

Winter Romance

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Chapter 1: Christmas Cookies

Just in time for Christmas, here is a Murder, She Wrote story to get you into the spirit! This is the story of Jessica and Seth's first Christmas together as husband and wife, and will cover the events leading up to Christmas Day. First up - a baking session that turns out to be sweet in more ways than one. Merry Christmas!

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Sight.

Dreams of Christmas lights in all colors, white flakes falling from the heavens, angels in the snow, and a midnight-blue sky sparkling with thousands of stars and a full winter moon.

Sound.

Church bells ringing throughout the sleepy Maine town, children laughing as they were swept up in the joy of the season, and Christmas carols sung by beloved friends, in voices both off-key and pitch-perfect.

Taste.

The icy cold delight of snowflakes on one's tongue, hot chocolate warming a person from head to toe, the fresh mint and sugar of a candy cane, and sweet, delicious kisses under a sprig of mistletoe.

Smell.

The rich, earthy, piney smell of an evergreen Christmas tree, the floral headiness of poinsettias and roses, and the sweetest smell of all: the nutmeg, cinnamon, chocolate, and *sugar* that went into Christmas cookies, which were now dancing in his dreams. He could almost smell them...

He *could* smell them. This was no dream. This was real!

The delicious smell of baking sugar cookies flew up Seth Hazlitt's nose and roused him from a deep slumber, as only something so wonderful could.

Christmas may have been a week away, but his wife was getting ahead of the game, baking batch after batch of cookies. And these weren't the kind you rolled out of a plastic package or a container of dough. No sir, these were homemade as only Jessica could make them, as she had been making them for years. He'd enjoyed them long before now, but now that

they were married, well... there was a special benefit to eating Christmas cookies. *But I'm not gonna enjoy it if I don't get my butt out of bed.*

If the smell of baking sweets coming from downstairs hadn't woken him entirely, the sunshine pouring through the window certainly did. Seth sat up in bed, stretched the weariness out of his body, and rose to "greet the dawn," as Jessica always said. No doubt she would say it was a beautiful day, and it was. The December sky was a brilliant azure bowl over Cabot Cove, the sun was out, and several fat, feathery robins were fluttering about through the trees, chirping their own Christmas carols. It was the perfect day to go Christmas shopping, as they had planned... just as soon as he got dressed and hauled tail downstairs to taste those amazing cookies.

As he showered, shaved, and dressed for the day, Seth couldn't help but catch himself staring at the ring that circled the third finger of his left hand - and smiling as he did. *Three months.* Three wonderful months since the day he and Jessica said *I do*, and now here they were, about to celebrate their first Christmas together as husband and wife. For years prior, they had always spent the holiday together, most often with him coming over to her house with a pumpkin pie. They would spend the day opening gifts and eating the feast they'd made, then cuddle up on the couch together to watch their favorite Christmas movies. Now that they were married, though... Seth knew that the routine would include romance instead of mere friendship, and much more than simply cuddling on the couch. And he planned on getting started with that special benefit that came with making Christmas cookies.

Twenty minutes later, groomed and aftershaved, Seth made his way downstairs, where the smell of baking sugar only became stronger – as did a certain female voice. He crept through the living room and dining room, pausing on the kitchen threshold. There, mixing a new batch of cookie dough, was Jessica, crooning like a bird. A smile spread across Seth's face as he watched her. She was also dressed, in khakis, a white blouse, and a comfortable red sweatshirt, with her favorite pink apron overtop. The apron was smudged with flour and a smear of it was on Jessica's cheek, but she didn't even appear to notice, swirling a wooden spoon in the bowl. Not that Seth cared. With the sunlight playing with her golden hair and a radiant smile on her face, her beauty was glowing through the baker's mess. And her voice was ringing through the kitchen, singing a Christmas classic. "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," Jessica sang, dancing over to the counter. She scraped the dough out of the bowl and onto a cutting board, then grabbed a rolling pin and began to roll the dough flat.

