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PRECIOUS CHRISTMAS VOWS

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*by top author Shirlee McCoy,*

*available November 2010!*

*The mission trip to Mexico was supposed to be an  
adventure. But the thrill turns sour when Jenna Dougherty  
and her roommate Magdalena are kidnapped.*

“It’s okay. I’m here to help.” The voice was as deep as the darkness, but Jenna Dougherty didn’t believe the lie. She could do nothing but lie still as hands slid down her arms, felt the rope around her wrists.

“I’m going to use a knife to cut you free, Jenna. Hold still.”

The cold blade of a knife pressed close to her head before her gag fell away.

“I—” she started, but her mouth was dry, and she could do nothing but suck in air.

“Shhh. Whatever needs to be said can be said when we’re out of here.” Nick spoke quietly, his hand gentle on her cheek. There and gone as he sliced through the ropes on her wrists and ankles.

He pulled her upright. “Come on. We may be on borrowed time.”

“I can’t leave my friend,” Jenna rasped out.

“There’s no one here. Just us.”

“She has to be here.” Jenna took a step away.

“There’s no one here. Let’s go before that changes.”

“It’s dark. Maybe if we find a light...”

“What did you say?”

“We need to turn on the light. I can’t leave until I know that—”

“What can you see, Jenna?”

“Nothing.”

“No shadows? No light?”

“No.”

“It’s broad daylight. There’s light spilling in from the window I climbed in through. You can’t see it?”

She went cold at his words.

“I can’t see anything.”

“You’ve got a nasty bruise on your forehead. Maybe that has something to do with it.” His fingers traced the tender flesh on her forehead.

“It doesn’t matter *how* it happened. I’m blind!”

*Can Nick help Jenna find her friend or will chasing this trail have Jenna running blindly again into danger?*

*Find out in RUNNING BLIND, available in November 2010 only from Love Inspired Suspense.*

FROM #1 NEW YORK TIMES  
AND USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR  
**DEBBIE MACOMBER**

**Mrs. Miracle on 34th Street...**

This Christmas, Emily Merkle (just call her Mrs. Miracle) is working in the toy department at Finley's, the last family-owned department store in Manhattan.

Her boss (who happens to be the owner's son) has placed an order for a large number of high-priced robots, which he hopes will give the business a much-needed boost. In fact, Jake Finley's counting on it.

Holly Larson is counting on that robot, too. She's been looking after her eight-year-old nephew, Gabe, ever since her widowed brother was deployed overseas. Holly plans to buy Gabe a robot—which she can't afford—because she's determined to make Christmas special.

But this Christmas will be different—thanks to Mrs. Miracle. Next to bringing children joy, her favorite activity is giving romance a nudge. Fortunately, Jake and Holly are receptive to her "hints." And thanks to Mrs. Miracle, Christmas takes on new meaning for Jake. For all of them!

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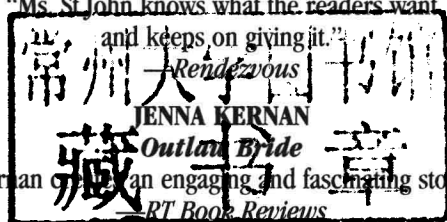
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**CHERYL ST. JOHN**  
***Her Colorado Man***

"St. John's strong yet sweet romance is peopled by characters readers will care about... the lesson St. John teaches in the subplot about abuse... touches the heart."

—RT Book Reviews

"Ms. St. John knows what the readers want  
and keeps on giving it."



"Kernan of *Rendezvous* an engaging and fascinating story."

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—All About Romance

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—RT Book Reviews

***Renegade Wife***

"Such a refreshing, heartfelt love story to read. For a Western romance that will leave you smiling, be sure to read *Renegade Wife*."

