



*The  
Book  
Lover*

A SHORT STORY

HAIR BY [unreadable]

# **The Book Lover**

a short story

Laura Thomas

## The Book Lover

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## The Surprise

Alexis James flinched under the menacing glare of a bizarre woman in black who stood motionless before her. Torrential rain poured over the stranger's hooded cape as she studied every inch of Alexis sheltering beneath the stoop of the honey-colored limestone building.

*This is not the surprise I had in mind...*

Alexis had envisioned her dramatic arrival in the English city of Bath to be a romantic surprise for Tom—not a repugnant stand-off with Cape Woman.

In one sleek, sudden move, the stranger plucked a large chef's knife from her patent handbag and held it up, the metal glinting as she rotated it around and around.

Alexis let out a cry and gripped her closed umbrella in front of her body like a weapon, her erratic pulse now marching in time with the pounding rain. Ten feet of pathway and a few steps stood between them. Railing either side meant there was nowhere for Alexis to run.

“How do you know Tom?” The crazed woman spoke with a very proper English accent as she narrowed her perfectly made-up eyes.

Alexis blinked, realizing it was almost like looking into a mirror. Similar slim build, and then beneath the oversized hood was the same pale blue eyes, long blonde hair, and bright red lipstick.

A coil of fear slithered up Alexis's spine, but she straightened her shoulders and lifted her chin. “I could ask you the same thing.” She was not willing to give away the fact that she was Tom Harrington's long-distance girlfriend of six months. Not until she knew who and what she was dealing with on his doorstep.

Alexis had been waiting here for the past twenty minutes, exhausted after her flight from Canada, bedraggled by a severe downpour, and now possibly in danger of being physically attacked. Quite the welcome to England.

“You’re American?” the woman sneered.

“Canadian, actually. Listen, you need to put that knife away, otherwise I’m calling the police.” Alexis suspected it would be no use screaming for help as the slick, cobbled street was utterly deserted on this stormy June afternoon. No one in their right mind would venture out in this. “Tom will be home any minute, too.” *Please, Tom.* Why on earth had she presumed surprising him would be a stupendous idea?

“Wait a minute, Tom was in Canada last Christmas.”

So, the woman knew Tom’s whereabouts. Yes, he’d spent a whole month in Alexis’s hometown of Hollybrook, where they’d fallen in love while fighting for their lives—that was an adventure she would never forget. Alexis focused on the blade before her. “He was in Canada. Yes. With me.” He had also been back since, three months ago. Three long months. Oh, how she’d missed him...

A chilling laugh. “He’s never mentioned you, whoever you are.”

“Is that right?” Doubt burrowed its way into Alexis’s tender heart. Trust. Tom has asked her to trust him...the only way a cross-continent romance could have a hope of budding into something more.

“I missed him terribly while he was away.” The woman slid her manicured fingernails along the edge of the knife she still brandished in front of her torso.

Alexis swallowed down sudden nausea as her old insecurities and fears of rejection rose from deep in her gut. Surely, this lookalike with the wild eyes wasn’t in any kind of relationship with Tom. They spoke or texted almost daily, and trust was an essential element of their story. A word she had learned to hold in her heart like a fragile treasure. After a disastrous history with men and almost giving up on ever finding “the one”, she had found Tom and he’d proven himself to be the kindest, sweetest guy she’d ever met. A successful, bestselling author yet a humble man of faith. *Her* man.

The blade was pointed straight at Alexis now. “You should leave if you know what’s good for you. Leave Tom where he belongs—with me.”

With no intention of losing him to this crazed individual, Alexis gritted her teeth and squeezed her umbrella tight. “No way.”

“I said, *leave.*” The woman let out a scream. “He’s mine.” She lifted her gaze to Tom’s

penthouse and then squinted at Alexis and lunged toward her, eyes flashing with pure rage.

Before Alexis had the chance to react, a car pulled up with a screech on the wet road. Tom's black Mini.

Thunder bellowed overhead and footsteps pounded as the woman retreated in the opposite direction. She'd gone?

Alexis dropped her umbrella and reminded herself to breathe. She shielded her eyes as she stepped out into the relentless sheets of rain.

"Alexis?" Tom jumped out of his vehicle, took three strides, and enveloped her in his strong arms. "I had to do a double-take when I saw it was you. What happened?" He glanced down the road where the stranger had disappeared.

"Good question."

"Are you all right?" Lines creased his forehead.

"I am now." She shivered from relief, cold, and the fact that she'd barely escaped an encounter with a sharp-looking weapon.

"I-I can't believe you're here." His face split with a wide grin.

"Sur-pri-se?" She attempted a sing-song voice but bit the inside of her cheek when her chin trembled. "Can we get out of the rain?"

