She pursed her lips and placed one of those ridiculous heels onto the running board. The moment she put weight on it, the boot slipped, sending her tumbling into the snow pile Mitch had created at the end of the hastily shoveled path.

Again, laughter bubbled out of him. Twice in one day? Unusual, but she was just so...so...unlike anyone in Elridge.

He extended a hand to her, but she refused the help. Instead, she struggled to her feet like a newborn calf, then stalked to his front door. She would have succeeded in regaining her dignity if not for the compacted snow stuck to her skirt.

She turned to look at him through narrowed eyes. "Let's go. I'm freezing."

Mitch put a chokehold on the shovel handle, imagining Candy's neck in its place. The quicker they got through this evening, the quicker morning would come. The quicker he could get her off to Atlanta. She didn't belong in Elridge. She certainly didn't belong in his house.

The screen door squeaked as he pushed open the front door.

"No locks?" Candy looked up at him as they stood close together in the threshold.

"Don't need them." Though someone should lock him up for bringing her here.

Her brow furrowed, as if the notion of not locking, double locking, triple locking one's front door was incomprehensible, then stepped inside. "It's cold in here."

"What do you mean?" Mitch shuffled in behind her and flicked the light switch by the door. Nothing. Judging by the frostiness in his small kitchen, the power had been out for a while.

Wonderful.

"Let me guess; you don't believe in electricity. It hinders your pure living out here in the middle of nowhere."

Mitch growled at her as he felt his way through the dark to the hall closet. He grabbed a flashlight and shined it on Candy.

"Stay here. Don't touch anything."

The last thing he needed was to have her wandering through his house. He'd get the power running, set the ground rules, and figure out what to do with the princess.

Chapter Four – Candy Heats Up
by Alison Henderson

Standing alone in the freezing darkness, Candy wrapped her arms around herself as a deep shiver chased through her body. Her teeth chattered. She clamped her jaws tight and rubbed her upper arms in an attempt to rev up her circulation through the soft cashmere. She wiggled her toes in her tight, pointed boots. Anything to get warm. She'd never imagined Georgia could be so cold. She'd locked her winter coat in the trunk of the rental car along with her suitcase for the drive to the airport, thinking she'd be plenty warm in her sweater and skirt with the car's heater running.

Her suitcase. Damn. Damn. Damn. Her rustic savior in denim and flannel had whisked her away to this icebox in the woods without her suitcase. And she'd let him. Suddenly, all she could think of were her cozy wool slacks, warm socks, and favorite fuzzy slippers imprisoned in the trunk of the wrecked car.

"Hey!" she yelled into the empty blackness.

Pipes clanked somewhere but no response came.

"Hey!" she called again.

More clanking. Then doggy toenails clicking on the hardwood floor.

Candy raised her voice. "Mitch!"

"What?"

She jumped as a flashlight beam danced across her face. "Don't do that," she protested.

He swung the light toward the wall so she could see him without being blinded. "What do you want?" he asked.

"We need to go back."

"Go back where?"

"To my car. I need my suitcase."

He stepped toward her, gripped her shoulder, and marched her to the front door. When he opened it, an icy blast blew up her short skirt, and Candy recoiled. Mitch aimed the flashlight out into the whirling maelstrom of white. "I don't think so."

Her heart sank. He was right. Only a fool would venture out in a storm like that, and he didn't strike her as a fool.

Mitch shut the door with a firm click. "Looks like the power may be out for some time. The lines are down, and I couldn't get the generator started."

"Won't the power company come out to fix it?"

"Not 'til the storm's over, and there's no telling when that'll be."

Great. Now she was doomed to freeze to death in Middle-of-Nowhere, Georgia, with a complete stranger and his sloppy dog—if she didn't starve first. She felt a whine coming on and couldn't muster the strength to suppress it. "But I can't stay here in the dark with no clothes and no food."

Mitch laughed. "I have food. We just won't be able to cook it on the stove. Besides, I thought you said you grew up in the woods. What happened to your survival skills?"

"I ditched them for civilization."

"Well, better bring them back. You're going to need them."

Candy closed her eyes. She never should have come on this trip. She should have stayed home in her comfortable apartment on the upper West Side where she had heat and light and...do what? Spend the holidays alone? Ever since her mother died, she'd dreaded spending holidays by herself. That's why she'd wanted to keep the office open. If she worked straight through this cursed time of the year, she barely noticed. Tears tickled the back of her throat, and she balled her fists.

I will not cry. No matter what.

But she made no promises about pouting. "I'm cold and wet and need a hot shower."

Mitch raised his left brow at her tone, but she didn't care. Let him think she was a spoiled princess. At least he was in his own home.

Then he smiled, and a tiny flame of warmth flickered inside her. "You're in luck. We may not have heat or light, but we do have hot water."

"How?"

"The water heater's gas. Just don't take too long. The pump's running on the back-up battery, and I don't know how long it will last. I'd hate to have to resort to melting snow for water if the power doesn't come back on in a couple of days."

"A couple of days!" That wasn't possible, was it?

He shrugged. "You never know. Follow me. I'll show you the bathroom."

Candy didn't balk when he grasped her small, cold hand in his big, warm one and led her down the dark hall to a compact, white, spotlessly clean bathroom with an old-fashioned claw foot tub. A large, round rain showerhead projected from the wall above it.

Mitch turned the taps to adjust the temperature, then pulled the valve for the shower. Water cascaded down, and clouds of steam boiled up to fill the frigid room. He opened a cupboard and handed her a thick, white towel. "Here. Remember, don't take too long."

"But I don't have anything to wear." Her sweater and slip of a skirt were damp from the snow.

"I'll leave something next to the tub for you."

"I won't be able to see."

"I'll leave you the flashlight." He set it on the toilet seat, aimed at the ceiling.

"Now you won't be able to see."

He heaved a sigh. "I'll be fine. I know every board and nail of this place."

The door clicked sharply behind him.

It crossed her mind that stripping down to nothing in the house of a man she'd known less than an hour might not be the brightest move. But common sense didn't stand a chance against the siren call of hot water. Thirty seconds later, she stood stark naked under the spray as the glorious heat brought her chilled flesh back to life.

With a sigh of regret, she turned off the water much sooner than she would have liked and poked her head around the curtain. In a neat pile on the bath mat lay a pair of gray sweat pants and a red plaid flannel shirt. She grabbed the towel and rubbed her skin briskly to generate as much heat as possible before slipping into the clothes Mitch had provided.

They were obviously his. Candy tightened the drawstring of the pants and rolled the legs until her toes peeked out. She felt warmer already. Then she pulled on the soft, worn shirt and turned the cuffs several times to free her hands. A pair of thick wool socks completed the ensemble. She wiped a dry end of the towel across the steamy mirror, peered at her image, and stifled a snort. Definitely the Anti-Fashionista. It was a good thing no one she knew could see her now.

When she opened the bathroom door, a faint glow drew her down the hall toward the living room. She turned off the flashlight and followed the light. When she stepped into the living room, her breath caught in her throat. A dozen lit candles flickered on the coffee table, end tables, even the windowsills. Mitch knelt in front of a crackling fire in the stone fireplace, tucking more kindling around the logs. He turned his head toward her then rose in one fluid movement.

Chapter Five – A Hard Liquor Kind of Situation
by Amber Leigh Williams

Mitch told himself to stop staring, but despite the heat of the growing fire in the hearth, the command froze before it could take effect. Funny, he'd thought the oversized flannel and sweatpants would lessen her effect on him.

No luck there. Her wet hair was combed back from her face, which only managed to make her hazel eyes look deeper, larger. Between the flames of the hearth and candles, her beauty took on a luminous quality. It feathered along the high arch of her cheekbones and softened the bottom curve of her full mouth.

The tightening in his chest eased into a welcome ache. It had been some time since he'd felt like this, and he didn't know how to curb it.

That wide-eyed gaze locked onto his, and his pulse picked up pace, the air going thick in his lungs. After several beats of continued silence, she blinked and looked away.

"Thank you for the clothes."

He frowned, clearing his throat to jumpstart the stalled words. They came out rougher than he intended. "It's not much, but you're welcome."

She licked her lips. His traitorous stare followed the quick flick of her tongue.

"This is a nice room. I imagine there's a lot of light during the day," she said.

Turning, he looked at the wide windows aligned with the western horizon. If not for the whiteout blanketing the landscape as far as the eye could see, they would be enjoying a nice sunset right about now. "This room is the reason I purchased the house. It was a bit of an impulse, to be honest." But he wasn't going into that now. Wiping palms that were surprisingly damp on the thighs of his jeans, he stepped back. "Here, sit by the fire." He shooed Major from the foot of the armchair closest to the hearth. "Are you hungry?"

"I could use a drink," she said, sinking onto the leather cushion. She was a tall woman, but the chair enveloped her, somehow making her look small and delicate.

"A drink." Yeah, he could use one of those, too. Maybe whiskey was what he needed to douse the warm, cozy fire she'd lit in him. As cold as the house was, he had no right to feel such riotous warmth. "I'll see what I have."

The kitchen, separated from the living room by a high granite countertop, ran toward necessity. He used the flashlight to find his way more easily around the rustic wood cabinetry. There wasn't much he could whip up for her besides the whiskey and a bottle of cabernet he kept around for whenever he was in the mood to cook anything nicer than microwave dinners. "Is wine okay?" he called back into the living room.

"I'll take some of that whiskey," her voice said close behind him.

Glancing over his shoulder, he watched her run a hand over the smooth wood face of one of the cabinets. "You sure?" he asked, holding up the bottle. "It isn't the smooth kind."

She rolled her eyes, and the jaded, city attitude that cloaked her face skewered him. "Just pour me a glass. This is without doubt a hard liquor kind of situation."

Taking a tumbler down from the cupboard over his head, he poured her a glass and set it down on the island between them. "There you are, princess. Have fun."

She lifted the tumbler but frowned at him as she cupped it in both her hands. "You don't think I can handle my liquor?"

"Did I say that?" he asked, amused. He poured a second glass and swirled the liquid. Rarely did he allow himself to indulge in whiskey anymore. Not alone, anyway. It had helped him cope with the most haunting events of his life. And from coping had grown a dependency he solved by pulling up roots and changing his lifestyle completely. In a way, whiskey had saved his life. He never took a drink without remembering—

She took a sip.

He waited for the flinch when the burn kicked in, but she did no such thing. Damn it, she was exceeding every one of his expectations.

“You didn’t say it, but the whole chauvinistic act leads me to believe you’re thinking it.”

It took him a moment to grasp the thread of the conversation. He snorted out a laugh. “Chauvinistic?”

“Yeah.” She set the glass down so she could prop her hands on the counter behind her and pull herself up on top of it. Crossing her legs comfortably, she lifted the glass again and gestured with it toward him. “You know what I’m talking about. The sweep-the-damsel-off-her-feet thing you did back there on the road.”

“Down here we call that chivalry, darlin’.” He smiled despite himself.

“Chivalry is dead. Didn’t you get the memo?”

“Apparently not.” Truthfully, surrounded by the rustic wood of the kitchen and with the glow of candle and firelight from the other room, if he hadn’t known any better, he would think this was a scene straight out of another era. An era in which chivalry was very much alive and kicking. He tossed back the whiskey in his tumbler and set the empty glass aside. The liquid joined the curious fire inside him and did nothing to squelch it as he’d hoped.

“So what do you do when you’re not driving a tow truck, Mitch?” she asked.

He leaned back against the cabinet behind him and crossed his arms. “You don’t have to do that.”

“Do what?”

“Make small talk,” he told her. “If you want, I can show you the guest room, and you can shack up there for the night. Neither Major nor I will bother you.”

Her shoulders stiffened. “I thought making conversation would be more pleasant than listening to the wind howl. My mistake.”

He frowned, cursing himself as she hopped down from the counter and took her drink into the living room. He didn’t know what about her amused him one moment and put his back up the next. The part of her that could sip whiskey like water intrigued him to no end, but the city part reminded him all too much of the types he used to date—the kind of woman who had been drawn to his name and the money behind it. Not the real man inside, the one he’d given up everything to save.

He ran a hand through his shaggy hair and sighed, forcing his shoulders to level off as the breath and tension filtered out of him. Then he poured himself another glass, afraid she might be right about one thing—this was on its way to becoming a situation only hard liquor could solve.

Chapter Six – Oh No!

by Barbara Edwards

Mitch turned the heavy glass in his fingers before he slammed it down on the counter. Adding alcohol to an already explosive situation was the wrong move. He'd bustle that tempting bundle into the spare room. If she wanted to stay up, he'd see about getting the generator started.

The small battery-operated weather radio on the counter crackled to life. "...long range forecast predicts this storm will hover over western Georgia for the next forty-eight to seventy-two hours with accumulations up to three feet..."

"Oh. My. God." Candy stalked into the kitchen, grabbed his glass and drank it in one gulp. Her watering eyes searched his. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to get the generator started, and you're going to bed, princess." Mitch put the whiskey bottle in the cabinet and closed the door.

Candy squared her shoulders so abruptly he thought he heard tendons snap with outrage.

"Stop calling me princess, like some kind of reverse snob. My name is Candy."

Mitch wondered if helping this woman was punishment for old sins. He inhaled her sweetness and wanted to run his tongue over the soft skin exposed by the drooping collar of his oversized shirt.

Instead he slapped the flashlight into her hand and pointed her toward the spare bedroom. "Go!"

Candy watched Mitch disappear quicker than a tax refund. She wasn't tired enough to sleep, so she wandered back into the living room and slowly piled more wood on the fire. Major sprawled like a lifeless bearskin rug in front of the hearth. He didn't move when she stepped over him. The howling wind scraped on her nerves like sandpaper. Despite Mitch's outrageous remarks, his strength and positive attitude kept her fears at bay.

She turned slowly, studying the masculine furnishings in the flashlight beam. The overstuffed leather sofa and chairs suited him. To her surprise a large fir tree stood in the corner, partially decorated. She no longer bothered to decorate her apartment for the holidays, and the idea of celebrating made her stomach clench. Maybe he'd had company for Christmas. Everything else in the room shouted bachelor. Even the heavy photo frames perched on the mantel looked like he'd picked them out. Without stepping up onto the hearth, she couldn't make out the details, but they looked like outdoor scenes.

A loud thump followed by a muffled curse from the basement made her smile as she stifled a yawn. Finding her bed sounded more and more enticing. She wandered down the hall, looking for the guest room. After briefly glancing into Mitch's room, she snapped the door shut. The king-sized bed covered with a fluffy goose-down coverlet looked too inviting. Her breath hitched at the idea of Mitch waiting underneath.

Candy shook her head. She had to stop thinking of him as an attractive, sexy male. As she opened another door, several lights flickered and came on. A computer screen turned blue as electronic equipment hummed to life. A fax machine spat out a page. *They must run on a backup battery.* The office was better equipped than her office in Manhattan.

She resisted the urge to check it out, slowly backing away. For a small-town tow truck driver, Mitch had an enormous amount of high-tech equipment. She rubbed her forehead. He seemed, somehow, more than he presented.

The next door opened into what was obviously a guest room. The double bed stacked with pillows called her name.

Mitch noisily climbed the basement stairs.

"Candy," he shouted. "I started the generator. The furnace will kick on in a minute and warm the bedrooms."

“That’s great. I was just thinking about going to bed.” *Only not alone.* She rubbed her arms as she walked back toward the front room.

Mitch stood next to the door. She glanced past him at the swirling snow visible through the tiny window. Wind rattled the pane. A horrendous tearing, snapping roar shook the earth.

Mitch stepped back, pulling her with him. The sound of metal crunching and glass shattering made her cringe. After a minute, he cautiously pulled open the door.

Snow blew in chilling her to the bone.

She stared at the enormous tree flattening Mitch’s truck.