—Romance Reviews Today

### ***CHERYL ST. JOHN***

remembers writing and illustrating her own books as a child. She received her first rejection at age fourteen, and at fifteen wrote her first romance. A married mother of four, and a grandmother several times over, Cheryl enjoys her family. In her “spare” time, she corresponds with dozens of writer friends, from Canada to Texas, and treasures their letters. You can visit her at [www.cherylstjohn.net](http://www.cherylstjohn.net).

### ***JENNA KERNAN***

is every bit as adventurous as her heroines. Her hobbies include recreational gold prospecting, scuba diving and rock climbing. Indoor pursuits encompass jewelry making, writing, photography and quilting. Jenna lives in New York State with her husband and two gregarious little parrots. Visit Jenna at [www.jennakernan.com](http://www.jennakernan.com) for excerpts from her latest release, giveaways and monthly contests.

### ***CHARLENE SANDS***

resides in Southern California with her husband, high school sweetheart and best friend, Don. Proudly they boast that their children, Jason and Nikki, have earned their college degrees. Charlene’s love of the American West, both present and past, stems from storytelling days with her imaginative father sparking a passion for a good story and her desire to write romance. Charlene invites you to visit her author Web site at [www.charlenesands.com](http://www.charlenesands.com) or [www.myspace.com/charlenesands](http://www.myspace.com/charlenesands) for more fun stuff. E-mail her at [charlenesands@hotmail.com](mailto:charlenesands@hotmail.com).

# **WESTERN WINTER WEDDING BELLS**

**CHERYL ST. JOHN**

**JENNA KERNAN**

**CHARLENE SANDS**



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ISBN-13: 978-0-373-29611-8

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## CONTENTS

CHRISTMAS IN RED WILLOW	
by Cheryl St.John	7
THE SHERIFF'S HOUSEKEEPER BRIDE	
by Jenna Kernan	95
WEARING THE RANCHER'S RING	
by Charlene Sands	199



# CHRISTMAS IN RED WILLOW

Cheryl St.John

Dear Reader,

I'm often asked where I get my ideas. Writers get ideas just like anyone else. Most of my best ones come to me in the shower or in that moment right before falling asleep, when the right side of my brain is unfettered. When a good idea arises, I write it all down longhand and place it in a thick binder filled with other story thoughts. When I need a story, I open that binder and find one that appeals to me. Sometimes I wonder what I was thinking when I jotted it down. Other times the idea sparks an interest all over again.

That's what happened when I needed a Christmas story. I opened my binder and flipped to a page titled simply Christmas Story. My notes were about a heroine who was alone at Christmas and stayed busy with activities to cover up her loneliness. I liked the idea, so I created Chloe first, giving her a past and a goal. Then I needed a man to come into her life—an unlikely man—and there's where Owen came along. He's from a big family, works with his hands and is a quiet, analytical fellow.

And I always ask myself—what's the worst thing that could happen to this person? I have written myself into some jams that way, but the question sure keeps the stories interesting.

I especially love Christmas stories, because they are filled with optimism and good will. I hope Chloe and Owen's story brings you joy this holiday, and I trust the spirit of the season will live on in your heart throughout the coming year.

Christmas blessings,

Cheryl

*This story is dedicated to the members of my critique group,  
who at any given moment will drop what they are doing and  
read pages when I need help in a crunch.*

*They are brilliant, funny, generous and incredible women,  
and I am honored to be in their company.*

*Bernadette Duquette, Debra Hines,  
Barb Hunt, Donna Knoell,  
Cheri LaClaire, Eve Savage, \*lizzie starr*

## Chapter One



*Red Willow, Colorado, 1880*

“That old building is an eyesore,” Richard Reardon declared, standing before the town council in his brown-and-gray-plaid cassimere suit, his brown hair parted in sleek precision.

Chloe Hanley felt sick to her stomach at the thought of the beautiful old structure where her grandfather had been chaplain for most of his life being destroyed.

It was the week before Thanksgiving, and the council had gathered to discuss the Independence Day celebration the town would be hosting for the entire county in eight months. Much had to be done if the storefronts were going to be refurbished and the overgrown park brought back to life in time for that event.