He planted a quick kiss on her lips. "Of course." He stared back at the empty sidewalk. "We should definitely get inside."

They hurried up the steps to the royal-blue door and Tom unlocked it. "After you, I'll bring your suitcase."

"Thanks. It's just this carry-on." Alexis ran a quivering hand over her soaking hair. Not quite the glamorous look she'd been going for, but she was safe and Tom was home. Her shoulders relaxed a fraction.

Tom rolled the suitcase and Alexis followed him into the spacious tiled lobby of the building. If she weren't in such a state of shock, she would have taken time to fully appreciate the charm and ornate decor oozing from every surface.

They stopped next to a small elevator—or *lift* as she should now refer to it.

"Hey, come here a second." He took her in his arms and squeezed her tight against

him. “I had no clue you were planning a visit. You never cease to amaze me.”

“It seemed like a good idea...” She inhaled the earthy scent from his leather jacket and a sense of home washed over her.

“You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m sure. Shaken up a little.” Alexis took a shuddering breath. “She looked eerily similar to me.”

He winced. “In that case, I think I know who she is.”

“She had a knife, Tom.”

“What?” He pulled back and his eyes widened. “We need to report this. I’m so sorry. You’re safe now. Let’s go on up to my apartment and I’ll call it in.” He glanced at the lift. “You good to use an elevator—or not so much?” Tom tucked a strand of her damp hair behind her ear, his brow furrowed in concern.

She attempted a smile. He remembered her claustrophobic issues well. Their life-threatening interactions with a dangerous thief in her hometown last Christmas had revealed her greatest fear. “Elevators still aren’t my favorite...but you’re in the penthouse, right?”

“Yeah, but it’s only three floors.” He tilted his head. “Let’s walk. The staircase is pretty swanky. I’ll carry your suitcase.”

“Thanks.” *I don’t think my nerves could handle any more stress right now.* “Lead the way.”

Alexis admired several oversized gilded framed oil paintings of English nobility as they plodded up the wide, carpeted staircase to the third floor. This was impressive. A perfect home for Tom Harrington.

“Here we are. My humble abode.” Tom unlocked a tall, wooden door and allowed Alexis entry into his apartment. “It’s small but it’s home. And I happen to love it.” He closed the door behind them and shrugged out of his wet coat and shoes.

Alexis slid off sopping ankle boots and shed her cream leather jacket, which Tom hung on a coat stand in the entryway. She rubbed her cheeks in an attempt to revive herself as she took in the modern yet cozy space. “This is where all the masterpieces are written?”

“I guess so.”

For several seconds, they stared at each other, grinning, soaked through to the skin, and finally together. Her pulse ignored her exhausted body and insisted on racing at breakneck speed. She craned her neck to look up and take in every inch of his handsome face, desperate to run her fingers through his thick, dark hair and kiss his delicious lips. He was, in her eyes, utterly perfect—and somehow, his heart belonged to her. No matter what the ominous lady in black tried to imply.

Tom let out a sudden laugh, picked her up, and twirled her around in a circle. “Life with you is never boring, I’ll give you that.” He set her down and took her face in his hands. “I’ve missed you so much. I’m sorry I wasn’t here when you arrived...and that you had to experience an encounter with that woman. I truly thought she was harmless—obviously I was wrong.”

Alexis recalled the glint of the blade and the hairs on the back of her neck prickled. “Tom, who is she—and should I be worried?”

## The Story

Tom's head was spinning. Alexis was actually here? And that dreadful woman had threatened her? "Good question. I'll try my best to explain, but why don't you come into the kitchen, and I'll make us a cup of tea."

"Ah, the English answer to everything." Alexis tilted her head. She was stunning, even with damp hair and a little mascara running down her cheek. "Mind if I use your washroom first real quick?"

"Of course. Door on the right. There should be spare towels in the cupboard under the sink if you need to dry your hair. Let me know if you need anything else."

"I'm not as high maintenance as I may look, you know." She sashayed down the hall, and Tom's heart squeezed. Man, he'd missed her. Before anything else, he grabbed his phone and shot a quick text to his friend, Nick, at the local police force. He was aware of Tom's issues with a few superfans. Tom would fill him in with more details later, once he'd spoken to Alexis.

*Poor Alexis.*

He stuffed his phone in his pocket and put the kettle on.

*What a lousy start to her stay in Bath.*

He dug some tea bags from the cupboard along with a loaf of chocolate chip banana bread he'd bought on a whim yesterday.

How long had it been since they were together in-person? Almost three months. After losing his beloved grandmother several weeks ago, this surprise visit was a balm for his soul.

"I adore your home. It suits you perfectly." Alexis wandered back into the kitchen looking put together and calm, scanning every inch of the place. "It's surprisingly contemporary for a Georgian exterior."

