



**AS YOU ARE
AT CHRISTMAS**

DAVALYNN SPENCER

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Christmas

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Contact Information: titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com

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Dedication

For teachers everywhere
who labor in unconditional love.

Praise for Davalynn Spencer

Dreams of family, finding love right under your nose, and rekindled faith make *As You Are at Christmas* a charming romance for any season. ~ Lisa Lickel, author of *Meander Scar*

1

But God demonstrated his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:8

Angela Murphy squeezed her eyes tight against the invisible onion mist and prayed she wouldn't slice her fingertips off with the next few strokes. Why did she always get the job of dicing onions for Mollie's sweet onion jam? Angela rubbed her sweater sleeve across her watery eyes. Over the years she had tried everything to prevent the sting—from holding a slice of bread in her mouth to cutting the onions under water. Nothing helped, so she cried her way through the process. But this time, the onions served as a perfect cover for the waterworks coming from her heart.

"Angie, dear." Mollie padded into the kitchen and stopped at the stove to check on supper. She lifted the cast-iron lid from her stew pot, peeked inside at the simmering Swiss steak and then looked at Angela. "You about finished with those rascals?"

"I'm on the last one now."

Mollie walked over and swept the onion skins and end pieces into her apron and peered into Angela's face. "He's not worth those tears."

Angela glanced at the diminutive woman and forced a shaky smile. "You're right. He's really not. But

it still hurts." How did Mollie always know if a tear was real?

"Well, there's plenty of fish in the sea—or deer on the mountain—as my Jim used to say." She emptied her apron into the wastebasket by the back door. "There are also several nice-looking young men at the church, I've noticed. You might meet someone there on Sunday."

Angela's heart squeezed at the thought of her adoptive grandmother's constant husband-hunt. She loved the woman dearly, the woman who had rescued her from Social Services, and raised her as her own grandchild. Mollie and Jim were the only family Angela had ever known.

"I never really cared for ol' what's-his-name anyway," Mollie said. She opened a lower cupboard door and pulled out another pot. "A little too wrapped up in himself, if you ask me."

Like a bad movie stuck on replay, Angela's memory flashed the image of what Aaron had *really* been wrapped up in. She dropped the knife in the sink and washed her hands under hot water. "You don't know how right you are, Mollie. Better to find out now than later, I guess."

Mollie patted Angela's back as she passed by on her way to the pantry. "Speaking of better"—the woman said from inside a closet off the kitchen—"there will be one more for supper this evening."

Here we go already.

Mollie rummaged around, sliding cans out and in as if looking for some vital, hidden ingredient. "Remember that nice man down the road I told you about who helped me with my sink drain?"

Angela knew exactly what Mollie was doing. She

was hiding. This was her standard way of broaching a touchy subject—casually, conversationally, from the security of the pantry shelves.

“He’s a boarder now and has the room at the end of the hall upstairs.”

No wonder Mollie was hiding.

“He bought the old Oxford place, if you remember. Fixing it up, he says.” Mollie stepped out of the tight little room with a slight flush, as if she’d bent over and all the blood rushed to her mischievous face. “His furnace is out and he needed a place to stay until he can replace it. Naturally, I offered him an upstairs room.”

Naturally.

“Besides, no one should be alone for Christmas, don’t you agree?”

How could she not agree with this lovable, hopelessly romantic woman? As Victorian as the house she occupied, Mollie had always considered a well-planned romance a thing of beauty, and frequently said so.

“He’s an architect, dear. And a wonderful handyman. He’s helped me with quite a few repairs.” She rifled through a large cutlery drawer for a manual can opener.

“Let me do that.” Angela took the tool from capable but aging hands and set the metal tooth against the rim of the green bean can. “I know what I’m getting you for Christmas.”

Mollie looked up with the delighted grin of a child. “What, dear?”

“An electric can opener. This is ridiculous.”

Mollie swept away the remark. “This old thing keeps my hands flexible. They have to be to turn it.”

