

A Christmas blizzard, a rescued dog,
and the love she never saw coming.
It's all part of

CHESTER'S MIRACLE

M. JEAN PIKE



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Dedication

For Chester. And for service dogs everywhere who so bravely and gently enrich the lives of humans.

What People are Saying

Jean Pike writes a beautiful love story that highlights the love of God. ~ Coffee Time Romance

Pike has the ability to make all of her characters not just actors in a story but very real people that the reader will care about and root for until the final, touching page. ~ L J Hippler, Author

I have long been captivated by M. Jean Pike's stories, each a celebration of life, love, hope and redemption. ~ Stephen Balga, Author

Every girl needs a Chester in her life! ~ Erin Stevenson, Author

1

Aimee Perkins was two miles outside of town when a nagging sense of unease intruded on her beautiful daydream. She tried to dismiss it as simply a bad case of nerves. This was an important day, after all, the day she would finally see the man of her dreams, face to face. What girl wouldn't be on edge?

A glance at the speedometer told her she was driving ten miles over the speed limit. She eased off the gas. It wouldn't do to get pulled over. Then she'd be late, and Max would worry. Not only that, but his plans for the two of them would be ruined.

Max...

Just the thought of him sent a warm flush from her head down to her toes. It didn't seem possible that she, a twenty-three-year-old unmarried woman who'd barely ever had a date, had landed such a catch, even if the catch had been on Fisherman's Catch, a new Christian dating site.

"Dating sites are full of predators," Corinne, her older sister warned. "Everyone knows that. Even the so-called Christian ones. You should delete your account ASAP. There are better places to find a man. Not only that, but this guy expects you to drive three hours just to meet him? Forget it, Aimee. Don't be so

desperate.”

Aimee’s stomach knotted. She should have known her sister would throw a wet blanket on her one spark of hope. Corinne couldn’t be right, could she?

Aimee dreamed of falling in love and someday becoming a wife and mother, but there were few romantic prospects in the small community of Maplewood, and she felt life was passing her by. She could lose a few pounds, but she’d been told she had pretty chestnut hair and expressive hazel eyes, though they were hidden behind her thick glasses. So what if she was a little chunky and socially awkward? Weren’t there any eligible men who could appreciate her good qualities? She’d almost given up. Until she met Max...

An uneasy feeling tripped through her tummy. Would Max be disappointed in her, too? No, she’d posted her picture on the dating site, had admitted later that she’d gained a few pounds since it was taken. Max seemed fine with that.

After another mile the nagging feeling she’d forgotten something returned, so she went back over her to-do list to figure out what she might have missed.

She’d risen early that morning, done her exercise routine, Bible reading, and then indulged in a luxurious soak in the tub followed by a rigorous beauty treatment, a mud mask, curl enhancer for her hair, and a press-on manicure in a gorgeous shade of crimson. She’d watched online makeup tutorials and applied her makeup flawlessly, a plum and lilac palette she’d spent an insane chunk of her paycheck on. She’d dressed in the plum-colored sweater and black slacks

she'd also splurged on for the occasion. She'd dropped off Christmas gifts to Corinne and had even allowed extra time for a cup of coffee and a prayer. She'd filled the car with gas and checked the oil. She'd done everything she was supposed to. After another mile, a small groan escaped as the realization finally dawned. She'd done everything...except the most important thing. She'd forgotten to feed and walk the dogs at the boarding kennel for her co-worker. Now she'd have to go back.

Marcy had called last night, just as Aimee was falling asleep, with yet another desperate situation. Her husband managed to get the day off, and if Aimee would fill in for her at the dog kennel, they could leave early for their vacation and have an extra day to spend together.

"With just Rusty and Clarence to care for," Marcy said in a rush, "it shouldn't take long. I know you have plans, but can you please cover for me? *Pleeease?* I'll owe you so, so big."

Yes, Marcie, you will. Aimee had nailed down her plans a month ago, requesting vacation time the minute her plans with Max were firmed up. But being a hopeless people pleaser, Aimee had agreed to help Marcy out. In the busyness of the day, she'd completely forgotten her promise.

Aimee glanced at the clock on her dash. Ten minutes after one. She had plenty of time. Once she crossed the West Virginia border, Lowryville would be another two hours, a little over three hours total driving time. She had allowed for three and a half, and

that was arriving early. Early enough to spend a couple of hours alone with Max before the Christmas Eve service began. The thought set her tummy to fluttering.

