

Chapter 1

I have to stop going places with Jolene Meister. Every time I go, catastrophe results.

“Merry, could you drop me off at my parents’ after work?” she asked as we returned from lunch. “My father brought me in this morning.”

It sounded a reasonable request to me. I’d only have to go out of my way a couple of blocks.

“Sure. No problem,” I said innocently and precipitated my involvement in murder. Again.

But first I met Airy Bennett.

Jolene and I had grabbed a quick lunch at Ferretti's. I had an Amhearst version of Caesar salad (there were bacon bits and red cabbage in it and not an anchovy in sight) and Jolene ate a huge plate of eggplant parmigiana.

"How can you eat that and not gain weight?" I asked. "It's swimming in oil. It's not fair."

"Fair?" she said, leveling a forkful of dripping eggplant at me. "Fair? Is it fair that you have two gorgeous men chasing you? Huh?" She snorted, a noise that sounded decidedly odd coming from her delicate nose. "Don't give me fair, Merrileigh Kramer. I'm not listening."

I grinned at her like an idiot. I'd never in my life had one man chasing me with any real enthusiasm, and suddenly I had two. It made me feel nervous. It made me feel powerful. It made me giggle.

It also made me check over my shoulder because Jack was in town and Curt didn't know it yet. I hadn't quite figured out how to break the news to my new boyfriend that my old boyfriend, suddenly ardent, had come a-courting. And worse yet, Jack didn't know that a warm, delightful and charming man named Curt existed.

My nickname isn't Marshmallow Merry for nothing. No spine. No guts. No idea how to keep this wonderfully ego-boosting situation from turning into a roast-the-Marshmallow pyre.

The one thing I could say in my defense was that Jack had only been here two days. I just hoped each man was full of the Christmas spirit when he heard about the other.

Jolene, beautiful Jolene, eyed me with something like admiration as she swallowed a mouthful of eggplant. “I haven’t had anyone chasing me in years,” she said, her lovely brown eyes looking forlorn beneath her brown bangs.

“Of course not,” I said. “You’ve been married.”

She shrugged carelessly -- which said volumes about her view of marriage. “But I’m not married now.”

“True and false. You’re not divorced either. Maybe you and Arnie will get back together yet.”

Again the careless shrug. Poor Arnie. I hoped he wasn’t pining for her somewhere because it looked like he’d waste away to nothing before Jolene paid any attention.

When we finished our lunches, we wrapped ourselves in our winter coats, scarves and hats and took our checks to the cashier by the door. As we walked outside into the dingy December Tuesday and the winter wind bit through my new red coat, I knew my nose was turning almost as rosy as my wool blend. And the two scars on my nose that I’d gotten in a bike accident when I was eight years old would be turning a contrasting blue.

Ah, well, I thought. If I smile, I can have a patriotic face: red nose, white teeth and blue scars.

Gene Autry was serenading downtown Amhearst about Rudolph the Rednosed Reindeer over a tinny public address system set up by Santa’s little house. How come a cowboy had made millions off a deer’s red nose, and all I got from mine was a color scheme?

I was facing this Christmas holiday with some excitement (two men) but also with much misgiving. For the first time ever, I wouldn't be at home with my family for our warm and wonderful celebration. No tree with Grandma Kramer's direct-from-the-Holy-Lands angel on the top. No hot mulled cider that Dad tried to foist on anyone who entered our home. No marvelous turkey smells and no Aunt Sissy's pumpkin pie.

Every time I thought about my holiday solitude, my heart sighed.

It was my job that prevented a trip to Pittsburg and home. I had only Christmas Day off, if you can call being on call "off". I kept telling myself that I didn't mind. I was pressing on with my new life. I was independent. But I didn't believe me.

I glanced at Jolene as we walked down Main Street. She had her family right here in town. She would have a warm, cozy Christmas. She wouldn't sit all alone, staring at her cat. That would be me.

But, I reminded myself before I started weeping on the spot, I was the one with two men!

