

***Before The Poppy Drops***

By C.L. Bauer

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“I’m not sure if I like holiday weddings.”

Lily sighed. “I know. It’s nice not to decorate the church especially when we have to walk through the snow with the flowers. It’s so cold today.”

“Right. When it’s this cold, and you have to cover every bouquet, it’s tough.”

“It’s tough when it’s hot too, just a different tough,” Lily acknowledged. Even though her shop delivered plants and arrangements for everything from birthdays to funerals, she preferred providing flowers for a wedding or event.

Abby judged the Christmas decor around the altar. “The church is pretty with all of those white poinsettias, and I love those Christmas trees in the back with the white lights. That’s perfect for the bride’s decor. I just wished we could’ve decorated her reception.” Abby always enjoyed

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decorating any venue, especially the most challenging ones  
with the largest budgets.

Lily chuckled as she sat down next to her assistant. The wedding party had yet to arrive at the church allowing the wedding florist and her helper to update each other on what had been happening in their lives. “Her aunt owns the place, and they already have all the candles and Christmas greens they needed. It’s okay. It’ll be good to be finished with work before it gets dark. I’ve been meaning to ask you how your date was the other night?”

“It was okay. He’s not the one though,” the younger helper admitted. Abby Lewellan was still in college, but Lily had hired her as a part-time worker. She didn’t know a daisy from a dahlia when she began working at the little shop in Kansas City over a year ago. But now, she could see a future in flowers.

Lily looked over the flower order one more time. *How many times have I looked at this? Way too many times.*

*Why? Why do I always have to look at it one more time?*

“You know, you can go out just to go out. He doesn’t have to be the one. He can be a maybe or one along the way.”

Abby giggled. “I’ve never thought of it that way. I just don’t want to waste my time. Life is too short.”

“Holy Moly. Are you kidding me?” Lily laughed out loud even though they were sitting in her parish church.

“You have many years of dating ahead of you. I’m the one who is heading toward being put up on the shelf.”

“What shelf?”

“There’s no real shelf.”

Abby’s head cocked to the side in confusion. “Then if there’s no real shelf, why did you talk about it?”

Lily sighed. Even though Abby was a good little worker, there were those times when it seemed as though her mind had a glitch...an Abby glitch. *It’s kind of like a brain fart!* “It’s an analogy, Abs. Look, I’m in my thirties. I’m single. The man I thought I was going to marry walked

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away. Both my parents are gone. My sister and brother  
have families, and they all live on the East Coast. I own my  
family's business. I work. I've had one date in the last six  
months. That's the shelf. You begin to collect dust. I've  
given up on ever having a baby."

Abby viewed her boss in a different light when Lily  
Schmidt spoke about her personal life. Her boss was being  
honest. All she did was work; there was no social life.  
"You've got to get yourself out there if you want a  
relationship, or a baby. Or, I guess you could hire someone  
if you really want to get pregnant."

Lily muffled her laughter. *We're in a church!* She saw  
her parish priest come out from behind the altar. "Father  
Mac is here." She stood up to greet him and to instantly cut  
off the invasive conversation with Abby. *Hire a man?*  
*Hmm, with all the women I know who are single in their*  
*thirties and forties, there might be a market for that!* Lily  
shook off the marketing idea...she was in a church.

“So, how is my favorite florist?” the priest asked as he met Lily in the aisle.

“Good. How was your Christmas?”

The priest shook his head. “Busy, very busy. I scheduled six masses thinking Father Parker from the Jesuit college would be helping me. He called Christmas morning to tell me he had the flu. It was too late to have anyone else help so I did it. I’m not as young as I used to be. By three on Christmas day, I was taking a nap that lasted for three hours.”

Lily cocked her head in thought. *And now this conversation is circling around age!* “Actually, a nap sounds wonderful. Can you really call that a nap if it lasts longer than thirty minutes?”

Father Mackenzie smiled. “Probably not, but I did, oh, and after a great dinner over at my sister’s house, I came home and slept for another eight hours.”

“That’s called exhaustion, Father.”

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The priest nodded. With fewer men entering the priesthood, more parishioners, and hundreds of students in the elementary school, a parish priest like him was always working more hours than a regular human being. And that's why it is called a vocation. Working hours was always in your job description if you were doing your work correctly.

“What was your Christmas like? And what about tonight? What exciting New Year's Eve plans do you have?”

Lily began to walk away. “Abs is back here.”

The priest gently tugged on her arm. “Lily, I asked you a few questions. I'll see Abby in a bit, but what about you?”

