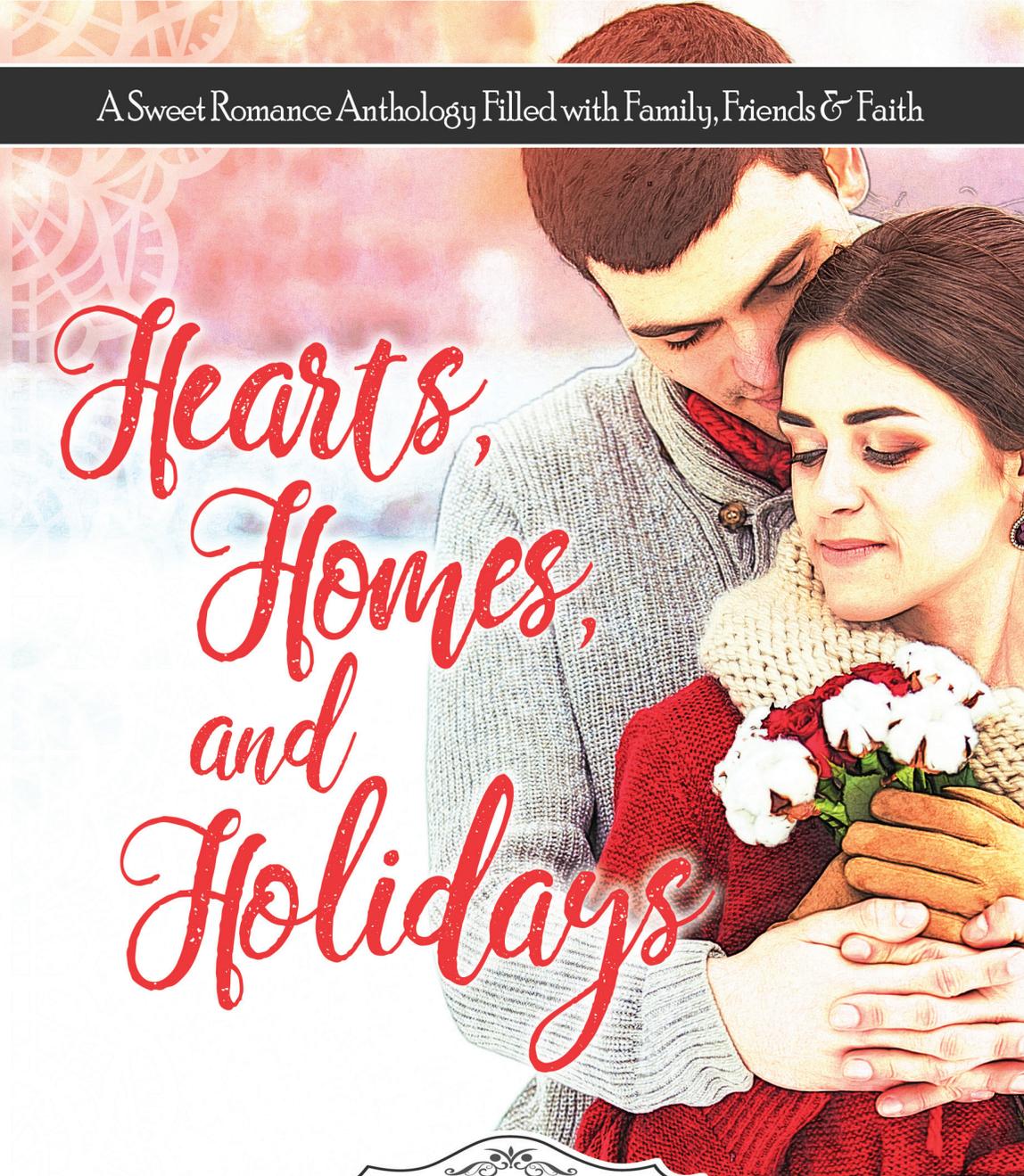


A Sweet Romance Anthology Filled with Family, Friends & Faith



Hearts, Homes, and Holidays

Romantic Treasury

Michele Brouder • Michele Pollock Dalton • Nancy Fraser
T.C. Hester • Jean Jacobsen • Caroline Lee
Kirsten Osbourne • Rose Pearson • Christine Sterling

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and
Holidays

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Kandie Kisses

by Michele Pollock Dalton

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Chapter 1

The packed bar along the backshore of Lake Superior was stuffed to the gills and stifling hot as Mick Polenz set up his Bose sound system. Despite the governor's "half capacity" orders, the Down Low Bar & Grill still hosted a wall-to-wall crowd every weekend. And Mick certainly didn't mind. The tips he earned from the gig always put him in a better frame of mind.

