

# **A Christmas Hope**

By

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Mountain Vines Publishing

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*This story is dedicated to Kaycee McKenzie, the woman who created The Joyful Table.  
We miss you, Kaycee, and know you are setting the perfect dinner table in heaven.*

## Chapter One

Clara Misowski stared at the man on the six o'clock local evening news.

His craggy face, guarded by a thick, but trimmed, black beard reflected the stony countryside behind him. His wild locks blew in the chilly late November wind.

*Heathcliff in the flesh.*

Clara leaned forward on her couch. She ached to reach through the plasma and touch him to make sure he was real. His piercing eyes taunted her with their vibrancy.

*Or insanity.*

Maybe she was the crazy one. Longing after a man on television was a sign of true desperation.

Three failed businesses and an abortive marriage had made her doubt her ability to make a success of anything. Her latest venture—a tasting party and culinary road trip business she'd named The Perfect Plate—would be her last chance at independence. Her most recent bank statement had shown a pitifully small balance. If something didn't change soon, she'd need to get a job. The thought of working for someone else made her shudder.

When her husband left her to move in with his secretary—*how clichéd is that?*—he'd made it clear he thought she didn't have anything to offer a *real* man. "You're too flighty," he'd told her. "You can't keep house, can't run a business, and definitely can't keep a man satisfied in bed."

Clara glanced back at the man on the television. He looked like he'd never known a happy day in his life. He'd probably make her miserable.

Then why did she have a burning desire to meet him?

She must be certifiable. That was the only possible answer.

On the screen, the impeccably dressed reporter smiled at the camera. Her black leather coat and matching high heeled boots mocked Clara's sweats. The reporter's carefully painted lips enunciated her words. "Sam Richards is a fourth generation farmer from Dutchess County in upstate New York."

While she spoke the unsmiling man stepped farther away from the reporter as if he might catch her fame.

"When he left for college, along with many of the young people from this small farming town of Roxbury," the report continued, "few expected him to come back home. But Sam Richards did return, a small sign that the brain drain from this charming, but rural, agricultural community may be reversing. Since his return, he's converted the family dairy farm to an artisan cheese-making operation."

*A charming small town.* Sounded like Clara's kind of place.

She grabbed a piece of paper, wrote down "Sam Richards," "cheese," and "Roxbury, NY," and went back to staring at the screen.

The camera followed the reporter as a black and white dog herded her toward Sam. When the dog successfully achieved its goal, it sat and waited for praise from its master.

Sam glanced at the dog, a hint of a smile softening the hard planes of his face, and patted its head.

“What made you decide to return?” the reporter asked before she thrust the microphone into Sam’s face.

The man’s features closed back down.

*He hates this.*

The reporter wiggled the microphone.

Sam shrugged. “I never bought the line of bull that a city’s a better place to live, and an office job is the only career.” He gestured to the sheep scattered across the meadow and the tree-covered mountains in the distance. “This is how people are supposed to live.”

*Sheep. He owns sheep. Why can’t he make cheese from cows? Or even goats?*

While the reporter closed the segment, Clara turned on her computer tablet and searched for “artisan cheese Roxbury NY.” Halfway down the page, she saw what she was looking for: “Richards Handmade Cheese.” His website was a bare-bones effort that explained how he made the cheese, and where she could buy it. The “About” section pictured Richards with his dog, but gave minimal information about the owner.

The company’s phone number hid in tiny numerals at the bottom of the page.

No wife or partner was mentioned.

*Heathcliff might be available.*

She sighed. *I’m lusting after a man I don’t know who obviously wants to be left alone.*

*But it’s late November—almost Christmas, her more optimistic self whispered. Isn’t that what the season is about? Hope that things will change? Maybe with the right tactics, I could convince him to rediscover the joy of the season.*

Clara searched the internet for more information about the town. As her fingers slid, flicked, and tapped over the screen, she realized Roxbury would be a great place for her first long-distance tasting and shopping trip. Besides the handsome cheesemaker destined to break her heart, there was a winery, a farm with exotic animals, and a bed and breakfast with organic foodstuffs and local handcrafted items. Google Earth showed a farm-studded area hugging the rough contours of the Catskill Mountains. Once snow fell, the area would be Christmas card picturesque.

The owners of the winery and animal farm should be easily convinced to set up demonstrations for the clients of The Perfect Plate. Sam Richards might be a little more difficult.

Maybe if she showed up in person, she could persuade him. She could make the trip to Dutchess County on Friday.

The impulse to visit Sam Richards galloped through her brain, while logic pulled at the reins. She ignored the tug of common sense.

Sam must need publicity because he’d done the interview with the New York television station. Clara would have to convince him that catering to her group would help him sell more cheese.

After tapping back to the cheesemaker’s site, she pulled up the “Locations” page.

*Good. King’s carries his cheese.*

Clara glanced at the time on the computer, flicked off the television, and walked to her bedroom to throw on a sweater, jeans, and run a brush through her hair. King’s Grocers wasn’t the corner store. Even at this late hour she might run into one of her wealthy clients. After sliding her favorite gloss over her lips, she dashed out the door.

At the market, she took her time and walked through all the aisles. Tangy vinegar odors from open bins of olives and pickles, yeasty smells of artisan breads, and a whiff of citrus from Clementine oranges, grapefruit, and lemons teased her nose. With only a few dollars in her

pocket, rich smells would have to do.

Clara ended her tour of culinary delights at the cheese section. A short gray-haired woman with a thick European accent helped her find Richards Handmade Cheese. Clara selected three of the smallest pieces and made her way to the bargain bins where she snagged a cheap bottle of pinot noir and crusty day-old bread.

After she returned home with her purchases, she opened the wine to air, lay out her feast, put on classical music, and sat at her kitchen table to sample Sam's cheddar, Gouda, and something called a *burrata*, which turned out to be an outer layer of mozzarella with a soft center of mascarpone.

*The food was as ambrosial as its culinary artist.*

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