



Love
IN SEASON

*a collection of christian
romantic short stories*

PAMELA S. THIBODEAUX

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Dedication

For Karla: family by blood, sisters of the heart, friends
forever ~

You left us too soon.
I love and miss you.
(B/F/C/S/A)

Winter Madness

They met on a cold winter morning in a cozy coffee shop. Not just the tinkle of the bell above the door announced his arrival, but also the quickening of her heart, the slow thud of blood through her veins, the sharp curl of need in the pit of her stomach. Even before she saw him, she knew the minute he'd walked in. A dream from her past.

He turned; their eyes met...

William's breath caught. There she sat all soft and glowing. A ghost from his past. He hesitated, blew a soft rush of air to cool the steaming brew he'd just purchased. A sigh escaped followed by a resigned shrug. *There's no way out of the meeting now.* Only a few steps separated them physically, miles emotionally. One hurdle at a time, he thought, and joined her at the table for two beside the window.

"Good morning," she breathed up at him, every year of distance, every minute of longing reflected in her voice as though she'd waited for him all along, just as she promised so long ago, and again not so long ago.

William scowled. "Snow everywhere, slush beneath, what's so good about it?"

Sienna sighed. "There's nothing quite as lovely as the first snow of the season."

He frowned. "Lovely? Tell me, what do you find so lovely about the cold and dampness that comes with the first snow of the season?"

She smiled, and his heart skipped a thud.

"Always reminds me of what the Bible says about

our salvation, and that the Blood of Jesus cleanses us as pure and as white as snow and offers us a chance for new life.”

He arched an eyebrow in interest. “Still the faithful optimist after everything you’ve been through; how’s that possible?”

She took a moment before she answered. “What would you have me do, William, forget everything God has done for me, turn my back on Him and just stop living?” Her voice was soft, not accusing.

William shrugged. God knew he’d never be able to live through what she had, which is why he’d never settled down and married. Fear of the unknown had always been his biggest obstacle. That, and the fact he’d yet to find someone who could understand, or at least tolerate, his idiosyncrasies. He’d heard all the rhetoric about faith and the power of it to make one’s life simpler, easier, and more harmonious. However, he’d never met anyone who actually lived out the concept, just the opposite, in fact. Nearly everyone he knew who professed to have faith, had lives as messed up as his.

Not sure how to answer her question, he posed one of his own. “So how do you get through something like that? And don’t give me the pat answer of ‘by faith.’ Explain it to me.”

Sienna knew people sometimes found it hard to understand the whys and wherefores of her faith despite the challenges she’d faced in her life, especially the death of her husband and daughter. She took a moment to send up a silent prayer. How could she explain something so personal and so deep as her faith in God?

She knew all those pat answers, but it was obvious

by William's response that he needed something more. She smiled a little. "We all have a measure of faith, but it's our choice as to what we put our faith into. For instance, what assures you that the chair you're sitting in isn't going to break?"

He shrugged.

"That's faith. Faith that the chair is well built and will hold you. But the faith I have is that God is in control of my life and no matter what may come my way, He will see me through. I understand you're asking how someone gets through the death of a spouse and a child. Believe me, it's not an easy thing to do. But true faith lives on even when we don't understand, even when we don't want to. And, there was a time when I didn't want to either. I'll never forget that day as long as I live, or the way God showed Himself to me in my darkest hour."

Encouraged by his attention, she mustered the courage to continue her tale. "About a month after I buried Jace and Olivia, I hiked to the bottom of Peg Leg Falls. The sky was overcast and gloomy, filled with dark, billowy thunderclouds. Mist rose from the falls, the water swirled and raged at my feet. Everything about that day reflected the agony in my soul. I wanted to die, you see, and I knew exactly how to accomplish the feat. As matter of fact, I went there with the sole intention of killing myself."

His gasp halted her words. Sienna reached over and placed her hand on his, pleased when he turned it palm up and threaded his fingers through hers. The strength of his grip encouraged her. She blinked back the sudden influx of tears and swallowed the lump in her throat.

"I even brought my husband's pistol to ensure no

other outcome," she said. "I stood there at the bottom of the falls, wanting to end all of the pain and misery in my life, but for some reason I just couldn't pull the trigger. All of a sudden, my heart cried out, 'Why God?' I screamed it into the air, and then I heard His reply. '*Beloved.*'"

Williams's eyebrow arched, but Sienna just smiled through his obvious skepticism.

