



**THE MOST  
PRECIOUS GIFT  
IN THE WORLD  
IS LEARNING  
TO RECEIVE LOVE**

**THE  
GIVING  
SEASON**  
**Rebecca Brock**

<http://www.pearlson.com/thegivingseason.htm>



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To my mother, Leah,  
and my brothers, Matt and Dave.  
Thank you for encouraging me to keep trying.



# Chapter One

**“PLEASE TELL ME you’re kidding—”**

“No, ma’am.” The old man behind the counter paused a moment to pick his teeth with a matchbook cover. “Storm’s caught near ’bout everybody by surprise. I’d say there ain’t an empty motel room within ten miles of here. And with tomorrow being Thanksgiving and all, there might not be one in the whole county.”

Jessy Monroe stared at the wrinkled little man, her whole world collapsing while a rerun of *Andy Griffith* blared on the countertop TV. So this was where her little cross-country odyssey would end: in the office of a cheap motel in Bear Paw, Minnesota, trapped by an unexpected blizzard. *Way to go, Jess.*

Melting snow dripped down her neck and back, chilling her to the bone. Great. She was wet, she was tired, and she was cold—and now this guy was telling her that there weren’t any empty rooms. For about the millionth time since packing up and leaving Kentucky, she mentally kicked herself in the butt. When it came to making brilliant life decisions, she really couldn’t be beat.

“I really am sorry about all this, ma’am—” The old man looked almost embarrassed, which made Jessy feel even worse. She forced a brittle smile despite herself.

“That’s okay,” she said quietly, straining to sound like she wasn’t about to collapse into tears. “Thanks anyway—”

Before the old man could mumble another apology Jessy headed for the door, suitcase cradled in her arms as she stepped out into

the night. An icy gust of wind slapped her in the face, pellets of snow blinding her for a moment as she trudged through the ankle-deep drifts. The achy feeling she'd had since leaving Kentucky was finally turning into a cold, and she coughed explosively, her throat already raw. Great. With her luck, it'd turn into walking pneumonia by morning.

Jessy winced as another wave of numbing wind sliced through her too-thin coat. *And who do you have to thank for all this crappiness*, she thought as she climbed onto the bus again. *Charlie? The bimbo he started living with?*

*Nope. It's all you, babe. You made the decision to drop everything in your life and follow him to Minneapolis. You made the choice to believe him when he said he loved you.*

*Idiot.*

If one of her friends had come to her with the situation, she would have told her that no man was worth giving up your independence. And if one of her friends had even considered leaving her job to follow her boyfriend to another state in the vague hope that it would lead to true love and marriage, she would have laughed in her face and told her to wake up and smell the reality.

But no. No, no, no. Jessy couldn't take her own advice. She was too busy mooning over Charlie Wilks, too busy being grateful that he had looked beyond the fact that she was a "big girl" and was willing to be seen in public with her. And too busy dreaming of silly romantic fantasies with a guy who obviously hadn't reciprocated her feelings. Hindsight was a wonderful thing, and now she could see that Charlie had liked her well enough, but he hadn't loved her. She served a purpose to him, kept him entertained.

And all it had taken was one drunken phone call to make her turn her life upside down and go running to him. She didn't like to think she was that gullible, that desperate.

Apparently, she was.

If she'd had more experience with relationships she would have immediately realized that she wasn't in one with Charlie. She thought that just because they had a million things in common, because they could have serious conversations and laugh at

the same jokes, because they felt so utterly comfortable with each other, it was love.

Well, it was on her part, at least.

The last few days seemed like a bad dream. When Charlie had called her late one night she'd known he was drunk, but the things he said were all the things she'd ever wanted to hear. She was worth her weight in gold to him. He wouldn't have been able to get through the past few years without her. She meant more to him than she'd ever know.

And then the final knock-out blow to her common sense: He was lonely up there in Minnesota without her, and he missed her so much he couldn't stand it sometimes. He said he had plenty of room at his place if she ever wanted to come up and visit—or anything else. Even now, replaying the conversation in her mind, she was sure he had wanted her to move in with him. He didn't come right out and say it, but he insinuated it.