"High praise indeed coming from Hollybrook's top realtor." He perched on a bar

stool at the island and reached out a hand for her to join him.

“I’m barely dipping my toes in that world anymore.”

“Still loving the bookstore life?”

A smile tugged on her lips. “I can’t believe how much I love owning ‘Happily Ever After’. It’s more fulfilling than I ever imagined it would be. Who’d have thought my whimsical decision to buy it from your grandfather would bring me so much joy?”

“Well, that makes this author’s heart very happy. Plus, I know Grandpa is content knowing the bookstore is in good hands.”

“Oh, don’t you worry, he comes in almost daily to make sure I’m not drowning. To be honest, I miss my own grandpa, so it’s a win-win.” She dragged the stool closer to Tom’s and hopped up next to him. “So, the woman outside? The one with a knife who seems to think you are hers, perhaps?” She quirked a brow.

Tom scraped his fingers through his hair and shook his head. “I can’t believe she had a knife and threatened you with it. If she’d actually hurt you…”

“She didn’t. Thank goodness. You came in the nick of time before she nicked my flesh. I don’t want to think of what might have happened if you’d arrived ten seconds later.” She shivered. “Who is she?”

He took a deep breath. “She’s a rather obsessive fan. A book lover. A stalker—I’d presumed she was harmless, but then again, she’s only ever been sickly-sweet and overly doting toward me.”

“Aren’t *you* the lucky one?”

“No. Not really.” He’d felt sorry for her initially, but now this stank of danger. She clearly had issues. He could look after himself just fine—but what if Alexis was in danger during her time here?

Alexis squeezed his arm. “Do you know her name? It was almost like looking in a mirror. Sans the crazy.”

He’d thought the exact same thing. “Creepy, right?” The kettle whistled and he sauntered over to make the tea. “She’s nowhere near as beautiful as you, though. Her name is Melissa Winters, but she calls herself *Dolly*.”

Alexis narrowed her eyes. “Wait, like Dolly in *The Paris Whisperer*? That makes

perfect sense. She looks identical to the woman on the cover.”

He nodded. “As do you.” His best-selling WWII fiction novel had skyrocketed him to fame and relative fortune, but with notoriety came a few superfans of an unusual variety. Most harmless. Not Melissa, apparently. “She’s a bit delusional. Moved to Bath when she found out I live here. Sends me regular fan-mail as well as love letters.”

“Really?”

“Which I definitely do *not* respond to. She’s known to the police. I’m not her first crush.”

“Obsession, you mean.” Alexis bit her lower lip. “We should report this though. Now I’m worried about your safety, too.”

“For sure. If she’s wielding a knife at visitors and watching my house, the authorities need to know. I have a good buddy on the force. Nick and I go way back. We attend the same church. I already texted him when you were in the bathroom and promised I’d give him a shout after you had a cuppa.” He poured milk into their mugs of tea and brought over a wooden tray with the banana bread.

“You’re a great host, Tom Harrington.”

“Maybe, but first, this.” He ran his fingers through her slightly damp hair and drew her in for a long, deep kiss that reminded him of the reasons why they needed to make this long-distance situation work. Warm jasmine notes filled his senses. He was in too far. Utterly smitten. With no small measure of reluctance, he pulled back. “I love you.”

She opened her eyes and let out a soft sigh. “I love you, too.”

He sat on his stool so their knees were touching. He’d missed this closeness. “You feel like any food yet?”

“I didn’t think my stomach could handle anything after the knife incident, but maybe I could eat a little snack. My stomach doesn’t know if it’s too late for supper or too early for breakfast, so banana bread is perfect.” She grabbed a mug and took a slice of the loaf. “Thanks. Oh, and before you start wondering about my intentions in your one-bedroom apartment, I’ve booked into a little B&B really close by. I don’t wish to sully your reputation.”

Tom choked on his tea and felt his cheeks heat. “Well, I appreciate that. I was going

to offer you my room and I could sleep on the sofa, but after that kiss—maybe it's best we settle you in the B&B when you start to feel sleepy. Where are you staying exactly?"

Alexis pulled her phone from the pocket of her jeans and scrolled until she found the booking. "Rose and Thorn?"

"Nice. We can literally walk to it from here." He eyed the rain pelting his large windows. "Let's hope the weather improves."

"It's okay. I'm not here for the weather." She bit into her slice of banana bread and closed her eyes. "Divine."

"It's possible that I keep the little bakery around the corner in business."

"Support local. I like it." She sipped her tea and then turned to him and slid her arms around his waist. "I've missed you so much. Also, I wanted to be here with you as you've sounded a bit sad lately. I'm really sorry about your granny. I know she meant the world to you."

