



One December Night

A Whisper Shore Christmas Story

Melissa Tagg

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By Melissa Tagg

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Pennilynn Baxter answered the phone at 4:57 p.m., right when she should've been turning off the library's last light and locking the door for the night.

At 5:18, when she should've been changing into the cocktail dress that'd cost a week's paycheck, she instead threw an overnight bag into the back seat of her sensible little Honda and checked her gas gauge. Good, enough to get to Whisper Shore.

And now at 6:56, when she should've been saying yes to Graham Forrester as he slid a ring over her finger, she stood in front of the two-story Victorian she used to love in the town she used to adore.

And pretended to be brave.

The house stared her down from behind shuttered windows, its rickety front porch stretching like a toothy smirk. Moonlight glinted off the snow that capped the roof and traced the porch railing.

"Penn, I know I said to call and tell me all about it after Graham proposed, but I didn't mean *right* after."

Penn blinked at the sound of Ellie's voice over her phone — their second call of the night. Only this time Penn was the one with news. And not the news her childhood

friend expected. The old-fashioned streetlamp casting a glow over the curb buzzed and flickered overhead.

She closed her car door, then thought again, reopened it, and reached for her ice scraper. Wind tangled through the hair that'd slipped free from her barrette. "Ellie—"

"You're calling me from the restaurant restroom, aren't you? Are you looking at your hand in the mirror? Literally for weeks after Tim and I got engaged, every single time I walked past a mirror—"

"He didn't propose."

The streetlamp blinked once, twice, then dark settled around her.

"He didn't." Her friend's voice fell flat, disappointment lurking around its edges. Understandable, perhaps, considering the holding pattern that was Penn and Graham's relationship. "This is getting ridiculous. After two years of dating—"

A laugh pushed out as Penn moved away from her car, ice scraper in hand, and started down the sidewalk to the house, snow crunching underfoot. "He didn't propose because he didn't get a chance, Ell. I couldn't go out to dinner after that call of yours."

Ellie's elastic pause pulled taut before she snapped the question. "Where are you right now?"

Penn burrowed her chin into the high collar of her belted brown coat and stopped at the bottom of the porch steps. "You wouldn't be using that disapproving schoolteacher tone if you didn't already have a good idea."

"You came all the way up to Whisper Shore? Tonight? It's been snowing all day."

"I'm a Michigan native. I was driving in snow before I had my first crush." On a real person, that is. She'd fallen for Gilbert Blythe the first time she read *Anne of Green Gables* at age nine.

"You better not be at the house."

She grinned despite the cold numbing her fingers and the voice at the back of her head yelping that this here, what she was about to do—just plain nutso.

But that was kind of the point, wasn't it?

"You're so predictable, Penn. You play it safe every time."

Graham. He'd said it yesterday with a chuckle in his voice and a pat on her back, referring to her meal of choice at a new-to-her café. An off-hand, innocuous remark. But his words had slithered under her skin, taken up residence where a hundred other whispers hunched together.

Penn never takes risks.

Penn prefers life neat and tidy—just like the bookshelves in her library.

Penn do something crazy? That'd be the day.

"I *am* at the house." It came out like a declaration.

"What are you going to do? Just barge in?"

Her phone beeped, signaling its low battery. "Ell, did you or did you not call me a couple hours ago to tell me, and I quote, 'Someone's squatting in your grandparents' house.'"

"Yes, but—"

"You said when Tim came over to check on the place like he does every week, he was sure someone had been here. Tracks in the snow. Evidence of someone making food

in the kitchen. What if a homeless person realized the house was abandoned and decided to stake a claim? What if some rowdy teens are using it as a party place? You said all that.”

“I remember the conversation, Penn. I was there.”

“So what did you expect me to do with the information?” Penn climbed the porch steps, wood creaking underneath her boots, nerves doing jumping jacks inside her despite the confidence in her voice.

She could practically hear Ellie roll her eyes. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe call the police.”

“Tim *is* the police.”

“Right, you could’ve let him check it out again tomorrow when he’s on duty. Or at least waited until morning to drive up if you really felt you needed to. Then Graham could’ve proposed like planned and I wouldn’t be here, six blocks away stuck at home on bed rest, worrying that my childhood friend is getting into trouble. I can’t even call Tim – he’s at the square for the annual snowball fight and –”

“That still happens?” And remind her again why she’d thought calling Ellie was a good idea?

“Not for several years. But Blake Hunziker is back and you know him. If he’s not traveling the world or making headlines, he’s back here reviving crazy town traditions and....what am I rambling about? The point is, I can’t call Tim to come over and meet you because he left his phone at home.”

Blake Hunziker was back? Penn may not have been back here more than a handful of times since ninth grade, but she kept in good enough touch with Ellie to

know Whisper Shore hadn't changed. Which meant Blake's return couldn't help but have the little tourist town in a tizzy.

"Ellie, I am going to be completely fine. Tim said there wasn't anyone in the house when he was, right?" She reached for the oversized gold knob of the bold blue front door. Another beep from her dying phone. "So if somebody has been camping out here, they've probably cleared out—"

A thump sounded from inside the house. Penn sucked in a chilled breath, fingers tightening around her ice scraper.

"What is it? Talk to me. If I go into early labor because of this..."

Ellie's panicked words trailed while Penn waited.

No more thumps. No footsteps. Only the purr of the wind and in the distance, the faint hum of Christmas music. Probably from downtown where apparently this quirky town's annual community-wide snowball fight was back in session. She exhaled, her breath turning the air white around her.

"Look, my phone's battery is low, so I'm going to let you go before it dies."

"Great, not only are you going in alone, you don't even have a charged phone."

"There's enough charge to dial 9-1-1 if needed."

