

A collection of Christmas romance novellas

a match made at
CHRISTMAS

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A-parent-ly
CHRISTMAS

Amy R. Anguish

For my children, who are sometimes mischievous and can plot a scheme with the best of them. They also keep the magic of Christmas alive and have the best giggles. My two best blessings from God.

One



Joy willed her fingers to relax their grip and let Andy move to the protection of the airport employee. The back of his light-brown hair stood up at the crown, just like Noel's did, and her heart warred with itself over the realization. Halfway down the jetway, her son glanced back at her, a huge grin on his face. She forced a smile into place, holding her eyes wide open to keep the tears at bay.

He didn't need to know that by allowing him to walk away without her, she might as well have ripped her heart from her body. She placed her palm against her chest. The light *thump-thump* proved her physical organ may still be beating, but her heart was no longer anywhere nearby. Nope. It boarded that plane right along with Andy as he headed to Tulsa to spend the holidays with his dad.

She watched through the window until the giant plane pulled away from the terminal. Somewhere in the belly of that beast was her baby boy—not that he'd want to be called a baby. At eight, he acted like he was a grown-up. But that didn't ease her angst.

"God, keep him safe, please." She sent up the prayer as she walked back through the busy airport and out to her car. Her son

was hurtling westward at hundreds of miles an hour while she drove away through the Christmas Eve Eve traffic.

There was nothing else she could do besides pray. And, for once, prayer didn't feel like enough. Half an hour later, she unlocked the door of their house and looked around. It was never this quiet. Not in the last eight years. She rubbed her hands up and down her arms, but it did nothing to chase away the chill inside her.

As she rounded the couch, her feet snagged on a pair of loafers. "Well, those were supposed to go with him. Still, if that's all he forgot, it's not the end of the world."

A flip of the switch turned on not only the overhead light, but also the Christmas tree lights. She blew out a long sigh. Andy had begged and begged to put it up Thanksgiving night.

"I'm not even going to be here for Christmas, Mom. If we put it up now, I'll get to enjoy it longer. And then I can help put everything away when I get back from Oklahoma." He'd wrapped his arms around her waist, his head coming up much too high on her. "You know you want to."

She'd given in. Hers wasn't the only year that had been hard. Noel leaving for his new promotion back in the Spring had about devastated their son. The way he was flaking out in second grade proved it if nothing else could. Raising Andy by herself since then hadn't been a walk in the park, either.

Joy pulled her hair back and padded to the bedroom. The space once felt like a paradise. But for the last nine months, it was a cavern of loneliness. After all, when they'd bought this house, she and Noel were supposed to share this room.

"You better call me when Andy gets there," Joy muttered to his picture that still sat on the dresser. A photo of happier times, back when forever meant longer than "until a job promotion."

After kicking her shoes toward the closet, she wandered to the kitchen. Nothing sounded good. Cooking could be a chore when she had someone to prep food for. Cooking for just herself was overrated.

She pulled a bag of popcorn from the pantry and stuck it in the microwave. Not the healthiest meal in the world, but better than not eating. And it wasn't like she had to be a good example tonight. Her eight-year-old was his dad's responsibility for the next week.

Back in the living room, she considered her options. No one was here to complain if she watched a cheesy holiday movie—a perfectly wasted opportunity because she wasn't in the mood. Her book club's latest pick glared at her from the side table, but it held no temptation. Whoever had chosen one about zombies and Regency England shouldn't be allowed to offer their opinion next go-round.

Feet up on the coffee table, she tossed a handful of fluffy kernels in her mouth. With school out, she had no deadlines hanging over her. Her job was on part-time hours for the next two weeks, and most of those were flexible. For the first time in years, she was at a loss. How long had it been since she'd experienced boredom?

A glint of something on the floor caught her eye. What in the world? Even though the tree was covered in decorations, it didn't look very happy without gifts. She and Andy had opened presents last night since he'd be gone on Christmas day. Maybe he'd dropped part of a toy or something.

But the shape was wrong. She set her snack-dinner aside and moved over to pick it up. An ornament. Not just any ornament. The one commemorating her and Noel's first Christmas together—nine years ago. Her thumb brushed over the dates and the cameo-style couple in the middle. How had their marriage fallen apart so fast?

“And how did you fall off the tree?”

Her eyes scanned the branches for the empty spot. There had to be one. This ornament was safely nestled in the branches earlier that day. There.

She leaned over to reattach the hook on the branch but paused. Was there something closer to the trunk? She would

certainly never shove an ornament that far into the branches, and she would've encouraged Andy to pick a better spot if he'd placed it there while decorating. Then again, Andy had been near the tree earlier that morning with a guilty expression on his face. If he'd shoved something into the tree, it would explain the ornament's fall.

"What did you do, Andrew?" She reached in and wrapped her fingers around the last thing she expected to find.

Longer than she anticipated, but oh, so familiar. Her fingers bumped over the mask part, telling her what it was before she worked it loose. The red plastic in her hands sent a tremble through her.

No. No, he'd packed this. She'd watched him stick it in the bag's front pocket. It couldn't be here.

But it was.

Andy's inhaler.

Not good. Not good at all.

Okay, what to do? She paced before the Christmas lights as they mocked her with their happy flashes. Andy was staying with his father for a week. With his inhaler, this wouldn't be a problem. But he needed to use his medicine every night—especially when in a different environment.

"Pharmacy. There must be a pharmacy in Tulsa that can fill a new one really fast." She snatched her phone from the couch and started searching.