A muscle twitched in his cheek and his chest ached. "Thanks. You would have loved her and I know she adored you from afar. She lived a good, long life. Said she was ready for no more pain and was excited to meet her Maker. To be with my mum, too."

"She was your last family member here, wasn't she?"

"Yeah. I may have to visit you in Canada more often so I can see my grandfather."

"I'm not going to argue with that."

"Anyway, how did you manage to arrange this little trip without me suspecting anything?"

She chuckled. "You know how I am when I put my mind to doing something. I wanted to surprise you. My sister's covering for me at the bookstore and I wangled a few days off work before the summer gets busy. Easy."

He gazed down into her stunning blue eyes, and his mouth curved into a grin. "I love this impulsive side of you. How long do I have you all to myself?"

"Five. Whole. Days."

"Luckily, I don't have a deadline at the moment. I think I can work you into my schedule."

"You better." She stood on tiptoe and pressed a feather-light kiss on his lips. "I want

to see your city. The phenomenal bookstores you keep telling me about. Sally Lunn's Buns. The Jane Austen Centre. The Royal Baths. Visit the beautiful abbey. All the things."

"So, you didn't only come to see me?" He pouted, then tickled her ribs.

She squirmed. "Yeah, I totally did. You know that by now. Anything else is gravy."

"Talking of...what do you fancy eating later this evening? As long as you're not too tired after the flight and all."

"You can choose for us." She took his hand and led him to the window overlooking several rows of city rooftops and then a charming vista of the English countryside. "This is breathtaking, even in a dreary storm."

"One of the reasons I'm still living in this place. I find the view inspirational. So much history within those walls and tucked in the forests. Wait until you see it on a glorious sunny day."

Alexis pressed her palms on the cool glass and peeked below at the road in front of their building. "Oh, no."

"What's wrong?"

"She's back down there. Your stalker-superfan."

"No way." Yet there in the pouring rain stood Dolly or Melissa or whoever she was. She raised her chin and stared right at them.

Alexis gasped. "Can she see us?"

Tom tugged her away from the window. "Let's not take any chances." He pulled out his phone. "I'm going to make that call to my friend on the force. See if they can send a patrol car to pick her up or something." Nick would make sure Melissa Winters was taken in for questioning.

"I hope she doesn't ruin our time together. I know it's going to fly by and I'm not sure when I'll see you next." She stifled a yawn.

He handed her the mug of tea. "Try not to worry. Why don't you go and curl up on the couch and rest up for a few minutes? You must be tired."

Alexis pursed her lips. "I guess the dramatic encounter outside is catching up with me a bit now. That and the travel."

“No kidding.” He led her over to a leather loveseat. “Close your eyes and try to relax. I’ll go into my bedroom and speak with Nick. Then maybe see if I can book a table at one of my favorite restaurants for dinner this evening?”

She mustered a smile. “Sounds good. Don’t let me fall into a deep sleep though. I don’t have time for any jet lag nonsense on this trip.”

Tom kissed her forehead before grabbing a slice of banana bread from the kitchen on his way past. He closed the bedroom door behind him and squeezed his eyes shut. *Lord, why now with Melissa Winters? Why when Alexis is here? If anything happens to her—I’ll never forgive myself.*

He sank onto his bed and took a bite of the loaf as he recalled the tumultuous events of last Christmas in Canada. As a couple, Tom and Alexis had already been through more danger than most. To think he’d considered an author’s life to be a sedate, settled, safe occupation. It had been exactly that up until the past year or two. His shot to fame was proving to be more stressful than his agent could ever have predicted.

He chewed the banana bread, soft and packed with rich chocolate chips—usually the perfect way to satiate his sweet tooth, but as he swallowed it down, he barely tasted the flavors and it sat like a stone. His gut was unsettled. This business with Melissa Winters was beyond disturbing. How worried should he be? He tapped Nick’s contact details again and paced over to his bedroom window, praying his friend would pick up.

*Interesting.* The woman had disappeared from sight.

Should he be relieved—or concerned?

## The Plot Twist

*I'm exhausted. Physically and emotionally drained.* The warm tea slid down Alexis's throat and comforted her insides. Pulling a soft, gray throw from a basket on the floor, she cuddled into it and inhaled, detecting hints of cedar and bergamot—Tom's delicious aftershave that made her weak at the knees.

As thoughts of the crazed woman, that knife, this beautiful city, and her handsome man invaded her musings, she was vaguely aware of Tom's quiet conversation floating on the air from another part of the apartment as she allowed her tired eyelids to close. Just a few minutes of rest...

*What?* The obnoxious siren sound was deafening. Alexis jumped to her feet and covered her ears. It took her a second to get her bearings and remember where she was. "Tom?"

He appeared at the doorway, his face pale. "We have to go. Now. It's not a drill."