"Gee, how comforting. But, Penn, before you hang up..." Hesitance hovered as Ellie's words drifted. "If Graham had asked, you *were* going to say yes, weren't you?"

Penn's stilled. "I...what kind of question is that?" Did Ellie think this was all some elaborate plan to avoid the proposal?

A chugging breeze carried the distant clamor of wind chimes from someone else's porch. "A simple one, I thought. Never mind. Go storm the castle. Text me so I know you're okay."

"Will do." Penn hung up, slid her phone into her coat pocket and reached for the doorknob once more.

But before she could twist it, the door lurched open, pulling Penn with it and thrusting her into the solid shadow that filled its frame, her squeal muffled by the shadow's flannel shirt.

And her ice scraper dropping to the snow.



"Whoa, hello there."

Hands clamped on both of Penn's arms as if to steady her, the snow-dampened hair in her eyes blocking her view of the man she'd toppled into. A man who smelled like laundry detergent and a hint of spicy aftershave or cologne or something and... what was she doing?

Penn yanked free of the man's hold, swiped her hair out of her face and backed up, bumping into the doorframe as a gust of wind blew snow into the entryway.

"You all right?"

The man had at least six inches on her 5'8" and from what she could tell in the dark, wore jeans and no shoes. And he wanted to know if she was all right. But shock or fear or most likely both held her voice captive.

He reached around her to close the door, but she jutted one arm out to hold it open. "Not so fast, mister." At last, words. Snow billowed around their feet, drifting over the hardwood floor Grandma used to polish once a week like clockwork. And oh, the cold. But if she let the good-smelling stranger close the door, she cut off her easiest escape route and the slanting light of the moon. She reached for her ice scraper. "Who are you? Talk."

"Impressive choice of weapon, there."

Her eyes narrowed. "Impressive choice of house to break into. I get it: biggest one on the block, empty, makes sense. But I'm here now, so you're going to have to take a hike."

And who said Penn Baxter played it safe? Facing off with Mr. B&E here better earn her all kinds of brave points.

Finally the man sighed, shrugged, folded his arms. "You're Pennilyn, aren't you?"

"Penn. Two Ns." No clue why she felt the need to tack that on. And how did he —?

"There are pictures of you all over this place. Man, your eyes are just as blue-green in real life. There's this one photo on the fridge. You with, I'm guessing, your mom and grandma. Said 'With Mary and Pennilyn' on the back.'"

Could he see her wince in the dark? *“Don’t look at Penn like that, Mom. I’m the one who asked her to do it.”*

Mom’s voice came whirring to life in her mind. Along with the image of Grandma’s angst-filled expression.

“You’ll wreck your daughter’s life if you don’t stop, Mary. She’d end up just like...”

“Just like who, Mother? Me? Go ahead and say it.”

Fifteen years ago, almost to the day, and still uncannily crisp in her memory.

Focus. She blinked, swallowed. *“And you are?”*

“Will. Two Ls.” He waited, probably expecting a laugh, but when she only stared he dropped his arms and reached for the door once more. *“Look, you may not mind turning into an icicle, but we’re halfway to blizzard conditions and this house is drafty enough. We shouldn’t waste heat.”*

He closed the door, then hit a switch on the wall. Her gasp came in sync with the light flooding the room from the vintage chandelier hanging overhead. *“Wait, the electricity is on? Oh man, have I been paying utilities all these months?”* She turned a full circle in the room, wet soles of her boots squeaking against the floor. Striped wallpaper above cherry wood wainscoting, the open staircase with the ornate bannister, the living room off to the right with its corner fireplace—all of it looked as she remembered.

She caught a glimpse of her reflection in the mirror hanging on one entryway wall—wind-tousled brown hair a mess, cheeks still red from the cold, makeup long-since faded.

She turned back to the stranger. Dark eyes, dark hair, dark five o'clock shadow covering his cheeks and jaw. Early thirties, maybe. Un-tucked black and white flannel shirt a contrast from the glasses that gave his face an academic look.

She shouldn't be here with him. Alone. Ice scraper or no ice scraper. This was crazy.

Penn do something crazy? That'd be the day.

She squared her shoulders. "You don't look homeless."

Was that amusement in his brown eyes? "Uh...thanks?"

"You need to leave." She un-cinched the belt at her waist and shrugged free of her coat. "So far the only crime you've committed is trespassing, far as I can see anyway. And if you'll just leave, I won't press charges."

"That's very benevolent of you."

Smiling, why was he smiling? All smug-like and relaxed? Bad enough the man was squatting in her grandparents' house. But did he have to be so, well, manly and stuff? Why couldn't he have been a gangly teen? Six years of working at the library in Grand Rapids meant she knew how to handle the occasional hoodlum.

But a man who could've played an awfully convincing Captain Wentworth? That is, if one of Jane Austen's lesser-regaled heroes took to wearing flannel.

"I'm trying to be nice here. This is my grandparents' house. *My* house now. Maybe I haven't been great about taking care of it. Haven't even been back to see it since grandpa's funeral, not that you need to know this, but the point is—" *Rambling.* She took a breath. "Just because I won't be winning any caretaker awards any time soon doesn't mean I'm going to let random strangers pretend it's a free hotel."

“Stranger.” He nudged his glasses up with one finger.

“Huh?”

“Stranger not strangers. I’m the only one here. Don’t worry, I don’t have a rowdy gang of people sorting through your grandmother’s jewelry.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You found my grandmother’s jewelry?” She jerked the scarf from around her neck and marched past him.

She took the stairs two at a time, Will’s clomping footsteps echoing behind her. “Where are you going?”