Chapter Seven – The Morning After
by Jannine Gallant

Candy woke slowly, head pounding to the rhythm of a jackhammer. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth when she tried to swallow, and her stomach rolled. Breathing in short pants, she waited for the nausea to pass. Not certain if she'd be forced to make a speedy dash to the bathroom, she pried open her eyes.

Pine paneling and an assortment of rustic furniture spun in her blurred vision. Definitely not her black lacquer Japanese style bedroom set. *Where in the name of God am I?* She peered toward the window. A swirl of snow slapped against the pane, and memory engulfed her. Wrecked car, know-it-all tow truck driver, candlelit room, bottle of bad whiskey. Check.

She pressed her hands to her throbbing temples, trying to remember what came after the whiskey. A tree had fallen on his truck. That had made an impression—and not only on the truck. She'd slipped her arm around his waist, sympathy taking the edge off her anger at the whole stinking situation. *Had he kissed her?* The rest of the night was a blur. Firm, cool lips, soft sheets...

She sat up abruptly, the movement reducing her to tears. Cold air hit her naked body. Staring down at her bare breasts, she let out a moan. *Did I sleep with the man?* Surely she hadn't stooped so low. Surely she'd remember something so supremely stupid. Candy Wright didn't have one-night stands. For crying out loud, she couldn't remember the last time she'd had sex, it had been so long!

Sliding out of the bed, she tripped and sprawled across something warm and furry. Eye to eye with the dog, she blinked. Major blinked back and gave her a swipe with his tongue. His doggy breath sent bile surging up her throat. Bracing shaking arms against the hardwood floor, she fought it down.

"Kill me now and get it over with," she hissed. The dog licked her again.

"Oh God." Rising to her knees, she tugged Mitch's wrinkled shirt and sweat pants out from under Major. Her bra and panties were beneath the bed. Teeth gritted, she dressed and cracked open the door. The hall was empty. She dashed to the bathroom.

After brushing her teeth with a new toothbrush she found in the medicine cabinet and washing her face, she was almost convinced she'd live. If she'd done the deed with hunky Mitch, she wasn't sure she wanted to. The man was infuriating. And sexy. He'd swept her off her feet, literally and figuratively. She wasn't used to men who didn't try to impress her, who ordered her around, who couldn't care less that she was the CEO of a successful Manhattan advertising agency. Of course he didn't know that. He didn't know anything about her.

Taking a breath, she opened the door and padded down the hall to the kitchen, the smell of coffee drawing her like a magnet. Mitch turned and smiled, holding out a steaming cup. Her hand shook as she took it. Wrapping her fingers around the mug, she breathed in the fragrance of heaven. "Is the power—"

"Nope. And the generator isn't big enough to run the furnace and the stove at the same time." He pointed at the green, two-burner stove set up on the table. "I dug out my old propane stove and made camp coffee." He eyed her up and down. "You don't look so good."

She grimaced and took a sip. "Thanks."

"It's not that you aren't gorgeous, even in my wrinkled clothes, but your face is a peculiar shade of green."

"Gee, just what every girl wants to hear after a night spent with a whiskey bottle."

His grin broadened. "And I thought you could hold your liquor."

"I can. I'd feel a whole lot better right now if I *hadn't* held it."

"Well, Candy Cane, next time you should learn to just say no."

She nearly choked on her coffee. "Candy Cane! *Candy Cane!* No one calls me that."

"Hey, you told me I could last night." His voice dropped low and sexy.

A hard knot formed in her chest. Tears burned behind her eyes. “My mom was the only one who ever called me Candy Cane.”

He cupped her chin in his hand and stared down at her. His voice turned gentle when he spoke. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

She wanted to lean into that hand, let it caress away her troubles. Straightening her shoulders, she stepped away. “You didn’t.”

“Your mother must be a special woman.”

“She was.”

His gaze never wavered. “Tell me about her.”

“Nothing to tell. She worked until the day she died so that I could have a better life.” She bit her lip. “Uh, Mitch, there are a few holes in my memory of last night. After the tree fell, everything is a bit of a blur.”

Color spotted his cheekbones, and her heart stopped beating.

“I may have taken advantage.”

She felt for the chair behind her and sank onto it. “What happened to all that talk about chivalry?”

“It was just a kiss. Well, maybe not just. Actually, it was an incredibly hot kiss.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“Oh my God, I thought you meant...” She let out a long breath. “I’m afraid I don’t remember it.”

“Not exactly flattering. I must be losing my touch.”

His self-deprecating expression made her smile. “Is there still hot water for a shower?”

“As long as the gas for the generator holds out.”

She stood and turned to leave the room, but his words stopped her.

“Candy, you said your mother worked to give you a better life. What did she do?”

She looked back at him, and the tightness in her chest returned. “She cleaned houses for rich people. Do you have an issue with that?”

His eyes were hooded, completely unreadable. “Nope. It’s an honest way to make a living. What was her name?”

“Why do you want to know?”

“No reason.”

She didn’t believe him for a minute. “Marie Wright.”

He ran one long finger along a scratch in the granite countertop. “You said you grew up in Vermont.”

She pressed her fingers against her temples. “For the first ten years, then we moved to New York.” Meeting his gaze, she wondered at his odd expression. “Is the inquisition over?”

He opened his mouth, then shut it. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to be nosy.”

Sure he didn’t. Between her pounding head and her embarrassment at having kissed him, she refused to wonder why he was curious about her mother. “I’m going to take a shower, and then I’m going to go get my suitcase.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at her. “How are you going to do that? It’s probably five or six miles back to your car. And in case it slipped your mind, my truck looks like a metal pancake.”

“I remember. I plan to walk.”

He snorted. “There’s a foot of snow out there and more falling.”

“I don’t care. I want—no—I need to change my clothes. Anyway, I could use the fresh air.”

His smile was slow in coming and made her stomach flutter. In a good way.

“Suit yourself.”

Chapter Eight – A Cup of Hot Chocolate and a Dose of Hot Mitch
by Brenda Whiteside

Candy stared at her boots. They wouldn't fit over Mitch's wool socks, and even if they did, the thought of walking five miles in a foot of snow on those heels slipped over the border of ridiculous. She snatched them from the floor.

"Mitch?" She stepped into the hall.

"Out here."

She followed his voice to the living room and stopped in her tracks at the sight of him. His back was to her, the glow from the fireplace bathing him in golden light. Hunched over a box beside the tree, he pulled a tangle of lights into the air. A waft of hot chocolate teased her nose, dizzying her with memories of her childhood. She and her mother had always had hot chocolate and a fire while decorating the tree in Vermont. In New York, they hadn't had a fireplace, but the hot chocolate tradition had continued. She didn't do Christmas like that anymore.

He didn't look up. "You all set to head out?"

The boots hung heavy in her hand. She clutched them tighter and took a deep breath to quell the nostalgia threatening her resolve. "I either need to borrow a pair of your boots, or a hatchet."

"Excuse me?" He looked over his shoulder.

She lifted the boots. "The only way to walk in these babies is to remove the heels."

"Right. You're going to mutilate a pair of...what? Three hundred dollar boots?"

She snorted. "They cost a lot more than that. Do you have a pair of boots I can use or not?"

"Candy." He pivoted around and sat cross-legged, the tangle of lights covering his knees. "If you don't like the sweats and shirt—you do look damned good in plaid—I'll let you pick out whatever you want from my limited wardrobe. You don't need to get lost in a snow storm."

Blond hair lit up in a halo around his head while the devil danced across his face. But the sweetness in his gaze, staring right through her, wiped away all ambition for striking out on her mission.

"I could use some help getting these lights off the tree and packed away." He gestured to the mess in his lap.

"I'm not much good at holiday stuff."

He stood, letting the lights fall around his feet, and stepped over them. In two strides he faced her; his hands gently rubbed the tops of her shoulders. The heat beneath her shirt increased ten-fold, and she sighed.

"You'll get in the mood once you've had my hot chocolate." He slid his hands to her arms and caressed. "Look at me, Candy."

She swallowed, inhaled his warmth, and tentatively inclined her face to meet his gaze.

"You don't have to be alone for the holidays."

"How do you know—"

"Just a wild guess." He brushed her hair from her cheek, his fingertips trailing sparks along her neck and collarbone on the way to her arms.

"Maybe I like being alone." She jutted her chin, ignoring the signals sent by her body. "Besides, I wasn't alone. I make a point of traveling, visiting friends. Just because I'm not a homebody—"

"There are all kinds of lonely. Believe me, I know."

Why was he looking right through her like that, like he knew something about her? In less than twenty-four hours, the man seemed to think he knew everything from her liquor consumption habits to her lack of holiday cheer.

She'd turn the conversation his way, and see how he liked being under the microscope. "Are you lonely, Mitch?"

His tongue swiped along his lower lip and the corner of his most kissable mouth ticked up. “With the weather and the state of my truck, it doesn’t look like I’ll be joining any friends tonight. But I have you.”

The thump in her chest vibrated down her body. His hands slid from her arms, clasping her waist and drawing her near. Her breath came in short puffs. His closeness stole the air from her lungs. The heat building beneath her sweat pants had nothing to do with the crackling fire.

“How long has it been since you’ve decorated a tree? Then days later fought with strings of lights while packing them away?”

She shrugged.

“I’ll let you take the star off the top.”

A wash of memory engulfed her. She dropped her forehead to his chest. The last time she’d topped a tree with a star was with her mother.

He hugged her tighter, bringing his body against the length of hers. His mouth brushed across the top of her head, and he murmured something into her hair. It sounded like poor little Candy, but it had to be her imagination.

She should move away. He’d get the wrong impression. Or he’d get the right impression; feel her pounding heart, her breasts taut against his chest. The magnolias and bourbon she’d enjoyed at her college roommate’s holiday celebration couldn’t compare with a real Christmas tree, a wood fire, a cup of hot chocolate, and Mitch.

“Why are you hurrying back to New York?”

“What difference does it make?”

He rubbed her back, a soothing kind of motion without anything expected in return. But the unintentional friction he created flushed her face. She turned her cheek into his chest.

“Are you hungry?”

Oh, God was she. “Mmm...” The boots fell from her hand, and she encircled his waist. The muscles beneath his shirt tensed.

“I make killer cook stove pancakes.”

Oh, hungry for food? Her stomach answered for her. She leaned back to look up at him, thrusting her hips forward. What she felt against her belly nearly stopped the words in her mouth. “Pancakes and hot chocolate?” She strained to keep a straight face.

“Sound good?” His voice, husky and low, shivered her thighs.

“Sounds a lot better than a five-mile walk in the snow with hacked off boots.”

“I want you to have an old fashioned, holiday morning. The best way to start is with pancakes. Then we’ll finish putting away the decorations while we drink hot chocolate. We’ll haul the tree outside and get chilled.” His hands rubbed her back, caressed her waist. “But I’ll keep the fire going...uh...in the fireplace. How does that sound?”

“An old fashioned, holiday morning.” This man had more than gorgeous looks. “Why?”

His gaze roamed over her face, his lips parted as if to tell her some huge secret. But he stopped. “Just because.”

Chapter Nine – The Odds Were a Million to One
by Laura Breck

What were the odds? Mitch couldn't begin to calculate as he gazed into Candy's familiar hazel eyes.

Like a bolt of lightning, it had all come back to him when she'd said her mother's name. Marie Wright had been the cleaning woman at his parents' penthouse apartment in Manhattan. She'd occasionally brought ten-year-old Candy with her to help in the kitchen during parties. Odds had to be a million to one that twenty years later he'd run into the adult version of that scrawny girl.

His lips curved into a smile.

Candy smiled back and blinked those same incredible eyes he'd stared into the first time he'd met her. During his twelfth birthday party, he'd snuck into the kitchen and found her elbow-deep in dishwater. She'd been startled, frozen like a deer, her large eyes watching him warily, obviously intimidated by the boy in a suit and tie.

He'd pulled up a stool and started talking. Asking her where she went to school, where she lived, what she did for fun.

It'd been fifteen minutes before his mother found him and hauled him back to the boring, family party. But in that short time, he'd succeeded in getting sullen little Candy to relax and talk to him. She'd even laughed a couple times.

"Mitch?" Candy's voice dragged him back to the present. She slid her hands up his sides, over his abs, and across his chest.

"Yeah?" He tugged her closer, spreading his feet slightly to better fit them together. Mmm, how they fit. Perfect.

As she gazed into his eyes, her irises darkened, and her arms wrapped around his neck, pushing her breasts tight against his chest. "I'd like that."

Her warmth seeped into him, sending spirals of desire that centered low in his belly. His brain couldn't decipher what she was talking about. So he gave up trying.

Pressing his lips to hers, he breathed in her scent. The woodsy smell of his bath soap clung to her skin, melding with her sweet, feminine musk. The combination did even more damage to his lucidity. He fought to cage his lust, struggled to keep his hips still.

Soft, full lips. The kiss last night had been fueled by whiskey. This morning, it was pure desire that kindled his need to taste her. He slid his tongue along the crease of her lips.

She sighed and opened her mouth in invitation.

He accepted, twining his tongue with hers. Exploring every crevice of her mouth, her soft cheeks, her straight, sharp teeth.

Candy's hips moved, and he groaned. He needed to pick her up into his arms, carry her he-man style. This time, into his bedroom.

As if an internal warning engaged, her stomach rumbled. She giggled, her tongue still gliding over the ticklish inside of his lip.

He slowed the kiss and pulled back, looked into her eyes, and murmured, "Pancakes first?"

"Yes, please." Her shining eyes and perfect smile hit him like a snowball to the head.

This was Candy. The little girl he'd teased and talked with and grown to care about. Their occasional kitchen visits had ended three years later when he'd left for prep school. His parents had downsized to a smaller apartment, and Marie had been let go. His gut squeezed when he recalled his distraught reaction to losing Marie—and Candy.

Anger surged when he remembered his father's dismissal of Mitch's feelings, with parental advice to *move on, Michael*. A phrase—and name—he would come to detest.

Mitch released her but bent for one more quick kiss. “Come on. Let's get something into that empty belly of yours.” Wrapping his arm around her shoulders, he guided her to the kitchen. “Fresh blueberries in your pancakes?”

Grinning up at him, she taunted, “You don't have blueberries. It's the middle of winter.”

He laughed. “I made a run to Atlanta before Christmas. Blueberries. Real maple syrup. Butter.”

Her stomach rumbled again. “Stop.” She put her hand on her stomach. “I'm going to start drooling like Major.”

At the sound of his name, Major trotted into the kitchen and sat at Candy's feet.

After a few seconds, she bent and patted his head. Awkwardly, but at least she wasn't cringing from the dog anymore.

“What about you, boy? Do you like blueberries in your pancakes?”

His tail swished back and forth across the floor like a windshield wiper in a deluge.

Mitch watched the two of them, startled by the warmth spreading from his heart, creeping its way through his chest to disrupt his breathing. Was it the homey feeling of a sexy woman wearing his clothes and petting his dog? Or was it Candy in particular who invoked some kind of freakishly un-macho nesting instinct in him?

She stood and looked at her hand as if it might sport hair, fleas, ticks, and assorted microscopic health hazards. Looking at him, she forced a smile and went to the sink, taking care to wash away at least one layer of skin.

He grinned and headed to the fridge, pulling out eggs, milk, and the promised blueberries. From the cabinet he hauled down flour, baking powder, and salt.

Candy sidled up next to him. “You're making them from scratch?”

“Can't afford the boxed mix on my salary.”

Her smile wavered. Was she feeling sorry for him? Or did she suddenly realize she'd been flirting with a man who hovered on the low end of middle-class?

He handed her a bowl and a fork. “Two eggs. Beaten.”

“Yes, sir.” She took the bowl and the egg carton to the island and got cracking.

Digging in a drawer for measuring spoons and cups, he asked, “Do you cook?”