Not that I needed two or wanted two. One would certainly be more than enough. I just had to decide which one. Most of the time I thought I knew what I wanted, but then I'd get scared and back off. Waffling Wanda was the alter-ego of Marshmallow Merry.

Curt was an artist who looked like a linebacker. He had dark curly hair and glasses, and he claimed he was falling in love with me. The trouble was that I'd only known him for a few weeks. True love needed time to grow. I knew that because my mother had told me so all my life.

Still, when he looked at me a certain way, my knees buckled, I had trouble breathing, and my heart *barumped* in time with the Minute Waltz.

Jack was a CPA who acted like a charming, late-blooming teenager. He had straight light brown hair and a smile to die for. I'd known him for almost ever and had gone with him for six years. Six *long* years. He hadn't been able to commit though, and finally I had to agree with my parents who said he never would.

I'd moved all the way across Pennsylvania, from Pittsburgh to Amhearst, about thirty miles west of Philadelphia, to get away from Jack's intense gravitational pull. Me, the woman who hated change. And he had followed me!

Eventually. It had taken him more than three months to decide he couldn't live without me.

He'd come to Amhearst this past Sunday as a matter of fact. Just in time for Christmas.

"Merry Christmas, my Merry," he'd yelled when I'd opened my door. He pushed a giant silk poinsettia into my hands, smiling broadly at my confusion. Obviously he thought he'd brought me a wonderful gift, and he wasn't thinking of the flower.

"What are you doing here?" I demanded.

"Is that any way to greet your sweetheart come this great distance just to be near you?"

I stared at him. Just four months ago I'd have swooned if he deigned to call me his sweetheart. Now all I felt was an incipient case of heartburn.

"I've moved to Amhearst, at least for a while," he said, taking off his coat without an invitation to do so. I think he thought I was paralyzed with delight, not horror. He threw the garment across the back of the chair my cat Whiskers was sleeping in. A sleeve flopped down and slapped Whiskers in the face. He sat up with a sleepy scowl and

decided right then and there he didn't like Jack. When Jack saw the cat, I could tell that the feeling was mutual.

Bad sign.

"You've moved to Amhearst?" I said, disbelief heavy in my voice. "Why?"

"To be near you, sweetheart. I'm working here now. I'm doing an audit on Bushay Environmental which, as you probably know being a local reporter and all, is right here in Amhearst." He stated this information like he was the one who had personally placed each brick in Bushay's building and bought each sanitation vehicle himself.

"Big deal," I told him, trying to recover from the appalling surprise of finding him at my door. "Your company sends you here and I'm supposed to believe that means your undying affection for me?"

"They didn't send me," he said. "I campaigned for this job."

He reached for my hand, and I suddenly felt the need to cuddle Whiskers. I leaned over and filled both arms with the big black and white mottled creature who immediately began to purr and prod my chin with his head. Jack either didn't understand my move or made believe he didn't. He kept on talking like he always reached out and found nothing to hold on to.

"Amhearst isn't exactly a desirable location," he informed me. "But I asked to be sent here instead of to Atlantic City. Now *that* was a plum assignment, but I wanted here. And all for you."

I looked at him doubtfully. Atlantic City in December didn't sound all that great to me. Atlantic City in July didn't even sound too great. I'd been there several times as a

kid, and I couldn't imagine that the casinos had done anything to make the depressing, worn seaside atmosphere any more acceptable.

Jack recounted his version of his campaign for the Bushay job, trying to convince me of his ardor. "You've got to send me to Amhearst," I told Mr. Proctor. "I want the Bushay job even though it means weeks away from home to complete it." He smiled impishly. "Obviously I didn't tell him about you."

"Obviously."

"But *I* knew you were my reason," he said as he reached for me again.

I dodged his grasp by grabbing my coat and throwing it over my shoulders. "Well, I may have been your reason," I said. "But I'm not sure I'm your girl any more."

