



DIXIE JO  
JARCHOW



*The Christmas*  
*List*

SHE HAS A LIST OF EVERYTHING  
A HUSBAND SHOULD BE,  
AND HE'S NOT ON IT.

# The Christmas List

Dixie Jo Jarchow

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### **The Christmas List**

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## *Dedication*

To my lovely readers.

# 1

“Isn’t he dreamy?” Jennifer showed Mandy the magazine with the spread of pictures. “I’d love to marry a prince and be Princess Jennifer. Look how perfect her hair is, and her outfit is to die for.” Jennifer threw the magazine on the coffee table. “Can you call me Princess Jennifer a few times with a ‘Your Highness’ thrown in?”

Mandy picked up the magazine and sighed. “Isn’t twenty-eight a little old to be dreaming about a prince? He doesn’t do it for me. Besides, you need the perfect hair first and nice outfits before you get a date with the prince. He’s not my type anyway.”

“Oh, you’d say no to a prince? Get out.” She shoved her friend’s leg.

“He doesn’t fit my criteria. I have things to finish before I get married. I want to expand my accounting firm and buy a house. A boyfriend is pretty far down.”

Jennifer rolled her eyes, “Don’t tell me—”

“I constructed a list,” finished Mandy. “How you can get through life, meandering from dating one guy to another is beyond me. It’s so disorganized.”

“I’m a blonde right now. What can I say? I intend to have more fun. I’m four years older. I don’t have as much time as you. A woman has a shelf life. I already have my business up and running. I’m ready for my prince.”

“When I’m ready to marry, everything will be

perfect. My husband will fit my expectations. See, I know what I'm looking for in a mate. You're like a meteorite, hoping to hit on the right combination. I'm more like a laser, with a keen focus." Mandy pantomimed a meteor whizzing across the sky.

"Don't you believe in true love?" Jennifer stopped, popcorn halfway to her mouth.

"I'm an accountant. Numbers don't lie. Probability says the chances are better if I narrow my search and know what I'm looking for." Mandy patted her always-present leather-bound notebook.

"What's on your checklist, Mademoiselle Accountant?" Jennifer demanded, eyes twinkling.

"It's stupid, forget it. Everyone pictures accountants as boring, but I can tell you, we get what we want. We're goal-setting achievers," Mandy said.

"Come on, help a girlfriend out. Lay the information on me. Perhaps I can learn something." Jennifer propped her chin on her palm and smiled.

Mandy made a great show of opening her notebook and finding the correct spot. Lines of neatly spaced writing covered the pages. "Brown hair and brown eyes," She began.

"Eyes? What do eyes have to do with anything?" Jennifer demanded.

"It's my criteria. Men with brown hair and eyes complement a woman who has different coloring from them. Perhaps more appreciative of someone like me, a raven-haired woman with blue eyes. Then, the children have more options for unique colorings, a wider gene pool."

"Point taken. Continue." Jennifer nodded, her grin lighting up her face.

"Strong hands are vital." Mandy ran a finger

down the list.

“So, a masseuse or a violinist?”

“Not sure. I like the way some men’s hands are so strong and rugged. I’d like him to be big. Tall and big, not fat, but solid and tall so I feel like a tiny fragile flower.”

Jennifer snorted. “You? A fragile flower? I’ve seen you scoop up a line drive and almost knock over the first baseman with your throw.”

“My softball days are long over. That’s why I need a big man,” Mandy said. “I am a substantial woman.”

“Substantial means fat, which you are not, by any stretch of the imagination, girl. Women would kill for a set of curves like yours, but you hide behind your baggy neutrals and beiges. You ought to let me dress you sometime. With that figure, you could be a knockout.” Jennifer sighed before giving up on the old argument. “What does this mountain of a man do for a living?”

“A professional man. Someone who wears a suit and sits at a big solid desk and makes a good living. That’s all.” She snapped the binder closed.

“Well, that’s a relief. I’m sure the combined masses of mankind just breathed a sigh of relief that at least some of them made the cut.”