“I used to. My mom taught me. But lately, I haven't had time.” She beat the eggs with the fork. “Do you cook a lot?”

“No. I work long days and eat sandwiches, mostly.” Up until ten years ago, he'd never even turned on a stove. His parents employed a cook, and when Mitch had moved out to attend college, they'd sent the cook to his on-campus apartment four times a week to prepare meals for him.

When he joined the family business, he hired a full-time chef, equipped to cater his weekly client dinner parties, Saturday evening social gatherings, and noon staff meetings.

Scraping something crusty out of the one-cup measure, he smirked. Times had sure changed. Circumstances reversed. For both of them. They'd each gone from one extreme to the other.

He glanced at his unexpected guest. How, and when, would he tell her who he really was? Did he even have to tell her? Or would this be just a hit-and-run for Ms. Candy Wright? The thought spiked his blood pressure.

Chapter Ten – Boxers or Briefs?

by Vonnie Davis

Candy took her first bite of Mitch's homemade blueberry pancakes and closed her eyes. Heaven. *Oh my God, curl-my-toes-in-his-socks heaven.* He'd even heated the bottle of syrup in a pan of hot water. The sweetness of the warm syrup and tartness of the blueberries struggled for dominance on her tongue. She moaned, opened her eyes, and looked into inquisitive blue ones.

"Well?" His lips twitched. "What do you think?"

She forked in another bite, broke a cardinal rule, and talked with her mouth full. "I think you should come to New York and work for me."

A faint redness crept up his neck, and he stilled.

"What?"

"Yeah, I'm thinking as soon as the storm's over, I'll take you back to New York and set you up as my house boy. You can clean—" She took another bite of pancake. "—cook, and iron my blouses. How are you at catering parties? I throw them from time to time for *The Wright Way*." She cut another bite of pancake.

"Candy?" His voice was deathly quiet.

She gazed into stormy blue eyes that held an emotion she couldn't identify. A bubble of laughter broke from her chest. "I was just teasing."

He rubbed his temples. "You know what would be great?"

Her giggles ebbed. "What?"

"If you would shut up and eat."

Not very gentlemanly, but she deserved it. She heaved an exaggerated sigh. "Guess I should just..."

"I guess you should just eat." Mitch extended a pancake to the dog who whined beside him. "You irritate me sometimes."

"Really? Do you have a short fuse?" *What put that odd look on his face?* "I'm sorry. I was joking. Don't get your briefs in a twist."

He blinked twice. "I don't wear briefs."

She forked in another bite and eyed the last pancake on the platter. "Ah, a boxer kind of guy."

Mitch raised his mug and took a long gulp. She watched his throat move and wondered what would happen if she snaked the tip of her tongue over his Adam's apple and down his torso. Good Lord, what had come over her? Being sexually aggressive had never been her style. She eyed that last pancake again. Maybe she'd better resist. Evidently blueberries were an aphrodisiac.

"Don't wear boxers either." He rose and carried his dirty dishes to the sink.

Her gaze followed his very magnificent behind.

He turned and came back for more dirty dishes. Plates in hand, he leaned over and placed his lips next to her ear. An involuntary shudder went through her.

"Commando all the way, baby," he whispered.

Candy's gulp sounded like a gong in the silent kitchen. He was naked under those jeans? Her eyes darted around the small kitchen, trying to focus on anything but his crotch. Her tummy did its fluttery thing and her nipples evidently loved the commando visual because they were certainly standing at attention.

Mitch poured hot water into the sink and started washing dishes.

"I'll wash." She stood, attempting to regain control of her sensually overloaded system. "You cooked. I'll wash."

"Are you sure you know how?" His voice sounded strained, but he didn't wait for an answer.

While Mitch headed outside to the woodpile, Candy stood at the sink and gazed out the window. Major jumped through the snowdrifts blown deep by the wind. His tongue lolled out, catching snowflakes. The dog

was like a spoiled child. She shook her head and rinsed off the silverware. Her gaze cut to Mitch who'd loaded his arms with wood. The man was moody today. Maybe cabin fever was getting to him the same as it was with her. Still, if he remained silent and surly, their snow prison could get mighty uncomfortable. Which was why she was better off alone. Bad enough she had to deal with men flexing their egos at work; there was no way she would happily endure one in her private life.

Michael. The old memory resurfaced every time she did dishes. She smiled. A cherished memory she unfolded and relived when emotional needs upset her. How many times had she taken out the few memories she had of Michael, then folded them into a compact square and tucked them back into her heart?

Her memories were from a fragile time in a girl's life, when hormones were just beginning to bud. Emotions bounced from one extreme to another. She'd been too old for childish familiar things and not old enough for others. And, oh how she'd missed Vermont. Making friends in Manhattan was next to impossible, except for Michael. While she washed dishes, the son of her mother's employer kept her company. He had a way of getting her to talk about herself, making her believe he was truly interested. Endearing qualities in a gangly kid—kind, gentle, caring, and incredibly honest.

Then suddenly Michael was gone from her life.

Twin tears tumbled down her cheeks.

For some reason, that loss left scars as deep as the loss of her childhood home and watching her mother work herself into exhaustion cleaning houses for rich people.

The door opened and Major bounded in, shaking off snow. Her vision was tear-blurred when she looked at Mitch.

"Candy?" He bent to lay the logs on the floor and removed his gloves, tossing them onto the pile of wood. "What's wrong?" He approached and cupped her face in his hands.

"N...nothing." She sounded like a needy woman. *Damn, grow a backbone here.*

He leaned in and kissed away her tears. "Honey," he breathed on a moan as his lips covered hers. "I didn't mean to snap at you. I...I've got a lot going on right now. Forgive me?"

His kisses grew deeper, more passionate. Tender nips at her lips turned to mind-numbing kisses that made her system do twitchy things. She wrapped her arms around his neck and poured all her emotion into the kiss. For a brief few seconds she wondered just whom she was kissing—Mitch Johnson or Michael Crawford, III?

Chapter Eleven – The Temperature is Hot and Rising
by Vonnie Davis

The woman had a mouth made for kissing. A man could live happy the rest of his life feasting on her sweet mouth. She was slowly driving him mad. A moan escaped from somewhere deep inside her. In response, he gently bit her lower lip and soothed it with his tongue.

Her wide eyes hazed with passion. “Mi...Mitch,” she murmured against his lips.

Did she say, *My Mitch*? Had he heard her correctly? He fisted his hands in her hair and blazed a trail of kisses down the side of her face and neck. “You’d better stop me while you can. Tell me to stop, Candy.”

She shook her head, her eyes hiding her emotions.

What was she thinking? Was she afraid to say no?

“What I’d really like...” Her voice trailed off and she swallowed. Slowly she unzipped his jacket and tugged off his knitted cap. “Pick up that wood and stoke the fire in the fireplace. Then take me to the bedroom and stoke mine.”

Did she mean it? His hands slipped under her shirt and found warm skin. Her lips parted as she leaned forward and bit his earlobe. *Don’t analyze it, man. Just take her to bed.* Slaking his needs—needs she’d stirred to a fevered pitch—was certainly how he wanted to spend the day. The entire day, because once wouldn’t be enough.

With his eyes locked on hers, he stepped back. “If you’re serious, my bedroom is...”

“I know where your bedroom is.” Her eyes were shadowed, full of mystery and emotion he didn’t understand.

His hands shook, and he clenched them on his hips. Yes, he wanted her. In some ways he always had. He frowned at the realization. Mitch had been fifteen, a skinny kid who hadn’t had his growth spurt yet, the last time he saw Candy. His hair was clipped short and tight the way his father liked it. Yet, even at that young age, there’d been something about Candy that called to him. When he visited her in the kitchen, there was a rightness about their time together.

He couldn’t put a label on it. As he stood in front of the adult Candy with her lips swollen from his kisses and her eyes heavy-lidded with passion, he couldn’t describe how the little Candy Wright he’d known so long ago made him feel. Needy. And hell, with her here in his house, she brought it all back. The admission scared the beejesus out of him.

If she knew who he really was, would she still want him?

“Don’t start anything you don’t plan on finishing. And don’t crawl into my bed if you’re going to regret it later.”

“No promises. No regrets. And definitely no entanglements.” She stepped out of his arms and headed for his bedroom. “Works for me.”

For some reason her remarks grated on his nerves. Bugged the hell out of him. He stalked into the living room and stoked the fireplace, filling it with wood. His gaze drifted in the direction of the bedroom. “Works for me,” he growled in a mocking tone. She was waiting for him. Was she taking off her clothes? He hardened at the thought. Would she be snuggled under his sheets, waiting for him to come to her?

Major nuzzled his hand. He scratched behind the dog’s ears. “Well, how does it feel to have a master who’s nothing more than a booty call?”

The dog whined.

Murky afternoon light filtered through the windows of the bedroom when Candy woke. The snow wasn’t coming down as heavily. Was the storm over? She stretched under the sheets and comforter, her naked skin sliding decadently across the smoothness. The shower was running, and Mitch was singing. Somehow it all felt

right, her being here in his big bed with her skin still humming from his touch, and her system singing its own sultry love song.

He'd come to her like a man possessed, almost as if he were angry. Then he turned tender, his sweetness nearly breaking her heart. She'd never been loved like that, as if she were someone precious. For this one morning, she needed to feel cherished. She needed to feel like someone truly cared.

Mitch had made love to her four times. She stretched again, lifting the sheet to cover her mouth as she grinned with feminine satisfaction.

The things that man did to her. Closing her eyes, she felt heat bloom in her cheeks. She wasn't aggressive. Normally she dated a man for weeks before sleeping with him, so why... A frown wrinkled her brow. Something about Mitch was different. Familiar, or so it seemed when she caved in to the need to be closer to him.

The shower turned off, but the singing continued. He had a nice voice. The man had a nice *everything*. She just needed to focus on the fact that this was all temporary. A sexual interlude in the middle of a raging blizzard. *How foolish am I for wanting something more permanent?*

When the bedroom door opened, Major shot in around Mitch and hopped onto the bed. The dog gave her one canine kiss before turning around twice and flopping onto the comforter with a contented sigh.

A towel hugged Mitch's waist. He was lean and well-muscled. Those six-pack abs weren't airbrushed on. She knew all too well the power behind them. He sat on the edge of the bed, his gaze locked with hers, and leaned down for a kiss.

"Hey." His voice was soft, affectionate.

"Hey, yourself."

He nuzzled her neck, his wet hair tickling her. "We missed lunch. Hungry?"

She laughed and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Typical male. As soon as the bottom half of your anatomy is taken care of, thoughts move above the belt."

His hand rubbed over her breast. "And just how many typical males am I going to have to fend off to keep you for myself?" His teeth grazed the column of her neck.

Fear crept into the bed and snuggled between them. "Mitch, we said no promises, no regrets, and for sure, no entanglements." Her life was in New York. "I'll be leaving as soon as the roads are clear. You know that."

He stood and went to the other side of the bed, yanked his jeans off the floor, and stepped into them. The zipper echoed in the silent room. "So what the hell was this? Just some meaningless fu—"

"Don't use that tone with me. Or that kind of language, either." She sat up in the bed and tugged the sheets around her neck. "It was what it was."

He gritted his teeth. "Maybe you could be more specific."

What did he want from her? Her heart clenched in her chest. They lived two different lifestyles hundreds of miles apart. She took a deep breath before she spoke. "It was an amazing afternoon between two consenting adults."

He tugged on a turtleneck and snagged a pair of clean socks from a drawer. He put on his socks and boots in silence. "Never figured you for a user, Candy." Standing, he walked out of the room, slamming the door behind him.

Chapter Twelve – Trouble in Paradise
by Laura Breck

Candy flinched at the words Mitch hurled at her. *“Never figured you for a user, Candy.”* If he hadn’t slammed the bedroom door when he stormed out, she might have responded impetuously, shouted something just as hurtful. Something she would have regretted.

She hadn’t risen to a high position in the corporate world by overreacting emotionally. Her psychology classes taught her to illuminate, evaluate, and communicate. And that’s just what she was going to do.

Using every pillow on the bed to prop herself up against the headboard, she took a deep breath.

Mitch hadn’t liked her flippant attitude. And it wasn’t that she didn’t care... If she let herself, she’d care more than was smart—or safe. Together, they’d been spectacular. But they barely knew one another. Hell, they’d spent more time sniping at each other than cooing and sighing.

It had to be loneliness. Out here in the woods, isolated and leading a rustic lifestyle, he’d latched onto her as a respite from his solitary existence.

Her amateur psychoanalysis made perfect sense. She grinned. Now she needed to test it on him and see if she could smooth out the wrinkles in their temporary situation.

After digging through his drawers and closet, she slipped into fresh backwoodsman apparel. Another flannel shirt, this time green, and a pair of black sweats.

Padding barefoot to the bedroom door, she inched it open and listened. Nothing. She headed down the hall to her room but stopped when she spotted him at his computer.

Before she could say a word, he killed the monitor and stood. “Storm’s let up for a while. Another heavy band is coming through in an hour or so.”

Funny, her heart had dropped at the thought of the storm ending, opening the door for her to leave. It rebounded when she heard there would be more snow. Maybe she should analyze her own loneliness issues before diagnosing his.

He brushed past her. “I’m going out to haul in a couple more trees I felled last spring. We may need more firewood than I have split.”

She followed him. “Can I help?”

Stopping abruptly, he turned. “Yeah. Maybe it would be good for us to get out of the house for a while.” His gaze locked with hers and his jaw worked, as if an apology fought to free itself.

She imagined how he felt. He’d snapped out those cutting words in the bedroom without thinking them through first. Just let his emotions drive him. Where did that come from? Her training pointed to the possibility of a deep scar somewhere in his past.

“Let’s get out of here while we can,” she said. “We’ll talk about...things...later. When we’re back inside.”

He nodded and looked away. Turning, he put a hand on the side of her neck. “Sorry, Candy. I didn’t mean it.”

“I know.” But they still would be having a long chat later. He wasn’t getting off that easily.

It took five minutes to outfit her in a voluminous jacket, waterproof pants, hand-knit mittens, hat, and scarf. She could barely make it out the door wearing the four pair of wool socks that made his boots less floppy.

Mitch shoveled a path to the garage and hauled open the door. “Wait here.” He went inside and manually opened the roll-up door.

Light flooded the space as she peered inside. Tools and gadgets and gas-powered lawn implements.

The roar of a motor startled her. Mitch swung his leg over the seat of a four-wheeler. Major barked and jumped excitedly, circling the vehicle as Mitch drove it out of the garage.

“Hop on.” He grinned at her and patted the seat behind him.

She'd never done this before, but it looked like fun. Waddling over, she put her hands on his shoulders and eased a leg over. He helped her place her feet on the back pegs, and with a roar, they were off.

It was beautiful. He'd chosen a perfect plot of land to call home. His property was thick with trees, and for a short way, they followed alongside a river. He wove his way through the forest as she held on with her arms around his waist, her body pressed to his.

When he leaned back and took them speeding down a hill, she giggled, feeling as excited as Major. The dog rushed ahead, stopped to dig and sniff, caught up again, and repeated the process.

Too soon, they stopped at a clearing where a dozen tree trunks lay piled in a pyramid. He turned off the engine.

She got off, her legs tingling from the vibration of the motor.

Mitch hefted a thick chain from the box at the back of the ATV and trudged through a snowdrift to the pile of trees. Wrapping the chain around one, he rolled it off the pile, and then wrapped another length of chain around the second.

He seemed so competent. Never hesitating, just doing what needed to be done. Candy admired that. In her life, every plan had to be checked and double-checked before taking action. She could learn a lot from this man.

After hooking the chain to the four-wheeler, he said, "Keep Major by you. Move back a ways, too."

She called the dog, and when he came, slid her hand into his collar. "Let's go see what's over here."

The dog walked along beside her without trying to tear her arm off. "Good boy." Who would have thought she'd become pals with this slobbering beast?

