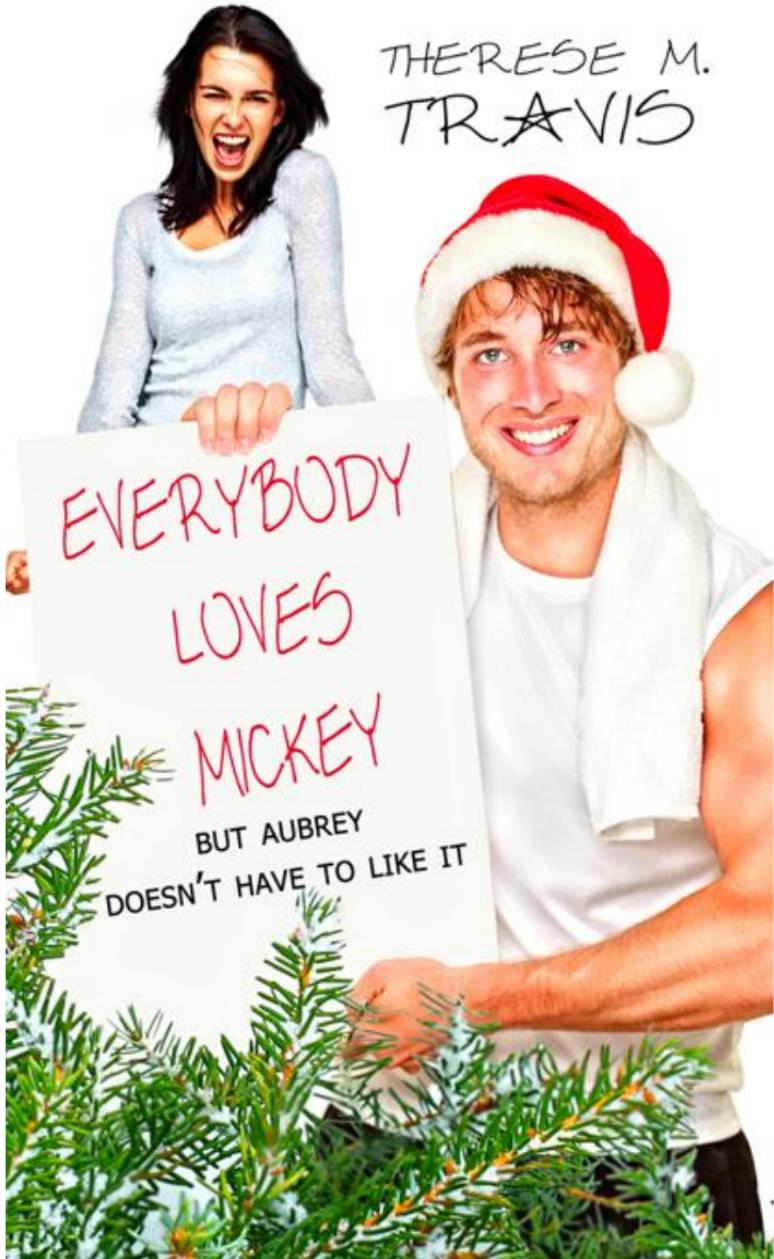


THERESE M.
TRAVIS



Everybody Loves Mickey

Therese M. Travis

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Everybody Loves Mickey

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Dedication

For the Tuesday ladies: Ann, Claudia, Maria and Miriam, thanks for the prayers, the tears, and the laughter.

1

We love Him because He first loved us. 1 John 4:19

Through the frosty square of safety glass plunked in the middle of her office door, Aubrey Thomas watched Mickey Hurst strut into the parish office reception area. Well, maybe he didn't strut. Maybe that was a little harsh. But he walked with all the confidence of a celebrity who knows he's loved.

Of course, it was true. Everybody loved Mickey. He was a fireman, a natural hero, good looking, had a voice to die for, and a personality to match. Just now, Bella, the receptionist, stared up at him like he had just granted her a million dollar tax deduction. Aubrey knew what that tilt to Bella's chin meant. She'd seen the look of admiration before.

Mickey stood with his hands in his pockets, throwing his head back with his great, booming laugh that Aubrey could hear through the closed door.

Then Bella pointed. Mickey turned, and Aubrey ducked out of sight. A second later a knock sounded, and she tucked a strand of hair behind her ear while she called, "Come in."

He did, all six feet plus of him, with the curly brown hair and blue eyes that would melt a confirmed man-hater's heart.