“I want to make sure our marriage lasts forever, and that takes some serious pre-selection homework. How about you? What do you picture in the man you marry?”

Jennifer leaned back and stared at the ceiling. “I’d rather enjoy the surprise. If I only focus on a certain thing, I might miss something else.”

“You’re like the little boy who missed everything because he was waiting to see if something better came

along," Mandy scoffed.

"Good thing something better always does," Jennifer threw a piece of popcorn at Mandy, who caught it in her mouth, smiling.

They both finished their snacks and got ready to leave.

"I can't believe we're doing this," complained Mandy. "It's snowing too hard. We should stay here tonight and be safe."

"It's my birthday, and you promised, bestest of best friends. That's why we're taking your car with the new tires instead of my car with the bald tread that are more like riding a water slide."

"I could make you a copy of my regular maintenance schedule for vehicles," offered Mandy. "You could put it right in the glove compartment."

"Keep it. I'd rather live on the edge. Let's go paint us a picture." She slipped on her coat and gloves.

"You should change your shoes. There will be snow in the parking lot, almost certain to be unplowed."

Jennifer looked at the strappy red sandals with the kitten heels. "But they're so cute."

"Do you want a small bag for your shoes? You could carry them and change once you get there."

"No, I'll brave it. I hate to carry things."

Mandy rolled her eyes at her friend and left her apartment through the garage door, locked the house and double-checked the knob.

"This is new, you made a note to remind you to lock the house. Oh, my, you are a list maker extraordinaire."

"There's beauty in being organized. Flowers don't just grow all disorganized, each one is different. There



are a certain number of petals for each flower. That repetition is what mathematicians call a Fibonacci sequence. It's one of God's glorious miracles." Mandy led the way into the garage.

Jennifer was humming a popular tune and paying zero attention to her.

"Mathematics is so interesting. I don't know what's wrong with you, but I won't give up. You'll see the beauty of mathematics eventually. On the opposite end of the life scale, group painting has to be an all-time low in my life."

"There's wine and snacks too, catered by Grits and Grins. I wonder if my prince will be there."

"This is horrible." Mandy sank her head onto the steering wheel.

"Start the car. Our artistic side awaits discovery."

## 2

“So when did you start your Christmas shopping?” asked Jennifer.

The snow pelted the windshield and Mandy slowed to a crawl.

“October. I kept the lists from last year. It was a snap to do, and stress free. Plus, I only had to buy for my mom and dad. It’s not like a huge list or anything. I purchase gift cards because they ship so well.”

“I love being out in the last minute dash. There are amazing deals for the daring shoppers on Christmas Eve. You drive like an old woman. Good thing we’re plenty early. I could use a glass of wine.”

“We should have stayed home. This is dangerous to drive in. I looked at the weather report but it didn’t look anywhere near this bad. Good thing we left in plenty of time to get there. We have to park three blocks away though. There are rules about parking on the streets during or after a snowfall.” Mandy pulled in under a street light.

Both women bundled up in the car before braving the storm.

Mandy had to help Jennifer over the curb to the sidewalk. She half-listened to Jennifer’s stream of complaints as she blazed a path through the unshoveled snow on the sidewalk. The cold air was so frigid it made her lungs burn. Slush filled her right boot. She put her head down and focused on placing

one foot in front of the other until they reached the Paint N Go.

"What a nasty night. I'm surprised they're open at all," Jennifer shook the ice out of her heels.

"I called to make sure. Still, this was a mistake." Mandy took off her boot and emptied it of the snow.

"Love you girl, for putting up with me," Jennifer swung her arms around Mandy and squeezed her. "This is awesome. Happy birthday to me."

They hung up their coats in the coat room and walked into the painting area.

"Isn't this amazing?" Jennifer asked, looking around.

The greeter smiled, checked their names off the guest list, and gave them aprons and funny hats to wear.

Jennifer and Mandy picked easels next to each other. Mandy straightened her pale skinny canvas and lined up her brushes by height while Jennifer introduced herself to the people around them. A slim, male waiter came and took their order of potato skins and wine.