She ignored him, hurrying to the first bedroom on the second floor – grandma and grandpa’s – pushed the door open and slapped on the lights and...*There.*

Grandma’s jewelry box, sitting atop her antique dresser, its mirrored door open to reveal her only valuable pieces – a pearl necklace Grandpa had given her on their thirtieth wedding anniversary, an heirloom locket, a velvet box with her one pair of diamond earrings.

She heard Will freeze in the doorway behind her. Silence shuddered through the room, only the tapping of a tree branch outside the window filling the quiet. Until Penn turned, accusation bubbling to the surface. “You were going to steal my grandmother’s jewelry.”

Will stepped into the room. “I was not going to steal your grandmother’s jewelry. I wasn’t going to steal anything. Trust me.”

“Trust you? I don’t even know you.” Somehow the flowery scent of the perfume Grandma used to wear still lingered in the room. Mauve walls and mahogany furniture made the room feel as old as it was.

Will moved toward her. “You need to let me explain—”

She backed up. “No, I need to make you leave.”

The howl of the wind joined the rapping at the window and for the barest moment, guilt at sending a man into the cold nipped at her. A person would have to be desperate to have somehow pinpointed and snuck into an abandoned home.

“If you need money—”

Before she could finish, something slammed into the window...a crash...
breaking glass...

And for the second time that night she found herself thrust into her intruder’s chest as he pulled her out of the way of the tree branch lunging into the room and shattering the window.

Her gasp was lost in the sound of the wind still pummeling outside and Will’s drawled “holy cow.”

Heartbeat two-stepping, she stared at the mess—shards of glass and now tattered cream-colored curtains whipping against the hurling cold.

“Penn.”

Will’s voice in her ear sent shivers clean through her and she inched away, avoiding glass and turning to face him.

“I’ll leave. But for the record, if I really wanted to steal this jewelry—or anything in the house—I could’ve walked out with it at any time. No offense—you’re plucky and all—but I don’t think you’d have a great chance at stopping me. So just know I’m not out to steal from you or in any way harm you.”

If the man was lying, he deserved an Oscar. “I don’t know why I believe you.”

“Maybe because I just saved you from one doozy of a concussion. At least let me help you clean this up before I leave, okay?”

“All right. I’ll go find something to sweep up the glass.” She started for the doorway, but turned halfway across the room, indecision knotting through her. The jewelry...

You’re so predictable, Penn. You always play it safe.

“Will?”

“Yes, Penn with two Ns?” His glasses had slipped down his nose once more.

Maybe more Gilbert Blythe than Captain Wentworth. “You can stay for dinner, all right?”

He only nodded.

Ellie would kill her.



“Explain to me again why we’re walking to the store?” Will zipped the thin jacket he’d pulled on over his shirt.

Penn opened the umbrella she’d found inside the half closet back at the house. It still fell now, the snow she’d thought might never come this winter, turning what was already a postcard-perfect, tree-lined street into a scene worthy of a snow globe. She

could only imagine how picturesque Lake Michigan must look right now – maybe she could drive past on her way back to Grand Rapids.

“We’re walking because downtown Whisper Shore is pretty around Christmas-time. All the storefronts are decorated, lights wrapped around every streetlamp, the town square looks like something out of a picture book.” Especially with the gazebo and the massive evergreen and a moonlight sky salting the landscape with white.

“We could’ve driven past all that.”

“Not the same.” Dense snowflakes tapped against the umbrella.

So maybe it was silly, traipsing through town with the man who’d broken into her grandparents’ house. Especially considering in the twenty minutes since they’d cleaned up the mess from the broken window and scavenged through empty cupboards in the kitchen, she hadn’t managed to learn anything about Will. Instead of his earlier ease, he’d turned monosyllabic the second she started questioning him.

“How long have you been here in Whisper Shore?”

Since yesterday.

“What brought you here?”

Work.

“What kind of work?”

“Not so sure anymore.”

Cryptic. And despite her curiosity, she’d severed her line of questions. Because needing all the facts, covering all her bases – that was typical Penn. She could practically hear Graham’s voice.

“Penn spend time alone with a stranger who trespassed on her property? Ha.”

Interestingly, just a couple minutes ago they'd run into someone on the sidewalk who'd waved as they approached and thrown a "Hey, Will!" their way. After they'd passed, Will had shrugged at her questioning look. "Stopped by the coffee shop earlier today. Met some locals. Nice people around here."

So he hadn't exactly been hiding out at the house, it seemed.

She glanced over at Will now. Good Lord, the man had gorgeous eyelashes. And he walked with an ease that defied his desperate straights. He *was* in desperate straights, wasn't he? Otherwise wouldn't he have an actual winter coat instead of that worn black jacket?

"You surprise me, Miss Baxter."

They turned onto the street that led to Main Avenue, and the laughter and squeals from the massive snowball fight happening in the square grew louder. "Oh?"

"Back at the house, I got the feeling you might be the uptight city type. Like in a Hallmark movie. Small-town girl moves to the big city and gets obsessed with her high-profile career. Leaves the past behind, turns fashionable—"

"You didn't even notice what I was wearing, did you?" Her most comfortable, faded jeans and a baseball jersey-style shirt with the name of her favorite band on it, topped by a hoodie she'd had since college.

He ignored her. "According to cutesy holiday movie tropes, you should hate the holidays and you won't talk about your painful past. I, the hero, should convince you to re-fall in love with Christmas and your small town roots and, well..."

He could just stop right there, thank you very much. "You met me half an hour ago and you assumed all that?"

Will shrugged and grinned. “You decided minutes into meeting me I was a vagrant burglar.”

“Touché.”

He reached up to wipe the snow from his glasses.

“You know, you could come under the umbrella.”

