

DANA PRATOLA

THE FORECAST IS FOR SNOW...BUT  
SHE'S DREAMING OF MORE THAN  
A WHITE CHRISTMAS



THE MAYWEATHER CHRISTMAS

*Quest*

The  
Mayweather  
Christmas Quest

Dana Pratola

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## **The Mayweather Christmas Quest**

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Contact Information: [titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com](mailto:titleadmin@pelicanbookgroup.com)

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The Covering





# 1

"Come on, you little brat...come on..." Olympia shifted her knees in the snow and shoved her coat sleeve as far up as it would go, which was only a few inches. Not enough to accomplish her goal. With a grunt, she pulled her arm out of the narrow opening between two paint starved pieces of wood, slipped off her coat and flung it away.

"I'm telling you, you better stop playing games and come out here this instant!"

She gave the warped door of the tool shed another tug. Still stuck. Heaving a frustrated breath, she jammed her arm back through the gap, scraping her skin from wrist to elbow. Extending her fingers as far as she could, she finally made contact with a soft ball of fur.

Just a little more.... Her shoulder ached as she pressed into the wood, but she managed to move the kitten toward her with her fingertips until she was finally able to snatch it by the back of the neck.

"You have some nerve, mister," she said in her sternest tone, as she raised the kitten into the daylight. "Are you trying to freeze to death?"

He looked away, unrepentant.

"That's fine," Olympia said, swiping clumps of snow with her free hand from the knees of her jeans.

"You can have that attitude, but you're going back in the house. Little hairball. Think you'd be grateful to have a warm home and plenty of food."

She couldn't help nestling him under her chin as she grabbed up her coat and trudged toward the house.

"Mrs. Mayweather?"

Olympia spun to face a stranger standing in her driveway just steps from her backyard. The sudden movement caused the kitten to claw her chest in protest

"Sharon Mayweather?" the man asked.

She hadn't heard anyone drive up, yet here he was, standing midway between her and a late model SUV. He was tall and broad shouldered, though it could mostly be the long wool coat that draped almost to the tops of his black-and-gray boots. His face was framed by a fur-lined hat with ear flaps. And what a face. Handsome and kind.

Blue eyes fixed on her, moving across her face. His lips were full and bent in a smile, and then parted slightly as he moved to speak. "Sorry if I scared you. Are you Mrs. Mayweather?"

"Who wants to know?"

The man came forward, hand outstretched, then seeing she didn't have a free hand, dropped his. "I'm David Della Santina."

The name sounded familiar. "But, who *are* you?" she asked, covering the kitten with her parka.

"I'm a reporter, with the *Tribune*."

There were like ten Tribunes in this area alone. She didn't ask which, because she didn't care. Why was a reporter looking for her mother? Olympia started for the house.

Despite not having been issued an invitation, David's boots followed behind hers, crunching the rock salt sprinkled over the path and back steps. Olympia quickened her pace, putting enough distance between them to get onto the back porch and close the storm door between them.

"As far as I know, my mother isn't expecting any reporters," she said through the window.

"What's that?" her mother called from the kitchen.

"Nothing, ma."

"Mrs. Mayweather?" David yelled, pressing his face to the door.

"Who is that?"

Olympia groaned. "It's a reporter."

Sharon Mayweather walked out onto the back porch, pushing her short caramel-colored hair from her forehead and pulling her pink sweater close at the neck. "A reporter?"

Her mother stared at him through the thin glass pane, tapping her pointer finger to her chin as she tilted her head one way, then the other. "I see," she said, finally.

Olympia looked at her mother. "Well, I don't. What's he want?"

"Did you ask him what he wants?"

"No, she didn't," David answered. "But, if you'd let me in, I can tell you."

"Oh, no." Olympia leaned through the back door to the kitchen, gently tossed the kitten in, and then pulled the door closed. "We're not letting you into our home."

David backed away from the steps and held up his hands. "I understand completely, you're not going to take my word for it." He reached into his back pocket

and took out his wallet. "Here's my driver's license and my press ID," he said, pulling cards from their designated slots and holding them up to the window.

They looked legitimate to Olympia, but even if they hadn't, it wouldn't matter since her mother was already pushing open the metal door and moving aside to let him in.

"How can I help you?" Sharon asked.

Olympia opened the kitchen door, moving the kitten back with her foot before going in. She absolutely refused to go after that little hairball one more time—so she said every time he got out.

When everyone was inside, Olympia hung her coat over the back of a chair and turned on the flame under the tea kettle.