Lily hoped if she glanced around the church, a member of the wedding party would magically appear and keep her from the interrogation. *No such luck, of course! And that is my luck...I have none!*“ Well, Christmas was quiet. I went out with a friend for lunch on Christmas Eve, and I

attended Mass that night, as you well know. On Christmas, I slept in, fixed breakfast, and I headed to my cousin's for a nice dinner. I was home by six to watch a holiday special on tv. The next day, I went into work to prepare for this wedding, and here we are.”

“That all sounds pretty normal for you. What about tonight?” the priest pressed.

“I have a date with a mystery writer. I'm eating Chinese takeout and changing into my pajamas for a marathon of murder mystery movies.”

Father Mackenzie pulled Lily into a hug. “What am I going to do with you? You do know there is more to life than work?”

“I know that, but right now, this is my life. Love seems to elude me. God and I keep talking about His big plan for me, but apparently I haven't received the valuable post-it note yet as to what is on His schedule.” Lily giggled at her own joke.

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“Would it sound cheesy if I told you I believe God has something really great in store for you?” The priest made sure his eyes looked right into his parishioner’s.

“Yes, and I believe that. I just wish He’d hurry. I feel like I’m running out of time.”

The two friends began to walk slowly toward Abby. “It’s all in God’s good time. Just remember that.”

Lily chuckled. “Now, that wasn’t just cheesy, it was an entire chunk of gouda.”

“I’m good with gouda. Besides, whomever you are going to end up with, if you are, will be someone very special. And if you don’t end up with that special someone, you need to figure out what you can do to make your life a little less normal and a lot more, just more. You deserve amazing happiness.”

“Got it,” Lily answered. “So, if tall, dark, and handsome doesn’t appear, I need to make my mundane life

disappear for something better? Maybe I'll become a private detective.”

The priest shook his head. “Where on earth did you get that idea?” He nodded toward Abby.

“I'm good with details, keeping track of things, noticing others, and their little quirks. Obviously, I don't mind waiting. My skills are perfect for a stake out, ooh, or maybe undercover work?”

“Abby, your boss needs a break, a very long break.” The priest directed his instruction to the stalwart assistant. “She has no plans for tonight.”

“Father, I already invited her out with my friends. We're going downtown to celebrate, but she said she wants to stay home.”

Lily shrugged. “I just don't feel the need to go out tonight. I'd rather stay home. My dad always said this was the night the amateur drunks came out.”

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The priest laughed. “I agree. You’re off the hook tonight Lily, but you need to get out, and stop working so hard. Have some fun.”

Lily noticed the limousine pulling up outside in the church’s drive. “Oh, I’ll have fun. It’ll just be Jessica and me. I may go crazy and have a little wine too.”

“Just try to contain yourself,” the priest joked. “Will I see you at church in morning?”

“Yes, I’ll be there in the back row, right over there.”

Lily pointed at her usual pew in her usual area of the church. *It’s funny how I don’t try out another seat. Am I really that boring?* “It looks like Abby and I need to go to work. We’re going to pin on the men’s boutonnieres, hand out the bouquets, and then I’m on my way to see a general.”

Abby’s brows almost formed a question mark. “What general?”

“General Tso, silly, yummy General Tso chicken. Come on, Abby. Grab the boutonnieres.”

The groom and his attendants swept in quickly to get in from the cold. Lily and Abby waited until coats were removed and hair combed through before they attached the simple cream rose boutonniere to each one of them. Abby noticed that the bride and her maids had slipped in through the other entrance. They hid themselves away in one of the back meeting rooms of the church.

After checking every bouquet one final time, Lily and Abby headed back to present the flowers.

“Wow, that dress!” Abby exclaimed. The bride’s gown was a shade between cream and champagne. It’s strapless bodice was covered by a lace bolero jacket. Hung over a chair in the room was a faux fur capelet and a muff.

“I had a muff for Christmas when I was five,” Lily whispered as they placed the flowers on one of the open tables. “It was made of real rabbit fur.”

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“You wore a dead bunny?” Abby was in shock. “How could you?”

Lily carefully removed a missed bruised petal off of one of the cream roses. The bridesmaids ’bouquets were small bundles of only roses. They were the perfect accent to their hunter green dresses. “I was five. My mom bought it for me. Besides, I’m sure that the bunny had an accident and died. That’s the only reason why they used his fur.”