She blinked. "How long was I asleep?"

"An hour or so. I didn't have the heart to wake you."

Her head started to clear. "Wait. What's not a drill?"

He grabbed her hand. "Fire. We need to get out of here."

*Seriously?* "Sure. Right. How do you know it's not a drill?"

"Take a deep breath. Smell the smoke?"

Alexis inhaled. Yes, it was smoke all right.

Sirens sounded in the distance and Tom's eyes were etched in regret. "I think it was Dolly. Melissa Winters. She sent me a text." He led her to the entrance. "This is a nightmare, but I'm going to keep you safe. Just stick with me, okay? Police and fire brigade are arriving."

Melissa? Cape Woman was also an arsonist? "Let me grab my purse." She picked it up from the floor and slid it over her head and across her body. No way was she losing

her passport and wallet.

They both stepped into their boots, and Tom grabbed his keys from a side table.

“Ready?”

She nodded. What were they supposed to expect out there? Flames? Smoke?

Tom opened the door and the stench hit Alexis in an instant.

She covered her nose with her forearm. This was bad. “Do we know where the fire is?”

“No.” Tom grabbed a scarf from his closet for each of them. “Hold this over your face. Stay low. We have to use the fire exit. It’s at the end of this corridor. Leads to the outdoor fire escape. We’ll be fine.”

“I’m right behind you.” Alexis closed the door to his apartment and gripped his hand as they both crouched while smoke wafted through the narrow hallway. She held her breath until they reached the end. “Is this it?”

Tom kicked and pushed at an ancient metal door. “It’s stuck. What on earth?” He released Alexis’s hand and rammed the door over and over with his shoulder. “It won’t budge.”

Alexis’s eyes watered from the smoke. Heat infused the space. “Should we try the main staircase?”

“We’ll have to. Stay close.” He coughed into his scarf and led her back past his apartment and toward the stairs.

Alexis noticed another door and squeezed his hand. “Your neighbors?”

“Away for the summer. I’m the only one up here. Keep moving.”

When they reached the top of the stairs, Tom stopped short, and Alexis stumbled into him. The heat increased. Flames licked the walls.

Fear flowed through Alexis’s veins like ink through a pen and she let out a muffled scream from behind her scarf. *This can’t be happening.*

Tom looked at her with his forest-green eyes and pulled his scarf down. “Do you trust me?”

She nodded. What choice did she have?

Without another word, he tugged her back toward his apartment. He opened the

door and they tumbled inside, both heaving rapid breaths. Alexis slammed it shut behind them. At least it was less smoky.

Tom grabbed two towels, held them under a running tap, then rolled them up, and stuffed them at the bottom of his door. He stopped to take her face in his hands. “You good?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak.

Sirens were louder now, and they both ran over to the front window. Tom slid his phone out and hit speed dial.

“Nick? We’re back in my flat. The flames are in the stairwell. The fire exit’s been compromised, I think. What’s happening down there?” He put the phone on speaker.

“Hang tight. Firefighters are on their way inside. Stuff damp towels at the bottom of your door and then both get to the windows at the front of the building. Wait for help.” His voice was clipped and efficient.

“Got it. We’ve already done the towels.”

“What else should we do?” Alexis hardly recognized her wobbly voice, laced with fear.

Static buzzed on the phone line. “Just sit tight, both of you. Call me back if you need to. I’ll keep you posted.”

Tom ended the call and turned to her. “We’re going to be fine.” He pulled her into an embrace, both of them breathing hard now.

“Should we jump? Is three stories too high for that?” Alexis took a shaky breath and whispered into his soft shirt.

“Not yet. We have time.”

“This is crazy. How do you know we’ll be fine?”

“Two things.” He took a step back and held her chin. “One, God is in control—even though we are most definitely not.”

She bit the inside of her cheek. Her relationship with her Heavenly Father had been tenuous at best for most of her life, but she’d learned to surrender everything to him six months ago and she was on a journey. This was a major speed bump. “What’s two?”

He swallowed. “Remember what happened in *The Paris Whisperer*?”

Alexis loved that book. His best seller. Apparently, the one Melissa was obsessed with. “Wait.” She grabbed the front of his shirt in both fists. “There was a fire, right? In a Paris hotel? Not unusual in the scheme of everything going on in wartime...but it was arson, wasn’t it? Set by...Dolly?”

He nodded. “Unrequited love.” He tugged her down to the hardwood floor beneath the window. They sat together with their backs up against the wall. No use watching the pandemonium happening outside. “It had a happy ending though, remember?”

“This really is Melissa Winters, isn’t it? She was outside watching us earlier, probably plotting how she could get rid of me.” Could she truly be a murderer? The evil in her eyes revealed the state of her heart. “Although she wouldn’t want to harm you, right?”

