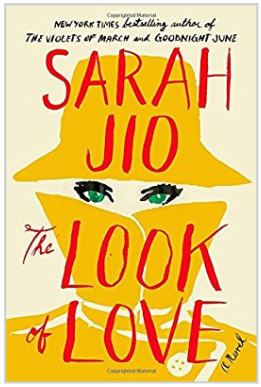

The Look of Love: A Novel

By Sarah Jio

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From the *New York Times* bestselling author of *Always* and *Blackberry Winter*, and inspired by the classic song, the magical story of a woman who can see true love**—but will she find it for herself?**

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Born during a Christmas blizzard, Jane Williams receives a rare gift: the ability to *see* true love. Jane has emerged from an ailing childhood a lonely, hopeless romantic when, on her twenty-ninth birthday, a mysterious greeting card arrives, specifying that Jane must identify the six types of love before the full moon following her thirtieth birthday, or face grave consequences. When Jane falls for a science writer who doesn’t believe in love, she fears that her fate is sealed.

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Editorial Review

Review
"An engaging story populated by lovable characters. This is a charming journey into the lives of people trying to follow the map of love and finding themselves somewhere totally unexpected at the journey's end."—***Booklist***

Praise for Sarah Jio and her novels:

“Jio has become one of the most-read women in America.”—***Woman’s World*** (on *Morning Glory*)

“Delightful and uplifting.”—***Historical Novel Society*** (on *Goodnight June*)

“Linger[s] long after the last page.”—***Romantic Times*** (on *The Last Camellia*)

“Eminently readable . . . a tribute to family and forgiveness.”—***Booklist*** (on *Goodnight June*)

“Terrific … compelling … an intoxicating blend of mystery, history and romance.”—***Real Simple*** (on *Blackberry Winter*)

About the Author

Sarah Jio is the #1 international, *New York Times*, and *USA Today* bestselling author of eight novels. She is also a longtime journalist who has contributed to *Glamour*, *The New York Times*, *Redbook*, *Real Simple*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, *Cooking Light*, *Woman’s Day*, *Marie Claire*, *Self*, and many other outlets, including NPR’s *Morning Edition*, appearing as a commentator. Jio lives in Seattle with her three young boys.

Chapter 1

2021 Pike Street, Apartment 602, Seattle
December 24, 2012

I steady my golden retriever, Sam, as I slide my key into my mailbox. Bernard, the apartment building doorman, looks away from the packages he's sorting and kneels down beside Sam to scratch his ears. "Morning, Jane," he says, looking up at me with a smile. "Did you hear? They say we're getting snow tonight. Four inches at least."

I sigh. We'll never get the flower deliveries out on time if the roads are icy. I collect the stack of mail and holiday cards inside the box, then cross the lobby to the front windows, which are lined with multicolored lights. Sam sniffs the Christmas tree in the corner as I peer outside. Pike Place is just waking up. Steam wafts from the awning of Meriwether Bakery, down the block. The fish-mongers are hosing down the cobblestones in front of their stalls. A flock of eager tourists carrying umbrellas (tourists always carry umbrellas) pause for a photo across the street, disturbing a seagull perched on a street sign overhead. He lets out an annoyed cry and flies off in a huff.

"Yep, those are snow clouds out there," Bernard says, nodding toward the window.

"How can you tell?"

"Come here," he says, standing and walking through the double doors. I follow him out to the street. "Let me give you a little lesson in clouds."

I feel the bitter cold on my face as I breathe in the frigid air, which smells of coffee grounds and seawater—aromatic and salty at the same time. Seattle. Sam wags his tail expectantly as a passerby reaches out her hand to greet him.

Bernard points up to the sky. "See those? They're cirrostratus clouds."

"Cirro-what?"

He grins. "They're the first cloud formations you'll see before a snowstorm. Look how they're thin and rippled, like fallen snow."

I study them with curiosity, as if they might contain a message written in meteorological hieroglyphs. A cloud language that I might be able to decode if I stare long enough.

