

SHE WANTS A SOLITARY GETAWAY,
BUT GOD HAS A DIFFERENT PLAN

SAVED
by a CHRISTMAS
ANGEL

A HOLIDAY
ROMANCE

LAREN MALLEY

Saved by a
Christmas Angel

Karen Malley

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Saved by a Christmas Angel
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Dedication

Much love to Ray, as we celebrate our 25th Christmas together this year.

1

Lauren threw another log on the fire and settled on the sofa. Not a minute later, a crash shook the entire cabin. *What on earth?* She ran to the window, wiped away the condensation, and peered out. Headlights illuminated the pine trees in the forest beyond. A driver had lost control on the slick roads. Through the swirling snow, she couldn't tell anything more.

Her nursing instincts kicked into high gear and she pulled on a heavy parka and boots, grabbed her nursing kit, and slogged through the deepening snow to the vehicle. The snow already covered the car. As she drew closer, it appeared the driver took the turn too quickly, skidded off the road, and plowed headfirst into a pine tree.

Lauren reached the car and assessed the situation, peering into the window. A single driver, probably male. She couldn't very well leave him out here to bleed or freeze to death. She drew in a breath. What if he was already dead? No, now was not the time for worst-case scenarios. She tried pulling open the driver's side door, but it wouldn't budge. Moving around the car, she yanked open the passenger-side door. She pushed the air bag out of the way, reached over, and found a pulse in the man's neck. Still strong.

She breathed a sigh of relief. At least he was alive. Hunched over the deflated airbag and bleeding, but alive.

Lauren felt along both sides of his neck and gently eased him against the seat. Blood trickled down his face, but the cut wasn't deep. His arms and torso seemed intact, but it was difficult to tell through his heavy coat. She moved her gaze downward. His left leg appeared unnaturally twisted where the door bent inward. Not good. She needed to get him out of the car and into the cabin where she could treat his injuries properly. She leaned over the man, trying to ignore the enticing woodsy scent he wore, and forced the door open from the inside. The man groaned as his leg shifted, but didn't regain consciousness. How would she get him into the cabin? From what she could tell, he was solidly built.

Inspiration struck.

Lauren raced to the garage. She returned to the car, pulling a toboggan behind her. Fortunately, she had plenty of practice lifting patients, even those who outweighed her.

Lauren removed the man's seatbelt and carefully splinted his leg with the apparatus she pulled from her bag. Before easing him onto the toboggan, she sent up a prayer. "God, please help me ease this man's discomfort. Please help me not to injure him further by transporting him. I can't leave him here." Leaving it in her Father's hands, she pulled him to the cabin, thankful there were no steps to maneuver.

She dragged the toboggan into the main living

area, assessed her patient, eased him out of his coat, and felt his arms and chest. Her quickening pulse had less to do with concern for his injuries and more to do with the solidness of his muscles. This man was in peak physical condition. Or at least he was, until the accident.

The temporary splint worked for immobilizing his leg for the trip into the cabin, but was not adequate if he broke it.

She grabbed the trauma shears and cut away the pant leg above the knee. His knee cap was shifted inwards, but after palpating the upper and lower parts of his leg, there didn't appear to be a break. A partially dislocated patella she could handle. Normally she'd give the patient painkillers before popping it back into place, but since he appeared to be out cold already, she maneuvered it into its normal position, wrapped it, and set an ice pack on it.

Lauren studied the man. Thick hair, a firm chin, and laugh lines around his eyes. The man's eyes flickered open. Two stunning pools of blue met her gaze before they drifted closed again. Who was this man, and why was he out here in the middle of nowhere in a storm?

She pushed his sandy hair back, and cleaned the wound on his forehead, thankful it was shallow. No need for stitches, just a bandage.

She turned him on his right side and pulled a wallet out of his pocket. Justin Foster. He lived in Philadelphia, not too far from her place. She pushed the wallet back into his pocket and carefully lifted him

onto the sofa.

Stomach rumbling, she moved into the kitchen. No sense starving just because a handsome stranger crashed into her life. She popped a new Christmas CD into the player and her mood lifted. She sang along while she chopped veggies and put on a pot of water to boil.

