

ROMANCING CHRISTMAS NOVELLA EXCERPTS

Broken Protocols 3.5 by Dale Mayer

Excerpt 1:

"When is Christmas?" Charmin asked.

Dani Blackburn looked over at her beloved orange Persian cat and grinned. It was a little hard to have any respect for his vast intelligence when he was upside down, four paws to the wind and twisted in a bizarre curl.

"Remember? They don't do any of those old holidays anymore."

"So? That's them. Then there's us." He snorted out a sneeze and flopped over on one side. "And the two don't have to be the same."

Sometimes the darnedest things came out of that cat's mouth. And where was this all coming from? "Are you missing the holidays?" She quirked her lips and laughed. "You hated the noise, the company. Really howled when I sang Christmas carols."

"Ha!" He rolled over to glare at her. "Anyone would howl at your singing."

While she was still gasping at his barb, he continued, "I liked the tree, it was fun. Adored the tinsel." He grinned evilly. "Loved the cookies."

She remembered the last Christmas in Technicolor. Charmin climbing up the pathetic fake tree until it collapsed on top of him. The problem of him constantly trying to eat the tinsel and her finding the tinsel and plastic needles everywhere, but the cookies...she groaned out loud. "You used to take a bite out of every one."

"I had to see which one I wanted," he said in such a reasonable tone of voice that she had to laugh.

"Christmas tree? Tinsel?" Levi, Dani's husband, who was technically several hundred years older than her, sat down on the chair. She grinned as the furniture stretched and sprawled to accommodate the extra person. That never got old. Her husband, and what a trip that still was, held a mug of something hot.

"Is that coffee?" she said accusingly. "And you didn't bring me one?"

He leaned over and kissed her. "I brought enough to share."

"Blech." Charmin rolled over in such a way that his butt was presented.

"Charmin, don't you fire that thing," Levi warned.

But gentle snores were already working up and out of her beloved dust ball of a cat.

Excerpt 2:

If she were to bring it up, she'd be reminded of her weakened state still. And after this morning, that was still true. But maybe not in a few months from now. She could be fully healed. Although portal travel still caused her stomach to revolt. Not as bad as the first couple of times, but still more than she liked so travelling wasn't an easy solution. Given the amazing times, she shouldn't complain.

Without realizing it, another heavy sigh escaped.

Charmin nudged her hand. "Hey. If you are depressed, the best way to get out of it is to be with your pets. I'm your pet, and I need more attention."

She looked at him, and that same big wave of emotion swept through her. She swept him into her arms and hugged him tight. Outside of his initial yowl, his engine kicked into super tanker mode and rolled through the room. "I'm not depressed. I'm just looking for a way to fit in."

He reared back and gave her a beady look. "I told you to lay off the extra treats, you know. If you'd listened, you'd have no trouble fitting into stuff."

Behind her, she heard Levi's strangled laugh. She shook her head in exasperation. "I am not having trouble fitting into my clothes." She glared at him. "I'm having trouble fitting into this life."

He jumped from her arms to the floor, took a few steps, and launched himself up to the counter. "Whatever. If you do need bigger clothes, Levi can adjust the program, you know. Just saying..."

"Charmin, that's not very nice." But damn if her hands didn't slip down to her waist and on to her hips, manually judging if she'd gained any weight.

Catching his smirk, she glared at him. "It's all right if *you* are useless. You're just a cat, but in my old world, I worked every day. I don't know what to do with myself now."

Levi studied her. She threw up her hands. "I know. I need to heal. I need to fully recover, otherwise I'm a handicap in the workforce. I guess I was thinking there was something I could do."

***Shades of Holly* by H.D. Thomson**

Excerpt 1:

She backed away. He made a move to follow her but she raised a hand. "Don't."

"Holly... give me another chance." He hated how his voice faltered. "I'm begging you now."

"I can't live with the person you've become. This last time you almost got yourself killed. I can't hang around and see you finish the job. I'm sorry." She pivoted on a heel and rushed from the kitchen. The door slammed shut behind her. Moments later the sound of her car engine started, then faded until a suffocating silence descended around him.

She'd left him. The pain of her loss hit him in the chest, took his breath away and left his heart shredded and bloody. He stood in the middle of the kitchen, more alone than he'd ever felt in his life.

Light flashed across his vision. The kitchen faded. A black void of despair slammed into him.

