

Candice Sue
PATTERSON

*She needs the future. He needs the past.
Together they find the true meaning of Christmas.*

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Dedication

This story is for your glory, Lord.

To the two most important men in my life:
Adam, my best friend, devoted husband, and now my
best brainstorming partner. God gave me you.

To Daddy, my miracle. You'll never know how special
you are to me.

1

Darcy Carr hated Christmas.

Well, she didn't *hate* Christmas. She loved celebrating Christ's birth, but on the cusp of thirty-two—and single—she found the family-driven holiday just...depressing. It hadn't held innocent wonder since 1994. No holiday had. December twenty-fifth loomed before her, holding nothing but a frozen dinner and a twenty-four hour marathon of *The Christmas Story* with her cat.

Best not get ahead of herself. She had to survive Thanksgiving first.

Darcy fingered the scruff of her cat's neck, his deep purr vibrating her fingertips. "Well, what do you think?"

Gomez blinked. With his paws stretched across her stomach, he yawned, snarling the black fur on his upper lip that resembled a pencil-thin mustache. He lowered his head and sighed.

She imitated the noise. "My thoughts exactly."

Her legs filled the length of the padded window seat. Translucent fog clung to the corners of the glass. Mammoth snowflakes danced in the air like God had opened a giant feather pillow.

Her gaze drifted to the snow-dusted welcome sign across the street, two houses down. *Christmastown, Vermont*. The perfect tourist destination to expand her wreath business. The sales of her online supplies,

ready-made wreaths, and instructional videos were climbing, but she wanted an economically secure place to hold classes as well. She'd found it here.

Gold, red, and green decorations transformed historic homes, since converted to businesses, into giant Christmas packages. Old-fashioned lampposts lined the streets. Pine garlands twisted around their bases with velvety, red bows glowing from halos of gaslight. The village burst with bed-and-breakfasts, specialty shops, candy stores, a coffee house, restaurants, and the community church at the edge of town, its large, white steeple peering above the pine trees. With the bakery next door, the crisp air smelled like Grandma's kitchen. Every inch of everything screamed Christmas. And would every day. All. Year. Long.

The sound of metal scraping against concrete broke the silent dawn. She checked the house across the street as the noise echoed louder. The house didn't exhibit one shred of decoration. Odd. Why hadn't she noticed it before? The structure itself fit right in, but the lack of adornment made it stark and lonely.

Did an elderly person live there, too feeble to keep up the tradition? After Darcy finished unpacking, she'd go over and introduce herself. They could probably use the company, and she could too.

A bulky silhouette emerged from the side of the naked house. A man scooped his shovel with ease, pitching snow from the sidewalk into the yard. Orange and purple sunrays splashed across his masculine features, revealing dark hair protruding from beneath a black cap and a couple days' worth of scruff. That was no elderly person.

She squinted for a clearer view. He appeared to be

around her age and, from what little she could see, quite handsome.

The clamor ceased, and he used a broom to sweep away snow from a large wooden plaque beside the porch light. Darcy squinted again. *Whitfield Copper, since 1898*. A business? Why didn't it match the rest of the town?

Gomez sprang from her lap and landed with a thud on the hardwood floor, distracting her investigation. He meowed and padded in a circle on the braided rug in front of the fireplace. Breakfast.

"All right, I'm coming." She threw her legs to the floor and made her way to the kitchen, though not without one last peek at her intriguing neighbor. The bottom of her slippers shuffled over the wood planks. She hugged her oversized cardigan tighter around her middle as the cooler temperature of the kitchen penetrated through to her skin. Owning a Victorian home was a dream come true, though the realtor failed to tell her how difficult heating it would be.

After feeding her kitty and pouring a cup of coffee, she snuggled back onto the window seat, disappointed to find Mystery Man gone. Darcy cringed. She was already transitioning into the nosy cat-lady. What came next? Scaring the neighborhood children?

She should still go over later and introduce herself, since she just moved in and it would be the neighborly thing to do and all. No sense in starting off on the wrong foot. Then again, what if she were greeted by Miss America's doppelganger and forced to witness the man's gorgeous features in his 2.5 kids?

Her life's soundtrack.

Darcy sipped her coffee, inhaling the fragrant vanilla steam. She forced herself from the window seat

toward the mountain of unpacked boxes stacked in the next room. If she didn't escape this insane frame of mind now, it was going to be one long winter.

Dean Whitfield drummed his fingers on the side of the brown paper-wrapped box in his hands. The post office brimmed to capacity, no one in a hurry this morning. If he hadn't already stood in line for so long, he'd give up and come back later. He hated crowds. Avoided them at all cost. Between the sardine-packed room and mindless chatter, a sense of claustrophobia crept in. He tugged his baseball cap lower and continued to wait.