~*~

Justin blinked and struggled to focus. He must be dreaming. If so, why did he hurt so much? He squeezed his eyes shut and tried to remember. He'd been on his way to Eric's place in the Poconos when the storm hit. He'd lost the signal on his phone, could barely see ten feet in front of the car, and he'd skidded several times.

But he'd seen an angel, with golden hair framing her glorious visage, smiling down at him. It must've been a dream.

He risked opening his eyes. A fireplace and wooden log walls. Oh, good. He'd made it to Eric's cabin after all. His other senses slowly came to life. Christmas carols played in the background and an amazing smell tantalized his nostrils, reminding him he hadn't eaten dinner. Was Eric cooking?

Shifting on the sofa, pain shot through his leg. He reached out to touch it and found his knee tightly wrapped. What happened? He struggled to sit up and glimpsed the kitchen. A kitchen where the angel stood stirring a pot. His breath caught. She was real.

She glanced his way and hurried over. "You're awake. How are you feeling?"

Even her voice sounded like an angel's. "Honestly? Starving. Where's Eric?"

Her brows drew together. "Who's Eric?"

"Isn't this his cabin?"

The angel shook her head. She knelt next to the sofa, and her words were gentle. "This cabin belonged to my grandparents. It's been in my family for decades."

Justin tried to clear the fog from his head. "How did I get here?"

The angel smiled. "I dragged you in."

That made no sense. Justin started to get up, but another wave of pain traveled down his leg.

"You crashed your car into a tree by my cabin," the angel said. "I dragged you inside so you wouldn't freeze to death, bandaged your scalp wound, and splinted your leg. Without an X-ray, we can't be sure there's no fracture, but I'm pretty sure you got away with nothing more than a dislocated kneecap and a few bruises from the airbag. You'd better keep off your leg as much as possible."

Justin reached his hand to his forehead and touched the thick bandage. "I guess I crashed in the right place."

The angel gave a brief smile. "I'm so relieved you're awake. Look here." She pulled a small penlight out of her pocket and shined it in his eyes. "Does your head hurt? Any nausea?"

"No, and no. I'm sore all over, but my head seems

fine. Are you a doctor?" Justin asked.

The angel handed him a cup of water and two over-the-counter pain killers. "Sorry I have nothing stronger, but this should take the edge off."

Justin gulped down the medicine and waited for an explanation.

"Trauma nurse." Her face fell. "Well, I was until a few days ago. Budget cuts at the hospital, and a week before Christmas, I'm out of a job." She quieted. "I'm sorry. You don't need to hear about my problems. I'm Lauren, by the way."

Ahh, so the angel had a name. "I'm Justin. I'm sorry about your job."

"Nice to meet you, Justin. Now about you starving..." She took the glass and helped him get fully into a sitting position.

Justin drew in a breath at her nearness. She smelled like flowers. Her silky hair brushed his cheek and his pulse quickened. What was wrong with him?

Lauren pulled a tray table in front of him and walked back to the kitchen. She returned, and set a steaming bowl of soup and a thick slice of crusty bread on the tray table. She pulled up a second tray table in front of the chair across from him and laid out the same food for herself.

As Justin took his first spoonful of soup, Lauren's melodic voice started praying.

"Dear Lord, thank You for this food. Thank You for the safety of this cabin and for bringing Justin to a place where he can receive care. Please let this be a place of healing for him. In Jesus' name, Amen."

A warmth traveled through Justin which had nothing to do with the soup. He couldn't remember the last time someone prayed for him. And healing? Time would tell whether God heard Lauren's prayer. He should—she was an angel, after all.

The warmth continued as Justin spooned the delicious creamy soup into his mouth. "You're an amazing cook, Lauren."

She waved her hand at him, but the hint of color rising in her cheeks told him she was pleased with his comment. He studied her while pretending to be busy eating. The firelight danced in her brown eyes, and her golden hair streamed around her face. What a sight to behold. He needed to learn more about this miracle nurse hiding out in the woods. He cleaned the last of the soup from the bowl with the piece of bread and sighed with delight. "So where are we, anyway? I was supposed to visit Eric's cabin for the weekend." He pulled out his phone. No service.

