

ROBIN BAYNE

Christmas Forever

A HOLIDAY ROMANCE



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Dedication

This story is dedicated to my best friend Jamie VanEaton, who encouraged me to revise and send it in.

Praise for *Christmas Forever*

An interesting twist, a satisfying read. ~ Author
Vickie McDonogh

A touching, compassionate story that leaves you
with warm and fuzzy feeling long after you have
turned the last page. ~ Jude Morris, Owner of Books
We Love

1

For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Jesus Christ.

—Romans 3:23-24

Jason Becker planted himself in front of his parents' front window, arms crossed and feet spread wide. A drumming began behind his eyes, and he hoped his posture conveyed his irritation.

The source of it was coming up the front walk.

Camilla Marie Jones looked just like she had three years ago, the last time he'd seen her, with hips swaying under her long skirts as she walked. She'd always preferred skirts, even in the snow, and today was no exception. Through the flurried white haze, he could see her old purple car. Not the car itself, just the burst of color he'd always associated with her.

Cami looked up as she neared the porch, caught sight of him and slowed her pace. He didn't think the cold was the only thing putting color on her cheeks.

Their gazes locked for a few seconds, until Jason looked away. Long, dark brown hair still fell halfway down her back. Her waist was still trim, though she had a child. For all he knew she could have more than one by now. She'd probably left him and gone straight back to Robbie's father.

She held a round, covered dish in her gloved

hands. Probably something his mother had told her to bring. Probably something special.

Jason closed his eyes for a brief moment and when he opened them, Cami was gone.

Cold air blasted his neck as his sister Joni answered the door, the chill settling like a blanket in the room. Or maybe it was the company causing the chill.

"Come in!" Joni said, behind him. "And let me take that. Umm, can't wait to see what you made. Toss your coat on the old recliner. Mom likes it better when she can't see the ragged old thing. Where's Robbie?"

Jason refused to look. To listen. Instead, he studied the pattern of snowflakes falling in the front yard, keeping his back to Joni and Cami. That ragged old chair had been his father's, and Jason knew his mother would never part with it.

Cami cleared her throat. "He went to his aunt and uncle's for the weekend. I met Colt halfway, in Pennsylvania, and he took Robbie on to the inn. They won't get to see Robbie for Christmas this year, and I figured he ought to spend some time with them now." The heavy door closed, and Joni cleared her throat.

"Say hi to my big dumb brother while I put your dish in the kitchen. That's his backside hovering over there by the window. Cup of coffee? Just cream, right?"

"That would be great. Can I help?"

"No, I've got it. Jason, say hello to Cami." Joni disappeared into the warmth of the brightly lit kitchen, leaving him alone with Camilla Marie in the cooler, dimly lit living room. A plastic candle set turned on in the window as he watched, and he wondered when his mother had discovered electric timers. Better than the real things, considering that the dried Indian corn and

gourds on display could catch fire. He sighed. Was it too late to slip out the back door? Probably so.

It was inevitable. With a sigh, he turned to look at her.

She brushed melted snow from her shoulders and purse, avoiding his gaze. "Hello, Jason. You're looking well."

He snorted a little at the clichéd words, but nodded. "So are you."

"It's been a while. Robbie and I have missed you." She took a few steps closer as she fiddled with her scarf.

"Been three years, the kid probably doesn't even remember me." He sounded childish, but couldn't help himself.

Cami looked up then, her green eyes damp as if she'd gotten snow in them. "You'd be surprised."

"Right. How is he, anyway?" Jason couldn't keep from asking. Robbie had been three the last time he'd seen him. He'd grown attached to the little guy, until Cami had ripped him out of Jason's life. There were still Saturday mornings when he half expected the toddler to come running up his front porch asking him to turn on Sesame Street.

"He's great. Already reading!" She slid the purse strap from her arm and opened the bag to produce a plastic sleeve of photos. "Want to see?"

Curiosity thawed his cold shoulder only slightly. He nodded and moved to the couch.