Although music was his first love, Mick's job as a first responder for the township paid the bills. The area that comprised Magellan was essentially Michigan's last outpost before the land gave way to Lake Superior, but the quaint village was a welcome change from the hectic pace of Lansing.

The atmosphere at the Down Low pulsed through the heavily timbered room and spiked Mick's enthusiasm for his upcoming show. Still, the nerves that lingered before each performance set his foot to tapping as he waited for one of the waitresses to deliver his water bottle. "Thanks, Chel," he commented when the harried woman handed off his beverage.

Rachel Boulton paused for a moment and gave the shy man an equally bashful smile before turning to hurry away. "Heaven's above!" she whispered to herself, wishing she had a hand free to fan her face. One simple brush of the burly firefighter's calloused fingertips made Rachel think of things a good girl would never admit.

Tamping down her runaway hormones, Chel pressed through the rabble rousers to greet the next group of diners. "How many?" she called above raucous laughter and the opening song of Mick's first set.

After leading the trio of suggestively clad women toward the last table, Rachel scanned the crowded bar room adjacent to the dining area. Intrigued, the busy waitress caught a glimpse of her favorite musician on the low-slung stage.

Alone under the weak spotlight, Mick's rich baritone belted out Waylon Jennings' "Good 'ole Boys" then quickly segued into Cash's "Folsom Prison Blues." Always a fan favorite, wooden train whistles "tooted" in all the appropriate places while he played.

At the end of the song, he turned a lopsided, boyish grin to the boisterous group hamming it up at the front table. Self-named "Mick's Clique," the rowdy bunch cheered and hollered out song suggestions as the evening wore on, but the affable musician was always glad to have their support. Their energy fed his, and Mick played his heart and soul out.

When the dining room closed down several hours later, Rachel rushed through the evening clean-up, so she could get home and begin her preparations for the following morning. Run ragged between her job at the Down Low and the supplemental work she picked up by baking sweet treats for the Merry Hollow Tree Farm; the weary woman wondered how long she'd be able to keep pace.

As Chel exited the back door off the prep kitchen, she gave a perplexed glance at her vehicle. The hatch of her older SUV was aloft. "Well, what the heck?" she mused in consternation as she approached the mismatched Santa Fe. After a recent fender bender, the predominantly black car now sported a red front quarter panel and driver's side door. "Must have hit the button," the buxom brunette mumbled as she pulled the key fob from the front pocket of her faded jeans.

Exhausted by long hours on her feet, Rachel climbed into the cold vehicle and got the defrost going. Despite the warmth of the day, as soon as the sun set, the September winds turned cold. And it seemed like the U.P. was in for an early winter if the blazing colors of the hardwoods were any indication.

Sipping from a travel mug of hot chocolate while the Santa Fe warmed up, Rachel stilled and listened. The noise of the bar crowd, still in full swing, along with the sound of wind and waves coming from the shoreline, carried a strange whine. The worried woman growled at the car, "Oh no, you don't! I just had you in the shop for a tune-up, you overpriced lemon! So, just settle down and idle right!" Banging on the steering wheel in frustration, Rachel jolted in shock as the back hatch smoothly slid open. "Is this dang car possessed?" she wondered before hopping out and rounding the back.

As she lifted her arm to slam the bedeviled door, tiny eyes opened and glowed against the blackness of Chel's cargo area. Frigid little fingers curled around the gray nylon netting that kept things from sliding about, and Rachel's heart constricted.

* * * * *

Mick stepped out onto the back patio for a break and a bit of fresh air. The heavy scent of bodies, perfumes, and frying food inside the bar gave him a pounding headache. So, he dropped onto a wooden bench away from the hubbub and took several deep, cleansing breaths of the chilly night air.

When he heard a startled cry, his body instantly went rigid, and instinct kicked in. Bolting across the dark parking lot toward a line of parked vehicles, Mick yelled, "You alright?" to the curvy waitress who turned bashful gazes on him whenever he played at the Down Low.

