



The Madness Must End!

All Abigail wants for Christmas is to be left alone. She has grown tired of her family's horrible matchmaking schemes and her daughters' deceptive plans to get her to take her ex-husband back. It's not that she doesn't want a relationship. She's more than ready for Mr. Right to sweep her off her feet. She's just come to the realization that there may not be a Mr. Right out there for her—and that's okay. Now if she could only convince her family of that.

Jeff is all work and no play, which is why he found himself stranded in the middle of nowhere with a blizzard quickly approaching. Desperate for cover, he spots a house in the distance. Upon meeting the kindhearted, gorgeous owner of the home, he deems Abigail his Christmas Angel, and thanks Santa for the early gift. But is she too good to be true?

Drake had always considered himself an intelligent man. He'd married the love of his life while they were in college, helped raise the two greatest children ever and become a very successful businessman. Now here he was, going on fifty, wondering where he'd gone wrong. Not really where, but why.

"You've helped more than enough. You need to hit the road before the blizzard hits." Abigail, the only woman Drake ever loved romantically, grabbed his coat out of the entry closet.

"I don't like you staying so far out here. Anything could happen." He pushed hair that escaped her ponytail behind her ear. Even more beautiful than the day he'd met her, he marveled at how well she'd aged.

"I've lived out here five years with no problems. I think you need to let it go. Call me when you make it back safely."

"It's not even Christmas yet, and we're about to have our third blizzard this year. The weather is making up for the years of mild weather. Come back to town with me. You know I have extra room." If he could convince her to spend more than a few hours with him here and there, he knew he could convince her he'd grown into the man she deserved.

"I'll be fine. I get my best work done when I'm stranded." A world-renowned artist, Abigail would go into hiding for days at a time. "Now get out." She playfully pushed him toward the door. "I need to call your daughters before I lose service."

He hugged her. Lack of reliable phone service was another thing he hated about her home. "I'm buying you a satellite phone for Christmas."

“Don’t waste money on one of those things. I barely use the iPhone the girls gave me last year. Now get. And don’t forget to call me when you’ve made it safely.”

He kissed her on the cheek. “The invitation to stay with me is always open.”

“Thank you for caring.”

Knowing Abigail’s phone probably wouldn’t have a signal by the time he got home, Drake sped back to Chicago. She’d always been strong-willed, which he admired, except when she wasn’t giving him his way. Since last Christmas, he’d been slowly working his way back into her life. He wanted happily ever after with her now, but knew he’d have to wait. It took him years to completely shatter her heart, and it would take him years to repair it. With the maturity of age, he realized she was worth the wait.

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“Mom, you should have gone back to town with Dad.”

From the comfort of her living room sofa, Abigail watched the snow fall. “You’re just trying to get us back together.” She resituated her earpiece. “I love your dad, but I’ve told you a million times, that ship has sailed. Let it go, Nell.”

“But he’s changed and you two love each other.”

“I know it’s every child’s dream to see their parents together. Even when the child is an old lady like you.”

Nell giggled. “If twenty-four is old, what does that make you?”

“Seasoned, darling. In the perfect world, your dad and I would be married and growing old together, but this isn’t the perfect world, and it takes more than love. I learned that with all of these extra years I’ve been around.”

“But you’re lonely and you won’t even date. You belong with Dad.”

Tired of this rerun conversation, she lay back on the couch. “I need to call your sister before I lose service. I love you.”

“There you go. Rushing me off the phone. Your defense mechanism is avoidance.”

“Call it whatever you want, but I call it redundant. Whenever I don’t do what you want, you hound me over and over hoping to wear me down. I’m done with this conversation.”

“Well, are you coming down for Christmas?”

“What did I say after the Thanksgiving fiasco?” Abigail couldn’t remember the last family function she’d attended where someone hadn’t tried to hook her up with “the perfect man for her” or try to get her to take Drake back. Oftentimes she wondered why others didn’t think she was good enough to be accepted as a single entity.

“Auntie didn’t mean any harm.”

“They never do, but that doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. Record this for future reference. Outside of weddings and funerals, I’m not attending any more family functions. I’ll come down to visit after the new year.” She sat back up and looked out the window. The snow had really started coming down. She hoped Drake was far enough ahead of the storm to make it home before the Chicago streets got crazy.

“Mom, please give Dad a chance.”