Oh, yes, everybody loved him, and people like

Bella were always shoving Mickey Aubrey's way. Those warm blue eyes and deep dimples just did something to her insides. But he couldn't look her in the eye, hadn't for three years, and that made it hard for Aubrey to believe Bella or any of the other matchmakers knew what they were about.

He'd done a lot of other things in those years. He'd turned his life around, given his heart to Jesus, persuaded the community that Rome ought to change its rules and proclaim him a saint before he died. But he hadn't met her gaze. Not once.

She'd been watching. That, and the fact that Mickey never seemed to either notice or mind the gossips, made her see red and plot murder on her off days. She'd been having a lot of off days lately. She hated feeling that way but really, it wasn't her fault.

Mickey. Hurst. Drove. Aubrey. *Nuts.*

Mostly because a huge part of her agreed Mickey belonged with her.

He slouched into her office and rubbed a hand over the faint stubble on his jaw. Her heart sang with the sound. Aubrey shushed it.

"Can I help you?"

Why couldn't she act casual? Everything she said came out of her mouth sounding like a formal office memo. But hurt feelings made her manner unwielding.

Not that Mickey cared.

The last time he had really paid attention to her was the day after he had made a drunken, hilarious pass at her. And she could have forgiven and forgotten, other than when she told it as a joke at parties, if he'd just gone on home, slept it off and never mentioned it again. But, oh, no, Mickey the Great, who could probably seduce a woman without knowing he

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was doing it, had come crawling to her apartment the next morning, looking like he'd gotten run over by a buffalo, just before it sat on him.

"I'm sorry," he'd said. "I am so sorry."

Even that would have been just fine, but he had to go on and dig a buffalo-sized hole for himself. "I shouldn't have done that. It was—I shouldn't have. Believe me, I would never have made a pass at you if I was sober. I swear, I'll never drink again."

As far as Aubrey heard—and she heard plenty—he never did.

From that day on Saint Mickey became a parish icon, a favorite in the pews, as popular as Father Julio. But *she* never forgave him for the insult that she wasn't worth making a pass at without a few beers in him. Or a lot of beers.

And here Aubrey had been thinking of that kiss as the start of something wonderful.

Now, Bella was probably giggling to herself at having been so clever, throwing Aubrey and Mickey together again, and Mickey the Awesome was once again in Aubrey's face. If it weren't for Mickey, people would think Aubrey was nice. But with him around, she could barely manage halfway decent.

"Bella says Father Julio is at the hospital with a parishioner and you're supposed to tell me where everything goes." Mickey stared at her nose while he spoke.

"Everything?" She raised her eyebrows, even though he probably wouldn't notice that part of her face.

"The nativity. You know what I'm talking about, don't you? I got a bunch of guys from the youth group to come help me move the statues into the church." He

turned in the direction of the parking lot, even though he couldn't see it through the walls, and kept staring that way.

Aubrey waited for him to actually show a sign he knew she had eyes. Or even a face to wear them in. He didn't. She sighed. "Right. Well, they go on the altar."

His mouth quirked and showed off a couple dimples that she wanted to—

No. She did not want to have anything to do with his dimples, no matter how deep or sweet or engaging or...Anyway, he didn't like her. He didn't *dislike* her; he just didn't *like* her. She told her heart to back off and pretended she needed something from her file cabinet. Not having to look at him—not looking at her—helped.

"It's a wide altar, and there are lots of statues to arrange." When she didn't answer, he said, "Tell you what, when we've got everything we need in the church, I'll call so you can come over to supervise. That way the guys'll still be there to put things in the right places."

She sighed again. "All right."

She'd tell him where to put his nativity, and maybe then he'd leave her alone. Again.

Mickey tossed the church keys from hand to hand on the way to the storage shed, and wished his heart wasn't pounding so loud he couldn't hear the music blasting from someone's car stereo. He'd never gotten over her. Never would. He'd just been monumentally stupid and made a pass at her and she'd never forgive him for that. He'd always had a crush on that Aubrey girl, but she held herself like he would need a

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stepladder to reach her. And then to wake up one morning and remember coming on to her, making a mess of trying to kiss her, because he'd had a little too much to drink—that had been Mickey's version of hitting bottom. He'd cleaned up, stopped drinking, even apologized to her, but he'd never since been able to look her in the eye. The shame of that night hung around his neck like Marley's chains, and anyway, she seemed to view him about as favorably as Scrooge did poor Bob Cratchet.

He rounded up the guys and between the six of them, they managed to get about a third of the statues moved on the first try. He debated locking the storage room door in between their trips to empty it, then shook his head. Nothing in there worth stealing, and if anyone tried, he'd have a time walking down the street hugging a painted plaster camel taller than he was. Wouldn't get far, anyway.