Bending low to untangle the toddler's fingers, Rachel lifted the frightened little girl and hugged the child to her chest. Whimpers from an infant tucked further into the recesses of the cargo hold drew the anxious woman's attention. So, when her handsome crush leaned in close to reach for the baby, Chel sucked in the heady scent of him and forcefully resisted the urge to press closer to his warmth.

Scowling at the fresh-faced woman, Mick ominously rumbled, "Why do you have KIDS in your trunk?" The first responder examined the little one before tucking the blanket tightly around the baby boy.

Injured by the brusque tone and awful assumption that she left small children unattended in the cold, Rachel stammered, "There is one more."

Furious, Mick freed a hand and reached back under the tonneau cover that concealed the cargo area. Locating another infant, he gently pulled the child forward. "What is going on here?" he angrily questioned, blue eyes snapping with fury.

Chagrined and confused, Rachel tried to console the itty bitty toddler in her arms. Although she wanted to shout right back at the presumptive dolt, Chel whispered, "I don't know."

"You . . . don't know?!" Mick retorted, eyebrows raised in disbelief. Watching the waitress struggle to soothe the tiny girl, he released a cleansing breath and flatly acknowledged, "You don't know."

Gently rocking back and forth, the overwhelmed woman chattered, "I thought my lift gate was malfunctioning. It kept opening on its own. But, I guess this little one was pushing the button."

Pivoting, Rachel looked around the parking lot. The outdoor crowd had thinned considerably as the hour edged toward midnight. And the over-packed, boat-sized sedan she was looking for was gone. "I think they've been . . . abandoned."

"Say again."

“Abandoned, Mick,” she sighed. “Their mother came to the back door around closing time looking for any leftovers we were going to throw away. But now, her car is gone.”

* * * * *

Arranging the twin boys in his arms, Mick waited while the reluctant woman gathered a worn quilted handbag and slipped it over her shoulder. “I’ll have to call the Sheriff,” he thought out loud.

“What? No! Their mother might come back! Let’s ...well, let’s just give her a few minutes. Please?”

Huffing, the man looked down at the tiny bits of humanity. “We need to get them warm,” he replied, tempering the agitation in his voice.

Grasping the musician’s muscled forearm, Rachel walked backward toward the passenger side of the vehicle. She juggled the toddler to one side and wrestled with the ratty diaper bag before she managed to get the car door open.

Rolling his eyes in exasperation, Mick awkwardly slid across the seat, carefully balancing his precious cargo. As soon as he was safely shut inside, the first responder gently laid the infants in his lap.

The dome light went out when his unexpected partner in crime shut the back hatch, and Mick waited for the bashful lady to slip into the car beside him. “Now what?” he grumbled as Rachel settled the whimpering girl in her lap.

Reaching up to flick the button that would restore light to the interior, Chel jostled the lumpy bag that had been left behind. “Let’s see if there’s anything in here that might give us a clue,” she sheepishly suggested.

“You met the person who left them here?”

“Like I said, she came to the back door looking for food.”

While the worried woman shuffled through the contents of the oversize purse, Mick unwrapped the first boy and gave him a quick exam before swaddling him more tightly. Sliding a large hand over the downy softness of the baby’s dark hair, he considered the newborn carefully before moving on to his brother.

“Found something,” he mumbled as the second blanket fell away to reveal a green and white dining check. “I saw what you did,” had been written in tiny letters under the meal total.

Looking up, Rachel pushed the hair out of her eyes and glanced at Mick. “What is it?”

Lifting the order stub closer to the light, the musician read the message out loud for her benefit: “I saw what you did when you took the money from your apron pocket and put it in the cash drawer for our meal. And I know you gave Kandie an extra big glass of milk with her mac & cheese. I also heard you say that someone in the bar worked for the local fire department. I couldn’t find the station, so I am asking you to please let the police know I tried to follow the Safe Haven law. Miss, I’m counting on your kindness and generosity to take care of them for me. My babies mean the world to me, but I just can’t do it anymore. Tell them I love them. Always.”

Rachel gazed down at the blonde girl in her lap, then closed her eyes. Bowing her head, she touched her forehead to the child’s and whispered, “I’m so sorry, little one.”

