

THE 12 GIFTS
OF
Christmas

LENA NELSON
DOOLEY

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OF
Christmas



WHITAKER
HOUSE

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THE 12 GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS

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ISBN: 978-1-64123-148-0
eBook ISBN: 978-1-64123-149-7
Printed in the United States of America
© 2018 by Lena Nelson Dooley

Whitaker House
1030 Hunt Valley Circle
New Kensington, PA 15068
www.whitakerhouse.com

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data (Pending)

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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my very best friend, Rita Booth. My husband, James, and I met Rita and David Booth about thirty years ago. They were missionaries to Mexico, and God tied all four of our heartstrings together in a knot that couldn't be untied. David has gone on to meet Jesus before the rest of us, and we miss his quick wit and his enormous heart for people. Rita has been closer than a sister to me. We laugh together, we cry together, and we pray for each other and our families. She's my rock. I love you, Rita, higher than the Texas sky.

The missionary story in this book is based on Rita and David's romance.

And every book I write is dedicated to the man who captured my heart fifty-four years ago. The question Malcolm asks Alanza on their first date, James asked me on our second or third. We were married three months and three days after we met on a blind date. He's the better half of me. I pray God allows us to have many, many more years together.



Wednesday – Fourteen Days Before Christmas

Malcolm MacGregor glanced around the dining room of Cantalamessa's Gourmet Pizzas and More on Highway 10 in Euless, Texas. Each time he'd eaten here, he'd chosen to sit at an out-of-the-way table, separated from most other patrons. With a major project he had nearing completion, he often worked through the lunch hour, even when he went out to eat. This was the perfect place to do it, and the same table where he'd sat before was free. He took a seat, opened his briefcase, and pulled out his laptop. Soon, he was deep into his work.

It was the third time he'd come here since a coworker told him about this place a couple weeks ago. He'd never been fond of the typical American pizza, with its cheap cheese, watery sauce, and way too many greasy spiced meats. But the pizzas here were works of culinary art. Not too doughy and plenty of

healthy options. He'd tried a couple different kinds and each was delicious.

"Hey, welcome back." It was the same cheerful waiter who had served him before. He handed a menu to Malcolm. "What would you like to drink?"

"Thanks. Dr Pepper, please."

"Should I call that your usual?"

Malcolm laughed. "Sure. Thanks for remembering."

"I'll be right back with it, ready to take your order."

Malcolm watched him walk away, then turned to the all-important file on his screen. In one worksheet, the figures weren't adding up. He had to find the discrepancy, so he could move forward.

Malcolm's employer provided specialized equipment for hospitals and medical centers throughout the United States. They recently launched a new division with a charitable outreach arm. Malcolm was keenly aware of its importance—not for himself, but for the patients it would serve. His employer was setting up mobile medical clinics in rural areas, walking the fine line between making enough profit to ensure they stayed open and keeping fees low enough that patients could afford them, even if they had a high-deductible health insurance plan, or no coverage at all. He was also putting together grant proposals to help those with the greatest needs.

Not much time passed before the waiter returned with the soft drink. Malcolm looked up from his laptop.

"What can I get you today? I know you like Dr Pepper, but I think you've ordered different pizzas each time you were here."

Malcolm smiled and glanced at the waiter's nametag. Ignazio. He appreciated waiters who remembered customers

and their preferences. "I'd like to go off-menu today and get a pizza with spinach, artichoke hearts, mushrooms, and basil."

Ignazio made notes on his pad. "That sounds good. Maybe we should put this on the menu. Would you like anything else on it? Maybe extra mozzarella?"

"Sure."

As the young man headed toward the kitchen, Malcolm went back to his work. He had to make sure the figures were correct. He started going through the columns with a fine-tooth comb. When the error finally jumped out at him, he wanted to shout, "Yay!" *Probably not the place to do that.* There were quite a few patrons here, even though he waited until after 1 p.m., trying to miss the lunch crowd. Cantalamessa's was probably packed from noon to 1 p.m., like many restaurants. Even when he arrived past the regular lunch hour, there was always a nice-sized crowd here.

"Here you are." Ignazio set the enticing concoction in front of him.

"Thank you. This smells delicious."

"Careful, the pan is hot."

"That's what makes it so good. Coming straight from the oven to the table."

As Ignazio walked away, Malcolm closed his eyes and said a silent prayer of thanks.

When he raised his head, he noticed the beautiful young woman who usually ran the cash register. Alanza, her nametag said. He couldn't be the only one who noticed how gorgeous she was. But Malcolm always looked beneath a woman's surface beauty. Alanza's eyes seemed to be windows to her heart. At first, he was fascinated by the unusual green in her irises. They were the color of budding tree leaves in early spring.

His best friend, Eric Summerfield, had dated a lot of different girls and women—in high school, college, graduate school, and even now. Dating was just a thing for him. He never seemed to be serious about anyone. Malcolm wondered if Eric would ever settle down with just one woman. He knew if Eric ever saw Alanza, all he would see was her lovely figure. Not her inner self.

She was tall, probably near six feet. She seemed confident, but in a gentle, easy way. Happiness and joy flowed around her, drawing other people to her. He'd watched her interact with customers in a way that let him know she really cared about people. He'd even seen her helping the busboys and waiters.

Malcolm forced his attention back to his files while he savored his pizza. Ignazio came and went, bringing him refills of Dr Pepper when his glass was empty. When all of his work was finally in order, Malcolm happily clicked the save button. The project was finished. He closed his computer and slipped it into his briefcase.