For all Mollie's pretense of living in the past, the can opener was about the only thing in her house that wasn't cutting edge. The antique cook stove had been refitted with gas burners and a gas oven, and the oak-paneled ice-box door opened into a spacious, modern refrigerator with a freezer below. Forced air heat ran through every room, in spite of oak-mantled fireplaces upstairs and down, and a small sitting room on the main floor served as an office, complete with the latest computer, printer, and fax machine.

Mollie pulled two strips of bacon from a refrigerated package and laid them neatly in a cast-iron skillet. As they sizzled, she added a little of Angela's chopped onion and some freshly diced tomatoes.

"You could use a food processor, too. No more onion eyes."

Mollie ignored the suggestion. "Could you put some potatoes on to boil, dear?"

Angela retrieved several potatoes from a bin in the pantry and rinsed them in the sink. She had to give her grandmother credit. The woman knew how to keep hands busy when a heart was aching.

Matt Dawson noted the green Subaru parked in the drive. He pulled in front of the two-story, yellow Victorian and left his pickup at the curb. Mollie's school teaching granddaughter must have arrived. Home from Greeley for the holiday break with her fellow-teacher boyfriend. He'd heard all about Angela and her other half—for whom his landlady had a keen distaste. He smiled to himself recalling how Mollie maneuvered every conversation around to her

granddaughter. Her intentions were obvious, and he almost felt obligated to out-man the scholarly suitor spending two weeks at the Berthoud Boarding House. It shouldn't be hard—Matt had his degree in architectural design. Hopefully, he'd get his furnace replaced in a couple of days and return home for a peaceful, less feminine Christmas.

Not that Christmas had ever been that important.

He wiped his feet on the front porch mat, opened the ornate oak door, and walked into a wall of mouth-watering aroma. Maybe he could tolerate Mr. Education for a few days. Mollie's cooking surpassed anything he threw together, regardless of his degree. He already carried an extra pound or two around his middle. If he wasn't careful, he'd be letting his belt out a notch before New Year's Day.

"In the kitchen." Mollie's spry voice invited him down the hall, and he followed his nose to the homey room where two women busied themselves at the counter. Mollie faced him as she wiped her hands on her ever-present apron.

"Matthew Dawson, I'd like you to meet my granddaughter, Angela Murphy."

The other woman turned with a peeler in one hand, a potato in the other, and a pained expression on her face. With one wrist she swiped a stray lock of dark hair out of her face and met his gaze with red-rimmed eyes.

"Hi. Nice to meet you."

The flat tone of her voice said the meeting was anything but nice.

"Nice to meet you, too." For Mollie's sake, he'd play along. "I guess I should say welcome home. Your grandmother tells me you grew up in this house and

come home every Christmas and summer.”

Angela turned back to the sink and tipped her head to one side. “Yeah. This is home.”

Not very enthusiastic. Or welcoming. Drama queens he didn’t need. He looked at Mollie, who smiled sadly and shook her head.

“Dinner will be ready in about half an hour, Matthew. That will give you plenty of time to clean up after your long day of whatever you do all day out at the Oxford place.”

“Then I’ll see you ladies in a little while.” He backed toward the hall. “It sure smells good, Mollie. You’re going to make a fat man of me yet.”

The remark brought the desired lift to his hostess’s mouth and a blush to her cheeks.

“Flattery will get you second helpings for sure, Mr. Dawson.”

He took the stairs two at a time, thankful again that the boarding house had spare rooms this time of year. Motels were so cold and lonely. He looked through the open doorways as he passed the other two bedrooms. No suitcases or bags of any kind. No Mr. Teacher sprawled across one of the antique beds.

No matter. Right now he needed a shower, shave, and clean clothes. Sawdust had a way of working into his ears, nose, and under his collar, and he couldn’t wait to shed the gritty powder. At least he didn’t have to share the upstairs bathroom with anyone. Yet.

Dining table conversation that evening centered on Mollie running into Matt at the hardware store.

“She was determined to unclog her kitchen drain

herself and insisted the clerk sell her—what did you call it?”

“One of those twisty things you stick down the sink to unplug it.”