Excerpt 2:

Zach stepped across the threshold and closed the door to the fast approaching evening. Backing away, Holly clutched her hands together to hide their sudden trembling. Snow clung to his mahogany-colored hair and leather jacket, which opened to reveal a t-shirt that clung to his powerful chest and flat belly. Faded jeans hugged his muscular legs. The color of his shirt matched the incredible blue of his eyes. Six-two, and almost a good foot taller than her. Even in

winter, his skin glowed with a subtle tan. He'd filled out, looked healthier and still had the ability to steal the air from her lungs. How could a man after two years touch her heart like non-other? There was nothing rational about it.

"Zach," she breathed. She hadn't seen him for over two years now, but that didn't mean she hadn't thought of him while alone at night, sleepless, restless, lonely.

"How have you been?" His deep, throaty and far too sexy voice fanned this sudden need and longing for what was and what could have been. "You look beautiful."

The sparkle in his blue eyes launched a myriad of emotions that she thought were long gone or at least buried deep in her psyche. But just one smile, one moment of his eyes on her and she felt herself melt when she had no business melting. "Thank you. I'm doing fine. Business has finally taken off to where I'm not running from the creditors."

"Glad to hear it but not surprised. I knew you always had the smarts. It was just a matter of time."

An awkward silence enfolded them. The heat in his eyes probably matched her own. She'd never been good at pretending. God, she missed him, but she had to remember why she'd left. There was a reason. She took another step back, more mental than physical. "I don't understand. Why are you here? Is there something wrong?"

Excerpt 3:

The man walked stealthily down a polished wooden hallway. Victorian-styled sconces illuminated striped green wallpaper, yet the electricity in the glass lamps spoke of modern day. A short rope dangled from one hand. What had interested the man appeared within the lenses. A woman in a pair of black pants, chunky sweater and with long, wavy, chestnut hair stood with her back to the man and within a partially opened doorway. She didn't turn at his advance. Anxiety crawled through Zach's body and burrowed into his chest when she continued to keep her back to the man advancing toward her. Damn it.

Holly. It had to be!

Physically feeling the threat of the stalker as if he were in the scene, Zach called out, "Look out, Holly!"

Zach's words reverberated as if in a large cave, sounding strangely as if he were there within the scene. She turned almost as if she'd heard him, but she didn't have time to react. The man struck her across the face with the back of a hand. Zach jerked and stumbled back, as if he felt her pain. Holly cried out, and the phone in her hand flung from her grasp as she stumbled backward into the room. The door slammed shut, locking her inside.

Holly.

Excerpt 4

"The place looks great," he murmured, his gaze briefly slipping from her face to look around before locking back on her with an intensity that forced her to look away. She found a sudden interest with her feet in a pair of shaggy, blue socks.

When she finally found the nerve to look back up, to her dismay the heat in his eye hadn't dissipated. "Don't look at me like that."

"Like what?"

She groaned inwardly. Damn. Zach wasn't going to be a gentleman and let it go. "Like you want to..."

"Kiss you?" He searched her face and stepped toward her, but this time Holly didn't have the willpower to back away. "Hold you in my arms? See if you taste as good as I remember?"

Holly's breath locked in her throat; her pulse throbbed wildly as she stared up at him. She couldn't move. She didn't want to move.

***Season For Love* by Chantel Rhondeau**

Excerpt 1:

The driver resumed his place at the head of the carriage, turning slightly to speak with them. "There's a portable heater near your feet. If you get too cold, let me know and I'll turn it on. Also, the thermos to the left there has hot chocolate."

"Thank you, Jim," Dash answered. "We're ready to go."

Jim nodded and turned his attention to the horses. Within seconds they clomped up the street, the sound of hooves ringing on the wet pavement.

Tess snuggled closer to Dash's side. "We don't need the heater. This is cozy."

Success!

Insides warming further from the happiness her words provoked, Dash disentangled his arm from hers and wrapped it around her body, cradling her to his side. "I like cozy."

With a contented-sounding sigh, Tess leaned her head onto his shoulder, and her flowery scent washed over him.

Breathing deeply, Dash decided he could sit here forever, no matter how cold it became, as long as she was with him. "I'm happy you didn't break this date," he said softly.

She looked up, the corners of her mouth turning downward. "Hmmm... How'd you know I'd considered that?"

"Do you mean to ask whether I figured it out before I went to work this morning and everyone told me you hated me?" Dash ran his thumb across her cheek and smiled, trying to ease her frown away.