She sat, leaving only inches between them, and leaned toward him glowing with maternal pride. "Here's his new class picture, and this one is Robbie and his little friends learning to hit a softball off a big tee." Jason studied each photo, clearly seeing Cami's

features duplicated in the boy's face. The dark hair, too, just as thick as his mother's. The closer Cami leaned in, the more Jason could smell her perfume. It wasn't a heavy floral scent like the department store clerks tried to spray on unsuspecting customers, but a light, lemony one. A scent that brought back memories.

Cami must have noticed he'd fallen silent. She tapped the photos for a few seconds and then faced him. "Jason, did you have any idea that I'd be here today?"

He shook his head. "No, I didn't." That was true enough.

"Would you have still come if you'd known?"

Would he? Jason decided to be honest. "Yeah. It is Thanksgiving, after all. No one should spend it alone." He wondered if she'd spent many holidays alone with only her son for company. If she had, it wasn't his fault.

"That's true." She folded the photo sleeve and put it back in her purse.

"Still like purple, huh?"

Cami's bright smile lit her face. "All things purple, I'm afraid." She patted her bag. "But you have to admit, this is a really muted shade. Very trendy."

"OK." He wasn't about to debate fashion or color. "Let's go help Joni in the kitchen." When he started to rise, Cami touched his arm.

"Jason, wait, please."

Taking a deep breath, he sat and prepared for whatever she wanted to say.

"Look at me?"

He did, staring into her eyes, seeing nothing but sadness there. His gut clenched. Anything she said was bound to hurt. "What is it?"

"I'm sorry. Really sorry. For taking Robbie away, for quitting my job and leaving your company in the lurch, for ..."

His pulse rose with impatience. He glanced down. "No rings. Not married?"

"No, I'm not."

"Have any more kids since you've been gone?"

Cami glared at him. "Of course not. What—"

The grandmother's clock began to chime the hour and, as if on cue, Jason's mother sailed into the room. "Cami! Come here, girl!"

"Hi, Mrs. Becker." Cami stood and allowed herself to be swept into a motherly hug.

"We've missed you around here. Come help me set the table and tell me all about my great-godson." His mother turned toward Jason, suddenly serious. "OK, son?"

Great-godson? He nodded, chuckling at the term his mom had invented. Whatever else Cami had been about to say would wait. He saw her throw him one pleading look before Mom tugged her from the room, probably tying her into a purple apron already.

When he heard them clinking china on the dining room table, Jason headed for the kitchen and poured a tall glass of water. The aroma of roasting turkey filled the air, and he inhaled deeply. He bent over the sink, leaning on his elbows as his mind tried to process seeing Cami again.

He wasn't sure how he felt about her or the situation. It was a shock, but not an altogether unpleasant one.

"It would never work, you know," Joni said, in her typical big-sister tone. Pushing himself up slightly, he turned only his head to glare at her. "What are you

talking about?"

"You and Cami. It would never work out." She continued drying the pan she held.

Jason snorted out a laugh. "I don't know what you're talking about. I haven't seen the woman in three years. She was my bookkeeper. I've had two others since her. I have a new accountant starting in less than a month."

Joni bent to put the large pan in the lower cabinet. Metal clanked on metal as she maneuvered it into place.

"Sure you do." She looked at him over her shoulder. "And you know exactly what I mean. She was more than your bookkeeper. I saw your face when she came up the walk. It was like you remembered ... and that now you realized you don't feel differently about her, that something's still there. And you've both grown up."

"You're crazy, sis. Been sniffing the cooking sherry?"

Joni straightened up. "Here, dry the baking sheets, would you?" She tossed him a towel. "Do you even realize you've started thinking about giving her another job? You don't even know if she's staying."

"What? This week we're studying to be a psychologist?" Jason stuck the cookie sheets in an upper cabinet, tossed the towel over one shoulder and leaned both palms on the cool counter surface. He'd sounded harsh. "Sorry. You're right. She was my friend."

"Forgiven. And *was* is the key word. Now you can start fresh with her." Joni shuffled a handful of silverware into a drawer.

