

Seasonal Dates



A NOVEL BY
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Seasonal Dates

A Small Town Love Story

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CONTENTS

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 1

It was Black Friday, the morning after Thanksgiving and I was shopping. Of course, it was crowded, too. Two out of two miserable options. My mood had never been at its best during this year and performing this chore did not improve it one bit. I wanted to be at my condo sitting in my recliner or, even better, lying in my nice, warm bed.

This year started with a cold winter and, when Marsha broke off our engagement in early February, it became colder. I knew there were some issues but I hadn't thought they were insurmountable. She did. She quit church which meant I didn't have to see her at church events. It didn't stop others from gossiping about us or me, however.

In March, my parents were killed in a car accident. It wasn't their fault but that won't bring them back to life. I am an only child. I inherited everything according to their wills. I was now well off. The suit settled for the maximum of the policy in October.

Since I already had the condo and a good car, there wasn't much for me to buy. I did pay off both loans. My job was okay but wasn't what I had really hoped it would be when I graduated college. Whether to continue in it or find something else was still a question that roamed about in my mind.

None of that explains why I'm shopping on Black Friday. The reason was simple and not totally unpleasant. My company was having a Christmas party early in the season. I was meeting with a co-worker to help her pick a gift for the party and for her to help me do the same. Fortunately, there was a twenty-dollar limit.

I met Kathy at Kohls. She is a nice older woman, who was one of my few friends at work or anywhere else. We walked through the store looking for gifts that would fit the woman I had or the man she had. We laughed about the luck of the draw. We found gifts reasonable for the persons whose names

had been drawn. Our purchases were just under the limit. It was almost lunchtime so we went to a restaurant for lunch after working our way through the line and paying for our purchases.

Kathy said, “I think we did well on the gifts. Thanks for your help, Randy. I never have been able to pick good gifts for men. Even for Paul, my husband, I got a list from him that was even a little detailed.”

I chuckled. “I understand. I’ve never been very good at any kind of gift. The only female gift I had to pick was for my mother when she was alive. I wonder how I might handle it if I ever marry.”

Kathy winked. “I’ll just have to find you a nice young lady and get you married off.”

“Kathy, it’s been tried before without success.”

“I’ll have to think on it. What about at your church?”

“There aren’t any younger people there at all. It’s an old church that has an aging congregation. They haven’t been as open as they could to new people who have moved into the community. I wish they were. I’ve been thinking about moving my membership so I won’t be the last one left when they all die off.”

“That’s not a nice thing to say.”

“I know. However, it is a reality. They’re good people but just don’t welcome new folk. I’m okay because my parents were members before their accident and my grandparents before then. It’s a long-time tradition.”

Kathy chuckled a slight bit. “How old are you, Randy?”

“I turned twenty-eight two months ago. Sometimes, I feel older.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, it’s just a number of things, most of them little, that add up to not fitting with my age group. I like old music from the forties and early fifties. I don’t have a tattoo. I’m a church-goer who is serious about his beliefs. My clothing choices are

old-fashioned. My hair is worn neither long nor short and I tuck my shirttail into my pants. I just don't fit my age."

Kathy grinned. "Maybe you should start going out with older women."

"Maybe I should." We both chuckled though I knew there was an element of truth in that. We finished our meals saying that we would meet again Monday at work. We gave each other friend hugs and went our separate ways.

I returned to my condo and wrapped my gift to Julia. She was a nice, married woman in her thirties who worked in accounting. I had met her twice at work when my duties in engineering brought me into contact with an accounting person. She was pleasant and I was able to resolve her question quickly and easily each time. She thanked me and I had gone back to my area and worked. I hoped she would like the present Kathy picked for her. I put a tag on it and set it to one side for Monday. I would put it under our "holiday tree."

It was quiet and I went to bed early. Saturday was a bust. I had nothing to do so I did it. I went to bed a little later to wake up Sunday morning feeling like I needed to be in church this morning. I went to the same little church and left feeling slightly let down as usual. The sermon didn't speak to me. The singing was lackluster. I finally decided what I had known for some time. It was time to find a church that would minister to me and in which I could serve some useful purpose. I knew that there was a little cop-out involved but, at the same time, the pastor had to preach to the congregation and I was the odd man out.

On the way to my condo, there was a church on the road. It was just getting out and I could see a wide mixture of ages including many children. I decided that I would be at this church next Sunday. I noticed that they advertised a Sunday school time on their billboard that my current church didn't even have. I was heartened.

Monday was work and I went in as usual placing my gift for Julia under the company tree. The work day was uneventful and I caught up on paperwork. I thought to myself that,

somewhere, someone would be happy to complete their file. Kathy and I went to lunch with Jim McDavid who actually went by Mack. We went to a Mexican restaurant that was close. We enjoyed our meals.

Hours later, the day was over and I headed to my condo. I stopped on the way for wings not wanting to cook. I knew that wasn't as cheap as cooking but I just didn't want to go the trouble of cooking for one.

I watched Dancing with the Stars and the news. I went to bed and slept peacefully. My week passed that way though I cooked suppers the rest of the week. I watched football Saturday eating chips and dip with beer. I went to sleep happy because my team won.

In the morning, I left the house for the new church in time for Sunday school. I came to the door and a middle-aged couple greeted me. The woman said, "Good morning."

I smiled. "I'm Randy Jackson and just coming here. Is there an adult singles class?"

The woman smiled kindly. "Good morning, Randy. We're Cynthia and Jack Rollins. We're glad you're here at Live Oak. There is a singles class. It's fairly large and has a wide spread of ages. It's the Burning Bush Class located four doors down on your right."

"Thank you, Ma'am." I walked down and saw a small sign for the correct class beside the door. I went inside to see about fourteen or so people though the majority were female. It appeared that four or five were in my rough age category.

I said, "Good morning, I'm Randy Jackson."

One of the women my age said, "Good morning, Randy. I'm Lois Copeland. Welcome to the BB's. Come on in and pick a seat."

I walked further into the room and found a seat at one of the tables across from Lois and next to an older woman. She said, "Good morning, Randy. I'm Gloria. It's good to see someone new this morning." Gloria was a strikingly good-looking woman who looked to be in her early forties.

Lois said, “Randy, have you lived here long?”

“Yes, for a number of years. I was going to another church. I was the youngest person there. Everyone else was over seventy. Nice folks, but I just don’t fit. I finally decided it was time to make a change.”

Lois smiled. “I know that church. It’s unfortunate. The congregation didn’t embrace the changes in the community and it will probably fail.”

“I know. I didn’t want to be the one to turn the lights off.” That drew the very slight chuckle it deserved.

Gloria said, “We’re a discussion class though with a leader. Pam does a fine job and is always prepared with verses and knowledge. We’re studying Paul’s letters right now.”

Our leader, Pam Martin, led the discussion after reading the chapter in Romans that was being studied. I was glad I brought my Bible. I added a couple of comments and answered a question from Lois. It was an enjoyable class. After the closing prayer, Gloria said, “Come, sit with us in church.” I nodded though was unsure who the “us” might be. It turned out to be Gloria, Lois, and another young woman who had been sitting next to Gloria. Helen, I quickly found out, was a college student and Gloria’s daughter. Lois was a neighbor living in the same subdivision with her parents. I noticed that Helen wore an engagement ring and asked about it. Her fiancé was a fellow college student who was visiting his family this weekend while she was visiting with her mother.

I was seated between Gloria and Lois. Lois was very pretty but also very quiet. Her answers to my questions were single syllable for the most part. When it was time to sing, we shared a hymnal. She sang the soprano part beautifully while I sang the bass. Gloria sang the alto part warmly along with her daughter. They both had beautiful voices, too.

I enjoyed the service. When it was over, Gloria suggested that I join most of the class for lunch at a local buffet restaurant. I agreed. Lois, on the other hand, was headed to her home.

Once there, I asked Gloria if I had inhibited Lois.

She thought a moment and then said, “No more than any other reasonably attractive man would. Lois had an unhappy marriage and divorced. Her husband was killed shortly afterward. I think they had problems with divorcing because neither of them believed divorce was right.” She grimaced. “Sometimes, it is. In those cases, one party or the other must take the first step. My relationship with Helen’s father is better than it ever was when we were married.”

“I understand. I just got out of an engagement that would have resulted in a disastrous marriage. It was tough when she ended it. I was relieved when the ring was returned and we went our separate ways. I heard through work that she is engaged again. I hope this one works for her.” I smiled a bit grimly.

We went into the restaurant and ate. I had a good time talking to everyone and, particularly, Gloria. She had a confident ease about her that made talk easy. As we were parting for the day, she said, “I hope you return, Randy.” I nodded in response to her statement. “There is a girl, a woman, who usually comes who wasn’t here today. I think she’s visiting her parents. She’s a neat person about your age. I think you would find her less standoffish than Lois. I like Nadia and you might also.”

“I’ve enjoyed everyone thus far, including Lois. I’m not pushy though and won’t be to anyone. I could use some friends.”