Seth's grin only grew. If he was any good judge, he could hear longing for some of that white powder in her voice. A white Christmas would be great, no doubt about it... and so would kissing goodnight and holding each other tight, as the song said. *Sounds like a great idea*, he thought, waiting for the right moment. Sure enough, as soon as Jessica's back was turned, he crept into the kitchen and hugged her around the waist from behind.

"Ooh!" Jessica cried, jumping and twisting in his arms. Seth ducked his head out of the way as she swung the rolling pin, and whether it was by accident or on purpose, he didn't want to know. She shot him a playful glare and smacked his shoulder with her free hand. "Seth, you scared the heart out of me!"

"Did I now?" Seth asked, his mischievous grin still firmly in place. "Let's see if I did." He placed a hand on Jessica's chest, seeking out the beat of her heart. "Oh-ho, what's this?" There it was, a steady *thump-thump-thump* beneath his fingers. "Looks like it's still in there."

"Beating faster because of you. You're lucky I didn't crack you with this!" she said, thrusting the rolling pin under his nose.

"Ayuh, I know that. I don't want visions of sugarplums dancing in my head right now." Seth kept his hand on Jessica's chest as she laid the rolling pin down on the table. "Your heart's definitely still beating. Don't think I've ever felt a stronger heartbeat, but then again, you've always had a strong heart... and a beautiful one." Seth wrapped his arms back around her and kissed her deeply on the lips. "By the way... good morning."

"Good morning," Jessica giggled, clasping her hands at the nape of his neck. "Did you sleep well?"

"I did. I thought I was dreaming about Christmas cookies, and I could smell 'em, all that sugar and spice, until I woke up and realized I wasn't dreaming after all."

"I came in here fully intending to make breakfast, but then I thought better of it. I'd make a few batches of cookies and you and I could get breakfast out before we kicked off our shopping day."

"Sounds like a sweet plan... very sweet," Seth said as Jessica, eyes twinkling with mirth, brought one of the freshly-baked cookies to his mouth. He bit into the red-and-green-sprinkled sugar circle and moaned in bliss.

"Oh, Jess, that's so good." He took his time chewing the cookie, savoring the flavor. "Nobody makes 'em like you."

"Nobody else has my recipe," Jessica teased, handing the rest of the cookie to him and turning back to her dough. "Wanna help me cut these out once I get the dough flattened?"

"Woman, is a frog's fanny watertight?" Seth added his chuckles to hers and joined her at the kitchen table, selecting a Santa Claus from the array of cookie cutters she had laid out. "I love these little buggers."

"What, the ones that look like Santa?"

"All of 'em. I just love Christmas cookies. I really love the ones with the sprinkles, though." Seth pinched off a piece of the dough and popped it in his mouth. "They ain't half-bad raw, either."

"That's the only piece of dough you get," Jessica warned him. "If you eat any more of it, I'll never get the sprinkles on them." She ran the rolling pin over the dough one last time and grabbed a cookie cutter for herself. "All right, gentlemen, start your cutters."

Cheerful chatter and more Christmas carols and songs filled the atmosphere as the cookies were cut, not only in the shape of Santa, but in Christmas trees and ornaments, bells, angels, and stars. Sprinkles in red, green, and a rainbow of other colors were added to the cut-out shapes, which were scooped onto a baking tray and shut into the oven to bake. As soon as the oven door shut, Seth turned to Jessica and grinned. "Well, honey... we've got about 15, 20 minutes for these cookies to bake."

"So?" Jessica asked, taking off her soiled apron and hanging it up.

"So, I'm wondering how we're gonna spend that time."

Given the amount of sheer mischief in his voice, it didn't take Jessica long to catch on to his meaning. "Oh, really?" she asked, placing her hands on her hips and throwing him an equally teasing smile. "Do you have any ideas?"

That grin of his only widened. "A few." Seth twined his arms around his wife as she came back over to him. "Want me to tell you what they are?"

