

Annette Bower ~ Karyn Good
Lesley-Anne McLeod ~ Jana Richards



The
Storytellers'
Bouquet

The Storytellers' Bouquet

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The Storytellers' Bouquet

Annette Bower

*Author of women's fiction and contemporary romance--
short stories and novels*



The Daisy

Moving On--A Prairie Romance - XoXo Publishing, 2011



Regina Beach's residents know everyone's business and they are very interested in discovering Anna's roots while she is enjoying being a mysterious business woman who drove into town. Nick, an injured sergeant in the Canadian Army, helps Anna feel safe and comfortable in her new environment, just as he has always done for his men in strange, dangerous places. Meanwhile, he focuses on preparing for his future physical endurance test to prove that he is capable of active duty.

Anna doesn't talk about her loss, and Nick doesn't talk about his future and therefore she is shocked to discover that his greatest wish is to return to active duty. She won't love a man who may die on the job again. Intellectually, she knows that everything must die, but emotionally, she doesn't know if she has the strength to support Nick.

Anna Jenkins pushed her foot on the brake as her hatchback picked up speed on the hill. The posted speed limit for the Town of Regina Beach was forty km/hr. She passed old cottages with verandas and gravel driveways surrounded by blossoming lilac bushes that were tucked in among new homes with steel doors and trees with spring green leaves shading designer interlocking block paths. Her doubts about moving to a small town washed in her fatigued mind like the waves pushing and pulling along the shore of Last Mountain Lake, that expanse of blue where the road she was on ended. Just past noon and no one was on the street.

After scanning street signs she turned west on Green Avenue and crept along until she found the address that was etched in her memory. She drove into the driveway of the place she rushed to after yet another encounter of "How are you doing? What a tragedy." Yes, it was a tragedy that her fiancé died a week before their wedding but it was her tragedy and she was tired of sharing it with others. They seemed to want to keep it alive like some macabre game where they could report to their friends and family, *I saw her today and she looks awful. I just didn't know what to say but if you ask me if Murray saw her now, he wouldn't look twice, never mind proposing.* She hadn't overheard anyone say these words but she had her suspicions otherwise why wouldn't they just accept their wedding gifts back instead of allowing her to keep them piled in a rented storage space before she left Toronto?

Sure, this chance at another beginning was because someone else had died. People dropped like flies in her life. Murray's uncle bequeathed his house to Murray and because Murray was dead, she was the beneficiary. A shudder of grief ambushed her. She leaned her head on the steering wheel.

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Her mother had suggested a plane ticket from Toronto and rental car, a long weekend vacation, check things out instead of rushing headlong into the unknown. But Anna couldn't. She drove for four days. It was now or never. She turned off the engine, opened the door and pushed one sensibly soled foot over the edge and onto the stone path that led to the house.

The windows were dirty and the exterior paint cracked and flaked. This was just the place she needed if as *they* say, your environment reflects your state of mind. Maybe in this place *they* would get off her back. She locked the doors to ward off thieves from her black suitcases piled in the car. What was she thinking? The street was empty. Besides, a battered guitar case shared the passenger seat with empty water bottles and take-away food wrappers, so it looked as if someone had already rummaged through her belongings.

Anna plowed through fallen leaves and broken twigs that were spread over the stone pathway leading to the stairs. The screened summer door sprung open but the solid weather door refused to budge. She twisted the key, jiggled the door knob and finally she turned sideways and bumped her hip against the stubborn paint-encrusted door. Banging against something and having it move felt wonderful. The momentary hip sting was an annoyance compared to the pain that she'd endured over the last year. Taking a deep breath she pushed the door open, inhaled stale air and watched dust motes floating on current of outside air.

The lawyer hadn't known if Murray had spent any time here. Part of her wanted to look around and think of him as a carefree child, then a young man whole and alive, while the other part of her wanted a clean slate.

Anna ran her hand over the white refrigerator and matching stove and trailed a finger in the dust on the country kitchen table and solid chairs. Through a large window was an expansive view of blue water. Her tongue stuck to the roof of her mouth reminding her that she was thirsty. Anna turned the taps at the kitchen sink. They squeaked, but nothing came. All that water out there but none where she was going to live. She walked down a hallway and peered into rooms until she found the bathroom. The taps in the sink and tub repeated the noise and the toilet had green liquid in the bottom. She stomped her feet against the tiled floor. Damn. There were a few bottles of water in the car, but how would she use the other facilities? She didn't know how to rough it; Murray was supposed to teach her how to camp in the wilds.

Anna turned back toward a knock at the door. A woman shading her eyes looked through the summer mesh door.

"Can I help you?" Anna called.

Fingers capped with red painted nails clung to the door the stranger pulled open. "Perhaps I can help you. I'm Margaret Lamb from next door. What right do you have to be here? I'll bet that you're one of those agents come to sell the place since John passed on. He's finally at peace. With the cottage boom, someone's going to get a fair chunk of money for this property. John had this place a long time. I sure hope you do a good job of selling this cottage--and not to a bunch of party animals. I've been here since the eighties, so there's not much I don't know or things I can't tell you."

When the woman stopped to inhale Anna held up her hand. Mrs. Lamb understood the universal signal to stop. Words ready to tumble remained captured behind her ruby lips. Mrs. Lamb's fingers fell from their flight in mid-air landing on each opposite forearm. She had her own body language stating *closed to strangers*.

"Mrs. Lamb."

The head with red-tinged curls nodded.

"Please come in."

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The short, stout, elderly woman, dressed in a flowered over-blouse and pink slacks, stepped onto the kitchen tile. The screen door slammed. One white oxford disturbed the dust on the white tile, while the other looked like a beacon in the night against the black tile. Anna leaned on a chair.

Mrs. Lamb's mouth moved, but Anna continued.

"I'm not a real estate agent. I don't intend to sell. I'm here to live. I'm thirsty. I don't have any water."

"Miss?" the unspoken question hung as her voice, eyebrows, and head rose.

"Anna Jenkins." She held her breath. She hoped that the months since the accident were enough time for sympathy not to cross her new neighbor's face. She'd had enough of that. This pity party was over.

Mrs. Lamb didn't recognize her name. Anna smiled. Mrs. Lamb might know everything in her town, but her knowledge had limits.

"Miss Jenkins, I can't be too careful these days. And it seems to me," Mrs. Lamb said as her eyes darted around, "that most young professionals would prefer something a little more modern without as much work as this old place needs."

"Although I appreciate your watchful concern, it's been a long day. I just want a drink of water and a comfortable chair." Anna paused. The whine in her voice reverberated in her ears. She consciously felt the spring of her chemically curled hair, the collar of her once crisp cotton blouse, the lapel of her buttoned grey blazer and the creased press of the black pants. "Perhaps this house is just what I need," she said.

"Don't look so worried, dearie. Beach living relaxes most city folk eventually. Now come on over to our house. I'll put on a pot of tea and Herman can answer your questions about the water."

Anna followed Margaret's splashes of color through a gate in the hedge to a white house with green trim and flower boxes with spring tulips nodding in the breeze. Mrs. Lamb opened the door to her home and stepped aside allowing Anna to enter.

Anna's mind circled back to her Grandma and memories of an aroma of baking bread and simmering stew intermingled with floor wax. The afternoon sunbeams bounced from the bric-a-brac to the crocheted doilies on the stuffed backs and arms of couches and chairs. From the corner came the rhythmic sound of a rocking chair.

"Herman," Mrs. Lamb sang out.

The newspaper lowered to reveal blue eyes behind round, wire spectacles and a toothless grin on his weathered face.

"Herman, put your teeth in! We have company."

The newspaper rose. A slight hand reached for a glass on the side table. When it lowered again, a gleaming white smile flashed. "And who is this pretty girl?"

Anna hadn't been called a girl in a very long time. She supposed that twenty-eight was a girl to someone who was probably on the other side of seventy.

Mrs. Lamb shook her head and rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "Anna's going to live in John's place."

He leaned forward in the chair. "Pleased to meet you, Anna! We've been watching over the place. Now I'll have a better reason to keep an eye on it."

"Herman. I'm checking with the doctor. Ever since you've been on that heart medication, your mouth says everything before your brain censors it." Margaret walked behind his chair and rested her hands on his shoulders, skimming her lips across his thin hair. "The water needs to be turned on in John's house."

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Anna concentrated on searching out stray pieces of fluff on her jacket. A trick she had learned at grief counseling when moments of tenderness shared between a couple triggered memories that were best held until she was alone.

When she dared to look up he patted his wife's hand on his shoulder, and with his other hand Herman glanced at his pocket watch. "Too late today. You'll have to go to the town office at nine tomorrow. Janice will have you organized in no time."

"I'll go and put on the kettle." Mrs. Lamb gave Herman another little tap.

"Sit down and relax until tea's ready. She makes a good cup of tea even if I still prefer coffee."

The sound of cups rattling on saucers seemed to resound in the brief silence as Anna and Herman both gazed out of the window at the rolling water.

"You look puzzled, Anna."

Was it her imagination or did Herman's teeth click with each syllable?

"I could buy some water and stay there tonight, I suppose."

"Not that easy, girlie! There's the bathroom to consider--no water, no flush."

"There must be a hotel in a resort town?" She didn't want to leave. She'd finally catapulted herself into her future.

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The Friends' Way - A Short Story

Muriel gripped the steering wheel and applied constant pressure to the hand brake to stop her blue Buick Skylark in the driveway. She tapped the horn in three short bursts. She'd driven into this yard every Wednesday for the past eighteen months, and for the first time she felt edgy.

Muriel didn't believe in premonitions, so she just shifted her backside further into the seat. The trees were bare and the air smelled of burning poplar. Fall was definitely here and winter not far behind. She kept an eye on the window until the curtain twitched--Nora confirming she saw Muriel waiting.

Shortly, Nora heaved her bulk down the steps of her mobile home and lumbered toward the car. She pulled open the door and turned to settle into the seat, then waved at the window.

"Everything okay, Nora? You're looking a little pale," Muriel said.

"Fine." Nora huffed. "I have a lot to do before the anniversary party on Sunday."

"I thought the kids were doing everything."

"You know how it is. It's just easier to do it myself." Nora wiggled for comfort in the navy blue fuzzy seat cover.

"You're supposed to have learned how to delegate by your age," Muriel said.

"Forget it, Muriel. Joe's not too good. I want everything perfect. It could be our last celebration together," Nora said. She wiped the perspiration from her forehead with a wad of tissue. "Do you have our lottery numbers?"

"Not this week. It's Inga's turn."

"When we get into the city can we go to a kiosk in a mall? I need to pick up a couple of things."

"There's a strip mall on the east side. It has a Safeway." Muriel glanced over at Nora as she backed onto the street. "Will that do?"

Nora nodded.

Muriel raised one eyebrow. "You haven't cracked one joke or passed on the tiniest bit of gossip since we left your house. There's definitely something wrong."