"I know you're thinking I'd lost my mind. But I'm not making this up, William. I actually heard the still, small voice of God above all of the chaos in my mind. I sat and cried, really cried, for the first time in months. You see, until that moment I'd been afraid that if I started crying, I'd never stop. Oh, I shed a few tears here and there, but to purge myself; to weep and rage until I couldn't move anymore and then just start again? Never, not me, I've battled depression all of my life and just *knew* if I started crying, I'd never stop."

"I never knew you battled with depression."

Sienna smiled at the tenderness in his eyes. "There's a lot people don't know about me. I've been very good at hiding the real me. But no more, if someone doesn't like the real me, it's their loss."

He squeezed her hand. "So, what happened after you heard the still, small voice of God calling you 'beloved'?"

Sienna took a sip of her coffee to gather her thoughts. She'd told this story only once to her church family and never realized how hard it would be to tell it again—especially to a skeptic. "Well, I'd like to say just hearing His voice made everything all better, but that's not true. I was so angry with God that I just couldn't let go. Not yet. We had a screaming match."

Her words trailed off at the snicker he tried to

muffle.

"I'm sorry. I just can't imagine God being so real that He'd actually talk, much less engage in a screaming match with you."

"Well, actually I did all the screaming. God just whispered."

"Whispered what?"

"Well, I asked Him why? He answered, 'Beloved' and 'My love is sufficient.' I asked, 'what's the point?' He answered, 'Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails.'

"I really let Him have it, then, shaking my fist at the sky and arguing that love does fail. I demanded to know where He was when Jace and Olivia lay trapped beneath the wreckage, suffocating in their own blood." Sienna paused and took another sip of her coffee. Her hand shook, voice trembled. She took a deep breath and continued.

"Then He told me that He had plans for me, plans for a hope and a future. Of course I couldn't see past the pain in my present to even consider a future, and I told Him so. I told Him they were my life, my hope and my future and He'd let them die."

William let out a snort that was full of disbelief. "Your life and hope? Not from what I hear. That may be true about the baby, but from what I understand, your husband was a real jerk and you're probably better off without him."

An angry flush warmed her cheeks. She narrowed and hardened her gaze as she considered her next words which were spoken between teeth clenched as tightly as the fists in her lap. "It's true Jace wasn't the best of men. Second choice husbands usually aren't. But that doesn't mean I wanted him dead."

She hoped her meaning wasn't lost on him. The memory of her pleading with him to marry fresh out of high-school rose like a thundercloud between them. William squirmed, swallowed hard, and then lifted his cup in mock salute.

"Touché. Please continue your story."

Sienna swallowed the lump in her throat and lifted her water glass with a trembling hand, not sure if she wanted to say another word. Silence stretched between them. *Tense. Wary.*

William reached across the table and lifted her chin with his finger. "Sienna, I'm sorry. True or not, my comment was way out of line. I'd really like to know what happened after you had your screaming match with God."

Uncomfortable with confrontation on every level, Sienna pushed aside the negative emotions and continued. "Well, after I said what I said about them being my future, He simply whispered, 'beloved,' again. That's when I broke down and cried for what seemed like hours.

"Afterward I asked Him to show me how or even why I should want to start over."

"What happened then?" William couldn't keep quiet. Despite the tension that had risen between them, the tale engrossed him as no other had. Everything about her convinced him what she experienced was real, and he wanted to know more—about God, and about the woman she'd become.

"Sunlight burst through the clouds, a rainbow danced on the mist. A dove cooed as it settled on its nest. Children's laughter rang on the wind."

He frowned. "That's it? No thundering voice, no warm, fuzzy feelings, no epiphany?"

Sienna smiled. "No only a revelation. You see, those are all sights and sounds of life, of love. In those few moments I knew, I understood what God wanted of me. He wanted me to live, to hope, and to love. For where there is love, God is forever present. His love is perfect, a perfect love which casts out the deepest of darkness. I guess you could say that *was* my epiphany."

Her entire being seemed lit with conviction. He felt it all the way to his core. *And just like that I'm forgiven*, he thought, and the realization touched his heart as no sermon ever had. "So, what did you do then?" he asked.

"I wept again, only this time they were tears of gratitude and hope. I threw the pistol away, turned away from the darkness in my soul which had overtaken my life and headed toward the light—the light of Christ—the light of life."

"So that's it? No more doubts, no more fears, just you and God, happy ever after?"

Heads turned when her laughter rang out in the coffee shop. Smiles bloomed on harried faces.

Sienna wiped tears of hilarity off her cheeks, surprised and glad she'd withstood the pain of telling her story as well as the quick flash of anger, and could emerge from both with renewed hope. "Oh yes, plenty of each. But William, the bible teaches us that we can choose how we live. In Deuteronomy God said, 'I've put before you life and death...therefore, choose life.' When those doubts and fears rise up, I still have to choose to believe in His good plan for my life and my future."