"Can I take your coat?" Her mother asked David with a glance at Olympia.

Olympia gave her mother a small smile. She didn't mean to be rude; she was just distracted by the unusual circumstance.

"Would you like some tea? Hot chocolate?" Olympia offered.

David shrugged out of the coat. The wool, clearly not the source of the broad shoulders, she noted with some sort of internal discomfort. Well, not discomfort...more like unwelcome pleasure.

"Hot chocolate sounds fantastic," he said, draping the coat over the chair and taking a seat beside her mother. "Thanks for inviting me in." He aimed a smile at Mom, drawing one in response.

Olympia joined them at the table. She couldn't help noticing all those straight, white teeth, framed behind lips, smooth and appealing in their curved state.

“So, what’s this all about?” she asked.

David looked back and forth between her and her mother. “Our office received a call about an unusual family tradition you all participate in annually, at Christmas. I’d like to learn more about it. If you’re willing,” he added hastily.

Olympia groaned. “Seriously?” It was bad enough they had the locals mocking their tradition every year, but to have strangers privy to it was humiliating. Especially since she was the only sister not to be married off yet.

Her mother’s brows rose, but she seemed more curious than surprised. “Do you know where the call came from?”

Olympia thought that was a terrific question. No one in the town had gone to the media before. Why now?

“I don’t know for sure,” David said. “Only that it was a woman.”

Olympia narrowed her eyes. It was probably Kate Trudeau. She’d been poking fun at the *Mayweather Quest* as she called it, for years. Just last week, she’d stopped Olympia in the hardware store to wish her luck. She puffed out a breath, waiting for her mother to politely decline.

The woman smiled gently, tapping her fingers on the plaid tablecloth as she considered. Finally, she opened her mouth. “What would you like to know?”

The words took Olympia by surprise. “Mom, really? You’re going to tell him—”

“Mercy, Olympia, why not? We’re not hiding anything. It’s all in good fun.”

David turned to Olympia. “That’s a nice name.”

“All my girls’ names end in A,” her mother told

him. "Aliza, Brinna, Helena and Olympia. They were all so beautiful when they were born that I ended all their names in *ah*."

David chuckled and glanced at Olympia. "They're still beautiful."

Olympia sneered. It was hard to tell if this guy was sincere. He seemed to be, but reporters would do what was necessary to get a story, right?

David twisted, reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small note pad and pen. "If you don't mind..." he said, raising the items for their inspection. "How long has this tradition been a part of your family?"

"Oh, who knows," Mom said. "It's been going around at least as long as my great, great grandparents. Who knows before then? I suppose you could research it."

"That's what he's doing now, Mom."

David smiled at her, then back at her mother. "And what specifically does this tradition entail? Are there certain guidelines, superstitions...?"

"Are you asking if we go through a blood ritual?" Olympia asked.

"Olympia, be nice," her mother scolded. "It's pretty straightforward," she told David. "A Mayweather girl has to be somewhere where it's snowing on Christmas Day, and if she meets a man under a Christmas snow, God blesses that union so that they'll be together forever."

Olympia rolled her eyes. Not missed by David.

"I take it you don't believe it," he said.

"Olympia is my last single girl," Sharon said. "So, we're taking any edge we can."

Olympia laughed. She did believe it—mostly—but

didn't want him to ridicule her. "I'm in no hurry to be married."

"I know, dear, I know," her mother said, patting Olympia's hand. "It's just wise to keep your options open."

"Your other daughters were married this way?" David asked.

"God blessed two that way, yes; Aliza and Brinna."

"What about the other" — he glanced at his notes — "Helena."

"We're waiting to see how it turns out." Her mother waited a beat before laughing.

"So, where is your pursuit taking you this year?" David asked.

"Snow's predicted in Duluth, Minnesota, so that's where we'll be."

As they talked about where they would be staying, how long, etc., Olympia got up and made the hot chocolate. She was trying to take it in stride, after all, this was something special the family did every year, but now it didn't feel right. She'd agreed to go to make her mom happy, but it wouldn't be the same with none of her sisters participating. If she didn't find a husband this year, there would be no one to deflect the attention. And now, having this stranger turn her family's harmless fun into a blatant joke was irritating.

She set a steaming mug in front of him and then took her seat.

"Thanks," David said. "So, you fly out a few days before Christmas. Do you scope out the prospects, or just wing it and let destiny have its way?"