"Seth." Jessica gave his nose a gentle tap with her index finger, staring up into the golden-green hazel of his eyes. "We've been married for three months now. I know you're better at show than tell." She planted a soft kiss on his lips, then one on his cheek. "So show me," she whispered in his ear. Seth's eyes twinkled. "As you wish... Mrs. Hazlitt," he purred, tilting his head and covering her mouth with his.

"Mmm," Jessica hummed against his lips, snuggling deeper into his embrace. "I love it when you call me that."

Those words warmed Seth's heart. Professionally, Jessica was still called "Mrs. Fletcher" by her colleagues and fans, as she was known in the literary and mystery worlds as J.B. Fletcher. Most people in Cabot Cove still referred to her by her original married name, both out of habit and familiarity. Mort Metzger, the sheriff and their mutual friend, called her "Mrs. F," but only as his old, beloved term of endearment.

Seth didn't mind any of this in the slightest. He knew that it was no disrespect to him and that it was not because they didn't approve of his marrying her. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, as the entire town had rejoiced to see them together after so long. But to know that Jessica herself was pleased to hear her new married name tickled him. It told him that she was happy with her new life, her new marriage... and with him.

"Good, 'cause I love calling you that, *Mrs. Hazlitt*." Seth deepened their kiss, tasting sugar and a hint of cinnamon. "Ah, that's the only thing sweeter than your cookies, Jess: your kisses." He broke their liplock for a moment and smiled. "You've got flour on your face," he said softly, wiping the smudge away with his thumb and caressing her cheek with his fingers. Jessica dipped a finger into the empty dough bowl and scooped out a tiny remainder of the sugar cookie dough, then smeared it on Seth's cheek. "And you've got dough on yours," she snickered, kissing the sugary spot away.

"No thanks to you." He kissed her mouth again, initiating another round of passionate kisses and cuddling. The two of them were so lost in each other, in a heady cocktail of intermingling colognes, sugar, and spice, that they almost didn't hear the oven bell ding. Thankfully, Jessica separated from their embrace long enough to pull the batch from the oven and set the tray on the counter to cool.

Seth beamed at the fresh cookies with approval. "I think old Saint Nick himself'd be proud to eat those cookies."

"Speaking of which, are you still going to play Santa at the Christmas party this year? You know how much it means to the children."

"Ayuh, I'm still playing the big guy. Jess, I gotta tell you, I'm not much for parties and dressing up, but I sure do love seeing the smiles on those little kids' faces. When I come in with that bag of toys and they light up and start whoopin' and hollerin', it gets me right here." Seth tapped two fingers over his heart.

"You really are wonderful with children, Seth," Jessica said softly. "They get to see the gentleness in you that I know and love, instead of the old crotchety doctor. That's probably what makes you such a great Santa each year."

Seth nodded. "That and I don't have to pad up to play him." He sighed.

"Let's face it, Jess, between my build, my grouching, and my snoring, I'm just a big bear of a fella."

"Maybe, but you're *my* bear. My teddy bear," Jessica laughed, hugging him tight.

Seth let out a bark of laughter and wrapped his big arms back around her. "Lord, woman, now you've got Elvis stuck in my head." Inspired, he began to dance around the kitchen with Jessica, singing "Let Me Be Your Teddy Bear" while she giggled and pleaded with him to stop.

"Nope," was the response to her pleas. He whirled her out and back into his arms, planting a firm kiss on her lips before releasing her. "All right, you win," he said, seizing her nearby winter hat and fitting it on her head; with a grin, he yanked it down over her eyes.

"Seth!" Jessica quickly fixed her hat, adjusting it so that a few silky blonde curls were peeking out from under it. "If this is your way of telling me you're hungry..."

"Naw. That's my way of telling you I'm ready to take our walk through town. If I wanted to tell you I was hungry, I'd kiss you."

In the middle of grabbing the rest of their winter gear, Jessica shot him a wry smile. "Really? If that's true, you are the most insatiable man on the planet."

