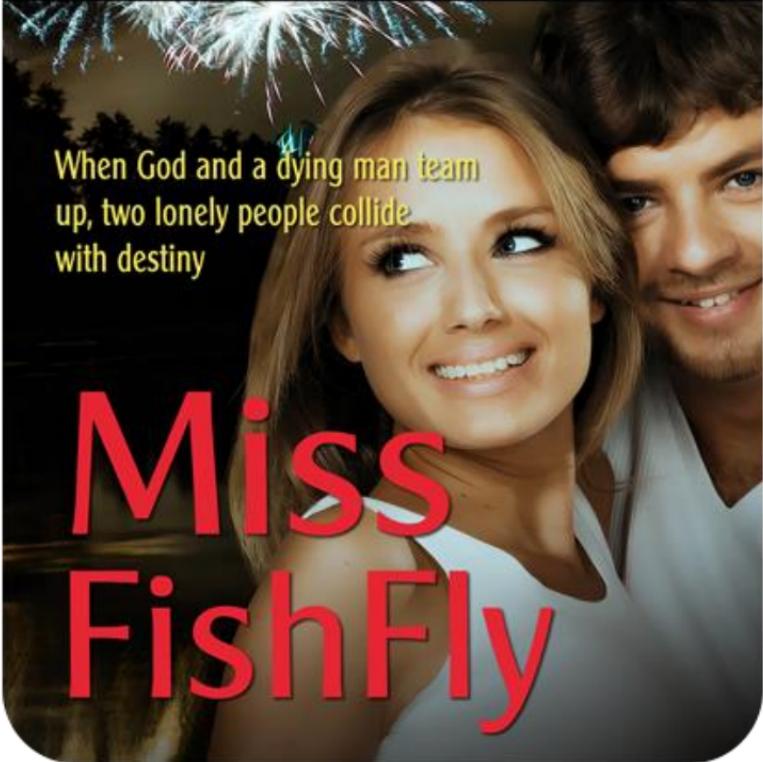




Linda S. Glaz



When God and a dying man team
up, two lonely people collide
with destiny

Miss FishFly

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MISS FISHFLY

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Dedication

To my Lord who has blessed my life beyond
reason...and then some.

Praise

Polar Bear Plunge

Heartwarming, funny, and poignant...a real winner...the perfect “curl up under a warm blanket with a cup of hot chocolate in front of the Christmas tree” book. ~ Deborah Dee Harper, author

1

Christie Hayes fluffed the bottom layers of Aleni's silk wedding gown, dreaming of a marriage of her own when she should have been concentrating on her maid of honor duties. "When you said you'd be wearing your mother-in-law's wedding dress, I thought you'd be wearing puffy sleeves and a headdress that dips over your forehead, not this beautiful silk gown and cap."

Aleni smiled over her shoulder. "You all right?"

Taking in this scene of perfection, Christie choked back a sob. "I'm fine. Really. Let's concentrate on today, your day."

"That doctor you were dating." Aleni frowned. "He responded 'no' to my invitation."

Chewing her lip, Christie stared at the floor. "I'm sure he didn't want to run into me."

"You two broke up?"

Christie slumped into the chair next to the mirror. "We did. I know you warned me." Her face crumpled into a frown. "He was seeing that pediatric nurse, Sara, on the fifth floor." Christie lifted her head, jutted her chin out. "You were right about all of it. And I was wrong." Her heart stuttered. "About so many things, Aleni. So many."

"Oh, Christie. I didn't tell you so I could be right." Aleni leaned down and hugged her. "When are you going to find a guy who will treat you like a princess?"

Bad boys might be exciting, but they don't change because of a promise or even a wedding ring. All guys with bad reps may not stay that way forever, but do you want to take the chance? You deserve better."

Not wanting to appear helpless, Christie pushed at Aleni's arms. "Let's not talk about men. I don't...well, I'm not smart like you. I can't tell if they love me or they're just saying it to make me happy. I've ridden the roller coaster of bad boys, and I still can't tell the difference."

"When a man loves you, you'll know. He won't have to tell you in words. There won't be any guesses, and the man won't pressure you into a relationship. There's more to love than sex, Christie Hayes."

Christie turned away, dabbing at her eyes. "I know. I just feel loved when there's a man in my life."

"Maybe, maybe not." Aleni pushed a curl off Christie's face. "I'm not a shrink. Only you know what you're searching for. Now, stop crying or your makeup will run down your cheeks faster than an overflowing creek."

Christie stared in the mirror. "Will run? Look at me. I already look like a raccoon. C'mon, girl. Don't let me keep whining. You're about to marry the most wonderful man in the world."

"I am, that." Gathering her skirt, Aleni did a one-eighty of the room. "Where'd Ty run off to?"