Pudgy fingers awkwardly brushed her cheek, and Rachel leaned into the featherlight touch. But her eyes blinked open when a very wet, sloppy kiss landed on the underside of her chin. “Oh! Oh my,” she giggled. “That left quite a spit spot.”

Scrunching up his face, Mick wrinkled his nose and expelled a disgruntled “ewwww” as Chel turned her head and wiped her chin against the shoulder of her t-shirt. “Guess I don’t mind my damp lap quite as much anymore,” he mumbled.

Rachel snorted in laughter and snuggled the little girl closer. “Hey, a kiss is a kiss,” she teased before sobering. “So, what do we do, Mick? How would you handle it if they’d been dropped off at the fire station?”

“I know you don’t want to hear it, but we have to call the Sheriff. The babies are probably only a week old, so their relinquishment could fall under the Safe Haven laws. But your little ‘puppy’ there? She doesn’t. So, there will be a criminal case opened against, ah, Sally...crud. I can’t read the last name.”

Mick tipped the ticket toward the light and then to its side, trying to make out the last few squiggles. “Still can’t read the last name. But there is a ‘P.S.’ here. Um, let’s see... I can’t bear. Ah, I can’t bear ... the thought! The thought of what, um, what... well crap. This writing is too small. I just can’t read it,” he huffed.

Reaching for the piece of paper she’d torn from her order pad a few hours earlier, Rachel tried to make out the words that wrapped up the long edge. When she finally figured out the message, she glanced down at the little girl one more time. Unable to hold back her roiling emotions any longer, a tear slipped free. She whispered, “P.S. I can’t bear the thought of what they will do with Kandie. Please don’t let them send her to an institution.”

Chapter 2

Mick packed away the rest of his gear and let out a frustrated sigh. Cupping the back of his neck, the tired man rubbed at the sore muscles.

"That was some show, Michelob!" one of his rowdies shouted on his way past, emphasizing the nickname Mick earned by his drink of choice.

"Yeah!?! Thanks, man! Glad you could make it!" As soon as the merrymakers were out of sight, Mick wiggled the phone from the pocket of his faded jeans and dialed his buddy in dispatch. "Hey, Stevie? You got any word on what happened at the Down Low tonight?"

"That's Officer Cade to you, man."

"Yeah, whatever. Just tell me what's goin' on with the kids, officer."

Ignoring the sarcastic tone, the dispatcher clicked through several screens and read through the comments in the system. "Not much here. Emergency foster care placement. Statements taken. No leads on the bio mom at the moment. That's about it."

"Anything about the waitress who found them?" Mick grunted. The clickety-clack of the keyboard filtered through the connection while he hopped into his CR-V and waited for the windows to clear.

"Nope. Nothing but her statement . . . oh, wait," Officer Cade paused as he read through the call report. "Rachel Boulton has temporary placement of the children until Social Services can run a search and make arrangements with suitable family members."

* * * * *

"Who on earth could that be?" Rachel yawned as she juggled an infant in one arm and a mug of coffee in the other. The tiny duplex she called home

was half of a trailer house, and, at the moment, it was overflowing with the chaotic little bodies of hungry babies and one very clingy little girl.

Pulling open the exterior door, the frazzled woman poked her nose through the opening left by the chain lock and got an eye-popping gander at the impressive chest of her favorite fireman. Stretched tight over prime male flesh, the deep blue t-shirt clung to Mick's frame, and Rachel wondered if drooling was considered an attractive trait. Cause, man, her mouth was watering!

"Ah, mind if I come in?" he asked again.

"Huh?" she blurted, then reconnoitered. "Wait. What?"

"Let me in," Mick calmly asserted. "Before Mrs. Hawthorne sends her husband after me."

"Jeff? Why would Lisa send Jeff after you?" Rachel mumbled in confusion.

Huffing out his impatience, Mick slowly and evenly replied, "Because I showed up on their doorstep at 6 a.m. on a Sunday morning looking for you? Or maybe because she wondered why I'm toting a bag full of diapers and formula. Your pick."

"Diapers! Really?! You brought diapers? Oh, thank you!" she enthused as she quickly shimmied back through the door, unlatched the chain, and threw the barrier wide open. With a happy little wiggle, Rachel hurriedly put her coffee mug down on an end table and grabbed one of the bags from the Supercenter. "I ran out of clean dishtowels about two hours ago. You're my freaking hero, Mick Polenz! I think I love you!" she joyfully announced as she unearthed a package of wipes along with the diapers.