Will shook his head. “Nah, I like getting pelted in the face with snow. Grew up in the south – saw snow like three whole times as a kid. This’ll be my very first white Christmas believe it or not.”

They reached Main Avenue just as Nat King Cole’s “Deck the Halls” drifted over the town square speakers. “I can’t imagine Christmas without snow.”

“Oh, we rarely even had a tree. Parents weren’t too big on holidays.”

It was the first glimpse he’d given her into whatever came before today. But apparently, it was as big a peek as she was going to get. Because as quickly as he’d inched open the door to his past, he closed it with a change in subject. “Anyway, clearly I was wrong about you being the stereotypical big city transplant, because obviously you love this place. Hence, our freezing trek to the grocery store. You must’ve liked growing up here.”

She tipped her umbrella to the side, letting snowflakes prick her cheeks with cold. “Didn’t exactly grow up in Whisper Shore. We moved here when I was eight – to be closer to my grandparents. But we left again when I was fifteen.” Had she kept the sliver of bitterness from her voice?

Will stopped as the town square came into view – a mess of people running and laughing, scooping up and throwing snow. “You weren’t kidding. It really is a town-

wide free-for-all." He turned to her, his smile so appealing it was disturbing. "Let's join in."

She hid under her umbrella once more. "No way, I'm starving. The frozen pizza aisle at the market is calling my name." Besides, memories had started creeping up. The kind she usually fought to avoid – like her last Christmas living in Whisper Shore. How she'd come home from that year's snowball fight to find Mom in the kitchen with Grandma, arguing...

And Grandma turning to look at Penn like she didn't even know her.

"I was just trying to help, Grandma."

"Come on, Penn with two Ns, I've never experienced a massive snowball fight. Don't take that away from me."

"You're not dressed for it. You don't even have a real coat."

"I'm hearty. I can handle it."

"Well, I can't." She started forward again, but his hand on her elbow stopped her.

"What happened when you were fifteen, Penn?"

Chalky surprise clogged her throat and windy cold clawed through her coat.

"You know what, Will? You got one part of that Hallmark movie scenario right. Some things I'd rather not talk about. Especially with a stranger."

She pulled away from him, fingers clenched into fists inside her mittens and turned away from the melee in the square. Maybe Will wouldn't follow her. And maybe that was better. Because somehow he'd gotten under her skin...irrational and absurd, but there it was.

To think, she'd thought by this time tonight she'd find herself engaged to the nice, stable man she'd dated ever since finishing her master's in library science, looking toward a fresh future. Instead here she was, playing defense against the past and a guy about whom she knew zero to zilch.

"If he had asked, you were planning to say yes, weren't you?"

The smack hit her in the back before she could answer Ellie's echoed question— snow sliding from her coat and plopping to the sidewalk behind her. She turned, slowly.

Will just stood there, waiting, his "Whatcha going to do now?" expression readable even from a distance. When she didn't move, he bent over to scoop up another snowball. Only this time when he sent it sailing for her, she wielded her umbrella like a shield. The snowball hit it with a thwack.

And in a whirl of a moment, a fragile wall inside her crumbled as she dropped her umbrella and reached for a handful of snow. By the time she rose, Will was jogging the other direction.

"You're running away?"

"Not going to make it easy for you," he called over his shoulder.

She chucked the snowball at his back.

Next thing she knew, they'd forayed into the square, joining the frenzy of flying snow and laughter. And every ball she sent flying at Will, he returned with a carefree abandon she envied even as she ran through the park.

Who is this man?

They'd switched places— he chased her now— and she skirted around the gazebo...only to find herself trapped. The old evergreen that stood guard beside the

gazebo and the back of the town square's nativity stable blocked her path. A squeal and a laugh eked up her throat together and she slid on her heels, turning to face Will.

"Ah, now I've got you right where I want you, Madam Librarian." How could he even see through his snow-covered glasses?

"Unfair."

The raucous sounds all around them faded as he moved toward her. "You don't have your umbrella to protect you now."

"I'm not scared of a little snow." She backed up, a branch from the evergreen poking into her coat.

"That so?" He stepped closer, still forming his snowball, until suddenly he stilled, playfulness seeping from his expression. "What happened when you were fifteen, Penn?"

Why the clipped breathing? Why couldn't she look away, hide from the question? She'd been able to ignore it last time, but this time, the truth scratched at its cage. "My mom's gambling caught up to her. I tried to help — stole some money from my grandfather's hardware store."

"Like mother, like daughter."

She could still hear the derision in Grandma's voice. Because when the paltry three hundred dollars Penn had taken from Grandpa's cash register hadn't been enough, Mom had attempted to steal five grand from her employer. She'd been caught in the act. Amazingly her employer hadn't pressed charges — only fired her.

Word had spread around town, though. And by New Years, they were packing their bags.

“We basically moved away in disgrace.”

Penn could feel the warmth of Will’s breath on her face. “And your grandparents?”

“We finally got back into contact with them when I was in college, started spending a couple holidays together here and there. But my mom was still in and out of gambling addiction programs.” Which is probably why, Penn guessed, Grandma and Grandpa had left her the house rather than Mom. “She’s been doing better the past year or so. But Grandma died two years ago and Grandpa this past summer. I’m not sure she ever fully mended fences with them.”

Will took a tentative step forward, reached out to touch her arm. “I’m...sorry.”

“I wish I’d done more, you know? Insisted on coming back to Whisper Shore more often, tried harder to play peacemaker between my mom and grandparents. But I was always so timid when we were all together, worried I’d ruin whatever fragile relationship we still had. I’m the worst at saying what I think.”