He looked at her, but she wasn't grinning in

amusement as he expected. "But you just said it would never work. What gives?"

"Oh, that." Joni's expression turned sheepish. "You used to always do what I told you you couldn't. To prove me wrong. Just a habit, I guess."

"A sister thing, huh?"

"Or a challenge." She batted her eyelashes at him, like she had when they were little.

"A challenge?" His mother entered the room, shaking her head, and Cami followed. "You know what a challenge is? A challenge is getting all the food hot at one time." She opened the oven door, and the turkey aroma grew stronger. Then she popped the dish Cami had brought into the microwave and pressed a series of beeping buttons. "Josh and Rachel are in the dining room. Cami, go on in and say hello. I don't think you've met Josh's new girlfriend. You go and introduce her, Jason. Joni and I need more room to finish getting ready." As she spoke, she pulled three foil-topped dishes from the fridge and handed two to Jason, one to Cami. "Set these on the table, please, as you go." She patted her son's arm. "Then you and Josh can decide who's going to say grace."

Cami walked with Jason down the narrow street outside his parents' house, enjoying the hickory scent of a neighbor's fireplace. The snow had dwindled, leaving only white piles among the remaining fall leaves. They passed three more houses in silence. She couldn't recall ever having felt so full and content.

"So, is it true you may be moving back?" Jason's voice sounded hesitant as he crunched a pile of leaves

beneath his boot. "Not that you have to tell me, or like I'm keeping track of you or anything."

Cami smiled, shoving aside her own pile of leaves, scattering them into the cold breeze. "Joni just can't keep a secret." A dusting of snow covered the next pile, and it mushed quietly beneath her boots.

"What about your job in Philly?"

"I've given them notice."

"Why?"

She shrugged, but her pulse started racing. "I wanted to be closer to Colt and Tia. They're only an hour from here."

"Why else?"

He was going to make her say it. So she did. "I missed your family. I missed the town. The company I worked for has grown too large, too impersonal."

"And?"

"And what?" She looked up at him, wishing she could hide under her eyelashes. She wasn't sure if she should sound like she only missed him on Robbie's behalf, since she couldn't expect him to want her as a woman again.

"OK, I missed you too. Robbie needs a male influence in his life."

He waited a few heartbeats. "You used to think his father might come back. Ever hear from him?"

She shook her head, feeling her cheeks warming. "No, I have no idea where he is. He's an accountant. We used to work together. He left the firm after I tried to contact him. It was a long time ago and I've never heard a word. Maybe he never got the message I left him. That I was pregnant."

"And maybe he did."

Cami lowered her eyes, and her voice. "I don't

think I really tried that hard to tell him.”

She knew she hadn’t handled the situation well, and though she’d like to think Pete hadn’t known about the baby, her heart knew Jason was right. Pete hadn’t cared.

“So you aren’t dating anyone?”

“Not really.” And she wasn’t going to elaborate on that one. She was revealing enough embarrassing stuff as it was.

“You could have kept in touch.” He sounded distant, hurt.

She couldn’t hold back a heavy sigh. He’d never have said that had they not been walking side by side, with no probing glances. “Jason, I have so much to be sorry about, and that’s one thing. I *am* sorry. I was wrong to cut you off like that.”

“What made you change your mind?”

“Would you believe something I heard in church?”

She felt his gaze on her, but kept her own eyes facing forward. A small child called hello from the porch of the house they passed, and Cami looked up and smiled at him, offering a little wave.

“Maybe.”

The boy ducked his head and turned back into his house, and Cami then turned to look at Jason. His brows were knit together over his dark eyes, and the jaw that was always so squared looked even harder, more determined to question her. In sync, they began to walk faster, either because of the falling temperature or because of the rising intensity of their conversation.

“When did you start going to church?” He asked the question in a quiet voice, but Cami also heard the unasked part of the query: *when you would never go with*

me?

“In Philly. A woman I worked with asked me to go with her. She didn’t have anyone else, and neither did I. She gave me a few web sites to look at, ones that answered a lot of my concerns about Christ, and I got hooked. Katherine—that’s her name—went with us to all the social events, too.”

