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Thank you!
The Proposal
a Christmas short story

* *

by Becky Wade
In the instant after a loud popping sound ripped through Amber Richardson's car, her '07 Chrysler Sebring lost its handling. It tugged her left at forty-five miles an hour into the night-dark oncoming lane of the two-lane road. Amber shrieked, her fingers tightening reflexively around the steering wheel, her headlights cutting across the broken white line. An oncoming car swerved and missed her by inches, its horn howling in indignation. The bright white lights of another car hurtled toward her, nearly blinding.

Just as she was about to follow her instinct to stomp on her brake and wrench the wheel, a memory of a long-ago Driver's Ed teacher saying never to stomp on the brake or wrench the wheel sliced into her mind. If she followed her instincts, she might send her car into a spin.

She wrestled against the pull of the wheel. She was a mother! A head-on collision would be really, really bad right now. December twentieth was a terrible day to die.

She managed to white-knuckle the Sebring back to her side of the street just as the car with the glaring lights passed safely by.
A tremendous thumping sound rose around her. What in the world? Amber let the car's drag slow it until she was able to jam it flush against the curb.

She blinked out the front windshield. Her breath was trembling every bit as much as her muscles.

She'd been on her way to the fire station to bring her boyfriend Will his cell phone. He'd called twenty minutes ago to say that he suspected he'd accidentally left it at her house when they'd hung out last night. Sure enough, she'd located his phone in no time. Since he was a firefighter and on duty this evening, she'd immediately volunteered to drive it over to him.

Truth be told, she'd have volunteered to do all kinds of things she had no interest in doing for his sake. Deep-sea diving. Climbing Kilimanjaro. Trekking across Death Valley. You betcha.

Once her heart rate slowed from runaway terror level to a dull, shaken thud thud thud, she let herself out of the car.

She saw at once that the culprit had been her driver's side rear tire. The rubber had split along one of the treads and now hung around the rim like a dead animal. This wasn't just a flat tire. This was a blowout.
Thank God she hadn't run into those other cars when she'd veered out of control. And thank God her six-year-old son Jayden hadn't been with her. He was at his buddy Bryce's house for dinner.

She was alone, unusually so, on this December night. She and her undriveable car.

Amber took in her surroundings. The blowout had happened on the road where the station house was located. But the station was still about a mile away. Two churches, a library, a park, and numerous businesses dotted the distance between here and there.

She could call Will and ask him to come and get her. Except, one, she had his phone. And two, he was working. What if someone's Christmas tree caught on fire in the next ten minutes and the captain couldn't be found because he was rescuing his girlfriend?

She picked up her phone and hit her friend Meg's number. It went to voicemail. She tried Dana. Michelle. Lyndie. Amy. Not a single one picked up.

Growling with irritation, Amber checked the time. Eight o'clock on a Friday. No doubt all of her friends were out having Pinterest-worthy Christmas celebrations.
In Amber's case, December hadn't felt all that Pinterest-worthy. Instead, it had left her exhausted and depleted. This blowout was merely the straw that was breaking the nativity camel's back.

She frowned at the tire, her frustration mounting higher and higher until she let loose and kicked the busted rubber. The impact reverberated up her big toe and she wheezed against the pain.

She'd simply walk to the fire station. A mile wasn't that far. The near-freezing temperature tonight was only mostly (not completely) unbearable. And it wasn't like she'd be mugged or abducted or anything.

Probably.

Holley was a quaint north Texas town. This particular neighborhood had a perfectly respectable reputation.

She double-checked to make sure she had Will's phone then secured her purse resolutely over her shoulder. "You didn't kill yourself or anyone else," she muttered as she hit the Sebring's locks and set off. "You didn't wreck your car. Jayden's at a friend's house. So focus on the positive already."

Will would welcome her when she arrived at the station. That was a positive. He'd hug her and listen to her and look gorgeous in the process.

A few cars glided by. Amber kept her face firmly forward and zipped up her quilted jacket.
Christmastime.