Except for now, it seemed. Because she couldn’t stop. “And I wish we could’ve had one more holiday here in Whisper Shore – one more Christmas at the house. I think that’s why I haven’t gotten around to selling the house yet. Because it feels like a story that ended too soon. If we just could’ve had some closure...”

Will let his hand slide down her arm, indecision playing across his face until he finally spoke. “You know, Penn, people like to talk about closure. I’m not sure that’s what we need, not always. Sometimes we need wide open spaces.” He closed the last gap between them. “And I know your grandparents are gone, but honestly, I don’t think

their story or your mom's or the house's – none of their stories are over unless you believe they are. *Your* story isn't over unless you believe it is."

The sounds of the town square floated back in, Bing Crosby crooning about a white Christmas, and something like wonder wiggled through her. "Who *are* you, Will?"

"Just a guy who finally got to experience a real snowball fight. Thanks for that." He brushed a clump of snow from her shoulder. "We should go find that umbrella we abandoned back on the sidewalk. Ready to go?"

But instead of answering him, she reached for his glasses, slid them from his nose and wiped them off with a dry corner of her coat. The gazebo's dancing Christmas lights reflected in Will's eyes when she handed the glasses back. "Ready."



"There's a difference between bravery and stupidity, Penn." Ellie's voice mixed with the sound of Penn's teeth chattering as she closed herself into the second floor bathroom of her grandparents' house. The burst of warmth was no match for the wet snow that had slicked through her clothing. She lifted the overnight bag she'd retrieved from her car onto the vanity and unzipped it. Grandpa and Grandma's second floor bathroom showed its age – yellow tile and countertops, striped white and yellow wallpaper curled at the edges.

"I'm only letting him stay for dinner. We bought a frozen pizza at the store. It's in the oven as I speak. He'll be gone within the hour."

A thought that did little to ward off the chill clinging to her.

"You have no clue who this guy is."

Penn tapped her phone onto Speaker and started changing. "Wrong. I know he likes veggies on his pizza and weirdly prefers to drink OJ with it rather than pop. He likes southern rock and get this, he's read every Jane Austen book. But – and he does lose points for this – he's never seen *It's a Wonderful Life*."

He'd also mentioned teaching college classes. That must've been before whatever happened to propel him into whatever circumstances he found himself in now.

Ellie's silence rang with disapproval.

"Besides, I already told you, I needed to do this. I know it sounds ridiculous, but I needed to do something that wasn't...safe and predictable." *And boring.*

"Which makes no sense. As long as I've known you, you've hated taking risks, Penn. Remember when crazy Blake Hunziker bragged about going sky-diving freshman year? You said you'd never do something that dodgy. You said Blake sky-diving was just as risky as all the gambling your mom did and that you'd never set yourself up for that kind of precarious living."

She stared at her reflection in the mirror over the sink – bedraggled hair and makeup long since gone. Cheeks pale. "Right, so I became a librarian who never does anything more exciting than put in the month's book order. Sometimes I think about going on a cruise or taking a year off work to, I don't know, write my own book or even

moving back to Whisper Shore on a whim. But I'm too scared of draining my bank account or messing up my future or..."

Or finally facing the truth about her feelings for Graham.

He might represent a safe, tidy future...but I don't think I love him.

She just hadn't been brave enough to admit it until now.

"I don't get you, Penn. I thought you loved being a librarian."

She combed her fingers through her hair. "I do, but—" She cut off with a start.

"I've got you right where I want you, Madam Librarian."

Will...

"But?" Ellie prompted.

"Ell, Will—the guy watching the pizza downstairs—he knows I'm a librarian. I never told him that. How could he...?"

"I don't like this. You have to make him leave. I'll send Tim over—"

"No, no don't do that."

"He knows personal information about you!"

Penn thrust her wet clothes into her bag. "I'll ask him to leave."

"What if he won't?"

"Then I'll leave the house and call you and you can send in Tim or the cavalry or the National Guard. Whoever you want. Promise."

She slung her bag over her shoulder and started down the hallway, reluctance slowing her steps. Nothing made sense—not Will somehow knowing her profession, not the nonsensical regret she felt at the thought of asking him to leave. The way he'd listened to her in the town square, known just what to say...he seemed like such a good

guy, that's all. How was she going to tell him to leave? Should she offer to pay for a night's stay at a hotel?

But when she reached the kitchen, Will was nowhere in sight.

Penn glanced at the timer on the stove – pizza still had five minutes. Had he stuck the pizza in the oven and...left?

She walked from room to room on the first floor – all empty, though he'd started a fire in the fireplace. She climbed the stairs once more, peeking into the master bedroom.

Where in the world...?

And then she heard it – the thump from overhead. The attic? She hurried into the hallway, tugged open the doorway leading into the attic, a blast of cold pouring over her. "Will?"

"Up here." His muffled voice carried down.

She climbed the wooden steps, dust particles and the smell of moth balls engulfing her. "I have to ask you something or tell you or..." A single light bulb dangling from the ceiling provided pale light. Will stood in one corner, cardboard box in hand. "What are you doing?"

He grinned. "Finding what I came for."

She angled around an old trunk. "Which is?" He held the box out for her and she peeked inside. "Christmas ornaments?"

"You said you wished you could have one more Christmas here. I found an artificial tree and at least five or six boxes here full of Christmas decorations. One of

them has your name on it—looks like it’s full of homemade ornaments you made. Your grandparents must have saved them.”

She didn’t answer. Couldn’t, not with emotion choking up her throat and pooling in her eyes.

“I know you meant one more Christmas with your family and I’m hardly that.” He set down the box. “And I know I was supposed to leave after dinner—and I still will. I’ll just haul the boxes down for you and grab a slice and—”

She couldn’t help it—she cut him off with a hug that surprised her as much as him.