"Now, look farther off over the sound," he says, pointing out to the distant clouds lurking over Elliott Bay. "Those are the snow clouds moving in. They're heavier, darker." He pauses and touches his hand to his ear. "And listen. Do you hear it?"

I shake my head. "What?"

"The way the air sounds muffled." He nods. "There's always an unexplained quiet before a snowstorm."

Sam sits at my feet on the sidewalk. "I think you might be right. There's something eerily quiet about this morning." I gaze up at the sky again, but this time I do a double-take. "Do you ever see things in clouds? Pictures? Faces?"

He grins. "Indeed I do. But what I see may be different than what you see. Clouds are illusive that way." He

pauses for a long moment. “I think they show us what we want to see.”

He’s right. I do see something, and it startles me a little. I quickly shake my head. “Then I’m not telling you what I see, because you’ll just laugh at me.”

Bernard smiles to himself.

“What do you see?” I ask.

“A roast beef sandwich,” he says with a grin, then reaches into his pocket. “Oh, I almost forgot. This came for you.” He hands me a pink envelope. “The postman accidentally left it in Mrs. Klein’s mailbox.”

“Thanks,” I say, quickly tucking the envelope into my bag with the other mail—mostly an assortment of unwanted Christmas cards. Perfect, happy, smiling families posing for the camera. Talk about illusions.

“Merry Christmas,” Bernard says as Sam begins pulling on the leash.

“Merry Christmas to you,” I reply. The words echo in my head. Merry Christmas. I don’t feel merry. But I never do this time of year.

I round the corner and nod at Mel, the owner of the newsstand at Pike Place. He winks and points to the mistletoe hanging on the awning. “A kiss for old Mel?”
I play coy and smirk, and Mel frowns. “Not even on Christmas Eve, Janey?”

I lean in and give him a quick peck on the cheek. “There.” I smile. “Are you happy now?”

He clutches his cheek and feigns paralysis. “Best day of my life,” he says. Mel is at least seventy. He’s operated the newsstand for forty years, maybe longer. A short, balding man with a potbelly, he flirts with every woman in the market, then goes home to a little apartment two blocks up the hill, where he lives alone.

“My Adele loved Christmas Eve,” he says. “She loved mistletoe. She’d do it up big, with a roast and a tree and lights.”

I place my hand on his arm. Although his wife passed away eight years ago, he speaks of her as if they’d just had breakfast this morning. “I know you miss her so much.”

He looks up at the clouds, and I wonder what he sees. “Every damn day,” he says. I see the grief in his eyes, but his expression changes when a woman, perhaps in her seventies, approaches the newsstand. She’s tall and towers over Mel like the Columbia Center perched beside the much smaller Fourth and Pike Building. She has silver-gray hair and chiseled features. Elegant with a strand of pearls around her neck, she was no doubt very beautiful in her youth.

“Do you have the Times—the London Times?” she asks in a tone that telegraphs disappointment. Her voice is sharp, commanding, and I hear the telltale clip of a British accent.

I watch the two face each other, and my vision clouds a little, as it sometimes does. I rub my eyes as Mel grins jovially at his prim-and-proper customer. “The Times?” he exclaims. “Ma’am, with all due respect, this is Seattle, not merry old England.”

The woman’s eyes narrow. “Well, any proper newsstand would carry it. It’s the only publication worth reading.” She scans the racks of tabloids and newspapers. “So much rubbish these days.”

Mel raises an eyebrow at me as the woman adjusts the collar of her trench coat and bristles past us.

He looks momentarily stunned before his face twists into a half smile. “Snobs!” he says. “Rich people think they own the world.”

I glance over my shoulder and rub my eyes again, careful not to disturb my recently applied mascara, which is when I remember the appointment I have tomorrow with Dr. Heller, the neurologist I’ve been seeing for most of my life. The British woman has disappeared around the corner. “Maybe she’s just unhappy,” I say. “My grandmother used to say that most of the time, people don’t mean to be rude; it’s just their sadness showing through.”

