

AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR

MARIANNE
EVANS

CHRISTMAS
At
TIFFANY'S

Christmas at
Tiffany's

Marianne Evans

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Christmas at Tiffany's

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Dedication

To a precious friend and deeply treasured sister in Christ - Hope Painter. Hope, you embody everything that is best about the streets of New York...its heart, its pulse, its faith and its drive. Thank you for sharing your heart and soul with me. Love you, sweetness. This one's for YOU...right down to the cupcakes!

Praise for Marianne Evans

Marianne Evans is the queen of Christian romance. ~
Nancee Marchinowski, Book Reviewer and Blogger,
Perspectives by Nancee

Journey from pain and despair to faith and hope, and
finally to deep and fulfilling love. ~ NYT Bestselling
Author Ruth Ryan Langan on Siobhan's Beat

Awards

Devotion - Booksellers Best Award Winner and ACRA
Heart of Excellence Award winner

Hearts Communion - Christian Small Publisher Book
of the Year Award Winner and ACRA Heart of
Excellence Award Winner

Use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace. ~1 Peter 4:10

1

As far as Tiffany Zelling was concerned, today amounted to nothing more than a complete waste of perfume.

She squiggled backward in her office chair—just far enough to maneuver her feet out of high heels and jam them into a pair of walking shoes tucked beneath her desk. Seething, but hiding that fact behind a professional veneer, she got up and nabbed her coat and smart phone on the way out. Striding toward the reception area, and ready to breathe fire, she offered tight smiles to the colleagues she passed in the IT department of InfoTraxion, a multi-national tech firm housed on the thirty-eighth floor of a skyscraper at the heart of Midtown Manhattan.

Sure, it never helped to punch the elevator call button more than once, but she was in no mood for patience or sound reason. Stifling a growl, she stabbed the round button repeatedly, willing the metal doors to slide open and deposit her on the ground floor where she could embrace a brief episode of freedom. A fifteen minute break would make all the difference in her

outlook—that along with a visit to her favorite haunt, Magnolia Bakery

Maybe she'd even linger a bit over the freshly unveiled Christmas displays adding light, color and festive life to the store windows along Fifth Avenue.

The arrival bell chimed and the tension creeping along Tiffany's shoulders immediately eased. She stepped inside the elevator, leaned against the rear wall and closed her eyes, soothing herself further with a bit of in-and-out deep breathing that helped restore her more typical sense of calm and quiet.

She tried hard to live up to the Christian ideal of love-thy-enemies, but her boss, Eric Parker, stretched that belief to maximum. He was insufferable. Striding through the marble lobby, dodging bodies with long-honed practice and skill, she moved through the badge-accessed entry point and pulled on a pair of gloves. Hunching her shoulders, she absorbed a blast of air that struck her body the instant she stepped outside.

But the wind came and went, sometimes gusty and strong, sometimes retreating against a stillness that carried with it a snow-globe style shower of flakes. Tiffany soaked in the atmosphere, watching the graceful fall of fat, air-crowding crystals of white.

The first stop she made was for the sweet treat she craved. Thankfully, the line at Magnolia moved fast, championed by a clerk who recognized Tiffany as a regular and didn't even need to ask for a preference.

Handing a white wax sack over the counter, delivering a wink and a smile, the clerk made change for a five and Tiffany was on her way with a handful of red velvet cupcake topped by swirls of white cream cheese. Perfection, she thought. See also: restorative

bliss.

Anger decreased in direct correlation to her wander toward Fifth Avenue. It was only the first week of December, but shop-hungry tourists already crowded the streets, stopping in the form of a human blockade before store windows packed with eye-tempting clothes, purses, picture frames, cookery, crystal...

And jewelry.

Pausing beneath the Atlas clock stationed atop the front entrance of Tiffany and Company, Tiffany smiled and gave a thoroughly relaxed and delighted sigh, lifting her face to the sky. Snowflakes kissed her lashes, her cheeks and lips with an appealing chill.

Continuing to enjoy her cupcake, she paused before the iconic store's glass window and surrendered another quiet, pleased sigh. Tucked upon a plush white bed of faux snow drifts were dozens of artistically stacked aqua blue boxes—some secured by red satin ribbon, some secured by white. The entire back wall of the display was crafted to resemble a miniature version of New York City at Christmastime, complete with gift-laden sleds, yellow cabs with massive back fins and lights clicked on within the depths of cheery-looking apartment building windows.