The motor gunned as Mitch eased the vehicle forward, hauling the two logs behind him. He turned off the engine and walked back to check the chains.

"That you, Mitch?" a voice called from behind them.

Major barked and tugged to get free.

"You can let him go," Mitch said. He held up a hand in greeting as Major ran toward the voice. "Hey."

Candy hadn't noticed the small, dark house tucked into the woods. On the porch, a tall man stood, wearing bib overalls and sporting a graying military-style haircut.

The man shouted, "Come over for a drink?"

Mitch cupped his hands around his mouth. "Can't, Jeb. Gotta put up some wood."

"Next time," the man answered, petting Major.

Mitch glanced her way. "Let's go."

"Who was that?" she asked as she climbed on behind him.

"Jeb Nobell, my neighbor."

As they followed the four-wheeler's path back to the house, she thought of her neighbors. Not acres away, but separated by sixteen-inch walls. What a different lifestyle he led.

They made slow progress hauling the load. Major caught up to them halfway back.

At the garage, Mitch unhooked the logs, tucked the vehicle away, and came out of the garage with a chainsaw. Major growled as Mitch yanked a cord and brought the tool to life.

"I know, boy. I'm not a fan of those things, either." Candy brushed the snow off the dog's head. "Let's be useful and do some shoveling."

Major leapt and snapped at every shovelful she tossed until she was laughing so hard she had to lean on the shovel.

The chainsaw droned and whined from the backyard as she shoveled a path from the front door to the flattened tow truck. Was it his? Or did the garage own it? She hadn't even asked. She took a peek inside what was left of the side window.

From the backyard, the chainsaw squealed and popped, then died abruptly.

Mitch yelled, low and long. "Shit!"

Major's ears shot up.

Candy straightened, holding her breath.

"Candy. I need help."

The dog took off at full speed.

Her heart raced as she plowed clumsily through the snow, encumbered by the big boots and loose pants.

Panic flashed through her, and her head spun. Dread choked in her throat.

She came around the back of the house and stopped dead.

Mitch held his arm. The snow was speckled with blood.

Chapter Thirteen – Rich Jerks
by Christine DePetrillo

Don't pass out. Do not pass out.

Mitch inhaled and exhaled slowly, trying not to look at the bright red blood marring the white blanket of snow at his feet. He hated the sight of blood, especially his own. His stomach churned, his pulse beat like a heavy metal drum solo in his ears, and his vision grew spotty.

How the hell had he lost control of the chainsaw? This wasn't his first time using the thing. He'd been cutting his own wood since moving out here with no accidents whatsoever.

You weren't focused, dumbass.

He tightened his gloved grip on his arm and squeezed his eyes shut as warm blood soaked through to his cold fingers. He'd been thinking of Candy while he sawed into the log. Remembering the soft curves of her naked body, the smell of his soap on her skin, the silkiness of her hair as it wound around his fingers. He'd been so distracted—and aroused—he hadn't held the chainsaw at the right angle, hadn't followed the standard procedures in Simple Lumberjacking 101. The blade wedged in the trunk and locked up on him. Before he realized what was happening, the saw kicked back and freed itself. Not expecting the sudden weight of the freed machine, Mitch had lost his footing in the deep, slippery snow. He hadn't fallen over, but with his fingers still on the trigger, so to speak, the saw blade got him right across the inside of his arm just below the elbow.

He wouldn't have believed it if he'd watched a video, but there was his blood, staining his torn jacket and shirt, seeping into his glove, and making his stomach flip-flop. He bent over at the waist, willing himself not to puke, not to faint.

Be a man, dammit.

"Oh, my God, Mitch. What happened?" His boots on Candy's feet came into view as he stayed hunched over, still holding his arm. Her hand rested on his shoulder, and he had a second to think he should respond to her before everything faded to black...

When he opened his eyes, he lay sprawled on the couch in his living room, a fire roaring in the fireplace. Candy hovered over him. Night had fallen, and even in the dim glow of the fire, her face was pale. Beautiful, but pale. Mitch tried to sit up, but instantly his arm burned with a searing pain. He had trouble swallowing as he remembered that saw blade grazing his flesh.

"Are you going to vomit?" Candy pressed a cold cloth to his forehead, and he settled back down against the couch cushions.

"Maybe." He closed his eyes to keep the ceiling from spinning above him.

"Please don't. Blood doesn't bother me, but vomit...no way, buddy. Not going to deal with that. If you puke, you're on your own."

"So much for a bedside manner." He pulled the cloth off his face.

"Hey, you're lucky I hauled you back in here, cleaned that gash, stitched it, and bandaged it. I charge extra for polite bedside banter." Having said that, she fussed with a quilt she'd thrown over his lower body.

Mitch looked at his arm, which was neatly wrapped with white gauze. He was wearing a fresh flannel shirt with the arm rolled up above the injury. It must have been quite a job getting him changed.

"How did you know what to do?" He couldn't picture the grown up, sophisticated Candy successfully tending the wounded.

"I have many layers, Mitch. Many layers. Don't judge a book by its flashy cover." She winked at him, and just for a second, he saw the girl he'd known all those years ago. That...spark was still there. That indescribable something that had drawn him into his parents' kitchen every time she came to help her mother work. And she was right about not judging. Life was a journey, and you never knew where people had been or what they were hiding.

“Well, thanks for coming to my rescue.” He almost spilled his guts right then and there about who he was, but she spoke first.

“Are you going to tell me what happened, or do I need to call in a forensic team to inspect the scene out there?” She gestured to the windows facing the back of the house.

He explained his stupidity, leaving out the part about thinking of her. She didn’t need to know she’d compromised his ability to function. Especially not after her comments earlier today about no entanglements. It was his problem he had let her crawl inside him. His problem that she already meant more to him than was safe. His problem that he’d never completely forgotten her all those years ago. She didn’t want commitments or complications, and truthfully, he didn’t need them either.

“Luckily, due to my expert emergency skills, you’ll live.”

When she smiled, Mitch began rethinking commitments and complications.

She shifted on the sliver of couch where she sat beside him. “You know, you remind me of someone I once knew.”

Every muscle in his body froze. And not because he was cold. The fire and Candy’s close proximity kept him heated. Overheated was more accurate.

“When I was a little girl, I knew this boy named Michael who was afraid of blood.”

She looked deeply into Mitch’s eyes, and he could barely breathe. “I’m not afraid of blood,” he managed to say, though his voice sounded hoarse.

“Mitch. Please. Save it. I saw you. You dropped like a rock back there. I’ve only seen one other male do that. Michael.” She grinned when she said the name. *His name.*

“He’d been squirting me with the hose attached to the sink in his parents’ kitchen. Being a real pain in the ass. I defended myself with a giant, silver serving tray. Water spilled onto the floor, and clumsy Michael slipped, knocking his head on the corner of the granite countertop. When he touched his head, and his fingers came away covered in blood, he said my name and boom. Right down to the wet floor like a sack full of watermelons.”

She laughed. “Sorry, I don’t mean to make fun, but when my mom brought him back around, the first thing he’d said was, ‘I don’t want to die, Marie. I don’t want to die.’”

Mitch remembered the incident. He’d needed stitches then, too, and had to be watched for signs of concussion. He remembered Marie’s tender touch, one his own mother never gave him. In fact, his mother had been more upset that he’d bled all over his expensive clothes and her imported tile floor.

After he’d come home from the emergency room, his father sent him up to bed to rest. Mitch knew his tears had made his father uncomfortable, as did any display of real emotion. With a pounding headache, he’d showered, slipped into shorts and a T-shirt, and eased onto his bed.

A soft knock had sounded on his bedroom door. The door opened slowly, and Candy appeared.

“Are you okay, Michael?” she’d asked, her eyes soft and full of concern.

“Yeah.”

She stood at the threshold. He knew she helped Marie clean the house and had been in his room before, but somehow, seeing her there, just a mere step away, moved him in a way he’d never been moved.

He’d lain there, tongue-tied. When her mother called, she gave a quick smile just for him, and scurried away.

Blinking up at her now, Mitch took a breath and opened his mouth to tell her everything.

“You know,” Candy said. “I really want to slap Michael.”

His mouth snapped shut. “Slap him? Why?”

“Once he went to prep school, his father sold the penthouse apartment and fired my mother. Losing that job crushed her. It was the only thing keeping her going. Work was her life, and it was a while before she found another job. When she died a few years later, he didn’t even come to pay his respects, and I sent the Crawfords a note. My mother cared for Michael a lot more than his own mother did. He knew it too.”

Hurt battled anger in her eyes. “Some guys are just rich jerks, I guess.”

Chapter Fourteen – Scrambled Eggs and Sympathy

by Alison Henderson

“I guess they are,” Mitch muttered. Like his father. The old man hadn’t bothered to tell him when Marie died. Mitch had been away at college by then, but he would have come to the funeral. He would have written. He would have...something. “I’m sorry about your mother.” It was too little, too late, but all he could offer now. He’d save his confession for another time—or maybe never.

Candy tilted her head and gave him an appraising look. “Thanks. How are you feeling?”

He flexed his arm gingerly. “Sore.”

“I bet. I’ll get you some aspirin in a minute. How’s your stomach? Have you recovered enough to eat? We missed lunch, you know.”

Was that a subtle reminder of their fight that morning? He glanced up and met the glittering challenge in her hazel eyes. Memories of the argument brought back memories of the hours of passionate lovemaking that preceded it. She was still angry, but she’d done everything she could to take care of him. Maybe he was getting under her skin the way she was getting under his.

“I could eat.” He leaned forward and started to rise, but she pushed him back with a firm hand on his shoulder.

“Oh, no, you don’t. You stay right where you are. I have no intention of wrestling with your unconscious body again.”

A grin tilted his lips at the corners. “I’m much more fun when I’m conscious.” He reached for her but winced when pain shot through his injured arm.

A look of concern crossed her face. “I told you not to move.” She rose from the couch. “I might not be as good a cook as my mother was, but I scramble a mean egg.”

“I’ll take three.”

She arched a brow. “You’ll take what I give you and like it.”

He snapped a mock salute. “Yes, ma’am.”

Candy crossed the room to the front window and peered out. “The snow’s coming down hard again.”

Mitch twisted on the couch to see. “This is supposed to be the last of it. The forecast says it should stop by morning.”

“How long do you think it will take them to get the power back on and clear the roads?”

Her voice held a wistful note. Or was it his imagination? Better keep things light. That seemed to be the way she wanted it. “Why? Can’t wait to get away from me?”

She turned and smiled. “Well, you are pretty demanding.”

“Come over here and I’ll show you demanding,” he growled.

This time she laughed. “That’s mighty big talk for a one-armed man.”

“Hey, I’m better with one arm than most men are with two.”

Her smile faded. “I’ll fix supper.”

Mitch lay on the couch and listened to Candy bustling around in the kitchen. A couple of times she called out a question about where to find something, but mostly she kept quiet. He wondered what she was thinking.

After locating the matches, Candy lit the camp stove. It was a far cry from her compact, state-of-the-art kitchen in New York, but she managed to whip up a fluffy batch of scrambled eggs that would make Rachel Ray jealous. She even threw in some grated parmesan cheese she found in the fridge. She hoped the eggs would make up for the sorry state of the toast. She’d had to dangle the bread over the open flame of the stove, and the result wasn’t pretty.

“Here you go.” She handed Mitch a plate and fork and sat in a chair across from him with her food.

“Thanks.” He stabbed his fork into the mound of eggs like a healthy man who hadn’t eaten in way too long. She guessed he was feeling better.

Glancing at the gauze bandage on his arm, Candy swallowed hard. She’d almost fainted, too, when she saw the blood-spattered snow and the glazed look in his eyes. Fortunately, the executive in her had taken over. She’d sized up the situation and done what needed to be done. Now that the crisis had passed, she was amazed by her own resourcefulness. The wound wasn’t deep, but it was ugly. Chain saws weren’t exactly surgical instruments.

Mitch had propped his plate on his lap so he didn’t have to use his injured arm. *It must hurt like the devil.* She wished she had something stronger to give him than aspirin, but she’d scoured his medicine cabinet with no luck.

While she watched him eat, she was struck by a niggling feeling of familiarity deep in her brain. She couldn’t put her finger on it, but she felt like she knew him. Really knew him. She shook her head at the fanciful thought and turned her attention to her eggs. Maybe it was the memories dredged up by sharing the story of Michael. Maybe it was her mind trying to justify the fact that she’d fallen, or in this case leapt, into bed with a near-stranger. Maybe it was all those hours spent together in bed, mouth to mouth, skin to skin. That was certainly one way to get to know a man. Whatever the connection, it eluded her.

After they finished eating, she collected the dishes and washed them. When she returned to the living room, she found Mitch fast asleep on the couch with Major at his feet. She should wake him; he would probably sleep better in his own bed. But she hesitated. He looked so peaceful. She studied the hard, masculine angles of his cheekbones and jaw. What was it about him?

She’d decided to leave him where he slept and was adjusting the quilt when a hand shot out and grasped her wrist. She sucked her breath in hard and looked down into a pair of sleepy blue eyes.

“Come with me.”

Her breath released in a huff as she laid a hand against his forehead. It felt warm, maybe a little too warm. “You’re not going anywhere except to bed.”

“Exactly.” He threw off the quilt and struggled to his feet.

Candy grabbed his good elbow. “Hang on. I’ll help you. I imagine the shock from this afternoon has kicked in.”

She steered him to the bedroom and helped him lie down.

“Stay with me,” he said, holding her wrist to prevent her escape.

“That isn’t such a good idea.” Their lovemaking had been amazing. There was no denying it. But the storm would end soon, and their time together with it. She needed to start putting distance between them.

“Stay with me,” he repeated softly.

“You’re hurt.”

“It’s not so bad. I want you with me while I sleep.”

“You’re delirious.”

“Maybe.” He tugged on her arm lightly. “Stay. Please.”

Good sense warred with desire. A smart woman would tuck him in and say goodnight, but she wasn’t feeling exceptionally bright at the moment.

“Okay. But just until you fall asleep.”

Chapter Fifteen – Who the Heck is Marie?

by Vonnie Davis

Candy couldn't move.

She couldn't breathe.

A band of searing heat crossed her stomach. Something heavy weighed on her chest, the pressure making it difficult to draw air into her lungs. Was she having a heart attack? What a pair she and Mitch made; a man with a wounded arm, and a woman in coronary arrest. Her eyes opened, and two brown orbs stared back at her. She blinked to bring things into focus.

“Major?”

A canine tongue swept across her lips.

“Ppptthhh.” She spat away his slobber. “Get off my chest, you mangy bag of bones.” The room was cold. No doubt the fire was out. What time was it? She tried to roll over to reach the flashlight on the nightstand.

Mitch moaned at her movement. His arm banded around her waist, his very warm arm. No, warm wasn't a strong enough word. Burning would be more like it. She turned and placed her palm against his face and neck. The man was running a fever.

She rolled out of bed, trying to organize her thoughts. Holding the flashlight so its beam illuminated her watch, she saw it was nearly five in the morning. She hadn't planned to sleep all night with Mitch, but snuggling up to him felt so good that sleep quickly followed.

She let the dog out, noting the snow had finally stopped falling. After stirring embers to life in the fireplace, she built the fire up and loaded it with wood. When Major scratched, she let him in. Next, she went looking for a thermometer. Major padded along behind her.

“Okay, show me where your master keeps the thermometer. Is he organized enough to put it in the bathroom?”

The dog whined.