Nora didn't answer. She pulled at the seat belt and extended it further from her chest while sucking air noisily through her teeth.

"Is something wrong with the belt?" Muriel asked.

"It must be caught or something. It's tight."

"Maybe it's your coat," Muriel said. She slowed down and drifted to a stop.

"There's Inga!" Nora wagged her hand in the general vicinity of the small white clapboard cottage behind its white picket fence.

While they watched buxom Inga stride to the passenger back door, Nora whispered, "Where does she find her hats? At Value Village?"

"Hi-der, ho-der, ladies!"

"What in the world are you doing with your car?" Muriel asked, waving at the rusted green Lada in the driveway.

"We're putting on the winter tires. It'll snow soon and I'll be ready."

"You know, Inga," Nora said, and winked at Muriel, "just because a car has four wheels doesn't mean it should be driven."

Muriel smiled as she checked her mirrors before merging onto the highway and leaving the town of Destiny behind them.

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"You make do with what you have," Inga chanted. "But this week I put on my lottery list a brand new red half-ton."

"What the hell you gonna do with a truck?" Nora asked. "You'll be seventy on your next birthday."

"What does that have to do with a truck? A truck hauls things. I just drive."

"Did you hear that, Muriel? Next, she'll think about building a garage too," Nora crowed.

"Sure, if there's enough money. How about you, Muriel, did you think of something new this week for your wish list?"

"No, it's the same as always. I'd buy blue-chip to firm up my portfolio."

"Sure, those computer stocks really knocked you for a loop." Muriel heard Inga leaning her large body toward the front seat so she could be closer.

"True, and every day it's harder to manage alone. But when we win, I'll hire anyone I need to so that I can stay at home," Muriel said.

"Yeah, then no one has to worry about where to put you. It's good to be positive." Inga patted Muriel's leather jacket.

"Guess what I added this week?" Nora wheezed.

"Something silly again, I suppose," Inga retorted.

"You might say that!" Nora breathed deeply. "Now that Joe's on oxygen twenty-four hours a day..."

"You're sounding like you could use some of that oxygen," Muriel said.

"Never mind. Let me finish. The TV's always on. So, I got this idea. Joe likes to look at pretty girls. I'll have one of those hot-tub beer parties in our back yard, for Joe. They send the girls in the bathing suits. That'd keep his ticker going for a while longer."

"Nora, that's sexist!" Muriel said.

"But fun," Nora said.

"You don't take this very serious." Inga stuck a hand between the front seats and folded down each thick finger as she listed, "A trip to the fat farm, a face lift, and a home security system so you can lock yourself in or out."

"That's me," Nora sputtered, "always kidding around."

"Nora, will you stop pulling on the seat belt, it's annoying!" Muriel exclaimed.

"You sick?" Inga asked.

"No. Just indigestion." Nora's head arched back as she rubbed her chest. "It's hot. Muriel, open a window..."

Muriel glanced over at Nora and frowned. She made her decision quickly and tightened her grip on the steering wheel. "Inga! She's in trouble. I'm pulling onto the shoulder. Come 'round the front and help her, you know I can't!"

The Skylark ground to a halt. The back door flew open. The front door pulled free. The highway traffic continued to hum by at one hundred kilometers an hour.

Muriel scanned the passenger floorboards. "There's her purse. Find her nitroglycerin! I've got my cell phone--I'm calling an ambulance!" She fumbled to press 9-1-1.

"Nora? Nora, how're you feeling?" Inga released the seatbelt. Muriel tried to split her attention between them and the calm voice talking in her ear.

"Pretty good, and you?"

"Stop fooling! How's the pain?" Inga reached for Nora's wrist.

"Big."

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"Here, let me put these pills under your tongue." Muriel caught Inga flashing a glance at her as she dropped her cell phone back into her purse. "What did the ambulance say?"

"Stay where we are. They'll be here as soon as possible. Nora, don't you do anything stupid. You've got that anniversary on Sunday."

"Shh!" Inga said.

"I feel so bloody useless. My walker is in the trunk--" Muriel struggled in her seat.

"What you going to do? Walk for help? No. We stay. Yeah, they'll find us faster. They've got the equipment they need. Should we call her kids?"

"Those no-good-for-nothings. If they'd help her out once in a while this wouldn't happen." Muriel fumed and banged on the steering wheel

"Hey, gals? I'm still here."

"Shh, Nora." Inga patted her friend's puffy hand.

"Do you know how they make holy water?" Nora asked.

"Enough already! Keep your strength!"

"They boil the hell out of it," Nora whispered. "Go out laughing."

Muriel scanned the clear blue bowl of the prairie sky and the horizon, looking for a dot with flashing lights to crest the hill. "You're not going anywhere but to get the help you need. Listen, the ambulance is coming."

"I can't hear a thing." Nora wheezed. "I thought hearing was the last to go."

"Maybe they got some cute paramedics to keep your ticker going," Inga said.

"I like a good bun," Nora said.

"Your humor might save you, but it'll be the death of me," Muriel muttered as the ambulance finally arrived.

She watched through the windshield as the paramedics loaded Nora into the back of the ambulance. Inga, as always, passed on the practical information, handing over Nora's health insurance card. Then the ambulance became a soundless flash of lights in the distance.

"Come on, let's get going!" Inga scrambled into the front seat.

Muriel rubbed her eyes. "I need a minute. Something like this sure makes you think."

"Sure, but can you think and drive?"

"Right. You phone her daughter. I'll drive." Muriel pressed the compact cell phone into Inga's large callused palm.

"I don't know how to work one of these things." Inga frowned at the strange contraption in her hand.

"Power. Number. Send," Muriel barked as she set the cruise control.

The Skylark flew down the highway past the last combines, moving against the horizon, trying to pull the best left from the crop. Inga was muttering. Muriel glanced over as her friend pressed the phone to her ear and frowned. "No answer!"

"Now what?"

"I'll petition the Holy Mother to save Nora."

"Do you really think Nora's and your God might take her before the anniversary?"

"You bargain your way and I'll bargain mine."

"Survival isn't always the answer, you know, especially with her history."

"Yeah, I know. But she's worked so hard for this party."

They fell silent. The heater fan roared. The tires thudded across the repaired cracks in the asphalt.

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For a change, a handicap spot was empty at the emergency entrance of the Pasqua Hospital. Muriel shuffled behind her walker. Inga strode confidently through the doors. When Muriel got beyond the swing of the automatic door, she saw Inga talking to the information clerk. The antiseptic odor wormed its way into Muriel's consciousness as she breathed deeply. It demanded recognition of the arbitrary and unexplained illnesses and deaths which take place in the beds behind the doors.

"We've got to wait in here." Inga turned toward the dimly-lit, climate-controlled waiting area with gray high-back chairs and TV buzzing for company.

They sat side by side. Two old women, one wearing a brown wool driver's cap and one with flyaway blue-tinged hair, staring at the emergency room door. Inga fumbled the pages of a dog-eared *Readers' Digest* on her lap. Muriel picked at her black polyester pants, pursing her lips and pulling her eyebrows together as she tried to quiet her thoughts.

"Muriel, what's the matter?"

"Our lottery ticket."

"Come on, now. What's the difference? If the numbers come up, we keep trying, next time."

"You know what a win could do for all of us. Especially Nora."

"Sure, but there are millions of number combinations. We've been doing this so long, what's another week? My Lada will still do another winter."

Muriel sniffed the sanitized air. She whispered, "But we haven't missed a week in almost two years. What if tonight's our turn? Nora could afford more help for Joe. Someone could come in and bathe him more than once a week, or they could get the portable oxygen tank so he could leave home."

"Heck, I didn't know she needed those things. Those things weren't never on her list." Inga took off her cap and massaged the furrows on her brow. "I've put away a few dollars for a rainy day. Maybe we could help?"

"No. I tried. They're proud."

"We'll think of something. Look! The nurse is coming. Let's go."

Inga and Muriel walked slowly down the mottled beige linoleum floor. They hung back and watched the nurse enter room number six. They stood and gripped each other's hand and took deep breaths, prepared for the worst but bargaining for the best.

"Hi, gals." Nora tried to smile around her oxygen mask. "Thanks for coming. But go. Get our ticket. It's not too late."

"No, we're going to stay with you," Inga said.

"Go! I'd feel worse if our numbers came up... we didn't win... because of me."

Inga pitched her cap back onto her head and sighed. "Come on, then, Muriel!"

Muriel bent past the bar of her walker and kissed Nora's cheek. "We'll call when we've completed our mission."

"No, we won't! You trust us, right?" Inga asked.

Nora nodded. Her eyelids fluttered.

Inga pulled on Muriel's walker and forced Muriel to trot, commanding, "Hurry, before the kids come. They don't know anything of our plan. If they did they'd pester her after every draw."

"You know it's too late," Muriel said, struggling to keep up.

"We never give up. It's my turn to be positive. Let me drive. We'll get there faster."

Muriel flopped herself into the passenger seat. Inga threw the walker into the back. Soon the Skylark darted through an amber light.

"There's a 7-11 a few blocks from here. Hurry!" Muriel told her.

"I'm going as fast as I can and not get a speeding ticket."

The Storytellers' Bouquet ~ *Annette Bower*

"Ticket. Ticket. I think I hate that word," Muriel said.

At an intersection, Inga yelled at an old lady slowly making her way at a pedestrian corridor. "Move it, lady!"

"Inga! You should be ashamed of yourself. She's one of us." Muriel glared at her friend.

"I know that, but now I'm in a big hurry." Inga banged the steering wheel with her broad hands.

"Pull into the handicap spot," Muriel urged.

"But I'm driving."

"And I'm handicapped. So don't argue."

Muriel watched Inga slam through the door and push the lotto form at the clerk. He shook his head. Inga's hands and mouth moved at the same time. Then Muriel watched her dear friend walk out of the store with her shoulders drooped and her cap in hand. "Too late!" Muriel confirmed.

"Just such a very little." Inga slumped into the seat behind the wheel.

"This is one time I wish that 'just a very little' was like being a little pregnant." Muriel sighed.

Inga looked surprised. "You made a joke!"

Muriel tried to smile. "I thought I'd try a page out of Nora's book. She always finds something funny."

They both stared silently at the salesclerk behind the glass, serving one person at a time.

"Want me to drive home?" Inga twirled the keys between her fingers.

"I think we should have something to eat first."

"Maybe this isn't such a good idea any more. We get false hopes. I never should've dreamed of a truck or a garage. I got to where I am today by hard work," Inga said.

"So did we all. But we need a dream. It's only two dollars each week. In a year that's only about a hundred dollars, not nearly enough for a truck," Muriel said.

"Sure, you're right. I enjoy our talks and lists and the suppers too. If we win, lots of people will be better off when all is said and done."

"But tonight we'll cross our fingers and hope that our special numbers don't roll out of the machine."