Lily smirked. Abby nodded, weirdly comforted by the explanation. *She ’s so innocently gullible. I wish I were that way.* “I’ll show the bride her bouquet, and then we are finished for the day.”

The bride began smiling as Lily walked toward her. First, she smelled her flowers. Her squeal brought everyone’s attention to the bouquet. “It’s so beautiful, and it smells divine.” Lily showed her the mix of open cream roses and stephanotis. The bouquet was an exact replica of the bride’s mother’s bouquet from thirty years ago that was

also furnished by Lily's Flower Shop. Having a family business which had been in the community for over one hundred years meant you had a history of families who were your clients. Happily, Lily cultivated those kinds of referrals. They were the best kind of clients, many of them becoming friends as well.

While Lily and the bride talked about the flowers, Abby watched two bridesmaids as they blocked the door of the room. "Can I help you with something?" Abby asked as she came toward them. "Is there something wrong?"

"Yes," one the maids answered quickly. "We can't allow the groom's mother in here. She's a real--"

"She's been a real piece of work," the taller bridesmaid next to her added. "She said some awful things last night at the rehearsal dinner, and we are going to block her from coming in today and ruining our friend's happiness."

Abby let out a whistle. "Wow!" She headed back to the table to wait for Lily. She noticed the bride's mother was

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now speaking with her boss. Lily said her goodbyes and  
joined Abby. “They are banning the mother of the groom  
from coming in here.” She pointed at the door and the  
security maids.

Lily rolled her eyes. “I understand. That woman was  
rude to me when she planned the rehearsal flowers. She  
even admitted her baby boy shouldn’t be marrying this  
girl.”

“But the bride is really nice, isn’t she?” Abby asked as  
she collected their boxes.

Lily nodded. “Yes, she is one of the sweetest. With the  
groom’s mother, it’s all about control. She knows the bride  
is a hard worker and a very kind person, but she wanted  
someone else for her son.”

“She did something at the rehearsal,” Abby said. She  
stacked the two boxes on each other and began to walk  
toward the blocked door. Her boss was in front of her.

The tall bridesmaid stopped the florists. “Lily? You did my wedding last year. I’m Rachel North, well now Rachel West.”

Lily remembered immediately. Obviously, it was difficult to remember every client and every wedding, but there was no way she could forget a bride who went from North to West! The two women embraced. “Of course, I remember you. Hey, what happened last night? We set up the flowers for the dinner party.”

The maid nodded. “I figured. They were beautiful, by the way. Well, his mom offered a toast. We were all holding our breath, and she didn’t disappoint. She got up with her champagne glass and then said she hoped he got a clue, and that this marriage didn’t last too long. She continued until her ex-husband manhandled her right out of the restaurant. It was ugly. So, we are guarding our friend today.”

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“Good. She’ll need you beyond today too. It was great seeing you. Um, can we just slip out?”

After another hug from the former client, Lily and Abby were quickly making their way outside. Abby loaded the empty boxes into the van. “What resolutions did you make for next year?”

Lily opened the doors and began to warm up the cold engine. When Abby finally made her way in, Lily answered. “You mean tomorrow?”

“Yes, but it’s a clean slate. We all start over, like a reboot.”

Lily began to drive out of the parking lot. “I don’t make resolutions. I always seem to have the same items on my list of things to do such as exercise more, eat healthier, read more, heck read anything--”

“Make fewer lists and use less post-it notes?” Abby asked quickly, poking at her boss’s love of everything organizational.

Her question gained a stern glance in her direction as Lily turned to drive back to the shop. “How about I’ll still make my lists, but mark more of them off as they are completed? And, I could never use less of those sticky wonders, unless they stop producing them.”

“And maybe we both resolve to never get a mother-in-law like that?” Abby suggested.

Lily laughed. “That, we can agree on. Holy Moly, that couple doesn’t stand a chance.”

“But, if they love each other, they’ll be stronger together.” Abby’s profound statement fell on Lily’s heart.

Lily nodded. “You know, I thought I was in love, but now that you mention that, maybe it wasn’t enough? That would really be amazing to have someone next to you who could give you so much strength with just his love that you’d come out of your cocoon and become a butterfly that had enough energy to fly around the world.”

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Lily's lament wasn't lost on her assistant. For a few blocks, Lily drove in silence as though she was inventing that man in her thoughts. Abby could tell she was making lists in her mind, again.

"So, when's your next date?" Abby's question in the silence lightened the moment.

Lily shook her head. "You just don't stop. I don't have a next date, okay? Right now, I'm not really looking. I'm just kind of done, Abby."