“Most men aren't big on organization, but Mitch has surprised me on more than one occasion.” In the bathroom, she opened the medicine cabinet above the vanity and aimed the flashlight beam over its contents. “Aspirin, Tylenol, Pepto-Bismol...” She moved items around to see behind them. Her hand stilled. “Sultamicillin.” She glanced down at Major. “Hmm...take one tablet every eight hours. Wonder what this was for?” She opened the bottle and glanced in. Six tablets left. “Evidently your owner doesn't believe in taking his medicine until it's gone like the doctor tells you to do.” *Men and their Superman Syndromes*. “Ah. Thermometer.” She snatched it from the shelf, grabbed a clean washcloth, and headed to the kitchen for a bowl of water. Hands full, she walked into Mitch's bedroom.

He was thrashing around in the bed as if battling some unseen foe. “Marie...Marie...”

Candy stopped and watched him. *Marie?* They'd talked about her mother, but why would he call her name? *Unless he wasn't...unless he has a girlfriend named Marie.* He moaned, a long drawn out sound that set her teeth on edge. Her eyes narrowed. Exactly what was he dreaming about?

Pain and disappointment swept through her, and she pressed a hand to her chest. They hadn't talked about significant others. Why should they? Neither wanted a relationship. What they had was strictly temporary. *Snowstorm sex? Blizzard passion?* She cringed.

Just my luck to tumble into bed with a guy who's involved with someone else and doesn't have the decency to tell me.

Thank goodness the storm had stopped. As soon as the roads were opened, she was out of there.

“Marie...Candy...”

Her brows pinched together, and she sat on the edge of the bed. "Mitch. Mitch, wake up." She jostled him as he moaned her name.

"It's me. Stop dreaming about another woman and wake up." When she got no response, she dipped the washcloth into the cool water, squeezed it slightly, and laid the dripping rag on his face.

Mitch gasped. His eyes popped open. "What the hell?" His hand grabbed hers, his gaze searching. "What...what's going on?"

"You're running a fever." She depressed the button on the thermometer. "Here, put this under your tongue." He dutifully opened his mouth, his eyebrows furrowed. "And if you don't keep it there, I'll gladly shove it elsewhere."

His eyes widened for a second. "My-mar-mu-missed?"

"What?"

He yanked the thermometer out. "Why are you pissed? I'm sick here."

The man had a girlfriend. For all she knew he was engaged. *Marie, indeed.* Murder came to mind. Dismemberment at the very least. "Put that back in your mouth so I can see how high your temperature is." No doubt if she stuck the thermometer under his pants, the tip would blow right off.

She wanted to be the only woman he dreamed about.

Crazy. Pathetic, falling for a man I don't know at all.

She opened the bottle of aspirin and tapped out a couple. "What were the antibiotics for? The bottle in your medicine cabinet?"

"Ne-Mo-Na."

"Huh?"

He rolled his eyes and removed the thermometer. "Pneumonia." He stuck the thermometer back under his tongue.

The thermometer beeped, and she checked it. "One-hundred and one point two. Not life threatening, but I'd guess you have an infection. Here, take these." Candy laid the pills in his hand and handed him a glass of water.

"What are they?"

"Aspirin for your fever. Maybe the old antibiotics would help..." She bit her lip. "But without checking with a doctor first..."

"Better not risk it." Mitch dropped the pills in his mouth and drank the water. "Thanks. Feel like crap. Arm hurts like a son of a bitch."

She removed the bandage and shined the light beam from the flashlight over the stitches. The cut was red and looked sore. "I'm going for rubbing alcohol. Be right back."

Pouring the alcohol over his wound a few minutes later, she took perverse delight in his reaction.

"Hells bells, that hurts."

"I bet." She leaned over him, resisting the urge to coil her fingers around his throat.

"Jesus, Candy, what's gotten into you?"

Chapter Sixteen – Past Remembered
by Jerri Hines

Candy stared at Mitch. What could she say? He hadn't done anything. She had no rational explanation for becoming so very, very angry. Except he'd crept into her heart when she wasn't looking and broken it a little. She'd learned long ago never to become emotionally involved. To bad she'd forgotten the lesson.

"Sorry. I'm just tired. Poor thing, having no one but a city girl to look after you."

"I wouldn't want anyone else," he said in a slow drawl. "No one else but you."

He sounded sincere... "Let's see if you feel the same way after I bandage your arm again."

He snorted. "Give it your best shot."

Not immune to his sense of humor, Candy laughed. After cleaning up the mess she'd made, she looked down at him. His eyes were closed. Hopefully his temperature had dropped. She hadn't a clue what she would do if it got worse.

An ache started in her chest. She missed her mom. Her mother would have known exactly what to do. Candy pressed her fingers to her temples. She could hear her mother now.

"Sometimes, Candy, you need to let go. You can't be in control all the time. Take a risk. Don't hold love in contempt because it didn't work for me. It doesn't always end badly, the way your father and I did."

Candy hadn't argued, hadn't wanted to disappoint her mother, but she couldn't open herself up to the pain she'd felt when her father left and never came back. She'd been so young. Still, she remembered that lost feeling.

She hadn't let a man get close enough to hurt her, was determined never to be dependent upon another living soul. This situation with Mitch was nothing more than a timely reminder.

Her glance strayed to the window. The sun was a glimmer on the horizon. It had been a long night. She turned back to Mitch. Sound asleep. Reaching over, she gently felt his forehead. Cooler, she hoped. Relief surged through her along with an unfamiliar feeling.

Major nudged closer. Turning she patted the top of the dog's head, "Yeah, boy. He'll be okay. I'll make sure of it."

Dreams disturbed Mitch's sleep. Dreams he thought he'd left behind. Voices called to him. Voices from the past. The past he wanted nothing more than to forget...

He was in his apartment in New York. The phone was ringing. *Someone pick up the damn phone.*

Lifting his pounding head off the pillow, he glanced over at his alarm clock. Oh, shit! He was late...again. Moaning loudly, he made a mental note never to go out for an all-nighter on a Monday again, especially when he had an early morning meeting. His father would kill him when he got back from Tokyo.

He held his head with both hands, trying to make the ringing stop. It didn't. *The phone.* Grimacing, he answered it.

"Michael, is that you?"

"Evan. Oh, thank God," he said. Reprieve waited on the other end of the line. Evan would cover for him.

"Michael, do you know what the hell is happening?"

Something in Evan's voice sobered him. A fire at work. At the Towers. Impossible. Television. Had to be on television. In a daze, he dragged himself to the living room and flipped on the big screen TV. He froze as images flashed before his eyes.

Smoke flowed out of the North Tower. In front of him the South Tower exploded in flames. He raced to the window of his high-rise apartment, looking out over the skyline of New York. Clear skies, not a cloud to be seen for miles except...smoke. Billowing smoke. Turning back to the TV, he watched in horror. Gray fog

choked the streets. People running for their lives. Firemen, policemen running inside. The top of the North Tower engulfed in smoke. Oh God, no! No. No. No. Crawford Industries sat at the top of the North Tower.

Holding the phone to his ear...he never let go.

“Don’t leave me, Bro.”

“I won’t. I’m here.”

Words merged together. Never could he repeat those words, but he couldn’t stop them resonating in every fiber of his being.

I can hardly breathe. The smoke. It’s black. Then a calm silence before Evan spoke again. *I left a message for Mom. Told her I was okay. Tell her...tell her...*

“I will...Evan...Evan...”

Mitch bolted upright, soaked in sweat. He caught his breath. For a moment he was back in New York. No, this was Georgia. He glanced around to find Candy looking at him. God, she had the most beautiful eyes. He reached for her.

“You didn’t leave.”

“Did you think I would? Are you okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” He nodded, taking a deep breath, and hesitated before asking, “Do you mind if I just hold you right now? Just for a little while.”

She didn’t say a word, just climbed in beside him. He wrapped her in his arms and pulled her close. For the first time in his life, Mitch wanted more than a brief encounter. He wanted Candy.

Chapter Seventeen – Knight in Denim Overalls
by Jannine Gallant

Snuggling against Mitch, Candy rested her cheek on the flannel covering his chest and listened to his heartbeat. Faster than normal. *A result of the fever or something else?*

“What were you dreaming about?”

His body stiffened, and his breath rushed out, stirring the hair at her temple. “Something that happened a long time ago.”

She turned in his arms to look up at his face. His eyes squeezed closed, lines of pain etched deep.

“I’m listening if you want to talk about it.”

When he met her gaze, she stared into the soul of a deeply wounded man.

“I can’t, Candy. It’s not that I don’t trust you...” His throat worked convulsively as he swallowed. “I just can’t.”

She pulled away a fraction of an inch. His words stung. “All right.” Staring at the ceiling, she bit her lip, then blurted, “Do you have a girlfriend, fiancée, significant other, someone I should know about?”

“No.” His voice rose. “Of course not. I wouldn’t have slept with you if I was involved with anyone.”

Relief surged through her like a torrent, little bubbles of happiness bursting in her chest. “You said...I thought...never mind. It doesn’t matter.”

“Not a very flattering picture you have of me. What kind of jerk do you take me for?” He picked at the covers.

She covered his hand with hers. His skin was hot to the touch. Jerking upright, she touched his brow. Definitely warmer than she liked.

“Mitch, you’re scaring me a little. I think you need to see a doctor. Now.”

His eyes widened. “Seriously?”

She nodded.

“Jeb, my neighbor, was an army medic. If you really think—”

“I do.” She slipped out from under his arm and stood beside the bed. “If anything bad happens to you because—” She broke off and worried her lip between her teeth. “Let’s just say I’m not going to risk losing someone else I...care about.”

Reaching out, he snagged her arm. His fingers burned around her wrist. A smile curved his lips, and the ghost of devilish amusement danced in his fever bright eyes.

“I like the sound of that.”

“Save it for later.” She backed up a step, then rushed forward and dropped a kiss on his lips. Her heart contracted when he slid his fingers through her hair. “Mitch...”

“I’ll be fine. We’ll be fine.”

“Definitely, but let’s make sure of it.”

The damned ATV wouldn’t start. So maybe she was doing something wrong. *Who knew how to run one of these things?* Not an ex-country girl turned confirmed concrete junkie. Giving the machine a kick with her borrowed boot, pain shot up her leg. Candy gritted her teeth and forced back tears.

By the time she reached the little cabin tucked into the woods, she couldn’t feel her feet. Rapping frozen knuckles against the solid wood portal, she stomped hard on the porch until a burning sensation assured her they were still attached.

The door flew open. A tall, lanky man with a gray buzz cut glared down at her. “What’s all the ruckus out here?”

“S-s-s-s-sorry. I got snow in my boots on the way over and—”

“Good Lord, come inside.” Reaching out a long arm, he pulled her over the threshold. “Aren’t you the girl Mitch was with yesterday?”

Candy nodded. Her cheeks burned in the sudden blast of heat. Flames leapt behind the glass window of a woodstove. “I’m Candy Wright.” She pulled off a knitted mitten and stuck out red fingers.

“Jeb Nobell.” He released her hand. “You’re half frozen.”

“More like three-quarters.” She sniffed and wiped her running nose on the sleeve of Mitch’s jacket. “But right now, I’m more concerned with your neighbor. He cut himself on a chainsaw yesterday, and he’s running a fever.”

Frown lines bisected his weathered face. “Did you take him to the clinic?”

“I couldn’t.” She tucked her numb fingers into the jacket sleeves. “A tree flattened his truck the first night of the storm, and my rental car is stranded beside the road with a bent axel. I did the best I could...” The sympathy in his deep brown eyes was her undoing. Sniffing again, she dashed tears from her cheeks.

“I’m sure your best is mighty fine.” He gave her arm a squeeze. “Let me get my first aid kit, and we’ll go check him out.”

Feeling as if a two-ton elephant had been lifted from her shoulders, Candy watched her knight in denim overalls lope up the stairs.

Standing in Mitch’s driveway next to Jeb’s powerful four-wheel-drive truck, Candy stretched onto her toes and pecked his leathery cheek. “How can I ever thank you?”

“No reason to. Mitch is a friend, and I look out for my friends.” He smiled at her, his chocolate brown eyes twinkling. “I like you, Candy. You made the best of a bad situation and didn’t panic. If you ever need anything, all you have to do is ask.”

Warmth filled her, thawing the last of the chill she’d been feeling since setting out that morning. “I appreciate it. Appreciate everything. Even if I’d had a working vehicle, I’d never have been able to negotiate the road to the clinic. Thank God they got the downed tree cleared away.”

“Yup, almost back to normal. Power’s on. Another day of sunshine, and the road will be in tolerable shape. Mitch, too.” He chuckled. “I mean, a day or two of those antibiotics should work wonders. Just make sure he takes them all.”

“I will. Thanks, Jeb.”

He nodded, sketched a salute, and climbed into his truck.

Candy walked back to the house, closed the door, and leaned against it, relief settling in. Mitch was going to be fine. The visions of gangrene she’d harbored disappeared with the melting snow. And she had clothes. *Real clothes*. They’d stop at her disabled car on the way home. The thought of wearing something other than baggy sweats and flannel sent a shiver of anticipation skittering down her spine.

“If that smile gets any wider, you’re going to pull a muscle.”

Her gaze snapped to the hallway. Mitch lounged against the wall, watching her. Major sat beside him.

“I was thinking about my favorite sweater. It’s shouting my name from its prison inside my suitcase.”

He cocked his head and frowned. “Are you sure? I thought it was the lace teddy.”

A giggle burst through her lips. “You must be feeling better. Still, I think you should go sit down.”

“Only if you come with me.”

The way his gaze strayed down the length of her body nearly convinced her. Heat flared. *For crying out loud, the man isn’t even touching you. Get a grip!* She took a breath. “As soon as I change.”

“If it’s into that lacy teddy, you have my blessing.”

She crossed the room and stopped inches away. The dog whined, and she reached down absently to scratch his ears. “You’re in no condition for teddies, lace or otherwise.”

Mitch tugged her against him. “Wanna bet?”

Wrapping her arms loosely around his neck, she smiled. “No.” Leaning in, she kissed him lightly. “I’m just so thankful you’re going to be okay. I was worried. Really worried.”

“Does that mean you care, just a little?”

She rolled her eyes at his wheedling tone. “Maybe a little, smarty.”

“Then sit with me on the couch. I’m sure we can think of something to do that won’t tax my strength.”

“Just as soon as I change. Promise.”

His gaze caressed her face. The look in his eyes... She let out a shuddering breath, afraid to put a name to it.

“I’ll be right back.”

“I’m holding you to it.”

Chapter Eighteen – Revelations
by Amber Leigh Williams

Candy had promised herself she'd leave as soon as the power was back on and Mitch was his healthy, hearty self again, but she lingered. Her rental car was being repaired. After hours spent on the phone with his insurance company, Mitch's tow truck had been hauled away. The snow was melting. Yet it became increasingly difficult for her to pack up what she'd pulled out of her suitcase, the pieces of clothing mingling with his in piles on the floor, usually where she'd discarded them at the onset of sex. Once Mitch got his stamina back, they went several rounds throughout the house.

If she were honest with herself—and the longer she spent with Mitch, the more she was forced to confront her feelings—it wasn't the lovemaking that kept her around. It was the unity that had grown out of their relationship. Despite the short time they'd spent together, being with him felt natural. Even the time engaged in their prickly brand of banter.

No, it wasn't just sexual. And if she were really being honest with herself, it never had been. She'd fallen for him. After all her resolutions and reservations and years of being alone, Candy Wright had found love in the unlikeliest place imaginable. With the unlikeliest man.

Still, reality had to intrude at some point. She had a home and a career hundreds of miles away.

Turning toward him, she studied his face in the afternoon light shining through the undraped windowpane across the bedroom. He'd crashed hard after their latest tussle. Their lovemaking had been tender, slow, drawn out with such care it had shattered her heart. She feathered her hand lightly over his stubbled cheek, and a soft smile touched her lips when he sighed in his sleep.

Though she'd thought of little else all morning, she hadn't known how to broach the subject of her return to New York. Usually, she didn't have a problem putting an end to a relationship. And though this would only be a temporary end—she hoped—she didn't want to wipe the soft look from his eyes. The look she'd basked under since their return from the clinic.