Tom ran his fingers through his hair. “The text she sent me while you were sleeping was ominous. You know how many times I’ve changed my phone number recently, but she’s relentless.”

“What did it say?”

“That if she—Dolly—couldn’t have me, then no one would.”

Alexis’s fingers were numb. “Did she mention a fire?”

“No, but it makes sense in a sick way. The authorities will catch her if this is her doing. She’ll be locked away for a very long time.”

“I hope everyone else got out from the lower floors.”

“Me, too, honey.”

“We...we’re stuck, aren’t we?” Alexis took in a ragged breath and held it. The four walls around them were closing in. Her pulse pounded and she struggled to exhale. Tom put an arm around her shoulders and stroked her hair.

“Hey, we’re okay. This is the safest place for us right now. Just breathe with me.” He placed her palm on his chest, and she felt him slowly dispel air from his lungs. She did likewise.

“Good. Now in, nice and slow.”

Alexis screwed her eyes shut. Pretended she was not claustrophobic in a small apartment with a fire raging somewhere down the hall. She was with the man she loved. Who loved her. His chest rose and fell beneath her touch. Comforting. Calming. Caring.

He kissed the top of her head. “That’s it, beautiful. God sees us. Right here. Right now. We’re never out of His sight. We have to trust Him.”

Tears welled in her eyes. *I love this man so much. Please, God, don’t let this be the end of our story.*

## The Next Chapter

Tom sent up silent pleas to God as he held the woman he loved. The woman he had planned on proposing to at the end of the summer. Spend the rest of his life with. He couldn't help thinking of the heartache and life-threatening danger he put his characters through in his bestselling book. *Please, no. Allow us our happily ever after?*

The phone in his hand rang out and he pressed speaker. "Nick?"

"Hey, man. Listen, the guys are holding the fire as well as they can, but we want you ready to smash that nice big window you're sitting by. That good with you?"

It was that bad. Tom fought down the urge to freak out. *I need to stay calm for Alexis.* "Right."

"We have a fire truck with an extension ladder getting set up."

He pulled Alexis to her feet, and they peeked through the window. A crowd was gathering on the other side of the road. No umbrellas were up so the rain had finally stopped.

She cleared her throat and raised her chin. "Got an iron?"

"Yes—what did you have in mind?" It seemed feisty, resourceful Alexis was surfacing. "Clearly, not ironing."

She touched the glass. "I'm guessing this is double-glazing and we have to break through. We need an iron, sunglasses, and...I'll get the blanket. Pronto."

"Sounds like she knows what she's doing there." Nick's voice was low. "Go for it."

Tom rushed to the closet and grabbed his iron and a pair of sunglasses, while Alexis snatched the throw blanket from the couch. "Let's do this."

"I'll hold the phone." She took it from him. "Put on the glasses and let's wrap the blanket around your hand and arm. That's it." She placed the iron in his grasp. "I've done this before, believe it or not, but you're going to have more strength than me and

we don't exactly have time for me to get all competitive about it."

"True." Tom's lips twitched.

"Now, aim for that bottom right corner. Few inches in. About here." She licked her finger and made a mark on the glass before moving well away from the window.

Tom called into the phone. "You all right for me to smash through this thing, Nick?"

"All clear. Go ahead."

He drew back and whacked the sharp edge of his iron into the glass. It cracked.

Alexis squealed. "Keep doing that. Over and over until you get through both sheets of glass."

Tom didn't need telling twice. With every ounce of strength in his body, he pummeled the window until he was through to damp, fresh air. It never smelled so good.

Alexis came behind him with a broom she'd found in his closet and began pushing out the remaining shards from the edges. "Good enough." She placed the blanket over the bottom ledge. "Should stop us getting cut to pieces."

Tom took the phone back from her and held her in his arms, the two of them peering through the open expanse in the window. "We're ready, Nick." The general hubbub of shouting and sirens rose from below.

"Hang tight. On their way to you now. Alexis first."

They watched as a fire truck reversed toward them, came to a stop, and then deployed an extendable ladder. A fireman effortlessly scaled the ladder to the top and stretched out his arms.

"Am I ever glad you only live on the third floor." Alexis muttered the words but gave him a kiss on his lips. "See you down there?"

"I'll be right behind you, honey." He helped her onto the blanketed ledge. "Easy does it." He could see the whites of the fireman's eyes as he grabbed Alexis and held her safely on the ladder. "Thanks, man."

"Be right back for you, sir."

Tom watched as the woman he loved descended to safety. He turned to see smoke that looked more like steam filtering through the sides of the door to his flat. Time was

short.

“You doing okay up there, buddy?” Nick’s voice brought him back to the task at hand.