Unsure if he was trying to insult them, Olympia offered what she hoped would pass for a genuine

chuckle. "It wouldn't be much of a custom if it was based on searching out a husband ourselves, would it? What would be the point of going when we could do that at church, or the mall?"

David flipped a page in his pad and turned to Olympia directly.

"Speaking of faith, would you say God is behind your mission to find a husband?"

His words forced her back in her seat. "I'm not on a mission. This isn't a *belief*; it's a legend, a game."

He smiled. "But, you all take it seriously enough to travel to Minnesota, or wherever the snow is forecast."

She didn't like the turn this was taking and she had a feeling her expression said so. David's smile disappeared.

"It's a four hour drive, not a big deal," she snapped.

"Three, the way you drive," her mother said, shaking her head. "Mercy."

Olympia ignored her. She felt herself getting upset but couldn't stop it. "Some families spend Christmas in Tahiti, or South America, would you call that a religious quest?"

David tapped his pencil on the top of the pad. "Sorry, I'm just trying to—"

"I know what you're trying! To make my family look like a bunch of fools. Why don't you come back on New Year's when Ma dances naked around the mailbox so the fairies will bring her grandchildren!" She pushed back her chair and stormed from the kitchen.

Her mother called after her, but Olympia kept going, straight up to her room, where she resisted the urge to slam the door from its hinges.

## The Mayweather Christmas Quest

A half hour later, when Olympia's black mood passed, she found her mother sitting alone in the living room, crocheting. Olympia sat on the couch, turned on the TV with the remote and flipped channels, not even noticing what was on.

"Are we still going to Duluth?" her mother asked, after ten minutes.

Olympia sighed and nodded. It was the only mention of the scene in the kitchen.

## 2

David didn't bother to unpack. He closed the room door, stuck the key in his pocket and strode down the short hall to the lobby and outside. It might have been nice to have a room on an upper floor facing Lake Superior, but the first floor was closest to the street, and the street was closest to the next street, and the next, which ultimately brought him to the street Olympia's hotel was on. And she was all he was interested in viewing while he was here.

He'd thought of almost nothing but her since their first meeting a week and a half ago. The story itself compelled him, but the object of the story was nothing short of fascinating. Though she had the look of a fairy queen, with sun-ripened, honey-toned hair, simmering brown eyes and pale marble skin, he couldn't imagine her relying on fables and superstition to find true love. She seemed too rational for that.

He wondered what she'd say if he told her that she might as well consult a magic eight ball. The thought made him smile.

A young woman walking up the block in the opposite direction smiled back. She looked vaguely familiar, but with her face barely visible, caught between a purple knit hat and a multi-colored scarf, he couldn't make her out. He intended to keep walking,

but felt something poke him in the left shoulder.

“Are you really going to keep going, like you don’t see me?”

The voice. Even if her face had been completely covered in wool trappings, he couldn’t miss that voice. Like raven song on karaoke night. How he’d found it pleasing all those years ago.... Then again, they hadn’t spent much time talking back then.

“Amy.”

Amy Rodriguez—a short-term girlfriend when they’d worked their first newspaper job on the Boston Bugler. If memory served, she hadn’t been a lousy person, just a lousy girlfriend.

She threw her arms around him, patting him on the back with mittened hands. “What are you doing here?” she asked, stepping back, but keeping a hand on his arm.

“Working.”

“Working? Oh! What do you do now?”

He didn’t know why the question bugged him so. Why would she assume he was no longer reporting?

“I’m working on a PI.”

She bounced once on the balls of her feet. “Really? You’re a private investigator? How exciting!”

“No.” He shook his head. “Not *as* a PI. *On*. Personal Interest. Story, for the paper.”

It seemed his memory was faulty, but watching her smile fade to polite interest jumpstarted it. Maybe she was a lousy person. She’d always had a way of making him feel bad about himself. Sleeping with his best friend’s father—the editor of the paper—hadn’t helped their relationship any.

“Are you *still* doing personal interest?”

He nodded. *Still*. Like he should be infiltrating

South American guerilla camps by now. He loved his job. He loved the people he met and the glimpses into the lives of people the rest of the world might never know.

“So, it was nice—”

“Aren’t you going to ask what I do?” she asked, moving in front of him to prevent his escape.

He already knew. *Anything*. But, he wouldn’t say it. “Sure.”

“I’m working on a story, too.” She paused, waiting for him to question her. “I’m doing a feature,” she said, finally. “For TV. It’s called *Is Love a Christmas Miracle?* I heard about this family who comes here every year to find husbands.”

