



M.J. PULLEN

# *Late for the Holidays*

A Story following the Marriage Pact Trilogy

When Suzanne woke on Christmas morning, staring at the water-stained acoustic tiles of her parents' basement ceiling, she went from mildly disoriented to totally depressed in about two seconds. She hated sleeping alone, hated being away from her own cozy bedroom in the townhouse she shared with Dylan. And the basement had the sickly sweet smell of the God-awful gingerbread candles her mother had used to banish musty odors since 1996.

She launched herself off her mother's 1990's blue and pink plaid couch, the pressing need to pee overwhelming her fervent desire to go back to sleep. She grabbed her phone, which had not connected properly with the basement outlet and ungratefully turned itself off in the middle of the night. Muttering quiet curses, she dashed into the tiny half bathroom with the seashell wallpaper and tried to pretend she wasn't spending Christmas morning the exact same way she had in college.

The old phone buzzed and flashed and practically whirred like "Chitty Chitty Bang Bang" as it restarted, then announced that it was nearly 9:30 and she had only 5% battery remaining, before spitting out a series of texts. Dylan was in Sydney, doing some kind of All-Star Country Christmas concert with Blake Shelton he couldn't get out of, and which Suzanne couldn't attend because of a foundation board meeting two days ago. He was 16 hours ahead of her and had tried to catch her this morning.

*6:12 a.m. Merry Christmas, Scarlett. We're offstage – press stuff in 15 minutes. Went well. Call me when you wake up.*

*6:17 a.m. Suze – wake up.*

*6:39 a.m. Come on, now. It's not that early, girl. Even for you.*

*6:39 a.m. How was last night? Did you overdo it with M?*

*7:20 a.m. We're headed to the hotel bar. 40 minutes left of Australian Christmas.*

*7:21 a.m. I bet your damn phone died. Again.*

*7:21 a.m. Guess I know what I am getting you for Christmas.*

*7:59 a.m. 10...9...8...*

7:59 a.m. ...7...6...5...

8:00 a.m. 4321. *Merry Christmas, Babe. I love you.*

9:12 a.m. *Back in my room – headed to bed. Limo to the airport in 4 hours.*

The last text was only twenty minutes ago. Shit. Suzanne did the quick math – it was 1:30 a.m. there. They'd managed to miss the window where it was Christmas in both places. Her thumbs flew over the keys:

*Merry Christmas, baby. I love you. So sorry my phone –*

And then, as though it could sense that she was blaming it for her neglect of her husband, the screen suddenly went black. She glanced around the dark basement in despair. This was not how she had pictured Christmas during her first year of marriage.

As she brushed her teeth, her stomach lurched and roiled, even beyond the guilt of missing out on talking to Dylan. Maybe she had been over-served at Christmas Eve dinner the night before? Marci and Jake had been kind enough to let Suzanne tag along to Kitty Stillwell's annual Christmas Eve soiree, always a study in excess.

Suzanne did a mental inventory: that first glass of wine, she'd set down before heading upstairs to the bathroom, that didn't count. There had been a second glass, but she was fairly certain she hadn't finished that one either. And the sherry Jake's mother passed around toward the end of the evening had scarcely touched her lips, too fiery and sweet for her mood. The pheasant had seemed fine, well cooked. Although the thought of it now sent a wave of nausea through her... Maybe that was it.

She sat on the closed toilet lid to steady herself for a minute. When the nausea seemed to pass as quickly as it had come, she finished brushing and padded up the shag-carpeted stairs, following the smell of breakfast. "You're late," her mother said without preamble said as Suzanne gained the top of the stairs into the large, recently remodeled kitchen. "Your father is already out on the course. I put your quiche back in the oven."

"Merry Christmas to you too, Mom." She kissed her mother's expertly collagened cheek. "Daddy's playing golf? On Christmas morning?"

Her mother shrugged, plating a four-inch quiche at the counter where Suzanne was settling herself on a barstool. "He doesn't know what else to do with himself. Your father doesn't understand days off, you know that."

"Guess I come by it honestly," Suzanne said, daintily forking an edge of the flaky crust as a lovely herbal steam escaped from the egg and goat cheese combination. "Is this thyme?"

Her mother nodded. "And scallions. It's from last year's League cookbook. Francie Warner's recipe. Horrid woman, but she *can* make breakfast."

Suddenly ravenous, Suzanne finished half the quiche before her mother managed to put a tiny glass of orange juice in front of her. She drank the juice as though it were a shot, ignoring her mother's disapproving raised eyebrow. "So what's the plan?"

"Christmas tea at Lynn Grosvenor's at 2:00. I thought you could wear that navy dress you wore for your wedding brunch."