Just like he'd never told her he loved her. But he insinuated it plenty. She wasn't stupid. She would have known if it had *all* been a lie.

God, how happy she had been at first. Usually she considered and reconsidered and considered yet again every decision she had to make, especially the big life-changing, earth-rattling decisions. She had been raised by her Aunt Amelia to question every motive of other people, especially when those other people happened to be men. All that had flown out the window. In a burst of misplaced idealism she decided it was time for a change in her life.

It seemed like a sign. She had just lost her job teaching third grade due to budget cuts and her apartment was turning into a wildlife preserve for mice due to a landlord who didn't like to deal with actually maintaining the apartment building. If ever there was time for a change, it was now.

So she did all the things she would have advised her best friend not to do. She decided to throw caution and common sense to the wind and, for the first time in her life, do something exciting and impulsive and crazy. She bought a plane ticket and decided she would just show up on Charlie's doorstep. He'd welcome her with

a kiss and be thrilled to see her and proud of her brave decision to take a chance, since he always told her she was too staid and boring, and then they'd live happily ever after.

Idiot.

When she showed up at Charlie's doorstep that fateful morning, it wasn't Charlie who had opened the door. It had been a gorgeous redhead. In a nightie. She'd taken a look at Jessy and smirked, then called for Charlie.

He came out of the bedroom with a towel wrapped around his waist and an instantly guilty look of surprise on his face when he saw Jessy.

Turned out that all that talk about being lonely and wishing she were out there with him was just that: talk. He hadn't wanted to hurt her feelings by telling her about Kirsten. The night he'd called, Kirsten had broken up with him and he'd gotten plastered to try to get over her. He didn't even remember half the things he had said. But now he and Kirsten were back together and planning to be married.

Throughout his whole confession Jessy had remained calm and unreadable. She didn't cry. She didn't speak. She just let him talk. He told her the story of how he met Kirsten the first day he'd moved into his apartment. He told her about their first date and how he realized he was in love with her a week after they met. He told her everything, and she listened. If he stopped talking, then she'd have to speak. And if she spoke, she didn't think she'd be able to hide the agony she felt.

It all came down to his cowardice, in the end. He simply hadn't known how to tell her the truth—that even though he really liked Jessy and thought she was a great person and a wonderful woman, he just wasn't attracted to her physically. He wished he could get over it, but he just couldn't.

And that was the final body blow that she just could not absorb. Those were the words Jessy knew she would play back in her mind for the rest of her life, even though she had known deep down that Charlie had felt that way. The few times he had kissed her he had seemed like he was forcing himself to do it, like he was trying

to make himself enjoy it. He'd never shown any signs of affection when they were in public—never held her hand, never put his arm around her. She had heard her aunt's voice in her mind, warning her not to fool herself about Charlie's sincerity when he'd told her that her weight hadn't mattered to him. At 220 pounds, Jessy realized that if a guy had to choose between her and someone half her size, the skinny gal would usually win every time; personality and character had nothing to do with it. She had just thought Charlie was different. She thought he could see beyond her shyness and her quiet nature. She thought he could see past her weight.

Before he came into her life she had been perfectly content alone. She was happy teaching, and she thought nothing of spending her evenings at home with a good book and a bag of popcorn. But it was the same old story. She took a chance and fell for him, and Charlie had broken her heart.

And now she was trapped in a blizzard, with five bucks to her name and nothing to go home to.

*Happy Thanksgiving to me*, Jessy thought, taking a deep breath as she leaned her head against the cold glass of the window. She wiped at her eyes, angry to be crying over him again when he so obviously wasn't worth it. Aunt Amelia would have tut-tutted over her crying and told her Charlie wasn't even worth the salt in her tears.

God, how she missed Amelia. It had just been six months since she'd died, and Jessy missed her more and more every day. Amelia had been her only family, and now she was totally alone.

Fresh tears burned Jessy's eyes as another series of wracking coughs tore through her, leaving her weak. She closed her eyes, willing her memories of Charlie and Amelia and everyone else she had lost to fade away. Her entire body ached as the slight case of sniffles she'd fought for weeks finally blossomed into a full-fledged chest cold. But a cold was nothing. She could survive a cold.