"Well, how about you cross your fingers, and I'll hold my rosary, while we eat some Swiss Chalet chicken and drink a beer. I have coupons," Inga said.

"Make mine a glass of a good red wine and you have a deal."

Perhaps, Muriel thought, to the waitress with her smooth-skinned face and shapely legs, they were just two goofy old ladies fiddling with the menus and comparing coupons. She raised her wine glass to Inga's beer glass. "To Nora. If she must die, let her die dancing and not in bed."

"Yeah, 'cause sometimes to dance is good."

Muriel pulled the chicken from its bone and pushed it around on her plate while Inga wiped up the last bits of gravy with her bun. She watched the street lights come on earlier than they had last month. She saw kids riding their bikes and skateboards in the sweaters and jackets of fall. The gardens on the boulevard were bare. This was a city prepared for the long cold winter.

After they calculated the fifteen per cent tip, they counted out the correct change, and Muriel said slowly, "Let's go back to the hospital and sit in that damn waiting room. I want to make a noise if she dies. I want to remind her we need to dance at her party. Those kids will need our help too. We're like family."

"Good idea. We'll get started on our luck next week. We still have lots left," Inga replied as she stuffed her beads back into her coat pocket. "You want I should drive?"

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“No, thanks. I’m fine, and besides, I stop for a long time for old ladies who cross the street.”

“Well, some of you should move a little faster. That’s all I have to say.”

“Inga!”

“Come on, let’s go quick. I want to be there already.”

“I’m moving as fast as I can. Do you think I’ll get a ticket?”

“Only for holding up traffic.” Inga laughed.

Annette Bower - A Brief Biography

Annette Bower is the author of many short stories published in anthologies and magazines in Canada, the United States and in the United Kingdom. She writes about women in communities, in families and about love. Annette is pleased to have her first novel, *Moving On--A Prairie Romance* published December, 2011 by XoXo Publishing and looks forward to the adventure of publishing e-books.

Her second novel, *Woman of Substance* will be released in the fall of 2012 by Soul Mate Publishing.

When she isn't writing or virtually promoting her book, she walks or bikes around the streets and parks in her neighborhood imagining complex worlds behind seemingly ordinary events.

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The Daisy - A Note

My favorite flower is the daisy. This flower appears with regularity in fields, in sidewalk cracks as well as in bridal bouquets. Daisies are associated with simplicity and modesty. They remind me of the romantic occasions that simply pop up when you least expect them.

--Annette Bower

The Storytellers' Bouquet

Karyn Good

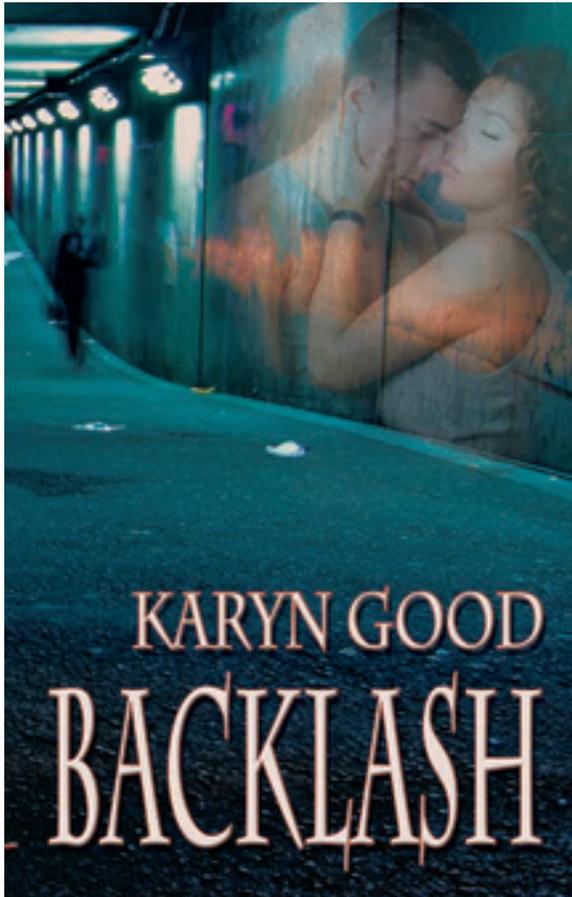
Author of romantic suspense...

"As soon as there is life there is danger." --Emerson



The Stargazer Lily

Backlash - Wild Rose Press, 2012



What he's sworn to protect, she's willing to sacrifice to save those she loves....

When dedicated teacher Lily Wheeler interrupts a vicious gang attack on one of her students, she vows it won't happen again. But her rash interference puts her in the path of a cold-blooded killer and the constable tracking him--a man she has little reason to trust, but can never forget.

Constable Chase Porter returned to Aspen Lake to see justice done, not renew old acquaintances. But when he rescues the woman he once loved from a volatile situation, he realizes his feelings for Lily haven't lessened over the years.

Now, the dangerous killer Chase has sworn to capture has Lily in his sights. Can Chase and Lily learn to trust each other again before it's too late--or will old insecurities jeopardize their future?

Lily Wheeler dug a pair of sunglasses out of the depths of her gigantic purse and plopped them on her nose. The back door of the school hissed shut behind her, leaving her smiling in anticipation. Seize the day. She repeated it over and over, keys clutched in her hand. As she started for her car, a huddle of young men in the middle of the lot snagged her attention. She paused. Something about the whole situation bothered her. Maybe their size? The way the small group was bunched together? She glanced at her watch. Bordering on late for her appointment, she wanted to dismiss it as nothing.

Still, weird to see the older students hanging out at this hour. She craned her neck to get a better view. Her teacher instincts tingled, but she strived to shrug them off. She didn't have time for more problems. A shortcut across the small patch of wilted grass led her straight into the parking lot. Her car sat in the far west corner, five yards past the knot of students.

At her approach, the tallest member of the group turned. She lifted her hand to wave, but her gesture fizzled in midair. Black ink sketched a spider web pattern up his neck and over his right cheek. Not pretty, not meant to be. He was no one she recognized. She tried to ignore the bony finger of fear scraping its way down her spine as ridiculous. This was Aspen Lake, not the big bad city.

Spider-Guy's lips moved, but the words drowned in the sea of space separating them. The rest of him remained stock still, arms crossed, legs braced until he shifted to stare past her and nod his head. Her internal alarm bells went from ringing to clanging. She didn't need to hear the heavy footsteps behind her to know someone was at her back.

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The drama in front of her escalated. A vicious shove sent the man in the middle of the pack stumbling back. The push shocked her. She hesitated. All thoughts of her appointment with the real estate agent and the future went poof. She didn't know what they were trying to prove, but she couldn't ignore them any more than she could walk away. They were on school property. She had the ultimate say-so here, which was all well and good in theory.

She drew in a shallow breath. Time to take a stand. "No loitering. You're not supposed to be here. Move along." She hiked up the strap of her shoulder bag, tucked it against her, put a protective arm over it.

A second shove. It sent the victim, who was a good foot shorter than the rest, stumbling back and down onto the pavement. Sick recognition hit as she glimpsed the boy's face before he curled up into a ball. It shot the dynamics of the situation straight to worst-case-scenario.

"Enough. Leave him alone." She cleared the clog of fear out of her throat. The smirk of the man in front of her and the whisper of laughter from the one behind her stiffened her spine. No one messed with one of her students. Her students were her family. There was nothing she wouldn't do for family.

"Now," she demanded.

Another signal from the man facing her, and a cohort swung his boot into the ribs of the skinny boy huddled on the ground. Lily flinched, her stomach cartwheeling. The three men in front of her pivoted towards her with a creepy, military-like precision. Three pairs of dark eyes stared at her, not a twinge of apprehension on their unfamiliar faces.

Shocked silent, but not stupid, she slipped her hand into her purse and grabbed around for her cell phone. It's comforting shape found its way into her shaking hand. Her nerveless fingers wrapped around it. The wrenching pull on her shoulder made her gasp. The sight of her purse hitting the ground a good six feet away made her tighten her grip on the keys in her other hand. She carefully threaded them through her fingers.

"I dialed. So, you can leave peacefully, or you can stay and take your chances."

All three of the men crossed their arms and advanced. The move had an eerie, choreographed air to it. Like they'd done this before. Many times. Her vocal cords seized up. She swallowed, hoping to grease them loose.

"I mean it. You need to back off."

They laughed. She guessed redheads with curly hair, freckles, and wearing bubblegum pink capri pants didn't pass for intimidating. Her regular tactics might work with her younger students, but these weren't teenagers. This wasn't her classroom. This was an empty parking lot protected on one side by a six-foot high hedge of faded lilac bushes. A deserted street ran in front of the lot with a retirement home on the other side.

"Back. Away. Now." She planted her hands firmly on her hips, prayed it made her look taller and wider. Her keys dug into her skin, but she refused to wince or give anything away.

The gang leader's eyes hardened into little obsidian points. He raised his chin a notch. His lips peeled back from his teeth. In that second, the sun's rays dimmed, the temperature dipped, and the day got a whole lot darker.

The menace emanating from them wasn't feigned. It was shady, threatening, and it went bone deep. Lily stepped back, forgetting the man behind her until a large hand slapped against the space between her shoulder blades.

He pushed her forward. She drew in a discreet breath and shifted her weight, hoping to anchor her sandal-clad feet to the pavement. The sheen of fear-induced sweat coating her skin iced over as

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they closed in. The one with the ink shook his head slowly and tsked at her. Lily gritted her teeth.

When his booted feet came to rest toe-to-toe with her summer sandals, Lily didn't back down. She had no place to go. Heart hammering in her chest, eyes riveted on his cold face, she stood her ground. Needed to stand her ground for Jason's sake. She opened her mouth to scream. A grubby tattooed hand reached out to grab her chin and pull her closer. A lump of undiluted terror, not to mention revulsion, choked off her air supply. She refused to flinch when his grip tightened. She didn't dare breathe. She blinked past the telltale nausea. Managed to keep her lunch down.

"Listen up. This is none of your business." With his other hand, he drew the sunglasses down her nose, let them drop to the ground. He tilted his head, leaned in closer, and squeezed harder. Repelled, Lily tried in vain to pull back. He stopped an inch short of putting his lips on hers and whispered, "You saw nothing."

The sudden advent of squealing tires into the school's parking lot had Lily desperately trying to turn her head. Friend or more trouble? She caught a glimpse of a black truck before Spider-Guy yanked her head back. She clutched her keys, prepared to stab him in the stomach.

"Remember what I said." With a sneer and a painful twist of his hand, her attacker released her. He glowered at the truck jerking to a halt and offered a hand signal to the others on the run. She didn't move, didn't breathe, didn't swallow, happy to be abandoned in favor of their exit strategy.

A man jumped out of the truck and yelled at the retreating men. The leader scrambled into their rusted out sedan, as smoke billowed from the spinning tires. She turned, stumbling towards the boy on the ground.