“We all can, Randy. Have a blessed day.”

“Thanks. It was good to meet and get to know you.”

I went home, changed clothes, and took a nap in my recliner.

Chapter 2

My work week went by with no problems. I ate lunch with Kathy and others during the week. Next week would be our Christmas party held from lunch to the early afternoon with the rest of the day off. I looked forward to that.

I worked on things in the condo Saturday. On Sunday, I dressed and went to Sunday school and church. I walked into the Sunday school class and there was Gloria with another young woman. Lois was to one side but sitting next to Gloria was younger woman about my age. Dark hair and blue eyes, this woman was attractive also. Gloria waved me to a seat across from them.

“Randy, this is Nadia Clark. Nadia, this is Randy Jackson, a new member of our class and church though he hasn’t made all that formal yet.”

Nadia looked at me and gave me a small smile. “It’s good to meet you, Randy.”

I replied, “It’s good to meet you, too, Nadia. Hello, Gloria, Lois.” I looked at each and then sat down. Pam started the class. She was introducing the letters to the Corinthians today. It was a good lesson, well taught. Nadia made a couple of good comments. Loise was quiet and looked pensive or somehow subdued compared with last Sunday. We had a closing prayer and everyone started to the sanctuary.

I asked, “Gloria, where’s Helen?”

“She’s back at school with her guy.” Gloria had my arm. To her other side walked Nadia.

Nadia said, “It’s good to be back. My parents live just out of town and I was visiting them last weekend.” She continued. “I work here but try to visit them at least once a month.”

I nodded. I had done that when my parents were alive. I got up some courage. “Would you join me for lunch today?” Obviously referring to both of them.

Gloria said, “How about it, Nadia? We’ve got to eat and Randy has been a good guy.”

I could tell from the sound of her voice that Nadia was a little reluctant. “I guess that would be okay. Like you said, we do have to eat.” I nodded. We were at the sanctuary doors and sat down about two-thirds of the way toward the front like before. While Lois didn’t sit with us, she did sit close. I thought she looked a slight bit wistful. It was another good service. After the benediction, we left for our cars to meet at a local Mexican restaurant at Gloria’s suggestion.

I walked in with a female on each arm. That had been Gloria’s idea. They were both looked good and I was proud to have them on my arms. I made no suggestive moves. I didn’t want to make Nadia any more skittish than she already seemed. We were seated at a table. We gave our drink orders for tea and sat back.

As we waited, Nadia asked, “Randy, what do you do?”

“I’m one of the engineers watching over production for Chase Products.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“Some days more than others. My job is to work with the production employees to make their jobs easier and safer without slowing production. Hopefully, we will increase production with some of our efforts. I do enjoy solving problems or preventing them. I figure that a problem prevented helps production, if for no other reason, by keeping people from being injured.”

Nadia smiled. “I do cost accounting for Bella Containers.”

I exclaimed quietly, “Bella’s plant is next door to Chase. Do you work there?”

“Yes, that’s the only location in this area. Years ago, before I went to work for them, everything in the southeast was consolidated to that location.”

I knew a fair bit about their computer systems and methodologies and we talked about that. Gloria listened and smiled. We weren’t in a hurry to leave and continued to talk to

each other while Gloria was involved and listening. Our plates were cleared off and I grabbed the check, pulled some bills from my wallet, and stood.

Nadia said, "There was nothing said about you paying for lunch. We should split the bill."

I grinned at her. "Next time, you buy and we'll be even."

Gloria grinned. "You two work close enough that you could meet for lunch during the week." I knew a set up when I heard one but I sort of hoped Nadia would bite. She was attractive though neither in the class of Lois nor Gloria. Also, she seemed more skittish than Lois though Lois didn't join for lunch last week or this week.

She did bite. She said, "I guess we could do that and be even."

We went out to our cars and Nadia and I traded business cards. I wrote my cell phone number on the back of mine. I said, "Nadia, call me any time."

She looked at me curiously. "I might cramp your style."

"I don't have any style to cramp. I would appreciate a call from you."

We all left for our homes.

It was later that afternoon when my phone rang. It was Nadia. "Randy, I want to talk to you about something."

"Sure, go ahead."

"Not on the phone. May I come over?"

"Okay." I said it slowly.

"Just talk. Where are you?"

"I'm at my condo in my recliner."

She chuckled. "Typical man. Tell me where and I'll come to you." I did and she said she would be there in fifteen or twenty minutes.

I hadn't changed clothes other than removing my tie and coat. I pulled my loafers back on and stood straightening my rumpled shirt a bit. I looked around the living room but

decided that it was clean enough. Eighteen minutes after the call, my doorbell rang. It was Nadia.

I opened the door. "Come in, Nadia." I looked but no one was with her. I shrugged mentally. She was seating herself on my couch. So, I returned to my recliner which was close to where she sat. "What can I do for you, Nadia?"

She blushed a little. "Randy, I want you to consider a deal with me." I gave her a very curious look and made a motion for her to go ahead.

"It's time for the gamut of Christmas parties to start. Then, there will New Year's Eve. I'm tired of going by myself or not going at all. I would like us to be dates for the season. Gloria likes you and you were pleasant company today at lunch. I wouldn't venture that we might get romantic but I would like someone to be with me at these events." She looked at me anxiously.

I thought for a few moments. I said, "It would also get Gloria off our backs." I smiled. "I have to admit. It would make the season much brighter if it were shared." I thought a moment more. "Are you also talking about Christmas itself?"

"I had hoped so. My parents are on me and having a 'guy' would help ease their thinking about me for a while. What about yours?"

"My parents are dead in a car crash last March. I was an only child. I wasn't looking forward to Christmas this year." I waved my arm at the room. "I haven't decorated at all. We need to talk about details and expectations but I think that, in principle, it's a workable idea."

"Randy, what would you expect?"

"You would be my date for any Christmas parties and for a New Year's Eve party if we can agree upon one. I would like to be kissed at midnight on New Year's at least."

"That sounds reasonable. I would like you to be my date for my family's Christmas day celebration. If there are gifts to be bought for me or for others, I would buy them and we would

give it or them to the person or persons. I don't think you will have much depending upon what Chase does for the holidays.

“Gifts to one of us would be chosen and paid for by the one receiving it. In early January, we will just quietly go our separate ways.”

I chuckled. “That’s sort of cold but it does make sense. It would take off a lot of holiday heat and give us some companionship. I like it. Nadia, you have a deal.”

We shook on it.

Leaning back, I said, “If we’re going to be dates for the season, then we need to start knowing about each other. Our ‘together’ story can start today. Our separate stories need to be told to prevent either of us from doing or saying something foolish.”

Nadia nodded. I said, “This hasn’t been my best year. In February, my fiancée broke up with me and returned the ring. She moved churches or quit going. I haven’t had contact with her since then though there is gossip that she is engaged again. My parents were killed in an auto accident in March. I was an only child so had to handle their deaths by myself as well as their estates. Most of all that is completed though my lawyer has told me to wait until early next year to close their estates. My job, at least, is going okay and one older lady, a widow named Kathy Wilson, has helped by being a friend. The company’s internal party is early this year and she helped me shop for a gift for the married lady in accounting whose name I had drawn. I helped her with one of the production guys who she had drawn. There will be an evening party on the ninth with dinner. I would like my new girl to go to it with me. I don’t have any other obligations though usually go to a New Year’s Eve party somewhere. I’m guessing the Sunday school class will have a party that we would attend.”

Nadia nodded. “I haven’t been engaged but did date steadily for two years. He went after someone else and we broke up. He never went to Live Oak. My parents are alive and I want you to come with me to their house for Christmas day. They live close so there is no overnight stay involved. Bella will

have an evening party the week after Chase. I would like to have you with me then. Randy, my parents have a New Year's Eve party and I would like you to plan to be my date to their house again. My brother and sister are both older and married. It has been lonely for me on the holidays. My mother has been pushing at me again. At least now, I can tell her I have a date for events. You will easily pass her scrutiny as well as my dad's."

She looked over at me. "Randy, I think this will work. I've just got to get over the shock of asking you."

I chuckled. "You're right. I was surprised, too. I didn't see you as an aggressive female type. It's a different enough deal that I think we should be able to pull it off."

I smiled more seriously. "Seriously, I think your new guy should take you to lunch Tuesday. That will give you a day to prepare your gossipers. You can come over to my office Thursday and return the favor. That gets us started." I grinned. "Gloria will be happy next Sunday. However, we tell no one at all about this deal. If it gets out, it could be embarrassing."

"Those are good ideas and a good way to begin. I agree about keeping this between us. Like you, I think it will work." She smiled. "I will give you my cell phone number. We need to be able to call and text."

I jerked. "That's right. We'll have to watch for little things so we don't trip up on something silly." I entered her cell phone number in my phone.