Glancing back over his shoulder, Mick sheepishly waved to the landlady who was eavesdropping and gawking from her back porch. "Might want to keep it down. Otherwise, half of Magellan will be wrangling an invitation to your bridal shower at church today," he quietly advised as he stepped over the threshold into domestic disorder.

Wide-eyed, Rachel's jaw dropped open, and a blush bloomed over her cheeks. "I . . . oh, . . . I," the woman gulped in embarrassment. "I just meant 'thank you,'" she timidly whispered, cursing the silliness that overtook her whenever she was overtired. "BB2 is having trouble keeping anything down, and everything runs right through BB1."

"BB?" he asked, quirked a dark eyebrow in question.

"Baby boy," Rachel offered with a shy Mona-Lisa smile. "Sally's letter didn't give their names, so for now, I'm just calling them BB1 and BB2."

Glancing around the tiny space, Mick surveyed the grass-green shag

carpet and darkly paneled walls of the combination living and dining room. An ivory floral love seat sat on the wall near the front door. On the opposite wall were a small drop-leaf table and two spindle chairs. Aside from that, there was a tall bookcase on his left between the bedroom doors. A narrow curved front dresser sat on his right between the compact kitchen and nearly non-existent bathroom.

“Okay. BB 1 and 2 it is, but where are you going to put them? This place isn’t even big enough for you.”

Taken aback, Rachel blinked, then scowled. “It’s affordable.”

Holding up his palms in a gesture of peace, Mick softly reassured, “Listen, I know you want to help out, but these kids were too much for their mother to handle alone. How will it be any different for you?”

“Well, for one thing, I’m not living in a car,” Rachel snapped before reigning in her temper – which was another ugly side effect of sleep deprivation. “And besides that, I’ll have the Hawthorne girls to help out after school when I need a babysitter.”

“Are you sure they are a good choice? They were pretty traumatized when their brother died a few months ago. And the youngest one? Is she even old enough to babysit?” Mick gently questioned before lifting the fussy little girl from her place near Rachel’s leg.

For a moment, Rachel just stared at the stoic man. Then she turned and laid BB2 on the kitchen table. She finished changing the infant before she formulated her answer. “I think you mean well, Mick. But you know why I have to do this . . . why I have to make it work.”

He understood the woman’s firm insistence, and as Mick looked into Kandie’s beautiful almond shaped eyes, he felt the same pull. It was why he spent an hour driving each way to the Supercenter after bar close. It’s why he was on a near stranger’s doorstep at the butt crack of dawn with shopping bags full of baby supplies.

Chapter 3

“Go ahead and crash for a little while, Chel. You look like you’re ready to drop,” Mick advised through a yawn. He wasn’t doing much better, but he was well used to working around the clock when he was on shift. Magellan might be a sleepy little township, but Lansing had been a different story.

“Once they are fed and changed, I think they’ll nap for a while,” she ruminated while measuring dry powder into the new bottles Mick thoughtfully provided. When Rachel turned with two bottles and a sippy cup in hand, her tired face morphed into sweet delight. Her rather brusque fireman was settled in the corner of the loveseat, the newborns laid over his heart. And the tiny little slobber puss was stretched out next to him with her head pillowed on Mick’s leg.

Slowly the poor man’s head dropped toward his chest, and a snore rumbled from him loudly enough that Mick startled himself awake. “Best get going,” he mumbled.

“Don’t you dare, Mick,” Rachel gasped. “You’re too tired to be behind the steering wheel right now. I’ll make up the hide-a-bed for Kandie and me. You can take my room.”

“Uh, you sure about that?”

With a brisk nod, Rachel settled the question and pointed toward two laundry baskets that sat in front of her back door. “Let’s get the BBs settled; then we can all have a good sleep.”

Mick quirked an eyebrow, and a slow, lopsided grin turned up one corner of his mouth. “Interesting sleeping arrangements,” he teased.

“Hey, it was either that or dresser drawers. And I was afraid Kandie would try sliding the drawers shut. She doesn’t walk yet, but she has this odd little bottom-scoot-crawl thing that gets her around lickety-split.”