She didn't want to be bah humbug about it, but honestly, it wrung her dry every year. In recent weeks, on top of mothering Jayden and working at her full-time nursing job, she'd had Christmas cards made, put together an elf costume for Jayden's school play, bought a tree, decorated the inside and outside of her duplex, made toffee for the neighbors, attended five parties, four programs, and one ornament exchange, and stretched her budget as far as it would go buying gifts.

She'd spread herself too thin. It was dumb, the way she did this to herself every December then spent the week after Christmas in a sort of coma, recuperating. Each year, when Thanksgiving rolled around, she told herself not to overdo it. To simplify and focus on the true meaning of the season. But then she'd look into Jayden's beloved, ornery, hopeful face. And it would hit her afresh that she was his only person.

Never was this fact more obvious, her shortcomings more weighty, than during the Christmas season. Amber's December craziness was her overcompensation for Jayden's lack of a father, siblings, and extended family. If she was being brutally honest, perhaps she was overcompensating for the lack of those things in her own life, too. The empty chairs at her table always saddened her the most at this time of year.
Her rocky relationship with her parents had culminated in a screaming match with her dad the night of her high school graduation. The fight had been so loud, so mean and hurtful, that she'd thrown her things into a suitcase and left Sanderson, Texas on a Greyhound bus. Back then, she'd been fatally sure of herself. Certain that her parents knew nothing and that she'd be better off managing her own life. She'd had no idea at the time that her actions would end up ushering in a decade of estrangement between herself and her mom and dad.

In the early months after she'd left home, pride and stubbornness had kept her from calling them. Then she'd gotten pregnant at the age of twenty-one. Her boyfriend at the time abandoned her as soon as she told him about the baby. She'd been too ashamed to contact her parents. More time had slipped past. Then more. Then more. The silence had grown too big to bridge.

Until she'd started dating Will. He'd lost his father when he was in college and his wife a few years later when she'd left him with their two daughters. He treasured family. From the beginning, he'd encouraged her to reconcile with hers. Last month, with Will's support behind her, she'd managed to screw up enough courage to call her mom and dad on Thanksgiving Day. She'd almost hung up and almost thrown up -- all before they'd even answered the phone.

Talking to them had been awkward and painful and cautiously joyful at the same time. The damage they'd done to one another would take time to repair,
and the lost years could never be recovered. But through the phone conversations they'd had over the past weeks, they'd begun to extend their fingertips toward one another again.

Recently, she'd told Will she felt ready to see them. Because of her work schedule, though, she wouldn't be able to swing a trip to Sanderson until after Christmas. Thus, the empty chairs around her table would remain empty through the holiday.

A car drew even with her, rolling alongside.

Amber's stomach clamped with fear.

"Ma'am?"

She cut a look in the direction of the street. An older man sat behind the wheel of a truck. "Is that your car back there with the blown out tire?"

"Sure is." Should she have admitted that? Am I the one who's stranded and helpless? Yes, sir! That's me. Um... Hadn't she heard that women were supposed to walk purposefully to deter attackers? Should she also hold a key in her hand to be used as a knife if necessary?

"If you have a spare tire, I can help you change it," he said.

She hadn't even thought about attempting to change the tire herself. It had been ages since she changed one, and the last time she'd had a friend at her
elbow the whole time, talking her through it. "Thanks, but I'm really close to... where I'm headed." She walked very purposefully.

"Can I give you a lift?

December twentieth wasn't just a terrible day to die. It was also a terrible day to be kidnapped. "I appreciate the offer, but I really am very close." She pointed at the nearest storefront which turned out to be a shuttered barbershop. Great. "Almost there!" Would he be offended if she brandished a key knife at him?

"All right then," he said. "Good night."

"Good night."

He drove off, and Amber released a pent-up exhalation. She watched his taillights in case he suddenly turned around and she needed to throw herself down an alley or something.

He didn't turn around.

It appeared that he hadn't been a kidnapper. Just a mannerly gentleman, like ninety-nine percent of Texan men.

Several store windows had been painted for the holidays. Others had Christmas lights strung along their eaves. A family of snowmen chortled at her from inside one window. *Merry Christmas!* had been written in a jovial font across another.
Amber dug her hands into her jacket pockets, and discovered the fuzzy red gloves she'd forgotten she'd stashed there. Gratefully, she slipped them on. Already, the tip of her nose stung from the cold. Tucking strands of her straight, shoulder-length brown hair behind icy ears, she wished for a hat, a scarf, and a much bulkier coat.