She left moments later. I sat back in my recliner wondering what just happened and if there were underlying reasons for her actions that I didn't know. I felt like there might be. Eventually, I went to bed.

Chapter 3

Monday was a normal day. I ate with Kathy and only said that I met an interesting girl named Nadia at Sunday school the day before. Of course, I said nothing about any deal.

Tuesday morning, I sent Nadia a text. She responded moments later telling me to come at a quarter before twelve. I sent back, "Okay." I told Kathy that I was having lunch with Nadia today. She grinned and waved me off.

I left, giving me three minutes to get in my car and drive five hundred feet. I walked in on time. I went to the reception desk and told the woman there that I was Randall Jackson to see Nadia Clark.

She said, "Uh, I'll tell Nadia she has a guest." She left her desk rather than use the phone. Nadia returned with her to some twittering sounds.

"Hi, Randy. Come on back. You can see the dungeon." She smiled. I got a light hug. With that momentary touching of her body to mine, I understood that she had a good figure even in business attire. I followed her willingly. I try not to be a male chauvinist pig but her body was good. We arrived in her office area which she shared with two others, a man and a woman.

She introduced me as a member of the Sunday school class. I shook hands with both of them and we left moments later. As we were walking out, I said, "Do you like Chinese?"

"Yes. I even cook it."

"Wow! Well, there is a pretty good Chinese buffet close. I thought I would take you there."

She smiled. "That sounds good."

We went to it and inside. We were seated and filled our plates for the first time. Returning to our seats, I said, "May I pray, Nadia?" She nodded and I did. She echoed my amen.

"Randy, do you like my name?"

I smiled. “Actually, I do. I also admit to being curious since Clark is radically different from Nadia.”

“That’s true. My grandfather came from England and became naturalized. My mother was Romanian until she defected with her family. She’s now a citizen and I was born here. Does that explain everything?” Her tone told me that she wasn’t mad.

“Very well. I’m trying to get to know my date. It’s an enjoyable experience.” I paused. “Nadia, what if this turns romantic?”

She smiled. “It wouldn’t be the end of the world.”

We continued to eat. I found that she really knew a lot about how to prepare Chinese food. I admitted that I wasn’t much of a cook but could eat. Nadia chuckled at that admission. She said, “Randy, I’ll have to get you to my place and prepare a meal for you. However, you don’t look under-nourished.”

I grinned. “I’m gaunt with hunger but I hide it well. I would love to go to your place. I’ll even bring wine.”

“Do you drink?”

“Only in moderation. I do like a glass of wine with meals. Sometimes, I will have a beer while watching football with chips though I’m just as likely to drink something non-alcoholic. Even more rarely, I will have a mixed drink. I get one at parties and then drink something that looks alcoholic but isn’t. It helps that I like the taste of tonic water.”

She smiled. “I really didn’t think you were a drinker. Heavy drinking isn’t good.”

“I agree. Being drunk can cause all kinds of problems that are otherwise easily avoided.”

I enjoyed my meal and learning about her. I drove to the front of Bella’s offices. Nadia said, “You may let me out here. We’ve proven you exist to my co-workers.” She grinned at me and exited the car. I watched her enter the offices before pulling away and driving the bit to Chase.

Inside, I went to work. I got a lot done. A number of little things helped to speed two projects along. I was pretty sure

that I could finish them before Christmas now. All in all, it was a good day. At home, I sat in my recliner and zoned out for an hour. I didn't have a roommate and enjoyed not having someone to question me about my day. On the other hand, it would be nice to have a person to ask me and provide company on occasion.

Wednesday was another day at work. I went to lunch with Kathy and two other people. As we talked and enjoyed our meals, I realized that I had enjoyed Nadia's presence yesterday. That worried me because, while our deal didn't foreclose the possibility of romance, it didn't encourage it in my mind. When I got home, I called her. Like me, she had just walked in the door.

"Nadia, do you have time to talk?"

"Randy! For you, I have time."

"I went with three fellow employees to lunch today. I realized that I missed having time with you." I was quiet.

She jumped in after I said nothing more. "We've only eaten lunch during the week once. How can you miss me?"

"I enjoyed our lunch yesterday. I'm looking forward to you coming over tomorrow if we're still on."

"We're still on. Randy, there's something you should know about me. I keep my promises. I was brought up that way. It's a big part of who I am."

She chuckled. "When do you want me to pick you up tomorrow? I'm guessing you want me to come in so you can show me off, too."

I laughed. "Of course. If for no other reason than to demonstrate to Kathy that you aren't fat and don't have buck teeth."

"What?"

"I told her you were an accountant with a great personality."

"Randy, you're a rat!"

"Yes, but a loveable one."

She was laughing. “No. just a rat. See you tomorrow. A quarter ‘til work for you?”

“Yes, dear.”

“Bye!” She hung up laughing as was I. I went to bed and slept like a rock. In the office the next morning, I told people that my new girl was picking me up for lunch. Kathy told me to be sure to bring her by. I smiled.

Nadia showed up on time and looking good though business-like. I gave her a quick tour including a stop with Kathy who approved. We left and Nadia drove. She took me to the Chinese buffet. We had found that we both liked hot and sour soup and sushi. I asked a blessing for the food and our time and then we ate and talked more about plans for the rest of the season.

At one point, she stopped and I said, “Nadia, have you considered that this deal might take us into a genuine liking for each other?”

“Randy, I think we have found that we already like each other or this deal wouldn’t work. Have I considered that this might really become a relationship? Yes. I will go where it may take us and live with such consequences as may befall us.”

I said, “I understand both possibilities for an end.”

She smiled thinly. “That’s a fatalistic approach.”

“I’m a fatalistic sort of guy.” After a moment, I added. “There is much we don’t know about each other. You have a large family. There may be a conflict there. I know I’m moody. I’ve been accused of that in the past. Any number of things may come between us and being a couple. You might meet a guy who’s better looking or something’er than I am or who just suits you better. On the other hand, you are a pleasant person to be around and to have around me. I enjoy having someone around and am glad you thought of this and had the guts to suggest it.”

She gave a small smile. Other than that, we didn’t talk about the future except for the time we had agreed for the season. We compared dates for company Christmas parties again. We

talked about our Sunday school class's party. She drove me back to Chase and I got out. She drove on to Bella.

Sunday, we met for Sunday school and sat together in class. Gloria noticed and said something to me privately. I responded. "Gloria, I just don't know. We're different but there seems to be a bit of something there. Anyway, she hasn't thrown anything at me yet." Lois noticed also but said nothing to either of us.

Pam taught her usually fine class. After praying a dismissal, we trooped into the sanctuary. I found myself between Nadia and Gloria. I had to admit to myself that Gloria, despite her age, was more attractive. Nadia was quiet but seemed to like having me next to her. She grabbed my hand as we walked to the sanctuary and kept it in hers.

After the service, a group of us went to lunch together. I noticed that Lois didn't go again. Pam went and kidded us about holding hands. She said, "Neither one of you looks ready to bolt so something good must be going on."

Nadia said, "We'll see."

We ordered and ate. The meal was good and I enjoyed getting to know Pam some and Nadia better. At the end of our meals, I walked Nadia to her car. She said, "You may give me a hug if you want, Randy." I pulled her tight and embraced her but didn't try to hold it over long. "Why don't you follow me to my apartment?"

I smiled. "Works for me."

We arrived at her apartment and I followed her inside. She smiled, "Have a seat. I want to change into something more comfortable." I nodded and she left. She returned moments later wearing shorts and a sleeveless blouse. She looked more comfortable and the shorts showed her figure a bit better. They were pretty tight and short defining her bottom deliciously to my eyes.

I was seated in an easy chair and she sat on the couch close to me. "I like you, Randy. I've been enjoying our meetings. I

want to go over our schedules for the coming week or two and plan more lunches together.”

“That’s good by me. My company’s internal party is this coming Tuesday. The one for families will be Thursday starting at seven. It will go a bit over two hours. It’s a cocktail party with background music. There will be a couple of speeches but nothing more than that.”

“It’s moderately fancy. Suits and ties for the men and dresses for the women. From the past years, some women will wear long evening dresses but most will wear something shorter. Some will wear really short dresses. It’s up to you but, if you wear an evening dress, warn me and I will go a bit more formal in what I wear.”

She smiled. “I will wear a short dress. It won’t be super short but will fall into the mini length category. I will wear the same dress for Bella’s party which is the following Thursday. It will be similar with, perhaps, more drinking. I’ve been previously but left early. Not having an escort wasn’t pleasant with some of the folk who were drinking.” She grimaced.

“Let’s meet for lunch on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday this next week. I think we’ve made our points so you pick me up and I’ll come to reception when you’re announced.” She looked at me questioningly.

“That sounds good to me. That leaves the Sunday school class party.”

“Correct. In years past, it has been at someone’s home and is informal. Men don’t wear ties. I’ve worn slacks to it in the past. We should be able to have a simple, good time.”

