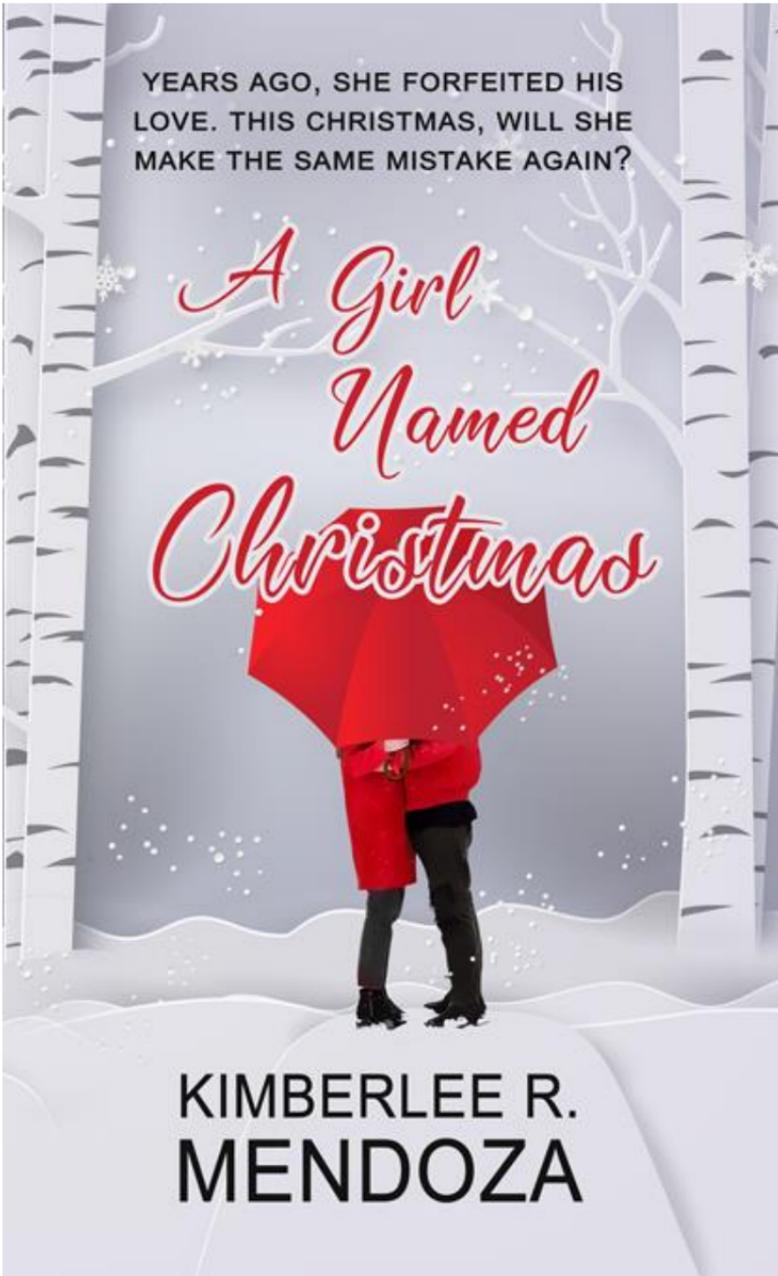


YEARS AGO, SHE FORFEITED HIS
LOVE. THIS CHRISTMAS, WILL SHE
MAKE THE SAME MISTAKE AGAIN?

*A Girl
Named
Christmas*



KIMBERLEE R.
MENDOZA

A Girl Named
Christmas

by

Kimberlee R. Mendoza

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A Girl Named Christmas

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Cover Art by *Nicola Martinez*

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www.pelicanbookgroup.com PO Box 1738 *Aztec, NM * 87410
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Publishing History

First White Rose Edition, 2007 Second White Rose Edition, 2022

Electronic ISBN 978-1-5223-0405-0

Published in the United States of America

Dedication

To Remy

PROLOGUE

DECEMBER 24, 1980

Chris made her way down the carpeted steps, each board squeaking against her weight. There had been a time when she was *too* skinny. Her hips were rounder now and her middle a bit fluffier; however, she was encouraged when the stairs squeaked under her cat's soft paws, as well.

