

CHRISTINE SCHUMPE

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CHRISTMAS

KIND of
PERFECT

A Christmas
Kind of Perfect

Christine Schimpf

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A Christmas Kind of Perfect

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Dedication

To Jasmine,
If you use the gifts God has blessed you with and
believe in your dreams,
they really do come true.
Love you forever, Nana

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

~Jeremiah 29:11

1

Lower Manhattan, New York

Lila almost tripped over her suitcase as she swept into her apartment. Hand to chest, she willed the panic to subside. It seemed that everywhere she went lately, she saw a tall, broad-shouldered man who reminded her of...*him*. Her first love. He was even showing up in her dreams.

Taking a deep breath, she locked the door and kicked off her high-heels. She dragged the suitcase to her bedroom and quickly unpacked as if by doing so she could set memories from ten years ago back in the closet of her mind where they belonged.

It hadn't mattered where her book signing was or that she'd been out on the west coast working on the movie versions of her books, Conrad haunted her.

Ah, the mind of an author was a terrifying place at times. She'd been working too hard. At least that's the excuse she gave herself. Settling into more comfortable clothes she headed to the kitchen.

Lila walked to the window of her apartment cradling a cup of chamomile tea sweetened with honey. She watched the street traffic below, which reminded her of a busy ant colony. How she wished the city would sleep, if only for one night. Oh, the blessed silence. She'd walk for miles. Better yet, she'd run. Although Lila feared the attempt wouldn't be

easy. Like so many other activities she used to enjoy doing, she'd abandoned running since moving to the Big Apple years ago.

She padded over to her favorite chair, a chaise longue in dire need of new fabric, and snuggled in like a fat cat finding its spot. The chair stuck out compared to the eclectic-themed room, but Lila refused to reupholster the piece despite the persuasive arguments from her friends. In an odd sort of way, Lila drew comfort from the inanimate object. They shared the same flaw—an inability to fit in with their surroundings.

Lila's bones ached. Now that she was back in the city, her life would return to normal. She'd hibernate for the next few weeks and start outlining her next book. Ugh. At this point, she'd much rather clean her uncle's morning catch of fish.

Goodness, what had made her think of her uncle? He'd died years ago.

Reaching for the remote, she flicked on the receiver. Sounds from an acoustic guitar filled the room. *Ooh, much better.* She placed her emptied cup near her phone on the end table, leaned her head back on the cushion, and stared up at the ceiling.

Her smartphone buzzed. *Ahh.* The phone always seemed to ring at the worst of times, scaring her half to death. The clock had barely moved five minutes, and she'd bet her last chocolate donut that her agent Andrea was calling with another idea for a book tour. Lila swiped the call through. With tired eyes and a worn-out spirit, she forced a pleasant tone. Sounding irritated was not how Lila wanted to present herself. "Hello."

"Hi, I'm calling for Lila Clark."

Lila's heart stopped as if she'd skidded on ice and slammed her vehicle into a fire hydrant. This wasn't Andrea. She recognized the sing-song melody in the caller's voice, so reminiscent of someone from the past. Was her memory going as well as her stamina?

"This is her. Is this—?"

"It's Melanie Lange. Actually, it's Melanie Winters now, from Sister Bay. Remember me?"

Lila bolted upright in her chair, her back ramrod straight, and her melancholy mood chased off by the sound of her best friend's voice. Melanie. "Oh, my gosh. Melanie? Are you kidding? It's been a few years since we've talked, but of course I remember you. How are you?" Photographs flashed in Lila's mind, whisking her out of her apartment and plopping her onto a pier next to the girl she considered more a sister than a friend, their feet dangling in the water, faces tanned with the afternoon sun.

"I'm well." Melanie giggled on the other end as if she were still a young girl.

She sounded exactly the same. Lila's heart warmed, listening to Melanie's pleasant laughter. "I can't tell you how good your voice sounds. It's been too long."

"I'm glad I called even though it took a while for me to muster up the guts."

"Is everything OK?" A stab pricked at Lila's heart as she realized the courage Melanie had to muster for her to call. How things had changed over the years between them.

"Lila, I wasn't certain what to do, so I decided to pick up the phone."