As he directed the guys on the last round, he frowned. Hadn't the manger, formed separately from the Child's figure, been pushed farther back, closer to the wall? And hadn't the baby Jesus been facing the other direction?

And what did it matter if it had? One of the guys had moved it, that was all. Nothing was missing.

He handed the Baby to Hector and hefted the manger out of the room, before he set it down and locked the door. The figure of the Baby wouldn't go into the manger for display until the Christmas Eve Mass, but Father Julio had told him it would be stored in one of the rooms behind the altar until then. That reminded him. He pulled out his cell and thumbed the number. "Hey, sweetheart—" He gulped, stammered, "I mean, Aubrey. We're ready for you."

The pause went on so long he had to check to see if he still had service. Then Aubrey said, "All right," and hung up.

If only he could crawl behind the altar and hide himself along with the Baby figure. He really had to find a better way to guard his tongue. He had a lousy enough track record with Aubrey as it was.

His face still burned when she got to the church. She walked up the aisle, her heels clacking on the marble, alternately washed in jeweled light from the stained glass windows and hidden in shadows.

Without even being aware of it, his heart started its plea to God, begging for a second or third or one thousandth chance with this girl. *Change her heart, Lord, because mine belongs to her, and sometimes I think I'll die if she doesn't decide to love me back.*

She reached the group of young men and statues.

"Camels and wise men go to the back of the church, in the vestibule. They're still on their journey. They don't arrive until the sixth of January." She pointed to the back, and two of the guys got together to heft one of the camels.

She turned and waved toward the altar. "Mary and Joseph up there, the manger between them, the animals crowded around. They all need to be looking at the empty manger. The Baby goes behind the altar. Here, I'll take care of Him."

"Father Julio told me where He goes." Mickey clutched the Baby to his chest. If she got any closer to him, much less close enough for him to smell her perfume again, he couldn't promise a hold on his restraint.

"Fine." She turned to walk away.

"Wait."

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Good thing dirty looks never had much effect on him, or Aubrey would have slayed him a long time ago.

"Don't you want to check and make sure we put everything in the right place?"

"I'll come back later."

"The guys might be gone by the time you get back, and I can't move most of these things alone. At least, not those camels."

Her sigh shivered down his spine, probably not the message she intended to give. "How long will it take? I'm really busy."

He glanced at his crew. "Twenty minutes? Or I could call you again before we leave, and you could come back."

She opened her mouth, then closed it as if she was breaking candy canes with her jaws. After a moment she seemed to sag in surrender. "I'll stay. I'll be over here." She muttered something else, and Mickey thought she said she'd be praying.

She's praying, God, he pointed out. Look at that. She's praying and I'm praying and it's the perfect time to zap her. I mean, I know You don't deal in love potions but You're all about hearts. You can do this. After a pause, and a session with straps and grunting and time spent kneeling on top of the altar maneuvering statues onto it, he remembered to add the disclaimer, *If it be Your will.*

But how could it not? Mickey believed Bella's claim that he and Aubrey were made for each other. Aubrey didn't seem to have caught on yet, but that was what prayer was for. He watched her bent head, and the mixture of love and confidence and fear filling him almost drove him crazy. She had no idea what she put him through.

2

Aubrey's cell vibrated as she gave her final approval to the nativity. It really did look nice, and Mickey had come up with a way to position the wise men and their camels in the vestibule that left more room for the people who liked to gather there before and after services. She'd told him so, and she hadn't missed the looks the young men from the youth group exchanged.

Maybe they couldn't believe she had it in her to be polite to him. She could—sometimes—and they didn't have to know how hard she fought to remain respectful. If he didn't act like he believed all the hype about his impeding sainthood, she might have had an easier time of it.

She shook her head. Mickey had no real conceit. *Aubrey* had a hard time because of her pride. And three years of prayer hadn't changed her enough to forgive him. Yet.

"Hey, Bella," she said into her cell. "I'm on my way. What's up?"

"Don't! Stay in the church until Mickey can walk you back."

"What? Why?" But her steps faltered before she reached the door and she turned back to see Mickey saying good-bye to his helpers. If this were another of Bella's matchmaking attempts, she might end up yelling at somebody. But Bella sounded a little too

panicked for simple meddling.

"The market across the street was held up and someone reported the guy ran onto the church property. They're still looking for him, but they said to be careful. They don't know if he had a gun or not."