"Jason. It's okay, you're safe now." At least she hoped so. She still wasn't sure who was driving the truck. She dropped down beside the prone body and gently put her hand on her student's shoulder. Jason moaned as he rolled over.

"Is he okay?" A man hunkered down beside her.

"I don't know, yet. Jason, talk to me. Where are you hurt? No, don't move." She scanned his prone body without moving him. Offering all the support she dared by squeezing his shoulder.

"He needs to see a doctor. There's no sign of blood, but he took a vicious kick to the ribs." She turned to the man beside her, needing to explain, ready to unload at least part of the mental trauma of the last few minutes. But he had his cell phone pressed to his ear and his eyes trained on the direction taken by the retreating Buick. The line of his jaw made the hairs on her arms stand up. The dark wave of his hair triggered an image.

She froze.

He shut the phone, stuffing it back into his pocket. His weight shifted as he faced her, started to say something, and stopped. He stared, his outstretched hand never making it to Jason's shoulder. "Lily?"

She swallowed and then swallowed again because, holy crap, she hadn't hit her head had she? Was hallucinating a sign of trauma? Then her gaze locked with those oh-so-familiar blue eyes, and she knew.

Knew she wasn't hallucinating. Knew that, instead of a heap of crazy, she now had a mountain of insane. Chase Porter had disappeared from her life ten years ago. Had left town and left her, without a word, never to return. Until now. She'd had ten years to think of what she'd say to him if she ever saw him again. *Thanks for your help* had never crossed her mind.

"I'm okay. Really." Jason's voice yanked her back to the present. He attempted to get to his feet, pain contorting his young face.

"I've got him. Here, take it easy." Chase placed an arm around Jason's shoulders and slowly

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helped him to his feet. Maybe fear did cause some kind of twisted temporary insanity. Why else would she notice his build, the stretch of his leg, the lines of his face? Lines that hadn't been there ten years ago.

"What are you doing here?" she asked, because apparently stupidity was also a symptom of fear-induced insanity. Like his presence was the biggest thing she had to worry over. Like she cared that he had appeared out of thin air, in the nick of time, after disappearing for a decade.

"Rescuing you?" His hands settled on his hips. His eyes traveled the length of her and back up, right before he shook his head like he couldn't believe his bad luck.

Rescuing her? Was he kidding? One quick glance told her, no, he was one hundred percent serious. The black hair, the blue eyes, the height, it was all too familiar. The condescending attitude, that was new. And very unattractive.

"I had the situation under control, thank you very much." Disgusted, she shifted her focus to a more deserving subject, ignoring Chase's rude snort.

"How's your side?" She resisted the urge to gather Jason up in a big hug. Instead, she searched for any signs of shock in his thin, pale face, noting the dilation of his pupils. His breathing, while shallow, didn't necessitate a call for an ambulance. She did, however, need to get him to a doctor.

Chase dug his cell phone out of his pocket, dialed, and paced out of her hearing range. She gulped in her first deep breath since leaving the school. He glanced back at them and she refused to look away. To give any indication his sudden return had upset her.

"I'm fine," Jason said as he braced his elbow against his side.

Lily gave herself a mental wake up call. "Come on, I'll help you into the school."

"No. I just ..." Jason winced as he tried to take a deep breath. "I need to go home."

Lily sighed. "Jason, please, we need to check out your ribs. I can tell you're hurt." She put a hand on his shoulder.

"It's not bad, really. I can manage." Jason shrugged her hand off and sent a sulky scowl in Chase's direction.

Lily switched to plan B. "Okay, but I'll drive you." When he opened his mouth, she shook her head. "I will be taking you home and making sure you see a doctor."

"I think it would be better if I took you both to the police station," said Chase, coming up behind them.

She bristled at his tone, which made the words he'd uttered sound more like an order than an offer. It suited the new Chase to a tee. It did nothing for her blood pressure.

"Yes, of course. After he's seen a doctor." She forced her lips upward into an I-can-manage smile. She'd been managing for ten years without his assistance, without his touch or the sound of his voice, his laugh. No way was she getting into any vehicle, let alone that big black beast of a truck, with him.

"Dude, I'm not going anywhere with you." Jason crossed his arms and took a step closer to Lily. Amen to that.

Constable Chase Porter shut his mouth before something stupid and irretrievable tumbled out. The words faltered over the tip of his tongue begging to be said, insane words like *please* or *beautiful* or worse yet, *forgive me*. His training saved him that humiliation at least. Bad enough to think the words, to have them clogging up his brain. He didn't need to open his mouth and spew his private longings into the open air. He swiped a sweaty hand over his mouth and regrouped. He couldn't afford distractions. Not now. Not when he was this close to Raphael Tessier and The Prairie Brother-

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hood.

And justice.

The piece of shit trash he'd come here to track down and lock up for a hundred years past forever had stood less than fifteen feet from him and gotten away. He should be furious. Needed to be furious. Anything other than twisted up and frantic. Tessier had touched her. Threatened her. The thought made his lunch turn to slop. In the interest of staying sane, he shoved all those thoughts back.

He needed to get her and the boy out of here. "Look, I can take you where you need to go. It's probably safer that way."

Her hand went to her throat, her lethal blue eyes widened, and the cornered animal look returned. "Safer? You don't think they'll come back?"

"No, but I don't want to take any chances. How bad is he hurt?" He eyed the kid, estimated his height to be approximately five feet, skinny, with stringy dark hair hiding most of his face. The Prairie Brotherhood's newest gang member? A recruit?

"His name is Jason." She glanced at the stone statue of a kid standing next to her. "I'm not sure how bad it is. He definitely needs to see a doctor."

Jason didn't seem to agree. He started to shake his head, then winced and stopped.

Lily placed a hand on the kid's arm and leaned in to say something Chase didn't catch, then handed him her keys. She waited while Jason slouched his way towards a little red Volkswagen before turning back.

"Thanks for the help, but I can handle it from here." Her chin lifted, and her shoulders went back as she faced him down. He couldn't help but be impressed. Other than a little shaky around the edges, she was holding it together. Then again, she no idea who she'd come up against.

"He needs to come down to the police station." His stating the obvious caused her chin to elevate another notch.

"I'll make sure things get done." The implication was clear. She'd do it without any help from him. He'd been dismissed. "Don't worry. We'll both be there."

"I'm not suggesting you won't. All I'm suggesting is that sooner rather than later would be better. While details are fresh in his memory." He dialed it back, trying to get a handle on his out of control emotions. For the first time since becoming a cop, he struggled to find his professional rhythm.

His hands clenched into fists as she walked away. It left him no choice but to trail after her like a lost puppy. She scooped up her purse, gathered its contents, and slung the strap over her shoulder. Next, she rescued her sunglasses and stuffed them inside, all while ignoring his existence.

"Are you sure you're all right?" Professional conduct required him to ask, memories begged him to double check and triple check. To reach out a hand.

She snorted. "Yes. Thanks so much for asking. I'm fine. We're all fine." She hugged her giant purse closer, and he frowned.

Her freckles stood out in stark relief against the pale canvas of her skin. The same freckles he'd played connect the dots with all those years ago, before he married his job. That same index finger twitched with the memory. Memories buried under a career, other women, and a promise.

He nodded at her purse. "Do you have a cell phone in there?"

"Yes. I do. Not that it's any of your business."

Oh, how he wished.

"Good," he said. "I doubt you'll need it, but keep it handy just in case." He glanced at his watch. "I'll meet you at the police station in half an hour."

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He didn't give her time to protest. Didn't stop to explain. Didn't allow himself time to change his mind or regret his rudeness. He headed for his truck and sanity. Time to concentrate on the bad guys. On what he did best. Raphael Tessier was on his turf now. It may have been a few years since he covered the ground hereabouts, but some details never left you no matter how hard you tried to forget them. All he needed to do was line RT up in his sights and close the deal.

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Waiting for Mason - A Short Story

In the waning light Willa Harris surveyed her version of the prettiest spot on earth. With its shelter of wolf willows and cottonwoods, the tranquil calm of the lake, it soothed her battered heart. She struck a red-tipped match. Held the tiny flame to the bits of dry grass and twig she'd arranged in the middle of an irregular circle of stones. It whiffed out in a puff of wind.

The second match survived the odds and sparked at the broken bits of branch. She held her breath, delighted when it caught. She needed the heat. Tonight the many miles between the rustic Qu'Appelle Valley and her native Toronto were adding up to doubts. She tossed on a couple of smaller branches. Not about setting down roots here. Or Mason. The dry wood caught and she leaned in closer to catch the flare of heat. She reached for her backpack, the motion jarring her swollen ankle. Could she convince Mason she belonged here, too.

Okay, maybe she could use a crash course in backwoods smarts, on how to survive on ants and tree bark tea, that kind of thing. Hiking without falling victim to a sprained ankle. But she was trying. Hadn't she'd trekked in alone to their special spot? Set things up? Okay, half set things up, but still it proved she was crazy about Mason Shaw, protector of the wild things. Didn't it?

The darker the night sky and the brighter the moon, the more she felt like maybe Mason wasn't coming. What if he hadn't found her note? What if he didn't show? What then? It'd be her and the howling coyotes. No. Mason would come looking for her. He was like that, straight up honourable in an old fashioned Camelot style that stretched way beyond appealing. She could count on Mason to do the right thing even when he'd rather not.

Willa massaged her throbbing ankle. In the distance the prairie wolves began their nightly serenade of howls and yips, in front of her the yellow-red flames fluttered and weaved. In back of her a breeze whispered through the fresh-leafed aspens. It wasn't so bad being out here all alone. To disconnect. Take some time to think.

She never heard a sound, not a footstep, snapping twig, or rustle of clothing. Nothing until he appeared on the other side of the fire blocking her view. She froze at the sight of the bent old man who stared back at her. He lifted a hand in greeting a second before he squatted down across from her and set his rifle on the ground beside him.

She braced her hands on the hard packed earth. On instinct she budged backwards and remembered why she wouldn't get very far. She stared at the old man who was an attention getter. Pain shot up her leg as she reached for one of the dead branches she'd dragged close to the fire. It was the best she could do for a weapon.

"Easy," he murmured. "I'm not here to hurt you."

Yeah, right. That's what all the serial killers said, right before they sacrificed you to gain favor with Satan.

He held up his hands. "Just an old man looking for some warmth from your fire."

She tried to level out her breathing as she studied him. He looked like some long ago actor from an old western, with his buckskin jacket and beaded belt. Very strange. His First Nations heritage showing on a proud and weathered face. His long salt and pepper hair was neatly braided, his lined face was creased in concentration. She eyed the rifle.

There was never a good time for a lone woman to be surprised by an armed stranger, even an elderly one.

"Mind if I share your fire?" He held out his aged hands to attract the warmth of the blaze then

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rubbed them together. She didn't imagine the quiet shutter his withered body threw off.