"What's going on?" Lila nibbled on her bottom lip, her interest piqued. She only hoped she could help.

"It's about my store, Window Shopping."

Lila released her breath. "Go on."

"Sales were up until this summer when the village board voted for a May-to-September construction project. The streets were demolished, heavy equipment moved in and along with total devastation as if a tornado passed through here. My store sales plummeted."

"Was your store accessible to customers?"

"Sure, if they were willing to climb over giant boulders or walk through construction zones. To be honest, the tourist season hit an all-time low. Water Front Restaurant and Summer Kitchen closed over the summer. They said it wouldn't pay to remain open."

Lila pressed her shoulder blades against the back of the lounge chair. "Oh, no. Is the rebuilding over now?"

"Yes, but the lack of revenue has left me, well, in the lurch."

"What do you mean?" Lila wasn't an expert in small business operations.

"My accountant was here today. She told me if I don't think of a way to increase sales, I'm looking at closing my doors at the end of the year. I need an influx of revenue and fast. But money isn't the only issue."

Lila scooted off the chaise longue and walked across the room to a solid maple desk. She pulled out the leather padded chair and seated herself, poised to write a check. "There's more?" The poor thing, as if she needed another problem.

"The vultures are circling." Melanie lowered her voice as if sharing a top-secret recipe.

Lila giggled, trying to soften the moment.

“Vultures?” She leaned forward and placed her chin in her free hand.

Melanie sighed. “I’ve been getting visits from interested investors who want to buy me out. They’re assuming I’m in trouble, but I won’t sell or even consider it. The store is my life, the reason I get up every morning. It means the world to me, and I refuse to give it away when times get tough.”

Melanie loved her store as much as Lila loved writing. Lila’s heart ached for Melanie, but what could she do? Melanie was in Sister Bay, and Lila lived in New York. “Oh, Mel, I’m sorry the store is struggling, but how can I help?”

Melanie’s tone brightened. “Remember Fall Fest?”

Lila would never forget Sister Bay’s last big festival of the season—live music, food booths, a parade... She’d spent the day with him ducking in and out of the quaint shops dotting the water’s edge, sharing hot cider, enjoying the festival’s music, and those tender, wet kisses in the dark—

“Lila, are you still there?”

Melanie’s voice pulled Lila out of her daydream. “Ah...yes. Right here.”

“With the construction over and our village brand-spanking new again...Well, I was wondering if you weren’t too busy.”

What on earth was she getting at? The suspense was killing her. “For crying out loud, Mel, please ask me.”

“How about the store hosting a book signing for your latest book during Fall Fest?”

Melanie rattled the request out so fast it took Lila a moment to realize what she said. She sat back in her chair and repeated it in her own head. Wait a minute.

This was not what she'd been expecting. She was anticipating Melanie asking her for a personal loan of some kind. If she went back to Sister Bay, she might run into her ex-boyfriend for real this time and that was something she wasn't prepared for.

"I-I'm not sure I can put a trip together that quickly. Plus, I owe my agent the first fifty pages for my next book."

Melanie sighed. "Oh, you're working on another book already?"

"Not really, but I should be. I literally walked in the door from a grueling East Coast book tour as well as at trip to California for a movie deal. To tell you the truth, I'm a little burned out right now."

"Well, I bet I know what you need." Melanie's tone was as matter-of-fact as the commentator on the six o'clock news.

Lila exhaled a slow, easy breath, allowed her shoulders to fall forward, and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She couldn't remember the last time she'd walked barefoot along the water's edge even though she believed it was the very practice that filled her spirit and fueled her purpose. She'd allowed that connection to break, to fall by the wayside like an old hobby she no longer enjoyed. Was that why she was struggling with an idea for her next book? Lila's slipped her bottom lip between her teeth. "OK, Mel, I'm listening."

"A little home sweet home. You could arrive a bit early, and we'll catch up at the store. It'll be like old times. Oh, Lila, please say yes."

"Oh, Mel, that sounds wonderful. I could use some serious time off. But I'm not sure I can manage it."

“Are you kidding me? Your agent works for you, doesn’t she?”

True. “She does.”

“Promise her those fifty pages will be in her hand on your return.”

“She may agree with that idea. It’s been forever since I’ve taken some time off. In fact, I can’t remember my last vacation.”