Later. She’d ask him to leave later.



The fireplace crackled, its heat drifting through the room and toasting Penn’s feet in their perch on the coffee table. Rainbow-colored lights circled the Christmas tree and glimmered against the mix of homemade and store-bought ornaments. Stockings hung from the fireplace mantle and the whole living room smelled of cinnamon from the Christmas candles she’d found in one of the six boxes Will had lugged from the attic.

He sat next to her on the couch now, hands cupping a mug still half-full of hot chocolate. It had to be past midnight and if she was going to make him leave, drop him off at a hotel, she should've done it by now.

"Will?"

He'd closed his eyes and leaned his head against the back of the couch. "Hmm?"

Tell him it's time to go. Offer to drop him off at a hotel. "You've listened to me talk all night."

He smiled, head still tipped back. "Well, you have a nice voice."

"You're silly, Will with two Ls."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Penn with two Ns."

"But come on, you got my secret, painful, Hallmark movie past out of me. Tell me something about you." And then she'd deliver him to the hotel. *Promise.*

He opened his eyes. "Fine, it's probably about time I tell you the truth—"

"No." She held up her palm, the couch groaning underneath her as she shifted. "No, that's not what I meant." Because suddenly she didn't want to hear it if he was any kind of criminal. Or on the run from the law. Or some kind of scam artist who sought out abandoned properties and found ways to make money from them.

She couldn't think of any other reason why he'd been lurking around the place, in the dark. But she didn't want to know...not anymore. "I just meant tell me about your childhood. Or...or a favorite Christmas memory."

"I already told you we didn't do Christmas in a big way. Nothing like here in Whisper Shore. My parents are both lawyers—they worked a lot. I don't resent it. Just means there wasn't time for Christmas with all the fixings."

“You don’t have a single great holiday memory?”

He stared at the fire, grinned. “Fine, there was this one Christmas our cat had surgery and had to wear one of those cone things around its neck. It climbed up our tree – one of the few years we actually had a tree – and the cone got stuck and the cat freaked out. It was like the Christmas tree came alive – ornaments flying, tinsel and branches waving all over the place. Good times.”

At some point during his story, she’d nestled into the couch cushions and leaned her head back. “Was the cat okay?”

“I think so. She never climbed the tree again, though.”

A peaceful quiet settled between them, the soft hum of a spinning ornament on the tree and the flicker of the fire filling the space. Penn slouched further, eyelids heavy.

“And there was this one year. I went with a friend’s family to a Christmas Eve candlelight service. I was seven or eight. First time I heard the actual Christmas story – Mary and Joseph, Jesus. That was kind of a game changer. I remember thinking, even at that young age, ‘How could I have gone so long without realizing...there’s more?’”

More. She liked that. It’s what faith was all about, really...the more that came with Christ’s birth and life. Death and resurrection.

“And I remember holding a candle with wax melting onto my fingers and whispering, ‘Yes,’ when the pastor asked if we wanted to be part of the story Jesus started. Wasn’t really sure what all I was signing up for, but I meant it.”

“You a church-going man these days, Will?” She felt her eyes close even as she asked the question, fatigue hazing through her as the fire lulled her into rest.

“Not always as good as I should be at the church-going part. I...travel a lot. But I do believe. I like to think I’m still saying ‘yes.’”

She felt her breathing slow. *Will...the hotel...getting so late...*

“I think I’d like Christmas in Whisper Shore,” Will continued. But his voice seemed softer now. More distant. “Always wanted that idyllic, iconic white Christmas. I saw this white church when we were walking and the sign out front said something about a Christmas Eve service. Makes me sorta wish I was going to be around...”

Penn couldn’t resist any longer, Will’s voice drifting as she gave in to the tug of sleep.



Penn felt the brightness of the December morning before she saw it. Warm and beckoning. Even with her eyes closed and clingy sleep still fogging her awareness, a contented smile wandered into place.

Whisper Shore. Grandma and Grandpa’s house. The fringe of an afghan tickling her cheek. Will...

Her eyelids juttred open. *Will*. She tilted her head – that was a throw pillow under her cheek, wasn’t it? And couch cushions underneath her. She blinked, willing her brain to work, to remember.

Last she recalled, she'd closed her eyes and leaned her head onto Will's shoulder and...

She jerked upward, feet swinging and dropping from the couch to the cool of the hardwood floor. The blanket slipped from her shoulders and the old sofa creaked as her heartbeat slowed.

"Will?" Her voice came out a croak.

She stood, gaze darting around the room. There was the tree they'd set up, its lights still twinkling, and the stockings over the fireplace and two emptied mugs on the coffee table. Sunshine reached through sheer curtains, like a spotlight highlighting a lone actor on stage.

Had he left already? Just like that...no goodbye?

She padded from the room into the hallway, only the creak of the old floor filling otherwise hollow silence. Disappointment crawled through her. Nonsensical, illogical – considering she had only met the man last night, didn't even know his last name – but disappointment all the same.

Maybe he just left. Could still be outside...

The thought was enough to buoy her into action. She grabbed her coat from over the stairway bannister, yanked on her boots, looked around for her cell phone. *Who cares about your phone?* Seconds later, she was still pulling her coat over her shoulders when she hurried from the house...

And barreled into the person climbing the porch steps.

"Will?" Her voice was lost underneath the man's chuckle.

“Sheesh, nice welcome.” Arms — not Will’s — half-closed around her. “Hasn’t even been forty-eight hours since we saw each other last. This kind of welcome, you’d think it’d been forty-eight weeks.”

Graham. Guilt chilled through her. “I, uh, I...hey, Graham.”