How she was going to live without that look... She didn't want to think about it.

Unable to settle down, she rose as quietly as she could from the bed and stepped carefully over Major on her way out. Candy wrapped a white silk robe around her waist, glad she'd had the foresight to pack it for the trip south. She thought about going into the kitchen for some hot chocolate but decided against it when she found herself at the door to his office.

The first steps had to be taken. Preparation. As she stepped around the jamb and cracked the door behind her, she hoped Mitch would continue sleeping without her beside him.

Ignoring the pang of guilt at planning the initial stages of her return without his knowledge, she sat down in front of the spiffy-looking desktop and hit the button to engage the monitor. First up, she would see if there were any more flight delays out of the Atlanta airport. With the inclement weather moving northwest, air travel was getting back to relative normalcy in the south.

Releasing a heavy breath, she scanned the flights from Atlanta to New York. *Which one?* Several flew out that evening. She wouldn't even consider leaving so soon. Biting her lip, she read the list for tomorrow.

The screen blurred. She blinked, surprised at the tears in her eyes and the ache in her chest.

She wasn't ready to take this finite step... Not without talking to Mitch first. She would be up front with him, no matter his reaction. Then she would book a flight and give them plenty of time to say their goodbyes.

Candy cleared her throat, swiped the tears from her cheeks, and opened her email inbox. There were several messages from clients with projects slated for completion after the holidays. She couldn't ignore them forever.

As she reached up to turn off the monitor, the fax machine to her right whirred to life. She jumped and knocked her elbow against the desk.

A single sheet of paper spat from the printer, overshot the paper tray, and fluttered to the floor. Reaching down to retrieve it, the letterhead caught her eye.

Crawford

The name pierced her memory. So did the corporate logo beneath it. Her eyes flew over the words underneath the heading....

Michael:

I've been trying to reach you for days. Do they no longer have phone service wherever it is you have chosen to bury yourself these past few years? Your mother is requesting your presence here at home on New Year's Day. I've told her not to get her hopes up as you never answer any of our summonses for the holidays or any other occasion and that you have distanced yourself irreversibly from this family. However, if you could be so kind as to drop her a line, I'm sure she would be most grateful.

*Your father,
Michael Crawford Jr.*

She stared at the signature, her heart pounding against her breastbone. After several long minutes, she crumpled the paper in her hand.

Crawford. How had she not seen it? Mitch had been lying to her the whole time. Mitch Johnson was Michael Crawford III, her childhood friend. He'd made her explain to him who her mother was, where she'd worked, the demise of what little family she had.... And he hadn't said a word. Not *It's me, Michael* or *I'm sorry*. Nothing.

"Candy?"

She whirled toward the doorway. By God, she shook with wrath, trembling and chilled to the bone. "I know who you are."

His eyes narrowed. "What is it? What's wrong?"

She held up the fax and waved it in front of his face. "I know who you are, Michael Crawford III!"

Chapter Nineteen – The Moment of Truth
by Laura Breck

His hand, scratching his bare chest, froze as Candy spat out his real name like she'd bitten into a rotten peach.

Ah, shit. How had he let it come to this? For days he'd been searching for a way to tell her, struggling for the right words.

Candy dropped the paper she'd been holding in front of his face, and it fluttered to the floor.

Mitch watched it settle and then raised his head to meet her gaze. Wet with tears, her beautiful hazel eyes glistened. His breath faltered. He opened his mouth, but words failed him. What the hell could he say? What could fix this?

Major nosed his way past him into the room. After sniffing at the paper, he yawned and stretched his front legs out in a yoga position, then dropped his butt and lay on the floor watching them.

“Ooooooh!” Her face pinched and turned bright red. “I could just...” When her gaze lowered to his bandaged arm, she dropped her raised fist and let out a heartbreaking sigh.

Major whined, the sound skittering along Mitch’s nerves.

“If hitting me would make you feel better...” He held his arms out to the side. “By all means, do it.”

When she blinked, tears ran down her cheeks. She shook her head, and her bottom lip quivered.

“I hate to see you hurting like this.” He lowered his arms.

“Really?” She snapped. “You’re concerned about me? You’re the one who orchestrated this whole—”

“Nothing was orchestrated.” He lifted a hand, and she jumped back. *As if she was afraid of being struck. Or worse, touched by something nasty.* “When I realized who you were...”

“You asked me a dozen questions.” She jabbed a finger toward him. “Questions you knew the answers to. And I went on and on, telling you all about my life.” She closed her eyes for a second, then looked past his shoulder. “You must have had a damn good laugh.”

“Of course not. I just didn’t know how to—”

“Was this a game to you?” she cried. “Did the rich boy have fun seducing the maid’s daughter?”

“No. Goddamn it, Candy...” He had to make this right. Mitch scrubbed a hand down his face. “I wanted to tell you. After we made love the first time, I wanted to tell you.”

“Why didn’t you?”

The misery in her eyes clawed at his gut. Everything he said was wrong. He had to get away, just for a little while. He had to have time to think before he screwed this up completely.

“C’mon, Major.”

The dog jumped up.

Without looking at her, he said, “I’m going to take a walk. When I come back, we’ll talk this out.”

She didn’t speak.

He waited.

She stared at him as if he were just this side of full-crazy.

Hell, maybe he was crazy. All he knew was, he didn’t want to say any more until he cleared his head. He turned and went to the bedroom, dressed, and walked through the kitchen to the back door. Major followed, not his usual exuberant doggy self, as if sensing the tension in the air.

Mitch let the dog out and paused to listen. Silence. Where was she? God, he hoped she wasn’t crying.

He headed into the woods as the sun dipped low between the trees. The ground sucked at his boots as the melting snow turned the forest floor into mud. He walked toward Jeb’s cabin and considered knocking on his neighbor’s door and burying his troubles in a bottle of whiskey, but that was a coward’s way out.

“I may be an idiot, but I’m not a coward.”

Major looked up at him from where he dug snow around a tree.

“Yeah, me,” he told his dog as he turned and headed back toward his own house.

Major barked twice and bounced alongside him as if in full agreement.

When he stepped into the yard, he drew up short. The fresh air and exercise had helped, but he still needed a plan.

He ducked into the garage and turned on the light over the workbench. Picking up a hammer, he whacked at a loose nail. Then dug out another one and pounded it into a piece of scrap lumber. Then another. Pretty soon, he’d wasted a half a box of nails.

“Shit.” Facing Candy would be one of the most difficult things he’d done in his life. No matter how hard, he’d tell her the truth. He hadn’t revealed his identity because she was only looking for a quick fling. Then she’d leave. How many times had she told him that? He hadn’t thought they’d grow this close. Never imagined she’d stick around.

He looked out the window toward the house. The kitchen glowed golden with light. Warm and inviting. His heart beat double time, and a bubble of emotion tried to break free of his throat. “Candy.” Damn, he was glad she’d stuck around.

He’d tell her how much she meant to him—no—how much she’d always meant to him. How those adolescent feelings had matured in the last few days. A love that took twenty years to—

Whoa! Love?

The hammer fell from his fingers, clattering on the cement floor. Panic gripped him. Where the hell had that come from?

Chapter Twenty – It's Cold Outside

by Barbara Edwards

Mitch's heart pounded at the sight of Candy seated at the table, her head in her hands. The rich smell of homemade stew filled the air. Guilt tightened his throat. She'd cooked supper for him. She couldn't be holding a grudge, could she?

He quietly closed the door behind the dog. He had to tell her how his feelings had changed.

He groaned when Major laid his head in Candy's lap. She ignored him, while she rubbed his dog's silky ears.

Mitch knew how those fingers felt, and his skin burned at the memory.

"Candy?"

"What do you want, Mitch? To talk? You're not the only one who needed time to think." A sigh trembled from her lips.

She finally looked at him, and he wished she hadn't. Her reddened eyes revealed she'd been crying.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. His cold fingers fumbled with the zipper of his jacket.

"For what? Not telling me who you are? Pretending to be interested in my past?" Her hazel eyes sparked with anger. "For making love to me like you really cared?"

Mitch held his hands up to stop the barrage of words. They found their target, anyway, ripping pieces from his heart. When he opened his mouth, nothing came out but a low groan.

Candy jerked to her feet.

Major scrambled to avoid being stepped on as she advanced until her face was inches from his. The varied colors of her hazel eyes glittered up at him. "Are you going to explain?"

His jaw worked as he tried to force out all the things he'd kept locked inside for ten years. All the horror and heartbreak. "I can't," he said, defeated.

She gave him a look cold enough to frost the Georgia Dome in August. "Then I'm out of here."

Chapter Twenty-One – No Strings Attached
by Claire Ashgrove

“Wait.”

The single word stopped Candy at the door. Her fingers grazed the brass knob. Wisdom ordered her to turn the cold metal and ignore Mitch’s nearly inaudible directive. Her naïve heart, that so desperately wanted him to have a justification she could forgive, instructed her to turn around. She pivoted slowly, pinning him with a mistrustful stare. “Wait?”

He nodded and stood taller. His throat worked visibly as he swallowed, and then the façade cracked and his stare dropped to Major. “You set the rules. This was no strings attached.”

His voice was quiet, but it lashed like the crack of a whip, flaying her already wounded heart into bits. She’d been so foolish. So absolutely *stupid* to think that Michael Crawford III might have developed feelings for the maid’s daughter. He’d known all along who she was. If he’d cared, if he’d come half as close to love as she had, he’d have spit everything out days ago.

Candy steeled her resolve. This man had hurt her once before. She’d be damned if she’d let him know he could wound the woman who’d moved beyond her subservient social status. He and his family didn’t deserve that kind of power. “You’re right, I set the rules. Now I’m holding to them and leaving.”

She yanked open the door and grabbed her purse. Chill winter wind rushed through the plush fabric of her sweater.

“Candy.”

Heavy boot steps followed her quick retreat down the stairs, crunching what remained of the slush and ice on the pave stones. Candy quickened her steps, her focus on the path leading into the woods.

“Candy! Your coat, your things! You can’t just walk out in the middle of winter. Come back and we can talk about this.”

Like hell. Gritting her teeth, she refused to acknowledge the cold and lifted her voice over the brisk breeze. “Burn them. I don’t want to see them again.”

No reminders of Mitch—her favorite cashmere sweater might be in a heap at the foot of his bed, but she could buy another. Keeping memories of him hanging in her closet would make it impossible to erase their connection from her mind. And she *would* erase him. One way or another.

Taking a deep breath, she ignored Major’s muffled bark and stumbled down the four-wheeler’s path. Jeb could give her a ride. To the airport, to town where she could catch a cab, all the way to Manhattan if necessary. It didn’t matter where he took her, so long as it was far from Mitch—no Michael’s—rustic home.

What in the world was he doing all the way down here anyway?

It didn’t matter. She no longer cared.

As she blinked back tears, she summoned the old, familiar walls around her heart and turned the bend, trudging deeper into the forest. Above the tall pines, a slender plume of smoke wove through the branches, marking the path back to the life she could depend on. The life where everyone remained at a safe distance and no one trespassed across the rock-hard boundaries she set.

So what if that meant Christmas, New Year’s, and all the rest of the holidays would be spent alone? So what if that meant she’d have to go out and buy her own damn dog?

So what if she never knew why Michael had ignored her mother’s death?

She didn’t really need to know. Like before, he’d said everything with his silence.

Chapter Twenty-Two – A Lonely Future
by Laura Breck

Mitch stood with one foot on the ground and one on the bottom step, hanging on to Major's collar. The disloyal dog wanted to go after Candy. Hell, *he* wanted to go after her, but something held him dangling between advance and retreat.

No one knew his inner pain. Other than the therapist he saw ten years ago, no one understood why he'd run away to Georgia.

Candy disappeared around a bend in the path. Gone. He looked down at Major, who stared at him with censure in his gaze. "In the house, boy." Major walked inside, his head held low.

Mitch stared down the path. He wasn't ready to spill his weaknesses all over the kitchen table for Candy to see. For Candy to judge. The way his father had judged ten years ago.

The fear that Candy would respond the same way held him back. It wasn't the girl he'd known years ago, or the woman he'd gotten to know the last few days. It was the Candy he'd met at the gas station that made him leery. The hard-driving, demanding city girl who'd looked him up and down and jumped to categorize him.

It was too late, anyway. She was gone now, or would be as soon as...

"Shit." He tugged his phone out of his pocket and dialed Jeb.

His neighbor answered on the second ring. "Brother, what's happening over in Romanceville?"

"Candy left me. She's on her way to your place."

Silence. "She's dumping you for me?" His voice held a chuckle.

"She wants to get away from me. Do you have time to drive her to Atlanta?"

"You're serious." Jeb huffed out a long sigh. "All I've got is time. But I'd rather hand you my truck keys and let you drive her."

If Mitch couldn't talk to her in his own home, there was no way he'd be able to break loose in Jeb's truck. "Just make sure you get her there safe, okay?"

"Yeah, she'll be safe." He paused. "When I get back, if you need a drink..."

"Thanks. I owe you one." He clicked the off button. No amount of alcohol would wash away this mess. His lungs wouldn't fill. As if something inside him was missing.

A rare nocturnal cardinal landed on a bare tree branch where Mitch had hung a feeder full of sunflower seeds. The yard light spotlighted the bright spot of color against the dull landscape. Kind of like Candy... *No. Not going to make up metaphors about her.*

He turned and walked into the house, the smell of the simmering stew hitting him in the stomach. It wasn't hunger. It tasted like guilt. He covered the pot and turned off the stove.

In his stocking feet, he padded into the bedroom and found Major lying with his head on Candy's sweater. "That's not yours. Off," he chided, and the dog raised his head.

Mitch picked up the piece of fluff and fought the urge to press it to his nostrils and suck in her scent. It probably smelled like dog anyway. Should he wash it and dry it before he shipped it back to her with the rest of her stuff?

No, this had to be expensive and dry-clean only. He knew of a half-dozen drycleaners, but all of them were in New York City. *Different lives.* Folding the sweater carefully, he shook his head. *Different worlds.*

He opened her suitcase. It sat on top of his dresser, serving as a reminder of the certainty that this relationship was over. He'd been counting on a few more days, though.

Setting her sweater in the suitcase, his fingers brushed a silky scrap of panty. He jerked his hand back. She'd been so soft, so passionate in his arms. Adventurous one hour and slowly seductive the next. The perfect lover.

Mitch rubbed the heels of his hands over his closed eyes, needing to erase those memories. He'd never hold her again. Never carry her to his bed and press himself along her satiny length. Never kiss her, or taste her sweetness.

Fisting his hands, he punched them toward the ceiling and dropped his head back, letting out an animal howl of pain. Major jumped onto the bed, barking and circling.

He picked up a pair of her jeans, rolled them into a ball, and threw it into the suitcase. "I'm so damned messed up..." Picking up her robe, he threw it into the suitcase. "I let her go..." He hurled her boots in on top of her clothes. "The most amazing woman..." Mitch picked up her bra, then dropped it.

He collapsed on the bed, and Major instantly lay next to him, his head on his chest, his canine eyes full of worry. Petting his best friend with soothing strokes, Mitch murmured, "The one I let get away."

Chapter Twenty-Three – Goodbye to What Might Have Been
by Brenda Whiteside

“Truck should be warm by now.” Jeb stamped his boots, knocking off snow, as he stood just inside the door. “You ready to go, Candy?”

Candy turned from the window where she’d watched Mitch’s neighbor clear the snow from the windshield of his truck. “Yes, I’m ready.”

Jeb pulled a hooded sweatshirt from a hook by the front door. “Put this on.”

“Thanks.” She slipped the fleece around her and smiled at the elderly man. Following him to the truck, her footsteps were heavy, but less from the soggy ground than the sadness weighing her down.