Just a few more blocks! *Will is at the finish line.*

She had a dating history filled with her terrible tendency to give her heart away to not-so-good guys. Because of that, she'd taken a five-year sabbatical from dating after Jayden's birth. She'd used the time to focus on her son and get her life in hand. She'd earned a degree. Found her way to God. Moved herself and Jayden into their cozy home.

Just last spring, she'd finally given herself permission to try dating again. She'd been wary and uncertain of herself. And then -- then! -- she'd met Will.

One of her favorite memories of him from this past autumn slid into her thoughts. She clung to it like a mug of cocoa, using it to warm her.

She'd been sick with the worst cold in the history of colds and unpacking groceries at warp speed because she was already late getting dinner started. Jayden kept zipping by on his scooter, screaming the theme song to Mickey Mouse Clubhouse.
"It's the Mickey Mouse Clubhouse," he roared. "Come inside; it's fun inside!"

Every muscle she had ached feverishly. She couldn't quit coughing. Her head pounded. When Jayden clipped her heel on one of his passes, she stilled, overcome by a wave of tears.

At that precise moment, her doorbell rang.

She answered it to find Will and his two teenage daughters, Madison and Taylor, standing on her porch.

Will's gray-blue eyes regarded her with sympathy and good humor. His dark blond hair looked faintly, endearingly messy. His body stood tall and strong, and he was holding a To Go bag from Holly's Kountry Kitchen. "In need of rescue?" he asked.

Gratitude suffused her. "Yes."

He shepherded her to the sofa, where he propped pillows behind her back. He slid a Nicholas Sparks movie (one that ended happily) into the DVD player because he was smart enough to know not to subject her to a sad-ending Sparks movie when she was already down.

Madison and Taylor bustled Jayden to his room to build a Hot Wheels course. Will got busy heating the soup he'd brought.
Amber relaxed into her sofa, dizzy with relief. She’d relied on no one but herself for a very long time. It meant a great deal to her to have Will here, offering help and support when she desperately needed it.

In no time, he was positioning a TV tray next to her. On it, he carefully set a bowl of vegetable beef soup, two slightly burned pieces of buttered toast, a fizzy glass of 7UP, and two Advil.

"I cannot express to you how grateful I am to you in this moment," she said.

He lifted an eyebrow, mouth curving. "Grateful enough to get us tickets to the Cowboys game this weekend?"

She laughed. "No." She could afford Cowboys tickets about as easily as a Lamborghini.

"That's what I thought. Good thing I don't need Cowboys tickets. All I need is for you to get better."

She reached for his hand. Immediately, he took it.

"Thank you," she said. "Truly. Thank you."

"You're welcome." He bent and kissed the back of her hand.

"Will! I have germs!"

He met her eyes, amused. "I'll take my chances."

"You firefighters are too brave for your own good."
"If I get sick, will you bring me soup?"

"I'll bring you soup," she promised.

He hadn't gotten sick.

What he'd done for her that day, and every other day since they'd started dating, communicated volumes about his character. Sorrow and single parenthood had matured Will, just like they'd matured Amber. He was honorable, kind, funny, sexy. Every single time their gazes locked, a delicious quiver ran through her. If only....

An icy raindrop plunked against her cheek, jerking her back to the present. Rain? No! She glanced up to see droplets plummeting down from an inky sky uplit by street lamps. Her boot tip hit an uneven lip in the sidewalk, and she pitched forward. She caught her weight on her other leg, threw both arms out for balance, and managed not to go down.

December twentieth was a terrible day to fall and break your wrists.

*Will is at the finish line,* she told herself repeatedly. *Will is at the finish line.*

At last, the beige brick bulk of the fire station came into view. Thank God! A flagpole stood outside, and light poured from the windows. Even the little old-fashioned dance hall on the far side of the station glowed tonight.

She tried the station's door. Locked. Rang the bell and stood shivering.
A twenty-something firefighter answered the door. "Hey, Amber."