The lower level of the cottage was dark and smelled of cedar mixed with something sweet. A few wood embers still burned in the fireplace and the scent of vanilla lingered from a stick of incense lit earlier that evening. She touched her foot to the cold, wood floor and recoiled at its chilly touch.

She darted across the room on tiptoes, anxious to rest her feet on the rug. Overshooting her mark, she knocked her shin on the coffee table. "Ouch!" She fumbled for the lamp, flipped it on, and frowned at the small raspberry forming on the surface of her skin. *Lovely.*

A biting cold floated through the house, and she retrieved an afghan from the back of the couch and hugged it close. Her flannel nightgown did little against the winter chill caused by Lake Erie. It had frozen over weeks ago, and the weight of snow had

A Girl Named Christmas

caused all life to slumber. She wished she could do the same. Maybe then she could forget tomorrow and what the day meant. *Big breath in.* She swung her gaze from the TV on her left to the rocking chair and then to the unlit evergreen in the corner. A sigh escaped her lips. *Why am I so down about Christmas this year?* It was her birthday, after all. *Yes, and my fortieth to be exact.* She had lived through a deadly disease to see it. So, why was she not rejoicing? *I should be thanking God for being alive.*

The silence of the two-story cottage reminded her of her solitude. Forever the spinster living only with her matronly sister and a cat named Mike. She stretched her legs along the couch and reached for the TV remote, when her hand grazed a package strategically placed in the middle of the oak table. She smiled. Her sister Martha loved to give.

Chris opened the card and read.

Dearest Sister,

May your next forty years be merry and bright. You mean the world to me. Thank you for sticking by my side all these years. May God grant your wishes this year.

Love,

Marty

Chris dabbed at her eyes and lifted the corners of the paper. Inside lay a leather journal with her name pressed in the lower right corner. She fanned the pages, willing herself to be more grateful. Though the sentiment was there, the empty book mocked her. *Just*

another place to write down my failures and reveal my lonely heart. "God, is there no hope for me in this life? My dreams and wishes are so far from reality." She sniffed. "How I wish I could go back a few decades."

"Who are you talking to?"

Chris jumped at the sound of her sister's voice. "You startled me." She held her chest willing her heart to slow its pace. "I thought you went to bed."

"Well, I could easily say the same about you." Marty came around the blue-gingham sofa and sat in the adjacent rocking chair. "Are you OK? You look a bit gray."

"I'm fine. Thank you for the gift, Marty." Chris slid the journal onto the coffee table. "It was very sweet."

"You used to be a writer. I thought maybe if you had something to write in, you might get back to it." Marty gave a tight grin, her eyes revealing her constant worry.

No use in making her stress more. "Thank you. I can't wait to use it." Chris offered a forced smile.

Her sister nodded and scooted to the edge of the rocking chair. Age had been kind to Marty. Her hair was still as thick and red as it had been thirty years ago. Her brown eyes were full of life, and though she'd had a rough life, her smile always remained present.

"I think I'm going to stay up for a little while longer," Chris said.

"Are you sure? You don't want to exhaust yourself. After all, a bunch of family and friends are

coming for your birthday tomorrow.”

Don't remind me. Chris shook her head. “No, they're coming for Christmas.”

Marty cocked her head sideways. “When was the last time you saw the whole family and our closest friends coming together for Christmas?”

Chris pursed her lips. “Um...I think I was fifteen. Right before...” Even at just the thought of Elijah, her heart accelerated. She hadn't seen him in about three decades, and yet, she could still remember the feelings he elicited in her. She sighed.

“Before Mom died.”