I’m hit with a sudden memory from childhood, when the first time I encountered deep sadness was the same day I first noticed a change in my vision. I was four years old, standing in the doorway of my mother’s bedroom. Mom sat hunched on her bed, sobbing into her hands. The curtains were tightly drawn, and darkness stained the walls. My father hovered behind her, begging her forgiveness. He held a suitcase in his hand and was leaving that day for Los Angeles to follow a woman he’d met. He said he was going to marry her. Dad was in love, and Mom was heartbroken.

I don’t remember my father’s face, or the exact words they exchanged that rainy Seattle morning. I recall only my mother’s deep sadness, and when my father placed his hand on her shoulder as if to say, “Please forgive me,” I blinked hard. It was as if my eyes had completely fogged over, but not from tears, from something inside me. I remember taking a step back, rubbing my eyes, and stumbling in the hallway, where I waited until my father slipped through the doorway. If he had intended to say good-bye to me, he didn’t get around to it. And so he left us—my brother, Flynn, oblivious, watching TV on the couch; me, confused and partially blind in the hallway; Mom, crying so loudly, I wondered if she might be dying.

I wanted only to cheer her up, so that morning, with a shaking hand, I offered her a cup of coffee. I’d watched her grind the beans and place them in the French press a hundred times, and I summoned the courage to try it myself. But my vision was still blurry, and I’d gotten it all wrong, and Mom was quick to tell me so.

“What is this?” she snapped.

“I made you coffee,” I said in a squeak.

She looked down at the coffee cup and shook her head, then slowly walked to the kitchen sink and dumped it out.

I held my tears as I watched her walk back to her bedroom. Dad had failed Mom. And I’d failed her too. An hour later, Grandma came over and explained that sadness has a way of controlling our behavior. I never forgot those words, or the way Grandma summoned Mom, and the two of them rushed me to the hospital when I told them about my eyes, still mildly blurry an hour later. After an inconclusive CAT scan and a needle prick in my arm that made me cry, I went home with a sticker and a cherry Popsicle. We didn’t talk about Dad anymore after that. And even now, as hard as I try, I can’t picture his face. In my mind’s eye, he remains a permanent
blur.

Mel shrugs as he slices open a bundle of newspapers with a box cutter.

“Well,” I continue, “I’m off to the shop. It’ll be a busy day today. Last year Lo created this arrangement with poinsettias, holly, and rosehips, and I swear, every socialite in this city wants four for her holiday table.” I sigh. “Which is not a bad thing, obviously. It just means that by the time this day is over”—I pause and hold up my hands—“these fingers are going to be arthritic.”

“Don’t work too hard, Janey. I worry about you.”

“I love that you worry about me,” I say with a slow smile. “But I can assure you, my life does not warrant any worrying. I get up and go to the flower shop, then go home. Simple, drama-free. No need for worrying.”

“Sweetheart, that’s why I worry about you,” Mel continues. “I’d like to see you cut loose a little, find someone.”

I smile and pat my golden retriever’s head. “I already have someone,” I say. “Sam.”

Mel returns my smile as I wave good-bye. “I’m going to set you up with a fishmonger I met yesterday. His name is Roy. He could make you a nice fish dinner sometime.”

“You do that, Mel,” I say, rolling my eyes playfully as I lead Sam down the next block and open the door to Meriwether Bakery. Elaine waves at me from the counter. Her dark hair is pulled back into a neat ponytail. There’s a dusting of flour on her cheek.

“Morning,” I say. Sam jumps up and places his front paws on the counter, waiting for Elaine to toss a dog biscuit in his mouth. The bakery smells of burnt sugar and yeasty, fresh-baked bread. In other words, like heaven.

Elaine, a third-generation owner of the bakery, befriended me when I took over my grandmother’s flower shop five years ago. We bonded over our shared love of chocolate croissants and white peonies, and we continue to trade them regularly. She wipes her brow. “We’ve taken forty-nine orders for pecan pie in the last hour. I may never make it home tonight.” The bells on the door jingle, and I turn to see her husband, Matthew, walk in.