Matt laughed at the memory. “Right.” He waited for Angela to respond, but her detached expression led him to believe she’d not heard the comment. “Even from two aisles away I could hear your resolve and felt obligated to rescue that poor clerk.” He grinned at Mollie.

“Matt introduced himself as a part-time handyman and said he’d be happy to check the kitchen drain.” Mollie peeked at Angela seated to her right. Disappointment whisked over Mollie’s features, and she dabbed her mouth with a soft linen napkin.

“She took me up on the offer, and I’ve been busy ever since.” He smiled across the table, recalling not only her generous offer of temporary housing, but also her bold once-over appraisal before agreeing to let him help.

After he’d unclogged the kitchen sink, Mollie had found various odd jobs that needed immediate attention, and she casually threaded Angela’s name into each repair request. His benefactor had also managed to milk every bit of personal history out of him. Almost. He’d withheld a couple of more troubling details.

He caught Angela’s sideways glance at Mollie when the conversation lagged. The older woman’s hunched shoulders hinted at fatigue. Or disappointed expectations. Angela heaved a visible sigh, and Matt almost felt sorry for her. *Almost*. She was being rude and self-centered. Mollie had done a lot to prepare for her arrival. She could at least pretend to enjoy the

evening.

Angela reached for the mashed potatoes.

"These are so good, Mollie. Don't you want another helping?"

Maybe a little guilt had kicked in because Angela attempted a smile, and her grandmother brightened.

"Thank you, dear, I believe I will." She plopped a buttery serving on her plate. "You know, Matthew, Angie here makes mashed potatoes as good as these." She passed the bowl across the table to him. "Maybe even better."

He helped himself and followed up with the customary brown gravy he hated to leave behind. The sooner he moved out, the better. He didn't need a bunch of depressing female drama. He'd already had more than his share.

2

Ten days until Christmas. Two hundred and forty hours. And another week after that before school resumed. Angela had anticipated being home for Christmas, tucked away in a rural setting with magnificent mountain views and no school bells. With Aaron and no dumbbells. Now she doubted she'd survive the break from school—and the break from Aaron. Her heart had shattered like a china plate.

She should have seen it coming. Instead, she justified Aaron's excuses for spending more time at the gym on weekends and less time with her. He'd stopped bugging her to buy a membership, and she assumed he accepted the fact that she wasn't into working up a sweat, pushing around resistive bars, levers, and weights. She preferred to walk or ride bikes, do something outdoors, not be cooped up in a room with a bunch of smelly people she didn't know.

When he missed their scheduled departure Friday evening, she'd swung by the gym to see if he was caught up in his weight lifting. He was caught up all right: in about a hundred fifteen pounds of slick, spandex-wrapped blonde dumbbell hanging around his muscled neck. Angela stood in the entrance to the weightlifting room long enough for him to catch her reflection in the mirrored wall. It was worth the shock that rippled his face.

From the window seat in her room, she stared out

at Colorado's snow-draped Rockies. "God's love is like the mighty mountains." Mollie had told her that for as long as she could remember. The woman had made her feel wanted and loved right from the start. But rejection often lingered in the shadows, pointing a wicked finger and whispering, "No one wants you." She knew it wasn't true. Mollie and Jim had *chosen* her. They'd loved her and raised her to know that God loved her too.

But she'd thought Aaron loved her. And he chose someone else.

She sniffed, swiped at her eyes, and dashed cold water on her face in the bathroom before going to the kitchen.

A china teacup full of coffee waited on the table, a handwritten list tucked beneath the saucer.

Mollie stirred something at the stove. "Good morning." She pushed a white strand into her upswept hair and smiled over her shoulder. "After you have your coffee and a good breakfast, I'll need your help with a few things."

Angela slumped into a ladder back chair, added cream and sweetener to the coffee, and picked up the list. She didn't know where the woman got all her energy.

"Breads, sweet and plain. Cookies, pressed and frosted. Deliver boxes for shelter." She sipped the coffee. "Take baked goods to church. Help paint upstairs bedroom—what?"

"What *what*?" Mollie said as she poured beaten eggs into a hot skillet of chopped bell peppers and onions.