What could she say? Yes, as a matter of fact, I do? "No. Go ahead."

"You out here alone?"

"My boyfriend will be here any minute. Mason Shaw? He's a conservation officer here at the park." She laid the branch across her lap.

"Never heard of him." His gaze flicked from her ankle to the small tent behind her. "Nice nest."

"I guess." She put her hand over a nearby large rock, an extra from their previous campfire visits, shifted it closer. There was nothing she could do to stop the wince of pain.

"Something wrong? You hurt?" His eyes narrowed as he leaned in.

"No. I'm fine." He didn't look dangerous. The rifle made her plenty nervous though and she stared at it a couple of seconds before meeting his eyes. She tried to keep him talking and distracted.

"Are you from around here?"

"Sometimes." His narrow shoulders shrugged under his leather fringed jacket.

Great. Just what she needed. Ambiguity. That didn't raise any red flags at all.

"Don't worry, not loaded." He patted the rifle like an old friend. "I could help you. With that ankle. Take down the swelling."

"It's fine. I'm fine. Like I said my boyfriend will be here any minute."

A look a thousand years old met her gaze across the fire. She winced again, a combination of discomfort and anxiety. Why was she lying? He'd know soon enough Mason wasn't showing up. But if she sent him away from her fire, what then? Better she keep him close by then wonder if he was lurking around in the bush.

"See that thick thatch of grass over there?" He pointed to his right and, reluctant but determined to keep him happy, she risked a quick squint into the darkness.

"Yeah, barely." She hesitated. He tilted his head, expectant and patient. She tacked on a "but very interesting" for good measure.

"Here at the valley's edge protected from the plough by slope or bush, the original native grasses still grow. That sturdy plant fed buffalo who in turn fed the plains grizzly bear and wolf, all disappeared now. Many plants and birds, too."

Okay. Now he was starting to sound like Mason and as the darkness closed in around them she felt herself start to relax a bit for no good reason until he reached a hand into his jacket. She flinched. He chortled, pulling out a pipe.

"Easy," he murmured again, like he was used to calming wild things with that voice. Next he pulled out some matches, a package of tobacco, and showed them to her. Then he set them down, came and squatted beside her. He held out his hands. "Easy."

She looked into his chocolate brown eyes and found herself nodding without knowing what she was agreeing to. He pointed to her foot shod in the flimsy pair of canvas sneakers she'd worn instead of the man boots Mason had bought her. Again she nodded. He slipped the shoe off and then her sock. Willa held her breath. His hands gentle as he handled her foot, probing a bit before setting it back down. He dug a bandana out of another pocket and hobbled to the water's edge, dipped it in and rung it out.

Back at her side he wrapped her ankle in the frigid blue square of cloth cold from the early June lake water. He propped her foot up and away from the fire, all without saying a word. Back at his side of the fire he picked up his pipe, packed it, lit it and started to talk.

"Many years ago, these shores of what's called the Fishing Lakes were home to the Cree and Saulteaux Nations. Do you know how this valley got its name?" He took a smidge of tobacco and

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sprinkled it over the fire.

She shook her head. Whatever else he was he had the voice of a storyteller. Strong without being loud. She had no trouble hearing him even though he spoke softly and the fire crackled between them. Hypnotic, really. Coaxing.

His hand swept out toward the water. "Long, long ago a young warrior brave paddled up the Fishing Lakes in search of a Cree maiden rumoured to be beautiful and very skilled. A treasure. One gifted with the right to choose her own mate."

He paused to puff on his pipe and she waited. She inched forward, closer to the fire, and he sent her a conspiratorial wink before continuing.

"The maiden liked the look of his strong body but it was his eyes that decided her and she gave him her heart on the spot. The warrior, full of love but bound by duty, had to leave her to battle their enemy, the Blackfoot. Before he left he asked her to wait for him. She agreed. She kept watch for him as the warm months passed, stores were replenished, babies born, milestones celebrated. She marked the passing of every day with a slash on a piece of oak wood. After the first frost, an Indian summer warmed the Valley and she dared to watch and hope for his return."

Willa knew what was coming. These love stories never ended well. Be it Cree, Shakespearian or any other. Her heart was already breaking in anticipation. "He didn't come back, did he? He died in battle. And she died of a broken heart. Right?"

"Patience, young one. Patience." He took another puff of his pipe, nodded at her knapsack. "Maybe you have something to feed an old man in those packs?"

"Sure, I guess." She snagged the pack, dug out an energy bar and tossed it to him. He unwrapped it, hands slow he bit into it and closed his eyes. Guilt prompted her to offer him a small bag of trail mix, followed by a banana and a brownie. All of which he enjoyed without saying a word. Refusing a second brownie he sat back and with a careful hand brushed away any leftover crumbs. Once again his picked up his pipe and puffed it to life.

"Under a hunter's moon, having defeated the enemy, the young warrior paddled his canoe back over the quiet waters." The old man pointed up to the full moon. "Like this one, only at that time of year when the leaves fall and the deer are fat. Victorious but battle weary, the warrior guided his canoe past miles of shadowed empty shores eager to make his way to his woman. Late one night during the last leg of his journey he thought he heard his name whispered over the water. He paid no attention, blaming the tired workings of his mind. The second time he stilled his paddle and listened. He searched the shoreline and saw nothing. Suspicious he raised his voice, 'Kahtapwao? Who's calling?'

The fire sparked as her storyteller laid more wood on it. Willa looked out over the calm waters of Echo Lake and imagined a handsome young man in a canoe with a strong steady stroke gliding over the water.

"Receiving no answer he switched to the language used by the French fur traders. 'Qu'Appelle?' Again. 'Who's calling?' But his voice was the only one to echo back. Keeping close watch he continued on his journey arriving at the other camp as dawn broke. To his dismay mourning cries greeted him, as did the sight of ceremonial fires. Her father stood on the shore.

"Where is she?' the young warrior demanded. The old chief shook his head. They say the young warrior's cry carried as far as the next camp. His woman's father placed a hand on the young man's arm. 'Her last thoughts were of you,' he said. 'When the Land of Souls called her she fought to remain, but in the end she had no choice. Before she was called away, she whispered your name three times.' Grief stricken the old chief and the young warrior turned away from each other. One to do his duty

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and the other to mourn a loss from which he'd never recover."

"That's so sad." Why did legends always have to be so tragic? She rubbed her arms to warm them and then dug out the thermos of hot chocolate she'd brought.

"In the decades that followed my people claimed to hear her death whispers calling his name across the water of the Fishing Lakes. Now they want to rename them the Calling Lakes. Better for tourism." He gaze settled on the moonlit water. "And that's why they call this the Qu'Appelle Valley."

"It's a beautiful story." She poured him a cup and offered it. "I wished they could have been together. Loved each other. Raised a family."

"Ah." He toasted her, a smile on his wrinkled face. "A romantic."

"After the story you just told, I'd say we share that fate."

He shrugged and put his borrowed travel cup down. Tucked away his pipe and matches.

"Wait, where are you going?" She panicked when he stood up. It was dark, even under the light of a full moon, and she didn't want him to go and leave her here all alone.

"Listen." And he pointed.

She turned, focused on the direction he was indicating and heard the sounds of someone breaking trail. Mason called her name and she smiled. *Thank goodness*. She turned back to explain the situation to the old man. She frowned as she searched for him. The fire casting a few feet of light over empty space.

Mason called her name again, a little closer this time.

"I'm here," she called out.

"Willa?"

"Yes. It's me. I'm fine." Careful of her foot, she stood up and waited for Mason to walk out of the bush. The glow from his flashlight announcing his arrival.

"Thank God. Willa." The relief in his voice warmed her. Then he rushed towards her big, strong and everything she wanted.

She smiled and held out her arms. "Hey. There you are. I've been waiting for you."

Karyn Good - A Brief Biography

I grew up on a farm in the middle of Canada's breadbasket. Under the canopy of crisp blue prairie skies I read books. Lots and lots of books. Occasionally, I picked up a pen and paper or tapped out a few meagre pages of a story on a keyboard and dreamed of becoming a writer when I grew up. One day the inevitable happened and I knew without question the time was right. What to write was never the issue--romance and the gut wrenching journey towards forever.

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The Stargazer Lily - A Note

The Stargazer Lily is a favorite flower of mine. My bridal bouquet was filled with them and one or two of them usually show up in my anniversary bouquet. Seeing them never fails to remind me of the day I married the perfect guy for me. Because the Stargazer Lily is a late twentieth century addition to the lily family, it's really a very contemporary flower and the perfect choice to represent my writing. They symbolize hope, optimism and limitless possibilities, three things I try and weave into my stories.

--Karyn Good

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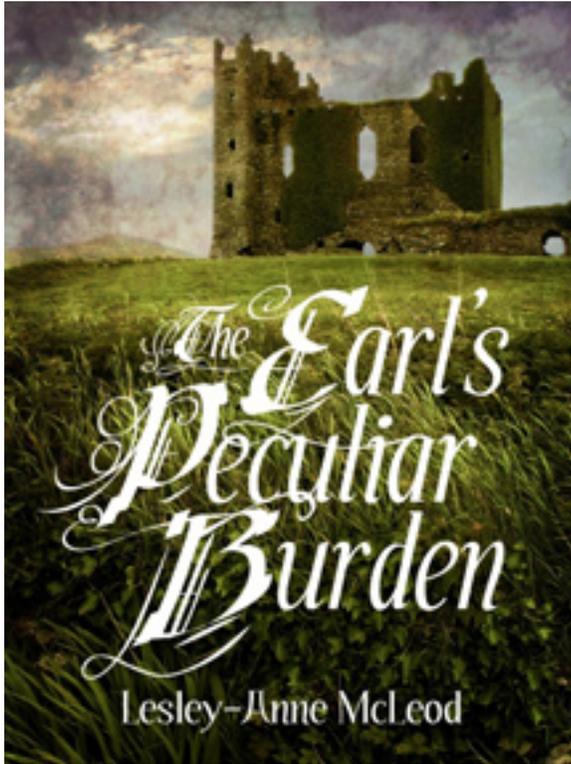
Lesley-Anne McLeod

*Author of Regency romance in the
tradition of Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer*



The Rosa Mundi

The Earl's Peculiar Burden - Uncia Press, 2012



Garret Kenning, the Earl of Therneforde, strives daily to conceal the strange secret that had plagued his family for generations. His home, Kenning Old Manor, is dominated by the last remnant of Kenning Castle--the Red Tower. The Tower has the strange capacity to transport people across time, and the constant possibility of peculiar arrivals encroaches on his freedom and his choices. Despite this worry, his life is ordered in comfortable lines with his aunt Lady Margery Kenning as his housekeeper, and his good friend and steward John Debray to supportt him.