“Honey!” she chirps from behind the counter. Matthew, an architect with rugged good looks, walks toward us and leans across the counter to give her a kiss. They have the kind of life that makes everyone around them just a touch envious: two beautiful children, and a house on Hamlin Street overlooking the Montlake Cut with a Martha Stewart–approved flower garden and a backyard chicken coop that yields unlimited fresh organic eggs.

“Did you pick up the Lego set, the one Jack wanted?” Elaine asks, twisting her wedding ring around her finger.

“Got it,” Matthew says, lifting a bag onto the counter. “Oh, and I got Ellie that American Girl doll she’s been talking about.”

Elaine exhales. “Good, because that would have been a major Santa fail.” She turns to me. “This man is my savior.”

Matthew grins. “Hey, did you meet the new neighbor?”

Elaine shakes her head.

“I said hello to him this morning,” Matthew continues. “His wife died last year. Just moved out from

Chicago. I thought we might invite him over tomorrow for Christmas dinner."

"Sure," Elaine says. "If you think he'd want to come."

Matthew shrugs. "He just moved into town. I'm sure he knows no one. And besides, his daughter is about Ellie's age."

While Elaine is inclusive and welcoming, Matthew is that, amplified. At their Thanksgiving celebration, I sat across from a recently divorced colleague of Matthew's with a bulging midsection and a perma-frown. Elaine took me aside in the kitchen and complained that if Matthew had his way, he'd invite every third person in Seattle to dinner.

"It's fine," Elaine says. "Tell him he's welcome."

Matthew nods, then turns to me. "Plans for Christmas? You know you're always welcome too, Jane. And who knows, maybe you'll hit it off with our new neighbor."

I meet his wink with an eye roll. "You are incorrigible, Matthew."

"Honey," Elaine says. "Leave Janey alone. She doesn't need the matchmaking services of Matthew Coleman."

He grins.

"Besides," Elaine continues with a grin of her own, "you forget that Christmas is Jane's birthday."

I grimace. "Yes, I have the poor luck of being cursed with a Christmas birthday. At least I get both out of the way on the same day."

Elaine frowns. "You're such a grump."

I shrug. "I go into survival mode on December twenty-fifth. You know that. It's brutal."

"At least let me bring you survival rations, like a cake," Elaine says. "You refuse every year."

"Please don't," I say. "I'd honestly rather order takeout and have a Scandal marathon on Netflix."

"That sounds depressing," she says. "And what takeout place is open on Christmas Day?"

"Yummy Thai," I reply with a grin. "They're open every year. See? All covered."

Elaine sighs. "At least give yourself a vase of flowers."

I smile. "I can probably do that, yes."

"How's business going?" Matthew asks.

"Great," I reply. "Booming, actually."

If there is any constant in my life, it's flowers. My grandmother Rosemary founded the Flower Lady, Pike Place Market's original flower shop. It opened in 1945, shortly after the war, and when my grandmother's fingers became arthritic in the 1980s, my mom, Annie, took it over until she passed away when I was eighteen. Mom's assistant kept the place afloat until I finished college, and the baton was passed to me.

I grew up in the shop, where I'd sweep up leaves and petals and sit on the stool at the counter and eventually help Grandma arrange. "You're a born florist," she told me time and time again. "We have the special touch of knowing how to reach people, to make them feel."

And I suppose she was right. Mom had it too. We knew—we were born knowing, perhaps—how the right blend of roses and freesia can help a man tell a woman he loves her; how a tasteful combination of chrysanthemums and yellow tulips can express a heartfelt apology.

I ache for my mother then, as I always do this time of year. Mom used to love Christmas, and she'd make it beautiful in every way, decorating every spare surface of the apartment with evergreen boughs and cedar garland. She'd never settle for a small tree either. Despite the space limitations, we'd lug home the biggest noble fir at the tree lot.