"No cell towers out here," Lauren said.

"Do you have a land line?"

Lauren shook her head. "No phone, no internet, no TV. This is where you go to get away from it all."

"Seriously? What about indoor plumbing?"

Lauren laughed. The sound did something to Justin's insides. He was on dangerous ground here.

"Grandma insisted Grandpa install indoor plumbing years ago. It's not exactly roughing it. Electricity, running water, gas stove, you name it."

"But no way to contact the outside world," Justin said.

"Which is why I was so relieved you were OK," Lauren said.

"Are you sure it's safe for you to be here by yourself?" Justin asked.

"I'm not by myself." Lauren grinned. "I've got a big strong man here to protect me."

Justin decided he'd better get out of here before he got any ideas. Her husband, or whoever the big strong man was, must be around somewhere. "Thank you for dinner and the medical care, but I don't want to impose. If you'd help me with directions to my friend's cabin, I'll get out of your hair." *Your golden, luxurious hair...*

Amusement danced in Lauren's eyes. "I'm guessing you've never been to his cabin, or this part of the state before."

"No, why?"

"Because you're not going anywhere soon. Not tonight, and likely not for the entire weekend. And only if your car is drivable."

The car. *Oh, no.* "How bad is the car?" Justin moved to get off the sofa.

Lauren held out a hand to stop him. "Don't bother getting up. It's pitch black out there, plus, it's been snowing about two inches per hour. Your car is covered. The roads, too, and we're not high on the list for the plows. As I said, you'll be here for a while."

"What does your...big strong man say about having a stranger spending the night here?"

She shot him a puzzled look before her expression cleared. "You're the big strong man, Justin."

“Oh.” Justin slumped back against the sofa while Lauren collected the dishes. “You should let me help you.” Despite the pain in his leg, he probably needed to live up to that “big strong man” thing.

“While I appreciate the thought, you need to stay off your leg.” Lauren took the dishes into the kitchen and folded up the tray tables.

Discomfort built. How could he ask this question? Sure, Lauren was a nurse, but a man had to hold on to his pride. “Um, Lauren?”

She turned back to him. “Yes?”

“There’s no way to put this delicately, but I need to get up. You said you had indoor plumbing?”

Understanding dawned on Lauren’s face. “Yes, of course.” She scrunched up her nose. “Where would it be? Hold on.” She disappeared into the back of the cabin and after a moment of rustling and doors opening and closing, she emerged with a triumphant smile, pushing...a walker?

“Oh, no, no way am I using that thing.”

“I don’t have any crutches, so this is the next best option, unless you’d prefer to stay on the sofa and I bring you an empty bottle to fill?”

Justin’s face grew warm. “Fine. I’ll use the walker.”

“Try to keep your leg straight, and you’ll be fine.”

Lauren helped him up, and her scent tickled his nose once more. The pain in his leg settled to a dull ache, and he made his way across the living room with Lauren at his side, guiding him toward the bathroom.

She turned towards the kitchen.

Minutes later, he was back on the sofa.

"How's your leg?" Lauren asked.

"Sore, but not too terrible."

"Good. I'm sure there's no break. You'd know it if you tried to put weight on a broken leg."

"That's a relief. Now come, sit, and tell me your story."

"It's not much of a story." Lauren protested.

"With no phone, no internet, and no TV, your story will be the most exciting thing I hear all night." Justin smiled.

"I'll tell you what. I'll tell you my story, but I want to hear yours first. You owe me." Lauren grinned at him.

"Because you saved my life, tended to my wounds, and made me dinner?"

"Yes." Lauren settled into the arm chair and pulled her legs up underneath her.

With the snow falling, the Christmas carols playing in the background, and Lauren's adorable smile, Justin could almost forget all his troubles.

"What do you want to know?"

"Where you're from, what do you do for a living, and why you're spending the weekend before Christmas in a cabin in the Poconos with your friend Eric."

"Oh, is that all?"

"For now." Lauren giggled.