A chuckle escaped, and the weary man looked down at the affectionate child. "She's certainly a cuddler." Studying the distinctive features that loudly proclaimed the little girl's disability, Mick cocked his head. The white-blond curls, ivory skin, rosy cheeks, button nose, bright almond-shaped eyes, and long lashes made Kandie look like a porcelain doll.

Timidly, Rachel lifted BB1 from Mick's chest and tried to ignore the tingles that raced up her arm from the brief contact. Heat blossomed along her cheekbones, and Chel all but threw a bottle at the poor man in her effort to retreat before she started to slobber.

Settled across the room on one of the dining chairs, Rachel watched as Kandie wiggled under the gorgeous firefighter's arm and snuggled into his side. Content with her sippy cup of milk and a warm, human pillow, the child cooed her contentment.

Mentally scolding herself for being jealous of the little girl's proximity to her secret crush, Rachel kept her eyes on the ravenous baby in her arms instead.

"Fed, diapered, and dead to the world," Mick announced in relief a short while later.

"Mine too," Rachel whispered. "BB1 goes in with the colors, and BB2 goes in with the whites."

"Excuse me?"

Freeing a hand, Rachel pointed to the neat labels on the side of each basket. Devoid of laundry, she'd lined the bottom of each container with one of her memory foam pillows. They were soft enough to support the newborns comfortably, and firm enough to eliminate any danger.

Mick glanced at the neatly labeled baskets and chuckled. "I see." And he did. One container was suitably dressed out with a white mattress, and the other with a navy blue one. "Guess you belong in this one, little fellow," Mick quietly advised as he lowered the child into the basket labeled "whites."

He wasn't going to ask, but curiosity got the better of him. "How did you decide who went where?"

"Diarrhea."

Crinkling his nose, Mick shook his head and grunted, "Sorry I asked."

Rachel giggled, handed BB1 into Mick's waiting arms, and gathered the empty bottles. "I'll never get that nasty green stuff out of a white pillowcase," she tittered, silliness making an inauspicious appearance.

After everyone was tucked in, Rachel tried to get comfortable on the hide-a-bed. The loveseat only accommodated a twin-size bed in its depths, so it was a bit of a challenge to keep the metal crossbar out of her back and

still leave room for Kandie beside her.

Whatever the case, sleep was elusive. Tantalizing thoughts of the man in her bed wandered through Rachel's brain without the censoring of her rational mind or spiritual convictions. "Sweet dreams," she softly sighed before falling into the well of slumber.

And they were. They really, really were.

* * * * *

In an echoing refrain of early, Rachel groused, "Who on earth could that be?"

"Got it," Mick softly announced as he stepped out of the bathroom. Since the doors were at adjacent angles, he managed to answer before another knock sounded.

When the cool morning breeze whooshed through the open door and across the hide-a-bed, Rachel tugged the covers over her chest and the little girl curled into the crook of her arm. The child's hot breath created a steam bath against Chel's neck, but it was the puddle of drool leaking into her hair that left the tired woman disgruntled.

Her landlady, Lisa Hawthorne, gazed at Mick's bare chest and gave a disconcerted, "Ooh. Oh, my. I . . . well, I wasn't expecting, ah, erm, . . . company?"

With a steady gaze, Mick cocked his head and issued a calm challenge to the gobsmacked woman. "What were you expecting?"

Flustered, Lisa retreated. "Huh? Oh, nothing, of course. Nothing!" she reiterated as she backtracked down the deck steps. "Um, Rachel just doesn't, ah, you know . . ."

Mick propped his athletic physique against the door frame and replied. "No. I don't know."

"Guests!" Lisa all but shouted before she stammered, "Guests. Rachel doesn't, um, entertain . . . guests."

Mortified, Rachel pulled the covers up over her head and hid the telltale blush that suffused her fair skin. "Way to go, Lisa," she mutinously thought. "Might as well just hang a sign around my neck that says 'Thirty-Year-Old Virgin.'"

Casting a glance over his shoulder, Mick caught Rachel's embarrassed retreat and couldn't help the cocky grin that stretched his cheeks. Turning back, he fixed his denim blue gaze on the nosy lady and nodded sagely. "I know. That's what I like about her."

Blinking rapidly, Lisa dropped her eyes from the glorious expanse of male flesh and mumbled, "Tell her I'll stop by later."