“I’m surprised it hasn’t been announced yet. Pam mentioned to me and to Gloria that she and her husband will host it. I believe it will be announced next Sunday for the following Friday.”

I said, “That leads us to Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.”

“Correct. Christmas Eve can be here and we can go to church. We’ll have to leave early in the morning for Christmas and return late in the evening. I’ve talked to Mom and she

understands our logistics though not our arrangement. You will be there as my guy. Try not to answer too many questions though there will be a few.”

“Okay, that should be easy. Chase has Tuesday off as well this year. Should we make plans for then?”

“Let’s think about it. We have two weeks.”

“Okay, Nadia. I guess I had better be going. It’s been fun.”

“Yes, Randy, it has.” We stood and she walked me to the door. I got a hug and a kiss on the cheek which I returned. I went home.

Chapter 4

Everything went as planned. We had lunches and I took her to Chase's Christmas party. We were careful in our drinking and, therefore, stayed sober. The next week was Bella's party and I picked her up for it. We handled things similarly. Nadia was a hit at both parties being a clever, good-looking woman wearing an attractive dress. At her company's party, both of us received many looks. She did because the clothes I had seen her wear during the week were noticeably more modest and I did simply because I was with her.

I enjoyed having her with me for lunches and for the parties. The only fly in the ointment was the lack of passion. Nadia was barely friendly but no more. Over lunch on the next Monday, Nadia said, "Randy, this isn't working for me."

I nodded. "I understand. We are okay with each other but, by now, there should at least be a better friendship. There isn't."

"That's true. I would like to call our deal off. We have gotten past most of it but we both know there isn't anything further waiting for us together."

"That works." We had finished our lunches. "Let's end it now and go our separate ways." She nodded. She was showing more emotion about our breaking up than at any other time during our "deal." I paid and returned her to her office.

As I went by Kathy's cubical, I must have looked a bit upset or unsettled. Kathy said, "Sit down and talk to me, Randy." I sat down. "What's going on?"

"Nadia and I called it quits." I took a breath. "We just weren't clicking. We aren't mad but won't be together any more. It's not like we really were anyway. That's why we ended it."

"I'm sorry. I know you would like some connection."

"Yes. I'll keep going to church and I'm getting to know the people there. It's just a little bump in the road." I shrugged. "I think she is going to spend the weekend and then Christmas

with her parents. The Sunday school class party is tomorrow night but it's not a date kind of thing. Maybe, there will be a connection there."

I went to the Sunday school class party and enjoyed my time that evening. Lois was there and seemed to be the only one initially not filled with joy. We talked and I admitted that Nadia and I weren't going to be seeing each other anymore. On Sunday, there was no Sunday school and I went to the main service. Lois was there and we sat together. She asked me to follow her to her house. I agreed. She pulled into a driveway on a paved spot. I parked on the street. It seemed quiet.

I got out and came toward her. She took my hand and we went in through the front door. "Mom, Dad, I have a guest. Her parents were in the den watching TV. Her father stood and shook hands with me as Lois introduced me as a member of her Sunday school class. Her mother nodded my way. Lois said, "Randy, please come with me."

I followed her into a second and smaller den. She went to the TV and turned it on to some Christmas music for background. She pulled me to a couch and we sat together. "Randy, my parents are barely Christian. They never go to church though have never placed obstacles to me going. They are moral and have been good parents over the years. They were supportive when I divorced and then Matt died." We will have lunch shortly or you can take me out. I know they were just planning sandwiches. I would like to go to the candlelight service tonight with you."

"Lois, let's go out. We can return here or go to my condo after lunch. I would like to go to the candlelight service with you."

She smiled. "Okay, let's go." We stood and she turned off the TV. As we left, she told her parents she was going to lunch with me and then the candlelight service later. She finished saying, "I'll be home very late."

Her father said, "Okay. Let us know if you need us."

We left. I assisted her into my car. As she got in, her dress rode up some and I realized that her legs like the rest of her were

quite good. I drove to a good chain restaurant. We ordered and ate after praying. I paid and we left for my place. I turned on my TV to the same music channel and we sat on my couch.

Lois said, "Randy, I like Nadia but I'm glad she broke up with you. I don't think you two fit together. I have hopes that we will. I've liked you since you first walked into the class."

I was a bit surprised and I must have looked it. Lois looked at bit anxious. She said, "I'm not pushy. On the other hand, I decided that if I didn't push myself, I might regret it. Gloria will find someone else to push on you quickly. She's a matchmaker."

I said, "But she doesn't match you?"

"No. She doesn't completely approve of me. I'm divorced. My ex was a member of the class and a cousin of hers. He quit coming when we divorced. He had gotten involved in a questionable group that I didn't like. I didn't like the direction of his life nor my presence in it. A month after the divorce, he was killed in a drug deal gone bad along with his new girl. It was ugly. I think Gloria blames me a bit for not keeping him away from all that."

I said, "I understand the dynamic better now."

I then grinned. "What were your plans for me?"

"The ones I had originally. I wanted to get to know you then and still do. Tonight, we will be together until late. Tomorrow, I will celebrate Christmas with my parents and would like to have you there." She looked at me very directly. "I think you would be 'here' for your friends. I would like to be one." In a very small voice, she added, "Maybe we could be more."

I smiled back at her. "Good friends are good. More could work."

I said, "I haven't gotten anything for you or for them."

"I know. Randy, I don't want your present but your presence." She grinned.

I grinned back. I said, "May I kiss you?"

"If you do, I'll kiss you back."

“Good.” I pulled her into my arms easily. She offered no resistance and we kissed. That kiss quickly became passionate. By the time we caught our breath, she was in my lap and her skirt had ridden high on her thighs. I kept my hands in safe places.

“Randy, I didn’t expect that.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t...”

“That’s not what I meant. I didn’t expect my reaction to your kiss. I didn’t just like it, I absolutely loved it! I’ve never kissed anyone and reacted that way. I want to try another.” She pulled at my head and our lips met again. This kiss lasted longer and she placed my hand on one of her breasts before wrapping both of hers around my neck. I squeezed her breast gently and she moaned into my mouth. We finally brought the kiss to a halt with my hand still on her breast and her body straddling mine. We were both breathing heavily.

I managed to whisper, “We need to go out and be seen or we will be obscene!” Lois chuckled and nodded slowly. She relaxed her hold on my neck and gradually stood letting her skirt fall back down to cover her decently. She took my hand and “pulled” me up.

“Where should we go, Randy?”

“I don’t know off hand but somewhere people will see us. It’s not that I didn’t like that but that it’s a bit inappropriate and we will want more. I know that I do.” She nodded enthusiastically. We put our coats back on and walked out to my car. Once inside, I said, “Let’s go look at lights, eat, look at some more lights and then go to the candlelight service.”

She nodded. “You will come to my folks’ place for all day Christmas. You’ll be fed and I will want to be kissed. You know that I’m off until after the first of the year?”

“I do now.”

“I could eat lunch with you every day and be here waiting for you when you get off work.” She grinned. “I can cook, too.”

I smiled. “That sounds delightful. What would your parents say?”

“Randy, they would have no objection to any acts we have done or might contemplate. Their moral limits are beyond what we are considering. I love my parents but there are a number of points on which we are not in agreement.”

I grinned. “I have dreams of beside delivery of homemade cookies with eggnog by you in an abbreviated French maid’s costume.”

“Nice thought. I don’t have a French maid costume, abbreviated or otherwise. I would like to share your bed already. I’m just not sure what that might mean yet or even what I want that to mean. There is a lot of attraction pulling us tightly together.”

By now, we had slowly pulled on our coats and were at the front door. We went out smiling and holding hands going to my car. We got in and I drove around a bit in the lower light of a cloudy afternoon looking for and at lights. We found an open restaurant and ate a nice meal. We rode around some more singing softly to the Christmas carols on the radio until time for our candlelight service. I pulled into the church parking lot and we went inside finding seats together. We held hands or I had my arm around her during the service. It was a different experience from any candlelight service I had ever attended. We left together with a warm spirit filling us with a joyous feeling.

Lois whispered. “I know it’s late but take me back to your place. I want to be held and kissed before you take me home.” I nodded. We got in my car and I drove us to the condo. We almost ran inside and doffed our coats heading for the couch.

We cuddled together on the couch with our arms around each other. We kissed again and again. I realized that I was falling fast. Finally, she pulled back. “Take me home, Randy. I want you to come over no later than ten tomorrow. Call me when you wake.”

I grinned. “I don’t have your number yet.”

We laughed as we keyed each other’s numbers into our phones. We stood and donned our coats and I drove her home.

I kissed her good night at the door and then headed back to my condo and bed. I slept soundly.

In the morning, I rose still feeling good, very good. After showering and shaving, I called Lois. “Merry Christmas! What does the well-dressed victim wear to your house today?”

“Merry Christmas to you, Randy.” She chuckled. “Casual is fine though a little better than jeans.”

“Okay. That will be easy. I’m dressing as we speak. When should I head your way?”