“If it was when you had to cancel your trip for my wedding because of your appendicitis attack, you are long overdue for a visit.”

“That was four years ago! Poor Aunt Cathy had to fly out and take care of me for weeks, bless her heart. Maybe you’re right, it’s time.”

“That sounds like a yes to me. Am I right?”

Lila paused. She didn’t consider herself impulsive, but she craved more spontaneity in her life. Over the years, she’d grown to be so rigid in her routine. She drew in a deep breath, garnering courage.

“I’ll do it. I’m meeting with my agent tomorrow night, and I’ll figure something out to make this happen. It’s time for a visit and I’d love the opportunity to help you out, Mel.”

“I’m so glad I mustered up the nerve to call you. I can’t wait for you to arrive.”

“Me, too. We’ll talk soon, I promise. I’ll text you the details.”

“And I’ll get started on some of the marketing. The whole county is going to go wild once they find out you’re coming. Look out Sister Bay. Lila Clark is on her way.”

“My ears hear a chant from our cheerleading days.” Lila giggled.

“I’ve still got it,” Melanie sang back. “Travel safe.”

"I will and Mel?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks for calling. I needed this."

"I love you, dear friend."

"Me, too."

After the call, Lila paced across her living room floor. Talking with Mel again felt like eating funnel cake at a summer fair. Going home sounded better and better to recharge. She was sure the chances of running into her ex-boyfriend were slim, and the idea of him attending her book signing was out of the question. She picked up the phone and dialed the only other person in Sister Bay, Wisconsin, who would care about her pending arrival. "I'm coming home," she said before her Aunt Cathy could even say a greeting.

2

Bong. The grandfather clock, one of the eccentric pieces Lila had inherited from her parents stood in the corner of her great room, chiming the quarter hour. Was the antique trying to tell her to pitch Melanie's idea to Andrea? Lila's agent stood at the kitchen island looking at the appetizers Lila had prepared for their meeting.

What approach would be best to break the ice? She could suggest the book signing Melanie wanted her to do, a vacation, or both. After all, her last trip home was close to five years ago. She expected Andrea would want her to get busy on her next book. She steeled herself for an uncomfortable conversation and hoped she could reach the friend and not the agent.

Lila curled her feet under her in the club chair. "A good friend of mine called last night."

Andrea turned away from the island, a small plate of appetizers in hand. "Really? Who?"

"Melanie Winters. She owns Window Shopping, a gift shop and bookstore in Sister Bay up in Door County, Wisconsin. She asked if I would come home and do a book signing for my latest book at her store."

Andrea stilled. "Oh? When does she want you to do that? You just returned home."

Andrea was right but going home to recharge offered more appeal. "During Sister Bay's Fall Fest."

"Fall Fest? Sounds like something I'd enjoy."

Lila leaned forward in her chair. "It's the last big

festival for the year and usually draws hundreds of tourists." She awaited Andrea's response.

"And who's Melanie?"

"A friend who is more like a sister to me."

"Why does she want you?" Andrea left her plate on the island and turned around to face Lila.

Maybe this wouldn't be as difficult as Lila imagined—so far, so good, but her comment caused Lila to ponder if Andrea ever had a friend like Melanie.

Lila shrugged. "Why not? I'm a local author, successful, and although we don't get together as much as we'd like, we used to be good friends. It'll also help the store's bottom line, which, according to Melanie, needs a boost."

"Isn't Door County a big tourist area for Wisconsin? What happened to her store sales?"

"Heavy road construction this summer. The project killed tourism. Many of the other local shops are in the same situation. Some of them decided not to open for the summer."

Andrea wrinkled her nose as if an unpleasant odor entered the room. "What happens if you don't do the signing?"

Lila hoped she wasn't losing Andrea's empathy. "She's looking at closing her doors at the end of the year." Lila allowed her statement to resonate and hoped it would touch the compassionate side of Andrea. "To be honest, I could use some time off."

Andrea frowned. She walked across the kitchen to one of the massive windows in the great room. Her crocodile heels clicked on the travertine floor like the typewriter keys of years gone by. She wore her jet-black hair in a chic bob accentuating her violet eyes. The expensive New York brand name tweed pencil

skirt and ivory silk blouse clung to her thin frame. Oversized pearls hung at her neck, concealing sharp-edged collarbones. "You're not thinking of actually going through with this, are you?"

