

Beyond
December

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*To my sister, Jody Prestine:
You were the first one, outside of my wife, who believed in this
crazy dream of mine.*



The background of the page is a soft, faded floral pattern. Large, light-colored flowers, possibly peonies or roses, are scattered across the page, creating a delicate and romantic atmosphere. The colors are muted, blending into the light background.

Chapter One

Zak Cooper awoke in heaven.

December held northern Indiana in its clutches. According to his radio alarm, an ice storm from north of Chicago was descending and would hit the area in time for the Friday afternoon rush. Likely dangerous for Chicago. But in Oak Hill? Typically, an inconvenience, but not much more.

Zak snuggled underneath a down comforter and curled around the woman he loved. Had to be heaven.

He traced the outline of his wife's face. Even asleep, Kay's beauty stirred him, and he rose on his elbow to breathe a kiss onto her cheek.

"Mmm." She turned into his arms, settling them both back into their bower.

"Good morning, my love," he whispered. "Storm coming. Got to start planning coverage."

Her hand teased the hair on his chest as he inhaled the aroma of their life together—intimacy in a scent.

"Andy will cover the traffic. Jeannie on the reaction. Mick—"

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Kay laid her finger against his lips.

He kissed it. “Okay, love. You go back to sleep.” He pulled back the covers and edged toward the side of the bed. Before his feet touched the sure-to-be-cold floor, he made a mental note: long johns.

Her hand slid down to his stomach and tickled him. “Where do you think you’re going?”

Her soft voice melted his resolve. As she pulled the covers back over him, Zak rolled onto his side and returned to her embrace, his mouth finding hers and closing over it.

Deadlines could wait.



IN THE SHOWER, Zak savored his morning coffee and the hot water. Warmth on the outside, warmth on the inside. His mind at work, he turned off the spray and made a mental note to ask Jeannie to check the homeless shelter. This might be a suitable time to pull out that feature he’d written on OakHill’s new town manager. A few fresh quotes and photos should do it.

“Do you like the coffee?” Kay called from the next room, interrupting his planning.

“Uh, yeah, I guess.” He peered around the doorjamb to where Kay sat at the kitchen table with her cup of tea. “Was something different?”

“Apparently not.”

Today, the coffee was just a caffeine delivery system. “A new brand?”

“No, same old same old.”

As he dried, he tried a new tack. “You added some cocoa to the grounds. I knew something was different. It’s my job to notice things, you know. It was fine.”

“Well, Mr. ‘It’s-My-Job-To-Notice-Things,’ there was no

cocoa either. The other day, I read in a magazine that adding a quarter teaspoon of cinnamon to your coffee grounds can help reduce your cholesterol.”

Zak stepped into the hallway, towel in hand. Shivering in the morning chill, he reached back to grab his bathrobe from the door hook.

He put on his best scowl. “You know I don’t like estrogen-enhanced coffee. Plain, black. No cream, no sugar, extra caffeine. None of that froufrou hazelnut almond mocha—”

“You said you liked it.” Kay smiled over her cup.

“I said it was fine.” He walked to the coffeepot and draped his towel on a dining room chair as he passed. He wrinkled his nose over the pot.

“You tricked me.” As he moved to the bedroom with a fresh cup, he wagged his finger. “No more cinnamon.”

“It’s good for your cholesterol.”

Women. Wives, specifically.

He could get used to the taste of cinnamon. If she thought his health was at stake, Kay would never give up.

She followed him into the bedroom. “You going to get dressed?”

“No, *Mother*, I thought I’d go to work in my bathrobe.”

Snap! The end of the damp towel Zak had left on the chair connected with his exposed calf.

“Stop it.” He leaped onto the bed as Kay pursued him. “Brat.” She took aim again. “Hey.”

“Maybe you’ll learn to not leave your stuff lying around.”

Kay snapped the towel once more but missed by a mile.

He grabbed the weapon, locked her in his arms, and pulled her onto the bed into a tangled fit of laughter, limbs, and towel.

“You’ve got to dress.” She extricated herself from the pile. “You’re already late. Sloan will have a cow.”

“Sore loser.” Zak hung his robe on the hook in the closet

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and grabbed his clothes, including the long johns, in case he needed to do any outside reporting.

“Someone needs to be the designated adult.”

As Kay picked out her clothes, he crossed the room, slipped behind her, wrapped his arms around her waist, and held her close.

“I love you, Katharine Renee Sharp Cooper. I love you like pizza. Like peanut butter. Like ice cream. I love you like NBA basketball and *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. You are all my best things rolled into one.”

“Like *The Grinch*? I am touched.” Her hand caressed his cheek. “You have such a way with words.”

“Well, I am a writer.”

They stood there until the ticking wall clock broke through Zak’s reverie.

“Criminitly! Look at the time.”

Zak charged around the house like a pinball, racking up points on every bumper. Cell phone here. Car keys there. Briefcase back here. In between, he threw his clothes on.

“Don’t forget about the meeting at church tonight.” He paused to pull on his coat. “Assuming the ice storm doesn’t shut things down, want to meet there and catch dinner after?”

“Sure, that’ll give me time to pick up some Christmas gifts at the mall since my last appointment is at the coffee shop on the highway.”

“It’s supposed to be a bad storm, you know. Ice and all. Why don’t I just bring carryout home after the meeting?”

She tucked in his shirttail and straightened his turned-up collar. “I’m already practically going to be at the church. It’ll be fine.”

“Call me if there are any issues. Promise?”

She smiled. “I promise, Zee.”

He raced down the hallway and grabbed his wallet off the

top of the microwave. “Speaking of *The Grinch*. It’s on tonight. I forgot to set the DVR. Can you do it?”

“The app on your phone not working?”

He blinked and grinned.

From the hallway, she laughed and shook her head. “I’ll take care of it, love. Now, go.”

“Thanks, hon. See you tonight.”

“Go.” She shoed him toward the garage. “Go, go, go. Give Sloan a hug for me.”

Laughing, Zak turned, punched the garage door opener, ran to the Jeep, and climbed in. As he pulled out, he began to plan the A-1 layout.

He was three blocks from home before he realized he hadn’t said goodbye.