She tucked her nose and chin beneath the collar of her coat, struggling to stretch her legs out in front of her. So it wasn't the most comfortable of positions; as exhausted as she felt, a bed of nails would have been perfectly cozy. After a few minutes, she finally managed to drift into a thin, dozy sleep.

“HEY—WHAT ARE YOU DOING out here?”

Jessy jerked awake, a sharp gasp catching in her throat, choking into a cough. For a moment she forgot where she was, unable to adjust her eyes to the dark.

“Who’s there?” she rasped, too weak to sound tough or confident.

“And you’re sick, too,” the man said, the faintest hint of disapproval in his husky voice. He took a few shuffling steps forward. “Have you got a death wish or something? It’s freezing out here.”

He stepped into a slant of light from the motel sign and Jessy instantly recognized him. Seat 2A: The scruffy, stubbly guy who had snuck stares at her over the top of his book for the last three hundred miles like she was the featured attraction at a freak show. He’d introduced himself as Michael Forrester when they’d boarded the bus in Illinois after a dinner stop, then asked if he could use her empty overhead compartment for his multitude of luggage. He’d gone a little overboard Christmas shopping, he’d explained with a way-too-charming dimpled grin that had immediately set off her insincerity alarms. Jessy had given him a vague smile and tuned him out after that.

Stifling a groan, she turned on the seat light and wearily glared at him—dark hair dusted with snow, piercing gray-green eyes, wide, slightly smirking smile. *Now* she remembered why she’d kept her distance from him: He was too damned good-looking. And if there was one thing she trusted even less than a drinking man, it was a handsome man.

“Thanks for the weather report,” she said and cleared her throat, wincing as she did so. “Good night, Mr. Forrester.”

“You’re not staying out here, are you?”

“Looks that way,” she said, closing her eyes as she settled back against the cushions again. Maybe he’d just take the hint and leave her alone.

“Fifteen below and you’re going to sleep on the bus. Lady, you’re either trying to kill yourself or you’re as dumb as a box of rocks.”

Jessy pried one eye open. He was staring at her again, trying to goad her into a response. God, how she disliked arrogant, know-it-all men.

“There aren’t any more rooms left at the motel,” she said quietly. “Now if you’ll please leave me alone—”

He smiled slightly as she spoke, as if she were just amusing the hell out of him. Jessy began to tell him exactly what she thought about that arrogant look, then crumpled in another coughing fit, this one worse than before. By the time she managed to raise her head to look at him again, he was watching her with an odd mixture of worry and sympathy.

“Listen,” she croaked, “why don’t you just go back inside and let me get some sleep, okay? And quit looking at me like that.”

“Like what?” he asked, a faintly teasing smile in his eyes. “Like I’m waiting to see how long it’ll take until you freeze solid?”

“Would you *please* just leave me alone?”

He folded his arms over his wide chest, smile slowly fading. “No.”

Jessy clenched her teeth, dropping her chin to her chest as she groaned in exasperation. She wasn’t usually so combative, but she was too cold, too tired, too sick to deal with this man right now.

“Like you said earlier, you don’t have too many options.” Michael leaned against the seat in front of her. “If you stay out here, you’re going to get sicker. And you already sound like you’re going to choke on your own snot before morning.”

“Gee, thanks,” Jessy muttered.

“So why don’t you just make things easier on yourself and bunk in my room with me.” He smiled again, wider this time. “I’m perfectly harmless. I promise.”

Jessy stared at him, too surprised by his offer to speak. He honestly expected her to stay in his room with him? This guy she’d never met before? This total stranger?

“How dumb do you think I am?” she asked, unable to keep from laughing. “Thanks, but I’m fine out here.”

“It’s supposed to dip down to twenty below tonight.” The smile in his eyes disappeared. “How ‘fine’ will you be then?”

“I *said* I’ll be okay.”

“Good Lord,” he muttered, turning away to open the overhead baggage compartment. His leather jacket opened as he reached up, revealing a flannel shirt pulled taut over his broad chest. Jessy stared despite herself.

“Just what is your problem anyway?” The unexpected frustration in his voice startled Jessy out of her reverie. She raised her gaze to his and saw something like anger in his eyes. “You know, I’m trying my damndest to be a decent guy and you’re acting like I’m some kind of pervert. What is it with people nowadays that you can’t even try to do something nice for somebody?”

