

Montana *Mistletoe*

Romance Has Perfect Timing
in Four Christmas Novellas

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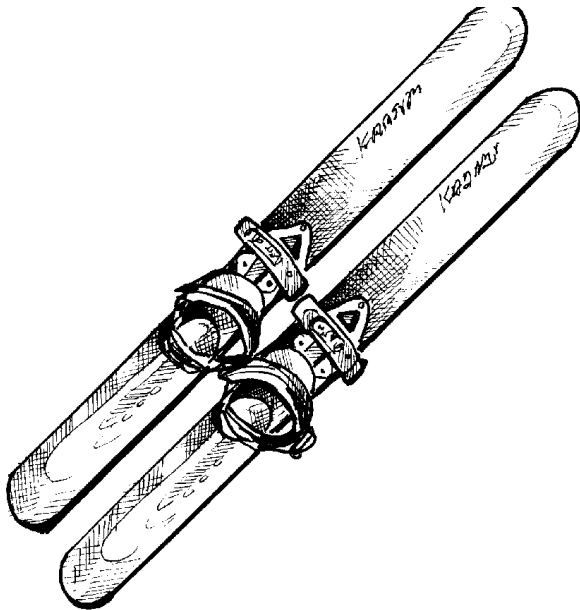
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Christmas Confusion

by Lena Nelson Dooley



Dedication

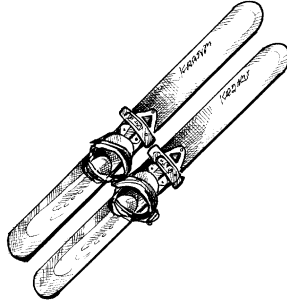
Crystal, I welcome you into the family
by dedicating this book to you.
I received the contract soon after attending
your and Timothy's wedding.
I look forward to our days ahead
and the great-grandchildren you'll give me.

James Allen Dooley,
you are the light of my life and the joy of my heart.
God gave you to me when I didn't even realize
what a precious gift you were.
Now I understand and praise Him every day that
you have been a part of my life for so many years.

*In his heart a man plans his course,
but the LORD determines his steps.*

PROVERBS 16:9

Chapter 1



January

The doorbell chimed the first ten notes of “Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas.” Lori Compton dried her hands on a red and green kitchen towel, untied the cheery Christmas apron protecting her velour jogging suit, and gave the table a last once-over. Everything looked just the way she wanted it to.

She hurried to the door and pulled it open. “Welcome!”

Deanna and Madison, two of her best friends, stood on the small porch knocking slush from their boots.

“Come on in.” Lori opened the door wider to give them plenty of room.

They complied with hugs all around, then removed their boots and left them on the rack in the foyer.

“Something smells good.” A red-and-green-striped stocking cap hid most of Deanna’s hair until she pulled it off using

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the snowball pompom on the very end. Static electricity gave her a strawberry-blond halo.

Madison headed toward the low round table in front of the stone fireplace. An abundance of goodies crowded the surface. “When you said high tea, you really meant it, didn’t you?”

“Well, I wanted to start the new year right.” Lori followed Deanna as she trailed behind their tall, willowy friend.

Lori’s chalet perched high on the slopes of Sugar Mountain just north of Mistletoe, Montana. Her father had built it for her before he sold his construction firm and retired to Florida with her mother. A large, open great room boasted a wall of windows overlooking the town and surrounding areas. The view of the mountains was spectacular any time of year. A roaring fire added a warm glow to the expanse.

Deanna bypassed the table and went straight to the windows. She sighed before she turned around. “I just love it here. I don’t believe there’s a prettier spot in the whole world, Lori. You’re so lucky.”

“So you’ve often said.” Lori joined her at the window. “I do feel blessed.” Her gaze moved to the pristine white blanket covering the landscape; evergreens jutted through the snow in clusters. “I like it more than ever since I’ve been elected mayor. I sort of feel like I’m protecting Mistletoe.” She gave an embarrassed laugh. “I guess that sounds ridiculous, doesn’t it?”

“Not at all.” Madison gave her a stern look. “I voted for you because you’ll be good for this town. We need your creative thinking.”

“I only hope I have enough.”

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This early in January, days were short in the Rocky Mountains. A weak winter sun sank slowly to touch the tips of the peaks across the valley.

Lori glanced at her watch. "Since it's past four o'clock, maybe we should start eating." The copper-bottomed teapot she'd put on the stove sounded a loud whistle as if on cue. "I'll set the tea to steep and bring it in."

While she fixed the beverage in the china teapot her grandmother had brought from England as a young bride, the murmur of lively conversation came from the great room. Lori set the teapot on a round silver tray and carried it through the swinging doors that separated the two rooms.

Madison and Deanna had already chosen to sit cross-legged on the thick carpet, and Madison held a half-eaten finger sandwich. "Is this cucumber and cream cheese?"

"Yes, Gram always made them for high tea." Lori set the tray in the vacant spot in the middle of the table.

"I'm going straight for the shortbread biscuits. Even though I know that's what the English call them, I have a hard time not saying 'cookies.'" Deanna reached for one and took a dainty bite. "Your grandmother's recipe produces the best I've ever eaten."

"And I made myself wait for you to get here before I had one of these raisin scones." Lori loaded a scone with strawberry jam and clotted cream before sinking her teeth into it.