“Come as soon as you’re ready. I’m dressing now and don’t have a drive to complete.”

“Okay, Lois. See you soon. Bye.”

“Bye. Randy.”

I finished putting on my clothing and a jacket and left for her house. As I came to the door, she opened it and I went inside. She grabbed my hand as I went in, closed the door, and pulled me to her. She kissed me and took her time to do it thoroughly and pleurably.

“I like being welcomed by you.” I grinned.

“You’ll have to come over more often for more.” I got a grin in return. Holding my hand, she pulled my unresisting body into the kitchen. “Randy, help me cook breakfast.”

“Okay. What do I do?”

Other than set the table and operate the toaster, I just watched her. That was a pleasure. More and more, I appreciated her slim form and expressive face. I noticed that she now always seemed to have a smile for me. As she was finishing her preparations, her parents joined us. We ate together making small talk. I realized that her parents were nice people and were what my father would have called “carnal Christians.” They professed Christianity but didn’t practice it. I decided that I would be nice and exemplary but not push them. I usually didn’t anyway.

With breakfast complete, I helped Lois clean up. We then helped her mother start the Christmas dinner. Once that was

done, Lois took me out for a walk in the subdivision in which the house was located. We held hands walking slowly and talking. She asked, “Randy, what are you looking for in life?”

I smiled. “Is that a trick question?” She shook her head. I then grinned. “Okay. Actually, I have thought about that a bit because of the events of this last year. When Marsha and I broke up, it was a relief and I have been more relieved as time progressed. She wanted to be married. Not married to anyone in particular but married. I have realized that, while I would like to be married, I want to be married to someone who I genuinely love and who loves me. I think that marriage in that situation will flow naturally.

“The other big thing was my parents’ death. That event made me appreciate my faith and think on it more. My folks had always had faith and practiced it outwardly. I have tried to adopt their attitude and manner into my life. I want people to think I’m a Christian man, not that that makes me better than them but that it makes me better than I would otherwise be. Hopefully, it will make me desirable to the right person.”

“Randy, it makes you desirable to me.”

“Lois, I like being desired by you.”

We kissed softly. We made it back to her house and opened presents. Supper would be leftovers which were good. I stayed with her until late. She asked if she could come to my office and meet me for lunch. I said that would be fine. We could lunch together with some of my co-workers. She nodded. I went home and slept fast.

Chapter 5

In the morning, I woke and went in to work. It was a good morning. At a quarter before twelve, I received a page. I had a guest up front. I went up to reception and there was Lois looking really good. I gave her a quick hug and kiss. We went to the back and I introduced her to Kathy and Mack. The four of us went to lunch. It was delightful. When we finished and were back at the office, I walked her out to her car. She said, “I enjoyed meeting your friends. They’re good folks. Now, I want the key to your condo. Tell me what time you get off. I’m cooking supper for you.”

“Do I get a choice?” I grinned.

“No. You just have to live with it.” She grinned back.

“I can do that. I removed my key and gave it to her. “See you at five or a few minutes after.” I kissed her one more time quickly. She got in her car and I went in and worked.

I left at my usual time and pulled in at the condo at six minutes after five. I walked to the door which opened as I neared it to smell good things from the kitchen and to see Lois in tight shorts and a tee shirt. The sight was better than the smells though those smells were excellent. I pulled Lois to me in a long, tight hug and kissed her long and slow.

“I could make this a habit, Randy.”

“I would like that, Lois.” I grinned at her. “Everyone at work liked you. Kathy was especially complementary.”

“I sense that her approval is important.”

“Yes, she’s been a good friend, particularly this last year. I’ve come to trust and value her opinion.”

We had walked toward the back of the condo and into the kitchen. I asked, “How long before supper?”

Lois glanced at the clock. “About ten minutes.”

“Good. That gives me time to go up and change.”

I was back quickly. She served the plates. After asking a blessing for our time and the food, we ate. When finished, I helped clean the kitchen though I noticed that she was a neat chef. Finished, we went into the living room and sat on the couch together.

“Lois, that was really, really good. What happens when school starts?”

“Randy, it means no more lunches at your office but I can still be here in the evenings.”

“I would like that.”

We kissed and that took some considerable time. By the time we completed the kiss, she was straddling my lap again and my hands were on her back but under her tee shirt.

I quickly found that she wasn't wearing a bra under that baggy tee shirt. I brought my hands around to cup them and kissed her some more. When we finally broke that kiss, we were breathing heavily.

Finally, I said, “Lois, it hasn't been long enough to know but I know. I want you with me always. What do we need to talk about doing to make that happen?”

She looked at me slowly. “You're right. It hasn't been long enough. As far as my folks are concerned, I could move in with you right now. As far as I am concerned, I am concerned. I have this great attraction to you but I know that I don't know you well yet. Randy, I'm ready and I'm not ready. If I move in with you, we will be intimate. I'm no virgin but I'm not experienced either.”

I grinned. “I haven't gotten that far in my thinking. I just want you around me. We don't have to do anything for that to work though, when I think about it, I know we will. You knew some of that when you arrived here and changed clothes.”

She looked at me. “I went home and packed a suitcase for a few nights. You do have an extra bedroom that has a bed in it. I could sleep there.”

“You could. I would rather you sleep with me. We can just sleep. I can do that. I think I would like to have us sleep next

to each other.”

She shivered but it wasn't with cold. “I would like that initially. Randy, are we going to love each other?”

“I think so. We haven't found anything about each other or our personalities that we didn't like. I think that will continue to be true. I want you around enough to find out.”

“Randy, I would like to find out. I think we will like what we find. Now, I need to get up.” I looked at her questioningly. She smiled. “We can continue this conversation more comfortably in bed.”

I helped her to stand and stood myself. We walked up the stairs together. Once in my bedroom, I looked around but didn't see her suitcase. She said, “I wasn't sure if I would be in here so my case is in the other bedroom.” We got it together and brought it in. She looked at me and said, “What is your regular sleeping apparel?”

“I wear boxers and a tee shirt. What about you?”

“The same though different sizes.” She grinned.

I grinned back. “Okay, I'll change here and you can have the bathroom.”

“Thanks, Randy.”

She left the room returning a few moments later. I had stripped down and pulled a pair of boxers and a tee shirt out. I had the boxers on and was pulling the tee shirt on when she came in from the bathroom. She looked hot. She was wearing a tee shirt and bikini panties. The tee shirt was over-sized making it look like she had nothing on under it. It caught my undivided attention.

“Wow! That's hot!” I smiled. Lois looked at me questioningly. “It looks like all you are wearing is the tee shirt.” She grinned and lifted the front to flash her tiny panties at me. Still smiling, she slid into bed with me. “Lois, I like having you close like this.”

“Randy, I like it, too.” She snuggled into my side. I reached back and turned off the bedside lamp which had been the only

light in the room. I kissed her forehead and we slept.

We woke in the morning happily. I had to shower and go to work. I just managed to leave on time. My day passed quickly and quietly. I came home to Lois at the door. She was wearing one of my sweatshirts from which I had hacked off the sleeves. The open holes exposed some of her including the fact that she wasn't wearing a bra. She kissed me at the door with a full body rub. I came in and closed the door. I was panting.

I grinned. "It's sure more worthwhile to come home now." I smiled at Lois. "It feels like a home now rather than a condo."

She kissed me again as we strained our bodies against each other. Now, I was really panting! I also realized that I was happy and that I had never felt this way with Marsha. I smiled some more.

Supper was another great meal. "Lois, you are feeding me too well. I'm going to get fat eating your cooking. It's also better because I don't have to prepare it."

"Since you are so grateful, Randy, you can help with the dishes." I smiled and did. It was a pleasure. We sat down on the couch and the shirt rode up enough to show that she was wearing panties; tiny, bright yellow panties! It was a tantalizing view. Lois made no effort to cover up.

"Randy, we could be this way always."

"I think that would be good." I took a deep breath. "Lois, I love you. I know we're still learning about each other but nothing has moved my joy nor my attraction to you. If you love me, too, say that you'll marry me."

"Yes, Randy. I will."

We kissed for a long, long time. When we came up for air, she said, "It's good that supper was finished and off the stove or it would be burnt now and we would have gone hungry." She grinned.

I grinned back. "It would have been worth it."

I said, "There are, I guess, two remaining questions. What about rings? And when? I would think we would marry at Live

Oak.”

Lois nodded happily. “We could go ring shopping tomorrow. I will call Pastor Joe in the morning and find out what he wants in meetings and what dates are available. My parents will go along with whatever we want. My mother will make sounds about ‘our’ church which I will stifle when I ask for particulars.

“Randy, I can’t really get away once school starts back so our honeymoon will be delayed but I don’t want to wait to be your wife. I do love you.”

“Lois, that all works for me. I love you and want you to be my wife as soon as we can arrange it.”

We kissed for a long, long time with body rubs and happy sounds.