She took the next exit and headed back to Maplewood. When she reached Sommers Animal Clinic, where she'd worked as a vet tech for almost four years, she swapped out her strappy black heels for the pair of old tennis shoes she kept in her car. She would feed and water the dogs and give them each a quick walk around the doggie yard, and then she'd be back on the road. Fifteen minutes at the most. She unlocked the door and went inside. Rusty, a sweet golden retriever, and Clarence, a Bassett hound who was all ears and attitude, barked joyfully at her arrival. She smiled, despite her irritation.

A flash of color at the end of the row of kennels chased the smile from her lips. She hadn't seen a tag like that in months, but there was no mistaking the red that glared at her like an evil eye. The red tag that could only mean one thing.

"Oh, no," she cried softly.

She walked to the kennel and peeked in. A dog glanced up from his blanket, sighed, and then laid his head back on his paws. He had the facial characteristics of a Mountain Fiest, though she judged him to be only twenty pounds. He was clearly mixed with a small breed, Chihuahua, maybe? His coat was a beautiful fawn color, but his muzzle was mostly white, his eyes slightly cloudy. Definitely an older dog.

"Who are you?" she murmured, glancing at the paperwork attached to his kennel for his name.

Chester.

Normally red tags were placed on dogs who were too sick, or too aggressive to be rehomed. Chester looked neither. Sighing, she returned to the golden retriever, who pawed impatiently at the steel wire bars of his kennel.

"Hello, Rusty." She opened his door and slipped inside. "OK, big guy. Let's take care of your business." She clipped a leash to his collar and led him out the back door. He completed the task immediately, and after a brisk walk around the yard, she returned him to his kennel and clipped the leash onto Clarence. After returning him to his kennel she refilled both dogs' water and food dishes and returned to Chester's kennel. She opened the door and stepped inside. His food and water dishes were still full from the morning check-in. She dropped to a squat beside him and offered her hand. "Hello, Chester."

He didn't respond.

"Do you want to go outside?"

The dog didn't even glance at her. Aimee considered her new slacks and sweater, and then eased to the floor beside him anyway. She had a lint roller in the car. She could clean off any stray dog hair before she got back on the road. She spoke quietly with the dog until he made eye contact, and then she pulled a soft treat from her pocket and offered it to him. He sniffed the treat and reluctantly accepted it.

"Good boy," she said, stroking his ears. People had always said Aimee was a dog whisperer. What she lacked in people skills she seemed to have in spades

with canines. She spoke softly, reassuringly, and after a few moments, Chester inched closer and rested his head on her knee.

Being careful not to disturb him, she pulled her phone from her pocket and called her boss, Marylynne Sommers.

"Good afternoon, Aimee," Dr. Sommers said. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm at the kennel, and I'm wondering what the story is with Chester."

"Oh, I thought Marcy was scheduled for check-in this afternoon. I called her a little while ago and left a message regarding Chester."

"Marcy had a change of plans, so I'm here."

"I see." After a moment, Marylynne sighed. "Well, Chester was brought in from the rescue last night. He's a medical alert service dog, twelve years old. A one-owner dog, until his owner passed away three months ago. Trained service dogs are in high demand, so even though they're horribly overcrowded, the rescue took him right away. He's had two placements since then. Both have returned him."

"But why?"

"He's trained to alert to medical conditions, seizures, and the like. I'm afraid he didn't do that in either case." Another sigh whispered through Aimee's phone before Marylynne continued, "He's a sweet boy, he's just not a good candidate for adoption. He's a senior dog and most people want puppies. For pets, anyway. For service dogs, they want dogs that will do what they've been trained to do."

Sudden tears burned Aimee's eyes. "Can't he stay here for a while, until we can place him?"

"And live out the rest of his days in a kennel? As I said, he's not a likely candidate. That would be very unkind, Aimee. You know that as well as I do."

"How much time does he have?"

"I'll probably do it tonight. It will be a kindness. He's clearly suffering." Her tone was matter of fact, but the vet had obviously given the matter careful consideration. Marylynne was a compassionate animal lover and a committed veterinarian. "What I called Marcy to tell her was to give him a little extra love today. And plenty of treats, if he'll accept them."

"I'll be sure to take good care of him."

"Thanks, Aimee. Enjoy your time off."

"I will. Merry Christmas."

Disconnecting the call, she ran her fingers over Chester's back. When she spoke, her voice cracked. "They didn't give you a chance."

Chester lifted his head and gazed at her with deep, dark eyes, the saddest eyes she'd ever seen.

"Of course you didn't bond with the adopters right away. Your heart is broken. I'm so sorry, Chester." She hurriedly blinked back her tears. She wouldn't have time to repair her makeup, if she cried it off.

Marylynne was right. One-owner dogs often passed away within months of their owners and Mountain Fiets were known to be fiercely loyal. Aimee stood and clipped the leash to his collar. "Come on, boy. Let's go for a walk."

