

The background of the cover features a romantic couple in a close embrace, about to kiss. The woman has blonde hair and is wearing a pink top, while the man is in a dark shirt. They are set against a soft, light blue background with falling snow. Below them is a panoramic view of a snow-covered town with various houses and trees. A large, teal-colored ribbon bow is positioned in the lower right quadrant, partially overlapping the town and the author's name.

THE
KEY TO
Christmas

*M. Jean
Pike*

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The Key to Christmas
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Dedication

For Marge.
Thank you for the nutcrackers.
And everything else.

What People are Saying

M. Jean Pike is an amazing author. Her stories are magical, emotional and romantic. I could read them over and over. ~ Simply Romance Reviews

CHAPTER 1

Hearing hearty laughter outside the window, Alexis Crossman glanced up from the Christmas tree she was decorating. Pete Brown from the corner barber shop and his apprentice, Stu, carried what appeared to be a ten-foot-tall candy cane down the sidewalk.

Across the street, Tom Drake, who owned Drake's Grocery and Luncheonette, was setting out tables that later, his wife's church group, the Sisters in Christ, would fill with baked goods and handmade ornaments. Christmas carols spilled from the PA system that had been set up at the bank.

The air was ebullient, super charged with energy as the town of Charlee Falls prepared for that night's Christmas in the Village festival. The volunteer fire department had spent the entire week hanging wreaths and stringing lighted garland from the street lamps and today, store owners put the finishing touches on their window displays. And here she was, just getting started.

With a slight frown, she turned back to her work.

Each year, on the second Saturday in December, Charlee Falls was transformed into a fairyland of lights and music, as Main Street reverted back to a time of horse drawn wagons, old fashioned Christmas

caroling, and mugs of hot cider. The stores, which normally closed at six, stayed open late to accommodate last-minute shoppers. Tucked away in a southeast corner of western New York state, the sleepy village of five thousand people was five hours from the perpetual motion and glamor of New York City. But during Christmas in the Village, Charlee Falls was as magical as the North Pole.

Normally Alexis would have been swept up in the magic of it. But this year she wasn't feeling it.

"We'll probably have to see about replacing that next year," Stan Goodman, her salesman and oldest friend, indicated the tree. "It's looking a little bit lopsided these days."

The nine-foot-tall tree had been a fixture in the window at Crossman's Furniture Store for two decades of Christmases. It was definitely showing its age, but hopefully once she got it decorated, it would be passable.

"I know. I meant to see to that, I just..." her words trailed off as her shoulder lifted in an apologetic shrug.

"I'm sure you'll make it beautiful. You always do." Stan hesitated. "I thought I'd have the guys get the nutcrackers out of storage after lunch."

She sighed.

"He'd want us to, Lexie," he said, giving her shoulder a gentle squeeze. "He'd want us to keep the tradition going."

She nodded. What would she do without Stan? In the twenty-five years since it opened, the store had seen countless salespeople, warehouse and delivery

men come and go, but Stan had been a constant. Her father's best friend since grade school, Stan had been like a second father to Alexis.

"Yes, have them do that," she said, focusing again on her work.

She wound the last strand of lights around the top of the tree and then unboxed the ornaments. Normally, she'd plan her color scheme weeks ahead, and the store often won the contest for best window display. She hadn't planned ahead this year, so last year's gold and red balls would have to do.

She'd just placed the first gold ornament near the top of the tree when a blue pickup truck pulled to the curb in front of the store. She couldn't help staring as Jessie Wainright and a pretty, young redhead got out and walked across the street to the luncheonette.

Well, he certainly didn't waste any time meeting someone else.

Although a few years older than she was, Alexis had known Jessie in school, but not well. His sister, Wendy, had set them up on a date last Saturday night, her first in months, and it had been a disaster. A born salesperson, she had the gift of gab at work. Her father had often joked that she could sell suntan lotion to a snowman. But sitting at the table at Crawford's Inn, one of the village's nicest restaurants, she couldn't seem to think of a single word to say to Jessie. It hadn't helped that he'd been aloof. The classic strong, silent type, Jessie's rugged good looks and obvious disinterest in her had caused her to revert to a tongue-tied teenager. Or maybe it had just been the restaurant.

Two years before, all her friends' husbands threw milestone thirtieth birthday parties for their wives. Things had been strained between her and Bruce. Nearing thirty, she'd felt desperate to start a family, and Bruce was dragging his heels. Even so, she hoped he would think to throw a party for her. He didn't. Instead, he took her to Crawford's Inn and over calamari and lemon rice, asked her for a divorce. She'd been soul crushed.

They'd met at twenty-three and rushed into marriage just six months later. She'd thought he was everything she wanted. She'd ignored the small signs that pointed to his unfaithfulness, tried even harder to be the perfect wife. Unlike some of their friends' marriages, they'd made it through the seven-year itch. Or so she'd thought.