As Therneforde begins to plan his future around marriage to a suitable spinster of his village, the arrival of a traveller from a distant past upsets all his arrangements. He is required, in the following weeks, to reexamine all his beliefs from his opinions of women to his life's most important choices.

Ysmay of Scarsfield's medieval world has changed with a single step. That one stride across the threshold of the Red Tower takes her to a new life, a new family and a new future in a world that is eerily familiar yet distressingly alien. New freedoms beckon, and she is reprieved from a difficult destiny. However, the challenges of adjustment may be too great and her hard-won peace is threatened by a suspicious newcomer to the village.

Reconciling the past and the present and confronting the future present huge obstacles to both Ysmay and Garret. As their world, and the people around them change, they will both require courage and tolerance, and their strength may lie in unity.

When Lady Margery sat at the pianoforte she emphasized the music as she spoke of the dance, and Ysmay began to comprehend the connections.

Then Therneforde was bowing before her. He had not touched her until this day. Or at least he had not touched her like this. He had offered his arm for her support. He had comforted her while she cried, he had held her hand just minutes ago. He had lifted her from the saddle, and he had placed a shawl about her shoulders occasionally. He had never, while lovely music played, taken her hand in his strong, hard fingers and guided her through the intricate steps of dance.

He wore no glove, as he would at the actual event, nor did she. Every bone and sinew, each muscle and movement in his hand was apparent to her. Her senses heightened by her emotional foray into her past, she was aware of a callous on his thumb, and a healing weal across his left palm.

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Ysmay even fancied she could feel the ink stain on his index finger. They dipped and turned, glided and whirled, but she was only aware of his hand. She ventured a look at his face, and saw something of the same awareness that she knew must appear on her own. Their glances met, strayed shyly and returned to fuse.

When the music ended, they halted. And they stood, hand in hand. And at last Lady Margery said, "That was very nice my dears! Ysmay, you are a natural dancer. Did you dance at your home?"

"Never, ma'am. My guardian would have entertainment but no dancing. He thought it a stupid activity as he thought music a waste of time. He threatened to burn my harp times without number."

The earl released her hand hurriedly, and stepped away from her side.

"Good gracious!" Lady Margery regarded her unblinkingly for a moment. "Well we regard music as a necessity. And now Garret will play, and we will undertake the country dance again. I can speak of the intricacies more easily as I help you. Then we will essay the cotillion; you will have no difficulty I am sure."

Ysmay displayed her surprise unreservedly. "The earl plays?"

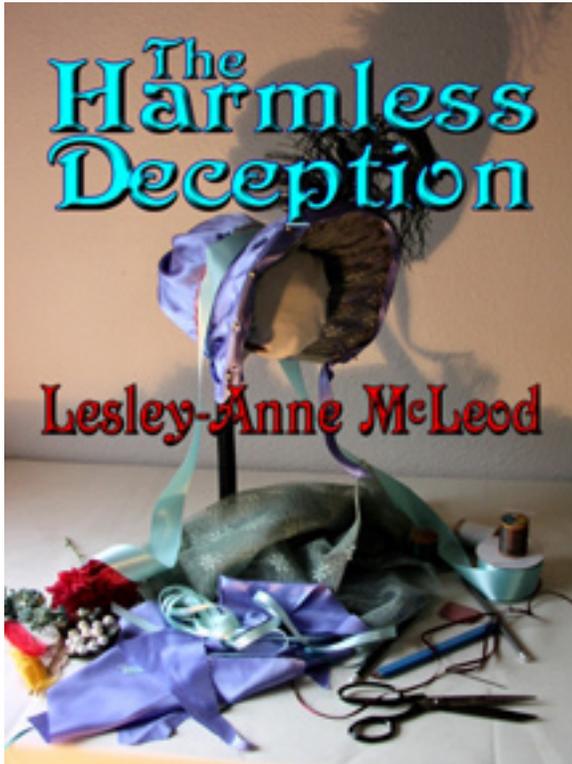
Therneforde had already taken his aunt's seat at the instrument. He said nothing, leaving his aunt to explain. "Yes, Garret does play, did he not tell you? And he plays very well. And now that you know it, he may perhaps accompany your harp, and that will be a pleasure for us all."

Ysmay exchanged a long glance with the earl, one she did not fully comprehend, one that she would have to consider in the dark of night. She shivered at the thought of making music with him, or dancing with him again. There were sensations, things here afoot, that she had never before encountered.

Purchase *The Earl's Peculiar Burden* for your e-reader:

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The Harmless Deception - Uncia Press, 2010



Rufus Evens, the Baron Evenswood, prides himself on his honesty. So when his sister Tansy suggests a massive deception in order to take her place in London society, he is appalled. The fact that she is involving a woman unknown to them, a millinery shop-owner of new acquaintance, further troubles him.

Grace Whitton, owner of Graceful Millinery, is also horrified when her new friend Tansy proposes the trickery. She has carved a place for herself in a world far different from that into which she was born and is hesitant to jeopardize her hard-won peace. But Tansy's scheme offers her the opportunity to take her rightful place in the beau monde for a brief period, and the temptation is overwhelming.

When the limited assistance Grace offers is not enough to solve the Evens' problems, both Grace and Rufus agree to Tansy's plan. They will pretend to be husband and wife, for the period of two months, in

order to provide Tansy with a home from which to launch her debut. When the masquerade is over, all participants will return to their previous lives without regret or harm.

But their plan does not allow for the complications created by new friends, new loves, and old family connections. No deception can take place without harm to someone. And this deception may have grave consequences for all.

“It is harmless, Rufus, scarcely dishonest! A deception so inconsequential you will have forgot it when we have been returned a week to the north. We harm no one in London, and no one at home. It would mean so much to me, to have Grace's help and support.” The girl cast a wheedling look at her brother.

Grace watched Lord Evenswood's expression soften as he gazed at his sister. “It is outrageous, and you know it, Tansy Sophronia Evens. How long did it take you to hatch this mad idea? No never mind.” He flung up a hand as his sister made to speak. “What if I return yearly to London to attend at Parliament?”

“You will have a wife in truth by then, and she will be remaining in the north. You know Charlotte will not travel. Who in London is to know that your wife is a different woman from the one they met?”

The baron looked set to respond heatedly to his sister's disdain.

The Storytellers' Bouquet ~ *Lesley-Anne McLeod*

Grace cut across the siblings' altercation. "Stop this, please!" She could not allow Evenswood to be convinced; there were too many drawbacks to the scheme. Not the least, her peace of mind could only be harmed by proximity to the baron. "It is out of the question. I cannot abandon my business, and I could not be party to such a deception. I will not for a moment contemplate it; I am sorry Miss Evens. The risks of discovery and dishonor are too great, for us all." She rose to indicate that, as far as she was concerned, the call was over. The smallness of her sitting room, the modest nature of her possessions reproached her decision, but she thrust aside the thought that she could preside in a more fitting setting.

The baron, who had halted his pacing near the door, bowed in her direction. He said to his sister, "You are rightly reprimanded, Tansy. Thank you, Miss Whitton, for your sane good sense. And thank you for your assistance with our housing problems. We will not trouble you further. Come Tansy, bid Miss Whitton good day."

The younger girl crossed slowly to her brother's side. She said, with equal reluctance, "I do apologize Miss Whitton, if I have given offence. It seemed such a brilliant notion. I--I do think it could work." She followed her brother as he strode from the parlour, down the corridor, and plunged down the stairs.

Grace found herself unable to speak, as she hurried after her visitors. The shop was empty of clients at that moment, but Miss Purcell was tidying gloves away. She watched as the trio crossed the show-room. Grace opened the street door for her companions.

The baron nodded coolly to her. His reticence had the effect of stiffening Grace's straight spine.

"I wish you every success with your stay in London, Miss Evens," she said. "And you, my lord. Good day."

Tansy turned suddenly and embraced Grace. "Don't think badly of me, I pray," she whispered, before withdrawing. Outside the door, she accepted her brother's offered arm.

Grace closed the door, and her eyes. For a moment, she felt dizzily undone. Then she felt a gentle hand on her arm.

Purchase *The Harmless Deception* for your e-reader:

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The Fan - A Short Story

"I see that at long last you possess a fan, Miss Morcatt. And a very pretty one it is too."

Lord Rustington bowed over her hand. Chloe Morcatt looked down on his dark curls thoughtfully. His grace was the envy of all the aspiring gentlemen of the ton; when he paid her court, all the young ladies envied her. Just now, Chloe sensed that all eyes in the crowded drawing room of Viscount and Viscountess Casterton were upon them.

"It was given me, my lord. 'Twould be churlish not to use it." Chloe snapped open the topic of their conversation with a surprisingly practiced flourish. The gilt paint on the ivory sticks shone in the candlelight.

"You have been loud, in the past, in your condemnation of the articles. 'Pretentious' I think you called the fan. 'Showy', 'superficial', even 'vulgar', I believe." He seated himself beside her on the striped satin sofa without asking her permission. In a nearby candelabra beside one of the many vases of hot-house roses, a candle guttered out with a sibilant hiss.

Chloe could only nod. They had been her words. She peeped over the edge of the offending item. Slowly she fluttered her long eyelashes--one of her best features, she had always thought.

He laughed. She always thought he looked exceeding attractive when he laughed, when humour lightened the dark intensity of his gaze and the harshness of his features.

"Oh, indeed, you have the knack of it already, a born flirt. And who presented you with this trifle?"

He indicated the 'trifle'--which sported gilt guards, intricately pierced ivory sticks, and finely painted parchment leaves. The flowers limned upon it exactly matched in colour the delicate blue of her evening gown.

"A gentleman...a kind and generous sort of person." She teased him further, fanning herself until the golden curls at her temples feathered across the pale, smooth skin of her forehead.

His gaze followed the curls' movement even as he shook his dark head. "A fool," he said.

With a quick movement, she snapped the offending article shut, and rapped him across the knuckles of his gloved hand which rested between them on the striped silk sofa.

He raised the hand with some reproof in the gesture. "You..."

"They do say you can send messages with the fan." Chloe had spread the fan and was hiding behind it again. "If both sender and recipient have agreed upon the language, of course."

His expression told what he thought of that idea.

Chloe gazed about her aunt and uncle's drawing room. The level of conversation was such as to deafen...an hundred voices all speaking at once. Attention had fallen away from them. No one seemed to notice that the Earl of Rustington, noted Corinthian and scholar, was seated beside her and flirting with her in a most intimate manner. In fact, despite the new fan, she was--unusually--attracting no attention at all.

She looked at the spread fan thoughtfully. "If I opened and closed the fan quickly, then opened it again, it could mean that I wanted you to come to me...if you were across the room."

The earl snorted in a manner decidedly lacking in charm.

"If I closed it, and left it closed, it could mean that I wish you to go away!" She suited her action to the words and stared at him challengingly.

He returned her stare. "If you open it, and lift it to your face..." He slid closer to her on the sofa.