“We’re friends. Nothing more, nothing less, and that works for me.” Static filled the line. “See, I’m losing my signal. I need to call Sasha. Love you.” She disconnected and called her youngest who was a freshman at UCLA.

"Mommy! How's it going?"

"It's going good, but we have to talk fast. I won't have a signal for long. How's my baby?"

"Great. Grandma's making me fat! She said you're not coming down for Christmas."

"I'm not."

"I can't believe that buster Auntie tried to hook you up with. I don't blame you for hiding."

Laughing, Abigail shook her head. "Why do they think my standards should be so low? Am I that pitiful?" she joked.

"Pitiful? Are all the reflective surfaces in the house broken? You are fine! You could have a different guy every night of the week if you wanted." Sasha said something else, but Abigail lost the signal for a moment and missed it.

"I can always count on you to make me laugh."

"I can't hear you."

Heart warmed, Abigail said, "I love you."

"I love you, too. Do what works for you, Mom." The line went dead.

What did Abigail want? She was in good health, had a loving supportive family, didn't need money, so she had no right to complain. But wants. When being completely honest with herself, which wasn't always easy to do, she wanted—not needed—someone to share her life with. Now that much of her family had migrated to the Southwest, she rarely had visitors and found herself more than alone—lonely. She'd never tell her girls that. They'd try to set her and her ex up in no time flat.

Never one to need lots of attention. Now that she had the solitude she'd always craved, she discovered it wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

What is my perfect world? Perfect would be having a man who loved her the same as she loved him. Who needed her as much as she needed him, but wasn't clingy just as she wasn't clingy. One who enjoyed solitude but not isolation. What did she want? A smile tipped her lips. A male version of herself.

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"It's about time you answered."

Driving much too fast for the weather conditions, Jeff smacked the steering wheel of his Porsche. "We're done with Caldwell. He'll never sell." The hands free enabled him to fuss at his brother without fumbling with the phone.

"He just needs more time. It's the holiday season. Slow down."

"This is business. Even Walmart is open on Christmas."

"You're joking, right?"

Snow fell harder by the second and the sun had already set, making visibility horrible. He slowed the car. He had hoped he could make it back to Chicago before the blizzard hit, but at this rate, he wouldn't make it. "Okay, I'll give you Christmas and New Year's Day, but Christmas isn't until next week, and he's been stalling since last spring. The only reason I'm still pursuing this is because you want it so badly."

"It'll pay off. You'll see. Give him time. Caldwell Enterprises has been in his family for over a hundred years. It's all he knows. Give him until the new year."

“Fine, but I’m tired of being fucked around. Come the new year, if his tune hasn’t changed, we’re moving on.”

“Sounds fair. I see the airport was shut down. Maybe you can get out of Detroit tomorrow.”

“I knew the blizzard was coming, so I drove up to Detroit. I should be back before the brunt of the storm hits.”

“In that little toy you call a car? You really need to slow down. It wouldn’t have hurt you to stay the night in Detroit. Everything you need for work is on your laptop.”

He hated it when his brother was right. “The road is slick, and I need to start paying attention to maneuver this little toy car.”

“I’ll see you in the morning. Pull into a hotel if the weather gets too thick.”

“See you in the morning.” He tapped off the hands free.

White, white, white and more white stuff covered the trees on either side of the road and made the two-lane back road look more like a snowmobile path. Jeff had taken a shortcut he’d used last summer to save time, but hadn’t factored in the difference the season would make. To make matters worse, the GPS decided it didn’t want to come out in the storm. Wishing he hadn’t come out, he continued onward.

A quick glance at his gas gauge about gave him a heart attack. He’d been so upset when he’d left Detroit that he’d forgotten to fill the tank, and now he was near empty with no idea where the closest gas station was or even civilization for that matter.

Praying for a miracle, he pressed his hands free to call AAA, but his signal must have wanted to hide from the storm also because he had none. “Perfect,” he grumbled.

A few minutes later, the tree-lined road gave way to a field of snow. No longer able to tell a difference between the road and the field, he went into a panic and slowed the car to a crawl.

He tried his cell again with the same result, no signal. “Great.”

Knowing the gas he had wouldn’t last long, he continued onward in hopes of finding help. Light. He saw a light in a window. He cautiously maneuvered his car toward the light until he saw the outline of a house. With the way his luck had been going, the house was a winter mirage of some sort.