"Oh honey, you know it." Seth waited until they were both bundled up and out the door before kissing her yet again.

Chapter 2: Wreck the Malls

We're treated to a little Christmas comic relief in this chapter, as Seth expresses his feelings on a certain issue I'm sure many of us feel strongly about at Christmastime! Of course, Mort is there to listen in, and there's the promise of a date between our favorite couple as well.

Thanks to jesmaine for requesting Mort's suggestion of joining the Caroliers to Seth - will he or won't he? It's another mystery to solve...

"Is it just me, or are kids these days nothing but a bunch of spoiled, ungrateful brats?"

"Seth, really! Not all children are spoiled, and you know it!"

"I know, I know. Just seemed to me like every single child that *is* a spoiled brat was out running amok today, screaming for toys, candy, and God-knows-what-else and not giving a flyin' fig who they ran into, yelled at, or generally annoyed the livin' crap out of."

"It ain't just you, Doc. And back in New York, we woulda said *flyin' fart*."

"*Mort!*" Despite her admonition to the sheriff, Jessica's face went cherry red with mirth and she began to laugh. The shopping day had ended earlier than anyone expected, thanks to a little incident in Cabot Cove's toy store, the aptly named Toy Box. It had been bad enough to spoil the day, so

Jessica and Seth went home with what purchases they had, making a quick cell phone call on the way. Now, the town's resident crime-busting triad was seated around Jessica and Seth's kitchen table, eating lunch and recalling the afternoon's events as best as they could. Strictly police business, the sheriff said. Nothing nosy about it. *Riiiiiiiiiiiiight*, Seth thought. "Okay, lemme see if I got this straight." Mort Metzger leaned forward in his chair, gesturing with his spoon as he directed the conversation at Seth. "You both went into the Toy Box to get a present for your niece." "Great-niece," Jessica said, ladling cream of potato soup into each bowl on the table. "Morgan." Jessica's lips curved into a fond smile and her eyes sparkled at the thought of the seven-year-old imp who had not only inherited the Macgill beauty, but the blarney as well. "You remember her, right?"

Mort grinned. "How can I not? That little girl knows how to be nosy and still look cute and innocent, just like a great-aunt of hers I happen to know." He ignored Jessica's mock glare and continued, "And she's got Seth wrapped around her little finger, doesn't she, Doc?"

"That she does," Seth replied, his own mouth smiling now. "She called me Uncle Seth long before Jess and I tied the knot."

"She knew what would happen far better than I," Jessica said, taking her seat at the table. "And thank God she did." She took Seth's hand in hers and the two of them shared a warm smile.

Mort watched the two of them holding hands over the table, staring into each other's eyes like a couple of lovesick puppies. "Y'know, if this was a Hanna-Barbera cartoon, there'd be hearts comin' out of you two's eyes," he said, snapping them both to attention. "How 'bout we get back to the story?"

Jessica cleared her throat and had the decency to blush. "Oh, yes. We went into the Toy Box to find a Disney Princess dress for Morgan."

"Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*," Seth said, with a hint of pride in his voice. "Most girls nowadays would rather dress as Ariel or Cinderella. My niece wants to dress up as the princess who's book-smart and street-smart *and* tamed a beast to boot. She's no dummy, that's for sure."

"Of course she isn't. She's related to me." Jessica paused to relish the simultaneous eye-roll from the boys before continuing on. "Anyway, I went to find Morgan's dress and Seth wandered over to the toy train display. I found the dress, paid for it, and went back to the trains to find Seth. And when I got there, what did I see but –"

"A miniature sleigh and eight tiny reindeer?"

"Mort, hush up!" Jessica ordered, despite her barely concealed mirth. The sheriff's brown eyes were crinkled at the corners and glittering with fun, and he and Seth were chortling like a pair of barflies swilling eggnog. "For pity's sake, let me tell the story! *Anyway*, I got there just in time to see Seth walk up to the trains, and this boy, probably five or six years old –"

"Old enough to know better," Seth interjected, swallowing a mouthful of soup.

