

KELVIN BUECKERT

A Stormy Season

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Chapter 1

-Early December.

“I tell you. There’s sure been some wicked things going on around here.” Drool dribbled down the old man’s unshaven chin as he mumbled. He sure made a tragic picture, laying there on his white hospital bed, staring straight up at the sterile ceiling above him.

“They should be ashamed of themselves.”

Melissa reached out and took his wrinkled hand in hers. “Why do you say that?”

“I saw them there in that little room.”

Her petite face wrinkled in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Her Grandfather kept rambling as if he hadn’t heard a word she said. “They were playing cards in there. That’s witchcraft.”

“They’ll be chopping off heads around here soon,” warned a withered old crone who had hobbled in to join the discussion.

The prophetess before her really was tiny specimen. Her grey hair was done in a neat bun, her clothing was as plain as those of a prairie settler, but her milky grey eyes were wide open with deeply held conviction.

“You’ve got to watch the people this place, they’re all wicked.”

“Now Mabel, you know what I told you, this isn’t your room.” Melissa took the arm of the confused woman. “Come with me, I’ll show you where you belong.”

The two women made their way to the doorway of the hospital room.

Melissa pointed down the hall. "Down there, that's where your room is, remember?"

"You young people think you know everything, do you?" The old woman grumbled as she made her way down the hallway. Naturally, she traveled in the opposite direction that Melissa had directed her.

"It scares me, the things that are going on around here these days," her Grandfather proclaimed.

Melissa returned to her seat beside his bed. "There's no need to be scared Grandpa...this is a nice place, the nurses are kind, I'm here..."

Grandfather and turned to lay on his side, staring at her with faded blue eyes that were completely void of recognition. "Who are you anyway?"

"Oh Grandpa, you know me, I'm Melissa, your Granddaughter."

"I don't know anybody by that name."

"Of course you do. Remember your son Ted? I'm his daughter."

Grandfather turned back to face the ceiling. "Go away."

"But the nurse said I could stay and I..."

"Get out of here! I don't need you here!" In happier times Grandfather would have never raised his voice to anyone but now, under the influence of Alzheimer's, he had no problem getting aggressive.

At least he was clean. That was an improvement from the last visit.

Melissa brushed a tear from her eye as she made her way to the door. It tormented her to see Grandfather like this. However, nothing could be done.

She just wished her her family could accept that.

"Merry Christmas," a passing Filipino nurse said, her pleasant face glowing with the cheer of the season.

Melissa felt like saying, "humbug," but instead, she managed to force a smile and returned the greeting. What did these immigrants have to be happy about anyway?

They were stuck in a small Canadian town in the middle of winter.

The blast of cold air that struck her as she stormed into the great outdoors was evidence of that wonderful truth.

She glanced around her.

The ground was being powdered with steadily falling snowflakes.

Humbug.

She picked up her pace and soon left the hospital grounds behind. The wind was picking up so she tightened the hood of her parka as she made her way alongside the snow-covered highway leading toward town center.

Like any good showdown, the time for the family meeting had been set for high noon.

It truly was the most wonderful time of the year.

Signs heralding the joy of the season were everywhere. Even the stark hydro poles that lined the roadway had been decorated with glowing candy canes. However, the eyes of the young man were focused firmly upon his feet.

In his opinion, if ignorance really was bliss, the world should be a much happier place.

Why couldn't things go right for a change?

"Hey! You dropped your smile."

"What?" Larry let out a startled chuckle as he turned his attention to the young woman who had just breezed by him.

"Oh you liked that did you?"

"It's good." Larry admitted, his laugh fading as he realized who stood before him.

"Glad you liked it." The stylish young woman flashed a smile of sunshine and then continued on her way. All that remained of her presence was the lingering scent of her expensive perfume. Then, a gust of wind had hurled even that away.

Larry shook his head and returned his attention to the ice covered sidewalk. Melissa Raynard had decided to grace his world with a joke. How nice. She must've decided that the peasants needed some cheering up at Christmas time.

Granted, Melissa was more personable than the others in her family.

Still, after a few miserable deals with the Raynard family, he wouldn't be disappointed if he never had to see any of them again.

A horse nickered at his back. He didn't even turn. It was just a sign that one of buggies that the Old Order Mennonites used was approaching. These people and their ways were another mystery to him. Maybe it just went to show that if someone looked Amish, dressed Amish, they could actually be an Old Order Mennonite.

To each his own.

Larry forced these thoughts from his brain. Auctioneers from Saskatchewan, Manitoba and even a few from beyond were headed into town for a day of competition.

Winning the competition would give his career as an auctioneer a much needed boost.