"Hey, Ryan."

"How are you doing?" he asked companionably, leading the way into the building.

"I had a tire blow out on the way here and was almost kidnapped—"

"Kidnapped!"

"Well, not really. The man who stopped turned out to be a Good Samaritan. But I did almost freeze, was rained on, and nearly broke my wrists."

"Huh?"

She came to a stop and told him the story through clacking teeth. A lock of hair stuck to her cheek. Also, her words seemed to be running into each other like bumper cars.

Ryan looked mildly panicked. "Will's in the bay. How 'bout you go find him?"

"I'll do that in a second--"

"It might be good to go now--"

"I'll just run to the restroom first."

"Um...."

"Thanks!" She shut herself into the bathroom off the hallway. She didn't want to see Will with hair stuck to her face and spouting bumper car words.
After stashing her gloves, she turned on the hot water and stuck her numb white hands beneath the faucet. Gradually, feeling returned. She finger combed her damp hair until the style fell somewhere between good hair day and drowned rat. With a paper towel, she smoothed rain from her face and wiped away the mascara smears beneath her eyelashes.

She and Will had been dating for seven months. Seven months that had been dipped in happiness the way an ice cream could be dipped in melted chocolate coating. She loved him, and he loved her. They'd talked a lot about marriage, and she wanted to marry him. In fact, she wanted to marry him so much it frightened her.

In recent weeks, though, the wedding talk had petered out. Everything else about their relationship had continued beautifully, but the wedding talk had regressed, and Amber had begun to feel a shifting unease.

Had Will changed his mind? The idea that he had made her want to cry every time she thought about it. Not just for herself, but for Jayden who'd let Will and Will's daughters into his heart.

She was ready to move forward with Will. Will was the sort of gold star level boyfriend who brought his girlfriend vegetable beef soup! Even so, he might not be ready to move forward with her.
It couldn't be, could it, that she'd waited years to fall in love and had nevertheless, once again, fallen for the wrong man?

No. It couldn't be. Surely.

God had forgiven her for her past mistakes. She'd forgiven herself. She'd left her destructive dating habits behind.

She drew herself tall and considered her reflection in the mirror. She'd changed into a long lavender sweater, skinny jeans, and flat-heeled black boots before leaving home because she'd known this would be the only time she'd see Will today. She hadn't wanted to appear in her work scrubs.

Back in the hallway, she discovered Ryan, still waiting for her. Strange. Had he been afraid that she'd have a nervous breakdown in the bathroom?

"Good?" he asked.

"Yep. Did you say Will's in the bay?"

"He is." He guided her in that direction as if he didn't trust her to find her way there on her own.

Ryan was cute. All the firefighters were very cute. Every one. Coming here was like stepping into a firefighter wall calendar. The guys were well-built and friendly and heroic, and they all wore navy cargo pants and navy shirts with the department's shield printed over their hearts.
A couple of months ago, Amber had attended a demonstration they'd done at Jayden's elementary school. The all-female teaching staff had turned out for the demonstration in droves. And not for the fire safety tips.

Ryan and Amber reached the garage-type area of the station that housed the truck and the engine. She thanked him, and he gave her a salute and continued on in a different direction.

Amber made her way into the cavernous space. Ordinarily when she visited the station, she could hear the thrum of distant conversation and activity. Tonight, the building vibrated with quiet. Maybe Will was over by the--

The strains of "Jingle Bells" suddenly swelled through the space. Three firefighters appeared from between the vehicles.

Amber jumped back with reflexive fright, her palms splaying out against the wall behind her.

The firefighters snapped their fingers in time to the music. None of them were Will, but through Will, she'd met all of them at one time or another.

They sang along with the track's opening line while grinning. "Dashing through the snow in a one horse open sleigh." Over their navy uniforms, they wore their beige turnout pants with the reflective yellow stripes near the hems, held up by suspenders. Santa hats perched rakishly on their heads.
What? What was this? Amber looked in both directions for other people, for some clue that might explain why the guys were singing a Christmas song.

To her.

To her? No. Except, yes. Now they were beckoning her to follow them between the engine and truck.