Chris glanced up. “Right. Before Mom died.”

“Well, don't stay up too late. OK?” *Marty. Always the mother figure.* She kissed Chris goodnight and walked back up the stairs.

Chris stared at the tree. Ornaments from their childhood filled every branch—the clay candy cane she'd made in second grade, the glass Santa she'd made in fifth, and the dove Mom bought at the fair. The... *Wait. What is that doing there?* She stood and walked to the tree. A silver colored cross hung right in front. She fingered the sprayed wood and lifted it from its perch. A small diamond ring from her past was still tied with a ribbon at the top. She had put them together so long ago. The significance behind the tokens hurt even now. *Marty, please don't try to help me. I hid this for a reason.*

Holding it tight in a cupped hand, Chris returned to the sofa. Her coffee table had a door that opened on

the side. She pulled the handle and stuffed the cross and ring inside on top of an array of books.

She flopped back onto the couch and turned on the TV. The ambient noise crashed like a tidal wave in the silent house. She snapped the television back off and shifted to the other arm of the chair. Her gaze drifted to the door that held her treasure. *Fine*. She reached in and lifted the ornament and removed the ring. As she stared at it dangling in front of her face, tears filled her eyes.

Lowering it, the journal caught her eye. She needed a release. As a kid, writing had always made her feel better. She retrieved the leather-bound book and flipped to the first empty page. A pen stuck out of a loop inside. She withdrew it and began to write:

December 24, 1980

Tomorrow, I turn forty. All the happiness I felt as a youth washes away with the realization I will never marry. I will always be as I am today, but I was happy once. Wasn't I?

Thoughts of her childhood seeped into her mind, pouring through the cobwebs of denial. She lay against the pillow, remembering when her heart felt more.

ONE

NOVEMBER, 1955

Chris came barreling down the steps in her family cottage and stopped. Her little sister, Amy, leaning on her elbows, had her nose pressed against the window. Her bobby-socked feet stuck out under her frilly dress, tapping like a happy dog.

"Amy, what are you looking at?"

"The gardener's son." She twirled her blonde ponytail, not taking her eyes from the window.

"Pete has a son?"

"Uh-huh. And he's dreamy." She snapped her gum and sighed.

"Oh, brother." Chris shook her head as she walked to the window and ducked down. The lot appeared empty. "I don't see anybody."

Someone knocked on the door.

Both girls shifted their gazes, startled.

Chris crossed to the door and opened it. "Can I help y..." Her voice trailed in an oblivion of butterflies. The cutest guy she had ever seen smiled down at her. His blue eyes were slightly covered by wisps of honey-colored hair. Though he couldn't have been more than seventeen, he had well-defined chest muscles and

strong arms. Dirt smeared his taut white T-shirt and sweat beaded his brow.

"My dad went to town to get some seed, but he wanted me to start digging for potatoes, but I need some tools from the shed." He jammed his hands in back pockets.

Chris stared at him, unsure what to say.

"I don't know the combination."

"Oh, sure," she heard herself say.

Amy bounded off the couch and shoved in front of Chris. "I'll help him, Christmas."

He cocked an eyebrow, keeping his gaze on Chris. "Christmas? Like the holiday?"

She blinked. "I was born on Christmas Day."

"Huh. And my first thought was that you were born on Easter." He winked.

Though his flip comment annoyed her as much as she hated her name, she smiled. "Right."

Amy grabbed his hand. "This way, Elijah."

"Elijah?" Chris asked.

He stuck out his free hand. "Elijah Thompson. Named after that guy in the Bible."

She glanced down at his dirt covered hand and then back to his face. He followed the path of her gaze and wiped his hand on his jeans. "Sorry, I forgot I've been out clawing the mud."

"Come on," Amy said, pulling him away. "I can get you in the shed."

"I'll see you later," he said to Chris.

She nodded. "Bye."

A Girl Named Christmas

He let Amy drag him out and down the path that led to the shed in back.