Excerpt 2:

Tess sat in Dash's car in her driveway. The horse-drawn carriage ride had been perfect, and she was reluctant to go inside her house and bring the night to an end.

"I had a really nice time." She reached across the console to take Dash's hand. "Thank you for tonight."

He squeezed her fingers softly. "I have a confession."

"What's that?"

Dash lifted her hand to his face, kissing her palm and then pressing it against his cheek. "I don't want to say goodnight."

A flutter of excitement tickled Tess's stomach. The smoothly shaved skin of Dash's face beneath her hand made the tingles extend even further down. It had been a long time since she had male companionship.

Reluctantly, she shook her head. “I don’t either Dash, but if I don’t get out of this car and go inside right now, I might not be strong enough to do so.” She looked away from his sexy blue eyes. The heat coming off him was enough to melt metal, and she so badly wanted to indulge herself in his fire.

“Why do we have to be strong?” Dash reached across and stroked her knee, making Tess squirm even though she couldn’t feel his touch well through the thick coat. Just imagining it was enough.

“This is our first date. We can’t end up in bed together.” Yeah, right. She was saying the right words, but there was no conviction behind them.

“We’re adults, Tess, and we like each other. I’m tired of being alone. Invite me inside.”

Ever since their kiss, Dash had been careful not to touch her too intimately. It was obvious that he wanted to though, and boy, did she ever want him to.

But she couldn’t. Until earlier today, she thought she hated him. It didn’t matter that he had proven himself to be a kind, compassionate, and utterly sexy man. She had to maintain some semblance of being a lady, not a sex-starved maniac.

She blew out all the air in her lungs and shook her head. “Not tonight.”

Hurt passed behind his partially shuttered eyelids, but he nodded. “I’ll walk you to the door.”

Excerpt 3:

Shaking his head, Dash knew he’d better focus on work. Entering the room of a sick seven-year-old with a huge smile on his face would be unprofessional, at best.

Dash took a deep breath to calm his nerves. Right now, the patient had to be all that mattered. Cindy Pritchard had been fighting leukemia for most of her young life. Between bouts of sickness tempered by improvement after chemotherapy, Cindy appeared to be worsening according to the oncologist handling her case.

On top of everything else, her kidneys weren’t holding up to the strain. The on-call physician had placed her in isolation last night to lower her exposure risks from the other children in Pediatrics.

Dash washed his hands and put on a mask before entering the room.

The child lay in the hospital bed with the head elevated slightly, watching TV. Purplish-black circles ringed her eyes and she looked paler than when Dash saw her two days before. Cindy’s mother sat in the chair next to the bed, obviously trying not to cry. “Dr. Brisson? They said you were working in neonatal today. Since Cindy isn’t really your patient, I didn’t think we’d see you.”

“I am in pediatrics,” he confirmed. “But when I heard my favorite girl wasn’t feeling well, I wanted to stop by and check on her.”

Cindy offered a weak smile, as her mother smoothed wispy blond hair from the child’s face. “I’m better than I was last night.” She sighed and rolled her eyes. “They gave me a new medicine and more blood. I’m tired of needles.”

“Feeling like a pincushion?” Dash asked, forcing himself to return her smile. His heart broke for her. She had fought this disease so long, and no matter what they did, it wouldn’t go into remission. She had to be tired of fighting.

Cindy wrinkled her nose. “What’s that?”

Her mom leaned down, kissing her forehead. “Something that gets stuck with a lot of needles.” She glanced at Dash. “I haven’t had time for sewing these past few years, so she doesn’t know.”

***Christmas Hope* by Leslie Lynch**

Excerpt 1:

A KALEIDOSCOPE OF MANIC and sorely out-of-season butterflies took flight in Becca Sweet’s stomach as she lifted her hand to press the doorbell of her sister’s house.

Or maybe it was the barely visible baby growing a few inches lower. *Nah*. She wasn’t quite far enough along to feel anything yet.

Either way, she didn’t relish the next few minutes. She stalled, looking at Maggie and Mike’s house. Her forefinger hovered over the lighted oval in a moment of indecision.

Light flowed out around partially opened draperies, a Christmas tree adorned with sparkling multicolored lights taking center stage in the picture window. A crèche stood silent vigil in the front yard. Snowflakes danced in the wind and settled on her cheeks, then decorated her eyelashes. Her breath created small clouds in the air.