"I'm supposed to help Mr. Fix-it *paint*? Come on, Mollie. This is my vacation."

“Did you have something else planned for the next two and a half weeks?”

Angela looked at her workhorse grandmother. A perky bow sprouted from her waist, testimony that Mollie starched even her apron strings. The woman had been born a hundred years too late.

“Well, do you?” Mollie peered over her shoulder.

“No.”

“Good. I can use the help. It takes a lot of work to keep a place like this going. Especially during the Christmas season.”

“Do you have other guests coming?”

Mollie scooped the cooked eggs onto a china plate, sprinkled grated cheese over the top, and set it before Angela. “You never know, dear. I have to be prepared.”

You should have been a Boy Scout.

Guilt needled Angela for such a spiteful thought. Mollie was nothing, if not generous. She resolved to change her attitude and peppered the eggs.

“Are these chores listed in any particular order of importance?”

“They’re not *chores*, dear, but that’s a good question. Let me see.” Mollie poured herself a teacup of coffee and joined Angela at the table. “We must bake before we can deliver, so that will be the first job. We don’t want the house smelling like paint for Christmas, so that should be done early in the week.” She scrutinized Angela over her cup. “What do you think?”

Angela wasn’t about to tell her what she thought—that Mollie was deliberately pushing her at Matt. It irritated her, but she wouldn’t hurt the woman’s feelings. She’d simply have to suffer through the not-so-casual encounters. the same way she

suffered through slicing onions.

"Of course you're right about the baking. I can start on that this morning." Angela dug into the eggs. "Aren't you eating?"

"I ate with Matthew. He's an early riser and loves my Denver omelets." Mollie smiled sweetly from across the table.

The fastest way to Mollie's heart was through her cooking, that was for sure. "Denver omelet?" Angela assumed a school-girl pout. "I didn't get ham in mine."

"And you're shoveling it in like a lumberjack." Mollie took her cup to the sink. "More coffee?"

"No thanks. If I'm going to get any spare time, I'd better start on that baking as soon as possible." She picked up her plate and at the counter pulled her grandmother into a hug. "I love you, Mollie."

"I know you do, dear." Her grandmother returned a tight squeeze. "I love you, too, and I want to see you happy."

Angela took a step back. "I thought you wanted to see me busy."

Mollie laughed and tapped her finger on the end of Angela's nose. "That's what I said. I want to see you happy."

That had always been her grandmother's philosophy and no doubt explained why she was so alert and healthy at her age. She kept on the move and always had some project going.

Angela opened the apron drawer and pulled out a jumper style that slipped over her head and tied in the back. She might as well dress the part as long as she was here.

"Not that I'm interested, but for the sake of fairness, did you have a list for Mr. Fix-It too?"

“Oh, absolutely, dear. I have so many things that require a man’s touch, and he’s perfect for all of them. I need to take advantage of his abilities while he’s here.”

How long would that be? Maybe he’d be gone by the end of next week, and she could relax and be herself without feeling like a single-female display.

She found the big crockery bowl on the top pantry shelf and set it on the counter. Flour, sugar, canned pumpkin, spices, raisins and other ingredients soon filled the extra space. She started with sweet yeast dough to let rise while she made pumpkin, banana, and zucchini bread. This afternoon she’d punch down the dough and braid it into a Christmas wreath before baking it. Then she’d top it with drizzled butter-cream frosting and red and green candied cherries.

“Deck the halls with boughs of holly,” she sang softly as she kneaded the dough, plopped it into the bowl, and covered it with a thin tea towel. Even though she helped her third graders make paper chains and caramel-corn balls for their classroom tree each year, it never felt like Christmas until she started baking with Mollie.

Angela looked up to find the woman wearing a secretive smile on her pink lips.

“What?”

“Nothing, dear. It’s just good to hear you singing.” She smoothed her hands down the front of her apron. “Think I’ll go upstairs and pull out the decorations. I sent Matthew to get a permit so the two of you can cut a tree tomorrow after church.”

Before Angela could reply, her grandmother disappeared down the hall humming the familiar Christmas tune.