"Shoved his way in front of Seth and started pounding on the train set controls."

"And I was polite, at first," Seth explained. "I said to him, 'Excuse me, young fella, but I was here first. You should've asked before you just pushed in like that.' Well, darned if he didn't turn his little snot-nose up at me and say 'I was here first. You're too old to play with trains.'"

"Jeez," Mort said between spoonfuls of soup. "Where the heck was his mother when this happened?"

"She didn't show up 'til a minute or so later, right after Jessica stepped in. 'Course, I was gettin' madder than hornets at that point, and she said to me, 'Let me handle this.' I just said 'Good luck' and got out of the way."

"What happened, Mrs. F? *Did* you have any luck with him?"

"No. I saw the whole thing happen and I was none too pleased either, so I went up to him and told him to apologize to Seth. He looked right up at me and..." Jessica huffed angrily, her eyebrows knitting together and her cheeks flushing scarlet.

Mort watched this display of emotion with some intrigue. It was pretty rare when Jessica got angry, as it usually took a lot to ruffle her feathers, but when she did get mad, woe betide the person who was at fault. "And what?" he asked gently, noticing how tightly her lips were pressed together.

"What'd he say to you?"

"I think I'd better tell you, Mort, before Jess swallows her chin," Seth said, giving Jessica's hand a squeeze. "He told her to get lost, which would've been no big deal had he not tacked an *old lady* onto the end of it."

Mort sucked in a breath. Yeah, that would definitely make her mad. Calling Jessica an old lady was like asking for a death wish, and considering her gentle personality, that was saying something. "What'd she do, Seth?"

"*She* didn't do anything but stand there seething. I, on the other hand, got so riled that it was all I could do not to grab that little brat by the arm and make him apologize to Jessica right then and there. As it was, I did raise my voice just a little. I didn't yell, mind you, but I did get short with him. I told him he'd better apologize, and when he said 'Why should I' in this

smart-aleck voice, I said, 'Because Santa will leave you nothing but coal if you're a rotten little brat.'

Mort nearly snorted his next spoonful of soup out of his nose. "You didn't!"

"Yes, I did. Unfortunately, I did right when his mother was coming over, and she had the nerve to chew me out for yelling at her little angel." Seth

snorted. "Little angel, my fanny."

The sheriff's face shone with admiration. "Man, good thing this is Cabot Cove. If you'd been in Macy's in New York, Mrs. F woulda had to come and bail you outta mall jail. Did you tell that woman what her kid had said to you and Mrs. F?"

"Ayuh, and you know what she said to me? 'Well, you *are* too old to play with trains,' just as snotty as her kid. Then she picked him up and said, 'I don't know why we came to this podunk town anyway. This store's a dump compared to Macy's.'"

"Yuppies," Mort commented. "What'd you say to her then?"

"Well, here's the funny part. I didn't get a chance to say anything, 'cause Loretta was in there buying a set of Matchbox cars for her nephew. She whipped right around and said to this girl, 'Then get your uppity butt outta here and take Chucky with you.'" Seth finally broke into a smile and chuckled heartily. "The look on that girl's face was priceless. She stormed right out of there and everyone applauded when she was gone."

Jessica, her face clearing at last, laughed herself. "Loretta even took a bow." She sighed and swallowed another spoonful of soup. "Lord, if there's one thing you definitely do not want to do in Cabot Cove, it's insult the town or the people who live here. You'll be run out on a rail if you do."

Mort shook his head. "Man, I'm tellin' ya, you can't trust tourists, no matter if you're in a big city or a small town. At least you stood up for yourself and for Mrs. F's honor, Doc, and you did it without wreckin' the malls."

Seth shrugged. "Hey, what self-respecting husband wouldn't have the decency to defend his wife? *My* wife's about as far from an old lady as you can get." His eyes crinkled at Jessica, who was peering at him over her cup of coffee, eyes gleaming. "Right, honey?"