He released her and backed up. He had to have left Grand Rapids before six to arrive in Whisper Shore, but his appearance didn’t reflect the early morning. Blond hair perfectly gelled and swept to the side. Khakis and Oxford visible underneath his unbuttoned pea coat and somehow unwrinkled despite the time in the car.

“W-what are you doing here?” She squinted against the sunlight bouncing off snow. White costumed every surface in sight — the porch and its stretching railing, craggy tree branches drooping under the weight of ice, the rooftops of the houses across the street lined up like an audience.

“You blew my surprise, coming up here last night. Figured I’d better check in on your reaction.” An undercurrent of chastisement laced his otherwise nonchalant tone.

“Your surprise?”

“Your Christmas gift. The date you bailed on last night, I was going to reveal the surprise, tell you all about it.”

She shuffled her fingers through her hair, suddenly conscious of the fact that she hadn’t so much as looked in a mirror before bolting from the house to find Will. What had she been planning to do, chase him down the street?

And what in the world was Graham talking about? What surprise? “Sorry, I just woke up. I’m not following.”

“The house, Pennilyn. I hired a guy to go through the house, inventory all the collectibles and valuables, do all the sorting and organizing you’ve been dreading. He came up yesterday, said it shouldn’t take him more than two days to get it done.”

She just stared at him, murky understanding finally beginning to clear.

Graham rubbed his hands together. “Trying to remember the guy’s name. Warren, Wesley, started with a W.”

“Will.” The name pushed out as realization lunged in. Will...he wasn’t homeless. He was Graham’s surprise. *Oh my goodness. Oh my...* She’d accused him of attempting to steal Grandma’s jewelry! She’d assumed he was a drifter, squatter, troublemaker...

And Graham. He hadn’t planned to propose. At least not last night.

“Oh my goodness.” She said it out loud this time, backing away from Graham and leaning over the porch railing.

“Your grandpa’s funeral was over six months ago. This had to get done eventually. Will works with traders, antique dealers, auctions. Anything he can’t sell, he’ll dispose of. Soon as he’s done, you can work with a realtor to get it up for sale. With any luck, you’ll unload it in no time at all.”

“But I don’t want to unload it.” The words toppled from her like a fall on the ice. Quick and unexpected.

“Of course you do. It may be old, but it’ll sell. You could wind up with a nice little nest egg. I know a bank where you can get a decent interest rate on a savings account.” The self-assurance in his sharp blue eyes assumed she agreed.

But she couldn’t. One night was all it had taken to revive her soft spot for this town and her love for this house. “You’re right, it may be old. And it’s drafty and in

need of some serious updates. But it's mine and I'm not ready to say goodbye to it." She buttoned her coat. "What if I could fix it up and make it pretty again? Rent it out or even move up here myself? If nothing else, I want to take some time, consider my options. I don't want to limit myself."

Graham shook his head. "Doesn't sound like you have much of a solid plan."

"Well, you're the one who's always telling me I'm predictable. I never take risks. I play life too safe."

His pinched grin bordered on patronizing. "Yes, but I like those things about you. They're cute."

"They're not cute. Not if they sprout from a place of fear or regret. That's not the person I want to be. Not anymore."

"So who do you want to be?" Skepticism tainted his expression as he folded his arms.

The person I was last night. Someone honest and vulnerable and... "Someone brave. Someone who isn't stuck in the past or afraid of the future. Who knows there's more, that her story isn't over, and who will say 'yes' even if she's not entirely sure what she's saying 'yes' to."

"You're talking in riddles."

She stopped in front of him. "Fine. I want to be someone who is bold enough to straight-up ask you if you're ever going to propose to me."

The blush of cold drained from his cheeks and rapid blinks took the place of any immediate response. But it was answer enough, wasn't it?

"Pennilyn." The scraping of a shovel against cement sounded from somewhere down the block.

"Well?" Her fists found her waist.

"Look, clearly you had an odd night and you're feeling...off."

"But I'm not. Graham, believe it or not, I feel more like myself than I have in months. Maybe years. I've been telling myself you and I have been in a holding pattern for too long, but the truth is, *I've* been in a holding pattern. It's time to get unstuck." She waited to go on until Graham looked her in the eyes. "So I need to know, do you want to get unstuck with me? Or is it time to...just let go?"

Minutes later, Penn stood on the sidewalk and watched Graham's Lexus slice through the street that hadn't yet seen a snow plow. She hugged her arms to herself. Two years, done, just like that. She should be tearing up or sniffing or...or something other than standing here trying to decide whether it was disbelief or relief cutting a path through her emotions.

She buried her hands in her pockets, fingers numb, and dug for gloves. *Sometimes we need wide open spaces.*

"Hey, Penn."

She whirled. Will? He ambled down the sidewalk from the opposite direction.

She pulled her hands free from her pockets, dropped one glove to the snow. "...I thought you'd left."

"Without breakfast? You kidding?" He held up a white paper bag as he approached. "I remembered seeing a bakery when we were in the square last night."

“Gable’s Bakery. Grandpa used to take me there for breakfast. Best donuts in the world.”

“Ooh, then I made a good call, if I do say so myself.” He stopped in front of her, bent to pick up her glove. “Actually, I did leave last night. After you fell asleep, I figured I’d better go check into that hotel you mentioned. But I thought I’d pick up breakfast to thank you for dinner last night.” He paused, handed over her glove, and took a breath. “And I reckoned it was about time I tell you the truth about why —”

He cut off suddenly as his gaze hooked on hers. Amber specks lingered in his brown eyes behind his glasses, his expression gliding to realization as he took in her gaze. “You...already know.”

“Graham was just here.” The breeze rustled over her cheeks. “Why didn’t you just tell me? Who you are, why you’re here.”