Mom's cancer was sudden. A blessing, in some ways, as she didn't suffer long. And yet, only weeks passed between the diagnosis and her death. It didn't give me enough time to ask her the things I needed to ask her about life, and love. There I was, faced with losing the most important woman in my life, overwhelmed with the idea of cramming a lifetime's worth of wisdom into a few final days.

On the morning of her death, I intended to bring her flowers, as I had done every few days. But the doctor called me at six a.m. He said to come quick, that Mom may not have many hours left. So I came empty-handed, tormented by the thought of losing my mother, and regretful that she didn't have her beloved flowers beside her at the end.

But then I heard a faint knock on the door of Mom's hospital room. A moment later, a young woman with a volunteer badge appeared, smiling tentatively. "Excuse me," she whispered. "My boss said to deliver these flowers to your mother."

At the time, I hadn't stopped to consider how Mom knew this volunteer's boss. It seemed an insignificant detail. And besides, Mom made a habit of befriending people at every turn, even at the end of her life. "Thank you," I said, accepting the vase of flowers, with its gorgeous blend of blooms in stunning shades of pale green. "These are exquisite. Obviously your boss has excellent taste. Please, tell her thank you."

Mom smiled when she saw the vase. Her voice had grown hoarse, and in a whisper, she said to me, "The last time I saw an arrangement like that, I was here, in this hospital. I had just given birth to you, honey." Tears welled up in her eyes then. "But you know what? They didn't come with a card. I never knew who sent them."

I remember trying so hard to fight the tears as I watched Mom extend a shaking hand to touch one of the green roses in the vase, its petals as delicate as her pale skin.

When I think back to that cold morning in October when she took her last breath, I can still see her face: the look in her eye, her will to hold on, even a few minutes longer. And when the doctor entered the room and asked to have a word with me privately, I didn't want to leave her. Every moment was precious.

But Mom smiled and called me to her a final time. "Your eyes, my dear Janey, have always been the color of new growth," she said, placing her hand on my cheek. "Like the green shoots of spring on all the trees, like the flowers in this vase. You're special, my beautiful daughter. So special."

The tears came then. I couldn't fight them any longer. "Go talk to the doctor," she said, shooing me out the door. "And bring me back a coffee." She smiled to herself. "And not instant or drip. Espresso. I want to taste espresso a final time."

“I’ll be right back,” I said. “I’ll only be a moment.” I touched her cheek lightly. When I returned, with a double-shot Americano, Mom was gone.

My phone buzzes in my pocket as Matthew kisses Elaine goodbye and waves to me. “Merry Christmas,” he says, heading to the door.

“Merry Christmas,” I say with a smile as I reach for my phone. It’s my older brother, Flynn.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hey.” He sounds down, which is typical of my big brother. He’s melancholic, the way Mom described our father. While I have my flowers, Flynn has his art. A painter, with reasonable acclaim in the Northwest, he opened his own gallery a few years ago, as a way to surround himself with artists. The venture has paid off, both in being a successful stream of income and also in cementing him as a leader in the Seattle art community.

His good looks don’t hurt either. And if you ask me, Flynn has always been much too handsome for his own good. All of my friends had crushes on him when we were growing up. And they still do. He’s devilishly handsome, with his thick dark hair and light stubble on his chin. But at thirty-five, he still has no interest in settling down. Come to think of it, I’m not even sure if he’s ever truly loved a woman. But, oh, have there been a lot of women in Flynn’s life.

“What’s going on?”

“Oh, I was calling to say happy birthday in case I forget to call tomorrow to say happy birthday.”

I grin. “You are such a guy.”

“I am. But at least I remembered, even if I’m a day early.”

“Well, thank you, big brother.”

“Are you going to come to my New Year’s party?”

I sigh. Flynn hosts a raging party in his Belltown loft every year, and I make it my mission to do my absolute best to avoid it. Flynn’s scene is one that, well, I tend to feel a bit obtuse in: anorexic-looking women in skintight dresses, men with fully tattooed arms, and loads of smokers crowded on the balcony.

“I don’t know, Flynn.”

“Oh, come on,” he says. “You have to come. Maybe you’ll meet someone.”