The way things were going these days, he sure needed a boost.

He needed money.

He needed to justify his decision to move back to town after a good life in the city.

If that wasn't enough, his newest romantic prospect had just dumped him.

"Larry, you're a nice guy and all. It isn't that. I just don't think we're compatible. I mean, you're used to this kind of life. Me, I can't stand it. I need something to do. I need some night life on the weekends. What do you have around here? Nothing. Even the tumbleweeds are too lazy to roll across the street in summer." Was the official story delivered over Chinese Food at the Paris cafe.

Larry had tried to argue this point but Blanca had made up her mind. After lunch she had shook his hand and headed back to the city where she had come from.

So much for that online compatibility quiz they had both taken. Perhaps the only thing that quiz had shown was that their credit cards were compatible with the payment system on the dating site that they had used.

He should've been busy practicing his auctioneering instead of

wasting his time on her.

Now he was left with an hour to get himself together if he planned on winning that belt-buckle and the thousand dollars that came with it.

He had to win. His future depended upon it.

As he continued walking, a black horse drawn buggy glided past him. A beautiful black form flowing amidst the confetti of falling snow.

Whatever else they stood for, at least the Old Order Mennonites knew how to move forward. That was more than what he knew how to do.

At least she had done one good deed today. The scruffy young cowboy looked like he needed some cheering up. Melissa scanned the street before her.

Sure, the less fortunate of the town needed some cheer. Still, it was high time to get back to business.

The family meeting was at hand.

To her right there was the town grocery store. A large blue painted building with the red and white “Co-op”, logo splashed in red and white upon it. Just past that, across another street, was the town hotel and bar.

Town center lay to the southwest of where she stood. That was her target and that was where she headed with a determined stride.

She had to hurry if she was going to make it on time. Aunt Karen hated people who were late and it wouldn't be smart to start off on the wrong foot with her.

Christmas lights flickered in the buildings she passed. However, the hope of the season was the farthest thing from her mind in that moment.

The sight of Grandfather laying there and babbling nonsense had shaken her soul.

She could still see how wide his eyes had been as they stared at the ceiling, unseeing.

She could still hear herself calling out his name in an attempt to reach the man he had once been but he it seemed that he was out of reach.

Alzheimer's was a terrorist. An evil bandit that smashed its way into

the mind of a perfectly good, honest man. Robbing him of the reason that had made him who he was.

If only her extended family could accept this reality. If only they hadn't decided to attack the very thread that kept Grandfather safe where he was.

Her authority.

They didn't approve of her being appointed as Power of Attorney over Grandfather's affairs and so they had decided to take action against her.

She wished that she didn't have to participate in any of it, however, for the sake of her Grandfather, she would make the effort. She turned south and crossed a set of railway tracks. Across the street she could see the entrance of the bakery. It was time for the confrontation, whether she was ready or not.

As she moved across the street toward her target, the memory of that young cowboy she had encountered ran like a rustic John Wayne movie through her brain.

What would it be like to be someone like him?

He obviously wasn't rich. But he was free. He didn't have to bear the cross of a prestigious family name. He didn't have to have weight of a decades old family business on his shoulders. It must be heaven on earth.

The door of the bakery gave way under the force of her shove.

She could see her family sitting around a table in the corner.

They sure didn't look happy.

Wonderful. If her life was a movie it would be called, "It's a Wonderful Life."

Larry was standing in the middle of the dingy apartment, wiping sweat from his face. Home sweet home was one small room in a run-down complex that held six low-income tenants. How he wished that he could escape it. In fact, it was with that goal in mind he had spent an hour auctioning off imaginary cattle.

His voice was exhausted.

Still, it was almost showtime and he needed to be prepared.

He gave himself a thumbs up in the full-length mirror before him and then launched into another round of vocal exercises.

A pounding noise at the door caught his attention.

“Larry, my man, you still going at it?” A pudgy face had poked through the doorway and was staring at him with undisguised curiosity.

“Yeah, I guess ya caught me,” Larry sputtered, struggling to catch his breath.

Herman forced his bulk through the open doorway and into the room. “You plan on practicing much longer?”

“Not much longer. Why do ya ask?”

“People are complaining. Hilda. That lady down the hall has been on night shift at the hog plant and she needs to get some sleep.”

“Come on. Was I that loud?”

“Were you that loud? Man. I’ve been to rock concerts that were quieter.” Herman placed his hands on his hips and surveyed the empty room like a commanding officer. “You planning on moving some furniture in here someday?”

“I dunno. I’ll get to it when I can.”

“Well, no need to rush yourself.” Herman wrinkled his nose as he suppressed a sneeze. “If I don’t get your rent payment by tomorrow night you’ll be moving on outta here.”