Christie re-applied her foundation and dabbed it with blusher. "He's with Brice. Your little man is putting on his jacket. How did you find a size four tux?"

"Megan found it. Not as rare as we thought. His father would be so proud of him." Her hands skimmed the edges of the flowers. Tears filled her eyes. "Eli was

a good husband and father, but Brice will be, too. I am truly twice blessed."

"You really are blessed, Aleni. If I believed in that stuff, that is."

Aleni grabbed her arms with both hands. "You could be, too, Christie. If only you'd allow—"

"Not today, OK? Maybe when you get back from your honeymoon. I said I'd go to church with you—once. All right? Then, no more about it." She wasn't looking forward to it, but going to church one more time wouldn't kill her if it would make Aleni and Brice happy.

"Deal," Aleni said. "Doesn't Megan's dress look wonderful? I can't believe she offered to let me wear it. And the veil's *her* mother's."

Christie adjusted the small head-hugging cap. "So much prettier than those huge headpieces they wore in the eighties. This is lovely and perfect with the dress. Brice is going to faint when he sees you."

"Oh, sure. Big bad soldier survives the madness of Iraq to come home and faint in front of a church full of people. How embarrassing would that be?" She giggled and pressed the flowers to her nose. "I can't believe you arranged these. They're gorgeous. And from Megan's garden. I never realized how delicious peonies smell. Thanks, Christie. I couldn't have done any of this without you and Megan."

Christie smiled at the compliment and grabbed Aleni's arm. "You hear that music? It's calling your name. I think we'd better get out there."

Megan peered around the corner. "Everyone's waiting, missy. There's a man who wants to marry you. And a little man who wants a new daddy—officially." She grinned, but Christie recognized the

hint of sadness in her eyes. Her son, Eli, had died in Iraq. And now, her daughter-in-law was marrying Brice Taylor, whom she welcomed with open arms.

"Get a move on."

Cole Keller smiled as Brice elbowed him in the arm. The maid of honor floated over the petal-strewn runner, her dress skimming the ground in the back.

Another beautiful woman followed.

Aleni had gorgeous friends.

"Not bad, huh?" Brice tilted his head in the first attendant's direction.

Beautiful didn't say it. The yellow dress hugged her like a kid glove. And even though she had strawberry-blonde curly hair pulled up into some kind of bun, some long strands of hair fell around her face like a picture frame. Tiny little thing. Whew, she outshone the bride.

Cole swallowed hard. It had been a very long time since a woman caught his attention in this way. Bennie had seen to that. She'd told him she loved him, promised to marry him, and then she'd run off with one of his closest friends while he was stuck in an Iraqi cell. His new mantra was love 'em and move on. After all, what woman would want to settle down with a man who had his colorful past?

The path that led to the altar of the church was covered in pink and creamy white rose petals tossed by the flower girl.

In no time, Christie arrived in front of the church mere feet from the handsome best man. She caught herself peeking to study the tall, well-built, warrior.

So that was Brice Taylor's war buddy, Cole. Wow. Easier on the eyes than Brice, and that said something. Blond hair still in the military brush cut she imagined he'd worn all through his service. And instead of the expected blue eyes that went so well with blond, this guy's were coffee brown. He had a familiar look, but they hadn't met before.

Probably the pictures from Brice's book, *The Human Shield*.

How had Brice hauled such a big guy out during their escape? Thank goodness, though. What a waste it would have been to leave him behind.

Jenna jabbed her in the ribs. "Christie. Your gaze," she whispered, "should be on the bride."

Drawing everyone's attention, Aleni floated down the aisle. Once she reached the front, Ty stepped to her side, grabbed her hand, and without waiting for the invitation said, "I gives her to Mr. Brice. But I'm gonna keep her, too." Then he turned to the applauding guests and bowed. "Thank you." He stepped back towards Cole and hugged the big man's leg. "D'I do good?"

Christie made eye contact with Cole and shrugged her shoulders. Her heart melted when he reached down and lifted Ty into his arms.

"Great job, buddy."

One had to love a man who cared for children.

2

Christie stood amongst the other girls all vying for position for the coveted bouquet.

Aleni honed in on Christie's face as if to say, "Hold your hands up, girlfriend. This bouquet's for you."

Christie caught the fragrant bouquet in her outstretched fingers rather than have it strike her in the head.

Across the floor, Cole nodded and headed in her direction. Arriving, he grasped her elbow. "Always an awkward moment, isn't it?"

She laughed.

He leaned in and murmured in her ear, "Don't worry. No one puts any stock in that old bouquet bit anymore. Besides, how can you be an old maid at twenty-three?"

"Twenty-four, thank you."

He flipped the curl off her forehead and clipped the end of her nose. "Just making small talk." In a complete one-eighty, he looked across the room at Brice and Aleni. "Think they'll enjoy Mackinac Island? They're going to be treated like royalty."