“You sure you wouldn’t like to stop at Mitch’s and get your own coat...or anything else?” He put the truck in reverse and backed out onto the road. “Wouldn’t be any trouble since we’ll pass right by.”

“I’m sure.” Candy didn’t mean to sound as icy as the weather but any reference to Mitch—to Michael—chilled her soul.

She stared out the window into the growing dark, not wanting to watch for Mitch’s place, but drawn to where she’d left her heart. The golden glow from the windows flickered through the trees before the cabin came into view. Tears stung her eyes. She could smell the wood burning in the fireplace, feel his arms around her.

“Mitch might like to ride to the airport with us. Should we stop and ask?”

Candy shook her head and forced herself to look at the road. She shut her eyes, damming the threatening tears. He’d made a fool of her. He’d played her, gained her trust and love, only to smash her feelings without any explanation. She never wanted to see that manipulating, heartless man again.

“You and Mitch—”

“There is no me and Mitch.”

“No? Maybe—”

“His name isn’t Mitch. He’s not who you think he is.” Why the hell should she protect his identity?

“He’s Mitch. He might have another name, another life before this one, but to all of us in Elridge, he’s just Mitch.” Jeb gave her a serious, narrow-eyed glance before turning his attention back on the road.

“You don’t know the real man. His name is Michael Crawford—”

“The third.”

Candy stared at Jeb, dumbfounded. She closed her gaping mouth when Jeb snickered at her.

“I’m probably the only one around here who does know, but that’s Mitch’s business.”

“Why would he hide his identity?”

“I don’t think he’s hiding, exactly.”

“No? Then why are you the only one who knows?”

“Can’t say. We all have secrets, and our reasons are our own.” His voice was quiet, the slushy road sounds nearly blocking out his words.

“Why, Jeb? Why did he change his name and move here?”

“I said I knew his real name, where he came from. Don’t know much more. When and if Mitch ever decides to tell me, I’ll listen. But it really doesn’t matter. He’s one hell of a man, whatever he calls himself.”

“Oh, yeah, one hell of a man.”

They rode in silence for a few miles. The fact that Mitch had told Jeb who he was didn’t mitigate her anger. *Michael, not Mitch.* But they were one and the same. All those years ago, she’d loved Michael—a childish love but love nonetheless—and he’d hurt her. What she felt for Mitch—the love, anger, hurt—was history repeating itself.

“The first winter Mitch was here, Jenny Martin lost her husband. Mitch went to her house every day, though he didn’t really know her.” He held up his hand when she opened her mouth. “Before you jump to

conclusions, Jenny's a grandma. But he was there, doing all the chores, helping her get the house ready to sell." Jeb nodded at her as if he'd relayed the news of the week.

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"A man's actions speak louder than words."

Candy hugged the fleece around her. Mitch's actions were loud and clear. He'd concealed the truth. That said it all.

"I was down with a broken leg a while back. Mitch was handy whenever I needed something done."

"Fine, Jeb. I understand he's a Good Samaritan."

"There's a lot more to the man."

"Like what? How can you be sure if you don't know why he's here? Why he lives under an alias?"

"I could tell when he first moved here, he needed to set something right."

"What do you mean?" Candy squinted to see his face in the dim light of the truck cab. If he knew something, anything that would absolve Mitch for his deceitful actions, she wanted to know. God, was she still harboring a sliver of hope?

"Sorry, Candy. I don't know exactly what I mean. It's just a feeling. But he's a good man."

She shook her head and turned away from him.

"When he was with you...happiest I've ever seen him."

"You don't understand, Jeb. You can't know..." She leaned her head back and closed her eyes.

The good neighbor took the hint, and they rode in silence the remaining miles.

Candy dozed; pleasant dreams of Mitch's kisses laced her slumber. She jerked awake when Jeb turned a sharp corner and pulled into a parking space at the Atlanta airport.

The engine noise died, and Jeb opened his door. "I'll walk you in."

"You don't have to do that."

"My orders were to make sure you were delivered safely."

"Your orders?"

His only response was a smile.

Tears came from nowhere. "Well, consider your task accomplished." She swiped the tears away with the sleeve of his sweatshirt. "Oh, jeez, sorry." She dabbed at the wet spot with her hand. "Look, let's just say goodbye here. There's no need to walk me in. You've been so very kind and helpful. Can I pay you for the gas?"

"You most certainly cannot."

"Then I'll give you back your hoodie and—"

"No, no." He shut his door and waved a hand in the air. "You keep it. You can return it when you come back."

"Jeb, I'm not—"

"Don't make promises you can't keep."

She leaned across the cab and planted a kiss on his cheek. "Goodbye, Jeb."

"Until next time."

There was no use arguing with him. She hopped out onto the asphalt of the cold parking garage, pulled the hoodie tighter, and walked to the elevator. As the doors closed, she waved goodbye to Jeb. Goodbye to what might have been.

Chapter Twenty-Four – Men... Who Needs Them
by Barbara Edwards

Candy flipped open another file, but her gaze refused to settle on the page. Silence echoed through her open office door. Down the hall, a single strand of garland sparkled and twisted as air moved from the heat she'd turned up. Someone had left a holiday candle in one of the cubicles, and the scent of spiced apple drifted to her. She pulled her cashmere sweater close and ignored the fact that her favorite lay at the foot of Mitch's bed. A shiver ran over her skin. Chilled by the slushy city streets, she needed warmth. Mitch's steaming body came to mind, and she snarled aloud. Those long, slow hours making love were in the past.

Her hand slid across the wide desk, sending the file to the floor. Anger and pain combined in a dangerous cocktail. If he were here, she'd show him pain. Her fist slammed down, and she winced. She didn't need him. She didn't need a man, period.

Rising to her feet, Candy rubbed her arms as she paced to the wide windows. Nightfall lent sparkling beauty to the street below. She'd been so proud to occupy the corner office of her own business. Years of hard work and dedication had taken her to the top of the advertising industry. Her mother would have been proud of her accomplishments. She pressed her hand against the cold glass.

What was Mitch doing? Did he regret letting her go?

Why? Why? Why? The why pounded like hammer blows inside her skull, and a tear trickled down her cheek.

Rubbing it away, she straightened her shoulders. Mitch wouldn't talk to her, wouldn't explain. And she'd let him get away with that? It wasn't like her. She spun away from the window.

Her mother's smile glinted from a candid photo on her desk. The breath caught in her throat. Her mom had loved Michael. Her big heart had welcomed the lonely boy. Though he had only a single neighbor and a big sloppy dog, shedding love like loose hair, Mitch's life now held more affection than it ever had in his youth. She rubbed away another tear.

Had she judged him too harshly? She'd blamed him for not talking to her, but had she asked the right questions? Pain closed around her heart and squeezed.

Her hand shook as she reached for the phone.

Chapter Twenty Five – One Call Changes Everything
by Laura Breck

Mitch's phone rang once then silenced. Major opened one eye from his prime spot in front of the fireplace as Mitch picked up his cell. A New York area code. "Huh." Probably another one of his father's tricks to get him to answer the phone, dialing from a new number.

Or...

He checked the number again. It could be Candy. He could Google the number...

No. He'd been the one to let her go. If she wanted to contact him—decided she wanted her clothes or something—she would call. He wasn't going to jump at every wrong number, hoping it was her. Replacing the phone on the table, he picked up his book and went back to reading.

After staring blankly at the paragraph for ten minutes, remembering the last afternoon he'd spent with Candy in his bed, he grabbed the phone. "Damn." Accessing the last call, he got up and walked toward the back of the house.

In the office, he fired up the computer and plopped down in his ergonomic chair. Why couldn't he get her out of his head?

He typed in the mystery number and came up with *unlisted cell phone*. On his phone, he saved the number, just in case whoever it was called again. While he sat at his computer, he checked e-mails, local weather, and sports scores.

Hell, who was he kidding? He only wanted to check one thing. Bringing up a search engine, he typed in *Candice Wright*.

A lot of results popped up, but none were the Candy he knew. He tried *Candice Wright New York*. There she was. A screen full of articles on her and her advertising agency, *The Wright Way*, followed by six more pages. He read a few of them, but they only discussed her business acumen and successful rise to the top of New York's advertising world. He wanted more, wanted to understand what made Candice Wright *Candy*.

On page three, a few articles talked about her philanthropic projects. He searched again, adding *philanthropy* to the hunt. Four pages came up with pictures of Candy in formal gowns standing next to dignitaries and stars.

Her company provided advertising services to charities for kids, and she personally donated a lot of money to a number of causes dealing with children. Homelessness, domestic abuse, literacy. She'd never mentioned this side of her business when she'd been here. Of course, she barely spoke about her company.

He read her mission statement. Even though the objectives focused on the usual, customer service and employee integrity, the last line stood out. *To share our talents and treasures in areas that will make a difference in a child's life.*

Mitch sat back and read the sentence again. Was it because of her difficult childhood that she chose to include such a personal goal in her business model? Her way of helping kids in similar situations?

A cold, wet nose nudged his arm. He turned toward Major's expectant face and wagging tail. "You want to go out?"

The dog whined and stepped back, his tail double-timing, his eyes wide. As Mitch stood, Major ran to the back door, then retraced the path until he opened it.

The night was clear and cool, the stars overhead shone in an inky sky. He and Candy had lain in his bed, looking out the window at the constellations. He'd gotten some wild notions that night. Wanted to keep her in his bed forever. Imagined them building a life together.

Major barked and Mitch whistled him back.

A chill rattled through his body. Could he have kept her? If he'd been able to talk about the demons of the past? Hell, those demons still took a run at him from time to time.

She'd had a lot of pain in her own life. Maybe she would have understood. Maybe he'd underestimated her. She might have been the perfect person to open up to. Instead, he'd shut her out.

He looked at the sky. So cold and lonely. It wasn't right. This wasn't what he wanted for his life. *Candy*. He'd let the best thing that had ever happened to him slip away without a fight. When had he become a coward?

Major ran toward the house, and Mitch opened the door for them to enter the warmth of the kitchen. He walked toward the table where he'd shared intimate meals with her.

He braced both hands on the table and let his head hang down. He'd made a mistake. He'd let her go when everything inside him told him she was *the one*. He'd lost...everything.

A voice in his mind shouted, *No!* His head came up as he straightened his backbone. He wouldn't give up that easily. He could fix this. He could make it right.

Major stood at his bowl of kibble, eyeing Mitch, as if sensing something odd happening.

Mitch pulled his phone and dialed. "Jeb, can you watch Major for a few days?"

"It's about time, dumbass." The older man's quiet laugh eased through the phone. "You book yourself on the next flight to New York, and I'll drive you to the airport."

Mitch grinned. "How do you know I'm not going to Allatoona for some fishing?"

Jeb snorted. "You're a smart man. Slow, but smart. You're not gonna let Candy get away."

"I should have stopped her—" Mitch huffed out a breath.

"Don't waste time pissin' and moanin' about what you should've done. Just get your ass up north. And Mitch?"

"Uh huh?" *This ought to be good.*

"Prepare to grovel."

Chapter Twenty-Six – Memory of an Angel
by Vonnie Davis

Candy tossed her keys on the table in her foyer and struggled out of her boots. The snow in Manhattan, blackened by soot and car exhaust, was no longer pretty. No doubt what snow remained back in Georgia was still pristine with less traffic and pollution to soil it. She hung her coat and scarf and stepped into her professionally decorated living room.

She gazed around the room, off-white carpet, ivory walls, white leather furniture and chrome and glass tables. Colorless. Flopping onto a club chair, depression pressed on her chest. One word described her life sans Mitch and Major. Colorless. She swiped at a falling tear. A major crying jag was brewing; she could feel the burning behind her eyes and the constriction in her chest. *Deal with it. You're the one who walked out.*

Five minutes later she stepped out of her bedroom in an old pair of flannel pajamas and padded into the kitchen to open a can of tomato soup for dinner. Cheddar slices and rye bread to make grilled cheese joined the accumulation on the counter. Given the mood she was in, the quart of Chocolate Fudge Brownie ice cream in her freezer would be dessert. Comfort food, and *boy* did she need comfort.

Standing at the stove stirring the soup, she wondered what Mitch was having for dinner. In Georgia, the roads were cleared by now. Businesses were open. Maybe he would go out. Her hand tightened around the wooden spoon. Would he go on a date? Her forehead furrowed. Would his eyes soften when he looked at another woman? Would his kisses be as passionate?

Stop acting like one of those besotted females in a romance novel. Who cares what he does. He lied.

She carried her bowl of soup and sandwich to the table and sat. Did she want to eat? Her appetite was nonexistent since her return. If she was still in Georgia, she could share her sandwich with Major. She sipped a spoonful of soup. That mutt had wormed his way into her heart. She missed his affectionate personality, even his wet canine kisses.

As for his master, she ached for him. Ached in a way she never imagined possible.

Had she allowed pride and fear of loving someone to ruin what might have been an incredible relationship? Mitch had offered to explain, but feelings of betrayal had clouded her judgment. Why the secrecy? Why the lies? Why had he changed his name? So many questions. *Too many.*

She gathered her dirty dishes and loaded the dishwasher. In an attempt to work off some stress, she wiped down her kitchen cabinets and mopped the floor. On a cleaning tirade, she dusted and vacuumed the rest of her apartment, singing *Gonna Wash that Man Right Out of my Hair*.

It didn't work.

Mitch was still in her mind—and her heart.

Okay, so maybe what she needed was time. After all, she'd only been back in Manhattan for a couple of days. While gone, she'd experienced the most amazing time of her life in close quarters with an attractive, charming male. In their isolation, it only made sense they'd be drawn to one another. After a few days ensconced in her established, busy routine, the memories and feelings would fade.

Truth be told, had Mitch been five-foot-five with a receding hairline and a beer belly, she'd no doubt have fallen for Mr. Chubby, under those circumstances. She slapped the heel of her palm to her forehead. *Oh, God, I'm delusional.*

She'd fallen in love with a man who didn't exist—Mitch, the tow truck driver. She opened the door to her freezer and peered in at the quart of ice cream.

“If Mom were here, she'd tell me chocolate was the cure-all for a case of the blues.”

Thinking about the hours she'd have to work out to reduce the effects of the ice cream, she closed the door. She'd nuke a bag of popcorn and watch a movie, something lighthearted to counteract the heaviness inside her. Candy rolled her eyes.

“I’ve turned maudlin. Thanks, Mitch...er Michael...for doing this to me.”

She pressed the buttons on the microwave, waiting for the popcorn to do its thing. The man had secrets. Why? Why had he kept his identity hidden?

Minutes later, she carried a bowl of popcorn into the living room and stood in front of the only thing she’d kept of her mother’s. A large curio cabinet filled with her mother’s cherished angel collection. She ate a handful of popcorn while her gaze swept over the many angels. Some were wooden, a few made of glass, many were porcelain, and a couple she’d made, herself, as a little girl. One was made from Popsicle sticks, another from strips of crafting foam.

Her mother had been a thrifty woman of necessity, given her meager earning potential, but these angels had been her one indulgence. Beneath each was a slip of paper written in her mother’s precise handwriting with the date she’d acquired the angel and where.

After her mother’s death, when she’d numbly gone about settling the estate, she’d decided to keep the angels and cabinet. At the time, she thought it odd that her mother had splurged on the cabinet, given her penny-pinching nature. When she’d wrapped each angel in tissue paper, she also tucked in its slip of paper, too raw with grief to read the angel’s history. She’d placed the notations beneath each angel. Tonight, when she needed the comfort of her mom, she’d read them.

She reached for the one made from Popsicle sticks. *Made by my darling Candy at day camp.* The year and her age were noted in the corner. She trailed a fingertip over her mother’s handwriting, drawing a sense of peace.