“Will be once I’m down there with you guys.” *God, I trust You. I have to trust You...*

“The crew are working well on the staircase. Sounds like they’re winning the battle.”

Alexis waved up to Tom as a paramedic came and wrapped her in a blanket. At that moment, from the back of the crowd of spectators, Tom spotted a familiar figure in black. His stomach clenched.

“Nick, I see Melissa Winters. She’s on the other side of the road.”

“Roger that.” The sound of muffled shouting came from the phone and Tom watched on from above as Alexis turned to see where the sickening scream was coming from. Melissa.

*No. No. No.*

Everything happened at once. Tom hung over the edge of the shattered window, helpless to do anything to stop Melissa as she barged through the onlookers and headed straight for Alexis. Nick and two other officers ran toward the action. The paramedic pulled Alexis to the waiting ambulance. Melissa reached out, knife in hand. Swiped at Alexis. Screams filled the early evening air. Tom couldn’t breathe.

“Sir?” He hadn’t even noticed the fireman returning on the extended ladder. “Let’s get you down.”

Tom squinted and moved to the other end of the window, desperate to get a glimpse of Alexis. “Is she all right?”

“Come with me. I’ll take you down.” The guy’s outstretched hand registered in Tom’s brain.

“Yes. Of course.” He almost vaulted over the window ledge onto the ladder platform. “Let’s go.”

In seconds, they were on the ground and Tom sprinted over to the area where he last caught sight of Alexis. The rain was drizzling again, and a sea of open umbrellas filled the street. “Alexis?”

A group of police and firemen parted, and Nick turned to face him. “She’s okay. It’s

not as bad as it looks.”

“Tom?” Alexis stood between two paramedics, blood covering her cream blouse.

No. His pulse skyrocketed. Three strides and he held her at arms length. “You’re hurt. How bad?”

“She nicked me. It’s a long but shallow cut. Doesn’t even need stitches.” She squeezed him tight and then looked up at him, tears streaking her face. “It was her. Melissa Winters. She did all this?”

They both turned toward his apartment building. Smoke billowed from open windows. His home. His books. His haven. He was vaguely aware of someone draping them both with a blanket and leading them to the ambulance, where Alexis’s wound was cleaned and bandaged.

Nick clamped Tom’s shoulder. “We have Melissa Winters. You’re safe now. Both of you.”

“Did she say anything?” Tom rubbed his forehead. Could he have prevented this from happening? Guilt pelted him like the raindrops.

“Man, I know you’re beating yourself up but there’s no way you could have anticipated this. She was yelling something about you being her hero. Charlie something? I don’t know.”

Tom narrowed his eyes. “Charlie? I can’t believe it.”

“Charlie Richardson.” Alexis gripped his arm as she turned to Nick. “From Tom’s book, *The Paris Whisperer*. She was obsessed with it. I guess fiction blurred with reality...and she certainly didn’t appreciate my presence.”

Nick offered Alexis a smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “Right. Sorry to meet like this. I’m Nick, by the way.”

“Alexis. Thank you. For everything you did here.” She shivered and pulled the blanket tighter over her bloodied clothes. “I think we’re both in a bit of shock after all this.”

“Understandable.” Nick groaned as he took in the building. “I’m really sorry about your home, bud. You know you’re welcome to stay with us until you get back on your feet. Looks like they were able to save the building but I’m guessing it’ll be a while before

you can move back in.”

“Thanks.” Tom put his arm around Alexis. “I’ll figure something out. We’re both safe and that’s all that matters.” His mind checked through his list of neighbors. “Please tell me everyone is all right.”

“Yep. God was watching over all of you, I’d say. This could have been much more devastating.”

He was right. *Thank You, Lord.*

“*I’m never out of your sight.*” Alexis mumbled the words.

“Hmm?” Tom’s head was spinning.

“I was just thinking of a bit from my favorite Psalm. “That we’re never out of God’s sight...even at times like this. I don’t get why this happened tonight or why Melissa decided to do what she did, but I think I’m learning it’s better to trust that God is in control. Always.”

Tom’s heart warmed within him, in spite of the damp, dreary drizzle surrounding them. Alexis had come a long way in her rekindled faith and he would do well to heed her insights, even when life slammed in hard. *Especially* when life slammed in hard.

The firefighters were busy comparing notes and seemed satisfied the blaze was out. Smoke damage would be a beast, but the Georgian structure on this iconic street was sound. Everyone would be relieved about that. Yet what on earth was he going to do now?

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Alexis squeezed Tom’s hand. The crowd dispersed and the drama wound down, as did her adrenalin. Neither one of them moved from the tailgate of the ambulance but she suspected she needed to take charge in light of what had happened. She still had a hotel booked for tonight, but Nick insisted they both head over to his house after they get checked out at the hospital. He and his wife had guest rooms and big hearts.