David’s heart fell to his stomach; his blood drained to his feet. “Uh...wow. That sounds like something.” He forced his feet to move forward. Just one slow step.

“Yeah, it’s weird, huh? Some kind of funky ritual or something. I know where they’re staying, but I thought I’d get a little shopping in first.”

Amy fixed him with her hazel eyes and put on the sulky pout he remembered only too well. Some useful devices were timeless. But, they wouldn’t work on him.

“So, what’s your story about? Maybe we can help each other,” she suggested, batting her lashes. “I’m at the Radisson over on Superior, if you—”

“Um, nothing you’d be interested in. The uh...resurgence of caribou in the area.”

Her face went blank and before she could think of something to say, he turned and backed away from her. “As a matter of fact, I’m just going to meet my guide. We have a long night in the cold ahead. See ya.”

He bumped into a passerby and quickly excused

himself as he headed to Olympia's hotel as fast as he could without breaking into a run.

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"You've got trouble."

Olympia's face must have registered pure shock when her head snapped up from her pancakes to find David Della Santina standing at her elbow. "What are you doing here?" she demanded, dropping her napkin beside her plate.

"Your mother invited me." David pulled out a chair next to her.

Infuriated, she grasped her fork like a weapon. "She wouldn't do that. Why would she do that?"

"You'll have to ask her. Listen—"

"Well, I didn't invite you to sit with me."

He sat anyway. "You have trouble," he repeated.

"What are you talking about?"

"I just ran into a reporter."

"Did you swat him with a rolled up newspaper?"

David smirked. "Funny. No, and this one won't go away no matter how much you swat her."

"Her?"

"Trust me."

There was something about the way he said that, that had the muscles in her jaw tightening. "Sounds like you know her well."

"We used to date back in Boston."

Olympia dropped the fork with a clatter and sat back, crossing her arms. There was an unpleasant jab just under her breastbone. "Isn't that a coincidence?"

Unbuttoning his coat, David sighed. His face was pink, and she could feel the cold air emitting off his

clothing.

"Let me guess, you're going to share a by-line?"

"I didn't know she was here," David barked, causing more than one head to turn in his direction. "I haven't even spoken to her in fifteen years. And I'm here to give you a heads up. She's here to do a feature on you and your crazy Christmas husband round-up. She knows where you're staying. Why would you register under your real names?"

Olympia's chest tightened. "Because we're not fugitives. We're not hiding anything."

"Finish your breakfast, and then let's go. We don't have much time."

"I'm not going anywhere. Mom's getting her nails done, and then we're going shopping." She picked up her fork to return to her meal, when a thought struck her. "And how do I know you're not working together? Or that you're using this other reporter as a threat to herd me toward you? She might not even exist."

In a flash, he grabbed her by the hand, tugged her out of her seat and pulled her across the dining room.

"Where are we going?" She pulled back, but he didn't release his grip until they reached the elevator.

"Unless you want to be on TV, and I don't think you do, we're going to move you and your mom to another hotel under an assumed name." He punched the elevator button. "And don't tell anyone where you're going or staying. If Amy knows you're in town, there's no telling who else knows."

"Yes, I guess you guys all come out of the woodwork when you get a scent. Like rats."

Even though he didn't react, she regretted saying it.

"I think you're being a little ridiculous," Olympia said. "I seriously doubt anyone's that interested in how I spend my holiday. It's just fun, and games and you're turning it into some kind of sport."

He looked down at her, so long that her mouth started to go dry. So long that the elevator doors opened and were starting to close again. He stuck his arm through the narrowing gap and the doors sprung apart.

Inside, he punched the button for her floor. She needed to have a talk with her mother. How could she ask him along without telling her?

"Hurry. Please," he said, as she unlocked the door to her room.

Her mother wasn't back yet, so Olympia moved around the room, gathering their things.

"Here," David said, handing her a blow dryer.

"That belongs to the room. Don't try to help."

"I'm trying to get us out of here quickly."

She retrieved the few items she'd placed in the bathroom and tossed them on top of her suitcase which still stood half full in front of the closet.

"So, is this a competitive edge thing?" she asked. "Don't want another reporter to *scoop* you?"

He chuckled. She hadn't expected him to and the surprise of it, combined with the tone of the sound, caused her to stop and stare at him. She already knew his face so well. Over the last week, she'd looked him up online, read all his articles, his bio, social media pages. She'd started to feel a little like a stalker, but looking into his incredible blue eyes now, allayed that fear. Who could *not* want to see more of him? It was perfectly normal.

"Is something wrong?" he asked.