

Four Contemporary Romance Novellas

Romancing the Elements

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Melting the Ice

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*For my grandsons. Ben, Wyatt, Dylan, Liam, Jack, Dax, and
Maverick.*

One



Amelia Kincaid wanted to scream. Instead, she turned her attention away from the frustrating meeting and gazed out the conference room windows. Her office building bordered downtown Chicago's Grant Park, which resembled a winter wonderland with snow-covered grass and shrubs. Bare tree branches whipped back and forth in the fierce wind. Arctic temperatures had arrived.

Even a walk in this frigid weather would be an improvement over this torturous meeting. As a girl, she'd always run from boredom to seek something fascinating.

"Windy Jack" droned on and on about his team. In his recent management evaluation, she'd cautioned him about his proclivity for rambling during meetings. It wasted everyone's time and made him seem pompous. Now here he was, at it again. He'd failed to take her admonition to heart.

She gritted her teeth and fought to keep her facial expressions neutral. "Windy Jack" appeared to be blowing inside as much as Mother Nature blew outside. Time to intervene.

Before she could say anything, a knock sounded on the conference room door.

Heads turned toward the noise.

Heather, Amelia's administrative assistant, peeked in. "Sorry to disturb. There is an important call for Ms. Kincaid. An emergency."

Amelia leaped to her feet, delighted for the excuse to end the meeting. "Jack, hold the rest of your thoughts until next week. Everyone, thank you for all your hard work. Now, please excuse me."

Once in the hall, Heather passed Amelia her cell phone. In a whisper, she added, "It's your sister."

"Thanks, Heather." Amelia took the phone. "Bells. What's wrong?"

Belinda sobbed at the other end of the worldwide cellular network.

Amelia rushed to her office and closed the door.

"I can't ... I can't handle it anymore. The dogs, the kids, Dan's needs ... everyone looks to me to be the problem-solver. I'm toast."

"It must be hard to handle everything your family throws at you," Amelia said. "You have a multitude of responsibilities. Wife, mother, homeschool teacher, housekeeper, animal wrangler, and seamstress."

Guilt stabbed Amelia's heart. She'd been so busy working, she failed to notice the pressure on her sister. She should have scheduled a fun weekend together or invited her to Chicago for a visit. Either of these options would have given her a break from her family.

Belinda was her favorite sister. That she was also her only sister didn't diminish her affection. Although opposite in personality and interests, sisterhood drew them together.

Amelia murmured inadequate words of apology. "We're long overdue for a sisters' weekend. It's been nearly a year since I've seen you, and that's my fault."

Belinda sniffed. "I'm losing my mind, Melly. Between

homeschooling the kids, Dan's work hours, taking care of the house and the animals, I've become ... like a machine. A machine that's breaking down and crumbling."

"You're a wonderful mother and wife. I don't understand what prompted this. Is your health okay?"

Belinda blew her nose. "I guess so. I feel overwhelmed. Like I can't handle one more thing. Not one."

"So, what pushed you over the edge?"

"It's only a few weeks until Hope's birthday, and two days ago, she decided the Suzy Lou doll was the only thing she wanted."

Amelia wasn't familiar with Suzy Lou dolls. "Is that a bad thing?"

"It is when none are available. She's sold out at local stores, and the online shops list her as unavailable. If Hope wanted other things, this wouldn't be a big deal. But all she wants is this doll."

"Any chance you can teach her about supply and demand?"

Crickets.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I merely thought I'd try humor to cheer you."

"When you find some, point it out to me."

With a dramatic voice, Amelia said, "You wound me with sarcasm."

"Sorry." Belinda sighed. "She's a sweet girl, and I can't allow her to think we don't care about her birthday wishes."

Amelia cleared her throat and took a stab at the root of the problem. "Although the search for the doll is frustrating, you need a break. A vacation."

"Yes, I do." Belinda broke into more wailing. "But we can't afford a vacation. I'm stuck here, losing my mind."

While Amelia could not guarantee locating the doll, she could provide Belinda with some time away. Far from the children, animals, and everything else associated with the other household duties crushing the soul of her sister.

With Belinda “ugly crying” in her ear, Amelia cooed soothing words while she outlined a plan in her head. She’d accumulated a million vacation days because she always worked. Even though her teams were in the middle of developing an important marketing campaign right now, her sister’s needs trumped work needs.

“Bells, let me help.”

“Be my guest. You’re always a miracle worker.”

“Well, I wouldn’t go that far, but I can be the voice of reason in a crisis. I’ll find a Suzy Lou doll in this city somewhere.”

