

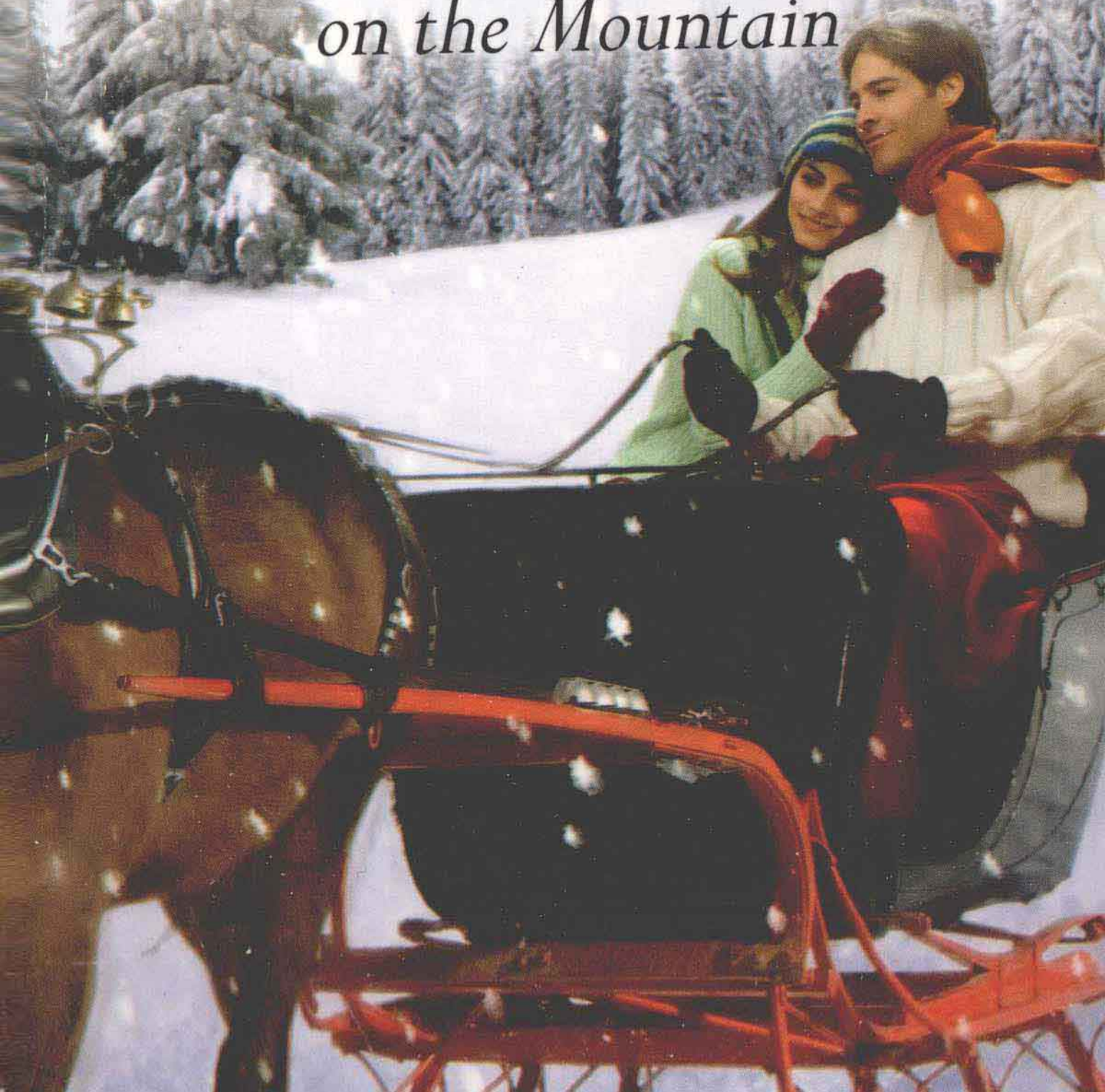


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to enjoy a sneak peek from
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*See below for a sneak peek from our classic
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Introducing DADDY BY CHRISTMAS by Patricia Thayer.

MIA caught sight of Jarrett when he walked into the open lobby. It was hard not to notice the man. In a charcoal business suit with a crisp white shirt and striped tie covered by a dark trench coat, he looked more Wall Street than small-town Colorado.

Mia couldn't blame him for keeping his distance. He was probably tired of taking care of her.

Besides, why would a man like Jarrett McKane be interested in her? Why would he want to take on a woman expecting a baby? Yet he'd done so many things for her. He'd been there when she'd needed him most. How could she not care about a man like that?

Heart pounding in her ears, she walked up behind him. Jarrett turned to face her. "Did you get enough sleep last night?"

"Yes, thanks to you," she said, wondering if he'd thought about their kiss. Her gaze went to his mouth, then she quickly glanced away. "And thank you for not bringing up my meltdown."

Jarrett couldn't stop looking at Mia. Blue was definitely her color, bringing out the richness of her eyes.

"What meltdown?" he said, trying hard to focus on what she was saying. "You were just exhausted from lack of sleep and worried about your baby."