The first pharmacist she called was kind but unhelpful. They were closing early that day and would be closed tomorrow. Fine. Tulsa wasn't tiny. She'd try another.

"I'm sorry, ma'am. Because his insurance is through a Tennessee company, it won't cover the prescription out here. When did you say you last filled it?"

Joy pulled her lower lip through her teeth before answering. "Last week."

"Even if the insurance did make a concession for your situation, they wouldn't fill it again so soon. I'm afraid there's

nothing I can do on our end. Perhaps you could overnight mail it?"

Two pharmacies down, but she couldn't give up. She tugged on her ponytail as she listened to the next line ring.

Three phone calls later, she let out a growl of frustration. Between the doctor's office not returning calls immediately due to shortened holiday hours, and the pharmacy closing in an hour, having a prescription called in was impossible. Maybe by Wednesday, but they couldn't make any promises. That was five days away.

"Andy, what were you thinking?"



"Hey, buddy." Noel Davidson wrapped his son up in his arms for the first time in far too long. The short week they'd shared together over the summer seemed ages ago.

"Dad." Andy bounced on his toes. "Know what I saw on the plane?"

"I can't begin to imagine." Noel ruffled his hair and then steered him by the shoulder toward the baggage carousel. "Let's watch for your suitcase while you tell me."

"Right. Mom said the flight was probably going to be boring. But I got to sit next to the window ..."

As Andy chattered, the beginning of his sentence penetrated Noel's head. Joy. He was supposed to call Joy.

His heart sped up, and his throat grew dry, just like they had the first few times he'd called when they started dating. With a trembling thumb, he pushed her contact and listened to it ring once before she answered. But it wasn't the cold, distant greeting he'd grown used to.

"What's wrong?" He kept one hand on Andy while pressing his phone to his ear.

"Andy hid his inhaler in the Christmas tree."

“What? Why would he do that? When?” Noel tapped Andy’s shoulder. “Is that your suitcase, bud?”

Andy nodded. Noel juggled his phone between shoulder and cheek, held Andy with one hand, and grabbed the luggage before it could go around the carousel a second time.

“I don’t know when.” Joy’s voice squeaked like when she was on the verge of tears. “Sometime between when he packed it last night after using it and when we left the house this morning.”

Her words broke through the haze caused by the surrounding din. “Wait. You’re not talking about something he did in the last few days. You’re talking about—you mean you have his inhaler right now?”

“It’s right here.” She groaned. “I should’ve checked his bag again before we left, but we were in a hurry because he couldn’t find the jacket he wanted. And then his zipper got stuck—”

“Joy, take a breath. We’ll figure something out. Can’t you call the prescription over to a pharmacy here?”

“I already tried. Called five different places. The odds are not in our favor.” He could picture her pacing the living room, her free hand slashing through the air. She never was one to talk without motioning.

“Okay, how desperately does he need it? I mean, he’s been doing better, hasn’t he?” He shot a look to his son that said, ‘We’re going to talk about this later.’

Andy ducked his head and looked the other way.

“The last time we forgot to use it one night, he started coughing around lunchtime the next day and didn’t stop for a week. And he’s not used to whatever allergens are around there, so I have no idea if his breathing will be better or worse.”

Noel released a long breath while the gears in his head turned—time to come up with a plan. “Andy, you hold on to this side of the handle, and I’ll hold the other. Do *not* let go. Let’s get out to the car.” Noel confirmed his son followed directions and then focused back on Joy. “What about shipping it overnight? We’d only miss tonight’s dose.”

“I don’t know. I ordered several items recently that still haven’t come in. And with tomorrow being Christmas Eve, I’m sure delivery times are even worse.”

“True. I hadn’t thought about that.” Noel unlocked his truck and loaded Andy and his suitcase. “Where does that leave us?”

“I honestly don’t know. I mean, he needs it.”

“Hang on, Joy. I’m putting you on speakerphone. I want to check something.” Noel slid into the front seat and quickly opened the app he’d been using to track his son’s flight. With a few deft taps and swipes, he found what he was looking for.

“How quickly can you make it back to the airport?”

“What?” Her voice was practically a shriek.

“You heard me. I found a flight coming this way in two hours. If you leave now, you can make it. Throw a few things in a bag and come on. I’ll email you the ticket.”

“You’ve got to be kidding. I can’t just hop on a flight to Oklahoma. Besides, how would I pay for that?”

“I’ll pay for it.” He barely held in his hurt. How long had it been since she wanted him to take care of her? “Do you have a better option?”

It didn’t take much imagination to figure out what she was doing now. More pacing, tugging her ponytail, running through every scenario fifteen more times only to come to the same conclusion. He was right. This was their best option if Andy was to have that inhaler tonight.

“Fine.” The word came out much lower than her normal voice, but he didn’t care.

“I’ll just grab this ticket now, and we’ll figure out how to get you back in the morning. This one doesn’t land until ten and in an airport the size of Tulsa’s, nothing else is heading back to Tennessee tonight.”

“Tomorrow?”

Noel said nothing, just waited for her to come to an acceptance. What else could they do?

“Fine,” she repeated. “I’m packing, and then I’m on my way.”

“See you in a few hours.” He hung up and then turned to their son. “You’ve got some major explaining to do. We’re going to go find a place to eat, and you’re going to fill me in.”

Andy’s eyes were big as he nodded in the backseat. But something besides a healthy dose of fear and shame danced in those baby blues. Mischief? Elation? Whatever it was, Noel needed to figure it out before Joy arrived.