"Exactly. Why say I'm over forty? Saying I'm over seventeen sounds much better!"

Mort laughed and cleaned his bowl of what soup remained. "Well, I better get going back to the station. Adele brought some hot cider over this morning, and I gotta make sure the guys haven't spiked it." He stood, pulled on his jacket, and set his Stetson back on his head. "Thanks for inviting me to lunch, you two. Oh, by the way, Mrs. F, have you picked out your song for the party Christmas Eve?"

"I have! I picked an old favorite from my childhood."

"Oh yeah? What is it?"

"You'll have to wait until the party to find out."

"All right. Doc, are you sure you don't wanna join the Caroliers this year? It's gonna be a blast."

Seth gave the sheriff a face full of *yeah right*. "No, thank you. When you all added that blessed N'Sync Christmas song to your repertoire, I decided to bow out."

"Seth, how could you bow out when you never *bowed in* to begin with?"

Jessica asked, giving him a poke in the forearm.

"Yeah, Doc! Don't knock it if you ain't tried it. 'Sides, we cut that song from the list. We're doin' Mariah Carey's 'All I Want For Christmas Is You,' though."

"Lemme guess. Eve's suggestion?"

"Who else? 'Course, I'm gonna solo on Andy Williams' version of 'Happy Holiday,' and there's Mrs. F's solo song... whatever it is." Mort yanked his jacket straight. "Think about it, okay, Doc? See ya later."

"Bye, Mort."

"See ya." Once the sheriff was gone, Seth returned his attention to Jessica.

"Jess, honey, are you sure you're all right?"

"I'm fine, Seth. I'm just a little irritated that we let our shopping day be spoiled by an ill-behaved child and his equally ill-behaved mother."

Seth smiled, an idea beginning to form in his head. "Well, we're just gonna have to find a way to fix that." He slid his chair around next to hers and put an arm around her shoulders. "How 'bout we go out for a nice dinner, finish up our shopping, and then come back here and just spend some quiet time together?"

Jessica pretended to mull it over. "Italian for dinner?"

"What else for a date?"

"Shopping for what and for whom?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out."

"By quiet time, I assume you mean cuddling on the couch in our pajamas with a cup of cocoa and enjoying a Christmas movie?"

"Of course."

"Ah-huh." Jessica nodded. "*White Christmas*?"

"Ayuh. Hot chocolate with extra marshmallas?"

"Only way to make it." Jessica shot him a teasing grin. "I'm going to take a bath before we leave."

Seth grinned, love sparkling in his hazel eyes. "Is that an invitation?"

Jessica pulled him in for a kiss. "You decide."

Chapter 3: Wake-Up Call

I know Christmas is over, but here's hoping this will keep y'all in the spirit! In this chapter, Seth and Jessica get a rude awakening, but an offer for a Christmas treat they can't refuse.

There were certain occasions when Seth felt like throwing the phone out the window. Holidays. Movie nights. Telemarketers ringing the house. And *especially* after he and Jessica had gone to bed. Tonight just happened to be *that* very occasion. A sharp *brrrrrrring!* grabbed him by the ears and yanked him up out of the Land of Nod, causing him to let out an indignant snort. A growl followed as he stretched out an arm and fumbled on the bedside table, trying to find the phone. "Dad-blammit," he muttered, knocking something off in his attempts; thankfully, the hollow *thwuck* as it hit the floor told him it was something plastic.

A mewling sound came from Jessica as Seth untangled himself from the snug cocoon of blankets, arms, and legs they were wrapped in together.

"Seth, what time is it?" she asked, her voice groggy with sleep.

Seth rubbed his eyes and brought the clock into clearer focus. "10:30. Who the Sam Hill's callin' at this hour?" His hand finally grasped the phone and he held the receiver to his ear. "Hello?"