"I met the new wreath lady at church yesterday," Ruth Simpson barked from her place in front of him. After a few beats, he realized she was talking to him. She crossed her arms and stared at him, as did her identical twin sister standing next to her. At least he thought she was Ruth. Maybe she was Ethel.

Gray hair brushed the collar of her thick denim jacket. The Christmas tree embroidered on the front was littered with beads, pearls, bells, and bows. Was that star a real working light?

"Ma'am?"

Ethel leaned her wrinkled face closer. Or maybe it was Ruth. "The wreath lady."

Ruth/Ethel curled the corners of her mouth. Hot pink lipstick bled into the fine lines branching toward her nose. "Her name's Darcy Carr. She bought your parents' place. Opening Twin Wreaths in the old parlor."

Dean's ears perked. He knew his parents' house

sold, but hadn't investigated any further. A customer left, and they all moved up a foot.

"She'll be selling wreaths and offering classes," Ethel/Ruth continued.

Dean offered a tight-lipped smile to the town's professional busybodies. "Good to know."

Ruth/Ethel turned, tugging her sister's arm closer to the counter. "We should sign up, Ethel."

Ah, so she was Ruth.

"You haven't seen her, have you? She's the type that makes a sloppy t-shirt and sweatpants look like evening wear."

Ethel gazed down at her paunch. "The type that makes the rest of us feel horrible about ourselves." She shrugged. "I hear the bakery's giving demonstrations on how to make German fruitcake. Let's go there instead."

Ruth shook her head. "I want to learn how to make a holly and twig wreath to put on Eddie's grave. We'll go to the bakery for dessert afterward."

The line shifted again, and Dean moved forward, bumping his arm against a man groping for a package of clear packing tape on a rack beside him. Dean nodded his apology.

"Next," hollered a sales clerk.

Double-trouble approached the counter. "What kinds of Christmas stamps do you have this year?" Ethel asked the clerk.

The employee named off several different varieties.

"Can I see them all?"

Dean hung his head. Good grief. This was why he avoided public places.

His customer's package in the mail, Dean stepped

out into the cold air and sucked in a deep breath. His claustrophobia subsided. He was sick of feeling trapped all the time. Like a caged animal, alive and well, viewing life in full motion around him but unable to participate.

All the way home, he avoided eye contact with as many tourists as he could, nodding at those he couldn't. Pedestrians crowded both sides of Main Street, bustling with shopping bags like they only had hours until Christmas instead of thirty-five days. Bitter wind nipped his nose and ears, and a white cloud formed in front of his face with every breath.

His childhood home stood proudly up ahead. He missed the old place with the wrap-around porch. But nothing was the same since Bethany died. Nothing. Their short life together had been Indian summer and every day after a cold, bleak winter. Would the new owner find what he'd left behind?

"Blessed Assurance" echoed from the community church's bell tower. Dean strode through his garage, passing Christmas decorations he ignored every day, and retreated to the silence of his workshop, blocking the music to a hymn he knew by heart but couldn't bear to hear.

A thin layer of ice had glazed the town overnight, creating natural prisms from rooflines and street lights. Three inches of snow and ice sagged tree branches and power lines. Darcy sprinkled salt pellets on the sidewalk, trying not to fall and break something in the process.

Her mysterious neighbor stepped onto his front

stoop with the same idea. She'd lost her nerve yesterday and never did walk over to introduce herself. Now, she waved, offering her sweetest smile.

Face expressionless, he nodded and dug straight into his salt bucket. The lyrics to "All By Myself" — Celine Dion rendition — carried from somewhere on the wind.

Whatever. She had this great, historical home. Her business. A cat.

Yeah, that thought didn't comfort her at all. This wasn't how she'd mapped out her future in the fifth grade in the Lisa Frank diary she hid under her bed. Darcy went back to work, spreading crystals on the slick concrete. She lost her footing a time or two but caught her balance before kissing the ground.

Darcy had prayed for a husband for at least twenty years, believing God would answer eventually. But her biological clock ticked faster than a stopwatch, and her faith on the subject waivered. Had God sent her dream man and she hadn't recognized him when their paths crossed? Or had Mr. Wonderful been one of only two serious relationships in her whole life, and she was too blind to see?

No. Neither one of them turned out to be very wonderful.

After pouring out the last scoop of salt, she headed for the house, her snow boots grinding the briny rocks into the sidewalk. A cracking noise like a gunshot pierced the air. She spun. Hands in his coat pockets, her covert neighbor jogged toward her house. Darcy straightened, adjusting her trendy jacket, and smoothed the tresses spilling from beneath her hat.

Another gunshot.

He broke into a sprint and jumped the picket fence

in that smooth, slow-motion way the cops did on TV. He charged at her, sending her heart straight into her throat. What was he doing? Why wouldn't her legs move?