Lila twirled a strand of hair around her finger. "I am."

"We talked about another series I could pitch to Jim over at Stonewood Publishers, remember? Besides I'm doing my best to secure the best publishing deal I can for you. It's my job to keep the business side of things running smoothly. I'm sorry, Lila, but you don't have the wiggle room to take time off. I wish I could say otherwise, but I can't."

Lila shrugged. She'd grown accustomed to the drill. "I understand, but I'm low on inspiration at the moment. I think getting out of New York for a while would do me good. Don't you?"

Was that the problem? The well of creative ideas had gone dry? Lila stared into a corner of the room, nibbling on her bottom lip, a habit she thought she broke years ago. She'd been reckless with everything that grounded her in life. She'd nearly abandoned her faith, and going home never occurred to her. But there was a good reason for that decision until now, and his name was Conrad Hamilton. Living with her shame in Manhattan was hard enough, returning to Sister Bay might dredge up the past, but she'd deal with that later. Melanie needed her, and Lila wasn't going to let her down.

Andrea turned away from the window. "I understand why you want out of the city. I hate to make an issue over this, but we're both aware of the situation over at Stonewood. The pressure is on, and Jim's getting tired of the grind. I'm afraid we might

lose him. The next editor may not be as eager to work with us.”

Lila exhaled. “I’d love to do this. This last book tour drained me. Don’t you ever desire to get out of New York—to recharge if nothing else?”

“Why would I want to get out of New York?” Andrea laughed through her words. “It’s one of the most exciting cities in the world. There’s nowhere else on earth like New York or anywhere I’d rather be.”

“True for you, my friend, but sometimes the city closes in on me. This is one of those times.”

Andrea walked toward Lila. She kicked off her heels and slid into the companion chair. “You shouldn’t be unhappy. You’re thirty-two years old with a stellar career as a best-selling novelist and with the movie rights you’ll continue on that path. You need to keep your momentum if you want to maintain this lifestyle. You live in this beautifully decorated penthouse apartment in Manhattan, shop on Fifth Avenue, and can vacation wherever you please. I’d kill to be in your shoes.”

As Andrea’s largest client, this wasn’t good news. But Lila was listening to her heart for the first time in years. “I need a break, and I’ll be helping out an old friend.”

The last glimmer of sunlight faded away, allowing a bleak darkness to creep into the room. Along with it, came an uninvited chill, sending a shiver up Lila’s spine. She picked up a remote and with a click of a button, the keystone fireplace whooshed into motion. Bright orange flames danced on blackened logs.

Lila closed her eyes and remembered the autumn season in full swing in Door County: the scent of outdoor fires, the showcase of color, and the bite in the

air at dusk. How she'd missed the fall extravaganza that walked into the village like a welcomed guest.

Andrea laced her fingers in front of her. For a moment, she looked like a stern elementary school principal. "I don't understand. What could be more important to you than securing your next contract?"

Silence found a spot between them and settled in. The grandfather clock chimed, reminding Lila time was moving right along.

"OK," Andrea drawled, "how long will you be gone?" She lifted a glass of cucumber infused water to her lips. The sound of resignation in her voice as clear as the antioxidant beverage she held in her hand.

"A couple of months. After the book signing at Window Shopping, I'll recharge my batteries and hit the ground writing."

"So, you'd be back here Christmas week? I want to remind you, Stonewood wants new contracts signed by New Year's Eve."

Lila reclined in her chair. "I'll hand you the fifty pages on my return. That should satisfy everyone."

"You realize you're going to miss out on Stonewood's Halloween costume ball. You remember how much fun it was last year? You might meet someone this year."

The thought of staying for the ball almost made Lila laugh. Every year, Stonewood Publishers threw a fantastic Halloween party. Writers, editors, the press, and fans with deep pockets arrived dressed in elaborate costumes for the event. She winced as she remembered last year's bash. Although she'd met someone at the event, in the end, the spark died and the relationship soon followed suit. It shouldn't surprise her anymore. It was so much like all of her