“Guess you’ll miss her.”

“Yeah. But she’s getting married in a few months, so she has someone.” They walked together in silence, traipsing into the snow bank as the street dead-ended near the woods. “How come you still aren’t married, Jason? You’ve always wanted a family.”

He touched her arm, and she felt his heat even through her coat. “Let’s turn around and head back now. It looks like it’s going to start snowing again.”

She understood he wanted to change the direction not only of their path, but of their discussion, also. And she couldn’t blame him—it drove her nuts when people asked why she’d never married. Well-meaning, most folks had no idea why she couldn’t enjoy the blessing of marriage, of a loving, committed partner. She had too much to make up for.

Halfway home, Jason turned to her again. “Would you like to go to church with us Sunday? Then I could go with you to pick up Robbie.” He scuffed his boot against a curb. “There’s plenty of room in our pew, especially since Dad’s gone on. Mom still takes the family right up to the front row. She’s amazing.”

They stopped two houses from the Becker property. A fist in Cami’s gut, twisted with the genuine affection she still felt for this man. “I don’t think so.”

That seemed to surprise him, and she watched the myriad of emotions cross his face. Finally, a look of

smug disbelief settled in his eyes, and the set of his mouth. "Why not? Are you really going to church now, Cami? I know we've had this discussion before, and it's really none of my business. But you can tell me."

"Of course I am. I'd never lie about that. It's just that when I attend, I sit in the back row. And I keep my head down."

2

Cami smiled at Jason from across the room, watching him enjoy an argument over a football game with his brother Josh. She had felt a swish of relief that he'd let her last comment go, had just stomped off, though she knew he'd revisit it later. Jason's dark eyes seemed to shine brighter when he wanted to make a point, and a few strands of black hair fell across his forehead. If she'd been standing nearer, she would've reached out and brushed it back, but at closer range she wouldn't have been able to take in his whole form, which always became involved in any debate. His broad shoulders, wider than his brother's, shook as he emphasized his point.

Jason knew almost nothing about the game—Cami doubted that had changed over the past few years—so watching him vehemently defend one team or the other was thoroughly amusing.

"So how is Robbie doing in school so far?" Mrs. B touched Cami's shoulder.

"He's reading already," Cami said, beaming with a grin she couldn't subdue.

"I'm glad to hear it." Mrs. B scooped fresh coffee into the basket and poured water into the reservoir of her auto-drip coffeemaker. "He's such a sweetie. And it's got to be tough for him without a father around." She turned the machine on.

Cami knew that subject would surface sometime during the long holiday. "Well, it's just fine most of the

time. But there are times when things are really tough. Like the camping trip Robbie was invited on with a few boys from the new school we visited down here. We manage OK, though."

Rachel entered the room after setting the table for dessert. "I heard that, Cami. My neighbor's son does that every year. Is this one of those father-son trips?" She opened an overhead cabinet and started to remove cups, lining them up on the counter. "It's been great bonding time for them. What will you do?"

"I could take him myself, I suppose, or ask my brother-in-law. It's not going to be easy, though, for him to get away while my sister's expecting." Cami opened the fridge and found the milk jug and whipped cream container. "The whole thing bugs me—why do schools put parents in this position year after year? Why do they rub it in the noses of us single parents?" She shook her head, and set the items on the table a bit too noisily.

"I think it's just that most students have two parents, dear. Even if they're not together." Mrs. B arranged small forks and spoons on a green tray then added the milk and cream. "Perhaps this year you could ask Jason instead of Colt."

"Ask me what?" Jason entered and took the tray from his mother.

"Grab the coffee when it's done, would you, dear?" Mrs. B and Rachel left the overly warm kitchen.

"Ask me what?" Jason repeated the question, balancing the tray as if it weighed nothing.

Cami shook her head. "Nothing. Really. We were just talking about Robbie's being invited on a camping trip. Should I take him? I camped out a few times when I was a Girl Scout. It's a shame it's so cold already. Last