It was so lovely and picturesque, it nearly took Becca’s breath away. Then again, maybe it was the bitter cold that stole her breath. An involuntary shiver ran through her and made up her mind.

She stabbed the bell and stood back, firming her lips and squaring her shoulders.

No more nights in the car. Even if it meant owning up to her failure to keep up payments on the loan Mike and Maggie had advanced awhile back. Evasion had been a bad plan to start out with, but now concern for her baby eclipsed Becca’s pride.

Excerpt 2:

“HEY, DAD, I appreciate the invitation”—*for the fourth time*—“but I’m not going to make it home for Christmas.” Sam Bledsoe tucked his cell phone between cheek and shoulder as he muscled apathetic power steering to guide the truck into his driveway.

“Are you sure? You’re breaking your mom’s heart. If you need money, we’ll spot the ticket for you.”

Sam huffed out a breath of combined frustration and guilt. Heck, he knew his mother’s heart was breaking, but they all needed to move on. Of course, he was the culprit here, as he was the one who had turned into a hermit.

He loved his parents and knew they loved him, but he’d just managed to get out from under their hovering concern. They’d dropped everything, one or the other spending months with him at Walter Reed. He truly appreciated their unwavering support, but he needed some time to breathe and rebuild his life on his own. Not to mention licking the emotional wounds of Tiffany’s defection. She’d dumped him as soon as she’d learned about his burns, and hadn’t had the depth of character to do it in person. He shoved the painful thought aside.

“It’s not the money. I have—” He grunted as he reached up and clicked on the garage door opener.

Nothing happened. The windows remained dark, and the door, stationary. He cursed silently, unease coiling through him even as his reaction made him angry.

Excerpt 3:

“Mommy, who’s that lady?” Megan’s voice rang out in the cold air like Christmas handbells.

Regret squeezed Becca’s heart. She’d let far too many months pass without making an effort to repair her relationship with Maggie. Now the months had stretched into more than a year, and Megan didn’t even recognize her anymore.

But Megan’s question ricocheted in her mind. *Who am I, Mags? Your sister? A bag lady?* Granted, she had a car full of stuff rather than a bag or a grocery cart, but that answer stung. *The black sheep of the family?* Well, that was a given, and had been since her earliest memories.

More than her imagined replies, though, Maggie’s silence struck a shaft of pain through Becca’s heart. She trudged through the accumulated dusting of snow toward her car, head bent against the wind.

“She’s...”

Tears pricked at the back of her eyelids, but Becca refused to shed them. She blinked, causing the image of her car to waver in front of her. At first, she thought the sensation was because of tears shimmering in her eyes, but then her vision narrowed. The odd combination of hunger and nausea that had dogged her over the past several months surged to the forefront and sapped the strength from her legs. She wobbled. Horror filled her as Becca realized she was on the verge of fainting.

“...my sister. Your Aunt Becca.”

Her knees gave out. Becca flung an arm out to break her fall, and everything went dark. As her consciousness faded away, one clear thought flared bright before it, too, evaporated.

Maggie had acknowledged her. *My sister.*

Hope, unearned and probably unreasonable, sparked as Becca’s surroundings slipped from her awareness and snow chilled her cheek.

***A Christmas Miracle* by Sandy Loyd**

Stealing covert glances now and then, Kevin noted how sad Megan appeared staring out the passenger window. He’d love to ease her sorrow, but he just didn’t know how. Nor did he dare broach the subject of his feelings. Her husband hadn’t even been dead a year. He had no idea when the time would be right, but one thing he did know, it was getting harder and harder to keep his thoughts to himself.

He’d hoped to spend some time alone with her during this trip, but that obviously wasn’t going to happen.

Adam had been his best friend, but he damn sure hadn’t deserved a wife like Megan, who centered her life on him, something Adam had expected as his due. And now that he was gone, she still pined for him.

If only he'd met her first. He'd treat her a lot better than his best friend ever did. At times Adam could be a selfish son of a bitch. Hell, just look at the way he died! In a parachuting accident. Couldn't the bastard have waited a couple of weeks to try out his new toy? The holidays were a hard enough time for families without adding an accidental death to the load.

As he continued driving, their silence was only broken with one of Ryan's occasional questions and Kevin's short answer. When the quiet became too ear-shattering, he flipped on the radio, using the background music to keep his thoughts occupied for the next hour.