“Meet someone? That’s the last thing I need.”

“Jane, have you ever considered the fact that a relationship could do you some good?” he says. “It’s just you and Sam. Don’t you get lonely sometimes?”

“My dear big brother,” I reply, “we may be related, but I am not wired the way you are. I do not need another person to make me happy.”

“You’re bluffing,” he says. “Everyone needs someone.”

“And apparently some of us need a new person every night of the week.”

“Please,” he says.

“Well, who are we dating now? Did things work out with what’s- her-name?”

“Lisa?”

I watch as Elaine fills the pastry case with lemon tarts, each with a sprig of lavender on top. “I thought her name was Rachel,” I say.

“That was before Lisa.”

“See?” I say with a laugh.

“Just come to my party, Janey, please?”

“I’ll think about it,” I reply.

“Good.”

I blow a kiss to Elaine, and Sam and I walk out to the street and round the corner. The Flower Lady is in the distance. The sight of it still warms me, just as it always has, with its old grid-style windows and emerald-green awning. Loayza—Lo—my assistant, has rolled out the carts to the curb. Barrels of festive holiday bouquets beckon passersby, and I watch as a woman lifts an arrangement of red roses and boughs of fir to her nose. I smile to myself. Who needs love when you have rewarding work?

“Morning,” I say to Lo, who looks up from the counter and pushes her dark-rimmed glasses higher on the bridge of her nose. We met in a college geology class and bonded over the fact that rocks made us drowsy. And so we took turns keeping each other awake on Tuesdays and Thursdays after lunch, at one o’clock, which is the very worst time to take a course that’s focused entirely on limestone and tectonic plates. Miraculously, we both managed to finish the semester with a pair of B minuses.

“I hate poinsettias,” she says with dramatic flair.

I hang my coat on the hook in the back room and reach for my apron. “So do I,” I say, glancing at the orders on the computer screen behind the counter. “But look at this. This may be our highest-grossing holiday season yet.” I roll up my sleeves. “Let’s do this thing.”

“Best-case scenario,” Lo says, “we finish up by five so I can meet my date at six.”

“A date on Christmas Eve? Lo!”

“Why not?” she says. “Who wants to be alone on Christ- mas Eve?”

To the average assessor, Lo could be (a) a hopeless romantic, (b) a dating genius, or (c) addicted to love. The number of men in her life is staggering, and she, not unlike Flynn, never seems to find any kind of lasting satisfaction with any of her conquests. Over time, I’ve begun to see that it’s the game, the pursuit of love, that Lo enjoys. I have decided that she does not love love, but rather the idea of love.

“Oh, come on, Lo,” I say. “There’s nothing wrong with being alone on Christmas Eve. And besides, you could always come over to my house.”

She grins coyly. “If all goes as I hope, I’ll be spending the evening at Eric’s house.”

“You know,” I say, shaking my head, “you’re going to get coal in your stocking this year.”

She smiles. “Oh, I’m tight with Santa.”

I open the cash register and eye the till, then say with unabashed sarcasm, “Yeah, because he’s an ex-boyfriend.”

Lo lets out a laugh. “He couldn’t be. I don’t date men older than forty-two, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, smiling. “I forgot about your rules.” I sort through a stack of checks from yesterday. “You like to write—you should write a book about dating.”

“Like a memoir, you mean?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “Or maybe you need a talk radio show. It could be called Lo on Love.”

She nods. “I’ve thought about that. I mean, I do have a lot of material.”

The bells on the shop door jingle. An older man walks in and pauses to look at the arrangements in the window. At first I don’t recognize him, but when he turns around, Lo and I exchange glances. “It’s Creepy Christmas Customer,” she whispers to me. I nod.

And, to be fair, creepy might not be the best word. Unusual, maybe, for his presence is a bit of a mystery. He comes in every year on Christmas Eve and orders the most expensive arrangement in the shop, utters no more than five words, and tips heavily.

“He looks like the kind of person who killed his wife and keeps her body parts in his basement freezer,” Lo had said once.