"It's not you, Lex. It's me. I just don't want the same things anymore."

As if that were supposed to make her feel better.

She'd torn up their wedding photos, replaced the towels and the sheets and the dishes with new. She'd taken back her maiden name. But she couldn't seem to reclaim her sense of self-worth.

In the end, she and Bruce sold the house they'd sacrificed so much to buy, and Alexis moved back to her childhood home, a sprawling old Victorian on Princeton Avenue, where her father had lived alone since her mother passed away five years before.

"I hate to impose on you like this, Dad. I'll find another place soon."

"Don't be silly, sweetheart. I have plenty of room here"

and I'll enjoy your company. You just concentrate on healing your wounds."

Both the house and her father had been a healing balm for her battered soul.

Somehow, she'd thought her father would always be there...

She hung another ornament, and then headed to the break room for coffee. Hopefully Jessie and his little girlfriend would be gone by the time she returned. In the women's room after dinner, Wendy had assured Alexis that she was not the problem. Jessie just wasn't ready to date yet. But obviously that wasn't the case. He was ready to date. He just didn't want to date her.

Fifteen minutes later, she returned to the window as Jessie returned to his truck. Their gazes met, and she gave him a tight smile and a wave. He returned both before he got in his truck and drove away. She sighed again, wishing that Charlee Falls was not such a small town.

CHAPTER 2

Sitting at the breakfast table that Saturday morning, his cell phone propped against a cereal box as he streamed last night's football game, Jessie Wainwright didn't know that this was the day when everything would change. Weeks later, he'd think back and pinpoint that exact morning as the end of life as he knew it.

His daughter, Izabella, sat across from him, busy on her own phone.

"What's your plan for the day?" he asked.

"Emma and I are going to the mall. I need my color refreshed."

His gaze skimmed over her hair, recently dyed black with two inches of purple peeking out from the bottom. Along with her pale blue eyes, she'd inherited a mane of lustrous honey-colored hair from her mother. He hated what she'd done to it. But Izzy's hair was not a hill he was willing to die on.

"And I need a new pair of jeans."

"Do you need some money?" Already his hand was sliding into his pocket.

"I have my birthday money."

He pulled out two twenties and set them beside her plate. "I'll get the jeans. Just don't buy a pair that's

full of holes.”

She sighed. “OK, Dad. Thanks.”

“How are you girls getting to the mall?”

“Emma’s mom is taking us. She has to do her Christmas shopping.”

Izzy had turned sixteen three months before, and so far, had no interest in getting her driver’s license. Which suited Jessie just fine.

He finished watching the game highlights and turned off his phone. A disappointing end to a disastrous season. There was always next year, except maybe there wasn’t. He’d stopped taking things like next year for granted.

He swallowed the last of his egg and sausage sandwich while Izzy nibbled at a slice of dry toast. The egg and sausage sandwiches had been their Saturday morning thing for as long as he could remember. He’d learned to make them after Nicole died, wanting to keep at least one small thing the same. But last week Izzy informed him she was a vegan now. That wasn’t his hill either.

He carried his plate to the sink and filled it with soapy water, grabbed the scraper and went to work on the fry pan. “I have a drywall job to finish up today. I shouldn’t be much later than six. Do you want me to bring home subs for dinner, or shall we grab something to eat at the festival?”

“Dad, about tonight. Can I tell you something without you making a federal case out of it?”

A federal case. His wife used to say that when she thought he was being unreasonable *It’s fine, Jessie.*

Don't make a federal case out of it. He didn't like the way it sounded any better coming from his daughter. He took a moment to compose his face before turning around.

"What is it?"

"I got invited to the movies."

A fist squeezed in his chest.

"Who invited you?"

"His name is Lon. And before you ask, you don't know his family. They just moved here from Brooklyn. Mrs. Murphy made him my study partner in science class. That's how I know him."

It was too much information coming at him all at once. A movie date. With a boy he didn't know. Lon from Brooklyn. *Thank you, Mrs. Murphy.*

"So it would be, like, a date?"

"Pizza and a movie, so yeah. Can I go? You said I could start dating when I turned sixteen."

Yes, he had said that. But at the time she was fourteen and sixteen seemed so far away...

This. This was his hill.

To say that Jessie had not enjoyed dating would be like saying the passengers on the Queen of the Sea did not enjoy their ride. A skinny, socially awkward kid, Jessie's dates were train wrecks, each one worse than the last. Until he met Nicole. He loved her at first sight, loved her calm spirit, and the way she put him at ease.

Baby, you're fine. Don't try so hard.

At seventeen, she was the third girl he'd dated. He thought she'd be the last.

The week before, thirteen months after Nicole

died, his sister, Wendy, set him up with Alexis Crossman. Jessie regularly did work for Wendy's real estate clients and Alexis had hired him to do some electrical work before she put her father's old Victorian-style house up for sale. Though it needed much more than just new circuit breakers, the house had sold within a week, and the day after the closing, they went out to dinner to celebrate. Wendy and Mark, Jessie, and lovely Alexis.