“What’s more,” Richard continued, “it’s a safety risk, now that the windows are broken out and animals and even drifters can get inside. We need to tear the whole thing down so work can begin on constructing a hotel. The property is right in the middle of Main Street, and anything less than a pristine new structure will reflect poorly on Red Willow and our citizens.”

Chloe leaned forward on her chair. “But the church is a historical landmark. The stone foundation and the brickwork are unique in this part of the country.”

“They’re *old*, Miss Hanley,” Richard pointed out. “Red Willow’s most important street should be modernized.”

“Edmund Rosemont designed that church,” she argued. “He was one of the greatest architects ever to build this far west,” she

reminded him. "And what would you do with the cemetery if you tore down the church? Our founding fathers are buried there."

"We can move the graves to the newer cemetery out on Long View Road," he replied.

At that thought, Chloe wanted to cry, but she tamped down her emotions to be able to defend her position against his cool materialistic plans. Thinking that she'd once fancied herself in love with the man, humiliation warmed her cheeks.

Apparently, he thought he had bested her because he offered her a cool smile. She wanted to climb across the table and slap that smug expression from his face, but she folded her hands demurely. "I've already paid the taxes that were in arrears. The women's league fundraising provided enough."

His smile dissolved.

Frank Garrison, the council chairman, leafed through the papers in front of him and shuffled one to the top. "She's right. The taxes have been paid."

"The town owns the property the church sits on," Richard reminded the group.

"After the church was vandalized, my grandfather couldn't hold services there and people stopped coming and giving. That's the only reason the property reverted to the town." After ten years of struggling, the few remaining members still gathered at the school. "The town could have helped repair the damages at the time."

"A church that can't afford to support itself must not be needed," Richard said.

His derisive dismissal came as a personal insult to Chloe. Her grandfather had dedicated his life to serving the people of this community. "The church was here before the businesses and the school," she told him heatedly. "The town sprang up around it, for goodness' sake. Even though we don't have a building to meet in, we still serve Red Willow all through the year. We just delivered food baskets to seven families who wouldn't have had a Thanksgiving meal without our help."

"I agree the church is important to the community," the bank owner, Charlie Salburg, finally offered, to her immense satisfaction. He didn't attend, but his wife June did and had helped Chloe with the food baskets. "I've thought for a long time that it's a shame

not to salvage the existing building. It was quite something in its day."

"There is a lot to be said for the historic value," Guy Allen agreed. "What if we set a deadline for the church to be restored? If it's not improved by then, we tear it down. At any rate, we can't have a dilapidated building in the center of town next summer."

Chloe experienced profound relief. Yes! Support for her cause at last. "How about the first of March?" she suggested, thinking four months would give her enough time to raise money and make repairs.

"Building a hotel in its place will require more time than what's left after that," Richard argued. "If the church is still an eyesore by Christmas, it comes down. That gives us six months to hire architects, contractors and have the work done by the Fourth of July."

"Christmas is only a month away," Chloe objected. "And it's winter."

"I think giving you a month is all we can afford," Frank said apologetically. "We do need to get things moving."

Chloe sat in silence as the council members agreed and voted. When all was said and done she had one month to find help to repair years of neglect and decay, do the actual work and have the place looking presentable. And she had no idea how or if the church board could pay for the work.

Trudging along the hallway of the municipal building on her way out, she noted each framed photograph lining the walls, settling on her grandfather's photograph. A similar likeness hung in the study of the house she'd inherited from him, and every time she looked at him in his flowing black robe with a white satin vestment, she missed him anew.

"Well, this is a fine how-do-you-do, isn't it?" He never answered when she spoke to his photograph, of course, but she imagined the corner of his mouth, defined by his neat white beard and mustache, curled upward. He'd always believed in her.

Owen Reardon used a brush made of short horsehair to clean the intricate carvings on the interior door lying atop sawhorses in his wood shop. The door was one of twelve, which were all sanded