

Love

SUSPENSE

RIVETING INSPIRATIONAL ROMANCE

RUNNING BLIND

HEROES
for HIRE

Shirlee McCoy

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Jenna Dougherty has survived cancer only to be thrown into another life-and-death struggle. Is her faith strengthened by her struggles? Or is it shaken?
2. As Christians, we are not immune to troubles and trials. What scripture verses do you cling to during troubling times?
3. Have there been times when your faith has floundered? If so, what helped buoy you up and keep you focused on the truth of God's power and faithfulness?
4. Nikolai's background is filled with heartache and loss. How has that shaped him as a person?
5. How would you describe Nikolai's faith? Do you think it is difficult or easy for him to allow God to have control of his life?
6. Jenna used to dream of getting married and having children. What has happened to make her believe that her dream will never come true?
7. Do you think that her infertility is a good reason for closing herself off to the idea of marriage, or is it simply an excuse she uses to keep from getting hurt again?
8. It's obvious that Jenna's dreams were not God's dreams for her life. Have there been times when you've pursued a dream only to find that God has other plans?
9. How does aligning our dreams with God's lead to fulfillment?

10. What dreams does Nikolai have for his life?
11. Jenna and Nikolai both have survivor's guilt. How does that impact their relationship?
12. How does Jenna deal with Magdalena's death? Does faith ease the sting of the loss?
13. What is it about Nikolai that makes Jenna want to lean on him? Why is she so determined not to?
14. Painful relationships can burden our hearts and keep us from enjoying all that God has planned for us. Are your past relationships hurting current ones?
15. What steps are important to true healing when it comes to broken relationships?
16. Have you been willing to forgive and move on? If so, how has that changed your life?

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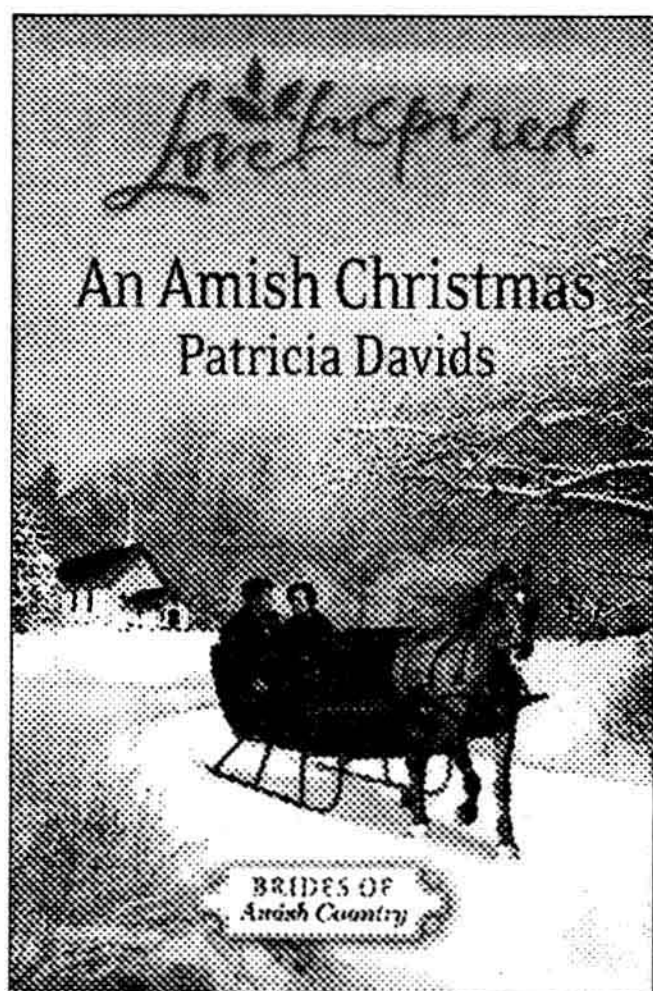
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SHIRLEE MCCOY

has always loved making up stories. As a child, she daydreamed elaborate tales in which she was the heroine—gutsy, strong and invincible. Though she soon grew out of her superhero fantasies, her love for storytelling never diminished. She knew early that she wanted to write inspirational fiction, and she began writing her first novel when she was a teenager. Still, it wasn't until her third son was born that she truly began pursuing her dream of being published. Three years later she sold her first book. Now a busy mother of five, Shirlee is a homeschool mom by day and an inspirational author by night. She and her husband and children live in Washington and share their house with a dog, two cats and a bird. You can visit her website at www.shirleemccoy.com, or email her at shirlee@shirleemccoy.com.

**“You okay?” Nikolai leaned close,
looked into her eyes.**

Her vision was still blurry, and the angles and planes of his face seemed to shift and sway as she tried to meet his gaze. Or maybe it was the tears swimming in her eyes that made it seem that way.

“I’m sorry, Jenna. There was nothing you could have done to save her. You know that, right?”

“I know that my head hurts. I know that I’m more tired than I’ve ever been in my life. I know that I wish I’d never agreed to go on that mission trip.” But she didn’t know that what Nikolai was saying was true. Maybe she’d missed an opportunity. Maybe she could have done something that would have changed things.

“Jenna—”

“I hate crying in front of strangers,” she said.

“I don’t think we’re strangers anymore,” he responded, and the first tear slipped down Jenna’s cheek. He wiped it away.