And I walked out. I had no place to go, but I knew I'd never have such a wonderful exit line again. And six years of no commitment is a long, long time.

"Hey!" Jolene's voice cut through my musings. "You're smiling to yourself. Which one are you thinking about?"

We were almost back at *The News*, the paper we both worked for, where she was a secretary and I was a reporter/gofer. I just smiled more broadly and didn't answer. That's when she asked me about a ride home after work.

"Drive you home? Sure. No problem," I said. "I don't have anything I have to do until 8 when I'm supposed to take a picture of the committee for the Amhearst Annual Christmas Food Project." Or AAC-FOP, as Mac, our editor, irreverently called it.

Suddenly a paroxysm of sneezes gripped me. I stopped abruptly and began counting as I convulsed. Eight. Not bad. Eleven was my all time highest. They had

happened as I was driving on the Rt. 30 bypass, my eyes squeezing shut at each sneeze. I thought myself lucky to still be alive.

“Whew!” I said when I could breath again. I swung my purse strap back onto my shoulder and slammed the bag itself into the woman walking past me.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” I turned contritely.

She smiled at me, her gray eyes crinkling at the corners . “It’s o--”

Her voice faded to nothing and her face lost its pleasant smile. She stared past me with a sudden look of great distaste on her face. I turned to see what she was looking at, and there stood Jolene. Her face had also lost all its charm as she stared back.

“Well, well,” said Jolene, venom dripping. “Look who’s here.”

“Hello, Jo,” the woman said in a tight, tense voice. “How are you? And how’s Arnie?”

“We’re both fine.” Jolene matched icy politeness for icy politeness. I could get frost bite from the frigid atmosphere between these two.

“Tell him I said hello,” said the woman.

“Like he cares,” said Jolene. The words were spat like little pellets flying from a straw to land stinging blows on the back of an unsuspecting neck.

The woman sighed in disgust. “It is always such a great pleasure to meet you, Jo. You have such a pleasant and endearing manner about you. Always have. Believe me, if I’d known you were going to be here, I’d have avoided the area at all costs.”

My eyes widened. I am Polly Peacemaker. I hate confrontation, and if I’m caught in it, I never know what to do. But it appeared I was the only one uncomfortable. These two women were obviously sluggers.

Jolene, face haughty, turned and looked behind her at the sturdy, gothic building. The large picture window on the ground floor had huge gilt letters that spelled out **THE NEWS**.

She turned back to the woman I had whacked with my bag. “I work here, Airy. Remember? I’m in this neighborhood every day.” She smiled coldly and drew herself to her full height. “I’m a newspaper women.”

I blinked at Jolene’s healthy misrepresentation of her job, but I knew this wasn’t the time to make a case for truth in advertising.

“Maybe,” added Jolene, “you just weren’t thinking. As usual.”

“Don’t give me that snotty attitude about intellect, Jolene. Which of us graduated valedictorian? It *certainly* wasn’t you.”

I stared at the woman named Airy. At twenty-five years old or so, she was still bringing up high school? What was next? Elementary school jealousies?

“Like test grades show intelligence,” Jolene scoffed. “I’d rather have my social smarts than your boring IQ any day.”

“You *used* to be nice, Jolene.” Airy nodded slightly as if agreeing with herself. “Up until sixth grade. Then it’s been down hill big time.”

Yikes, I thought. *Elementary school*.

“You never did get over not winning Most Popular at Oak Street Elementary School, did you?” Jolene sneered. “You’ve been jealous of me ever since.”

“Oh, pu-lease! I’d kill myself before I ever became like you.”

Two men walked past and looked askance at us, their attention caught by the nastiness of the voices. They locked eyes with me for the briefest of seconds.

Not me, I wanted to tell the men. I'm not fighting. I'm an innocent bystander. I know better. I have class.

Jolene and Airy didn't even notice them.

Suddenly Jolene turned sly, an unpleasant smile crossing her face. "By the way, Airy, how's Sean?"