Justin adjusted his position on the sofa to keep his leg straight. Lauren moved the coffee table closer. She pulled a pillow off the sofa, laid it on the table, and

helped him prop his leg on the pillow. The simple gesture touched Justin. No one had been this kind to him in a long time.

"I'm waiting," Lauren said, when she reclaimed her position in the chair.

"I'm a supply chain manager. I live in the city, but grew up in the suburbs. Never moved too far from where I grew up. The job has been super busy, but we're closed until after the new year. My buddy Eric bought the cabin last year and has been asking me to come up and visit. He's staying for the weekend, and then will go home to spend Christmas with his family."

"What about you?"

"What do you mean?" He tilted his head as he gazed at her.

"Where are you spending Christmas?" Lauren asked.

"I'll be at home." Justin didn't want to get into it.

"Is there a family waiting for you at home?"

"No." He folded his arms across his chest.

Lauren seemed to realize it was time to change the subject. "What does a supply chain manager do?"

Justin relaxed. This he could handle. "I manage all the purchasing, shipping, and receiving personnel for my company, and handle all the negotiations. Sometimes it's exhausting, but I enjoy it."

"Exhausting, I understand. Life at the hospital is always crazy." Lauren shrugged. "I guess I'll see what the opposite of crazy is for the rest of the year."

"Are you planning to stay in this cabin until

then?"

"I consider it a low-budget retreat."

"What will you do? Without the internet, how will you find a job?"

"No one will review applications this time of year. It won't hurt anything if I wait two weeks to apply." Lauren leaned back in her chair. "I'll spend this time with God, and learn what He has planned for my next steps."

Justin's jaw dropped. "You're planning to spend Christmas all alone? Don't you have family you should be with? No boyfriend waiting for you under the mistletoe?"

"My parents are on a ten-day cruise for the holidays, and my boyfriend and I broke up last week."

If anyone else said it, they'd be fishing for sympathy, but Lauren seemed so matter-of-fact.

"You had both a breakup and a layoff the week before Christmas? Sounds pretty rough."

"The layoff, yes. The break-up, not so much. We both knew we weren't right for each other, so why drag it on any longer? As for work, I was one of the last nurses hired, so I had the least seniority. Life as a trauma nurse in the city is a bit hectic, as you can imagine, so I came up here to get away, to spend time with God, and to celebrate a simple Christmas this year."

"No presents, no tree..."

"No presents, but a tree is the first thing on the agenda once the snow slows."

Justin raised his eyebrows. "Oh?"

“Absolutely. There’s no shortage of trees on the property, as your car already found out. I’ll chop one down first thing tomorrow, as long as the storm is over. Matter of fact, I may put the one your car hit out of its misery.”

“Sorry.” Justin hoped his expression showed his regret.

“No worries. As I said, I’ll be chopping one down tomorrow anyway.”

“What else is involved in your simple Christmas celebration?”

“Decorating the tree, eggnog, hot chocolate, cookies, putting out my grandma’s Christmas decorations, a full Christmas dinner with all my favorites, and of course, Christmas Eve service at the little country church in town.”

“I’m almost jealous. It sounds wonderful.”

“What do you plan to do for your day?”

Justin frowned. “It’s just another day for me. I don’t do much for the holidays.” Trying to change the subject, he latched on to one of her Christmas plans. “What type of decorations does your grandma have?”

Lauren’s face lit up. “Wait here, and I’ll show you.” She hurried from the room.

~*~

Lauren rummaged through the closet in the back bedroom until she found the large box marked “Christmas decorations.” Before returning to the living room, she took a moment to sort through her jumbled

thoughts and sent up a quick prayer. *Lord, I wanted to spend some quiet time alone with You this year. You must have a reason for Justin to be here. Please help me reach him, Lord. He seems to be hurting. If he needs a friend to talk to, please help me be a good listener.*

Lauren lugged the box out to the living room, plopped it on the floor in front of the sofa, and moved over to stoke the fire.

"What's on your mind?" Justin asked.

"Why do you ask?"

"Your face is so peaceful. I don't quite understand it."