RUNNING BLIND

Shirlee McCoy



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In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see. Once more the humble will rejoice in the Lord; the needy will rejoice in the Holy One of Israel.

—*Isaiah 29:18,19*



To Brenda Minton, Love Inspired author, friend,
sister of the heart. Of all the things that being
a writer has brought into my life, I value your
friendship the most.

ONE

Jenna Dougherty woke to darkness, the pulsing agony in her head drowning out sound, wiping away thoughts and memories. For a moment she knew nothing but darkness, nothing but pain, and then she knew it all.

Three men breaking down the door to the hotel room, dragging Magdalena Romero away. Jenna following, screaming for help as she tried to save her friend. Both of them being shoved into a van and driven for hours before being dumped into a basement room.

Had they been there days or hours before the men had returned? Jenna wasn't sure, she only knew that she and Magdalena had fought for freedom.

Fought and lost.

For Jenna, there had been a moment of agony, and then nothing.

Until now.

Jenna tried to move her arms and legs, tried to call out, but the bonds were too tight, the rag over her mouth oily and old. She gagged, her heart racing with terror, her fingers scratching against dirt-covered cement as she tried to gain leverage and mobility. She twisted onto her side, trying to shimmy closer to the area where she'd last seen Magdalena. Was she still there? Or had she been taken?

Please, God, let her still be here.

A sound drifted through the darkness. Fabric rustling as someone moved. Soft footfalls on cement.

Jenna tensed, her eyes straining in the darkness. She saw nothing, not even a hint of light or movement, but the blackness seemed to pulse with energy. Someone *was* there. She felt what she could not see, and she braced for the attack she knew was coming.

A humid breeze tickled her cheeks, carrying a hint of rain and the dusty, thick scent of sun-baked earth. Was a door open? A window?

She needed to get her numb hands moving, try to undo the heavy rope that bound her. Only then would she have a chance at survival. She shifted, hoping to ease the pressure on her arms, get some blood flowing to her fingers. She *could* do this. She *would*.

The sound came again. Closer. Maybe only feet away, then right beside her. The air alive with it. Someone touched her neck—warm, dry fingers probing the pulse point there—and Jenna jerked back.

Or tried to.

Her movements were sluggish, the retreat nothing more than a subtle recoiling of muscle.

“It’s okay. I’m here to help.” The voice was as deep and velvety as the darkness, but Jenna didn’t believe the lie. She wanted to kick and punch and claw her way to freedom, but her body would not respond, and 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. Your brother will have my hide if I hurt you.”

Her brother?

Kane? Had their folks called him when she hadn’t made her Monday evening phone call?

She tried to ask, but the gag kept her from speaking, and she choked on the oily cloth.

A hand smoothed her hair, the cold blade of a knife pressing close to her head for just a second before the gag fell away.

"I—" she started, but her mouth was dry, her throat tight, and she could do nothing but suck in great gulps of humid air until she thought she would drown in it.

"Shhhhh. Whatever needs to be said can be said when we're out of here." He spoke quietly, his hand gentle on her cheek. There and gone as he bent over her wrists, sliced through the ropes. Her ankles were next, and then she was free but not free, her body still numb from hours spent tied up.

"Can you stand?"

"Yes." If it meant escaping, she could do anything. She pushed against the floor, struggled to her knees.

His arm wrapped around her waist, and he pulled her upright. "Come on. We may be on borrowed time."

"I can't leave my friend," Jenna rasped out. "Magdalena?"

"There's no one here. Just us."

"She was here. She has to *still* be here." Jenna took a step away, her legs trembling, sharp pain shooting up from her feet as the blood began flowing there again.

"There's no one here. Let's go before that changes."

"It's dark. Maybe if we find a light..."

"What did you say?" He put a hand on her shoulder, holding her still.

"We need to turn on the light."

Fabric rustled and hands cupped her cheeks.

"What can you see, Jenna?"

She wanted to shove his hands away, tell him that they had more to worry about than what she could or couldn't see, but something in his tone held her motionless. "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, everything within her stilling.

And then she reached up, touched her eyes, not sure what she expected to feel. What she hoped to feel. Maybe a blindfold. Something that would be blocking the light. But there was nothing.

"I can't see anything."

"You've got a deep bruise on your forehead. Maybe that has something to do with it." His fingers traced a line from the bridge of her nose to her hairline, probing the tender flesh there.

"It doesn't matter how it happened. I'm blind!" She could feel herself panicking, feel the breath catching in her throat, her mind spinning away.

"Hey, it's okay. Take a deep breath. Let it out slowly." He laid his palm against her cheek again, let it rest there as she tried to catch her breath.

"No. It's not."

"Yeah. It is. You're alive, and you're going to stay that way. We'll worry about the rest after we're out of here."

He was right.

She needed to calm down, get a handle on her emotions the same way she had the day she'd been told she had cancer and had less than a year to live. She'd fought that diagnosis, and she'd won. This was simply another battle, another challenge.

"Okay. I'm okay," she managed to say, even though she wasn't sure it was true.

"I knew you were. Now, let's get out of here and get you to a hospital." There was a hint of an accent to his voice, but Jenna couldn't place it.

"We have to find Magdalena first." She pulled away, turning around in a circle, the darkness suddenly deeper, more oppressive. She was blind, and that was something she couldn't think about. Not if she was going to help her friend and herself.

"I told you, she's not here."