

Elementary, My Dear Gertie

a novella

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ONE

First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Nori pushing a baby carriage. As I stared at the words stitched on the needlepoint pillow, my cheeks burned. Leave it to my mother to transform Christmas morning into an Embarrass-Nori-Fest. Since arriving back in Ten Commandments, Iowa two days ago, I'd put up with non-stop innuendos, commentary, and sermons about my living-in-sin lifestyle and ticking biological clock. However, with the gift I'd just opened, Mom had gone too far. Way too far.

"Smile and say 'thank you'," advised Gertie, my childhood imaginary friend who'd come back to haunt me nearly two years ago.

"Haunt you? Hmmph! If it weren't for me, you'd be pulling espresso shots at Starbucks or asking, 'Do you want fries with that?' Who's responsible for you becoming the hottest talk-radio personality in all of New York?"

I glanced across the room to where Mac, my boss and significant other, sat wedged between my father and an overabundance of hand-made throw pillows, Mom's latest *craft du mois* on her cable TV show. Mac wore a patient expression on his face and a hand-knit red and green striped tie draped around his neck.

Ties were September's *craft du mois*. Thanks to Connie Stedworth, America's craft maven and my mother – not necessarily in that order – males all over America opened gifts of knit, crocheted, painted, appliquéd, cross stitched, hand-woven, or patchwork quilted ties this morning. Unless they were Jewish, in which case they'd received their handmade neckwear ten days ago on the first night of Hanukkah.

Gertie interrupted my necktie digression with a shrill question. *"Sure Mackenzie Randolph hired you, but who's responsible for you meeting him? If it weren't for yours truly, you'd have walked right past him and kept on walking."*

Highly unlikely, given the only available seat in Bean Around the Block that day was the empty one across the table from Mac, but Gertie's a credit hog.

"I take credit where credit's due. You'd have a hard time surviving without me, Honora Stedworth. Besides, who came crying to whom for help? I was doing just fine, thank-you-very-much, enjoying my hard earned and richly-deserved retirement after dealing with your childhood and adolescence. Not an easy job by any stretch of the imagination, I might add."

So what type of 401K plans are available to imaginary friends?

"Save the snarkiness for your listeners. It's Christmas. Suck up your pride, and thank your mother. You've only got five days to go before you fly back to New York."

I stole a peek at the anniversary clock fighting for space among a multitude of Christmas cards covering the mantle. Five days, three hours and forty-seven minutes if our flight departed on time, but who's counting?

"Earth to Nori. I don't suppose you've noticed that everyone is staring at you, waiting for you to hold up the gift and say something?"

Pushy, isn't she? I gritted my teeth, plastered a smile on my face, and said, "How sweet. Thank you, Mom." But I kept the pillow firmly planted in the cardboard box on my lap. No need to expand the Embarrass-Nori-Fest into an Embarrass-Nori-and-Mac-Fest. So far, Mom had behaved herself in front of Mac, reserving her innuendos, commentary, and sermons to times when he was out of earshot. I hoped to maintain the status quo.

"The pastel colors will work for either a boy or a girl," said Mom.

Not that there was even the hint of a boy or a girl bun in the oven. And none planned. I folded the red and green tissue paper back over the pillow and reached for the cardboard lid.

Mom jumped to her feet. "What are you doing, Nori? Hold it up. Show everyone."

By *everyone* Mom meant the two other people in the living room – my father and Mac – but I'm sure Dad had already seen Mom's less-than-subtle needlepoint missive. Her message was aimed directly at me and my partner-in-sin.

However, in Ten Commandments, Iowa we were more like partners-in-absentia. Or maybe that should be partners-in-*abstaintia*. Mac and I had been sharing both an apartment and a bed in New York for more than a year and a half, but this was our first trip as a couple to visit my parents. We'd avoided a Christmas trek

to the Midwest last year by booking a trip to Europe. I'd been dealing with the fall-out ever since.

So here we were. And although my parents were aware of our living arrangement in New York, they chose to ignore it, refusing to set foot in our apartment whenever Mom's burgeoning empire brought them east.

Share a room with Mac under their roof? Never going to happen. Not until we'd exchanged *I do's* in front of my uncle, the Reverend Zechariah Stedworth. And my mother had no qualms about employing every available means of communication to hammer that fact into me – including needlepoint. Frankly, I was surprised not to see a billboard directed toward me as we pulled into town.

"For heaven's sake!" Mom strode through a floor of discarded wrapping paper and ribbons, grabbed the box off my lap, and headed toward Mac. "I spent hours stitching this for you. The least you can do is share it with your...your –." She frowned at Mac.

Dad cleared his throat. "Significant other, dear."

