

*Pure Amore*

SWEET ROMANCE · PURE ENJOYMENT™

MARY  
MANNERS

Coffee  
Shop

*Blackberry Ridge*

Blackberry  
Ridge

Mary Manners

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## **Blackberry Ridge**

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## *Dedication*

To my sweet sisters in Christ: Marianne Evans, Delia Latham, and Tanya Stowe...I am blessed beyond measure by your friendship.



## *What People are Saying*

“Christmas Wishes Special Delivery” is a wonderful novella that is sure to remind what the greatest gifts of Christmas are as well as leave you thankful for new beginnings!

~Laura Pol

“Mary has crafted a memorable story...Every description places the reader in Mills Landing, lush with greenery and small town flavor. Her characters are rich and well written...I love the way Mary writes children! Mary Manners has become a favorite author.”

~Deena Peterson, TWJ Magazine,  
On Miracles and Dreams

“It’s an emotion-filled whirlwind of romance and tangled dreams. But love is known to conquer all things, and Manners has a way of making that happen in the most romantic of ways.”

~Delia Latham, Love Notions.





*Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; a man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions.*

*~ Luke 12:15~*

# 1

"No, Aunt Chloe...not like *thaaat*." Lizzie's sing-song voice admonished as she pirouetted from Chloe's reach. "Mama always uses my princess comb so the tangles come out easy and my head don't hurt."

"Doesn't hurt." Chloe followed the direction in which her niece's tiny finger jabbed. A wide-toothed comb complete with a colorful handle fashioned in the form of a princess sat on the whitewashed dresser backed up to a bubble-gum pink wall. Beside the comb, a ceramic bin overflowed with a rainbow assortment of clips and bows.

"Doesn't hurt," Lizzie mimicked. "And I need my apple spray for the tangles, too. Daddy says it makes me sweet."

"Of course it does." A breeze drifted through the open bedroom window, carrying

the scent of rain-kissed grass and playful bird-chatter as Chloe eyed the pint-sized green pump-bottle propped beside the comb. "Thanks for the four-one-one."

Lizzie skipped back to where Chloe waited. Dimples formed at the corners of each cheek as she grinned. "The four-one-*what*?"

"The info...the heads-up." Chloe corralled Lizzie and ran a towel over the child's hair one last time, squeezing the last bit of moisture from the matted locks before dropping the towel onto the floor. "It means, thanks for explaining."

"Oh, yeah...Daddy says that sometimes, too."

Rick—her brother-in-law and the reason Chloe had absconded from her quiet apartment nearly an hour away to this sprawling house where she and her sister, Pam, had spent their childhood. Pam and Rick had taken over the property following the death of Pam and Chloe's parents four years ago. The country house, closing in on a century old, was in need of some renovations, and Rick was just the guy to see it got done. He was a house-flipper by trade and specialized in scooping properties, fixing them, and then reselling them at a profit—a healthy profit. They'd chosen the farmhouse to work on next and had recently taken up

residence as they planned the renovations.

Chloe had mixed feelings about the sale. When her parents died, she hadn't felt ready for such a huge undertaking as putting the house to rights. She instead left the upkeep in Pam's and Rick's care as she followed a job promotion into the city. But now, a handful of years later, she was saddened by the thought of letting the property go to strangers. So many memories...so many bittersweet times spent here. But she had no one to talk to about her emotions. Her parents were gone, and Pam, well...due to the success of the business, she and Rick were most likely sleeping off a twelve-hour drive on day one of a two-week extended trip. The vacation was part business, part pleasure. Rick had intentions to expand what he'd grown over the years. Thus, the trip to check out some outlying properties in the Smoky Mountain area—capped by a Caribbean cruise to celebrate his and Pam's tenth wedding anniversary.

What it all meant for Chloe was two weeks alone with Lizzie...and supervision of the first leg of the farmhouse's renovations Pam and Rick had asked her to oversee during their absence. Chloe didn't know which of the two—Lizzie or the renovations—had her nerves more on edge.

On one hand, the kid was a spitfire of energy if Chloe'd ever seen one. On the other, the thought of making decisions about the structural integrity of the century-old house and the grounds surrounding it, were daunting.

Not to mention the memories of a childhood spent here.

Chloe's head was reeling and her heart heavy with nostalgia. She missed her parents; their death had been both sudden and unexpected. She hadn't returned to the house since the day they'd been laid to rest and had gladly handed the keys to Pam and Rick in exchange for her freedom.

But she'd returned now, and Rick had promised Chloe that the guy he and Pam had hired to head-up the construction of an indoor work studio and a playhouse for Lizzie—as well as the added project of a gazebo near the rolling grounds of the creek behind the house—was a good friend of theirs and a coworker who could be trusted. Chloe had expected to meet this elusive tool-belt-wearing miracle-worker before Pam and Rick took their leave, but he'd been too busy to drop by in the days leading up to their trip. It sure didn't give her warm fuzzies to think the guy was too overbooked for even a quick hello and cursory introductions.