"Is that how it works?"

Brice nodded. "I attended a weekend seminar there before I shipped out. It was off season, and the residents treated us as if we were the only guests they'd ever had. We had an amazing time."

Christie sighed. Maybe one day she'd use some of

Miss Fishfly

that overtime pay she made working extra shifts at the hospital and spend a weekend in style.

Brice called to Cole and he excused himself. That was fine.

As maid of honor, Christie had several duties to fulfill. The hours passed quickly, and when she looked at her watch, she was amazed.

3

“Christie, Mr. Hartway’s back and up to his old antics. Can you give Trish a hand?”

“Sure, I’ll help out.” Christie finished her notes and hurried down the hall. As she approached Hartway’s room, her gaze fell on shoulders wide and thick. A man’s back that screamed for a second look.

Big Shoulders turned and stared. “Christie?”

“Cole. What are you doing here?”

“This is my grandfather’s room.”

She stepped towards the door of the room, and then went inside.

“How’s he doing?”

“I didn’t know he had grandchildren.” She turned back and locked eyes with Cole. “Could I speak with you outside?”

Cole flattened his hand against the small of her back and guided her from the room. “Is anything wrong?”

She nipped the edge of her lip. His hand sent rivers of warmth up her back.

“Has Dr. Littlefield talked to you yet?”

“Sure. Said Gramps is worse, but I think we all expected that. We’ve watched him drop almost thirty pounds in the last two months. I don’t suppose any of us hold out much hope.”

“I’m so sorry. The cancer is progressing, as we all knew it would without intervention. And he was adamant about that. What did Littlefield tell you with

respect to a time frame?"

"About two months, tops. Gramps wants to make it to the Fourth of July. Says he'll go happily if he can see the fireworks one more time. Says it reminds him of 'Nam. He lost a lot of buddies, and he likes to pay his respects when the fireworks explode. Quite a sight to see him stand in the front of the red, white, and blue sparks, saluting. He's a good man, Christie. I don't want him to suffer."

"He won't. We'll all see to that. We've got six weeks 'til the Fourth. Maybe he'll get his wish after all."

Cole gazed at the hard plastic chairs along the hallway. They were sterile, almost aloof in appearance and feel. He kept his gaze away from Christie.

As cute and perky as she'd appeared at Brice's wedding, he figured her in more of a happy people-person job. He wouldn't have envisioned her as one who would be at a dying man's bedside. But Christie seemed unusually attached to his grandfather.

"What made you choose nursing?" he asked.

"I wanted a career, something that would always be needed, that wouldn't be subject to layoffs, or downsizing. I have to take care of myself. I'm not the brightest bulb like Aleni, but I worked hard in nursing school and finally made it.

"It's a sometimes dirty job, dealing with sick people, hurting people, and of course, death. Some families can't handle a nurse's long hours during times of crisis, or their being called out. A lot of men in particular...don't like my job, or me for doing it."

He lifted her chin with his thumb. "I like you just the way you are."

"Thank you. I needed that today. You have no idea how much."

Someone had hurt this girl. Some jerk out for a good time with no strings. Like himself.

What had Brice told him? "You don't respect women for who they are, only what they can give you, Cole. You need to get your life straightened out spiritually if you ever want to settle down with a good woman."

Like God had ever cared about him. His parents had fought like conservatives and liberals in an election year, every day of every year of his life.

If it hadn't been for his grandfather's calming influence, he might have taken more risks in Iraq, but he knew he had to come back for Gramps and his sister, Morgan.

He thought he'd come back to Bennie, too, but she had other ideas when she ran off with his best friend, Justin. Oh, well. Life's surprises kept the blood pumping and a man cautious.

"Sorry you had a bad day. Maybe a cup of coffee when your shift's done?"

"Thanks, but I'm pulling a double. They haven't replaced Aleni yet."

"They're happy, aren't they? I never would have pegged Brice for a daddy, but he's taken to the responsibility."

"I think it's because he doesn't think of it as responsibility, but a joy. They are very happy. I guess some men take to family and some don't." She stepped around him and left the room.

He watched her walk away.

Christie rounded the nurses' station. Maybe she should have accepted his offer for coffee, even if it meant cafeteria fare.

"Christie?" Her boss narrowed her brow. "I wanted you to know why you didn't get the position."

She waved her hand, dismissing all the reasons as unimportant and not intending to go down that road again. "No problem."

"Christie, Jennifer has her Masters. I was overruled. But I wanted you to know, you're a great asset to my floor. And I hope you realize how important you are here. Bless you."

Bless me? She sounds like Aleni.

"Thanks, I appreciate that."

The sound of metal. She turned to see a bedpan bouncing off the wall behind her. She went back to the old man's room.