Chester reluctantly followed her outside. He perked up slightly as he sniffed and explored the doggie play yard, so Aimee let him investigate to his heart's content. After a leisurely stroll, she took him back inside.

She gave one treat each to Rusty and Clarence and gave Chester two.

"Goodbye, sweet boy," she said, kissing the top of his head. He gazed at her hopefully for a moment, and then retreated to his blanket as she closed and locked his kennel door.

Out in the parking lot she started her car but couldn't bring herself to drive away. Dr. Sommers' words echoed in her head. *He's just not a likely candidate.*

She knew exactly how that felt. She hadn't been a likely candidate either, until recently. Until she met Max.

Aimee sent up a prayer. *Lord, I don't understand why there has to be so much sadness in the world. I know Chester is a dog, and there are millions of humans suffering today too, but please. Chester needs a miracle...*

2

Aimee had hoped to fall in love that Christmas, had, in fact, planned on it. But not with Chester. She didn't have room for a dog. Her efficiency apartment above the pizzeria barely had enough room for her. And the place had a strict no pets policy. And she certainly didn't have time. Between her full-time job at the animal clinic and trying to write her first novel, she barely had time to breathe. And a vet tech didn't earn the kind of money it took to care for the needs of a senior dog. These were all of the things she told herself.

Putting her car in gear, Aimee drove from the lot and headed back toward the highway, blocking Chester from her thoughts. Within moments another nagging sensation began, another sharp knocking, this one at the window of her heart.

"I can't," she whispered.

She couldn't. How could she go merrily on her way, knowing this would be Chester's last day? She couldn't.

Sighing, she once again exited the highway, drove through the village, and pulled back into the lot at the clinic. She unlocked the door and grabbed a spare leash from a hook. She hurried past Clarence and Rusty, who were once again barking uproariously, and stopped in

front of Chester's kennel. Dr. Sommers would not be pleased. In fact, this could very likely cost Aimee her job. But she would deal with the consequences later. Like it or not, she would have to be Chester's miracle.

Chester lifted his head and gave an almost imperceptible wag of his tail. Before she could change her mind, Aimee opened his kennel and clipped the leash to his collar.

"Come on boy. Let's get you out of here."

Twenty minutes later, she was traveling down the highway with a stolen dog, hoping beyond hope that Max's aunt and uncle would have room on their farm, and in their hearts, for Chester.

"Don't worry, boy," she said, though the dog did not seem particularly worried, fast asleep with his head resting in her lap. "We'll figure something out."

As she drove, she thought again of Corinne's warning about going off to meet a stranger. It did seem crazy, but what else could she do?

Virtually no single men attended her church, and on the occasions when one visited, the other single women pounced on him like cats on a mouse. As one by one the single girls at Maplewood Christian Church got engaged, and then married, Aimee began to feel as if her life would never move forward the way she'd hoped. She'd resisted the idea of online dating sites. The humiliation of putting herself out there for everyone to see seemed too much to bear. But when ads for Fisherman's Catch, a new Christian dating site, started popping up on her social media feed, she couldn't resist checking it out. After a week of trolling

the site, she gathered her courage and joined. She agonized over what to call herself, what to write in her profile, finally deciding to keep it short and sweet.

AimHigh: Aspiring author. Vet tech. Loves Jesus, dogs, and iced coffee.

With her heart nearly jumping out of her chest, she uploaded a photo, hit *join now*, and waited to see what would happen.

For the first two weeks, nothing did. Discouraged, she made the mistake of mentioning the site to Corinne.

"Oh, honestly, Aimee. Why would you join such a thing? Those sites are full of weirdos."

Corinne was thirty-five, twelve years older than Aimee. Since Corinne had no children of her own, when their parents retired to sunny south Florida two years before, Corinne had taken on the role of smother mother. She'd been married to Jack forever. He was her high school sweetheart and the first and only man she'd dated. Corinne had no idea how difficult it was to find a decent man.

"Personally, I don't know what was wrong with Jeff."

Aimee did her best not to pull a face as she remembered her short-lived romance with Jack's cousin, Jeff Simpson.

"There was nothing wrong with Jeff. We just didn't have the same interests." Jeff was a car fanatic, and car races bored Aimee to tears. She saw the years stretching out ahead, being dragged off to car shows and drag races every weekend for the rest of her life.

Desperate or not, that was a hard pass, thank you very much.

Corinne's disapproval made Aimee more determined than ever to be successful on Fisherman's Catch. She pored over the profiles and sent virtual waves to any man who looked promising. None waved back.

When she returned home from work one day and discovered she'd gotten a wink and a message from a user called *SmoothSal* she was over the moon. Heart fluttering, she opened his profile, and her high hopes crashed to the ground. *SmoothSal* had to be fifty years old. Cringy. His message was even more so.