Eventually his torture came to an end when his exit came into view. He veered off the freeway and wound his way through the Brentwood streets.

At Oak, he turned right. Seconds later he eased the car into the Jenkins' driveway and, after climbing out of the car, ran around to open Megan's door. She grabbed on to the hand he offered.

"Thanks." She smiled, then brushed at her jeans and buttoned her coat while he focused on helping Ryan.

"Need help, Uncle Kevin," Ryan asked as Kevin began unloading the trunk.

He handed him his suitcase. "You got it?" he said, releasing the bag when Ryan nodded.

Loaded down, he followed Megan and her son up the walk.

The door opened just as his foot hit the top step.

"You made it. I was so worried that the storm would delay you."

"No need. I made sure we had plenty of time." As a licensed pilot, Kevin never took chances with anyone's life, especially his own. Not like Adam, who lived to take chances—his last with deadly consequences.

"Look how much you've grown." Leanne Jenkins hugged her grandson, then greeted her daughter-in-law with a nod and a curt, "Megan." Turning her back on her in a most insulting way, she reached up to give him a peck on the cheek, and said, "It's good to see you, Kevin." Placing her arm around Ryan in a proprietary move, she guided the boy inside.

"After you," Kevin said, smiling at Megan in an attempt to gloss over Leanne's lack of warmth toward her. As she stepped ahead of him, he followed, wishing Leanne would quit blaming Megan for her son's faults. In his mind the fault lie with Adam, maybe even his upbringing, but certainly not with his wife, who was left to mourn because of one of those faults.

Inside the sprawling mansion, he did his best to keep the conversation going.

Jerry Jenkins, Leanne's husband did his part to help. The older man had always been Megan's ally. He seemed to understand and accept his son's failings, never once attributing them to her.

***The Salty Carmel Christmas* by Barbara Lohr**

Eli tasted like popcorn and hot chocolate, warm except for his cold cheeks. Soft and searching, his lips nudged mine and they opened. Excitement ignited in my chest like Mr. Wheatman's lights. Clutching Eli's arms, I fell into the kiss until I couldn't catch my breath and pulled away, panting.

Panting, for Pete's sake. And this was Eli.

"Hey, Eli?" I whispered, palms flat on his chest.

His eyes opened. "What?"

“Nothing.” I tipped my face up for more.

A makeout session in front of my house in broad daylight on Christmas seemed wicked. People were leaving for their relatives, trunks full of cranberry jello molds, Christmas cookies and gifts.

Time to come to our senses, not that it was easy.

“That was so nice, Eli. Really,” I whispered.

“Nice?” He pressed his lips together, like he had when he came over to fix my computer, loping up our walk like a middle school Ichabod Crane.

Ichabod had filled out. My mouth dried at the difference.

I ran one hand up, feeling his heart thud under my palm. “More than nice, okay?”

“What are you doing Friday night?”

***Heating Up the Holidays* by Marcia James**

Nicky heard Chris mutter something under his breath, but she kept walking from the kitchen to the foyer of her home. If he didn't want to leave, he shouldn't have ended what was the sexiest damn kiss she'd had in thirteen years. Of course, she had no plans to actually let the too-honorable-for-his-own-good man walk out her front door. He was back in town to stay, and she was staking her claim on him tonight.

She stopped by the main staircase and hung his leather jacket on the mahogany newel post. Then wiping the huge grin off her face--something Chris wouldn't appreciate under these circumstances--she turned to meet his disgruntled gaze. “Thank you for the pizza and wine.”

Chris nodded. His expression was pleasant, but a vein ticked in his temple.

Gesturing to the snow-battered windows in her nearby living room, she continued. “Looks like the weather's gotten worse. Could be a dangerous drive back to your place. Did you say Holly is sleeping over at your parents' house tonight?”

He nodded again, a mix of hope and amused suspicion flickering in his eyes. Maybe she wasn't so skilled at presenting a poker face.

“Well,” Nicky glanced at the nails of one hand in an exaggerated show of nonchalance, “then I guess you have two choices.” She met his gaze again, her lips curving despite her efforts to control them. “You can put on your jacket and head out, your virtue intact. Or...you can come upstairs and show me your tan lines.”

He made a grab for her and she danced away, laughing. Chris put his hands on his hips and smiled. “You had me going there, brat. I thought you were throwing me out.” He pointed to the floor in front of him. “Come here and kiss me.”