“No,” I’d said. “He just looks lonely.”

“I don’t know,” she had replied. “I don’t like the way he looks at you.”

And, I suppose, it’s what gives me pause this morning, and every Christmas Eve before this. This man pays attention only to me, not to Lo.

I take a deep breath and smile at him as he approaches the counter with a slight limp. He wears a pair of khaki pants and a rain slicker. “Hello again,” I say cautiously. “Another Christmas Eve.”

He nods.

“Will it be your usual arrangement?”

He nods again, and I immediately get to work on his flowers, snipping and blending until I have just the right mix.

“Will this do?” I ask, holding the vase out to him.

“It’s perfect,” he replies, eyes fixed on me.

“Good,” I say, ringing him up.

“Merry Christmas.” He hands me a wad of cash. He doesn’t smile, just stares at me for a long moment, and for a tiny second, I can see a flicker of feeling in his eyes. Sadness? Regret? Flowers have a way of stirring up emotion in people. Memories of love found and lost, Christmases past, new beginnings and finish lines—all can be conjured up by petals and greenery. Perhaps that’s why he comes every year. To remember.

“Merry Christmas,” I reply as he walks out the door, bells jingling as it closes behind him.

Lo leans over my shoulder as I count out the one-hundred-dollar bills on the counter. “One thousand dollars?” she says, annoyed. “The dude is weird.”

I shrug. “He’s definitely odd—but hey, I’m not complaining.” I tuck the cash in the till. “This will pay for those two windowpanes that need fixing up front.”

Our mysterious customer is forgotten the moment a man in his midforties enters the shop. He’s tall, with slightly graying hair and a strong-looking face, a bit weathered, as if he’s spent too many summers at the beach, but the look suits him somehow.

“Can I help you?” Lo asks, walking toward him. He pauses, the way most men pause when in Lo’s presence. She’s beautiful in an old-fashioned way: porcelain skin; dark, perfectly straight hair (a unique combination passed down from her relatives in the Basque region of Spain); an ample chest and tiny waist.

The man rubs his forehead. “Yes,” he says quickly. “I’m stop- ping in to pick up an arrangement of flowers for . . . Christmas. My . . . we . . . we have a lot of family in town. I thought we could use something for the table.”

Lo smiles and points to a display of decorative urns filled with red roses, white tulips, and greenery. “Definitely consider one of these,” she says. “It’s a statement, but won’t overpower the table.”

The man casts a quick glance at the arrangement, before his eyes fix back on Lo’s. “You’re perfect—I mean . . .” he stammers, “you definitely know flowers. It’s perfect.”

She grins as she carries the arrangement to the cash register, where she rings him up.

“Merry Christmas,” he says slowly, before turning to the door.

“Merry Christmas,” Lo says with a grin.

Once he’s left, I place my hands on my hips. “Lo, he’s way too old for you.”

She pretends to busy herself with an arrangement.

“And I know you’re going to hate me for confronting reality, but there’s the tiny, inconvenient fact that the man is married. Don’t tell me you didn’t see the gold band.”

She shrugs. “Oh, I didn’t notice.”

“You’re impossible,” I say, half-amused, half-annoyed.

“Oh, Jane, stop being such a prude. You know I’d never go out with a married man.” She looks thoughtful for a moment. “But it could make an interesting chapter in the book.”

I scowl at her.

“Kidding,” she says.

“Good.”

Bing Crosby’s voice croons over the speakers as we turn back to our work. Earlier, Elaine suggested that I make myself a flower arrangement, and in spite of the orders I have to get to, I find myself reaching for the green roses in the bucket behind the counter, which I intersperse with winter greens. For me, for Mom.

I send Lo home at a quarter to five so she can get ready for her date, and after Juan, our delivery driver, picks up the last batch of arrangements at six thirty, I decide to call it a day myself. I zip up my coat, attach Sam’s leash, and step out to the curb, where, on a whim, I decide to toss one of the last fir wreaths on my arm. I reach for the flower arrangement I made earlier, then lock up the shop.