As for Lizzie, a play-date with her here and there, where they spent the day swimming or making rounds at the local playground or indoor gaming facility was one thing, but two solid weeks of responsibility for the girl's every need? What had Chloe been thinking to take on such a challenge?

Chloe shrugged off the thought. Surely she could handle chauffeuring her niece to school, helping with kindergarten homework, and preparing a meal or two each day, not to mention the laundry and remembering to feed Ginger the cat. No problem...no problem at all. She redirected her attention to the waiting princess comb.

"Mama sings to me when she combs my hair." Lizzie tugged at the hem of Chloe's sleeve. "Will you sing to me, too?"

"Um...I don't know what I have stashed in my repertoire, but I'll do my best." Chloe closed the distance between the bed and the dresser, snatching the comb as beads of water dripped from Lizzie's hair to the carpet. Thank God spring had settled in, with temperatures warm and forgiving. They were running late for school, so Lizzie's hair would have to air-dry on the way with the windows down. That was blow-drying on the go, wasn't it? Perfectly acceptable in this situation. "What would you like me to sing?"

"I don't know what it's called, but it sounds like this..." She pursed her lips and hummed a few off-key measures. "Do you know it, Aunt Chloe?"

"Sure. That sounds an awful lot like 'Amazing Grace.'"

"That's it!" Lizzie clapped her hands together. "Sing it for me, *please*."

"I'll give it a go." Summoning the best tone she could muster, Chloe broke into song. She took her time, drawing out each note in a soulful timbre as Lizzie scampered to the dresser. Chloe scooted onto the edge of the bed and drew Lizzie onto her lap as Ginger slinked across the floor before finding a place on the area rug to curl up. Their reflection in the mirror stood as a contrast—Lizzie with mischievous, bright blue eyes and curly wheat-blond hair while Chloe's jet-black hair, straight as an arrow that swept her shoulders in a blunt, sleek bob framed wide-set, deep-green eyes. Both, though, had dimples that winked as they smiled. Lizzie laughed and stuck out her tongue out at her reflection.

"You sing real pretty, Aunt Chloe. Are you gonna sing at church Sunday?"

Chloe paused mid-refrain to answer, "I love to sing at church. What about you?"

"Uh huh. Mama says singing at church is

like your heart havin' a talk with God. Is that true?"

"Your mama is absolutely right." Sunlight streaming through the window warmed Chloe's cheeks. She gazed through the glass to the creek beyond. Water rippled and shimmered like a million brilliant diamonds as it danced downstream.

"A little higher, Aunt Chloe," Lizzie directed as Chloe swept into the second verse of the song.

She turned her attention to the task at hand and carefully spritzed the detangler, then combed, spritzed some more and combed again.

"Yeah, like that. Keep singing. I like it."

OK, so Chloe wasn't front and center on the American Idol stage, but Lizzie's enthusiasm was something, at least. With renewed gusto, Chloe swept slick, damp locks into a band on one side of Lizzie's head, and then the other, belting out the hymn with each stroke. Soon, two curlicues framed impish, dancing eyes and deep-dimpled cheeks.

"Good?" Chloe asked, feeling quite a bit proud of her handiwork. She had to admit, it wasn't bad for a novice. The sweet scent of hyacinth that grew along the creek bed drifted. Its subtle aroma evoked childhood

memories of time spent playing in this very room—time with Pam...with friends. A wave of longing swept through...the desire for a simpler, more carefree time when summers were meant for wading in the creek and baking in the sun—not trapped within the confines of an office building with her eyes weary from the glare of a computer screen as she compared swatches of fabric and blended textures of paint to enhance room interior designs.

“They’re super-duper.” Lizzie’s voice brought Chloe back to the present. The child bobbed her head, her image dancing in the mirror. “Thanks, Auntie Chloe.”

“You’re very welcome.” Sure, sometimes the kid had the attitude of a six-year-old going on fifteen, but her smile could charm paint off the wall.

Speaking of paint, the room was a glowing testament to girly, frilly stuff, just as Pam had always dabbled in as they grew up. It was the first and only room thus far that Rick and Pam had done any work on. They both wanted Lizzie to feel at home in the farmhouse. Obviously, Lizzie was well on her way to following in her mother’s footsteps, and not her aunt’s. Chloe, the resident tomboy, had a hard time relating to the world of lace and taffeta. In contrast to her older

sister, Chloe felt more comfortable in faded jeans and a no-nonsense blouse, like the ensemble she'd donned following her morning shower. As a child, she'd preferred turning cartwheels along the front lawn to tea parties and playing with dolls.

"Do you think Mama an' Daddy is havin' fun on their trip?" Without warning, Lizzie interrupted Chloe's singing as she broke into an onslaught of questions.