"OK, got it." Aubrey shut the phone and rushed toward the guys. After she explained, they shrugged at each other, clearly unimpressed.

"We all came together. Two cars. No one's gonna mess with us." Lance swaggered and one of his friends punched his shoulder.

Mickey pushed them toward the door. "You go quickly, and I'll walk Miss Thomas back to the parish office."

"Sure, sounds good." They exchanged more waggled eyebrows, and though Mickey growled, it didn't stop their laughter. Aubrey clenched her jaw and glared at their backs, but she refused to look at Mickey. She had no desire to find out what he thought of it all. Not that she could tell from his eyes; he still wouldn't look at her.

After the boys drove off, Mickey waved his hand. "Are you ready to go?"

"It's a hundred yards. I'm perfectly safe." But if she hadn't known he'd ignore her claims and insist on protecting her, she wouldn't have protested. Aubrey didn't like the sound of the word *gun*.

And now, for the first time in three years, Mickey Hurst touched her. He took her elbow, his fingers warm and electric through the fabric of her blouse, and he moved close enough that she felt him all along that side, like static zinging up and down her nerves. Every part of her remembered that one kiss and hoped he might repeat it.

Yeah, right.

"I'll walk you."

She'd spent so much time trying to convince herself that he was a jerk, beyond redemption—time wasted if she considered how her heart was acting right then—that she hadn't spent much on noticing what a nice guy he was. A truly decent man who worried about a person's safety, whether he cared for that particular person or not. Three years hard avoidance down the drain. She fell right back into that wide-eyed, impressionable girl just out of college, who had fallen under Saint Mickey's spell, just like everyone else.

Bella opened the office door and ushered the two in. "The police are doing a thorough search of the grounds. Did you see them? Did you see anyone else? A stranger?"

Aubrey started to say no, but Mickey said, "I saw a couple cops in the parking lot. I figured they were doing their job."

So why hadn't Aubrey seen them? Oh, yeah, because, despite all her private little talking-tos, all her self warnings, all her reminders of reality, she'd been up there walking on cloud nine instead of on the sidewalk. All because he'd touched her elbow. She was a case, that was for sure.

"You're going to wait here, aren't you? You won't go out until they catch the guy." Bella grabbed Mickey's arm as if she could keep him from leaving. "Anyway, we're doing the staff Christmas party, and you have to pick your Secret Santa."

"Um, I'm not staff." Mickey looked like he thought he was the one making the mistake. With that slightly shamefaced wrinkle between his blue eyes and the

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little curl of brown hair falling across his forehead, he probably knew no woman would ever blame him for a thing, whether he'd done it on purpose or not.

Except for Aubrey.

And she really had to get over that habit.

"No, really, you have to come. You're always here, always helping out. Everyone loves you, you know that. Anyway, all kinds of people who aren't on the payroll are coming." She thrust a basket filled with folded slips of paper at him, shook it, and waited for him to dip in and come up with one. Then she shoved the basket under her desk.

"Am I invited?" Aubrey asked.

Bella busied herself with a stack of papers. "Of course. You're staff. Why would you think you're not?"

Aubrey crossed her arms. "Because you didn't ask me to pick *my* Secret Santa."

Bella did the avoiding-her-eyes trick. "Silly. I can get to you anytime."

But why wait?

"I'm going now." Mickey sidled out the door.

Bella shoved Aubrey out after him. "You'd better go with him if you want to leave on time. Mickey, walk Aubrey to her car, please?"

Aubrey shook her off. "I need my sweater and my purse."

"He'll wait."

He would, too, because he *was* a nice guy. A knight-in-shining-armor kind of guy.

After she closed the office door behind her, Aubrey glanced at Mickey. "I wonder who's going to walk Bella to her car."

"I'll make sure she's OK. Maybe Father Julio will

be back by the time she's ready to leave."

Aubrey nodded, wishing he weren't so nice and careful and remote.

"It'll be all right," Mickey said, and Aubrey got the idea he meant something besides the worry over the robbery, as though he'd seen inside her mind, seen more clearly than she had, and wanted to reassure her.

How could he know what she felt? And how could he promise things would be all right when he was the one making her so miserable?

Oh, if she ever caught that blighted robber, she'd ream him. She really would, because if he hadn't caused such a panic, Mickey would never have touched her and she would still be under the illusion that she didn't like him any more.

Knight in shining armor indeed!