"As soon as she wakes up," Mick promised. "We were very . . . busy last night. But I'll send her up to your place later."

"Sure! Absolutely," Lisa agreed in a flurry of head bobbing as she rushed away.

As soon as Mick closed the door, Rachel flipped back the covers and shot him an annoyed look. "You did that on purpose!"

"What?" he innocently asked, the devilish twinkle in his eyes belying the serious tone. After scanning the curves that dimpled the quilt into shapely hills and valleys, Mick finally locked gazes with the sweet woman, flushed with sleep - all warm and soft.

The breath hitched in Chel's lungs as Mick's heated glance trailed over her from head to toe. "You."

"Yes?"

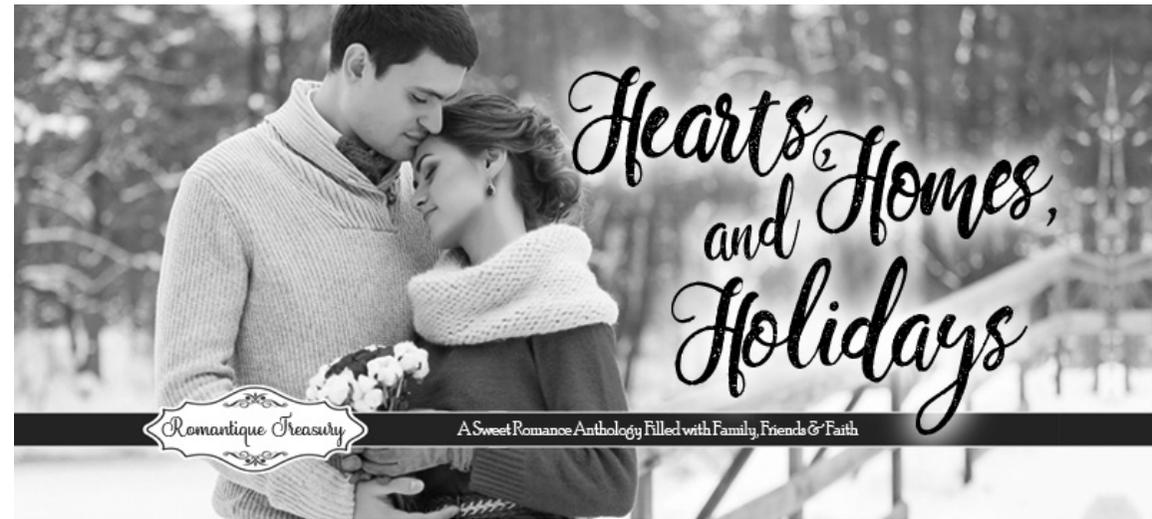
Uncertainty laced her soft voice when Rachel said, "You let Lisa think something is going on."

"Isn't there?" he quietly questioned.

*** END OF SAMPLE ***

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KANDIE KISSES by Michele Pollock Dalton

Frazzled by a hectic lifestyle, Rachel Boulton has no choice but to rearrange her priorities when a surprise gift is left for her at work. With the help of her secret crush, Mick Polenz, can Rachel meet the overwhelming needs of this special delivery, or will she lose the greatest joy she's ever known to the demands of unfulfilled ambitions?

LONG TO BELONG by T.C. Hester

Mark Diamond has never had a family of his own, but being on the spectrum makes relationships extra complicated - until Katie Reed, owner of the Bountiful Blueberry Coffee Shop, stole his heart faster than an underpriced IPO offering. For Katie, her shy beau has been as yummy as a dandelion-cocoa latte, but can they handle each other's situation, or will their dreams be thrown out like yesterday's brew?

MACY'S GIFT by Nancy Fraser

Macy Williams loves her career as a photojournalist, but when her brother and sister-in-law die, Macy is drawn back to her small hometown to handle

their estate. Cord Adams is surprised by his deceased friend's choice of guardian. He only met Macy once, and the meeting was anything but cordial. Can two strong-willed individuals set aside their differences for the good of two young girls?

NOT PART OF OUR EVENING PLANS by Caroline Lee

As one of the couples who found love at River's End Ranch, Jace and Dinky Cunningham struggle with the loss of their dreams for a family; but, circumstances can shift in a split second. Dare they hope this change of plans will bring them everything their hearts desire?

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