As she walked forward, motion from above caught her eye and she spotted a teen perched high on the truck. He pointed a smartphone at her.

"What fun it is," they sang, "to ride and sing a sleighing song tonight."

They reached the rear wall. Three more firemen waited. Will still wasn't among them, but Ryan was, and when he caught her eye, he winked. These three were dressed the same as the first group, except they wore felt reindeer antlers. They took over from their buddies, picking up the song, bobbing their chins to the beat, and doing a step that looked like the grapevine. They executed it a couple of times in imperfect unison.

She smiled hesitantly at them. She had no experience with this. Was she supposed to bob her head, too? Try out a grapevine?

Had one of Will's daughters put them up to this? Had Will arranged this? But why? This whole thing felt very surreal, as if she was the only normal person in a Christmas-themed dream.
The group slowly led her to the side of the building. Ryan pushed open an exit door, and the guys pointed outdoors. Another teen with a camera waited there, backing up as Amber stepped out.

Fake snow blanketed a pathway from the station to the dance hall next door. Her friends—oh my goodness! Some of her closest friends lined the sides of the path. Her co-workers. Two friends from church and two friends who had boys Jayden's age. No wonder none of them had answered when she'd tried to call them earlier.

They were all bundled up against the cold and wore light-up Christmas necklaces that looked like strings of Christmas lights. They rocked back and forth arm in arm, laughing and singing. "Jingle bells, jingle bells, jingle all the way."

Amber made her way down the snowy lane, blushing furiously and laughing and still clutching her purse like she was Queen Elizabeth. This was such a set-up! Such a wonderful, embarrassing set-up.

Her boss, Dr. Dean, held the side entrance of the dance hall open for her. Cautiously, she stepped inside. The only illumination came from two shining lanterns flanking the door on the inside. The rest of the interior lay in shadow. Amber had visited the hall a few times before. She could sense the room's old wooden floor, the posts interspersed throughout the space, the numerous tall
windows. She could also sense a large number of people gathered deep in the room's swaths of darkness. Waiting silently.

She might pass out. She wasn't particularly shy. But to be the sudden subject of... whatever this was, had sent her heart into overdrive. She was scared to let her mind leap ahead to what all this might mean.

Waiting in the pool of lantern light were Will's daughters. Next to them stood Will's mom, who was holding Jayden's hand. Love for Jayden rushed through Amber, warm and deep. He wasn't at Bryce's where she'd left him. He was here. Bryce's mom must be in on the surprise, too.

Will's daughters, his mom, and Jayden carried on the song. "....bells on bobtail ring, making spirits bright." The music expanded through the hall, filling it with Christmas cheer.

Madison took Amber's purse, then spun her into a dance twirl. Next, Taylor stepped in front of her and did a funny Running Man type of move. Will's mom hug-danced with Amber for a few beats. Last, Jayden came forward. His smile stretched his little face and revealed his missing teeth. He took hold of her hands and shook his rear end in a way that exhibited neither coordination nor rhythm.

His mother was very proud.
Amber swept him into her arms and swung him around. "Great job, Buddy!" she whispered near his ear.

"Thanks, Mom."

"What's going on here?"

"Big surprise!" He wriggled to get down. She set him on his feet and he dashed back to Will's mom. Everyone sang the chorus with enthusiasm. "Oh, what fun it is to ride in a one horse open sleigh!"

All at once, the overhead lights came on, revealing a scene bursting with color. Amber blinked. The room did indeed hold *lots* of people. Friends of Will's and hers from every area of their lives stood in two even groups. They'd left an empty aisle running from where she stood straight down the middle of the crowd.

At the end of the aisle stood Will.

He'd dressed in the sage green sweater she'd often told him was her favorite. The lines of his body were uncompromisingly masculine, his square jaw and killer bedroom eyes achingly familiar. He was holding something behind his back. As she started toward him, he pulled his arm forward, revealing a bouquet of flowers.

Oh boy. Oh boy. *Don't pass out, Amber!*

Her pulse rattled like a tambourine.
Will looked powerfully strong and also vulnerable, standing alone and apart from everyone else, holding flowers.

She'd been afraid that he might not want to marry her. And now... this.