"A balanced diet," smiled Mandy taking a sip.

"Look at how many guys are here. Who knew this was a great place to pick up men?"

"There's a plan, and when it's right it is right," Mandy avowed.

"God helps those who help themselves. Think how frustrated God must be when you sit home night after night. He would have to arrange for a man to drive a truck through your living room for you to meet someone." Jennifer waggled her eyebrows at her friend.

"That's why he made us friends: You drag me out

to these delightful soirées where eligible men abound.”

A woman walked by with an elderly man who hobbled with a walker.

Jennifer winked and nodded at the couple.

Mandy stuck out her tongue at her friend, and in her peripheral vision saw a red haired man across from her grinning. Heat crept up her neck, and the room became stifling warm. She concentrated on her painting and ignored him. He continued to gaze at her, and she pursed her lips in annoyance. “Problem?” She hissed at him.

“You’re cute,” the man whispered back. His hair was that rare dark red color that people try to achieve through dye. It was slightly unkempt and curling at the edges. He had a smile that quirked up on one side, and his bright blue eyes sparkled with joy. His skin was pale, without freckles, and perfect.

“Could you not stare at me?” Mandy whispered.

“I can’t help it. You’re gorgeous.” He gave up keeping his voice down, but he did stop staring at her.

Mandy looked for signs that he was toying with her but found none. “Well, thank you, but I have to concentrate on my work, and you’re distracting me.” It was lame but all she could come up with. No one had ever called her gorgeous before. Her mind spun while tears threatened to drip from her eyes. Conflicting emotions flooded her heart. Was she happy or offended?

The man hid behind his slim canvas but he kept sneaking glances at her.

Jennifer grinned at her and winked. She mouthed the words, “Told you so.”

Mandy gave up and concentrated on her canvas and the instructions of the teacher. A half hour went

by, and she was startled to realize she was enjoying herself. "This is fun."

"I knew you'd like it." Jennifer gave a knowing smirk. "And your masterpiece is coming along."

"Not ready for the Louvre, but good enough for Casa Mandy," Mandy said, satisfied with her efforts.

"You made nice daffodils," Jennifer told her.

They left their canvases on the easels to dry and took a group picture. The man who'd smiled at Mandy stood behind her.

"Everyone scrunch together," the woman taking the picture sang out.

The participants compressed until they were squeezed together. Heat from the man behind her penetrated Mandy's back. How could anyone be that warm? She was still chilled from the walk here. She shivered. After the photo, everyone wandered around looking at each other's paintings.

The one by the man across from her was amazing. They'd used the same stock brushes, the same picture to model from, the same paint, yet his could hang in a gallery. He'd caught the light reflecting off the petals from the setting sun. He'd mastered the shimmer of the sun's race on the water in front of the flower.

"Something wrong?" He came up behind her without a noise.

"No, it's just so good, I realize I had false pride in my work. Yours is incredible."

"It was just for fun and relaxation. Did your friend drag you here?" The blue irises of his eyes were pale and circled with a dark ring that emphasized their intensity. They danced with mirth.

"Yes. It's her birthday present. Painting isn't my thing."

"Mine neither. Sculpture appeals to me more. I'm a 3D person. Hello, I'm Max." He held out his hand, which then encased hers in warmth.

Her stomach fluttered for a second before she jerked her hand back. "I'm Mandy. Are you here for your birthday?" She asked him. Could she be any more awkward?

He laughed a deep, generous laugh that had women across the room turning to stare at him. It was the guileless laugh of joy. "No, I bought raffle tickets at the church and won." He leaned in to whisper in her ear. "I tried to give them back but it's only a few days until Christmas. I'm a trapped and reluctant guest, too. But now I'm thinking it might be the most fortunate day of my life." He grinned at her.

Mandy smiled, feeling awkward, and looked around for Jennifer. "Excuse me, but my friend and I need to get going. The snow is getting deeper." She gave a quick nod to Max and went to Jennifer.

"Who's the hottie?" Jennifer asked.

"Max. His painting is amazing."