His feet slipped from under him, and he flung his arms out to steady himself, all the while barreling closer. This wasn't how she'd planned to meet Mystery Man, but they were definitely about to meet—he: the bowling ball, her: the pin.

They collided. On impact, she caught a glimpse of white smoke as her breath exploded from her lungs. Her feet left the pathway that led to her front door. She twisted, and her face met the ground. Frozen snow plugged her nostrils, numbed her cheeks. Her chest struggled to expand from his heavy body crushing hers. Was he trying to kill her—or save her life?

2

Skull-splitting pain shot through Dean's head. The supple body beneath him wriggled. Muffled shrieks reverberated through the snow. Was she hurt? He pushed up on his arms to relieve her of his weight. She was no bigger than his pinky, and he didn't want to crush her.

He opened his eyes. The light hit him like a sucker-punch to the face.

Frosted in snow, she flipped over and brushed off her nose. "Are you crazy?"

He pointed to the solid limb with the circumference of a small tree, which snapped from the weight of snow and ice, falling at least twenty feet. The simple act of pointing sent more pain radiating through his body, pinning him back to the ground.

Through blurred vision, he watched her examine the tree then study her yard.

"You saved me." She focused on him, and her eyes grew wide. "Oh my goodness, you're bleeding."

Dean raised his head. Red rivulets of blood absorbed into the snow, giving the appearance of a cherry Slushie.

"I'm fine." Liar. He could feel every nerve ending in his brain. Warm blood trailed down his temple.

She hovered over him and wrapped her mitten-clad hands around his cheeks. "No, you're not."

Using her teeth, she snatched off her mitten and

pressed it against his forehead, inflicting more agony. With her other hand, she clasped his and lifted it to press against the wound. Her hand was so warm.

The earth wobbled and spun like a Tilt-O-Whirl at the county fair. He fell onto his back, hoping to balance his equilibrium.

“Hold this.” She hopped to her feet.

“Where’re you going?”

“To call 9-1-1.”

Ridiculous. Dean chuckled then winced in misery. “No, just...give me a minute.” He fought a wave of nausea. “What did I hit?”

She settled back down beside him. “It happened so fast I can’t be sure, but I believe you busted your head on a landscaping rock.”

He followed her finger to the splotch of crimson on a boulder lining the sidewalk. How did he end up over here? He must’ve hit the rock and bounced off.

Dean remembered the day his dad brought the blasted things home. At twelve, with muscles the size of spaghetti noodles, he’d been afraid of dropping one on his foot. He never expected to meet one with his face, though.

“I really think you need to see a doctor. Let me drive you to the hospital.”

He sat up and rested his elbows on his knees, his left hand still holding her mitten against the gash. His pulse pounded in his teeth. Snow froze to his jeans.

She knelt in front of him. Her delicate brows scrunched together forming grooves. Sandy-blonde hair framed her pink tinted cheeks. Brown doe eyes stared back at him. The Simpson twins were right—a natural beauty.

The thought kicked his chest, adding to his agony.

Biting back a groan, he stood to go, wavering when he reached full height. She tucked her body beneath his arm for support. The top of her head met his chin, making her tall by most standards.

"Come on, let's get you inside." She led him to her back door, taking baby steps.

Dean's legs obeyed, but his heart protested. His brain was on the fence. He turned to go. "I've got work to do."

She tightened her grip. "You've got an ostrich egg growing on your forehead. It's not safe to leave you alone. You might have a concussion. It's either my house or the hospital. Take your pick."

Bossy woman. His head rang louder than the bells of Notre Dame, and he didn't possess the strength to argue. But the closer his feet got to the house, the tighter the memories gripped his throat until he thought he'd suffocate.

Darcy blew out a loud breath. "Here, sit down. I'll get you some aspirin."

He fell onto a barstool at the kitchen counter. Darcy grabbed a bottle of pills, a first-aid kit, and a warm washcloth from the upstairs bathroom. Her breakfast churned in her stomach. Blood always made her woozy, but she had to help him. He'd saved her from a major injury.

Back in the kitchen, she placed two white capsules in front of him, along with a bottle of water she pulled from the fridge. "How're you feeling?"

No response.

Stupid question. "Take these." She prodded the

medicine at him. "I'm Darcy Carr, by the way. Your new neighbor."

He took the pill bottle from her hand, shook out two more, and downed the aspirin along with half the water. "Dean." He cleared his throat. "Dean Whitfield."

The deep timbre of his voice warmed the kitchen.

"May I?" She held up the washcloth.

He half-nodded.

She eased the mitten from his skin and tossed it into the trashcan. The flow of blood had decreased enough for her to tend to the injury. She dabbed the washcloth over the smeared spots of dried blood. He jerked away.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Almost done."