Mickey strolled into the church where the choir director was holding a series of extra practices for all choirs: mixed, men's, women's, youth, and children's. Once upon a time Aubrey had belonged to the mixed choir. Five minutes after Mickey joined, which was about half an hour after he gave his heart to Jesus, Aubrey quit. She'd shown up a couple weeks later in the women's choir, largely, Mickey had heard, because the director had begged, bribed, and shamed her into it. Mickey was pretty sure she'd left because of him.

When Aubrey walked into the church, Gus, the director, grabbed her arm, shoved her next to Mickey and announced, "I want you two to sing a duet, 'O, Holy Night,'" making it hard for Aubrey to ignore him.

But she managed. She lifted her tipped-up little

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nose in the air, and her green eyes flashed as she said, "Oh, no, I couldn't." She walked right past him as if he were no more than a hymnal she had to step over, or she wouldn't have paid him any attention at all.

"I spent hours on the arrangement." Gus tried to catch her and drag her back, but she evaded him with some good moves. So good that Mickey wondered if she had ever played football. If not, she ought to. She'd be really popular on the youth team.

Mickey would show up for every game.

"Aubrey Thomas, you have the perfect voice for this."

If Gus scolded Mickey like that, he'd have done whatever the director ordered. Not Aubrey. She slid into the pew next to Sister Mary Elizabeth and whispered something, all the time showing off her endearing smile.

Gus growled, "Aubrey Thomas," again, and that time, Aubrey's face went red.

Mickey would have ducked except then he wouldn't have been able to see the fallout. Still, he moved a few feet out of range. Aubrey had excellent aim, as he had reason to know, but she could always claim she'd smacked him, and not Gus, by accident.

Of course, if she hit him, well, that would be touching.

He moved closer to Gus.

"Oh, my dear, you really must, you know." Sister Mary Elizabeth's sweet, quavery voice broke the stunned and expectant silence. "All for the glory of God. You can't deny Him your talents."

Now, even Mickey could see it. The tiny nun had turned into the snake in the garden. The bringer of evil. She'd backed Aubrey into a corner and how could the

girl get out of it with her dignity, and her reputation for faithful service, intact?

She couldn't. They were going to sing a duet together. Oh, the opportunities! Practice several times a week, with only Gus—and probably every other choir member in the church, considering how invested they all were in his and Aubrey's non-relationship—as chaperones. Hot chocolate afterwards, to soothe their throats. He could walk her home in the crisp evenings, or drive her if it happened to rain. She'd start to look for him every time she came to a service, find excuses to turn up on the school grounds when he came to teach Catechism or hang out with the youth. She'd get the shivers every time he hit a particularly resonant note, and catch his eye—

If he ever managed to look at her. His shoulders sagged, and Aubrey finished off his daydream with a vicious snort. "Fine, I'll sing but that's as far as it goes."

"There you are, my dear. That's the Christian response." And Sister Mary Elizabeth patted Aubrey's hand.

Mickey had to laugh along with everyone else—even Aubrey—because Sister Mary Elizabeth said it with all sincerity.

Gus handed them each a copy of the music. "We'll go over it privately later, no sense in the whole choir staying for that. You won't mind." It wasn't a question.

Mickey could not look at Aubrey. If he did, she'd slay him with a glare more lethal than Medusa's.

OK, so was this duet good or bad? Mickey couldn't decide until Gus turned away from Aubrey and winked. And then Sister Mary Elizabeth winked. And Bella winked. And a couple guys from the Youth Group choir, and almost all the teenage girls. And his

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best friend from junior high, who had been married for five years and so obviously had had no trouble entrancing the girl of his dreams. They were all in on it.

Good, he decided. Very good.

Now, to convince Aubrey.

What had she just said? In front of all five choirs. Inside the church. Full of young children and teenagers. With impressionable minds. Oh, she'd always known her big mouth would get her in trouble and she'd been right.

And Sister Mary Elizabeth. *What* had she been thinking? She'd been teaching school for more than fifty years, and she'd just told all those children that Aubrey had done the Christian thing.

Which left Aubrey with the job of making it right. And she had to move quickly, before those young minds forgot the act and only remembered the erroneous lesson. She forced her feet toward Mickey, and the rest of the choir scrambled out of her way like ants facing a can of bug spray. Mickey stared at her, for once almost getting his gaze up to her face. Deer in the headlights didn't begin to describe his expression. Poor guy probably wished she wouldn't talk to him. She stopped in front of him and held out her hand. "Mickey, that was a horrible thing I said. I'm sorry."

The hush that had followed her charge up to face him exploded into whispers. Gossiping in church. At least she wasn't party to it. Just the main subject. Lovely.

Mickey stared at the neckline of her red sweater, with its prim white collar and holly leaf bow, and