When he glanced up, Malcolm's gaze was drawn to Alanza. He hadn't dated a lot because he had asked God to direct him to the woman He'd prepared to be his wife. Ever since he first laid eyes on Alanza, he wondered if she could be the one.

An older man came out of the kitchen area and hugged her.

"Poppa! You're back." She threw her arms around his neck.

Malcolm noticed some similarities between them. Was she the owner's daughter? If so, he needed to pay more attention to them. If she *was* the woman God had for him, Malcolm would be speaking to her father one day—hopefully soon—to ask for her hand in marriage. Malcolm wouldn't even date a woman without her father's permission. His family was very traditional.

For the rest of his meal, he watched Alanza and her father's every move. The older man made the rounds of the restaurant, stopping and leisurely talking to the customers as if they were old friends. No wonder this restaurant had such a loyal clientele.

Malcolm didn't wait for Alanza's father to reach him. He wanted to get back to the office and felt he'd wasted enough time already. *Not wasted*. Watching the lovely Alanza sped up his heartbeat more than his workouts did. He'd never experienced that feeling before.

When he went to the register, Alanza was talking to another worker. Malcolm leaned against the counter beside the cash register and waited. The man gave Alanza a slight nod and left for the kitchen.

She quickly turned toward Malcolm. When their eyes met, everything around them seemed to fade away. Alanza looked as surprised as he felt. For a moment or two, he couldn't remember why he was there. Finally, he took a deep breath, and the connection was broken. He pulled a credit card from his wallet and slid it across the counter toward her, along with his bill.

"Was everything all right..." She lifted his card and glanced at his name. "...Mr. MacGregor? You've been in here a couple of times recently, I think. I guess you liked it, uh..." An attractive blush tinted her cheeks and her green eyes sparkled like a forest after rainfall.

"Call me Malcolm. Yes. I love your pizzas. Maybe I'll try some pasta next time."

She handed him a receipt to sign.

When he finished, he glanced up at her and caught her eyes roaming over his face and upper body. The blush deepened and seeped to her hairline. She was even more beautiful up close.

"Now that you know my name, may I ask your name?"

Her eyes widened. The pulse at the base of her neck started beating double-time. "Alanza Cantalamessa." Her answer was so soft, he almost missed it.

"So, you're the owner's daughter?" He raised an eyebrow.

She gave an expansive gesture taking in almost all of the workers. "Many people who work here are members of my extended family. Ignazio is my cousin. My parents own Cantalamessa's."

Malcolm smiled and pushed his wallet into the hip pocket of his suit pants. "I'm really glad a friend told me about this place." He didn't take his eyes off her face while he made a declaration. "And I'll be back soon."

Did her smile grow even wider? Sure looked that way.

On the trip to the office, his Beemer was almost on auto-pilot. His thoughts kept returning to Cantalamessa's and the beautiful Alanza.



ALANZA'S GAZE FOLLOWED Malcolm MacGregor as he strode to the front door. Before he opened it, he glanced back at her one more time and gave her a broad smile. *Holy cow, he's so handsome! Why is my heart almost jumping out of my chest?*

All afternoon, she kept thinking about him. He was tall, with the thick, wavy auburn hair and eyes the color of a Texas summer sky. He had to be a businessman, with his sharp-looking

suits and laptop. Why did he come to the restaurant alone? Most businessmen came in groups, or at least with a lunch date or a friend.

She didn't see a ring on his left hand. And there wasn't a white line where one would be if he'd worn a wedding ring out in the sun but had taken it off. Could he possibly be single? Her heart beat faster and she took a deep breath to try to calm down.

What difference would it make anyway? Poppa always said he hoped she'd marry a good, Christian Italian man. Of course, Poppa didn't marry a good, Christian Italian. Mamma was a strong Christian, but they met in Brazil when he visited Buenos Aires for spring break during his senior year at college. He laughingly called her his "Girl from Ipanema." He thought of that song when he first saw her. She was almost six feet tall and had a glorious tan from spending time at the beach.

Alanza was like that, too. She never got sunburned. Her skin just darkened.

Mamma was only nineteen when she stole Poppa's heart. Alanza had heard the stories many times. How Mamma had been heartbroken when Poppa returned to the United States. How she prayed he'd return to her, even though they'd spent less than a week together. How surprised she was when only a month later, she's watched him walk along the beach at sunset... right toward her. Grandpapa would never let Mamma go to America with a man he hardly knew. So Poppa had to stay until Grandpapa would let her go. They were both stubborn men... but Grandpapa quickly realized just how much Mamma and Poppa loved each other. And the two men made sure the families got together at least once a year—either in Brazil or in the U.S.

And here Alanza was, three years out of college, and she'd never had the heart-stopping kind of experience her parents talked about. *Until now.*

Whatever happened when she saw and talked to Malcolm MacGregor was strong. She had experienced all kinds of visceral reactions. Breathlessness. Rapid heartbeat. Hummingbirds flitting around her insides, their wings beating right in time with her racing pulse.

Poppa had always talked about her and her siblings marrying other Italians. He would probably have a cow if he knew what she was thinking. With a name like MacGregor, he had to be Scottish. There were lots of miles between Scotland and Italy.

"Alanza."

She jumped.

Her mother's voice penetrated her tumultuous thoughts. "A line is forming. Do you need help?"

"No, ma'am."

Giving herself a mental shake, she turned back toward the cash register. Four regular customers stood ready to pay their bills.

"How was everything today, ladies?"