She couldn't believe he was putting himself out there in such a public way. He'd enlisted the help of all these people! It blew her mind to think that they'd managed to keep this secret from her. She worked for the town doctor! She knew everything that had happened and ever would happen in Holley, Texas.

Except this monumental thing that seemed to revolve around her.

The lyrics to the song ended, but the notes continued. As if on cue, the volume softened the way it did in church when it was time to pray.

She reached Will, accepted the flowers, then threw her arms around him. They were both shaking.

"Are you all right?" he murmured.

"Other than the fact that I might have a heart attack, yes. You?"

"Other than the fact that I might have a heart attack, yes."

She pulled back enough to smile at him. Ah, his beloved face. He'd neatly combed his hair. Shaved. His rugged features held an expression both sheepish and serious.
"I talked with Madison and Taylor a while back," he said, just loud enough for her to hear. Everyone in the hall was staring at them, but the music covered their conversation with a layer of privacy. "I... told them I wanted to ask you to marry me, and they insisted on helping me plan the proposal because they didn't think I could manage it on my own."

The “I wanted to ask you to marry me” part poured over her like liquid delight. This explained why he'd stopped talking to her about marriage. He'd been planning for this day.

"This is what you get," he continued dryly, "when teenage girls help you plan. You get a surprise they can upload to YouTube." He gave a small smile.

Amber laughed. "I'm totally surprised. That's for sure."

"You are?"

"Yes. I'm going to look like a goofball in the YouTube video."

"You look beautiful. I look like a goof, but I thought, well, if I propose to her in front of all these people like the girls want, it'll be harder for her to turn me down. I decided I was willing to look like an idiot to up my chances with you."

"What're you waiting for?" a male voice called out. Amber looked to the side and saw that it was the fire chief with his bushy white mustache who'd spoken. He gave them an eager thumbs up.
"Thanks, Chief," Will replied. Everyone laughed.

Will got down on one knee, reached into his pocket, and pulled free a red velvet ring box.

A groundswell of gasping, whistles, and sighing moved through the crowd.

Part of her wanted to blurt out, *Yes! My goodness! Get up, sweetheart. I do!* But this was Will's moment to speak and hers to be quiet. Will was actually, right at this moment, proposing to her.

One of her hands clasped the flowers. The other lifted involuntarily to cover her mouth in a gesture of wonder mixed with self-consciousness. Yikes! She hoped her nose wasn't still bright pink from the cold.

"I love you." Will’s voice roughened with emotion. He looked directly into her eyes and seemed to see and cherish everything that she was, right down to the very last detail. "I love you, Amber. I'd like nothing more in the world than to be your husband. Will you marry me?"

"Yes," she answered, her lips quivering and tears piling up on her lashes. "Yes, I'll marry you." She lifted her chin to address the room at large. "I said yes!"

A cheer went up. Applause. Shouted congratulations.
He slipped the ring onto her finger. The ring! A princess cut diamond surrounded by a vintage-style platinum setting of tiny diamonds. In recent months, they'd looked into a few jewelry store windows during shopping trips. He must have filed her comments away because he'd remembered the *exact* style she loved best. Air left her lungs in an astonished huff as she regarded the ring. On her finger. Her ring!

She tugged Will's lapels until he returned to standing. He stepped in and lowered his head. She went to her tiptoes in her boots to kiss him. The audience sent up a renewed shout of pleasure then started talking excitedly amongst themselves.

When she and Will stepped apart, Amber laughed breathlessly. "I really can't believe this. I... I guess you didn't accidentally leave your phone at my place last night."

"No. I left it at your place on purpose."

"So that you could call and ask me to bring it to you."

He hefted a shoulder. "I had to think of a way to get you here."

"I...." The challenges she'd faced on her way to the station were already taking on a comical tinge. "I had a tire blowout on the drive over."

His face turned instantly solemn. "A tire blowout?"
She nodded. "A mile from here. But it's fine. I mean, everything and everyone except the tire are fine. I, personally, am way better than fine at this moment."

"You could have called me."

"On what? I had your phone. Also, I thought you were working."

"I took the day off."

She smiled. They were engaged!

"I'm sorry about the tire blowout, Amber."