"I love this place. So many wonderful memories here." Lauren moved back to the chair and dragged the box in front of her. "Christmas is only part of it. Winters we'd cross-country ski or toboggan through the hills. In the spring I'd pick wildflowers, in the summer we'd go swimming in the lake. In the fall, the colors of the leaves are to die for. This is one of the most beautiful places on earth." She sobered. "I miss my grandparents so much."

"You're lucky." Justin's gaze dropped to his hands. "I never knew mine."

"How sad." Lauren brushed her hair from her face and opened the box. "My grandparents were amazing people. They were always taking care of others."

"What's your favorite memory of them?"

"There are so many, it's hard to say." Lauren rubbed her forehead, trying to decide. "I enjoyed learning to cook in my grandma's kitchen, but I loved sitting by the fire listening to my grandfather reading

from the Bible.”

Justin’s brow furrowed. “How can that be a special memory?”

Maybe this was why Justin was here. “Do you have a problem with the Bible?”

“I don’t understand how hearing how God will smite you every time you do something wrong would be a comforting memory.”

“Is that what you think the Bible is all about?”

“Spare the rod, spoil the child. My dad used it as an excuse when we got out of line.”

“How terrible.” Lauren paused for a moment. “That isn’t exactly a phrase from the Bible. What it means, is, if you care about your children, you’ll correct them so they learn right and wrong.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Oh, but it does, Justin. The Bible is a love story to us. It’s full of encouragement and help for dealing with life when things are difficult. Have you ever read it?”

Justin shifted on the sofa. “No, not really.”

“Oh, you should. It’s all about God’s love for us.”

“OK, maybe I will someday.” He waved his hand as if the matter were closed. “What’s in the box?”

Lauren lifted the lid and began pulling out Christmas decorations. She filled the room with snowmen, reindeer, and jingle bells. Simple joy welled up inside her at recreating the Christmas cabin the way it was when her grandparents were alive.

Lauren turned back from lining the mantel with greenery and candles and found Justin’s gaze on her. “What?” Her cheeks warmed.

Justin chuckled. "I've never seen someone enjoy decorations so much. You almost make me wish I had a reason to celebrate Christmas."

Lauren moved to sit next to him on the sofa. "There's always a reason to celebrate Christmas."

Justin shrugged. "I didn't have a fairy-tale cabin to spend Christmas in when I was growing up."

"It wasn't always easy, but my family loved me and each other, and it made all the difference."

"I envy you."

Lauren reached back into the box. "There's one more thing left to decorate. Besides the tree, of course."

"Of course."

One by one, she unwrapped the figurines representing the nativity story. "My grandmother's nativity set, passed down from her grandmother. And now I get to tell the Christmas story to you."

Lauren lifted her grandfather's heavy Bible from the end table and turned to the book of Luke. She gave Justin a sideways glance, but he made no objections, so she read the Christmas story. When she finished, she set the nativity scene up on the side table where her grandmother always proudly displayed it. She turned back to Justin. "I know you aren't here on purpose, but it was nice to share the story with you."

Justin's face was unreadable. "Since your grandfather couldn't read it to you, I'm glad I could be here."

The Christmas CD ended, and Lauren replaced it with another. After putting another log on the fire, she turned to Justin. "Hot chocolate?"

Justin grinned. "You don't do Christmas halfway, do you?"

She threw him a grin of her own. "Nope. I'll be back in a few." Minutes later Lauren returned.

She handed one steaming mug to Justin, and settled back in her chair with the other.

They fell into simple conversation. Eventually, their cups were drained, the CD ended, and the fire was nearly burnt out.

Lauren fought to stay awake. "I'm sorry. I don't know why I'm so tired."

Justin glanced at his watch. "It's nearly 3:00 AM."

"Are you serious? We've been talking that long?"

"You're easy to talk to." Justin smiled. "I won't take offense if you go to bed. I'll be fine here on this couch."

"Nonsense. There's more than one bedroom in this cabin. Come on, I'll get you set up." She pushed away the coffee table with her hip while lowering Justin's leg to the ground. She reached out an arm and he took it. Pulling him up, she positioned him in front of the walker.

Minutes later, they were lying in beds on the opposite sides of a log wall.

As much as Lauren wanted to relive their conversations, she was soon fast asleep.