The Storytellers' Bouquet ~ *Lesley-Anne McLeod*

She did not move other than to open the leaves and assume an elegant pose with the fan raised.

He leaned toward her until his warm lips nearly brushed her cheek. She turned her head with a languid little smile, and kissed him. After a long moment, the fan which had neatly hidden them from view, clattered to the polished floor. It narrowly missed the Persian carpet which would have muffled its landing.

Now everyone in the over-heated, rose-scented chamber was staring at them.

Lady Casterton, Chloe's aunt, broke the sudden silence with a laugh.

Mrs. Morcatt, standing with her sister, said to her daughter, "You see, I knew how it would be. I told you Rustington sent the fan only to make mischief."

Rustington was laughing again, his expression relaxed as he lounged on the stiff sofa. He openly held Chloe's gloved hand, his thumb unobtrusively caressing her wrist.

"Then, as I replied this morning, Mama, it is fortunate we are betrothed." A roguish twinkle, and a smile that neared a grin, displayed Chloe's happiness.

The gathering laughed along with her, and returned their attention to gossip of matters more urgent than the month old betrothal of Miss Chloe Morcatt and her Earl.

"I suggested fans could be most useful, did I not, my love?" Rustington asked her in an undertone. "But you should not drop yours at such a crucial moment; now I shall have to wait at least until this rout is over before I can kiss you properly." He bent to retrieve gleaming device and when she would have taken it from him, he retained his grip. "I should dislike it greatly if you were to use this fan to flirt with anyone other than me."

Chloe spread the leaves and peered over it once more at him. "So should I, my darling." She waved the fan gracefully. "So should I."

Lesley-Anne McLeod - A Brief Biography

Lesley-Anne McLeod has been writing for thirty-five years, around motherhood, office work, and a ten year career in bookselling.

Though she has written fiction in a variety of genres (among them science fiction, contemporary and western), she has always been drawn to historical fiction. A life-long Anglophile, it seemed natural that she should write Regency romances, those uniquely English historical romances. She takes her inspiration from the work of Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer. With a library of several hundred research volumes, she immerses herself in the Georgian world, particularly the years from 1795 to 1825.

Lesley-Anne is married and has one daughter. She lives on the prairies of Canada, distant in time and place from Regency England, but her world retains an echo of Great Britain in history and tradition.

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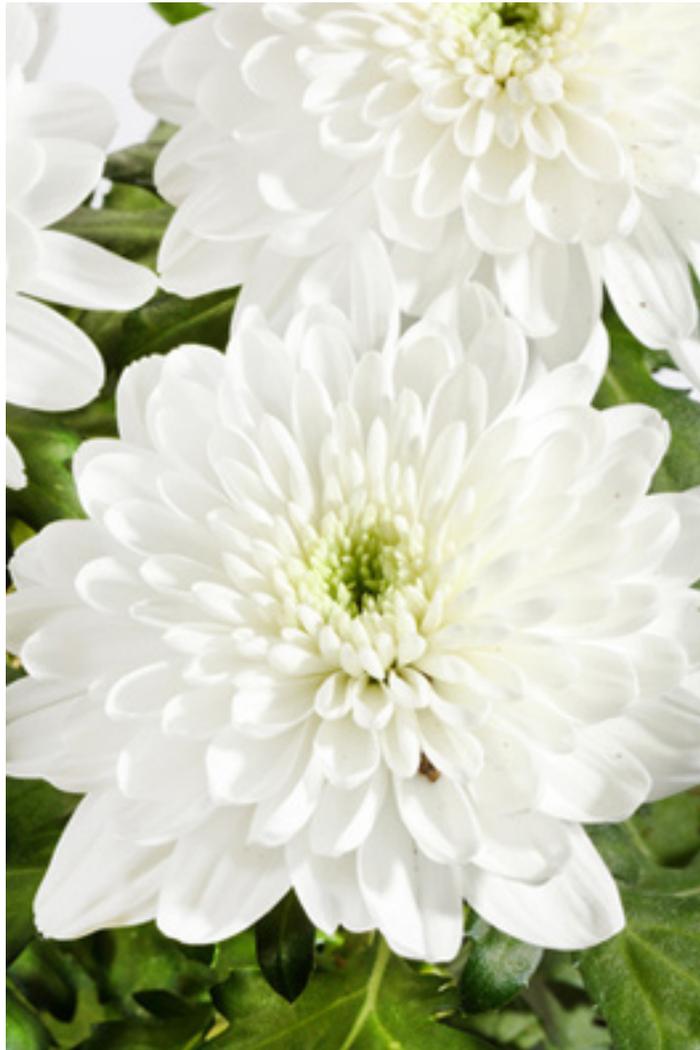
The Rosa Mundi - A Note

The Rosa Mundi seems perfectly to illustrate the world about which I write. One of the oldest of the English striped roses, the Rosa Mundi--*Rosa gallica versicolor*--predates 1580. It was a mutation of the red rose of the Lancasters. There is a legend that it appeared much earlier in English history however, and was the flower of the fair Rosamund, the mistress of Henry II in the 1100s. However that may be, the Rosa Mundi is emblematic of English history, and a living relic of the past.

--*Lesley-Anne McLeod*

Jana Richards

*Author of contemporary romance, romantic suspense,
and historical romance set during World War Two*



The Chrysanthemum

Home Fires - Wild Rose Press, 2012



Anne Wakefield travels halfway around the world for love. But when she arrives in Canada from England at the end of World War Two, she discovers the handsome Canadian pilot she'd fallen in love with has married someone else. Heartbroken, she prepares to return to London, though she has nothing left there to return to. Her former fiancé's mother makes a suggestion: marriage to her other son.

Badly wounded and scarred during the war, Erik Gustafson thinks he's a poor substitute for his brother. Although he loves Anne almost from the first time he sees her, he cannot believe she would ever be able to love him as he is--especially as he might be after another operation on his bad leg. Anne sees the beauty of his heart. The cold prairie winter may test her courage, but can she prove to Erik that her love for him is real?

The three-piece band, consisting of an accordion player, a fellow on drums and another on guitar, played an energetic version of "The Beer Barrel Polka." Erik tapped his foot to the beat of the music as he watched his neighbors and friends get up to dance. He couldn't keep a small note of bitterness from creeping into his thoughts. Here he was at his own wedding reception, unable to dance with his wife. He'd give anything to be able to take her into his arms and whirl her around the floor.

Anne sat beside him, clapping in time to the music and singing the words of the old song along with the rest of the crowd. Carl Bjornson, their closest neighbor, approached their table and, after introducing himself, extended his hand to her.

"Would you care to dance?"

Anne glanced at Erik, and then smiled at Carl. "That's very kind of you, but no, thank you."

Erik touched her arm. "Just because I can't dance doesn't mean you shouldn't."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, of course. I've heard Carl hardly ever steps on his partner's toes." When she hesitated, he squeezed her hand. "Go. Have fun."

Excitement lit her eyes. She kissed his cheek. "Thank you, Erik."

With that she accepted Carl's offered hand, and together they navigated the crowded dance floor. Erik watched as they began to dance across the floor, the voluminous skirts of Anne's borrowed wedding dress swirling around her legs. She laughed up at Carl and Erik experienced a painful pang of jealousy. It should have been him dancing with her.

When the dance was over, Carl led Anne over to the table where his pregnant wife Julia sat

The Storytellers' Bouquet ~ *Jana Richards*

with his parents. Anne shook their hands, making small talk. He imagined her asking Julia when her baby was due and how she was feeling. His wife was a caring and compassionate person.

His mother took the seat beside him. "I think she's going to fit into the community just fine. People already like her."

"Of course they do. She's wonderful."

Astrid chuckled. "Be careful, dear. People will start thinking you're in love with your wife."

"Let them think what they want."

"For what it's worth, I believe the two of you will have a good marriage."

"I just want to make her happy." Maybe if she was happy, she'd want to stay.

She patted his hand. "You will."

A woman's scream sounded over the noise of the band. The accordion player faltered, and then stopped playing. Again the woman screamed.

"Help! My son is choking! He can't breathe!"

General confusion enveloped the community hall. A call went out to find the doctor, but everyone knew that by the time the doctor arrived from the next town the child could be dead. Erik watched Anne push her way through the crowd. He followed her as best he could. By the time he reached her, she was standing behind a small boy with her hands locked around his midsection. She spoke to him in a calm voice.

"Don't worry, love. Everything's going to be fine."

She pushed her hands upward, thrusting into his upper abdomen with enough force to lift the child off his feet. Still he clutched at his throat, unable to breathe. Anne pushed again. Something flew out of the boy's mouth, landing several feet away. He began crying for his mother, and she scooped him into her arms, tears streaming down her face.

"Thank you, thank you! I don't know what we would have done without you."

"I'm just glad he's all right now."

The boy's father shook Anne's hand. "He coughed up a small piece of hard candy. It's hard to believe something as simple as that almost killed him. I can't thank you enough."

She smiled. "You're welcome."

He put his hand on his wife's shoulder as their son continued to cry in his mother's arms. "I think we'll head home. Congratulations on your wedding, and again, thank you."

"Goodnight."

Erik put his arm around Anne's waist. "Well done, Mrs. Gustafson."

"Thank you, Mr. Gustafson. I was lucky. Those abdominal thrusts sometimes injure people, especially a child as tiny as this one."

Erik's heart swelled with pride. She was an amazing woman. If she hadn't known what to do, if she hadn't remained calm, the child would have died.

He kissed her, not caring that the whole town watched. He loved her and probably had since the moment he met her at the train station. He knew he'd never love anyone as deeply as he loved Anne.

For one moment he let himself hope that their marriage would last, that Anne would love him. But he knew too well the hardships of living on the farm. And he knew he wasn't the man she wanted. But when she kissed him, he could almost believe he was.

Erik locked away his feelings, afraid to hope.

The Storytellers' Bouquet ~ *Jana Richards*

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Flawless - Wild Rose Press, 2010



France, 1942. The world is at war. The Nazis have stolen the infamous blue diamond, Le Coeur Bleu, intending to barter it for weapons that will destroy the Allies. Jewel thief Hunter Smith is given a choice; help the French Resistance steal back the diamond and avenge the death of his best friend, or stay locked up in an English prison. He chooses revenge.

Resistance fighter Madeleine Bertrand's husband died when he was betrayed by Hunter Smith. How can she now pretend to be married to the arrogant American? How can she betray Jean Philippe's memory by her passionate response to Hunter's kisses? Neither is prepared for the maelstrom of attraction that erupts between them. To survive they must uncover the mysteries of the past and conquer the dangers of the present. But first Madeleine must decide if her loyalties lie with her dead husband and the Resistance or with the greatest love of her life.

“From now on you will be known as Jacques Lemay, Monsieur Smith.”