He couldn't help remembering how, during the night, he'd kept going in to watch her sleep. How strange was that? "I hope you got enough rest."

She nodded. "Plenty. And you're a good neighbor for

coming to my rescue.”

He tensed. Neighbor? *What neighbor kisses you like I did?* “That’s me, just the full-service landlord,” he said, trying to keep the sarcasm out of his voice. He started to leave, but she put her hand on his arm.

“Jarrett, what I meant was you went beyond helping me.” Her eyes searched his face. “I’ve asked far too much of you.”

“Did you hear me complain?”

She shook her head. “You should. I feel like I’ve taken advantage.”

“Like I said, I haven’t minded.”

“And I’m grateful for everything...”

Grasping her hand on his arm, Jarrett leaned forward. The memory of last night’s kiss had him aching for another. “I didn’t do it for your gratitude, Mia.”

Gorgeous tycoon Jarrett McKane has never believed in Christmas—but he can’t help being drawn to soon-to-be-mom Mia Saunders! Christmases past were spent alone...and now Jarrett may just have a fairy-tale ending for all his Christmases future!

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“Close your eyes.”

Sean did. He felt a rush of cold air, as if someone had opened the door.

“You can open them,” she said.

He stared out the front door at a horse-drawn sleigh in his driveway. A large black horse pulled a red-and-green sleigh decorated with garlands. Two old-fashioned lanterns hung off the front. A driver with a stovepipe hat in forest-green held the reins with gloved hands.

Zoë touched her lips gently to his. “Merry Christmas, Sean.”

“Wow. I never would have expected this.”

She pulled back to gaze into his eyes, hers wide with hope. “You like it?”

“I love it.”

I love you, he thought. But he wasn’t ready to say the words just yet.

Dear Reader,

You know how certain people intrigue you? How some places draw you back again and again? That happened to me writing about Sean Hughes and Hood Hamlet, Oregon.

Both first appeared in *Rescued by the Magic of Christmas*. I fell in love with the quaint mountain town, and I wanted to give the handsome team leader of Oregon Mountain Search and Rescue his own story.

My original idea had heartbreaker Sean and his loyal Siberian husky rescuing my injured heroine. I submitted a brief story line to my editor and was good to go. And then I heard from the sister of a friend about Michael Leming, a member of Portland Mountain Rescue and one of my go-to guys for research questions.

Michael had been climbing a twelve-foot vertical piece of ice just below the summit of Mount Hood. A chunk had sheared off. He fell back on a fifty-degree slope and slid over two hundred feet. He was taken off the mountain by helicopter with two injured ankles.

Fortunately Michael's injuries weren't life threatening, but he did require rehab and physical therapy. Thirteen weeks later, however, he climbed Mount Hood—a tad slowly—and snowboarded down from 9,500 feet. A year after his accident his ankles are at ninety percent.

Once I knew Michael would be okay, the writer in me took over. I kept thinking about a rescuer needing to be rescued. Suddenly I knew I had to change my story. The changes kept getting better when my editor asked me if I could set the story during Christmastime.

I had so much fun writing about Sean Hughes and Zoë Flynn Carrington and revisiting Hood Hamlet. It's a story about hope, family and of course love!

Enjoy.

Melissa

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*Christmas Magic
on the Mountain*



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CHRISTMAS MAGIC ON THE MOUNTAIN

First North American Publication 2010

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With a degree in mechanical engineering from Stanford University, the last thing **Melissa McClone** ever thought she would be doing was writing romance novels. But analyzing engines for a major U.S. airline just couldn't compete with her "happily-ever-afters." When she isn't writing, caring for her three young children or doing laundry, Melissa loves to curl up on the couch with a cup of tea, her cats and a good book. She enjoys watching home decorating shows to get ideas for her house—a 1939 cottage that is *slowly* being renovated. Melissa lives in Lake Oswego, Oregon, with her own real-life hero husband, two daughters, a son, two lovable but oh-so-spoiled indoor cats and a no-longer-stray outdoor kitty that decided to call the garage home. Melissa loves to hear from her readers. You can write to her at P.O. Box 63, Lake Oswego, OR 97034, U.S.A., or contact her via her website, www.melissamcclone.com.

For Virginia Kantra, my critique partner
extraordinaire, and Michael Leming,
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discrepancies are entirely the author's fault.

CHAPTER ONE

THE FAMILIAR sound of the crunch of traction tires against packed snow filled the cab of Sean Hughes's truck. He inhaled the crisp air laced with the scent of pine and the smell of wet dog. Denali, his Siberian husky, panted on the seat next to him.

Winter on Mount Hood was their favorite time of year—boarding, climbing and snowshoeing. Sean grimaced wryly. Too bad Thanksgiving and Christmas had to get in the way of all that fun.

A snowplow heading west passed him.

No doubt the early morning road crews working hard to clear the overnight snowfall from Highway 26. Portlanders would be driving up in throngs today to spend Thanksgiving on the slopes or eating turkey at Timberline Lodge's Cascade dining room.

Sean wished he could be one of them.