"Seemed like you two were getting along OK. Count on you to find the only eligible man in the room." Jennifer's complaint was rueful.

"What do you mean? There are plenty of guys here."

"Those guys at that table have girlfriends across from them. These two over here are together. That guy has a walker. Only the redhead remains, and I wore these cute, uncomfortable shoes for nothing."

"See, should have gone with the boots like me. I'm a guy magnet." Mandy grinned at her friend. "Anyway, painting is fun but tiring. Happy Birthday, Jennifer. I hope you appreciate the sacrifice I made for

you tonight.”

“Thanks. This in no way gets you out of buying a Christmas gift for me. I had a blast. Didn’t you enjoy it? Next time I won’t have to shanghai you to come.”

“I’m not sure how many more of these masterpieces my walls can hold.”

Jennifer rolled her eyes. “We need to go. The wine made me tired.”

“Great idea. The snow is going to get worse. I know we aren’t far from home but I hate driving in this stuff.”

They returned to their own easels, retrieved their paintings and put on their outerwear.

“I hope you had fun. Come again!” The instructor called out as everyone else also began to put on jackets, mittens and hats.

Mandy looked up from buttoning her coat.

Max was waving, a bright smile on his face. “See you later,” he mouthed.

### 3

The snow was blinding, driving sideways with sharp shards of ice tapping on the front window.

Jennifer shivered. "That looks nasty. Let's grab some drinks and wait it out."

"The weather report says it won't stop until tomorrow mid-day. Do you want to spend the night here?" Mandy asked.

"I'm not staying here."

A woman walked past them and opened the door, letting in a chilly wind and snow flurries. Within a few moments she had disappeared in the blinding snow.

"Would you ladies like me to walk you to your car?" Max had a red scarf on and big mittens. He plunked a fuzzy blue hat on his head and smiled at them.

"Thanks."

"No." Mandy stared at her friend, trying to communicate with her eyes. Jennifer was not being sensible. She had no idea if this guy was a decent human being.

As if reading Mandy's mind, Max spoke up again. "May I point out, I'm a well-known local and the owner of this Paint N Go knows me. Hey, Kerry, vouch for me with these lovely ladies, please," he yelled into the paint studio.

Their instructor came out into the hallway. "He's solid. You're safe with him. Hey, are you coming back



to sleep here, Max?"

"I'll be back when I make sure they get to their car. I'm Max and you're Mandy and you're, let me guess, Jennifer." He held out his hand to Jennifer.

"How do you know our names?" she asked him, awestruck.

"I painted across from you for two hours and you had a name tag on," he smiled, deep dimples bracketed his mouth.

Mandy stared. Men shouldn't be allowed to have dimples. It wasn't fair. "You're coming back here?" she asked.

"Kerry lets me bunk here in exchange for a painting once in a while and cleaning up in the evenings."

"Hi," Jennifer reached her hand across Mandy and shook Max's hand. "I run the Berry Boutique and this is Mandy, accountant extraordinaire."

Mandy smiled.

"Do you have a card? I need an accountant," Max smiled at Mandy.

She dug into her pocket and produced a card. "Give me a call."

Jennifer rolled her eyes behind his back.

They both seemed to be doing that a lot this evening. Mandy shook off the inconsequential thought.

"I will, but for now, let me walk you to your car."

Jennifer gave Mandy a look that said, 'come on' and smiled.

"Let's do this." A shudder ran through Mandy that had nothing to do with the temperatures outside. She could see the headline: *Idiot Adult Women Leave Art Place with Stranger. Never seen Again.*

"Come on, Mandy," Jennifer whispered in her ear.

"What are the odds he's a bad guy who paints on the side?" Jennifer turned and gave Max a bright smile, linking her arm through his proffered elbow. "I'm afraid I'll slip in my heels."

As a compromise, Mandy found her pepper spray in a deep pocket and unlatched the top, keeping a finger on the trigger.

The three struggled to the parking lot, blinded by snow.

"My feet are freezing." Jennifer wailed, slipping as she clung to Max, who dragged her upright for the third time and steadied her.