Chris rushed into the kitchen and peeked out. She could see him standing in the yard, while Amy prattled on about who knows what. Chris's twelve-year-old sister had to be the most boy-crazy person who ever lived in Ashtabula County. Boys who weren't old enough for girls stayed clear of Amy, and boys who *had* discovered girls spent every free moment at school trying to win her affection. It helped that she was petite, dressed in frills, and quite pretty with golden blonde hair, hazel eyes and a sprinkle of freckles across her nose.

Chris, on the other hand, had lots of "boy" friends, none of them in line for her affection. Not surprising. In her mind, boys were only good for playing ball or climbing trees. She kept her brown hair pulled back and had never worn an ounce of makeup. She preferred hand-me-down jeans and baggy flannel shirts to hide her annoying curves, rather than wear dresses and gloves. Her older sister,

Barbara, said Chris was blessed with a great body, and she should want to show it off, which, of course, was absurd.

Chris would be happy with the figure of a five-year-old. Breasts just got in the way of all the fun stuff.

Elijah craned his neck and his eye caught hers.

Chris ducked, her cheeks hot. She spun around the tiled floor and sat below the window for a moment. She inched up to peek again, but heard the screen door

open in the living room.

“Chris, where are you?” her sister Barbara yelled.

Chris crawled a few feet forward, hoping Elijah wouldn’t see her when she got up.

“What are you doing down there?” Barbara asked.

Biting her lip, she used the table to stand. “I thought I saw a bug.”

Barbara wrinkled her nose. “Did you?”

Chris shook her head and slid past her into the living room. “How was your morning?”

“I have the most amazing news.” Barbara followed her, unwrapping from her scarf and unbuttoning her pink jacket.. “Remember Tom?” She slid her horn-rimmed glasses up the bridge of her nose.

Of course. How could I forget? Her sister had been mooning over the dark-haired jock for months. “Yeah, sure. What about him?”

“He asked me to the Winter Sock Hop.” She squealed and then covered her mouth.

Chris’s eyes went wide. “Mom said yes?”

Barbara flopped onto arm of the sofa and frowned. “I didn’t ask her yet.”

There was an unwritten rule in the Blevinses’ house. It didn’t matter how boy-crazy the Blevins sisters were or weren’t. They couldn’t date until they were of marrying age, which came at the completion of college. “You’re not even eighteen years old, and you’re still in high school. There is no way Mom will let you go. You know that.”

“My birthday is less than two months away, and I

graduate from high school soon." She fluffed her brunette, shoulder-length bob. "Besides, I'm not going to college."

Chris opened her mouth to retort that decision, but was interrupted as Amy flung open the screen door, spun around, and dramatically fell onto the couch, practically knocking Barbara off with her foot.

"I just talked to the cutest boy I've ever seen. ."

Barbara nudged Amy's leg. "Oh, is Tom here?"

Amy sat up on her elbows. "Very funny. I was talking about Elijah, and I'm in love."

"Who's Elijah?"

"Apparently, the gardener has a son," Chris said dryly.

Barbara raised her eyebrows and smiled. "And he's cute?"

"Yes!" Amy leapt to her feet smiling and then scowled. "Wait! No way. I saw him first. He's mine!"

"Amy, you're only twelve." Chris shifted her weight to her other hip. "He's at least five years older than you."

"There's no way Mom will let you date a guy at your age, let alone one that is older than you," Barbara said.

Why do these conversations always unnerve me? Boys. Who cares? Every time her sisters started talking about boys, Chris buried her head in a book to block out their existence to avoid the trivial, useless conversation. Their mother wouldn't budge. End of story. Get over it and find a new diatribe. The guy debate was stale.

"I know. Mom isn't going to let anyone date anyone. I just like to flirt." Amy pulled a pillow into her lap and tucked it under her chin.

"Don't say that." Barbara tossed another pillow at her. "I'm counting on Mom getting over that notion and letting me go to the sock hop."