The market is quiet, but it’s not the usual dinnertime calm. It’s a lonely quiet. It’s the sound of people who are elsewhere—drinking warm drinks beside roaring fires, seated next to loved ones, where they belong. It’s the sound of people belonging.

I sigh and walk ahead. It doesn’t matter. I don’t need to be with anyone on Christmas Eve. I am not like Lo. I am not like Flynn. I am not like, well, anyone. I am content with Sam and a good book, a glass of wine, and then bedtime. Holidays are overrated, especially this holiday.

I pass the newsstand and wonder what Mel’s doing tonight. The lights are dim in Meriwether Bakery, and I wonder if Elaine finished the pie orders for the day. I imagine her on Hamlin Street holding a platter with a turkey or a roast, or whatever people eat on Christmas Eve, presiding over the family table, beaming with love. I walk through the empty lobby to the elevator. Bernard has gone home for the night, and I think of him too. I think of him settling in with a hot toddy beside his wife, Sharon, thinking about the snow clouds.

The elevator doors open, and I press the button for the fourth floor. A moment later, I unlock the door to my apartment and walk into the dark entryway. Sam laps up water from his bowl, and I set down my keys. I lift the wreath from my arm and hang it on the nail inside the door, then set the vase of flowers on the mantel, where Mom would have placed them.

“Merry Christmas, Sammers,” I say. He’s the only one who can hear the weakness in my voice, the tiny tremor. I reach into my pocket to locate my cell phone, which is when I find the pink envelope I tucked away this morning.

I turn on the light in the kitchen and eye the unfamiliar handwriting. There is no return address, but the envelope is postmarked Seattle. Curious, I tear open the flap and lean against the counter as I survey the birthday card, then begin to read the message written inside:

Dear Jane,

You don’t know me, but I met you on the day of your birth. On that day, you were given a gift, a rare and special gift, passed down to a select few through the ages, one that affords you the ability to see love in all of its forms in a way that others cannot. But with this gift comes great responsibility and a task that must be completed before your next birthday, before sunset on the day you turn thirty. The rest I must tell you about

in person. Will you please meet me at my apartment in Pioneer Square the day after Christmas? We'll have tea at two. I'm in the Waldron Building on Main Street. Apartment 17. I'll be expecting you.

Yours,

Colette Dubois

I set the card down on the counter as if it could quite possibly be contaminated with anthrax.

I shake my head, then slip off my shoes and walk to the window seat in the living room that overlooks Elliott Bay. It's been a long day, and I'm exhausted. I hear Bernard's voice in my head then. "Four inches of snow tonight . . . See those, snow clouds . . . They show us what we need to see."

The sky is dark, but in the glow of the streetlights below, I see a flurry of snowflakes in the air. A layer of white is just beginning to stick to the street below.

I think of the birthday card on the counter and the cryptic words inside: ". . . you were given a gift . . . one that affords you the ability to see love in all of its forms in a way that others cannot." I think about how foggy love has been for me, so unclear. And how, even though I deal in a business of love and help people express theirs through flowers, I know nothing of it myself. Nothing at all. I think of my college boyfriend who broke up with me for my roommate; the chef who criticized my cooking, then called it off after tasting my apple tart (which I secretly bought from Meriwether); the medical student I dated last year for two weeks, who turned out to be also dating every third woman in Seattle.

Me? A person who can identify love? Some joke. I consider calling Flynn right now and telling him off. This is absolutely something he'd do. And if I do go to that apartment in Pioneer Square, it will surely be a setup. I'll knock on the door and one of his single guy friends will be there ready to take me on a charity date. I cringe.

Sam nuzzles my leg, and I scratch his neck. "You're all I need, Sammers," I say, then press my nose against the window and watch the snow fall from the sky like flour, coming from a great sifter in the sky. That's when I remember the image I saw in the clouds this morning. I didn't tell Bernard, of course; nor will I tell anyone else. But it was there, as big as life: a heart. A perfectly formed heart, dangling from the sky like a Mylar balloon.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Wilda Alexander:

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