We went to bed early and cuddled. In the morning, I got moving. Lois would make calls and we would go ring shopping that evening. She called me that we could be married the third Saturday afternoon in January. Lois set up meetings with Pastor Joe for evenings and talked with her mother. She said her mother was happy for us. We were wanted to come to a New Year’s Eve party at their house in the evening. That all worked for me.

We went out ring shopping. We found a beautiful set that Lois liked and I could afford at the second store we checked. Even better, the rings fit! I paid for them and Lois wore the engagement ring to the restaurant where we went to eat.

She was noticed. A beautiful, very happy woman attracted attention. We enjoyed our meal teasing each other and being playful. We left for the condo in a good mood. We pulled in and went to the couch. Lois said, “Sit down, Randy, I want to straddle you.” I did as she asked and she straddled me. We kissed endlessly and touched each other. Finally, she said, “Randy, I want you to make love to me. We are committed and I want that from you.”

I was a little surprised. She said, “We know that we sleep well together. I want us to find out that we love well together, too.”

We went to the bedroom. We found out and we did, very well. We both slept soundly until time for me to get up for work. I went in to work with a smile and a kiss on my lips.

Kathy saw me and said, “Something good is happening to you, Randy.”

I smiled a little more broadly. “I’m engaged. Lois is the right one.”

“Good. Tell me about it over lunch.”

Kathy and I ate lunch together. She listened to me talk about Lois. She said, “I met her and liked her then. I like her better now. Your other two girls, Marsha and Nadia, neither felt right to me. Hang on to this one.”

‘I intend to do just that. Thanks, Kathy.’

I finished the week with Lois at my condo. We delighted in each other. We would go to church Sunday and then go directly to her parents’ house and stay for the party. Church was delightful with Pastor Joe giving a sermon about looking beyond endings to new beginnings in the course of our lives. It spoke to me. Few in the BB Class were present. That meant putting off any situation that might arise due to our engagement. We left church and I drove us to Lois’ parents’ house.

We pulled in and were cordially invited inside. Mister Copeland suggested that I doff my tie as well as my coat which I did. They then asked about our week together. Lois said, “It’s really very simple. Look!” She showed them the engagement ring on her finger. They knew our plans but weren’t perhaps as aware that we were prepared to follow through. Both were happy for us. Missus Copeland and Lois went into the kitchen to finish cooking.

I sat with Mister Copeland in the living room until we were called into the dining room to eat. Missus Copeland cooked a fine meal and I enjoyed it greatly. The conversation flowed around the table easily.

Mister Copland suggested that I carry my coat and tie out to my car to keep from forgetting them later or being tempted to

put them back on. He said, "It's not a fancy party. It's a few friends of ours and some relatives. Lois' two brothers will be here with their wives."

The afternoon passed quietly with Mister Copland and I watching a bowl game. At about four, we called upon to help by Lois. We set out snacks and such. While supper wouldn't be served, there was enough there to feed anyone easily with some heavy snack food. I grabbed a ripe olive or two as I worked. I had fun. We finished in under an hour and Mister Copeland and I sat back down. We were joined by Lois and her mother shortly. Missus Copeland warned her husband, and me, that the TV would go to music once people were due to arrive or when someone did arrive whichever was sooner.

The game ended and Mister Copeland switched to a seasonal music channel. I pretended to pout. Lois had been next to me with my arm around her. She moved a little closer and said, "Don't pout. A bird will crap on your lip." She laughed and I joined her. I was enjoying my time with them especially including Lois. I didn't feel overly on display and enjoyed all the personalities thus far.

It was time for the party to start and the first guests arrived. I stood to greet people. There were plenty of seats with the dining room chairs moved into the living room and a few folding chairs also available. I met both Lois' brothers and their wives. They seemed to approve. Lois held my hand or had her arm around me. I enjoyed her closeness.

Chapter 6

The party progressed through the evening with nice people in attendance. I got to know Lois' younger brother though he was older than she. Mark and his wife, Angie, were thinking about starting a family after the first. They seemed nice people and lived on the other side of town. The four of us talked for almost an hour. I got to know them both and liked them. I hoped they liked me. I learned more about Lois, too. I liked what I heard. I knew that she was an elementary school teacher for a school close to her parents' home. She had been married, which I knew, that had ended in divorce and then his death. I was told she taught advanced placement at the elementary school in the sciences. I quickly realized that my fiancé was a bright lady even more than I had thought before. I kept her close.

I sensed that Lois had been lonely in some ways and was looking for a fresh start. From what Mark and Angie said and suggested, she had some definite ideas about the future and I fit into those plans well. As midnight approached, she and I grabbed glasses of Champaign to toast the new year. The clock chimed, the ball and the peach dropped. We drank a toast to a new, better year. Then, we kissed. That kiss started innocent and simple but quickly became passionate and over-powering. We finally moved our heads apart though continued to hold each other tightly.

We moved apart a little more to take notice of people around us. Fortunately, we hadn't drawn notice from people in the room. I took Lois' hand and went to the table with the Champaign and refilled our glasses. I then walked us away from the rest and into a quieter den that was lit but not brightly. I gently pulled her down onto a sofa in the room.

“Lois, that kiss was electrifying again.”

“Did you like it?”

“Yes. I just hadn’t thought to receive it almost every time we kiss. I want to know what you think.”

“I enjoyed it. I do love you, Randy.” She pulled me to her and we kissed again with even more passion. We finally ended the kiss.

Before we stopped the kiss, she was straddling me and we were rubbing together. I had a hand under her sweater palming her breast. We broke the kiss and moved apart a little. I removed my hand from under her sweater. She pretended to pout.

I smiled. “We are moving a bit too far to be in public. There is time for us to become more physical later tonight. Let’s enjoy the party.” She smiled and nodded.

We held each other for a long few minutes before I loosened up and gently said, “We need to reappear or people might stop wondering and know.”

We slowly went out into the rest of the area refilling our glasses as we went.

We separated for a few moments and Mark came up to me. “Take care of my sister, Randy. I can tell you two are working well together.”

“I will, Mark. We want a good fire not something that burns out. We need some time together to learn more about each other though we each know the answer. That’s why we’re engaged and will marry.” Mark smiled and patted my arm.

It was late when we finally left for my condo. We would return in the morning for New Year’s Day.

We arrived at my condo and quickly stripped for bed. Once in bed, we then prayed thanking God for our time together. I slept like the proverbial baby with Lois in my arms.

I woke refreshed and beat the alarm. I watched Lois sleep for a few moments before she woke. “What are you looking at, Randy?”

“My beautiful fiancée, of course.”

We cleaned up and dressed. It was seven forty and we were ready to go fortified with our first cups of coffee. We left for her house. We arrived ten minutes later.

“Randy, we’ll cook breakfast for us and for Mom and Dad. They’ll be up soon.”

We started cooking with me helping but Lois was masterminding the operation. She knew what she was doing and could cook even while she watched over my efforts. As things were coming to a conclusion, she had me set the table in the kitchen and start working the toaster. Her parents came in at that time.

Her dad said, “Good morning, Randy. I see Lois is putting you to work. Fortunately, she’s a pretty fair cook so it shouldn’t be too bad.” He grinned. Missus Copeland gave him “the look.” He ducked grinning.

She said, “Good morning, Randy. It got Lois out of bed with you and cooking.” She grinned. “We could make this a habit.”

Lois blushed. “Mom, Dad, how many pieces of toast do you want? He’s working on that now. I want two, Randy.”

Missus Copeland wanted two also while Mister Copeland wanted three like I did. I toasted and buttered toast until everyone had their request fulfilled. We sat down and Lois and I blessed the meal.

It was a warm, comfortable time and I enjoyed being with Lois and her parents. After the meal, we went into the living room planning to watch the Rose Parade and then some bowl games. I realized in the back of my mind that this warmth was a natural state for Lois and her parents even though her parents weren’t practicing Christians. I also realized that Nadia and Marsha, my ex, were not comfortable people by comparison. Lois was seated next to me on the sofa and was a warm presence physically as well. As I thought about her and compared, she came out well and well ahead. Lois has a good figure, a good head, and a kind heart. I liked where this situation was going. We watched the beautiful floats and whispered to each other telling more of our lives and aspirations.

Lois and I continued to find many areas of life about which we agreed. We were becoming even closer rapidly. She didn't mind disagreeing with me but we were finding more on which we agreed than disagreed. I was enjoying my day.

We had a late lunch of standard New Years' fare. As the afternoon progressed, Lois asked me to go for a walk. I smiled and agreed. We walked out of the house and held hands as we walked slowly along the sidewalk.

Lois said, "Randy, I hope you aren't bored. We're not very exciting people."

"I'm not bored at all. I have enjoyed being with you and your family. There is an aura present that I find delightful. My partner is warm and cuddly and strings her words together intelligently. What's not to like? I find you and your folks exciting. Taking time to look at people is usually worthwhile and my, now, extensive knowledge of you is all good."