Mom glared at Dad, then shot a hostile nod in Mac's direction. Identical round, red spots surfaced on each of her cheeks. "If he's so significant, why aren't they married? Or at least engaged?" She dumped the box on Mac's lap and marched toward the kitchen.

So much for maintaining the status quo.

"Connie," called Dad, "come back."

Mom muttered under her breath, "If I don't get that bird in the oven...and then there's the cranberry relish...and the yams..."

Dad shook his head at both Mac and me before he hauled himself off the sofa and followed Mom into the kitchen.

I sighed.

Mac sighed.

Then he took a look at the needlepoint pillow and sighed again, this time more forcefully before he read the embroidered phrase aloud. "*First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes Nori pushing a baby carriage.*"

When God was passing out the Subtle genes, my mother was probably off *faux* finishing something.

A sheepish grin spread across Mac's face. "And you were worried I'd be bored in your little hometown?"

"Bored and embarrassed. So which is worse?"

He laughed. "I'm definitely not bored." Then he motioned toward the front door. "Think we can duck out of here for a while?"

Since Mom's crafting talents didn't extend to chastity belts (yet), she wasn't satisfied with placing Mac and me in separate bedrooms at either end of the second floor. When we arrived, I was assigned my childhood bedroom, and Mac was relegated to a room at the Ten Commandments Inn, the only motel in town.

Mom couldn't control what went on in New York, but she was determined a mile would separate me from temptation as long as Mac and I were on her turf. And given that the establishment was owned and operated by Mom's second cousin Maude-Ann Krissendorf, I suspected an additional pair of eyes had been pressed into service to deter any possible hanky-panky.

"I'd better go make nice first," I said.

"Good idea. Fill a thermos with coffee while you're in there."

"What for?"

"Knowing your mother, if we take the car, she'll come after us with a shotgun. We'd better hoof it."

I glanced out the window. Anyone who wished for a white Christmas had never lived in Iowa in December. An inch of fresh snow had accumulated since the plow had come down the street a few hours ago. More continued to fall, lightly but steadily. White windblown whorls danced in gusts down the empty street.

A perfect morning to curl up in bed, but the bed in question was a mile away, and Mac was right. Taking the car would set off Mom's internal radar. My embarrassment over the needlepoint pillow would pale in comparison to having her barge in on us after she'd cajoled Maude-Ann out of a pass key. Or maybe she already had one stashed away for just such an emergency.

I headed for the kitchen while Mac grabbed our coats and boots. “We’re going for a walk,” I said, coming up behind Mom and pecking her cheek.

She stiffened at my touch, her hands freezing in mid-stuff of the turkey. Then her shoulders sagged, and the stiffness drained from her spine. She withdrew her hands from inside old Tom, gave them a quick rinse at the sink, then grabbed a dish towel. Finally, her hands still damp, she turned to face me and offered a weak smile as she tucked a few strands of my always unmanageable riot of strawberry blonde curls behind my ear. “Nori, I only want what’s best for you, dear.”

“I know, Mom.” I saw no purpose in pointing out that at twenty-eight years of age, I should be the one to determine what was best for me. We’d had this particular argument too many times. “We’ll be back in plenty of time for me to help you with the side dishes.”

“Isn’t it too cold for a walk?” asked my father, pausing in his yam-peeling duties.

I glanced over at him as I filled the thermos from the coffee pot Mom always kept simmering with fresh brew. Did he suspect we’d tramp a mile through snow and slush for a quickie? Would he spill the beans?

I never knew how to read Dad lately. He’d always been the more conservative of the two, but several scandals involving members of his family, along with Mom’s foray into the world of celebrity, had changed him. When Dad was forced to confront the fact that not everyone marches to the tune of his particular drummer, he abdicated his role as mayor and moral arbiter of Ten Commandments, not to mention the world.

Still, I knew it was difficult for him to accept that his only daughter was no longer as pure as that white stuff falling from the heavens.

I crossed over to the kitchen table and kissed the top of his balding head. “We’ll bundle up.” He eyed me as if he saw right through me but went back to yam peeling without saying another word.

“Wear your boots,” said Mom. “And don’t forget a scarf and gloves.”

“Of course.” Pushing twenty-nine by the calendar, still nine in my mother’s eyes. Some things would never change.

I met Mac in the front hallway. He slipped the thermos into a backpack while I shrugged into my parka.

“Desperate, aren’t we?” asked Gertie as Mac and I crunched our way down the road, being careful to dodge black ice and mounds of frozen slush.

Desperate didn’t begin to describe the jumble of emotions inside me. I loved my parents, but I loved them a lot more when they were in Iowa and I was in New York. After two days in Ten Commandments, I had a lot of pent-up frustration to burn off. I figured I had two choices: sex or matricide. I opted for the more pleasurable and less sinful of the two.