All color drained from Airy's face. "Don't you even mention his name," she hissed. "Don't you even *think* about him."

Jolene just smiled. If I'd been Airy, I'd have been tempted to sock her one for her arrogance.

"How do you like his new mustache?" Jolene asked innocently. "I think it makes him look quite debonair, don't you?"

"His new mus-- How do you know--?" Airy was so angry -- and scared? -- that she was sputtering.

"Come on, Airy." Jolene used her hands like a bully might taunt a smaller boy to take a swing, like someone might tell a driver how far forward he can pull his car. "Spit it out. I know you can do it."

Airy shut her great gray eyes and took a deep breath to calm herself. When she opened her eyes, she raised her chin and said in an urgent, passionate voice, "Sean is off-limits to you, witch. Don't you ever, *ever* come near him."

"You mean I shouldn't have had lunch with him yesterday?" Jolene put a hand over her mouth in mock distress. "Oops."

Airy looked like she had turned to stone. She didn't even appear to breathe for too long a time. Jolene did everything but smack her lips at the reaction she had gotten.

I looked heavenward, sort of hoping the Lord would understand my unspoken supplication for peace and intervene. I was very surprised to see, looking down at us from the second floor picture window of *The News*, Mac Carnuccio, our editor. He scowled at me and mouthed the word, “What?”

I hoped I looked innocent as I shrugged and shook my head.

Mac turned his attention to Jolene and Airy, the body language of both women Terminator tense. He rolled his eyes, looked back at me and jerked his thumb toward the building.

I nodded. I’d be happy to come back to work. I turned to Jolene.

“Come on,” I said, putting a hand on her sleeve. “Mac’s watching.”

She didn’t even hear me. Her whole attention was riveted on the increasingly distressed Airy.

“Did I say something that upset you, Airy?” Jolene asked. Her smile was decidedly unpleasant. “I’m sorry. After all, we’re such old friends.”

Airy swallowed and ran her tongue over her lips. “You leave Sean alone or I’ll -- I’ll --” Desperation made Airy’s voice quiver.

Jolene’s lip curled in contempt. “Why don’t you just settle for Arnie? You and he would make a great pair. The leftovers.”

I hissed at the nastiness of the comment almost as loudly as Airy.

Suddenly a finger with a long vermilion nail was waving under Jolene’s nose.

“Don’t push me, Jo. I mean what I say about Sean. Leave him alone! You can’t have him!”

“Nice nails,” Jolene said as she tapped Airy’s with her own perfectly manicured finger. “Phony, of course. Like you. Or --” She smiled nastily. “Or like you and Sean.” And she turned away.

Airy reached out and grabbed Jolene’s arm and spun her around. Jolene looked surprised in spite of herself.

“I mean it, Jo. *Stay away from Sean.* You may have taken Arnie away from me, but not Sean. Not Sean! He’s mine.”

Jolene raised an eyebrow and looked down her perfect nose. “Only if you can keep him.” She shook Airy’s hand from her arm like she was flicking garbage off a plate and strode into *The News*.

I was left staring at my toes, feeling most uncomfortable in the emotional backwash. What did one say to the loser in a cat fight? It was one of life’s little lessons that Mom, usually so good at preparing me, had neglected.

I heard a soft sigh and looked up. Airy looked so sad.

“I’m sorry,” I said, even though I had nothing to do with any of it.

Airy nodded and smiled weakly. “You’d think I’d have learned to deal with her by now, wouldn’t you? I mean, I’ve known her since I was four years old. Princess Jo.”

She pulled a packet of tissues from her purse, lifted the tab and extracted one. She wiped delicately at her nose.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

She stuffed the used tissue back in her purse. “Merry Christmas,” she said and walked up Main Street without looking back.

When I turned to go back to work, I looked up to see if Mac was still watching. He wasn't, but Jolene was, standing straight and beautiful and haughty. She was staring after Airy, and the look on her face was vintage.