We walked along in a comfortable silence still holding hands with our fingers interlaced. I was enjoying the walk. After all, the weather was great and my companion was pretty to look at and enjoyable to hear. We covered a couple of blocks before coming to a recreational area for the subdivision. It had a closed pool and tennis courts. It was larger than most with a nice park-like section. We walked into that area and sat on a park bench with my arm around her.

"Randy, I wish we had met sooner or I had, at least, been a bit more aggressive when we first met."

"There will be many days in our future, Lois. We'll just have to continue working it out."

She kissed me hard and we barely stayed polite for being in public. We relaxed back looking in each other's eyes. "Randy, what did you mean by 'many days?' We have just started to make plans for our future."

"I'm aware of that. I want us to be together from now on. That's why we are going to get married. I think we had and have a real connection with each other that will lead us to a very good place that will include many, many days."

“Oh, Randy! I love you so!” She kissed me again with even a bit more force. I tried to kiss her back showing the passion that I felt for her.

We settled back and just looked out over the park and into a small wooded area. We weren't moving just sitting together and enjoying ourselves. We had been there for almost an hour before the sun going down started to allow the air to cool and move us to return to Lois' house. We made the walk back even slower. We had our arms around each other rather than holding hands. It was pleasant though made us slower. We didn't care. We were just enjoying each other's presence.

When we reached the house, Lois opened the door and we went in. Both of her parents smiled at us as we sat down on the sofa. We were holding hands and picked up on the current bowl game being played.

Missus Copeland asked, “If anyone is hungry, nod and I'll warm up food.” All of us nodded.

Lois said, “I'll help you, Mom.” They left for the kitchen.

Mister Copeland said, “You seem to be spending a lot of time with Lois.” He said it in a way that suggested I respond to his remark.

I responded, “Well, we are engaged. I am still getting to know things about her but it's all good. We first met when I started going to Live Oak.” I didn't think he really wanted a history lesson but I wanted to explain why I changed churches. “I changed because my prior church was my parents' church before they died. I was the only member under seventy and wanted a place to worship that was more in tune with my age. Live Oak accomplishes that and is even closer to my condo. Lois and I met in the Sunday school class. She made the move or we might have continued to be just a little better than acquaintances. I'm glad she did. We've found that we have a real connection which we are still exploring. I am looking forward to our life together.”

I added. “I've enjoyed being here, too. My parents were killed in a car wreck last March and I'm, like them, an only child. There just aren't any relatives. I've missed family.”

He smiled. "We've been glad to have you here."

At that moment, Lois came in and said, "Time to eat."

I stood and joined her taking her hand as we walked to the table. We sat down and Mister Copeland prayed this time. It was all good warmed up. Southern food is that way. It's comfort food and ages well taking to being warmed up repeatedly. We ate heartily again. Sated, we moved back to the living room for more football.

It was late when we left and neither Lois nor I wanted to go. It had been a good day and a good start to the new year.

We got home and quickly went to bed. It was easy to do and I realized again as I felt her warm body against mine that there was a deep love between us.

I went into work Tuesday morning with a smile on my face. Kathy saw me and said, "You must have had a good New Year's."

"Yes, I did."

"Other than going to your church, what does she do again?"

"She is an elementary school teacher and lives at home. I spent a lot of time there and found it a warm, comfortable place. It was all good."

"That's good, Randy. You needed a good person in your life. You deserve that and the right girl will find being in your life a blessing." She smiled and went her way.

Chapter 7

Work was quiet. I had lunch with Kathy and another. I arrived home and was welcomed by Lois at the door.

“How was your day, Lois?”

“It was good. The kids are back and seem to have a renewed interest in learning for a day or two. They always seem to be that way after the Christmas holidays. Of course, we call it Winter Break now. We have guidelines about asking and answering questions about this time to be politically correct. It’s infantile but a number of parents are infantile, too.”

I chuckled. “Have you ever considered teaching at a Christian school?”

“Randy, I looked into one a few years ago but they were just as crazy in the other direction. However, our school system has gotten worse steadily. I think the leadership is now looking over their shoulders, figuratively. They fear the federal education folks will make them give equal time to Christianity and moral values now with some of the political changes nationally.”

“Lois, I guess most parents who complain don’t want Christian values?”

“True. It’s funny in an ironic way. They don’t want those values taught or promoted but, without any basis, what is the reason for the moral direction that they seem to expect or for any other for that matter? Sometimes, it’s frustrating.”

“I understand. My company doesn’t allow Christmas trees. They have to be called Holiday trees and may not have any stars or religious symbols. Up north, there were questions about white snow flake ornaments being symbols. Our Christmas party is officially called a holiday party. I just let it go. My real concern is the long-term effect all this will have though I hope to be dead and gone before it gets really bad.”

I chuckled and added, “We sure are philosophical this evening.”

She laughed, “I’m just following your lead.”

“Perhaps, I can lead you into temptation.”

“You have. I hope you will again many times in the future.”

I smiled. “What’s your schedule for this week?”

“Just teaching my class. There aren’t any after usual hours events to attend in this bit of the week that’s left We start meeting Pastor Joe next week.”

“What about your weekend?”

“It’s open except for Sunday morning.”

“Fine. I will monopolize your entire weekend starting with dinner Friday night through Sunday night.”

“Oh, whatever could we find to do in all that time.” Her voice had a lilting, teasing quality to it.

“I intend to show you some more of my etchings.” I chuckled and heard her low laugh. “Seriously, I will take you to dinner and find something that’s not too obscene to do after that. I hope you will find it in your heart to spend all day Saturday doing something with me. If nothing else, we can go look at all the sales. I will find something for us to do.”

“Okay.”

“You’re okay with those sketchy plans?”

“I’ll be with you. That sounds good, Randy.”

“Thanks.” The next day was Friday. I checked for something after dinner and found a free concert at one of the area colleges. The time would work barely.

I came home on time. She met me at the door with a kiss that would warm the blood of a zombie. She looked ready to go so we went out the door with her holding my hand. She looked great in a short skirt and light sweater.

I drove us across town to the restaurant. We had a fine meal and arrived at the concert hall in time. We both enjoyed the

concert. It was themed on more modern composers but the numbers picked were melodious with almost no raucous sounds. When it ended, there was coffee and we stood talking to attendees and orchestra members. It was fun. I thought that Marsha hadn't enjoyed the one concert that we had attended. I drove us back to my place.

We went inside. She kicked her shoes off and sat on the sofa while I went into the kitchen and turned on the coffee maker. I pulled two small plates out for cookies pulling the packages out of the fridge and setting them on the counter with the plates. I returned to the living room with coffee and cookies.

I had seated myself next to Lois on the sofa. Lois said, "There is, however, one problem." I gave her with a questioning look. "I haven't been kissed enough yet to need a break for coffee and cookies." I grinned and moved to correct such a terrible problem. I think we both enjoyed the effort. I know I did and I had help.

We lay back still holding each other. We slowly unraveled. We drank some coffee and ate a cookie each.

She placed her coffee and cookies back on the coffee table. She took mine from me and put them next to hers. She pushed me to the middle of the sofa. To my surprise, she mounted me forcing her skirt up. We kissed for a long, long pleasant time.

She stood slowly and let her skirt fall back to its normal length. She sat next to me placing her cookies in her lap and sipping her coffee. I slowly joined her in that process. I was still a little out of breath from just before.

She grinned. "I don't guess that was something you had expected."

"No. However, I enjoy it and hope we'll do it again. I like the way you kiss." With our decision to marry and her moving in, we were continuing to be loving. I liked that about her. Marsha had either been cold or in bed. I liked the time to be with each other and to enjoy holding each other lovingly.

She grinned. "That works for me."

We finished the cookies and most of our coffee. Lois carefully placed her dishes on the coffee table. She looked at me and I followed her in placing my dishes on the table with hers. She climbed into my lap to straddle not regarding how much of her lovely legs showed as she did. She had, I noticed, great legs all the way up!

We started kissing and it quickly became highly emotional. When we came up for air, I realized I was cupping one of her breasts and she was moaning into my mouth. I also realized again that it was quite firm. She returned her lips to mine and our kisses continued and became almost frenzied. She sat back still straddling me. I could see her blue bikini panties! Lois made no effort to cover her body and I enjoyed looking at her including her eyes.

She looked down at me and said, "I could stay in this position for a long time, Randy."

"I've not hidden the way I feel about you." She smiled. "Actually, being with you has only confirmed my suspicion from before. I care about you and you care about me." She leaned forward and kissed me hard but not lengthily.

"Lois, we've wasted a lot of the season. However, there is plenty of winter left and I will try to keep you warm and happy in the new year."

Tears came to her eyes. "That's all anyone can ask of another, Randy. I've been very happy and warmed in my heart from what I sense your heart says to mine."

We kissed again. This one was started soft but escalated to deeply passionate and lasted. We finally broke apart a few inches breathing hard. She smiled and was flushed.