"Hello, Dr. Hazlitt, this is Ted Hartley. Did I call at a bad time?"

Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer. "Oh no, I'm always bright-eyed and bushy-tailed this time of night, waiting for the phone to ring."

He could almost picture the wince on the face of Jessica's editor. "I'm sorry. I should've realized you'd be asleep."

"Ayuh, well, day late, dollar short. You wanna talk to Jessica, I presume?"

"Please, if she's awake."

Now Jessica was sitting up in bed, rubbing at her own eyes. "Who is it?"

"She's awake. Hold on a second." Seth handed the receiver to her. "Your loyal editor, who needs to tune his timing."

Jessica clamped a hand over the mouthpiece and shushed her husband, giving him a glare. "Seth, for heaven's sake! He'll hear you!" She took her hand away and answered the call. "Hello, Ted? What's the matter?"

"Nothing's wrong, Jessica. I'm sorry if I woke you and Dr. Hazlitt, but this couldn't wait. Your book's been selling spectacularly, even more so with the holiday season."

"Probably because it's a Christmas-themed mystery," Jessica said. "Ted, honestly, if statistics are the only reason you called so late..."

"No, no, I have a good reason, believe me. Because your book is a Christmas mystery and it's been doing so well, we want you to come to New York for a special book signing."

"When?"

"Two days from now."

"Two days? Ted, don't you think this is a little last-minute? And how long is this going to last? Christmas is only a week away, and I was hoping to spend it at home with my husband. It's our first Christmas together."

"I realize that, Jessica, which is why we're sweetening the deal. The signing lasts for the twentieth and the twenty-first, three bookstores in two days. In return for the short notice and any monkey wrenches in your holiday plans, we're giving you and Dr. Hazlitt a Big Apple Christmas with all the trimmings." Ted's voice grew excited. "I'm talking Rockefeller Center, the Christmas Spectacular at Radio City Music Hall, ice skating in Central Park, the whole kit and caboodle."

Jessica was stunned. "Ted, are you actually *treating* me and Seth to all of this? I can't let you do that!"

"Jess, consider it our Christmas gift to you, for being such a wonderful client."

"Uh-huh, and for earning you a steady paycheck?"

Ted laughed over the line. "Touche. And since I know Dr. Hazlitt might be a little reluctant to pull up and come to New York, we've arranged for tickets to the Holiday Train Show at the Botanical Garden."

Now it was Jessica's turn to chortle. "You are devious. He won't be able to resist that... and nor can I resist the offer. Just let me talk to Seth for a minute." She laid the phone aside and turned her attention to her still-yawning husband. "Seth, what would you say to an early Christmas in New York, for the next two days?"

Seth looked at her as though she had suggested they go skinny-dipping in the Arctic Ocean. "I say Ted Hartley's lost what marbles he has, if that's what he's called you about. He's planning on hauling you down to New York for a last-minute book signing, isn't he?"

Jessica held up her hands. "Hold on; you haven't even heard the rest of it. This trip isn't just for me. If you come along, my publisher will treat us to a New York Christmas - shows, ice skating, Rockefeller Center..." A sly smile graced her lips. "And the Botanical Garden's Holiday Train Show."

Seth's eyebrows quirked at this little tidbit, and Jessica gave a silent prayer of thanks that she had once mentioned her husband's love of toy trains to Ted. "The big train show? The one with the antique model trains?" Jessica nodded and Seth heaved a sigh. "Ted's playin' dirty, but he's doin' a jim-

dandy job of it." After a moment of deliberation, Seth threw up his hands. "All right, let's go."

"That's the spirit!" Jessica laughed as she picked the phone up again. "Ted, I'd be honored to accept the offer. We'll be on our way tomorrow."

Seth waited until she'd exchanged goodbyes with Ted before putting the phone back in its cradle. He glanced back just in time to see Jessica grinning at him, her eyes glittering cobalt. "You're lucky I love trains."