She lifted the foam angel and its paper. *Made by Michael. Candy made an angel at the same time and gave it to him. So sweet to see how they care for each other.* Her hand trembled when she set the foam angel back on its paper.

A long ago memory surfaced; sitting at the table in the kitchen while her mother bustled back and forth, making hors d’oeuvres for the party the Crawfords were hosting that night. Michael, looking very grown up in his suit, walked into the kitchen. When he saw her at the table gluing together pieces of colorful foam, he pulled out a chair and joined her.

“What are you making?”

“Angels,” she whispered.

She’d been too shy to talk. Slowly he brought her out of her shell as he asked her questions about what to do next. After he made this angel, he’d given it to her mother. Enamored with Michael—her first childhood crush—she’d hesitantly offered her angel to him. For weeks, she’d dreamed of his smile as he accepted her impromptu, awkward gift.

Even then we had a connection. If only he’d told me who he was as soon as he figured out our shared past.

She shook her head. So many secrets—and for what reason? Nothing added up, and in her orderly world, things had to make sense.

The next angel she reached for brought a smile to her face. She knew the history of the jade figurine. Her mother’s face always lit up when she talked about it. Her Uncle Tim had bought it while on liberty in Viet Nam back in the ‘sixties and sent it to her mother for her sixteenth birthday. Beneath the angel were the words, *Tim’s Vietnamese Angel.*

Her hand wrapped around an exquisite, gold trimmed porcelain angel. On its paper was written, *Given to me by Michael. He claimed the angel caught his eye because it reminded him of Candy.* Tears burned. When she read the note written below it in a different color of ink, she lost it. *Michael bought me this curio cabinet with his first paycheck from Crawford Industries. He asked me to keep his present a secret.*

Michael had cared for her mother—and for her, too. Why all the secrecy? Didn’t she owe it to her mother to hear his explanation? Didn’t she owe it to herself? She set the angel back on its paper and closed the door to the cabinet.

Wiping tears from her eyes, she reached for the telephone and dialed. Mitch's phone rang. Was she too late? Would he want to explain after she'd so rudely walked out of his house—out of his life? Her heart pounded in her ears as the phone rang and rang—and rang.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – Prepare to Grovel
by Jannine Gallant

Mitch paid the cab driver and stepped out onto the slushy street. A cold wind blew down the back of his neck, and he shivered in his denim jacket. After ten years in Georgia, he'd forgotten how damn cold New York winters were.

Not nearly as cold as I'll be if Candy refuses to listen.

Taking a breath, he pushed random buttons for the secure building, lighting up the board. Every button but Candy's. He wanted to look into her eyes when he spoke to her, not beg for forgiveness through an intercom. Finally the door buzzed, and he pushed it open.

His heart pounded in his chest as he climbed the stairs carrying his overnight bag, too keyed up to wait for the elevator. His feet echoed hollowly in the stairwell. Exiting on her floor, he stood in front of the door and raised his fist.

Then lowered it.

Closing his eyes, he leaned against the wall. "Get it together, moron," he muttered. *If she tells me to drop dead...* He shuddered.

Rapping softly on the door, he waited with his heart in his throat. The door cracked open, chain attached, and one wary hazel eye regarded him. It widened before Candy shut the door in his face.

All his blood drained straight to his feet, and he swayed. *God, I'm not going to get a chance to explain.* If only she'd listen...

Raising his fist to launch a fresh attack, the door swung wide. He caught himself on the jam to avoid toppling inside. Embarrassment surged as he took a step back.

Candy wore pink flannel pajamas, and her hair was hauled back in a sloppy ponytail. Face devoid of make-up, her eyes were red-rimmed and a little puffy. Had she been crying? His heart expanded. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

Mitch swallowed. "Hi."

One brow shot up. "Hi, that's all you have to say?"

"No, but I'd rather not say it in the hall."

She stepped back and gestured him inside. "I was thinking about—Major."

Leaving his bag in the foyer, he followed her across an acre of off-white carpet and sank into a butter-soft leather couch. Close enough to touch her if he stretched out a hand... He clenched his fingers together in his lap.

"Major missed you. I missed you. Candy..." He cleared his throat.

"I missed you, too." Her voice cracked a little. "But nothing's changed. You lied to me about—everything."

He let out a shuddering breath, shifted closer, and picked up her hand. Smoothing the back of it with his thumb, it took all his willpower not to grab her and kiss her. "I'm ready to explain about that."

"I'm listening."

He saw a flicker of hope in the clear hazel depths of her eyes, and smiled. "Jeb suggested groveling."

Her lips curved in response. "Jeb is a wise man. If you don't start talking, I'm going to head back to Georgia and marry him."

Leaning against the couch cushions, he held her gaze. "I'm not sure where to begin."

Her grip tightened on his. "How about with why you changed your name and moved to the middle of nowhere. If I can understand your reasons, maybe I can forgive you for not telling me the truth." Her nails dug into his palm. "Maybe."

He reminded himself this was Candy, the woman he loved. Suddenly, telling her everything didn't seem like an impossible task. The tightness in his chest eased as he opened his mouth.

"Ten years ago, Crawford Industries was located in the North Tower of the World Trade Center." He heard her indrawn breath but didn't pause. "On that day in September when everything changed, I was late to work, home nursing a hangover." He squeezed his eyes closed, then forced them open. "I lived. Friends and co-workers didn't. They call it survivor's guilt."

"Oh, God, Mitch. I'm so sorry." She bent her head and kissed their tightly clasped hands, her lips whisper soft. "I can't imagine what you must have felt."

"I was worthless for months afterward, and my father..." He hesitated and stared at the floor. "He told me to be a man and move on." Raising his head, he met her concerned gaze full on. "So, I did. I left New York and Crawford Industries and moved to Georgia. Michael Crawford III died with everyone else in the towers. I became Mitch Johnson, a man whose skin I could live in, a man I could respect."

"There was nothing wrong with Michael. Nothing at all." She grasped his arms and gave them a shake. "You were the better man for caring. I'm sorry your father couldn't see that."

He sighed. "You're right, but I couldn't stay in New York. I had to get away."

She drew her finger down the seam in the cushion, avoiding his eyes. "Why didn't you tell me who you were? Didn't you trust me to understand?"

Mitch swallowed. He had to tell her the truth, even if she walked away. There'd been too many lies between them.

Pulling her close, their thighs touched, sending a shot of desire straight to his groin. When she didn't shove him away, he slipped his arm around her waist. Her head dropped onto his shoulder, fitting perfectly in the hollow of his neck.

"Honestly, I didn't trust you at first. You were a city girl with attitude." When she stiffened, he held on tight. "But that changed as I got to know you again. The Candy I cared about all those years ago emerged and won my heart."

"You had plenty of chances to confess, Mitch." There was an edge to her voice that sent a quiver through him.

"I tried more than once, but the words stuck in my throat. My past isn't something I talk about to many people."

"So I'm the same as everyone else?"

"No, of course you're not." He rubbed a hand across his face. "I'm making it worse, when all I want..."

She spoke softly. "Tell me what you want, Mitch."

"I want you, Candy. No one else. Just you."

Chapter Twenty-Eight – Forgiveness
by Jerri Hines

Doubts flooded Candy. Could she forgive him? *Survivor's guilt*. In one short phrase, Mitch had explained everything. Not in words, but his eyes spoke of the world of pain he concealed for not dying in the Tower. With his confession came an understanding of the demons he'd fought all these years. The fact that he sat next to her now meant he'd come to confront those demons. To face her. To grovel.

She stared at him, didn't dare blink for fear he'd disappear. For a brief moment she considered flinging herself into his arms and accepting his apology. Then the hurt flared to life once more along with the wall she'd let slip. He would leave. If there was one thing she'd learned from her past, it was that men left when the next obstacle emerged. And this time it just might kill her.

"Mitch, I can't." The knot in her stomach tightened. "I hate that you came all this way, but it just won't work."

"Why not?" he asked, edging closer.

"Because...it just won't. Okay. This love thing...I suck at it."

A smile flickered over his lips. "That makes two of us. Maybe it didn't work in the past because it wasn't right. It's right now. I couldn't stand it in Georgia without you. You shouldn't mess with something that feels this good."

She'd always taken pride in knowing the right thing to say, the right move to make. Sitting so close to Mitch, she hadn't a clue how to defend her emotions against him—and realized she didn't want to. The memory of their time together burned within her. Maybe it was time to take a risk.

"What are you saying?"

"I want you, Candy. I have since the moment you stopped for gas in the middle of a freak snow storm. Fate threw us together. We don't need to rationalize our relationship. Maybe we should just let ourselves feel."

He kissed her sweetly, drawing her tight against his chest. "I'm not going to let you go."

She ached to believe him. Her heart pounded painfully as fear gripped her.

"You say that now." Her voice broke. "But if I do this...and it doesn't work..."

"Trust me, Candy," he said simply. "I can't promise you the road before us won't have bumps. That's life. But I can promise we'll face them together. Honey, I didn't run from you. I came back to New York because I can't live without you."

He hadn't left. She had. Speechless, she stared at him. He wasn't fighting fair. She'd never expected him to break down her defenses so easily.

He didn't give her time to answer. Cupping her face between his hands, he touched his mouth to hers, wiping out any lingering doubts. His strong embrace and the press of his lips against hers mesmerized her.

He pulled back and caressed her face with his thumbs. "I've never felt this way about anyone. I've never wanted something so badly. I want you, Candy. I need you. You gave me the courage to come back to New York. I never thought I would. Never realized I needed to return to start living again instead of just existing. But I can't live without you."

When he kissed her, love filled her to bursting. She'd spent years protecting herself, but the wall around her heart was only an illusion. She wanted desperately to be loved...to be loved by this man.

Candy gazed up at him. She pressed the palms of her hands against his solid chest but couldn't say the words.

"Tell me there's something special between us. Tell me I'm not imagining it. Tell me you love me as much as I love you."

Her fears melted away and elation rose inside her. He loved her.

"I love you, too, Mitch."

Chapter Twenty-Nine – It's Always Been You
by Claire Ashgrove

As Mitch folded Candy into his embrace, a glimmer of gold in the warm light caught his attention. He squinted at the curio cabinet he'd given Marie. Back then, he'd been afraid his father would find out and dish out another serving of disapproval. Now, he hated that he'd been afraid, and later unable, to tell the woman who'd been more of a mother than his own what she meant to him.

He eased Candy out of his arms and rose to his feet. Crossing to the cabinet, he stuffed a hand in his pocket, glad he'd given in to the impulsive urge to bring the angel Candy had made so long ago with him. In case he seriously needed to grovel. In case she clung to doubts about the place she'd always held in his heart.

He opened the cabinet and gently plucked out the angel he'd given Marie. "I miss her, you know," he murmured.

"No. I don't know." Though her voice lacked censure, her honesty stung.

Mitch pulled in a deep breath. "My father never told me about her death, you know. I hate that I never got to say goodbye. I hate that I wasn't there for her...for you."

He turned to find her watching him. A flicker of pain passed over her face before she attempted a smile. It trembled at the corners of her mouth. "I survived... I understand—"

With a shake of his head, he turned to stand in front of her and fished the angel out of his pocket. Keeping his fingers closed around it, he levered himself to both knees in front of her. "No, it's not okay. Hold out your hand."

Puzzlement creased her brow, but she extended her hand palm up, fingers open.

"I brought this with me in case you made me beg. If you'd spent just a little more time in my office, you'd have seen it sitting right next to the fax machine. There to remind me of you, what you gave to me, the peace you brought." He uncurled his fingers and gently pressed the angel into her palm. "It's always been you, Candy. Will you add this to the collection? Can we make it ours?"

A soft gasp escaped her lips as he pulled his hand away and revealed the childhood trinket. Her eyes lifted to his, tears giving them a bright sheen. Mitch's heart rolled over, the enormity of feeling swelling behind his ribs making it difficult to speak. God, if he didn't watch himself, he'd end up in tears too.

He blinked anyway, just to make sure. A chuckle slipped free. "I don't have anything with me to do this the right way. I figured I'd be lucky if you heard me out." He laid his palm over hers, trapping the memento between them. "You're my angel, and I want to build a life with you. Say yes, Candy?" Holding onto her gaze, he willed her to understand the pain, the regret...all the fulfillment she alone could give him.

As tears trickled down her cheeks, Candy nodded, and the vise around Mitch's lungs let go. He hauled her onto the floor in front of him, wrapping her tight in his embrace, barely making out her whispered, "yes" before claiming her in a hungry kiss.

He'd missed her. Ached for her. Now that she was in his arms, the past no longer a mountain between them, he was certain in a thousand lifetimes he'd never get enough of her sweet flavor. Not even forever could satisfy his need.

Chapter Thirty – Georgia on My Mind
by Jannine Gallant

A mirrored silver ball lowered to the countdown on the TV in the corner of the room. *Five, four, three, two, one... Happy New Year!*

Mitch deepened the kiss, and Candy clung to him, breathless. Finally he released her, and she gasped for air. Longing for this man sizzled through her.

“We could have gone out. Could have joined the masses in Times Square,” he said, pointing at the TV. “It is our first official holiday together.”

She leaned against him and let out a sigh. “I’m pretty happy right where I am. I don’t need pizzazz and hoopla, Mitch. Some of the happiest moments of my life were spent in a cabin tucked away in the woods.”

Stroking the hair back from her brow, his hand paused. “Uh, about that cabin...” He cleared his throat. “I realize your life is here in Manhattan.”

Candy scooted around to face him and took both his hands in hers. “Yes, it is. My company is important to me. But it doesn’t have to be my whole life.” She pressed their twined fingers against her breast. “There’s room in here for more.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

A smile curved her lips. “Did you think I was going to make you give up everything for me?”

“Now that you mention it...”

She punched his arm. “Funny man. Feeling pretty cocky since I’ve said yes?”

He raised her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Just relieved.” He rolled his eyes. “You have no idea how relieved.”

“Oh, I think I do. I was so certain I’d blown it for good with you. I let hurt get in the way of our happiness.”

“I was a bigger idiot not to trust you.” He grinned. “Just ask Jeb. He’ll tell you.”

“Jeb is a wise man. He knew all along we’d work it out.” She grinned. “I’m actually looking forward to hearing *I told you so* and getting a big, sloppy dog kiss from Major.”

“Until then...”

He bent his head and kissed her, his mouth claiming hers, stoking the fire inside her. When they broke apart, she let out a shuddering breath.

He pressed his forehead against hers. “It’s after midnight. Time for bed?”

She nodded. “It’s a new year. What better way to start it.”

“I can’t think of one.” Mitch lifted her into his arms and settled her across his lap, his hand sliding beneath her shirt. “A time for fresh beginnings.”

She quivered as his fingers trailed across her ribcage and traced the underside of her breast. “New Year’s resolutions?”

“I have two. The first is to make you happy. Always. The second is to stop hiding from my past. I need to build a life for myself here with you.”

Candy looked into his beautiful blue eyes and saw the glint of determination in them. “At Crawford Industries?”

He shook his head. “I want to go forward, not back.”

“*The Wright Way* is always looking for new talent.” She smiled. “I can vouch for your creativity.”

He ran his finger along her jaw. “I do want to get involved with your work, but I was thinking more along the lines of your charitable causes.”

Warmth flowed through her. “Really?”

“Yeah. I’d like to give something back. I think it’s about time.”

She framed his face in her hands. "I do love you."

He rose to his feet with her in his arms, his eyes alight with teasing. "I'm going to let you show me how much."

She scattered kisses across his face as he headed toward the back of the apartment. "Big of you."

"Isn't it?" He hugged her tight, his hand curving to her bottom.

"About your cabin," she said on a breathless gasp.

He pushed open the bedroom door. "It'll be our refuge, our place to go when we want to be alone together."

As she slid down the length of his body until her toes touched the carpet, she looked into his eyes and smiled. "Then we definitely haven't seen the last of Georgia."

The End