When Jeff was a teen, he’d gone to a haunted house that was in a Victorian-style home such as the one he was driving up to. This house was larger and pristine, yet still eerie. Maybe it was the solitude or the flickering light that poured from the window. He couldn’t imagine living this far from civilization. He’d go crazy.

Parked in front of the house, he took out his wallet for his driver’s license. These people didn’t know him from Adam, but knowing he wasn’t lying about his name may make them feel more at ease about taking a stranger in. He checked his cell phone. Still no signal.

Wallet and keys in hand, he exited the car and went up to the door of the house. Before he could knock or ring the bell, one of the most attractive women he’d ever seen in his life opened the door with her large Blaxploitation Afro held back by a scarf she used as a headband. Man how he loved those movies when he was a kid. He watched them mainly for the women.

“May I help you?”

“Yes ma’am. I’m Jeff Madison.” Scanning her hand for a wedding band, he handed over his driver’s license. “My car is on empty. May I use your phone to call a tow truck?” She didn’t wear any rings, but in reality, that didn’t mean much. His mother never wore a ring, was married and also never faithful to his father.

Without glancing at his license, she handed it back to him and stepped to the side. “Come in out of the cold.”

“Thank you.” Grateful to be inside, he slipped his license back into his wallet, and then watched her cross the fireplace-lit living room. “I have an important meeting in the morning. I can’t believe I didn’t check my gas gauge.”

“I guess what they say about no one being perfect is true.” She picked up a cell phone from the coffee table. “Just what I was afraid of. No signal.”

At a complete loss, he had no idea what to do. There was no way he’d expect a woman to allow a strange man to stay in her home and he wouldn’t ask.

“I’ll be right back.” She went to a back room and returned with a set of keys. “Put your car in the garage and bring mine out front.”

“I’m not taking your car. I wouldn’t leave you stranded. A blizzard is coming.”

Her laugh was free and intoxicating with the cutest snort at the end. “I’m not giving you my car to use. I’m taking you into the city before the blizzard shuts everything down.”

“Is there a gas station nearby?”

“I’m sure it’s closed by now. We don’t get much traffic out here, so they usually close down early, especially when the weather is bad. Nope. I’ll need to take you into town. You’ll need to make arrangements to come back for your car, but you’ll make your meeting and won’t be stuck out here with a crazy woman.” She flashed a traffic-halting smile.

That a complete stranger would go so far out of her way for him was overwhelming. Used to the cut-throat attitudes in the business world, she was a refreshing change. “I can’t allow you to do that.”

“You don’t have a choice.” She handed him the keys. “Go on now. I’ll be out after I make sure everything is out and off.”

“Wow. Thank you. Can I at least have the name of my angel?” That brought a smile to her lovely face. Good. He liked her smile.

“Abigail.”

“I’ll be out front with the car in a minute. Thank you, Abigail.”

“You are most welcome.”

Jeff parked his Porsche next to her Escalade. Exiting the car, he said, “This has got to be the cleanest garage in history.” Curiosity about the mysterious, kind-hearted beauty, he snooped around, but found nothing interesting.

He backed the Escalade out of the garage. Unlike his car, the tank was near full.

Abigail. He didn’t like the name. Angel fit her much better.

Book bag and purse in hand, she hopped down the steps and approached the driver’s side.

He lowered the window. “The least I can do is drive.”

“You won’t get any argument from me.”

After escorting her around to the passenger side and helping her in, he returned to his spot behind the steering wheel. "I'll never be able to thank you enough for this, Angel."

"There's no need to."

The three-hour drive into the Chicago Loop seemed more like three seconds. Angel knew basketball better than he did and he was part owner of an NBA team. She joked and laughed easily and was confident in herself without being arrogant. All of this made him wonder why she wasn't married. Outside of her loving the life of a hermit, she'd make someone a good wife. Someone else. Not him. Jeff enjoyed the freedom from betrayal too much to chance close relationships.

He pulled the Escalade into the parking garage of his Lakeshore Drive condo and parked in his assigned slot. "At least let me take you to dinner."

"It's getting late, and I need to check into a hotel. I know the airports are closed by now. There'll be a rush on the rooms."

What a complete jerk! "I'm sorry. I was so focused on my situation that I didn't think of your accommodations." He ran his hands over his face. "I'll pay for your room."

Hands held out, she shook her head. "No, no. It's not every day I get to be an angel. I'll be fine."

In no way did this sit right with him. "Come on up, and I'll help you find a hotel and I'm paying."

"You win."

END SAMPLE

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Dee