"Perhaps boots would've been a better choice," he murmured, huffing, with effort.

They located Mandy's car under a drift.

Max made them get into the car while he cleared snow from the vehicle and the pavement in front of it. He waved and started to walk away into the blizzard.

Mandy rolled down her window. "Come in and warm up. You'll freeze out there. At least let me give you a ride back."

He shook his head and headed back.

"Too bad he's homeless. I think he liked you," Jennifer yawned.

## 4

After the knuckle-gripping drive home, Mandy was tense and wide awake.

“Come in for a few minutes to relax.” Jennifer had obviously noted her tight expression.

Once inside, Jennifer made a soothing chamomile tea and the friends drank it while discussing the painting class.

Though they lived in the same building, their apartments couldn't be more dissimilar. Jennifer's three bedroom housed a guest bedroom, an office and a lavish bedroom. Vibrant colors and colorful drapes and cushions filled the space. Mementos of her travels filled every surface, but it was a comfortable, kaleidoscopic mix of textures and patterns.

Mandy had chosen a smaller one-bedroom utility apartment next door to Jennifer's. She left the walls neutral and decorated with only a few quality pieces. In her secret heart, she would have loved to have had Jennifer's lifestyle as a free-spirited global wanderer, even as she decried the expense and danger.

Mandy had met Jennifer four years before and rented a ten foot by ten foot office in the back of Jennifer's boutique for her accountant business. Jennifer had generously told Mandy she could put in hours at the boutique to supplement her income until her accounting took off. So far, her only client was Jennifer. They walked together every day to and from

their businesses.

Mandy's tension seeped out. "That was a good idea, I'll probably sleep like a baby now." She yawned and rose to leave.

"I'm glad. I felt a little guilty for dragging you out in this. But we did have fun." Jennifer grinned and followed her to the door. "See you in the morning."

Mandy walked across the hall. She got ready for bed, and sank back into her pillow. A vague shadow of Max wandered through her dreams, but Mandy was so tired, the subject was almost forgotten by morning.



Mandy knocked on Jennifer's door the next morning.

Jennifer answered, dark circles under her eyes and hair going every which way.

"Whoa, what painting event did you go to last night?"

"One of my friends came over for a drink for my birthday after you left. We hadn't seen each other for a while and were catching up into the wee hours." Jennifer yawned and opened the door wider. "Give me a bit to get ready."

Half an hour later, they walked together on the freshly shoveled sidewalks. In unspoken unison, they turned to the coffee express store. The lights were out.

"How can it be closed?" Jennifer asked. "I need a cup of coffee this morning. I wonder if the storm knocked out their power." She looked around as if a cup of coffee might appear.

"I could go out around nine when the Maxi Mart opens, but it will be gas station coffee," Mandy offered.

They walked further down the sidewalk to Jennifer's boutique.

"Hey!" A bright blue, fuzzy hat attached to tousled red hair and a green coat beckoned them from farther down the street. Max had a tray of coffees and a bag of something.

"Hi, Max." Jennifer waved as he came closer. She opened the door to the shop.

"This is nice." He looked around.

"Thanks, I'm in the process of starting another across town. Is that coffee for us? If it is, you are a Godsend. If it isn't, you're just teasing me."

"Then I'm a Godsend. How exciting to be opening another shop. Why, hello, Mandy. How are you?"

"Fine. What's this about a new store?" Mandy said as she made her way through the eclectic shop to get to the back office.

"I wanted to tell you about it last night but forgot. By Easter. If I can open the doors three weeks before Easter, it's a go." Jennifer followed her and Max to the back. "We have to open the doors by the first week of March. Can you manage the new store or would you rather have this one? This one would be better for you, it's already established."

"You want me to manage? Why am I just hearing about this now? I can't manage your store. I'm trying to get my accounting firm up and running," Mandy retorted, ignoring Max.

They stared at each other, both frowning.

"But I've always wanted you to be my partner. Who else could I trust? Do you know how hard it is to find a good partner? I read the trade magazines. It's a horrible problem. I need you." Jennifer leaned across the neat desk.