I said, "I want us to know each other completely."

She smiled softly. "We're headed that way and I'm enjoying the ride."

I smiled back. "I'm enjoying being ridden." I kissed her and that kiss went on and on. Finally, we "came up for air" breathing heavily. Both of us were smiling.

She said, "Well, rider, what's on the agenda for tomorrow?"

“Looking at the sales. I had noticed when doing the wash that my sheets are looking threadbare. I only have one set which I was wash and put back in place. I thought I would get two sets this time.”

Lois grinned. “Should I pick a set that I like?”

“That seems reasonable. In case you don’t remember, the room is painted a very light shade of blue with a darker blue accent wall.”

She stood easily letting her skirt fall to its normal position. We toured the first floor and then went up the stairs to tour the second floor. We walked into my bedroom. She liked the colors of the walls. She went over to the bed and bounced on it. She said, “It’s a comfy bed.” I gently pulled her up.

“Lois, you’re over dressed. Do you want to get an early start?”

“Is eight too early? We could go out for breakfast.”

Chapter 8

I slept happily all night. Lois woke me with a light kiss. “Good morning, Randy.”

“Yes, it is that. It’s good to see you this morning.” We got out of bed and began our morning rituals. We dressed. Lois looked good wearing a pair of slacks that fit her bottom well. Her sweater looked good on her, too. I was wearing slacks and a sweater.

Hand in hand, we walked to my car and got in. I drove us to a chain restaurant for breakfast. We were seated and ordered breakfasts. Coffee was brought with the menus which was a good thing. I took mine straight. Lois added a touch of sugar to hers. She said, “Other than sheets, are you shopping for anything else in particular?”

“Not really. There are a few appliances I might find useful if they are cheap enough. I might pick up some pants if they’re reasonable. I’m open for ideas. What things might you want to buy or look at?”

We went shopping after eating breakfast. It was fun. We flirted with each other. I bought two sets of sheets and Lois picked the colors of both sets. I also purchased some new pillows and, at another store, some pants. I could have done this in less time but it wouldn’t have been near as much fun.

For lunch, we had Mexican at a restaurant I knew. The food has always been excellent and today was no exception. It was another joyous meal.

After our meal, we went to the mall to wander for a bit and to see if there was anything that either of us decided we just had to have. We held hands the entire time. We didn’t find anything to buy but walked by a theatre and saw times for a flick that we each admitted we would like to see. We had an early supper and went to the movie. It was a romantic comedy and we enjoyed it while holding hands.

We left after watching some of the credits. Lois said, “Take me to our place, Randy. I want to be held and kissed.”

I smiled and drove us to my condo. We brought the packages from my car. We went inside and dropped the packages. I took her in my arms and pulled her close while we kissed. It was steamy. Both of us had been flirting with each other the whole day and evening. After that first kiss, we half fell and half sat on the sofa. She was straddling me again. It wasn't as obscene this time since she was wearing slacks but we were touching and rubbing each other as we kissed. Finally, I broke the kisses and put my head back to breathe.

“Lois, I'm happy with everything about you I've found and hope you are, too.”

“Oh, Randy, I am! I am!”

I smiled. “You use my name a lot. Are you afraid you'll forget it?”

“No, Randy. I like your name and enjoy using it when we talk. It's one of the incidental things about you that has never been true before with anyone else. I've kissed other guys before and called their names just not kissed as joyfully nor used their names as often. Randy, there is something about kissing you and saying your name that warms me through and through.”

“I don't guess I mind, particularly since it brings you pleasure.”

“That's good. Let's sit down on the sofa a minute. I want to talk to you seriously because this will come up sooner or later. I admit that I'm telling this so there may be some bias involved.

She looked me in the eye and said, “You're real. Everything I've seen about you has been real. The only thing I didn't and don't understand was Nadia.”

I grimaced. “That, unfortunately, is all too easy to explain. I met Nadia on that second Sunday and Gloria pushed us toward each other. Nothing was going on until that afternoon when she came to my condo. She called and then came over. She offered a deal. We would be each other's dates for Christmas

for such parties and events that might occur. Wednesday, before Christmas, she made a second trip here and broke up. She just wasn't interested. I didn't blame her. I had quickly become uninterested and, even as a date of convenience, it just wasn't that convenient. Thus, on Christmas Eve, I was available when you kidnapped me and took me to your mountain hideaway."

She looked at me with a smile. "I've heard no complaints or moaning about your fate."

"You won't either. I'm happy. You've been a great partner for starting a good new year. I like the way this year looks to be going."

That got me kissed with a full body rub. Lois had a great body and we enjoyed our closeness. Her personality and body created a special warmth that I hadn't felt with another girl. I never wanted to let her go when she was in my arms. She felt right being held by me.

She had moved to straddle me on the sofa. It was a nice position because we were close and our bodies were in considerable contact. I had my arms on her back gently rubbing while we kissed some more. She took one of my hands and placed it on her breast. "Only touch me if you want to, Randy."

"I always want to, Lois." We finally backed away from one another by an inch or so. We both were breathing hard. We were looking deeply into each other's eyes.

Lois said, "I guess we should get the packages put away. At some point this evening, we need to make the bed."

"That will be more comfortable."

We kissed again and touched. Finally, we came up for air and I noticed the time. "Lois, it's late. We need to make our bed and sleep in it. Tomorrow, it's Sunday school and church."

"That works for me, Randy."

In the morning, we woke, dressed, and left for Sunday school. She gave me a kiss after I got in the car from holding the door for her. I parked and we walked in together holding hands. Her

engagement ring was out and obvious. I knew in my mind that there would be questions. I decided that I would answer them honestly but would try to minimize any hurt to Nadia.

Somewhere in the past, I suspected that she had been hurt and I didn't want to add to that hurt. I said as much to Lois who smiled. "You two broke up and I jumped in and have not let you go yet. I don't intend to let you go now either. I have your ring."

With that statement, we walked into the room. Nadia was there as was Gloria and most of the rest. There was a sudden silence when we were seen. As the noise started back, we found seats together. We took the first available which were not too close to Nadia. I had noticed her eyes widen as she saw the ring on Lois' finger. We said nothing about our attachment to each other nor were asked because Pam started the lesson. I felt that it only put off the questions not stopped them. We would see.

Pam's lesson was good and she dismissed the class with prayer.

Folks gathered around us. Gloria asked me, "What happened with you and Nadia?"

"Gloria, we gave it a try but weren't right for each other. Nadia ended things a day or so before Christmas. Lois stepped into the void on Christmas Eve at the morning service." I didn't offer more.

Nadia didn't hurry to leave or otherwise make a scene. She also had nothing to say to either of us. We got into the sanctuary on time. I was seated with Lois on one side and Gloria on the other. Lois and I had been holding hands through the class and during the service. As we were standing waiting to leave after the benediction, Gloria asked me, "Are you afraid she might get away?"

I smiled. "She has a good hand. I like holding it and she seems to tolerate me well."

Gloria grinned. "I don't guess you want me to try matching you up with anyone else?"

“No. I think I am done. After all, she has my ring. It’s going well.”

We would join the group for lunch. I noticed that Nadia had left. I was sorry for her situation and hoped she would meet someone who would match up with her at some point. We went through the buffet which was the only time we didn’t hold hands until we were seated to eat after praying. Gloria was watching us carefully. After a bit, she said, “Randy, you two seem pretty far along to being a couple in a short period of time.”

“That’s true. It’s been enjoyably intense. It’s working well for us.”

Gloria asked, “Where is it going for you two?”

“We will marry in a couple of weeks. We’re still getting to know each other and spending a lot of time together.”

Gloria didn’t question me more. We left and got into my car. Lois looked at me and said, “Drive to us home, Randy.”

I drove to my condo in silence and we got out. We walked to the door hand in hand. I opened the door and Lois walked inside to sit on the sofa. She pointed to a spot next to her. I walked there and sat. She said, “Randy, that went pretty well without a lot of drama. I was a little worried.”

I smiled. “That’s true. I was a little bit concerned about both Nadia and Gloria. Do you think it’s resolved?”

“Probably! We’ll be gentle to Nadia but true to us.”

I kissed her and we took our time about it. She moved to straddle me and I helped her get situated though that wasn’t hard. However, part of me was!

“Randy, I love you.”

“I love you, Lois.” We kissed taking our time.

I smiled at her. “We’ll work it out.”

We did. Every person in the class became supportive. We were married in the church though Lois’ parents weren’t excited

about us marrying so quickly or marrying at Live Oak. They didn't have options for us. We were excited about our plans.

We married in a wonderful, though small, wedding. We managed one day extra thanks to MLK Day and came back to my job and her teaching happy on the Tuesday after the wedding. We did go on a longer honeymoon at Spring break and enjoyed ourselves thoroughly. Lois looks great in a skimpy bikini.

Lois' parents are okay with our marriage since Lois is happy and I know I am.

We are looking forward to many Merry Christmases in our future as we go forward together.