“Like I'd take orders from some surfer-dude lawyer.” Whirling, she charged up the staircase with Chris on her heels. Nicky made it almost halfway to the second floor before he caught her and lifted her into his arms. It was like *flying*. The autumn of their senior year, he'd chased her, picked her up just like this, then thrown her laughing into a pile of leaves they'd raked together. Those had been such wonderful times. Tonight they'd make even better memories.

She circled his neck with her arms as he took the rest of the stairs two at a time.

When he reached the upstairs hallway, Chris asked, “Which room?”

Nicky tugged on the hair at his nape. “Put me down before you get a hernia.”

Lowering his head, he nibbled her ear. "You're a flyweight, Nickels. And unless you want our first time together as adults to be against this wall right here, you better tell me which room."

A delicious full-body shudder ran through her, one that literally knocked off her fuzzy slippers. "Why don't we save the wall 'til next time." She pointed down the dark corridor. "Last room on the right."

***Insanity Claus* by Carolyn Hughey**

"My, my. Someone's happy. That must mean you met a woman."

"Now, there you go again."

"So who is she?"

He grinned. "You always could read me quite well, couldn't you?"

"Well, I didn't just fall off the turnip truck, you know. I know infatuation when I see it. Now, who is she?"

"I doubt you'd know her."

"Do you now?" She snickered. "As the municipal clerk, I know everyone. They may not know me, but I know them."

"All right," he said with a huff. "Her name is Mallory Gardner."

"Ah, see. I do know her. She owns the Christmas shop in town." She raised her hands.

"And?"

"No *ands*. I'm just trying to get her to have coffee with me but she refuses."

"You know she lost her husband in a motorcycle accident, don't you?" she said in a hushed voice as though afraid someone could hear her.

"No. At this point, she's avoiding me, my questions, and having coffee with me."

"There was always something fishy about the way he died," she continued. "In the mountains with young drug addicts." She gave a disgusted shake of her head. "A wife and two kids; the man had no business trying to act like a teenager."

"That must have been really hard for her. Maybe that's why she's so reluctant to get involved."

"Ask her to help decorate that tree you just brought into the garage," she said with a grin.

"Geez! Can't I get anything by you?"

"I'm afraid not," she said, filling the bowls. "Here," she said gruffly, "grab this basket of biscuits and bring them to the table."

"I wanted to surprise you," he said in a huff. "You stole my thunder."

"I'm sorry, but if you want to give me the perfect gift, find a woman and settle down."

"By Christmas?"

"Why? You think that's too soon?"

***A Family For Christmas* by Tallulah Grace**

Erin felt the heat of his gaze, and looked away. She would not let herself fall for a man who, it had been confirmed, was little more than a hound dog. No offense to Delilah.

“Jason thinks you’re shy, are you?” Luke needed to know why she kept blowing him off. “What a question!” Erin feigned surprise, but her blush gave her away. “I’ve never thought about it.”

“You’re either shy, or you have no interest in going out with me, which I find hard to believe. Which is it?” Luke was determined to get an answer.

“Well, aren’t you full of yourself? As it happens, I have no interest in going out with you. There, are you satisfied?”

“Nope, not until you tell me why,” Luke persisted, surprising himself. He’d never had to work so hard to get a woman’s attention.

“For one thing, I’m not attracted to arrogance. For another, I’ve no interest in being just another notch on your bedpost. Is that enough, or should I go on?” Erin couldn’t believe that she was saying

A Father For Christmas by Rachele Ayala

“I want a papa for Christmas,” my four-year-old daughter Bree tells Santa. She bounces in his lap and tugs his beard. “A real live papa to play with me and take me to the zoo.”

“You mean a puppy,” I cut in, my face flushed with heat. Ever since I put Bree in preschool, she’s realized she’s missing a father and bugging me to find one. She even suggested we put up posters on telephone poles like they do for lost pets.

“No, silly mama.” Bree crosses her arms and shakes her blond ringlet curls. “I want a papa with two legs and two hands.”

The mall-supplied Santa chuckles. “And a papa you shall have.”

Giggles and titters spill from the women behind me.

“I need me one of those, too,” a young mother holding a baby boy says. “Let’s see, six-foot-six, blazing hot and built like a fire truck.”

“Oh, yeah,” another mother with two squirmy toddlers replies. “Do they have a catalog? I can spend hours drooling instead of wiping up drool.”