"Mr. Hartway! Good to see you feeling better."

And time to call housekeeping.

4

Christie tossed her jacket on the back of the chair, jarring the top of the desk. The small fishfly bobblehead wiggled back and forth. Had she really kept the toy all these years?

Miss Anchor Bay.

Her friend Kelly had called her Miss Fishfly. After all, the festival honored the clingy little pests that arrived along with the hot, steamy weather on Anchor Bay.

She'd been a beauty queen for a forgotten little pageant, one that had started her on the road to taking care of herself by giving her the means to attend nursing school. She wondered what Cole would think about Miss Fishfly.

Cole oozed points on his man card. She pictured women drooling on him as he and Brice toured for Brice's book. A girl in this town, another in the next.

More tired than hungry, Christie walked through the living room, down the hallway, and into her bedroom. She collapsed on the bed. The fluffy pink and sage green quilt welcomed her. These long shifts were hard, but home eased the stress.

She glanced at the framed picture sitting on her nightstand. Had her parents been happy before her father started drinking? Why had such a genial family man turned into a monster? Now, her mother was dead and her father was...well, she didn't have a clue.

After Mom died, he'd packed up and left. The only

correspondence had come from an attorney when she turned twenty-one. The deed to the house had been officially put in her name.

Without changing into pajamas, Christie crawled under her quilt and tugged it over her shoulders. The soft, creamy cotton was warm, comfortable, and afforded her a wonderful place to wipe her eyes.

Cole pounced at the chance to watch Ty so Aleni and Brice could go out to dinner. "I really don't mind." He ruffled Ty's dark hair. "My buddy and I are going for extra-cheese pizza and chocolate ice cream, and then we have a date with a cartoon and some buttery popcorn."

Ty danced from foot to foot. "Yummy."

Brice pulled out his wallet. "Let me at least pay for the yummy pizza. Or the antacids to follow all that food."

"Brice, I could buy your son pizza for the rest of my life and still not repay you for all you've done. It's on me. Besides," he leaned in, "the little man's a babe magnet. You should see the ladies when I have him with me."

"I should have known." Brice picked up Ty and tossed him in the air until he squealed for more. He leaned in the direction of the hallway. "Aleni, you about ready?"

Cole chuckled. "I'm serious about the babes."

"I know you are. That's the saddest part. You need to find one woman. Settle down. Have a son of your own. There's nothing like it, man."

"You're married to the only woman who could

have tempted me. Who'd want an old has-been like me, anyway? I'm on my own, Brice." He sucked back a breath and shrugged when Brice narrowed his eyes. "But look at it this way. You get a ready-made sitter whenever you need one."

Her cell rang at...nine o'clock? "Hello?"
Breathing, a couple scrambling noises. Silence.
"Hello?"
"This Christie?"

"Yes, and who's this?" She sat up. The breathing continued, heavier and heavier. "Oh, c'mon. The breathing thing gets really old, really quick." She slammed down the phone and ran her hand through her hair. Creepy, but probably a teenager dialing to torment at random.

Her stomach grumbled. She hadn't eaten supper. She slid into a pair of well-worn, but comfortable slippers and padded to the kitchen. Colorful plates filled the open shelves.

A fridge brimming with takeout invited her to load one of the dishes with a sweet and savory salad. She poured on way too much dressing, and her mouth watered as she speared the first leaf.

Later, drying the last dish and putting it away, she lounged against the edge of the sink.

Who would have called her this late? Probably the Winston kid two houses down. He and his friends loved playing tricks on the neighbors. She'd have to have a talk with his father.

Her phone rang again.

"Listen, Zak. You and your friends call somebody

else. I've had enough tonight. Knock it off, or I'm going straight to your dad!"

"Uh...I'm not Zak. I don't make crank calls, and my dad lives in the UP. You'll have to yell really loud to tell him how badly I'm behaving." A soft chuckle came from the other end of the line.

"Who is this?"

"Colton Keller."

"Cole."

"I'm sorry to be calling so late, but Brice and Aleni aren't answering their cells. Ty's not feeling well, and I can't reach Megan. Sorry if I sound a bit frantic, but this isn't my forte."

"What are his symptoms?"

"Rubbing the side of his face, crying. I'm lost here. I don't have any idea what to do." He sounded genuinely worried.

"Aleni told me he's had trouble with his molar coming in. So he might run a fever—"

"A fever! Ummm...I'm not exactly a genius when it comes to kids. I don't know what to do."

"Are you at Brice and Aleni's?"

"Yeah."

"Give me about twenty minutes and I'll be there. As for Brice and Aleni, I think they had backstage passes. They probably had to turn off their cell phones in the theatre. Hold on and don't panic."

Cole breathed what she could only assume was a sigh of relief. "I can hold on, but don't count on the no-panic deal."