Caught off guard, Jessy couldn’t immediately respond to that. To her dismay, another round of gut-deep coughs ripped through her, leaving her breathless and weak.

“Listen,” Michael said quietly, his expression softening as he looked at her. “I realize that you don’t know me and that as far as you’re concerned I could be a serial killer, but I’m just a dairy farmer from upstate Minnesota—and I hate to be the one to break it to you, but dairy farmers just aren’t interesting enough for that kind of thing.”

“Wasn’t Ed Gein a farmer in Wisconsin?”

Michael smiled slightly and Jessy’s instincts got the better of her. She didn’t want him to be this nice. It made things that much harder for her.

“I would really appreciate it,” he said softly, “if you’d do me the favor of coming in from the cold. You can trust me. Honest.”

Jessy studied him for a few moments. Yeah, he looked like a decent enough guy—but then again, so had Ted Bundy.

“Besides,” he added, “if you don’t come in, I’ll worry myself to death. I’ve got three kids. Worry is coded in my DNA.”

He smiled at her again, and as much as Jessy wanted to see something devious and insincere in that smile, she couldn’t. She couldn’t even pretend. And maybe she’d live to regret it, but she sensed that she could trust him—for one night, anyway. She’d just sleep lightly and keep her guard up. And since she figured she probably outweighed him, she was fairly certain he wouldn’t attempt to try

anything. Besides, it was *her*. When had a man *ever* attempted to try anything with her?

“Fine,” she said as she rose, faltering as the bus seemed to tilt and rock beneath her feet. She staggered slightly and Michael instantly grabbed her elbow, steadying her as she regained her balance. Jessy tried to ignore the gentleness of the gesture.

“But I’ve got one condition,” she said as she took her arm back. “I’m paying you back for half the room. That way I don’t owe you and you don’t owe me. Deal?”

“Sure thing.” Michael grinned as he allowed Jessy to step in front of him, following her down the bus aisle. “But I call dibs on the little bars of soap.”

Jessy stopped in her tracks and turned to face him again, shaking her head slightly when she saw the wide, teasing smile on his face.

She had a feeling it was going to be a long night.



# About the Author

**REBECCA BROCK** is the director of a small library in southern West Virginia. She is also the author of a collection of short horror stories (*Abominations*) and a variety of other horror stories published in anthologies and online since 2000.

When not cleaning up after her cats, Rebecca enjoys books and movies in a variety of genres (romance, horror, true crime, sci-fi) and attempts to be crafty by crocheting, sewing, and cross-stitching. *The Giving Season* is her first published novel; all the others are hidden away in drawers somewhere.

**FEEDBACK IS** always welcome! Please check out Rebecca's blog (<http://horror-hack.blogspot.com>) and website (<http://www.rebeccabrockonline.com>) to leave messages and see what's coming up next.



# About Pearlsong Press

**PEARLSONG PRESS** is an independent publishing company dedicated to providing books and resources that entertain while expanding perspectives on the self and the world. The company was founded by Peggy Elam, Ph.D., a psychologist and journalist, in 2003.

**PEARLS ARE FORMED** when a piece of sand or grit or other abrasive, annoying, or even dangerous substance enters an oyster and triggers its protective response. The substance is coated with shimmering opalescent nacre (“mother of pearl”), the coats eventually building up to produce a beautiful gem. The self-healing response of the oyster thus transforms suffering into a thing of beauty.

The pearl-creating process reflects our company’s desire to move outside a pathological or “disease” based model of life, health and well-being into a more integrative and transcendent perspective. A move out of suffering into joy.

And that, we think, is something to sing about.

**PEARLSONG PRESS** endorses **Health At Every Size**, an approach to health and well-being that celebrates natural diversity in body size and encourages people to stop focusing on weight (or any external measurement) in favor of listening to and respecting natural appetites for food, drink, sleep, rest, movement, and recreation. While not every book we publish specifically promotes Health At Every Size (by, for instance, featuring fat heroines or educating readers on size acceptance), none of our books or other resources will contradict this holistic and body-positive perspective.

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