One corner of his mouth lifted. “Initially because you wouldn’t let me get a word in edge-wise.”

“Will.”

“And because...because you were so funny, okay? You were so mad. And then... then you thought you were doing this generous thing, letting me stay for dinner.” He looked to the ground, drawing a circle in the snow with his shoe. “Finally, probably mostly, because I wanted to stay.” He looked up, a mix of honesty and...and something else in his eyes.

“You wanted to stay.”

“I wanted to stay.” He went back to tracing patterns in the snow. “If I told you who I was, then you would’ve known I could afford a hotel and goodbye one really

great December night. It was snowing and this town, the house was like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting and you were...you."

Despite the cold, despite the short night of sleep and the fact that she'd just watched the man she thought she'd marry drive away, warmth puddled inside her.

Wide open spaces. "What's your last name, Will?"

Surprise danced into his expression. "Anderson."

She tugged one hand free and held it toward him. "Nice to meet you, Will Anderson. I'm Penn Baxter. May I ask what you do for a living?"

"I'm a professor nine months out of the year."

So that part was true.

"But during my summers and Christmas breaks, I do estate and collectible assessment, some eBay trading on the side."

"I didn't even realize that was a thing...a job, I mean."

He still held her hand. "My uncle was in the business. For me, it's more of a hobby than anything. Something about going through other people's stuff. It's like reading their story, being a part of someone else's history." His gaze latched onto hers. "And every once in awhile, I get to meet the family of the person who has passed away and left the estate behind. By far the most rewarding part."

She swallowed. "I hate to tell you this but I think I'm going to be hanging on to the house. Probably most of the stuff in it, too."

"I thought you might."

Maybe she should offer to pay his travel expenses. Or apologize for wasting his time. Or at least pull her hand back.

But she couldn't make herself do any of it. Not with that grin tugging at his lips and the breeze whipping snow around their ankles. And the donuts in that bag tantalizing her taste buds.

"So at the bakery, I saw this flier for a big Christmas festival coming up soon. Some guy named Blake Hun-something is organizing it."

"Blake Hunziker? No way."

"I take it there's a story there."

"Like you wouldn't believe."

Instead of releasing her hand, Will tucked it into the crook of his elbow and started walking to the house. "I'm thinking I need to hear this story. I'm also thinking maybe I should drive back for said festival. Who wants to miss a good festival, right?"

"Where do you live, anyway?"

"Madison. It's not too bad of a drive." He paused, glanced down at her. "Any chance you might be in town?"

She tasted crisp morning air and sweet expectation. "Oh, I'll be here, all right."

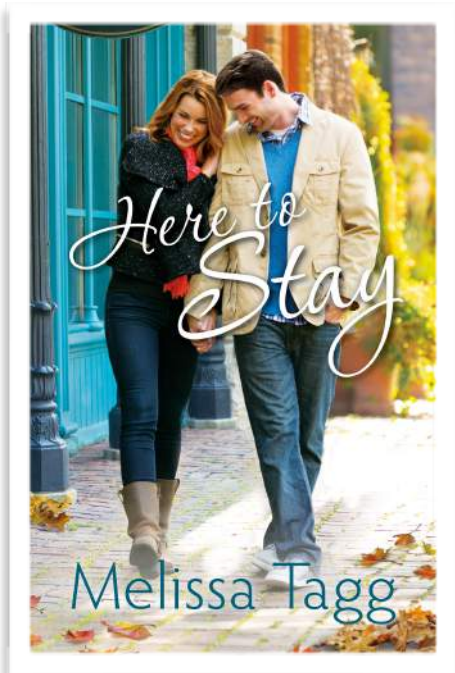
He flashed that enchanting grin of his and she tightened her hold on his arm. They moved toward the house once more, footprints trailing together in the snow.

THE END

If you liked this short Christmas story, you may also enjoy Melissa Tagg's *Here to Stay*, a full-length companion novel USA Today.com calls "simply adorable."

Discover the story behind the annual Whisper Shore snowball fight, meet the Blake Hunziker mentioned in *One December Night* and fall in love with the town reviewers are comparing to *Gilmore Girls' Stars Hollow*.

Here to Stay



After playing nomad for five years, Blake Hunziker has finally had enough of adventure. Not sure what reception he'll get from everyone back in Whisper Shore, he's stunned at not only a warm welcome from his hometown but also a job offer. The job is his if he can successfully pull off the annual Christmas Festival. If only he knew the first thing about coordinating events...

If there's one thing Autumn Kingsley knows, it's Whisper Shore. For years, she's been stuck running her family's inn when all she wants is to see the world. Now she has a visit scheduled from a potential investor who could take over the inn, as well as a dream job offer in Paris. But with just two weeks to whip the inn into shape, her chance at escape is a long shot.

The Hunzikers and the Kingsleys may not get along, but Blake knows Autumn's the only one who can help him. She agrees to a trade--she'll help with the Festival and he'll help with inn repairs. But what was meant to be a simple deal quickly becomes much more than that when the guy who's done running away joins forces with the girl who can't wait

to leave.

***Here to Stay* is available in bookstores and online, including:**

[Amazon](#) | [Barnes & Noble](#) | [Books-a-Million](#) | [CBD.com](#)

"With her charming wit and engaging prose, Tagg pens a story of hope in God's dreams for us and ties it all together with sigh-worthy romance. Truly a book and author not to be missed." ~ **Rachel Hauck**, bestselling author of *The Wedding Dress* and *Princess Ever After*

"Book me a room at the Kingsley Inn - I'm coming to the delightful town of Whisper Shore for Christmas!" ~ **Susan May Warren**, best-selling author and rabid fan of *Here to Stay*.