Monsieur Gagnon filled his pipe, dropping bits of tobacco onto his wife's immaculate floor. Madeleine sat off to one side of Monsieur Gagnon's kitchen, watching as Madame Gagnon prepared breakfast for her husband and their “guest.” Madeleine silently seethed as Smith—*non*, Lemay—helped himself to another piece of bread. Did he have to eat so much? Didn't he know that food was scarce here in Lille, just as it was all over France?

She listened as Smith handed over the new two-way radio to Monsieur Gagnon and explained its use.

“It's supposed to have a clearer and stronger signal than the radio you're using now,” Smith said. He flipped a few dials to illustrate. “They also told me it is easier to scramble the signal to avoid detection.”

“*Bon.*” Monsieur Gagnon beamed in pleasure. “Good communications are essential to our work. Thank you for bringing it.”

“No problem. What else can you tell me about my cover here?”

“You are to work as a junior gardener at the chateau. I wrote to the head gardener, as if I was you, inquiring about work. He's desperate for help. The Germans have rounded up many young Frenchmen and shipped them east to work in factories in Germany, so there are few able-bodied men available. You start tomorrow.”

He paused as his wife set a bowl of porridge in front of him. Monsieur Gagnon could not be

The Storytellers' Bouquet ~ *Jana Richards*

connected with Jacques Lemay in any way; their comings and goings to this house had to be done with the utmost discretion. Madeleine knew the importance of keeping Monsieur Gagnon and his wife safe. He was the heart of their operation, their connection to the outside world through the radio he operated. If something went wrong and Hunter Smith was captured, it was crucial that no trails led back to Monsieur Gagnon. The safety of their *réseaux*, their Resistance network, depended on it. She hoped Smith understood the danger.

“I said in the letter that you had not worked as a gardener before, so he is not expecting you to know the difference between a delphinium and a dianthus.” Monsieur Gagnon poured milk onto his porridge. “But he is expecting you to work hard. If you don’t, you could be fired, or your cover could be blown.”

“I can manage.”

“The job might require a little more than sticking a shovel in the ground occasionally and spreading a bit of manure,” Madeleine said. The others turned to stare at her.

She immediately regretted her sarcastic remark, regretted throwing his words in his face. She shouldn’t let this man get to her, but she couldn’t seem to stop herself. They needed to work together for the sake of the mission. But she hated him. After what he’d done to Jean Philippe...

Hunter’s gaze locked with hers, and the heat of his anger scorched her clear across the room. She refused to back down from the challenge in his stare. She’d be damned if she’d let him intimidate her.

“Madeleine, enough.” Monsieur Gagnon spoke sharply. “Regardless of your feelings, we need him. He is our only hope for getting the diamond out of the hands of the Nazis.”

He was right. If they couldn’t steal *Le Coeur Bleu*, Jean Philippe would have died for nothing. She couldn’t let that happen.

She inhaled deeply and looked away. “All right. We’ll work together.”

Purchase *Flawless* for your e-reader:

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The Way to a Man's Heart - A Short Story

I can remember the exact moment I fell in love with my best friend Rob. We were watching the Canadiens thump the Leafs on *Hockey Night in Canada* one snowy Saturday night when I suddenly felt a painful cramp in my foot. Rob casually reached over and began to massage my aching foot, his touch firm, yet gentle. I remember staring at the top of his dark head as he worked on my foot, and feeling like I'd just discovered him for the first time.

That was the oddest thing. Rob and I had known each other since diaperhood. Our mothers have been best friends forever and we were born within six months of each other. There are embarrassing pictures of us wearing coordinating outfits, one in pink and one in blue. We grew up playing together, going to the same schools, and eventually attending the same university. Rob was always a presence in my life, like the sun in summer or the snow in winter. He was just there. I guess I expected our relationship to always remain the same.

But after that night, things were different. I started looking at him differently, noticing things about him I'd overlooked before. I'd always known he was a good person and great friend. Rob was the kind of guy who helped his friends move without asking for any compensation, except maybe a cold beer at the end of the day. More than once he'd driven across town in the middle of the night to pick up a friend who'd had too much to drink. He was smart too. He'd graduated at the top of his engineering class and had just landed a job at firm that specialized in building bridges.

Now, I suddenly realized what a handsome man he'd become. He had dark curly hair that fell over his forehead in a boyishly charming way, and dark brown eyes framed by thick lashes that a woman could get lost in. It irritated me that other women were trying to get lost in those eyes on a regular basis. I wanted to hang a sign around his neck saying "Hands Off, He's Mine" to ward off the unwanted attention. But how could I? Rob and I were just friends. I had no claim on him.

That was the frustrating part, and the scariest. What if I confessed my feelings to him and he didn't feel the same way? Our friendship might not end, but it would be irrevocably changed. I couldn't bear the thought of losing the special relationship we'd had since infancy.

So I concocted a crazy scheme to win his heart. The advantage of knowing Rob so well for so long was that I knew all his weaknesses. And one thing I knew about Rob was that he liked to eat. His appetite and love of food were legendary among our family members and circle of friends. We often joked about his "hollow leg"; how else did you explain how he could pack away the calories and still remain so lean? I reasoned that if I fed him his favorite foods, he'd keep coming back for more. Soon he'd realize that I was the one for him.

There was only one thing wrong with my plan. I couldn't cook.

Torture was too mild a word for what I did to food. Criminal seemed a more apt term. Just as Rob's appetite was legendary, so were my less-than-stellar efforts in the kitchen. Forget complex recipes; I had trouble with Kraft Dinner. I'd once messed up a box of Jell-O. Who can't get Jell-O to work?

Still, I was determined. I enlisted the help of Rob's mother, the best cook I knew. Elise could take a fridge full of leftovers and whip up a gourmet meal. My plans were far more modest. I would get Elise to teach me to make one of Rob's favorite desserts, chocolate cake.

I've eaten Elise's chocolate cake since I was a kid. The light texture melts on the tongue, the rich chocolate causing a riot on my taste buds. Even with all the chocolate and frosting it manages not to be too sweet. It is, in a word, perfect.

The Storytellers' Bouquet ~ *Jana Richards*

I approached Elise and begged her to teach me, a Yoda to my Luke Skywalker. If she was suspicious of my motives regarding her son, she didn't let on. Elise patiently led me through the baking process, writing out idiot-proof step-by-step instructions for me to follow at home. She gently suggested that perhaps I wanted to start with something less complex, like maybe a lettuce salad, but I persevered. When the cake we made together turned out okay, I figured I was on my way.

In my enthusiasm I invited Rob to my apartment for dinner. He hesitated, until I promised that I was buying take out chicken and ribs from our favorite place. It irked me that he was afraid I might try cooking, but with my history in the kitchen I guess I couldn't blame him. When I fed him my version of his mother's special chocolate cake, he'd change his tune. He'd look at me differently, just as I now looked at him differently. I couldn't wait.

The day of the dinner party, I assembled all my tools and ingredients, lining them up carefully on my kitchen counter. I followed Elise's directions, beating and folding and mixing until I had the batter in the pan. I baked the cake in my pre-heated oven as per Elise's recipe, testing the middle with a toothpick to ensure it was properly baked. When it cooled sufficiently I spread a can of store-bought frosting on it. Next time I'd get Elise to teach me how to make her frosting, but for now it was baby steps.

The cake looked beautiful, perfect even. I hummed with anticipation, imagining Rob's reaction when he saw it.

I wasn't disappointed. Rob was truly amazed when he saw my creation. We decided to skip the chicken and ribs for now and go straight to the dessert. I cut us each a generous slice and we dug in. I knew something was wrong the moment the cake hit my mouth. Instead of the sweet concoction I'd expected, bitterness assaulted my tongue. What was worse was the look on Rob's face. I thought he was going to throw up.

"Katie," he said gently, after washing down the mess with a glass of water. "I think you might have forgotten the sugar."

I burst into tears. How could I have been so stupid? I'd worked so hard to make something perfect for Rob. He'd never see me as anything but a colossal screw up. I loved him so much but I'd never win his heart.

The next thing I knew Rob pulled me into his arms and held me tightly.

"You were trying to win my heart?" he asked.

Oh oh. Had I said those things out loud?

"It's okay, Katie," he murmured. "I don't care if we spend the rest of our lives eating out. I'm just glad you finally see me as more than your friend. I've been waiting for you to come around for a long time."

I was so surprised I stopped crying in mid-hiccup. "You were waiting for me?"

He nodded. "All my life."

We got married six months later. All our friends and family teased us, asking what took us so long to figure out we belonged together when they'd known it all along. I countered that they should have clued me in before I unleashed my cooking on poor Rob.

Both of us are taking cooking lessons from Elise. It turns out that Rob has inherited his mother's skills as a culinary whiz. I don't have to worry about cooking ever again.

But I'm determined to get something right in the kitchen. I'm happy to report that last week I prepared a box of orange Jell-O and it came out just right.

Is that a happy ending or what?

Jana Richards - A Brief Biography

Jana Richards has tried her hand at many writing projects over the years, from magazine articles, blog posts and short stories, to novella and full-length paranormal suspense, contemporary romance and romantic comedy. Her romantic suspense novel "Seeing Things" was a finalist for an EPIE award in 2008. She is published with three small press publishers, Awestruck Ebooks, Uncial Press and The Wild Rose Press, and together they have published eight of her novels and novellas as ebooks. Her dream of being published in print recently came true when her short story "Wings of Fire" was included in the Saskatchewan Romance Writer's anthology "Love, Loss, and Other Oddities: Tales from Saskatchewan".

Lately, she's been exploring a life-long fascination with the events of World War Two. She's discovered that war provides a multitude of stories to tell, but she's especially interested in the domestic stories that take place far from the battlefield. So far she's written two stories set during the WWII era and has plans for several more. Whatever the era, she loves to create flawed and very human characters. But no matter how intense her characters may be, she believes they also need a sense of humor to make them real. To Jana there's nothing more interesting than peeling back the layers of a character to see what makes them tick.

Jana currently works at her day job as a bookkeeper/office administrator. In her spare time, she enjoys spending time with her husband, her two grown daughters and her extended family. She also loves reading (she just discovered books on mp3 files), gardening, and yoga. At the urging of her husband she's taken up golf, but at best she's a weekend duffer. The pros on the LPGA tour have nothing to fear!

Jana lives in Western Canada with her husband Warren, and a highly spoiled Pug/Terrier cross named Lou.

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The Chrysanthemum - A Note

I chose the chrysanthemum as the flower to represent me for a number of reasons. First of all, since my birthday is in November, it is my birth flower. In some cultures it is considered a symbol of the sun, as well as a symbol of optimism and joy. But the main reason I choose the chrysanthemum is that in the Language of Flowers, the white chrysanthemum represents truth. Trust and truth are themes that run through all my books. Sometimes a truth is withheld, and trust is lost. It is only when truth is revealed that characters in my books learn to trust each other, and themselves.

--Jana Richards

The Storytellers' Bouquet

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