"And have you any idea yet, what the future might hold?" he asked.

She nodded, "Love, peace, joy and hopefully another family one day."

"Is that what you really want?"

"More than anything else," she confirmed. "OK, enough about me. What about you, what do you want out of life?"

William's heart hammered in his chest when he realized her dreams coincided with his. Not until that moment did he realize how very much he wanted someone to share his life with. Nor had he appreciated how much he wanted the kind of faith and optimism she exuded.

He shrugged hoping she couldn't read his thoughts. "Guess I want the same things in life everybody else does....A decent place to live, enough money to live comfortably, someone to share it all with."

"So what's stopping you, or has stopped you, from getting all you want?"

William sipped his now-cold coffee and grimaced. "This rat-race we call life. Sheer madness if you ask me."

Once again her laughter bubbled throughout the room. William watched in amazement as her contagious joy affected everyone around them. Businessmen, frustrated moms and irritable children all responded. Heads turned, furrowed brows smoothed, frowns turned to smiles. His eyebrow quirked in curiosity, "What's so funny?"

Her laughter trailed off into giggles between words. "You. I never knew you were so pessimistic. I mean, you've always had those dark, brooding good looks, but a pessimist?"

"Dark, brooding good looks? Sounds like

something out of a romance novel. Besides, I'm not a pessimist, I'm a realist."

"Oh please, realist my foot. You've been frowning since the moment you arrived nearly an hour ago. You probably had a frown on your face before you walked in. A frown, by-the-way, which deepened the moment you saw me. Like you'd seen a ghost."

Shocked because her words echoed his exact thoughts when he walked in and realized the woman he'd chatted with online was the same girl he'd known and loved as a teen, he flushed and scrambled for an explanation. "I was just surprised. I mean, Sienna is not that common a name, but I wasn't sure until I got here that it was really you."

Her merry hazel eyes danced with humor, but she simply arched an eyebrow at him without comment and rose from her chair. She held a hand toward him. "Come on, I know what we're going to do today."

He couldn't resist the lure of her joy, and grinned as he placed his hand in hers. "What are we going to do?"

"I'm going to show you the beauty and joy of life, if only for this one day."

Hope flared in his heart that she may be the one person who could do what he considered the impossible. After all, he'd never really gotten over her. Nor did he forget how she'd touched his heart so many years ago in a way no other had since.

They paused at the door to fasten their jackets and slip on caps. She took his hand again and led him across the way and two blocks down to a park on the other side of the street. The tiny wooden bridge they traversed crossed over a creek and swayed under their feet. Sienna stopped midway to their destination.

"Listen," she urged.

He cocked his head. "What?"

"What do you hear?"

He turned in the direction she looked, stood still, and tried to hear what she heard. A smile tugged at his lips when he turned to her. Her eyes were alight with joy.

"You hear it too, don't you?"

"Tell me what you hear, Sienna."

"Children laughing, the sounds of joy, of love; two things that make this world go around are love and joy. A child's laughter encapsulates both."

His heart melted another degree. He slipped his arm around her waist, took her hand in his, and walked with her to a bench on the edge of the frozen pond where children ice skated in a flurry of color and movement. Never in his life had he felt as complete as he did in that moment.

"Do you skate?"

She nodded. "I love to skate. Olivia loved to also. Jace had two left feet when it came to skating and dancing."

"Well I don't." He pulled her up with him. "Let's go."

They changed into rented skates and danced across the ice. Hours later, weak from laughter, giddy with excitement, they shared soup and salad at a nearby restaurant. "What's next on your agenda for showing me the beauty and joy of life?" he asked her.

She shivered. "Well, after we thaw out a bit, we'll walk back to where our cars are parked, fetch mine and, well, you'll just have to wait and see."

"I must warn you, I don't like surprises."

"I love surprises," she countered. "Surprises are

what make life interesting.”

As much as she had known in her heart the person she'd chatted with online was the same boy she fell in love with in high school—and somewhere deep inside still loved—she never dreamed they would actually spend a whole day together. But, just as she had known twenty years ago, she still felt from the very depths of her soul they were meant to be together. Now, she hoped the afternoon would melt into evening and linger. Where could they go, what could they do that would surpass the last few hours spent skating with children? A thought wormed its way into her mind. An image formed, idea gelled.

She finished her allotted one glass of wine and excused herself to depart to the ladies room. She returned to find William up and ready to leave. He held the jacket for her to slip on and then took her hand in his.

