

# CHRISTMAS *Rewired*

**Ren@Vations Inc. \* 4**

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MERRICK



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*To Heather, Amy, and Erin. We pulled together as authors for a crazy project and have ended up staying together for everyday life.*

*Thank you, ladies.*



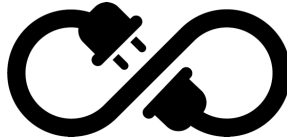
*The LORD will fight for you;  
you need only to be still.*

*Exodus 14:4 (NIV)*



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## Chapter 1



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**T**race Reno exited the Plant Manager’s office deep in thought. He raked his hand over his face and down his beard.

Two weeks. Two weeks until unemployment.

*Thanks for seven great years with the company. Here’s your severance package and letters of recommendation ...*

Downsizing had been a threat for a while since the rumor mill reported the company started a new line in Mexico.

For only the second time in his life, Trace needed to find a job, and selling himself was beyond his comfort zone. He preferred to work hard and competently. That should be enough to let people form their own opinions. But that wouldn’t work this time.

*I could always move to Mexico.*

He paused for a second. *With my red hair and freckled complexion? Not.*

“So much for the Caribbean vacation, huh?”

“What?”

Trace was in his own head, a situation he found himself in

frequently. It wasn't that he didn't like people, he just preferred them on his terms.

"Yeah."

A deep breath and a sigh later, Trace turned to his friend and pod-mate, Zach Weatherly. Zach had just enough seniority over Trace to keep his current position. "I knew the cruise deal was too good to be true, for me. Good thing I sprang for the travel insurance."

"Hey, it might eat into the severance, but it could be worth it." Zach grinned. "Who knows? Ms. Right might just be on the same tour, trolling for her Mr. Right."

"That is so not the reason I planned this trip."

Ever since Zach got married last summer, he'd hounded Trace with attempted fix-ups and suggestions.

"Watch out, or you'll be sliding into confirmed bachelor mode."

Trace chuckled. "I'll be okay. I don't expect Ms. Right to appear out of nowhere."

"No 'love at first sight,' huh?" Zach grinned.

"You know the answer to that."

His friend shook his head. "You're missing out, man. I didn't expect to meet Abigail, but look at us now."

A chuckle broke through. "Not everyone finds the love of their life in a bicycle crash."

Zach winked. "Who says our crash wasn't fore-ordained?"

Trace brushed off the subject. "Anyway. We've got two weeks to get this last project put together and sent to the big-wigs." Trace handed him a large binder.

Groaning, Zach accepted the tome. "And then, the holidays. Does this mean a trip to Indiana for Thanksgiving?"

"Not this time. My folks moved back to Kentucky, remember?"

"Oh, yeah. What about Eli and Sam?"



Trace's twin brother and little sister were just as confused about their parents' move to their dad's hometown of Clementville, Kentucky—a hop-skip-and-a-jump from absolutely nowhere.

“Eli's ‘in love,’ so he claims he's not budging from southern Indiana. Sam's still on the fence. I don't know. Sometimes I think it might be nice to live in the middle of nowhere. No traffic, no crime—well, not as much crime—and solitude.”

“Sounds idyllic.”

“Yeah, well, now that I don't have an excuse *not* to go, I guess I'll RSVP yes for my cousin's wedding Thanksgiving weekend.” The dread of attending a wedding almost overshadowed the anxiety of unemployment.

“Great place to meet chicks.” Zach ducked when Trace threw the pencil in his hand.

Trace scoffed. “Yeah, and Clementville is so small, all the women in town will be there ... and I'm related to most of them.”

“I THINK MAYBE God wants me to be single.” Hannah Buckner tilted her head as she stirred her glass of sweet iced tea with a straw.

Mandy Reno's laugh burst forth, hand over her mouth to barely contain the spit-take sending droplets of liquid flying everywhere. “Girl, at twenty-five, I don't think you can climb up on that shelf just yet.” A few more chuckles escaped. “Sometimes the right guy comes along when you least expect it.”

Hannah huffed. “Easy for you to say. You with your hunky sheriff who thinks you're all that and a bag of chips.” Hannah

loved teasing her friend, Mandy, but there was some truth to her statement.

She continued, brushing droplets of tea off her “RenoVations Inc.” T-shirt. “I’m just sayin’. I’m surrounded by guys every day of my life. If I can’t find somebody in those circumstances ...”

“You know what the problem is?”

Hannah snorted. “What, O learned one?”

“You’re too nice.”

*Here we go.* “You say that like it’s a bad thing.” Hannah knew where this was going.

Mandy tilted her head and glared at her from beneath her furrowed brow. “You treat everybody the same. Girl-next-door. Approachable. Down-to-earth. Keep everybody happy except Hannah.”

“You make me sound like Mary Richards on the *Mary Tyler Moore Show*.”

“Girl, you’ve got to quit watching retro-TV and Hallmark movies exclusively.”

“I identify with Mary. She made it ... after all.” Hannah had to laugh at her friend’s face at the addition of a phrase from the lyrics of the show’s theme song. “I know. Lame.”

“Very.” Mandy stared Hannah down. “My point is, you either need to show you’re interested or play hard-to-get. Surprisingly, not everyone is as nice as you.”

“There’s that word again. For one thing, I haven’t met anyone I would lower myself for to ‘show interest,’ and most of the guys I’m around wouldn’t recognize hard-to-get if it smacked them upside the head.” Hannah shook her head. “All I know is I may as well be happy with my life as it is. I’ve got a great job that pays well and is in high demand, and I’ve bought a house I can’t wait to get my hands on.” A quiet squeal and little dance in her chair served to change the subject.

“That’s so cool. I can’t believe you actually bought a house. What’s the move-in date?”

“Probably the week after Christmas. Maybe even before, if the cabinets are ready in time.”

Mandy had a small crease between her brows. “Are you sure you want to live out in the boonies?”

Hannah stared at her friend. “Most people consider the entire community of Clementville ‘the boonies.’ Honestly, the little lane that the Durbin place—I mean, my house—is on isn’t any farther out of town than Nick and Lisa’s house.”

“I know. It just seems ...”

“Scary? Remote? Like a chainsaw murderer is hiding in the garage just waiting to get me alone?” Hannah shook her head. She’d heard it all before. “It’s a house with a little land around it. I’ll be fine.”

Inside, Hannah felt a little chill at the idea of just how dark it would be out there at night, but for every negative, she had a solution—mostly.

*I’m an electrician. I can light up the place like a Christmas tree if I want.*

She wouldn’t think about that now. Her goal was to prove to herself and everyone else who saw her as “sweet little Hannah” that she could be tough. “Sweet little things” long for adventure too.

“Whatever. I’m not saying anything Mama Buckner’s not thinking.”

“Oh, I know. They think I’ve gone rogue.”