"It's okay. The walk to get here was worth every step." And she didn't just mean the walk from her car to the fire station. She also meant the walk she'd taken over the course of her lifetime. "It was worth every step. Times one hundred. I love you."

Another quick kiss. "I love you."

She intertwined her fingers with his, and together, they angled to take in the scene. Music continued to flow through the space. Many of the guests were already in line at a long banquet table holding a vast assortment of Christmas cookies. A commercial-sized coffee maker and coffee fixings filled a side table. "Did everyone bring cookies?" she whispered, touched.

"Everyone," Will answered.

"Who decorated? Meg?"
"Meg."

Meg had excellent taste and deep pockets. When Amber had first come to Holley, Jayden had been a toddler and Meg had been her very first friend. Both she and Meg had experienced heartbreak in the pursuit of love, which had ended up bonding them. They'd been close ever since.

Amber spotted Meg across the room. She caught her eye and waved. "Great job!" she mouthed.

The beautiful, sweet-hearted blonde waved back and blew her a kiss. Thick, creamy candles in mason jars sat on wooden stumps of varying heights all the way down the length of the cookie table's runner. A sprig of greenery had been tied to the top of each jar with a red and white gingham ribbon. The same ribbon stitched in and out of the wreaths hanging from the posts that held up the old-fashioned tin ceiling. "It looks beautiful in here."

"I agree," Will said.

"Where are our kids?"

He gestured with his chin. "Over there. Madison and Taylor are keeping an eye on Jayden. It looks like he's playing with Addie Porter."

Several of their friends approached, each of whom had a story to share about how they'd assisted with the planning of the evening and the keeping of Will's secret. Their kind smiles and congratulations multiplied Amber's joy. She
couldn't quit grinning. *We're engaged! Will asked me to marry him. We're going to be married!*

When a pocket of quiet opened around them, Will lifted her bouquet from her and set it into a mason jar on the table with the coffee. The jar had already been half filled with water. Meg had thought of everything.

"Should we hit the cookie table?" she asked.

"In just a minute. I...."

She waited.

"Now remember. I'm the guy who just proposed and you said yes and we're both really happy."

"Thanks for reminding me."

"I have one more surprise. I'm hoping it's going to be okay with you."

"I can't think of anything you could do tonight that wouldn't be okay with me, Will McGrath."

"I invited your family."

Everything inside her went still.

"They're here," he said.

"Here?"
He squeezed her hand. "When I decided to propose, I called and spoke with your dad. It's tradition, you know, to speak to a woman's father before proposing."

Her lips came open. Her mom and dad were here? She was going to see them *now* after ten years of separation?

"They wanted to be here tonight," Will said.

Her parents worked, and December was so busy, and Sanderson was an eight-hour drive from Holley. When she'd talked with her mom and dad about the possibility of a visit, Amber had suggested and assumed that she'd be the one to make the trip. It somewhat amazed her that they'd been willing to put in the effort to come.

"They're standing over there." Will motioned to the corner.

She gathered her nerve and looked in that direction. Sure enough, her mother and father stood in a small huddle, talking. They weren't holding drinks or cookies. They weren't looking in her direction. They both appeared drawn and nervous.

Her family. After all this time. To look at them again with her own eyes was another impossible-to-believe moment in a night full of them.

"What do you think?" Will asked.
"I.... I think that December twentieth is a good day for reunions. Don't you?"

"I do. Want me to go over there with you?"

"Please."

Worry pricked her as they crossed the room. She hadn't been a good daughter. Down deep, she didn't feel that she'd fully earned back her right to a relationship with her mom and dad. If they decided to reject her now, her past actions would justify that decision.

When they were a few yards away, her dad glanced up and caught sight of her. His face went blank. He'd always been burly and appeared to have added more padding over the years. He'd lost much of his hair, and what remained had turned gray.

Her mom's face bore deeper lines than Amber remembered, but she still wore her dark hair in the same short, teased-high style.

Without hesitation, her mom came toward Amber with her arms outstretched. Mom had always been the quieter parent, the one who'd followed her dad's lead. Amber stepped into her mother's arms. Emotion burned Amber's throat.