If only life were that simple—that perfect.

Tiffany tossed the thought aside as an Atlantic-born current swept by. She focused instead on designs created to dazzle the eye. Strategically draped diamond necklaces were snuggled next to chunky engagement rings and eternity bands. Bracelets of gold, sapphire, ruby and emerald formed a sparkling pattern at the front of the display.

Then there were the pearls.

Tiffany nibbled on her cupcake, swallowed and swooned, captivated by an enticing fantasy world. Yards of perfectly matched orbs—white and black—had been twined together and strewn against the snowy floor, giving a lustrous shimmer to the entire visual. Lost in the beauty of precious stones and radiant light, she polished off the last of her treat. After dabbing crumbs from her lips with a paper napkin, she moved closer still, resting her fingertips against the glass.

She needed to get back to work. Dedication to performance and a solid work ethic that had haunted her since birth were the blessing—and curse—that prompted her to move away from simulated perfection and return to the lion's den. Be that as it may, she was in no hurry. Fifteen-minute afternoon breaks were expected and encouraged, and she needed every last second of this one. Meandering toward the intersection that would lead back to InfoTraxion, Tiffany pulled her phone from her coat pocket and speed-dialed her sister, Melody.

"Hey, Tif!" Melody was the only person on earth allowed to refer to Tiffany as Tif.

"I hate my job."

"Shocker. And, a cheery top of the afternoon to you as well. What happened this time, sweetie?"

"The jerk still has it in for me."

A beat of silence passed. "That Parker guy? Eric, isn't it?"

"That's the one."

Another strategic pause. "You're eating a red velvet masterpiece, aren't you?"

"No comment."

"And dreaming of a sparkly shopping spree?"

"Pleading the fifth...while standing on Fifth."

Melody was her big sister. She understood the fact that late afternoon exits from the office, which included decadent cupcakes and window drooling—er, shopping—most likely spelled trouble on the job front.

"Come clean."

"Let me put it this way. My self-control might be impressive when it comes to indulging my dreams of high-end jewelry, but not so much when it comes to Magnolia cupcakes and Eric Parker. The jerk. Besides, let's be fair. You can't really call it a sparkly shopping spree if you don't end up with a pretty blue bag that contains a pretty blue box all tied up with pretty silk ribbon. Added bonus, that bag would have my very own name lettered neatly across the front."

"You nut. You've always loved the connection between your name and that absolute fantasy land of a jewelry store."

Tiffany grinned, her mood on a gradual upswing. "Very true, but have no worries for my savings account. I was all look and no buy. I'm a twenty-five-year-old college student inching her way ever so slowly toward a Master's degree. Not a dime to spare, even for T-Co."

"Sorry for that, but congratulations on an impressive exhibition of self-control."

"Mel, the window displays this year are incredible. You really need to come to New York and see them in person, plus, the tree and the plaza at Rockefeller Center are all lit up and the ice rink is—"

"Hey, you don't need to sell me. Actually, I need to do some serious shopping in the next couple weeks. I'll train in from Greenwich and we can hang out. For now, though, tell me what happened."

Melody had always been persistent—and protective. “Eric Parker is just...poking at me. Shoving and antagonizing for no good reason. He’s after me, I swear. I rejected his dinner date last month. Ever since then he’s been a complete terror on the job. Just before break, I had launched the website for Pets Finding Home. I did that because I was gathering information for a charitable contribution request that had been made by the head of our company.”

“The guy you once described as the business world’s answer to CEO Charming, right?”

Tiffany’s skin bloomed with a responsive flush, but since CEO Charming wasn’t the finer point, she opted to ignore that statement and continue on the defensive. “Whatever. Anyway, I had the website up as Eric walked by, and he immediately jumped down my throat. Accused me of paying attention to personal matters rather than business objectives.”

“The Humane Society bumper sticker that’s tacked to your wall along with the ‘Pets are Family Forever’ plaque hanging right next to it provide some red-hot indicators about where your heart resides.”