A well-cooked dinner served by an obliging wait staff at a nice restaurant where quiet conversation was *de rigueur* would be better than the chaotic holiday meal at his parents' house where everyone poked their noses into everybody's business. Especially his. No one listened to his "let's eat dinner out" suggestion—not even when he offered to pay for all thirty-eight of them. Make that thirty-nine. One of his cousins had given birth to another baby a couple of months ago.

"A good thing we don't have to be at Mom and Dad's until later." Sean glanced at Denali. "I'd rather spend this bluebird

day on the mountain than be stuck inside listening to people tell me what's missing from my life is a wife."

Denali nudged his arm with her nose.

"They don't seem to understand you're my number one girl." Sean patted the dog's head. He had nothing against marriage per se, but he didn't have the time necessary to make a relationship work. He had too many other things going on in his life to make any woman a priority. In the past, he'd somehow given women the wrong idea about his commitment level so now he only dated casually. Much to his family's dismay. "No worries. We'll make the most of the time we have on our own this morning."

The dog stared out the windshield and barked.

At the base of the road leading up to Timberline Lodge stood a snowboarder. A large, overstuffed backpack set at his feet along with a board.

Around here, no one thought twice about hitchhiking up to the ski area or giving a skier or snowboarder a lift.

Sean remembered hitching rides up the hill from locals and strangers when he'd been a teenager. Back then he'd worked all summer for his dad to pay for a season pass. He'd pack a lunch since he couldn't afford to buy a cup of hot chocolate, let alone food. Times and his circumstances sure had changed since then. But seeing the kid made Sean remember the joy and freedom of those days.

Flicking on his left turn signal, he tapped the brakes to slow down. The image of the kid hoping for a ride made a great visual. He would have to mention that to the advertising firm his snowboard manufacturing company used. They were already talking about next season's promo campaign.

He turned off the highway, pulled over to the right and rolled down the passenger window.

A burst of frigid air rushed in. Denali stuck her head out.

The snowboarder straightened. "Hi."

Not a kid. A woman. Even better.

"Hey," Sean said to her.

A wool beanie hid her hair. The fit of her jacket made him wonder what curves lay underneath.

"Beautiful dog," she said.

"Thanks." The woman was pretty herself with pink cheeks and glossed lips. Her outerwear coordinated with the graphics on her board. Not one of his snowboards, but she looked like the type of rider more interested in fashion than in function. He didn't mind. Sean had a soft spot for snow bunnies, especially ones who boarded. "Heading up for a taste of the fresh powder?"

"I hear it's light and fluffy. My favorite kind." Hopeful, clear blue eyes fringed with thick lashes met his. "Have room for one more?"

She was young. Early twenties, maybe. But cute. Very cute. She'd be turning some heads on the slopes today the way she had turned his.

He shifted the truck's gear stick into Park. "I'll put your stuff in the back."

A wide smile lit up her face. "Thanks, but I've got it."

Independent. Sean liked that. Much better than the women who wanted him to do everything for them.

In the rearview mirror, he watched as she put her things into the back. He appreciated how careful she was to avoid his splitboard and the prototype bindings he'd been working on. She kicked the snow from her boots, climbed in the cab and closed the door.

"I can't tell you how happy I am you stopped." She pulled off her mittens and wiggled her fingers in front of the dashboard vents. "Oh, the heat feels so good."

She smelled good. Like vanilla. He wouldn't mind seeing if she tasted as good as she smelled. "Been waiting long?"

"It felt like forever." Her fingers fumbled with the seat belt until she managed to fasten it. "But it was probably only twenty minutes or so. There isn't as much traffic as I thought there'd be this morning."

"Most people won't head up until later." He shifted gears,

pressed on the gas pedal and drove up the curving road to Timberline Lodge. "The lifts don't open until nine."

"That explains it." She rubbed her hands together. "I'm Zoe."

"Sean Hughes." Walls of snow from the plow lined each side of the road. "This is Denali."

"Nice to meet both of you."

Denali rubbed her muzzle against Zoe's cheek.

"Off," Sean ordered, his gaze focusing for a moment on Zoe's high cheekbones. The dog obeyed. "She's very friendly."

"I see that." Zoe glanced at the window behind them. "I noticed an OMSAR sticker on the window."

"Oregon Mountain Search and Rescue."

She fiddled with her mittens on her lap. "You guys are on TV a lot."

"When something happens on the mountain, the media flock to Timberline, but otherwise they pretty much leave us alone."

"I suppose really bad things happen up there."

"Sometimes." He thought about fellow OMSAR member and good friend Nick Bishop who had died almost seven years ago climbing on the Reid Headwall. "Accidents can happen to the best climbers."

"I'd like to climb a mountain someday."

"There isn't much in this world that beats standing on a summit," he encouraged. "But it's all about getting to the top and back down safely. You need to be ready, prepared."

With a nod, she rested her left hand on a contented-looking Denali.

Sean noticed her bare ring finger. He'd bet she had a boyfriend. Still, awareness buzzed through him.

"Before I forget," she said. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Same to you." At least Thanksgiving was only one day. That made the holiday a hundred percent better than Christmas, when the chorus of "When are you settling down?"