With a deep breath, he leaned forward and rested his head back into her hands.

When she'd finished cleaning the wound, she threw the bloodied rag in the kitchen sink, removed her coat, and tossed it on the back of a chair. It slid off and coiled on the floor. Darcy wrapped his face in her hands. "Well, Dean Whitfield. Thank you."

His five o'clock shadow was rough against her hand, but his skin beneath the stubble was soft. Dark brown eyes—almost black—liquefied her legs. His brown locks were ruffled, and his nose was slightly crooked. He was handsome and strong and...injured. Not just his head, but his heart. She could sense the sadness hidden deep, see it layered in his eyes.

Dean swallowed, shifting his Adam's apple. "You're welcome."

She blotted a cotton ball soaked with peroxide on his split skin. "I think it looks worse than it really is. I don't believe you need stitches. It's not very deep."

He drummed his fingers on the counter, drawing her attention to his left hand.

No ring. Good sign. *There you go again, Darcy. And you wonder why men turn tail and run when they see you coming. Can you say desperate?*

She tore open the adhesive bandage, splintering the silence. Applying it to the small cut, she pressed carefully. "Well, soldier, I believe you're going to live."

Nothing. Not even a grin.

"Can I offer you something to eat? Coffee? Tea?"

He barely shook his head.

Slow down, Dean. I can't keep up with all your chatter.

She leaned her elbows on the counter. "So, obviously, I just moved here. Born and raised in Morgantown, Pennsylvania. I had a wreath business back home that steadily declined with the economy. Online sales are thriving, though. Drove through here on a visit to Maine last summer, and thought it might be a good place to relocate the shop."

Stop rambling. "I'll be selling my wreaths at Sugar Plum Flowers and Candy Cane Crafts, as well as hosting how-to classes in the parlor. What's your story?"

He blinked.

Come on, Darcy, you're losing him. Should she break out the defibrillator?

Dean scanned the room. "Big house for one person."

He speaks! Only to remind her how very alone and very single she was. "I looked at several available places, but there were things about this house I fell in love with. Impractical as it is, I had to have it."

His shoulders perked, and he sat a little straighter. "Like what?"

“Like this kitchen.” Her gaze floated upward. “Just look at that copper ceiling. It’s exquisite. Every time I walk in here it’s like stepping into an issue of *This Old House* magazine. If I ever meet the genius responsible, I might just kiss him.”

Dean propelled from the stool. The legs screeched along the black and white tile and threatened to topple backwards. He righted the chair and moved toward the door. “Thanks for, uh, everything.”

She stuffed her hands in her back pockets. “Thanks for saving me from becoming a pancake. I’ll stop by and check on you later. In case of a concussion and all that.”

“No need.” His gaze held hers a beat longer before he disappeared through the door, engulfing the room in a blast of winter air.

Her mother had always warned her about talking too much.

Dean stood at his workbench, a copper sheet wrapped around a domed anvil. Every time he struck the metal with his rubber mallet, a stick of dynamite blasted in the knot on his head. He could still feel Darcy’s warm hands on his face. Smell the cottony scent of her perfume.

Mallet to metal, he caught his thumb in between.

Growling, he slammed the tool on the bench and raked his fingers through his hair. Maybe he did have a concussion. Her touch awakened feelings in him he thought he’d buried long ago. He didn’t like it.

A rap sounded at the door. His neck and shoulders stiffened, followed by his jaw, adding to the

torture in his head. It was Darcy; he just knew it. He pictured her standing on the opposite side of the door, huddled against the bitter wind under his porch light. Another knock.

Good grief. He dodged the mess on the floor and swung open the door. "Mom, Dad."

Icy air invaded the room.

"Hey, sweetheart." Mom's smile faded. "What on earth did you do to your head?"

"Bar fight."

Mom swatted his stomach. "Very funny."

Snow drifted to the ground, illuminated by the street lights. "What are you doing out? You should be home."

"I needed to pick up a few things in town. Your dad wants to visit with you while I run my errands."

Dean stepped aside, stretching the door wider.

Dad shuffled in, and Mom guided him to the nearest chair. She unbuttoned his coat then hung it on the wooden peg beside the door. Her petite hands rested on her thick waistline. "Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"I'm fine, Mom."

She shook her finger in a silent scold. "I'll be back in a little while." Mom tightened her hood around her silver-streaked hair and kissed Dad's cheek. "Keep an eye on him."

She hitched her thumb at Dean. Another blast of cold air swept through the room as she left.

Dean's hero, once able and strong, was now withered and frail from the stroke. He appeared much older than his fifty-five years. It didn't seem right for such a good man to be treated that way. Then again, God allowed a lot of things he didn't care for.