Chris laughed. "You're more likely to get into Yale with your D average than go on that date."

Barbara's eyes narrowed through her cat-eye shaped lenses. "I told you. I'm not going to college."

"Thanks for emphasizing my point." Chris crossed to the couch and drew her copy of *The Glass Menagerie* from the side of the seat cushion. She had planned to study for literature class before the ruckus started. Dropping to the floor, she opened to the dog-eared page. "I don't get what all the fuss is about. Why do you guys fawn over those boys anyway?"

Amy gasped. "How can you say that? Boys are delicious."

Chris rolled her eyes. "They're not food."

"You don't understand, Amy." Barbara spun around. She faced Chris with a smirk. "Our dear sister would rather have her head in a book or climb a tree, than look at boys."

Chris had listened to Barbara make fun of her a million times before. Nothing new "It's better than chasing after something you can't have. I'd rather be sensible than stupid."

"You mean boring." Amy giggled.

"Call me what you want but don't come crying to

me when your heart gets broken." She shifted her glare to Barbara. "Or when Mom says, 'no'."

Barbara crossed her arms and took a step forward. "Just wait, someday you'll fall in love, and you'll see that the heartache is *so* worth it."

"What's worth it?" Marty asked from the doorway, her red hair covered by a polka-dot scarf, and bulky cream sweater pulled tight around her chest.

"Boys," said Barbara. "Dating."

Amy giggled, which sounded more like a tittering bird, than an actual laugh.

Marty tossed her purse onto the small table by the door and knelt to remove her galoshes. "Who's dating?"

"No one," Chris said.

"Yet." Amy turned away, hiding a smile behind her hand.

Marty glared at Amy. "You better just get that idea out of your head now. When I was thirteen, I kissed a boy on the cheek. Totally innocent moment, but Mom grounded me for three months." She unraveled from her scarf and removed her sweater. "Stay clear of the boys, girls. You don't want to see the wrath of Mom."

"Well, that's no fun." Amy pouted and rested her arm and chin on the back of the couch. "Why is Mom so old fashioned anyway?" Barbara wilted into the rocking chair and mirrored Amy's pout.. "It's 1955 for goodness sakes."

"I agree with Mom. Waiting is good," Chris said, without looking up from the script in her hand.

"You always were the sensible one." Marty came around the couch and sat next to Amy.

"Don't you mean the dull one?" Amy spat.

"Thanks, Amy. I love you, too," Chris sneered.

She smiled and kissed the air.

The door opened and their mother flowed into the room like a model on a runway. Chris had always admired her mother. Even in her nurses' uniform she emitted beauty. Her auburn hair was pulled tight into a bun. Her brown eyes sparked with joy. She had high cheekbones, ruby lips and a figure that any fifty-year-old woman would kill for.

"My gorgeous girls all here to welcome me. Hello, dears." She traveled around the room and kissed each cheek. "So, what's on the topic of discussion today?"

"Boys," Chris said.

Surprisingly, their mother didn't flinch. "Well, I hope there was some wisdom in that banter."

Barbara and Amy exchanged looks and then suppressed a laugh.

Chris shook her head and dived back into her play. *Act II*. But her eyes blurred. For years, she had been just fine without idealizing boys. *What's the big deal anyway?* She glanced up. Through the living room window, she caught a glimpse of Elijah carrying a bag of fertilizer across the lawn. Her heart lurched. She sighed and stuffed her nose back into the pages. *I'll be just fine for many more.*

TWO

In a daze, Chris helped set the table. She didn't know why, but her stomach ached, somersaulting at the thought of eating chicken casserole, her favorite food.

"Are you all right, dear?" her mother asked.

"Huh?" Chris peered from the table to her mother.
"Oh, yes. Fine."

"I just asked you if you could get some vegetables from Pete."

Amy slammed the breadbasket onto the table. "I'll get the vegetables."

"No Dear, I asked Chris."