Before the appetizers had even arrived, he was that awkward kid again, his heart knocking around in his chest while sweat soaked his armpits. Not wanting to seem as though he was trying too hard, he sat like a buffoon, silently shoveling in his pasta. Embarrassed. Angry at himself. At Wendy. At life's cruel twists. He wasn't supposed to have to do this again.

Later, Wendy scolded him for being a grump.

"I wasn't a grump."

"You seemed it, sitting there like you were made of stone all evening. I'm afraid you made Alexis feel very uncomfortable."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean for that to happen."

"You need to lighten up, Jess. Take a chance and grab a little happiness. It's OK to be *happy*."

"I am happy."

But he wasn't happy. He was lonely. Alexis hadn't seemed happy either, but he could understand that, having unexpectedly lost her father just a few months before. Even so, she was beautiful and intelligent, and he'd wanted very much to grab some of that beauty for himself. Instead, he'd caused another train wreck. He

didn't enjoy dating. But he could understand why Izzy would.

"You can go," he finally said. "Movie. Pizza. Nowhere else. Home by eleven."

"Dad, it won't even be—"

"Home by eleven. That's the deal. And I get to meet him first."

She sighed.

"OK?"

"Okaaaay."

"What time are you going?"

"The movie starts at seven. He's picking me up at six thirty."

"You don't want to go to Christmas in the Village, then?"

She shrugged. "I've been a million times."

"What about your key? You might be a winner this year."

"I thought maybe you could go. You could get my prize for me if I win anything." She slid a silver key from her pocket and tapped it across the table, as though she'd prepared for the question ahead of time.

"I don't know if I'll go."

"Please go, Daddy. I know you enjoy it. I'll feel terrible if you spend the evening sitting around here alone."

Then don't go. But of course, he couldn't say that. With a sigh, he slid the key into his pocket.

"And Dad, could you not be wearing your bathrobe when Lon gets here? And not be watching those old reruns?"

"I thought you liked those old reruns."

"I do, it's just..."

He didn't know how it became a thing. After work, on winter Saturdays, he'd shower and put on the bathrobe Nicole had given him their last Christmas together. He and Izzy would eat the take-out he brought home and watch reruns of old sitcoms. A daddy-daughter date. Something for them to share. Something to laugh about at a time when there seemed to be so little laughter in their home.

Suddenly it dawned on him. It was the laughter, the earthquake of his laughter that was the problem. Fine for the two of them here alone, but an embarrassment in front of Lon from Brooklyn. He was losing his baby girl to a stranger. *Lord, I'll need your strength to get through this.*

CHAPTER 3

By early afternoon the nutcrackers had been installed on either side of the store's entrance. Her father's Magi. Years before, her parents had fallen in love with a set when they'd visited a nutcracker village in Ohio. Her father, an amateur woodworker, had spent months painstakingly recreating the life-sized wise men in his basement workshop, carving each intricate detail in a labor of love.

Balthasar and Caspar stood on the left, Balthasar in a suit of gray with blue buttons, cradling his bowl of Myrrh. Beside him, Caspar was decked out in purple, his gold buttons matching the crown on his head. His gift, a thurible of frankincense, dangled from a silver chain at his side. Melchior stood alone on the right, adorned in scarlet. The lovely gold treasure box he held was carved with stars and peace doves and winter berry vines. Near the bottom the box contained two velvet lined drawers. Her father had thought of everything.

Sudden tears clogged her throat. As she turned to go back inside, someone called her name.

"Hold up, Lexie."

Her friend, Miriam, strode toward her, as fast as her bulging belly would allow, waving two envelopes.

When she reached the store, she stopped to catch her breath. "Can you believe this weather for December?" she said. "I remember years of having the festival in close to freezing temperatures. I'll take this any day."

"I know. It's unbelievable."

Miriam was the Executive Director of the local Chamber of Commerce that sponsored the yearly event. But she and Alexis went back a lot farther than that. She'd known Miriam since grade school. They'd been in the glee club together and played on the girls' soccer team. Having both gotten married the same summer, they'd planned their weddings together, had dreamed of raising their children together. But while Miriam was expecting her first baby in a few weeks, Alexis was back to square one.

"Listen, I'm knocking off work for the day; doctor's orders. I have to go home and rest before tonight, but I wanted to get these to you." She handed Alexis the envelopes.

"Thanks. I'll put them in right now."

"Some friends are meeting at the Tavern later for Christmas karaoke. You should join us. We could nurse mocktails together."

Alexis didn't drink, and she certainly didn't sing in public. And besides that, she didn't feel up to it today. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass."

"You need to get out more, Lex," Miriam said gently. "Your father wouldn't want you to become a recluse."

"I know."

"Promise me you'll think about it. Matt and I will