“True enough, but this was business legit. When I’m at work, I focus on work, and that fact has never been questioned until now. After a tongue lashing, he railed on me to give up pet-sitting and use my time instead to finish the IT analysis he needs for Webber Strategic. He assigned me the project of completing a comprehensive analysis of data storage and inter-state connectivity for a bid he’s presenting to the CFO tomorrow. Of course, he only handed me this *business objective* yesterday afternoon. I’m not some genie in a bottle, Mel, but as usual, I have to be the grown up professional, ignore his antics, and perform at the top

of my game."

"I know—and that's so not cool, sweetie."

"Tell me about it. The thing is he's cagey. He exerts just enough pressure to be annoying but not enough to cross any carefully established HR lines."

Therefore, Eric Parker could take a lengthy hike into the oncoming arctic blast for all she cared.

"How did it end?"

"Not well. The hot-head didn't even let me explain myself before he stormed off to CEO Charming's office, probably to lodge a complaint. I didn't hang around for the bomb blast. I decided to take a break so I could cool off. Literally. It's snowing pretty hard."

"I heard some hefty accumulation is in the forecast for you guys."

"Yeah, adding more fun to my day. I think the weathermen are right this time. Seems to be picking up steam as we speak." Indeed the gentle hush of plump, fat flakes had increased substantially within the span of mere minutes. "I better get back. Thanks for letting me vent."

"Any time. Stay safe—I'll get you dates for a visit once I figure out the kids' schedules and make sure Jack is OK with me vacating."

Melody teased about 'vacating' her family, but she and her husband Jack had an awesome marriage—the kind of marriage that gave Tiffany just enough hope to believe in happy endings.

"You could always bring the boys. I'll bet they'd love seeing the city at Christmas." Tiffany loved doting on her nephews.

"Ordinarily I would, but to be brutally honest the idea of spending time together—just the two of us—sounds like heaven right now. Besides, it would be a

lot easier on this mama if the boys weren't underfoot trying to steal peeks at every gift I buy."

Tiffany laughed, affection fueling her spirit. "Makes perfect sense. I love you."

"Love you, too, and we'll talk soon."

Her sister signed off just as a sustained blast of moist, icy air curved around towering skyscrapers. Folks jostled past, propelled along the sidewalks by the rapidly deteriorating weather.

In passing, Tiffany glanced at the Atlas clock. It was just after two PM. Three more hours at the office and she'd be home free, no matter what kind of antics Eric-the-jerk-Parker had executed while she was gone.

~*~

Mitch Alexander braced for trouble the instant Eric Parker stormed across the threshold of his office and performed a none-too-discreet close of the door.

"We need to talk."

That much was obvious. Mitch angled his chair away from the dual monitors that rested on his desk and focused on the team leader of his information technology department. Presently this IT wunderkind, whom InfoTraxion had nabbed from its closest competitor a half-year ago, was ruddy cheeked and his eyes sparked hot.

"What's going on, Eric?"

"I'm having issues with Tiffany Zelling that need to be addressed." Eric dropped onto the chair across from Mitch's desk and clenched his jaw then visibly forced himself to relax. "The woman is a non-starter, and I'm increasingly put off by her attitude."

Mitch fought for calm and won. "In what way?"

"She's not committed to our culture."

The flat-out rebuke, full of corporate-speak rather than solid evidence, left Mitch relying on an acquired ability to keep cool under pressure. Mitch had been transferred to New York from Los Angeles HQ over ten long months ago, asked by the owner of the company to take the helm of east coast operations. At the time, he had been told the position was temporary. They needed a regional director who not only understood systems management, but also understood business operations—someone who could keep production levels and employee morale at suitable levels until such time as a replacement could be found.

The fact that business had doubled during Mitch's brief tenure left the leadership squad in Los Angeles content and in no great rush to find another candidate. Increasingly eager to return to the west coast, Mitch faced this episode head on, ready to add it to his repertoire of the ways in which his time in New York City had benefited the company.

"Tiffany is brilliant at what she does. I've heard nothing but praise for her work."

"When her head is in the game, yes, but she's not committed to what we do. Never has been."

Mitch performed an internal translation: Tiffany had a number of important aspects to her life, not just her nine-to-five job. "I have to argue the point. Her work is above reproach."