Amy's lip protruded. "Why can't I go?"

"Because my sweet Amy, I don't trust you." Mother patted Amy's arm, then reached to fold another napkin.

"Why not?" Amy pouted.

Her mother tugged on the leaf of the table and connected the sides. "Because Pete has an adorable son."

"Oh, that." Amy diverted her eyes, smiling. "I hadn't noticed."

"I can go." Chris dropped the napkins on the end of the table and walked toward the door.

“Wear a coat. It’s getting colder,” her mother said.

Chris reached for her father’s old pea coat on the hook by the door and pushed open the screen door. The night air nipped at her skin. She wrapped herself in the jacket and bundled it close. The moon hung high in the sky, lighting her walk across the yard to the gardener’s shed. The Blevinses’ property wasn’t that big, and they weren’t exactly rich, but their dad had hired Pete as a “gift” to their mother. Pete mission—to maintain her rose garden and surround her with beauty. At least, that’s how she explained it. He also produced all their vegetables and kept their lawn neat.

“Hello? Pete?” Chris peeked around the metal door. The light was on, but the shed stood empty. “Hmm.”

“He went to the store.”

Chris spun around, eyes wide, heart racing.

Elijah stepped out of the shadows and smiled.

“You scared me.”

“Sorry.”

She shifted from one foot to the other. “Um, do you know when he’ll be back?”

He leaned a hoe against the door and stepped next to her. His hand grazed her wrist, and she flinched. He must have noticed, because he said, “Sorry, didn’t mean to bump you.”

“No, problem.” Her voice cracked. She cleared it and said, “Um, do you think you could help us get some vegetables for dinner?”

“Yeah, my dad already pulled some carrots and

A Girl Named Christmas

peas this afternoon. Give me a second, and I'll grab them." He disappeared into the darkness of the garden.

Chris stepped inside the shed. The small space felt warmer. She glanced around. A few pictures were taped to the side of the wall. One of them must have been Elijah as a kid fishing with his dad. His broad smile and blue eyes were undeniable.

"We caught an amazing fish that day," he said behind her.

"Her pulse quickened at his proximity. Flustered, she reached for the box.

He shifted the box away. "No, I'll carry it for you."

She nodded, stepped past him through the opening, and climbed the stairs that led into the house.

He trailed her into the kitchen. "Where would you like them?"

Her mother wiped her hands on a dishtowel and pointed to the countertop. "There would be lovely. Thank you."

He set down the box, wiped his pants and beheld each eye in the room.

Amy and Barbara acted giddy, giggling and pressing into one another.

"Night, then." Elijah tipped his hat and backed out.

"Good night, Mr. Thompson."

After he'd left, Amy hopped up on a stool and reached for the carrots. "I'll skin them."

Her mother narrowed her gaze. "Since when do

you want to help?"

"They're filled with his cooties." Smiling, Amy withdrew a bouquet of carrots and held them to her chest. "And I intend on collecting them all."

Her mother snatched the carrots and tossed them into the box. "Go wash your hands and stop your nonsense right now."

Amy's smile flipped to a pout. "Yes, Mother."

None too soon, Chris thought as her sister left. She didn't want to think about Elijah any more. He made her belly and insides feel uneasy. And to be frank, talk of him distracted her.

She wrangled the carrot stems. "How do you want them prepared?"

"Chopped for the soup," her mother said.

Chris nodded. Chopping carrots made sense. Chopping carrots, she understood. Hopefully, the conversation would remain pleasant. "So, Mother, how was your day?"

Her mother tied an apron around her waist and dug in the cupboard for a pot. "Wonderful. We had a new born baby today. Always a pleasure."

"Oh, I love a new born baby," Barbara said. "Boy or girl?"

Please don't say boy. Chris could not stand another round of tittering.

"A little girl with big blue eyes and a head full of hair." Their mother searched in the fridge and removed a box of broth. "A little thing too. Less than six pounds."