“What? Yesterday you said that I had till the end of the month.”

“You can’t go on living in the past man. Today is a new day and tomorrow will be moving day if you don’t get me your payment. That’s just how it is.”

Larry stared into the cruel grey eyes of his landlord. “Listen, I went to law school and...”

“And you dropped out after a month cause it was too hard on you, everybody in town knows that story. You’re a quitter.”

“That’s not true! I dropped out because...Well, ain’t your concern why I dropped out. You still can’t be kickin me out on a day’s notice!”

“Hmm.” Herman pretended to consider this. “That’s an interesting argument. Too bad it’s stupid! The thing is, it isn’t what you know that counts in a small town, it’s who you know.” Herman’s fat belly jiggled like a bowl full of jelly as he laughed. “You’ve got twenty-four hours. If you get the money, fine. If not, I’m afraid that you’ll hafta to move on. That’s all you need to know.” With that, Herman maneuvered himself out the door and slammed it shut behind him.

Wasn’t that a fine Merry Christmas.

Larry licked his dry lips.

He needed a glass of water.

As he rinsed the only cup he owned under the kitchen faucet, his thoughts wandered back toward his encounter with Melissa Raynard.

What would it be like to be someone like that? Someone who never had to worry about where their next rent payment would come from?

It must be heaven on earth.

Larry finished cleaning his cup and then began filling it with water.

He had to get better at auctioning things off than he had been.

Sure this apartment smelled like dust and mold but where could he go if he got kicked out of it?

He had to claim that thousand dollar cheque.

The water felt soothing as it dribbled down his throat. He finished his drink and then headed back to his position before the full-length mirror that hung in his empty living room.

He had twenty minutes to whip himself into shape.

He started back into his routine. If his life was a Christmas movie it would be Rocky. Granted, Rocky without the muscles, looks, or the desire to use violence to solve his problems. Still, he could hope for a happy Hollywood ending.

Even if that seemed to be pretty far-fetched at the moment.

They sat before a large window.

Occasionally, people passing by on the street outside stopped, looked inside and then continued on their way.

It was a small town after all.

Entertainment needed be taken where it was found.

“You’d think we were onstage.” Melissa frowned as she took in the roomful of other customers staring at them. “Why couldn’t we have discussed this somewhere a little more private?”

“That’s what I said,” Grandmother grumbled. “People in this town should be minding their own business, not ours.” Grandmother was a short, plump woman in a grey parka and with a head of curly brown hair. She pursed her lips and then continued. “You know how people gossip around here.”

“Well, I for one like to keep an eye on what our employees are doing,” Karen stated.

“So do I,” Jack agreed.

“You never know what these waitresses will try to get away with,” Karen said, peering suspiciously over her horn tipped glasses at her surroundings.

“Exactly. This way we can kill two birds with one stone,” Jack took a sip from his coffee cup and grimaced. “My word! I’ve tasted wall paper paste that was better than this.” He took another tentative sip and then spat it back into his cup. “After we’re done here I think I’m going to need to have a discussion with our waitresses. A very serious discussion.”

Jack was a very distinguished looking man, complete with a expensive grey business suit and black briefcase. His expression was dark as he studied his coffee cup.

“If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a thousand times. I think we should fire them,” Karen said in a sharp tone as she shuffled through the papers on the table before.

“Not now, at Christmas,” Grandmother interjected. “That’d be cruel.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Karen snapped as she pulled the paper she had been looking for from its place in the pile. “If an asset isn’t producing, it needs to be replaced. If a waitress isn’t doing

her job, she should go elsewhere.”

“I couldn’t agree with you more,” Jack grumbled. “First it’s bad coffee, the next thing you know it’ll be bad baking. We have to nip this in the bud.”

Years of family meetings had taught her well. Melissa knew her opinion wouldn’t be welcome so she scanned the bakery. To the west of her there was a counter, a cash register and a selection of coffee and tea. To the south of her was a long glass case packed with freshly baked treats. On a normal day she’d be salivating over this selection, however, today she seemed to have lost her desire.

If she could she would go home and read a book.

Jack continued to inspect his coffee cup as if it had been filled with radioactive waste.

“Let’s get down to business, shall we? We have a lot to do today!” Karen, a tall, thin woman, looked up from the paper she was studying. “I was reading that power of attorney agreement last night and it says that you have the power to do whatever you choose with the estate and also to enlist help in doing so.”

Melissa closed her eyes, letting herself float on the pleasant aroma of fresh baking.

“Melissa, are you listening to me?”

She jerked herself out of her pleasant reverie. “Yes, yes, of course.”