"Perhaps, but she isn't passionate about our mission and objectives. She's not interested in IT, she's interested in cats and dogs and gerbils, and rabbits, and—"

Enough was more than enough. That level of condescension crossed the professional line. "Be

Careful of your attitude, Eric. Be respectful. I've found her to be passionate about many things, yes, but she's equally committed to her work as an information system analyst. Having an outside focus, such as her effort to attain a Master's degree and her volunteer efforts at an animal rescue center, doesn't make her less valuable to our firm. In fact, well-rounded employees should be our foundation."

Mitch could almost feel the grind of Eric's teeth but continued to push his point home. "She coordinated and executed the development of Streamline Corporation's internal database and network management system. That exercise encompassed a block of over eight hundred employees scattered across three states. To the client's delight, she ran a tight show and did so under budget."

"I was out of line, and for that I apologize."

The comment reeked of false sincerity, but Mitch chose to let it pass. Why exasperate the issue?

Eric leaned forward. "My point is this: I need to see those solid work results continue. Yesterday I asked her to outline a similar playbook for my pitch to Webber Strategic which takes place early tomorrow afternoon. When I passed by her desk a short while ago, intending to check on status, she was away from her station, and she wasn't even working on options for system design. Instead, she had that animal rescue website on display. Again."

Mitch fought back a sigh, thinking. *For the love of everything precious, Tiffany, learn to lock your monitors before you leave your desk.* Before Mitch could begin an explanation, Eric barreled ahead. "Everyone knows she's working on her Masters in Counseling. She's all about animal therapy and bettering herself beyond IT

system designs and analysis. Good for her. However, this lapse in professional drive clearly illustrates the point that she's not invested when it comes to my development team."

Mitch seethed within an onslaught of heat. "Eric, I can easily explain what happened. She wasn't on the rescue site for personal reasons. At my request, she was researching the methods by which InfoTraxion might support the shelter where she volunteers. In honor of Christmas, I intend to seek corporate approval for a charitable contribution to the organization." That piece of news didn't stem the fire in Eric's eyes, not that Mitch expected it to.

"I laude her compassion and empathy, but this presentation is important, and could land a two million dollar project for the firm."

"I'm aware of the proposal. Congratulations on securing the opportunity." Eric's lips curled and he leaned back in his chair, happily preening. The team leader's self-righteous behavior prompted Mitch's protective instincts. "I'm also aware of the fact that she's not being forced to recreate the wheel. She won't need to execute hours of research and data alignment in order to deliver a top-rate explanation of the infrastructure and processes necessary to build the network Webber Strategic requires. You said so yourself: she can utilize the foundation of a previous playbook. Meanwhile, I have every confidence she'll flesh out the finer details of the client's requirement and deliver an excellent product. I don't see an issue here." With that, Mitch moved in for a kill-shot. "By the way, was she given adequate prep time?"

Eric leaned back slightly—a retreat of sorts—and his eyes lost a bit of that haughty indignation. "She

was given enough notice, yes.”

Sure she was. It was Mitch’s turn to battle against a knowing sneer. “Then my advice would be to leave the project to her. If she fails to follow through, let me know. I’ll handle it.”

The meeting ended but Mitch knew Eric was far from satisfied. Too bad. Mitch knew Tiffany’s history with the company. She had been part of the systems development team for almost three years, proving herself as pro at follow through and an exceptional end product. He had tamped Eric’s fiery crusade for the time being, but sensed the deeper reach of the man’s personal tensions toward Tiffany. Mitch wouldn’t tolerate them for long. Tiffany was quiet to the point of studious—introverted and pleasingly shy. He severely doubted she had earned the show of hostility based on professional capabilities.

His mind’s-eye drew the portrait of a woman with large, dark eyes and a short, straight cap of black hair worn in those soft, tempting type of layers that caught the air when she moved, dancing and shifting like ripples around a fair, heart-shaped face.

Pursing his lips, tilting his chair backward so he could look outside, he contemplated the view of a winter storm on the brew. He ignored the onslaught in favor of his own personal countdown. In one short month—January 1st to be precise—he’d be back in Los Angeles, and he could leave the snow-cast gloom of the east coast behind in favor of sun, warmth, beaches and incomparable mountain vistas.

He had done his time and earned his spurs on behalf of InfoTraxion. With all due respect to NYC, he couldn’t wait to get back home to California. Meanwhile, the Christmas season was kicking into full

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swing, and he wanted to encourage philanthropy. Business focused and intent, Mitch returned to his computer and crafted a meeting invite to Tiffany's e-mail address and clicked send.