Hello AimHigh! Do you happen to have a bandage? Because I just scraped my knees falling for you.

She immediately blocked him. "Goodbye, Sal."

Shutting down her laptop, Aimee made herself face it. Corinne was right. An online dating site was no place to meet a decent man. Feeling lower than a kicked-over ant hill, Aimee opened her freezer, took out the double fudge cake she'd resisted all week, and cut a thick wedge. What was the difference? Two years before, she'd made a resolution to work on her appearance. She'd gone on a strict diet and exercise program and lost twenty pounds and two pants sizes. Men were no more interested in her thin and toned than when she was chunky, so why deny herself the pleasure of chocolate? After finishing her cake, she returned to her laptop to delete her account.

With a last glance at the screen, her chocolate cake did strange things in her stomach.

His user name was *MaximumPraise*. His profile said he was a poet, animal lover, prison security guard, and part-time street preacher. He'd sent her a virtual cup of coffee as well as a message. *Hey there, AimHigh. Looks as though we've got a lot in common. Wanna chat?*

He was beyond gorgeous, with longish blond hair, a killer smile, and a surfer dude tan. She gulped deep breaths, trying not to hyperventilate as she keyed in her response and hit send.

Hey there, MaximumPraise. Thanks for the coffee. I needed it today. I'd love to chat.

His reply came back immediately. *You're welcome, AimHigh. My friends call me Max. What should I call you?*

They messaged back and forth for over an hour. Max seemed to want to know all about her, asking about her job, her family, her church, and even her unfinished novel. He was a poet and understood her love of writing. When she finally signed off for the night, she felt as though she'd fallen into the most beautiful dream. A dream where she mattered.

Knowing Corinne would take the joy out of it, Aimee kept her budding romance a secret from her sister. Each day she rushed home from work, eager to continue her conversations with Max. She'd never been comfortable sharing her dreams with other people, but it was different with Max. He was special. And he made her feel special, too. The only problem was he lived in Castleton, West Virginia, a six-hour drive from her small Ohio town.

One Saturday, a few weeks into the relationship, Corinne invited her to lunch. "I haven't seen much of

you lately," she commented, spearing a wedge of cantaloupe with her fork.

"I've been busy."

"Writing your romance novel?"

Was that a smirk Aimee detected? "Among other things."

"What things?"

"Well, I..." *Don't tell her*, an inner voice warned. Ignoring it, she blurted, "I met a guy."

"Not on that dating site?" Corinne spit the word out as though it were a rotten grape in her fruit salad.

"Yes, I met him online, and he's wonderful. Let me show you." Pulling out her phone, she scrolled to his profile photo and showed it to Corinne.

"Maximum Praise? What kind of name is that?"

"His name is Max. And he's a poet and a street preacher. I really like him."

Corinne gazed for a long moment at Max's photo before handing Aimee's phone back. "I'm not trying to be mean, Aim, but look at him. Why would a guy like that be interested in you?"

Tears sprang to Aimee's eyes. "Thanks."

"I'm not saying that you're not a wonderful catch. Any man would be fortunate to have you, but Max seems a bit too good to be true." Corinne sipped her water and set the glass on the table. "Have you prayed about this?"

Feeling a hot flash of guilt, Aimee averted her gaze. She hadn't prayed about the relationship with Max. She'd give almost anything for this to work out. The truth was, she was afraid God might say no.

After that, Corinne discouraged Aimee's romance every step of the way, reminding Aimee that Max might not be all that he seemed and could even be a scam artist halfway around the world.

"I've been reading up on this," Corinne said one day. "It's called catfishing. People create a fake online profile and get you to trust them. Once you do, they try and scam you."

Until this moment Aimee had thought the expression *her blood boiled* was just that. Now she knew it was a real thing. "Max is not a scam artist. What on earth would he want with me, if he were? I don't exactly have thousands of dollars to send him."

"They don't always ask for money. Sometimes it's other things, like your personal information." Her face colored. "Has he asked you to send...pictures?"

"You mean... No! Max would never do that."

But alone that night, Aimee thought of all the questions Max had asked. She'd been flattered that he was interested in her thoughts, but maybe it wasn't her thoughts he was interested in at all. As Corinne said, what would a hunk like Max possibly see in her? He could be anyone, anywhere. He could be sitting in a cubicle halfway around the world, messaging dozens of unsuspecting women every day. Using a fake name, fake photos. She had to know the truth, even if it broke her heart.

Aimee could express herself beautifully in writing, but face to face she was awkward, saying too much, and usually saying it all wrong. And besides that, the picture she'd uploaded for her profile was from two