“And what do you have to say for yourself?” The stern face of her Aunt Karen glared at her over the small table that lay between them.

“Nothing. I didn’t ask Grandfather to do this.”

“Don’t be silly. You told him to say those things, so you and your mother could take money from the family business,” Karen snapped.

Grandmother seemed about to say something then thought better of it.

“That’s silly.” Melissa felt like screaming but somehow she kept her voice under control. “Grandfather set this up himself. I couldn’t change it even if I wanted to.”

“I’m not so sure about that,” Karen pursed her lips. “Frankly, with

the amount of money at stake here I think it'd be far better if someone else in the family took care of things...like Jack and myself."

"I agree, one hundred percent," Jack said as he nodded his distinguished silver head.

"But that's not what Grandfather wanted!"

"Hm." Karen adjusted her stark black dress. "That may be, but we have other factors to consider. The future of our family business for example."

"Our business?" Melissa felt anger overwhelming her normally reserved emotions. "Why does this have to be so complicated? I could care less about the money. If there's a decision to be made, I'll let the family know about it and you can make the decision. All we really need right now is someone to sign papers and why can't I do that?"

Jack sighed as he shoved his coffee cup to the side. "That's all well and good to say that, but what if there's a crisis?"

"That's why phones were invented," Melissa said with a glibness that she didn't feel. She wished more than ever that she could escape this. "Besides, you couldn't draw up a new power of attorney if you wanted to. Grandfather isn't legally capable of signing anything in the state he's in now."

"Of course he is," Karen said in a voice full of confidence. "Have you seen him? He's gotten a lot better lately."

Once again Grandmother seemed about to say something but she was cut off before she could get her words out.

"I think there's only one thing to do," Karen continued as she toyed with a black pen.

"What's that?" Melissa didn't really care to hear the answer but she had to play along.

"Your Grandmother is going to her lawyer tomorrow to ask him to rescind the current power of attorney. After that is complete, we can draw up a new one."

"I told you. Grandfather can't make a new agreement! If you rescind the current power of attorney then no one will be able to sign anything.

Where will the business be then?”

“I wouldn’t concern myself with that. The man is healthy, so he can and will sign a new agreement. ” Karen smiled a savage smile. “In fact, I went to see him yesterday to talk about this very issue. He agreed that this was the right course of action.”

“What?” Melissa snorted with contempt. “If he said that he had no idea what he was saying. Have you asked the nurses or the doctors for their opinion?”

The silence in the room said all that needed to be said.

Melissa took a breath and continued. “Grandpa doesn’t care about money anymore. He doesn’t even know what’s going on in his own hospital room. Let him live out the life he has left in peace.”

“Hm,” Kathy pressed her lips together. “Melissa. I know you mean well, but really, what experience do you have in these matters?” Karen stood and plucked her fur coat from the back of a nearby chair. “We’ll be in touch with further direction. Jack could you come outside with me for a moment?”

Jack nodded.

“Oh, and you should come too.” Karen pointed at her mother. The orders had been given and they were promptly carried out. The unhappy trio left the room.

Melissa sank into her chair, feeling the weight of shame. If there was anything to be thankful for in this moment it was that the customers in the room were all involved in their own conversations and were ignoring this one.

Everyone had seen the Raynards argue before.

It was getting old.

“Can I get you more coffee?”

Melissa looked up at the cheerful young waitress standing before her. “No thanks, I’m done here.”

The waitress nodded and began clearing the table as Melissa stood, preparing to leave. Her overtired head processed possible solutions to this situation but found none.

Grandfather had been ravaged by a disease beyond his control. Leaving him without a legal guardian would be foolish at best. Without anyone to sign the paperwork the money keeping him in the care that he needed would be cut off. What would happen then?

Grandfather wouldn't be able to stay where he was. As a condition for providing care, the Hospital required an active Power of Attorney agreement to be on file.

Her duty was clear, she had to stop the motion to rescind the power of attorney.

Snow-flakes battered against her face as Melissa stepped from the warmth of the bakery into the chill of winter.

Her family had moved on. Thank goodness. She didn't know if she could stand another minute of arrogant condescension.

She made her way across the street. If she went left she would be at the post office, however she didn't need that at the moment. She turned right, heading toward the lawyer's office.

As if echoing her mood, an icy wind blew snowflakes down the barren streets. All indications were that a good old-fashioned Canadian blizzard was on the build.

What a family she had. A tin of mixed nuts. Or perhaps it would be more truthful to say that they were a few nuts short of a full tin.

She chuckled despite herself.

Whatever they were, they had quite a way of preparing for Christmas.

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