"And you're lucky I mentioned your love of trains to Ted Lord knows how long ago. Seth, this could be a lot of fun! Christmas is a magical time in New York." Jessica snuggled close to Seth and put her arms around him.

"Just think: we can have dinner at the Tavern on the Green, do a little more shopping, go ice skating together."

"Ayuh, that's all I need, to fall on my butt on cold hard ice in front of a hundred total strangers, where any Tom, Dick, or Harry can take a picture and sell it to the *National Enquirer* for a fast buck. I can see the headline now: *Mr. J.B. Fletcher has Frigid Fall on Fat Fanny.*"

Jessica was laughing so hard that her shoulders were heaving, her face buried in Seth's chest to muffle the noise. The attempt did not so much mute her guffaws as it did shake his body along with hers. He looked down at her, helpless with mirth, and felt his own mouth begin to twitch. "Jess, calm down! You're gonna give yourself hiccups if you keep on laughing like this."

A few more giggles escaped Jessica before she could speak again. "I'm sorry, Seth. It's just..." Giggle. "Those were really..." More laughter. "*Really* good alliterations."

Seth smiled at that. Considering what she did for a living, that was pretty high praise. "Well, thank you. I'm actually pretty surprised you're laughing at *that*. I thought you were laughing at the *Mr. J.B. Fletcher* part." She straightened up and he took sudden notice of the mirthful tears streaking her face. "Good thing you're not wearing mascara. You'd look like someone hit you in the eyes right about now," he said, reaching out to smooth her tears away with his thumbs.

Jessica kissed his thumb as it moved down to trace her lips, and she tasted the salty tang of her tears. "I think you're exaggerating."

"Well, maybe just a little. It'd be a shame to see those pretty eyes blackened."

"No, I mean the *Mr. J.B. Fletcher*. In the three months we've been married, I've never once heard anyone call you anything even remotely close."

Jessica laid a hand against his cheek. "Seth, if you're worried about that..."

Seth silenced her with a kiss. "Shh, no I'm not. I'm just an old country doctor, Jess, and I don't give a rat's behind about fame. I'm not one of those thin-skinned Hollywood pretty boys who throws a duck fit when his wife becomes more popular than him. And honestly, who'd call me Mr. Fletcher anyway? Anybody with half a brain who follows the news knows my name, date of birth, and Army serial number."

"So being known as the husband of J.B. Fletcher doesn't bother you?"

"Bother me? Jess, do you have any idea how proud it makes me to *be* your husband? When we go to parties and people ask who I am, I 'bout bust my buttons when you say 'This is my husband Seth.'" He leaned close to her ear and whispered, "And considering how long I waited to become your husband, I think I'm entitled to a *little* pride."

"Careful," Jessica whispered back, holding a finger to his lips. Her voice was deadly quiet, yet humor shone in her eyes. "You're in grave danger of making me sound like a prize horse."

Seth grinned. "In a pig's eye. I'm not like those other men who compare their wives to animals. Filly, heifer, bunny, kitten; I'd never call you any of that."

"I know you wouldn't. You've got your opinions, but you're not a sexist monster."

"Nope." His hazel eyes sparkled wickedly. "I'm a tickle monster." He shot out his hands and tickled her under her arms so quickly that she didn't even have time to block him. Jessica shrieked with laughter and batted at his hands, which escaped her clutches and moved south to her tummy. At this point, Jessica was reduced to a laughing heap against the pillows, completely at Seth's mercy when he targeted her weakest point. Once he had her tickled pink, Seth pulled her close and laid a soft, sweet kiss on her lips. "I love you."

"I love you, too." Jessica snuggled deeper into his arms and laid her head on his chest. "We're going to have such fun in New York. So don't worry about anything. You're not *Mr. J.B. Fletcher*, nor will you have a frigid fall when we go skating."

Seth was quiet for a moment while she pulled the covers around them. "I don't hear you dispelling the *fat fanny* part."

Jessica chortled. "Oh, *Seth*," she groaned as she turned out the light.