“Where to?” he asked and linked arms with her.

“We'll fetch my car and go for a drive.” Once ensconced in the warmth of her economy sized SUV, the atmosphere nice and toasty, she headed out of the city.

“Any place special you're taking me?”

She smiled over at him, “Yep.”

She laughed. “Just relax, William and enjoy the drive.”

The atmosphere grew comfortable as they rode in silence. Sienna wondered if he was immersed in the same pleasant memories which warmed her. She glanced over at him and remembered with profound clarity the way she felt the first time his electric blue eyes met hers in high school, the thrill that raced through her every time their hands brushed, the pain

of losing him when he said they were too young to fall in love.

Her heart beat in wild jubilation that this might be a second chance at her life-long dream of marriage and children.

She slipped an instrumental CD in the disc drive and turned the volume down to where it served only as a backdrop for the scenery which unfolded before and around them. A rainbow shimmered in the sky off to the east. Clouds surrounded mountain peaks like halos to the north and west. As the car climbed upward, small waterfalls burst through rock to splash onto the road, on some, icicles hung like crystal prisms and reflected sunlight in bursts of color in the air.

He reached over and took her hand in his, played with her fingers then kissed the tips. "You're right, this is beautiful. I guess I don't take time often enough to soak in the magnificence of everything around me."

"That's the problem with most people today; they're all caught up in the rat race, as you so colorfully put it, that they don't appreciate the simple gift God has given us." She answered, trying to ignore the soft fluttering his touch caused.

She stopped at a roadside vantage point on the edge of a small canyon. They disembarked and stood together where heaven and earth met in a glorious profusion of rock and sky. Sienna moved forward, leaned over the guardrail and hollered, "Hello!" then burst into laughter when her voice echoed back in answer.

"Your turn," she told him. William chuckled, shook his head and took a step back.

"C'mon, loosen up a bit and have fun."

"I've had more fun so far today than I believe I've

had in my entire life. Don't want to overdo it. Besides, being so close to the edge makes me nervous. So, back up will you?"

She cocked her head and eyed him, so handsome hunkered down in his jacket, his breath tiny wisps of fog in the chilly air. Flakes of pristine white snow clung to his dark hair, glimmered, and left a silky shine in their wake when they melted away. "So close to the edge of what, the mountain or falling in love...with life," she qualified.

William took her hand in his, raised it to his lips and whispered, "Both."

She laughed, twirled away from him, and challenged him to a race.

Her feet slipped on the icy walkway. He wrapped his arms around her waist and hauled her against him. He lowered his eyes to her lips which quivered only inches from his then looked up to capture her gaze in a heated embrace.

William's heart thundered in his chest, breath clogged his throat. "Careful," he rasped. "To race on this ice is sheer madness."

Her eyes shone with laughter. She brushed her fingers through his hair and slid from his grasp. She hurried ahead of him and picked up a handful of snow then turned and began to walk backward.

"Sienna, don't you dare," he warned no doubt in his mind what her plans were when she packed the snow into a firm ball.

She tossed the globe into the air, once, twice, as though considering the consequences. On a laugh she threw it at him and made a mad dash for the SUV. She wasn't fast enough to escape retaliation when he scooped up a handful and slung it in her direction.

Giggles trailed on the breeze and danced straight into his soul. He was falling in love with her all over again as he found himself laughing while they pummeled each other with snowballs. Breathless, he held up his hands in defeat. "No more, I surrender."

Sienna threw one last bombshell, flung her arms open wide, and twirled in a circle. "The earth declares the glory of the Lord," she exclaimed to the heavens then plopped on the ground and proceeded to make a snow angel.

William watched her a moment then walked over to where she laid, her arms and legs moving in a scissor-like motion.

"C'mon and make angels with me."

He shook his head, held a hand toward her. "Why would I make angels of snow when I'm looking at one in the flesh?"

His words feathered over her like a caress and warmed her blood. Sienna halted her movements then took his outstretched hand and let him pull her to her feet. His arms wound around her, hands brushed the snow from her back. He urged her closer to his hard frame and breathed her name as his lips covered hers in a sweet, tender gesture.

"Sienna, my sweet, to wallow in this is nothing short of madness. You could catch pneumonia or some other nasty ailment." He ran his hands through her silky blonde hair then over her back and shoulders in an effort to chase the chill from her skin.

She smiled and caressed his cheek. "William, my dear, it behooves us to remember God gives His angels charge over us and to honor and acknowledge them. To *not* take advantage of an opportunity like this and create snow angels is what sheer madness is."