She cleared her throat and winced at the faint taste of smoke. “Tom?”

“Hey, you.” He tore his eyes from the building and gave Alexis his full attention. “Sorry. I don’t have words right now, which is unusual for an author...”

“Luckily, I do.” She batted her lashes in an attempt to lighten the understandable

heaviness he wore like a cloak. “I realize we’ve been through a harrowing ordeal and it’s hard to even attempt to string together logical thoughts, but I have an idea.”

“Tell me. I’m open to anything at this moment in time.” Intrigue flitted across his handsome features. “What do you have in mind?”

“You trust me, don’t you?” She nibbled on her lower lip and clutched both his hands in hers. Was this ridiculous?

“Yes. I honestly do.”

“Then come back to Canada with me. It’s going to take ages for them to fix this place up. Come and write your next book in relative peace and quiet while I manage the bookstore. Spend time with your sweet grandfather. Come and see if you might consider a life in Hollybrook. A life with me. Maybe even forever.” Her insides flipped and burned. He could turn her down. This was his home. His work. His life. What if she wasn’t enough? What if—

“Alexis James.” He raised a brow and a grin gradually spread across his face. “Are you...are you proposing?”

*Am I?* “Umm...yes. Yes, I believe I am. What do you think? Shall we get married? It’s not like we haven’t dreamed about it and considered possible logistics. We can keep your apartment and spend our summers here if you want. Honestly, I don’t care if we’re here or there or on the moon—I want you, Tom. I love you so much. I choose you, and I’m hoping you’ll choose me back.” Her heart hammered in her chest.

Tom looked into her eyes with an intensity that stirred her soul. “Meeting you was the best thing that ever happened to me. Loving you has filled my heart to overflowing. I was going to ask you that very question when I visited at the end of the summer, but it seems you beat me to it. Let’s get married, Alexis. I’ve never been more certain of anything before. I choose you. Always you.”

As Alexis’s lips touched his, the sound of people and vehicles, the smell of smoke and ash, the touch of rain and threat of despair all dissipated.

Her heart swelled as Tom’s hands cupped both her cheeks, warm and steady, anchoring her with his quiet strength as she pressed in closer, trembling with the weight of everything she had just laid bare. The kiss deepened—not rushed, not careless, but

full of promise—of choosing, of staying, of a future neither of them need question any longer. Her breath caught when they finally drew apart and their foreheads rested together, the world around them now faint and frivolous.

Alexis traced his stubbled chin with her fingers as another idea traced through her mind. “Here’s a thought. You know that Psalm of mine?”

“It’s yours, is it?”

“I think so. Anyway, I love the part where it says we’re open books to God.”

Tom smoothed damp hair from her face. “I like that part, too.”

“How do you feel about me changing the name of my bookstore from ‘Happily Ever After’ to ‘Open Books’?”

“Open Books?” He took her fingers and kissed them. “I love it.”

“Really?”

“Sure. An open book is something active, inviting, ready to be explored. It’s more adventurous. More like you.”

Her heart swelled as they climbed into the back of the ambulance ready to be transported to the hospital.

“I do have one request, as a book lover.” Alexis perched on the gurney and Tom joined her.

“Anything for you.”

She laced her fingers in his. “Could you please write another bestseller? I’m not sure I can read *The Paris Whisperer* ever again.”

He let out a solid laugh that resulted in a brief coughing fit. “Fair. I’ll try my best. And I suppose you won’t be wanting us to honeymoon in—”

“Anywhere but Paris. Please.”

“How about *you* choose a setting, and *I’ll* write us a happily ever after?”

Alexis gazed up at the man she would travel across the globe for any day of the week. “Surprise me.”

THE END

“God, investigate my life;  
get all the facts firsthand.  
I’m an open book to you;  
even from a distance, you know what I’m thinking.  
You know when I leave and when I get back;  
I’m never out of your sight.”

Psalm 139:1-2

(THE MESSAGE)

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed “The Book Lover”—I wrote this short story as a free gift for you and as a sequel to my multi-award-winning Christmas novella, *Snow Globe Secrets*.

Feel free to check out all my books here: <https://laurathomasauthor.com/books> or contact me anytime at my website: [www.laurathomasauthor.com](http://www.laurathomasauthor.com)

Blessings & joy,

Laura



**AUTHOR BIO:**

A multi-award-winning Christian author, Laura writes heartwarming encouragement for your soul—especially in her numerous romantic suspense novels, Christmas novellas, teen fiction and children’s books, as well as her non-fiction writing.

Laura is a certified writing coach, a book-loving chocoholic mom and nanny, and is married to her high school sweetheart. Originally from the UK, they now live the empty nest life in Kelowna, British Columbia, with their French bulldog!

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