*"Are having fun, and yes."*

*"When're they comin' back?"*

"They just left here last night, so they'll be gone two more weeks, sweetie, until the last Thursday of this month—April. See the calendar on your wall by the light switch? I marked the days for you."

"I see it." She glanced toward the wall calendar where Chloe had highlighted a string of days with yellow marker. "Is two weeks a long time?"

"It depends on how you look at it." Chloe guided Lizzie to the small tea-party table off to one side of the room where she'd set a plate of toaster pastries cut into bite-sized pieces and slathered in maple syrup.

"When Mama comes home will you still stay here with us?" Lizzie settled in beside a doll dressed in lilac chiffon, took a bite of pastry and then sipped milk from a teacup.

“We could have tea parties and sing songs.”

“I’m not sure where I’m going to stay. It depends on a lot of things.” Pam and Rick had offered her the run of the house, but to Chloe that felt an awfully lot like sitting third wheel.

Even so, she’d have to make a decision soon since the lease on her apartment was set to expire at the end of the month. With her job in transition, she seriously considered branching out on her own. Five years with the company had garnered the experience she’d need to successfully carve her own path in the interior design business. She’d certainly managed to squirrel away enough capital for any startup costs, and if she took Pam and Rick up on their offer that would lighten the financial load, as well. Having more time with Pam, Rick, and Lizzie also served as an incentive.

So much to consider...

“Depends on things?” Lizzie parroted as she craned her neck, turning back to gaze at Chloe as she chewed a mouthful of pastry “Like what?”

“My job...it’s in transition.”

“What’s that mean?”

“It’s going through changes.” Chloe settled into a chair at the table. The seat was much too small to feel comfortable, but she

managed to hold her balance. "I'm not sure what's going to happen."

"But Mama said this used to be your house, too, back when Papa and Gran were alive. She said you grew up here, and that you used to share this bedroom with her."

"It was, and we did." The thought of her parents brought a wave of sadness. Their loss tore a jagged rift in the fabric of her life. "I used to play with your mom in this very room. The walls were sunflower-yellow back then, like rays of sunshine."

"I wish you'd stay here forever and ever, Aunt Chloe." Lizzie leaned in to peck her on the cheek. "I love you."

"I love you, too, sweetie." Chloe stroked Lizzie's hair and cupped one pinked cheek in her palm. The skin was smooth, soft as a flower petal, and sticky with syrup from the toaster-pastry.

"Is ten years a long time to be married?"

"I guess that depends on your perspective."

"What does that mean?"

"For someone your age, ten years is forever. But for someone who's eighty, it's not so long."

"Why aren't you married, Aunt Chloe?"

The question startled Chloe and she struggled to find an answer appropriate to

share with a five-year-old. She finally settled for, "It's just not time yet."

"When will it *be* time?"

"I don't know. I imagine the time will be right when I meet a man I want to spend the rest of my life with."

"Are you lookin' for a man?"

"No." Chloe laughed at the innocent yet pointed question. "Not particularly."

"Then how're ya gonna find him?"

"I suppose God will help me, if I'm patient enough."

"Is it hard to be patient?"

"Sometimes." Chloe tweaked Lizzie's nose and offered a smile. "But that's not for you to worry about. Worrying is my job."

"Mama says if you trust God there's no point in worryin', 'cause He will see you through."

"How did your mama get so smart?"

"I dunno. Maybe Daddy helps her."

"Maybe they help each other."

"Yep." Lizzie scooted back from the table, plodded to Ginger, then settled on the floor beside the cat for a quick snuggle. She pressed her ear to Ginger's snout and gave a listen.

"What's she telling you, Lizzie?"

"Ginger asked if we can we have pizza for supper. She likes pizza...and ice cream."

"Is that so?"

"Uh huh."

"Well, it depends on whether or not you get all your toys up off the floor and into their bins lickity-split. Otherwise it's spinach and lima beans." Chloe winked. "We're already running late for school."

"Oh, no. Ginger doesn't like that at all." Lizzie released the cat and hopped up, launching into a full-on assault of dolls and dress-up costumes strewn across the floor. Her pigtails bobbed as objects flew toward bins, finding their target with amazing accuracy. "Spinach ain't so bad, but lima beans are *yucky*."

"Isn't so bad, and ditto." Chloe surveyed the room, pointed to a doll peeking from beneath the bed, and waited while Lizzie snatched it up and set it on a shelf.

"Pizza?"

"Pizza it is." Chloe smiled and winked as Ginger, completely unaffected by the chaos, hopped onto the cushioned window seat and curled up in a sunbeam. "Boy, you had that done before I could count to twenty."

"I can count to one hun'ed. Wanna hear?"

"Sure, when we get in the car. For now, we'd better get going so we're not late. I promised your mom I'd get you to school on