Much like the hours I spent perusing anonymous sperm donor profiles back when I was a successful investment banker worried about aging eggs and the probability of getting struck by lightning without hitting the husband jackpot.

Bree hugs Santa. “Will he be under the tree? Pwo-mise?”

“You bet.” Santa high fives her.

“Picture?” I scramble with my camera, an old Canon point-and-shoot borrowed from my mother, but the battery light flashes and the camera shuts off. Meanwhile, the elf manning the professional camera snaps a few shots of my sweet daughter kissing Santa. Ugh, I wonder how many germs are embedded in that polyester beard?

Santa hands Bree to me and winks. “Shall I put a smartphone under the tree for you?” I’ll need a lot more than a smartphone: try rent, utilities, and car payments. Not only was I a former investment banker, I was stupid enough to believe my own research and ended up losing everything on a bad tip.

“No, she wants a papa, too.” Bree tugs my coat sleeve. “I hear her praying for one every night.”

Thankfully, Santa doesn't answer. He's already receiving the baby from the woman behind me. And actually, no, I'm not praying for a man, but Bree hears what she wants to hear, and in her little mind, all of our problems will be solved when the handsome princely father figure emerges to sweep her off her feet in a cotton candy sleigh drawn by a team of rainbow reindeer.

As for me, I'll settle for responsible, solvent, and well-endowed, although in my profession, er, former profession, I never saw a need for a man, especially the banking types who kept half the strip clubs in Manhattan in business. No thank you.

The picture-taking elf smirks at me and hands me a ticket for the picture. "It'll be twenty bucks for a five-by-seven or thirty-five for the package."

"I want a train ride." Bree squirms from my arms and points to the Holiday Express miniature train making the rounds inside the enclosed winter wonderland play area in the mall. "When my papa shows up, he'll take me on the train and we can wave at you."

Clutching the ticket for Bree's picture with Santa, I bypass the photo booth conveniently placed near the line for the Holiday Express train. My meager paycheck has to be stretched for the holiday season, the first one since my insider trading conviction. Unable to land a job anywhere close to the financial services industry, I've been picking up shifts afterhours, cleaning the very office buildings I'm not allowed to enter as a banker.

But I can afford five dollars a ride on the Holiday Express. Bree looks at me expectantly and points to the monitor behind the cash register. "Mommy, there's my picture with Santa."

"There you are, and don't you look cute?" I say, dreading her next request for buy it.

The cashier flashes a toothy smile. "We can have it printed while you wait for the Holiday Express."

"Can we?" Bree bounces on her toes. "He pwo-mised me a papa for Christmas."

"Maybe after the train, sweetie." Going for distraction over chancing a meltdown, I hand the cashier a ten dollar bill for our two tickets.

Fortunately, the screen behind her cycles to a baby boy crying on Santa's lap, and Bree's attention turns to the candy cane man.

"Mommy, candy cane's my fa-wor-ite."

"We have some at home."

"Those are teeny tiny. I want a big red and green one."

"We can't lose our place in line. Oh, look, see the fairy princesses?" I direct her toward three teenaged girls wearing princess outfits.

"They're so pretty." Bree's mesmerized, and I breathe easier. My phone chimes with a text message. I flip it open. It's my mother reminding me to be on time for Wednesday night church. We're singing a special together, and she wants to rehearse before the service.

The line inches forward as I text her back. Mama's nervous about the piano at church not responding like hers. Could I get to church half an hour early to do a dress rehearsal? I'm not sure why she's so nervous. Maybe it has to do with the handsome widower who recently joined the congregation. I tell her I still have to finish shopping and prepare dinner for Bree, but mother says not a problem. She'll bring macaroni and cheese and juice boxes to church, and Bree can eat in the multipurpose room. I agree, and Mama replies with her classic line to give Bree a kiss from her.

I text my goodbye and put my phone away. "Bree, Nana's giving you a kiss."

She's not standing anywhere near me. A hot dagger of panic shoots up my chest. "Bree? Oh no, where's Bree?"

She was here a minute ago. The line hadn't gone forward by much. Surely, she surged ahead to gawk at the train and the princesses. I jump out of line, looking toward the fairy princesses.

"Bree!" My voice rises to a high-pitched shriek. People are staring, and I'm running in circles. "Have you seen my daughter? Bree! Blonde, wearing a pink Hello Kitty jacket. Bree!"