Abby could understand that, especially after Lily's breakup with the supposed love of her life. Lily had been badly hurt, scarred emotionally on so many levels, but her boss needed to get back out there, and obviously she still had a bit of romanticism in her soul. "I get it, but if you do want a life with someone who can make you want to be that butterfly, where are you going to meet him?"

After her recent talk with the priest, Lily still had faith that God would figure it out. "God is taking care of it."

“Has God told you if the guy is here in town? If he isn’t, how is God going to get him here? Wait, I’ve got it. You’ll go on vacation and meet him. You do remember what a vacation is, don’t you?” Abby’s sarcasm dripped like honey.

Lily cringed. “Yes, I remember what a vacation is. I plan on still flying out to Virginia in a week to see my family.”

Abby sighed. “That’s not a vacation. You’re visiting your family. Wait, what if you meet the guy in Virginia? Do you think he’s there?”

“Abby, I’m going to need more wine tonight after listening to all your questions. You’re sounding like a teenager. With my luck, he is in Virginia, but he’s on some secret mission in South America.”

“A girl has to have her dreams. Besides, maybe he’ll bump into you in the airport on his way home.” Abby’s comment fell on deaf ears. Lily was creating another list in

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her head, one that included dusting, laundry, and cleaning the refrigerator.

They were only a few blocks away from the shop when she finally spoke. “I don’t want to get hurt like that again. It was awful. If I hadn’t had my work and my business, I would’ve gone crazy.”

Abby gently rubbed her boss’s arm. “I know. That was bad, especially since he was a minister. He acted very, very non-ministerly-like.”

Lily giggled. “I’m pretty sure that wasn’t proper grammar. Thank you for the sentiment. I just think if I’m supposed to be with someone, then I will. Until then, I need to be my own person, with my own work. I make people happy. That’s what I do.”

“But can’t you push it along by going on dating sites, that sort of thing? Remember that butterfly?”

Lily could feel her face flush. *Should I tell Abby that I'm scared to death? I'm so afraid to get hurt I'm paralyzed. I'm not sure I could survive being hurt again.*

“I’m in my thirties. I’m not your age anymore.”

As Lily parked on the side of the building, the two women were quiet again. They unloaded the van and entered through the back of the shop to unload their boxes and supplies.

“Promise me, you’ll just take tomorrow off. All of tomorrow,” Abby suggested. They headed up to the front of the shop to set the alarm.

Lily gestured, making a cross over her heart. *Can Abby read my mind now?* “Fine. I promise. And, I will think about what you said about putting myself back out there.”

“And off that shelf,” Abby giggled. “Besides, it’s not like some tall, dark, handsome, mysterious, strong, intelligent, secret agent man is just going to walk through this shop’s door one day.”

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As Lily set the alarm, closing the door behind Abby and her, she wondered. She looked at the door. *Could he just walk through this door someday? Would he be worth waiting for until that day?*

Lily grabbed Abby's coat and pulled her close as they walked to their cars. "You, my little helper, have to have more faith. God and I have been talking. Maybe my Mr. Right will just walk into my life."

"With your luck, he'll be there with his future bride to plan their wedding flowers." Abby laughed loudly. "Or he'll be a boy scout asking for donations for his eagle project."

Lily wasn't amused. "Or maybe he'll walk in by mistake, or he'll need directions to somewhere, or he'll need flowers for his dear mother--"

Abby nudged her boss as they neared their cars. "Okay, you win. God will drop him in Kansas City, and your great love will walk into the shop. He'll be strong and handsome.

He'll be everything you never thought you needed. Your life will never be the same after that. And you will fly, your cocoon thrown off forever.”

Lily nodded, but she didn't allow Abby to see the tears beginning to fall down her cheeks. She quickly hugged her assistant and rushed into her vehicle. It would be another New Year's Eve alone. She needed something, or someone, in her life. She couldn't keep going on like this day after day, and doing it alone. She revealed so much to Abby. She hadn't realized she had so much longing buried deep down within her.

She needed to have **another** talk with God in the morning. *I do believe it could happen, don't I?* Lily wiped away her tears and headed to her favorite Chinese restaurant.

“Let the party begin!” Lily said out loud. “Right. The man who is going to change my life is just going to just walk through my door.” She snorted in laughter. “I will

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give you this coming year to get here! How's that for a resolution?" *I believe. I do believe...*

Read *The Poppy Drop* to see if that man walks right through her door!

Happy reading!

*C.L. Bauer*