“That would be fantastic.” Belinda burst into tears again.

When the crying morphed into hiccup noises, Amelia interrupted. “I also have an idea. A surprise for you. I need to talk to Dan about it. Is he available?”

“He’s working from home today.”

“Please put him on the phone.”

“I’ll see if he can take a call. Why?”

“Indulge me.”

With one more hiccup, Belinda said, “I love you. Thanks for letting me dump on you.”

“Love you too. Now let me talk to Dan.”

While Belinda walked the phone to Dan, Amelia ruminated on the situation. Money was always tight with Belinda and Dan. Squeaky tight. They were a one-income family. Her brother-in-law worked hard to provide for his family and cover all expenses. This left no extra money for luxuries.

Amelia’s percolating idea would be a tremendous gift to two over-worked, under-rested parents. A four- or five-night stay at a fabulous hotel in a city would be perfect. An adventure for only the two of them. They’d converse with no child interrupting them, eat adult food at an upscale restaurant, get a massage, and enjoy being adults who loved each other.

This gift was an act of love for her sister. The girl who’d thrown rocks at her when they were kids.

Guilt was a powerful motivator. Amelia had been too busy to join Bells and Dan for Christmas. Same for New Year’s.

Now, nearly Valentine's Day, she still hadn't taken time to visit them.

To Belinda, Amelia said, "Don't think I was ignoring you and your family this past Christmas. An enormous work project was due at the end of the year."

A sigh crossed their connection. "You've ignored us for too long."

"That's not fair."

"I agree. It's not fair because we're your family. We'd like you to be present in our lives, not someone who only sends presents. Come and make memories with us. Burn food for us."

Amelia stiffened. "Hey. I've improved my cooking skills."

"Prove it. Come here and cook for us."

Amelia harrumphed. Her sister's insults proved this gift must be a surprise. Belinda wouldn't believe she could handle everything at the house. Dan must embrace this plan to make it a reality. His chances of selling this idea to Belinda exceeded hers. He'd be more persuasive.

When he took the phone, Amelia launched her plan. "Dan, I want to surprise my sister in the nicest of ways."

"Fantastic. She needs something special."

"You will also benefit from this gift."

Dan chuckled. "Even better. What do you have in mind?"

"I'm giving you both a long weekend. What do you think about a four- or five-night stay in Hot Springs, Arkansas, at the Arlington Hotel? It's a swanky, historic hotel."

"That would be fantastic!"

"You'll have fabulous meals. Belinda receives an all-day spa treatment, and you receive a round of golf if the weather cooperates. If it doesn't, we'll think of something else for you."

"We can't afford that."

"You won't be spending a dime. No money required. It's my present to the two of you. Totally my treat."

"A break would be wonderful. What a fantastic gift. But what about the kids?"

“I have a plan for them too. I’m going to stay with your children, and your dogs, your cat, and your ferret.”

“No more ferret. We rehomed him.”

Amelia knew better than to cheer. “Any other creatures living at your house right now?”

“Fish.”

She sighed with relief. They often fostered animals for the local animal shelter. “Could you hold off taking in more of God’s creatures until this getaway is over?”

“For this? You bet.”

“Thank you. What about the fish?”

“We only have two tanks, and I can buy special food to feed them while we’re gone. All you have to do is admire them.”

“Perfect.”

He cleared his throat. “You think you can handle all the humans and animals at our house? They aren’t your thing.”

“Well, not for everyday use, but I’ll rise to the occasion to care for my beautiful nieces and handsome nephews—and your animals—for a few days. Scout’s honor.”

“Okay.”

“Your job, should you choose to accept it, is to convince your wife this is an opportunity of a lifetime. Go to that enormous calendar-planner thing in your kitchen. Find some days that seem relatively free of activities. Then text me those dates, and I’ll make the arrangements.”

“Bless you, Amelia. You’re going to make me cry if you keep talking about this.”

Amelia laughed. “Call me back to confirm. It needs to be soon, considering your wife’s tenuous mental status.”

“I promise.”

After the call, Amelia felt like a superhero. She enjoyed problem-solving. It’s what made her a terrific upper-level manager. This surprise gave her the opportunity to solve her sister’s problem and spend quality time with her nieces and nephews.

MELTING THE ICE

She'd take care of the kids, the dogs, the cat, and the fish. No problem.

That's a lot of living creatures, but I can do this, can't I?

As much as she loved these kids, and they loved her in return, she'd only been around them in small doses.

Did she even know what to do with them?

No matter. She'd figure that out later.