Her mom was an inch or two shorter than herself. Small. An amazing realization, because in Amber's memory, she stood so tall. The familiar scent of
her mother's drugstore body powder engulfed Amber with memories of bedtime 
hugs and sitting beside her at the kitchen table doing homework.

    "Congratulations," her mom whispered brokenly. "I'm so happy for you, 
honey. So happy to see you."

    "I'm happy to see you, too," Amber managed. "Thank you for coming."

    "I hope it's all right that we showed up like this. Without warning."

    "It's definitely all right."

They straightened apart, and Amber faced her dad. He looked pained. 
Neither of them moved. The remembrance of their fight and the awful 
things they'd both said rose between them. Excruciating. Uncomfortable. 

Then suddenly, his weathered cowboy face cracked into a sad, 
affectionate smile. "Amber girl."

That smile and his old nickname for her spoke more words than a sermon 
could have. For the first time in a decade, she felt the strength of her father's 
arms band around her.

    "Daddy," she breathed.

    He inclined his head. "My temper's gotten the best of me too many times. 
It cost me you, and I'm real, real sorry."

    "I'm sorry, too." She'd had no idea how much she'd value seeing them, 
hugging them, having the opportunity to hear her dad apologize and to apologize
to him in return. She'd carried the loss of her parents a very long distance. Somewhere along the way she'd told herself she didn't need them.

Maybe they'd never be close-knit the way some families were. Maybe they'd have future challenges and disagreements. But she did need this link to them.

"Forgive me?" her dad asked.

"Yes. Do you forgive me?"

"Yes." He patted her back. "You've got yourself a good man. I'm glad for you."

When her dad released her, Amber focused on Will, who was grinning despite the moisture shining in his eyes. Ever since they'd started dating, Will had wanted this for her.

Jayden came running in their direction, chasing Addie. Amber shot out an arm and grabbed him like an outfielder snagging a grounder. Her son stood panting, holding a half-eaten sugar cookie dripping crumbs. "This is Jayden," she said simply.

Her parents smiled and greeted him.

"Hello, sir." Jayden had to tilt his head way back to look into the adults' faces. "Hello, ma'am." He was a very active and occasionally mischievous kid.
He'd learned early that good manners and charm could sometimes get him out of scrapes.

This was not the time to explain to Jayden who these people were. For that conversation, Amber would need quiet and time. For tonight, this was perfect. This beginning was enough.

Jayden tugged on Amber's sweater. "Were you surprised, mom? By the song and the propose—whatever it was?"

"The proposal. And yes. I was very surprised and now I'm very, very happy. Are you happy?"

"Yeah. So Will gave you a ring, huh?"

She showed him the ring and experienced a fresh spurt of awe.

"I liked the dancing you did when your mom first came in," Will told Jayden.

"Thanks." Jayden held up his palm, and he and Will went through the high five, bump, slap, and shimmy routine they did every time anything good happened.

When they finished, Amber extended her hands to both of her guys. Will and Jayden took hold.
Will had given her the best engagement gifts ever. Dancing firefighters. Singing friends. A bouquet. A ring. A cookie party. And to top it all off, her parents, too.

She gazed at him, overcome with a sense of how fortunate she was. Hope, living and rich, weaved upward within her.

And wasn't that, wasn't hope exactly what Christmas was all about? December twentieth was an excellent day to get engaged.

Will bent his head and kissed her hand, just the way he'd done the day he'd brought her the soup. "Merry Christmas, Amber."

"Merry Christmas, Will."

"And to all a good night!" Jayden yelled, his young voice ringing through the joy-filled hall.

Read Meg's love story in the novel Undeniably Yours, which will be FREE for e-download at online bookstores starting December 4th.

Merry Christmas to all!
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About the Author

Becky's a California native who attended Baylor University, met and married a Texan, and settled in Dallas. She published historical romances for the general market before putting her career on hold for several years to care for her three children. When God called her back to writing, Becky knew He meant for her to turn her attention to Christian fiction. She loves writing funny, heartwarming, and inspirational contemporary romance! She's a Carol Award, INSPY Award, and Inspirational Reader's Choice Award winning author.

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