By the time they finished eating, the fire needed tending. Lori placed a couple of large logs on the bed of glowing coals. "These should last us the rest of the evening."

Deanna rose from the floor and lounged on the leather sofa.

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Lori smiled. She had saved a long time to afford the rounded couch that formed a conversation pit. Seeing her friend look so comfy made the cost worth it.

“So does anyone know what year this is?” A sneaky smile lit Deanna’s face.

Madison raised her hand. “Two thousand—”

“I don’t mean the date.” Deanna huffed out a sigh. “This year is significant for us. . .and Kathy. I wish she were here.”

Lori pictured their friend with the bright red curls and large, expressive eyes. “Yeah, I miss seeing her. Actually, I’ve missed hearing from her, too. How long has it been since any of us heard from her?”

“Well, we send cards for each other’s birthdays, don’t we?” Deanna placed a finger to her chin while she thought. “Who got the last one?”

As if she doesn’t know. Madison and Deanna had been at the party Aunt Ethel and Uncle Hiram had thrown for her last night. Lori smiled. “I heard from her last, since my birthday is New Year’s Eve. But this year her card didn’t even include a note, just her signature. Maybe she’s really busy.”

Deanna cleared her throat. “Back to my original question. Why is this year significant?”

“We’ll all be turning twenty-eight,” Lori and Madison sang in unison.

“Yeah,” Deanna agreed. “The year of the *marriage pact*.” The emphasis she placed on the last two words indicated the weight of her pronouncement.

Silence descended on the room. Lori remembered the

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agreement the four friends had made right before they left college—to be married by the time they were twenty-eight years old. Well, it hadn't happened yet. For any of them.

Lori started laughing, and the other two joined in.

“Do any of us even have a prospect?” She glanced from one friend to the other.

“Well, not exactly.” Madison reached across the table and refilled her cup with tea. “This is empty. Do you want me to make more?”

“No, I'll do it.” Lori jumped up and took the tray to the kitchen. Should she share the hopes she had hidden in her heart? She had one prospect, if she could call him that. His serious eyes and warm smile floated into her mind.

In a few minutes, she returned to her friends. “Well, I kind of have my eye on someone.”

“And you haven't told us about him?” Deanna sat up and pulled one foot beneath her. “Is he someone we know?”

Madison gave a very unladylike snort. “How could he not be? Mistletoe isn't very large.”

“Maybe,” Lori said slowly. “But I'm not telling you who. He and I have known each other quite awhile, but the friendship seems to be moving toward a romance. I don't want to share until I know for sure.”

No matter how many questions her friends asked, Lori didn't reveal any details. “What about you girls?”

“Well,” Deanna began, stretching out the word. “You know Frank and I have been dating. I'm just not sure he's the one for me. I guess I want more zing or something.”

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“Zing?” Once again Lori and Madison spoke in unison. The two women thought remarkably alike—it was probably the reason they were the first to connect in college.

“Yeah, you know, a special tingle or something that sparks. . .” Deanna’s words faded to nothing.

“When I was on a recent buying trip to New York. . .” Madison left a pregnant pause before dropping her bombshell. “I met someone.”

“And you kept it a secret?” Lori leaned toward her. “Tell us more.”

“There’s not much to tell. . .yet.” Lori sensed Madison’s smile hid a world of meaning.

Deanna leaned back with a satisfied grin. “Well, we don’t know about Kathy, but it looks as if there’s a possibility that one or two of us will keep the pact.”



Lori’s friends left an hour later. She pondered what she’d told them about the silly pact they made in college. She hoped she hadn’t said too much; she also hoped Matthew would make a move toward her soon.

Rev. Matthew Hogan, the handsome pastor of Living Word Chapel in Mistletoe’s town square, was single. Lori had been active in the church for as long as she could remember. Since Matthew came to town, they had spent a lot of time working together on programs and activities. Of course, other people worked with them, but he did seem to pay a lot of attention to her. *Because you’re often in charge of things*, she berated herself.

If she were honest, that was true. She’d always been a leader

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both at church and in other activities in town. After all, she never would have been elected mayor if she had been shy.

Lori took the leftovers to the kitchen and stored them. She'd have a ready-made lunch for the next couple of days. She brewed one more cup of tea before going back to stand by the fireplace and look out over her town. Darkness had stolen across the land, and Christmas lights defined various features of Mistletoe, especially the town square.

She loved this time of night because the area was full of activity. Even though the Christmas season was officially over, every day was Christmas in Mistletoe, Montana. The fact that every store displayed Christmas items year-round was a major tourist draw. But for the last two years, this type of traffic had gradually decreased, and the trend worried Lori. Her promise to make innovations to bring tourism back up to par had helped get her elected. Had she once again bitten off more than she could chew? She hoped not—for her own sake, as well as the town's.

Her attention settled on Living Word Chapel. Its steeple rose toward the indigo sky, now dotted with a multitude of twinkling stars. Evergreens in varying sizes and shapes formed a framework around the building, and light streamed through the stained-glass windows. From this distance, the colors ran together like those of a watercolor, adding to the charm of the quaint building. Looking at the picturesque church reminded her of one of the Christmas cards she'd received in December.

Could she and the good-looking man of God have a relationship? Would he be the answer to her longing for a husband and family?

Lori hung her hopes on that thought.