"It's forty degrees out. I'll freeze."

"You can borrow some nylons."

"Mom."

"We'll come back and pick up your father for dinner at the club with the Kensingtons. Their daughter Minnie got married this year, too. Dentist. Handsome." She sighed. "It's really too bad Dylan can't be here."

"He's sad to miss it, too, Mom," Suzanne said patiently. "But he committed to doing this charity concert months ago."

Another beleaguered sigh. "It's just such a shame. Do you know Mary Anne Kensington owns all his albums? She's really into that country stuff." Mrs. Hamilton said this with a little sniff of distaste, as though the prim, middle-aged Junior League Vice President was "really into" injecting herself with horse tranquilizers and selling her body for crack.

"Dylan will be so glad to know *someone* likes his music," Suzanne said flatly.

Her parents had been pleased enough to see Suzanne married two months before - not knowing that she and Dylan had secretly wed on a beach back in March - and the fact that Dylan was rich beyond imagination made his worn boots and signature camo hat forgivable in their eyes. Mostly, Suzanne liked to assume that his devotion to and care of their daughter also won him some brownie points with the Hamiltons, but as they had never said so out loud, she tried not to pull at that thread.

Completely missing the irony, her mother perked up. "No chance he'll get back early? He's flying out soon, right?"

Suzanne shook her head, swallowing the last of her quiche. "He leaves later this afternoon and it's a twenty-hour flight. He'll be back..." She thought suddenly thought

of her dead phone, downstairs, still not charging. She stood to clear her plate.  
“Tomorrow afternoon sometime.”

At her mother’s deflated look, Suzanne said. “Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll be sure to drop as many celebrity names as I can during dinner.”

“Don’t be gauche, Suzanne. I did not raise you to be gauche.”

“I’m going to get my phone. I missed talking to my incredibly handsome, famous husband last night, and I would hate to do that again.” She patted her mother’s shoulder affectionately. “He’s not a *dentist* or anything, but maybe I can ask him to write a quick song for Mary Anne Kensington in the Sydney airport.”

Suzanne could feel her mother’s eyes boring into her back as she padded back toward the sickly gingerbread scent of the basement. She might have to sleep at home tonight, husband or no husband.

# # #

“So where are you going, again?” Dylan asked. Suzanne could hear the bustle of the airport behind him and a gate agent making an announcement with a lovely Australian accent. “Did you say something about *tea*?”

“Yes,” she said, rolling her eyes and trying not to sound as tired as she felt. She was sitting on the horrifying plaid basement couch, wearing the navy dress as prescribed, longing to be in sweatpants instead. “Apparently Mom is trying to make me atone for all the Junior League meetings I’ve missed lately by dragging me along on every tedious holiday event she can swing an invitation to.”

“I’m not going to lie, that sounds pretty awful. I’ve been wishing I was home with you, but now I’m back to wishing you were here instead.”

“Oh definitely the second one,” Suzanne yawned. “I’ve never been to Australia.”

“I hated being here without you,” he said, lowering his voice. “I tried not to see too much so we can come back together sometime. We never did get an official honeymoon.”

Suzanne heard exaggerated gagging noises in the background, which were a little too close for comfort given the current state of her stomach. These were followed by the voice of Dylan’s brother-in-law-slash-promoter, Jeff. “You guys are disgusting. Do you even hear yourself, dude?” Jeff got louder as he leaned closer to Dylan’s phone. “Suzanne, you’ve made him completely pathetic. Country music’s bad boy, my ass.”

"You're one to talk," Dylan said, "showing those girls at the bar pictures of my nephew all night." Suzanne could see the laughter in his eyes as though he were right there in the room. It made her ache for him to be home. Twenty-four hours seemed like a very long time just now.

"Someone had to entertain them since you kept disappearing to text your wife," Jeff was saying in disgust. "At least Kate and I can go two hours without slobbering all over each other."

Suzanne lay back carefully against the back of the couch, trying not to wrinkle her dress as she listened to the men banter. She was thrilled to finally talk to Dylan, but she was starting to wonder if they needed her for this conversation at all.

Her eyes were just drifting shut when Dylan's voice intensified. "Wait, are you serious? They can't just *cancel* an international flight, can they?"

"What?" Suzanne sat up, heart pounding. "Did you say your flight is cancelled?"

"Not sure. Let me call you back."

# # #

It was more than an hour before she heard from him again, and her mother glared when Suzanne stood up abruptly from Lynn Grosvenor's tea table to answer the phone. Truthfully, Suzanne had been just as anxious to escape the sweltering heat of the older woman's house as to hear back from Dylan. She stepped out the front door into the relief of chilly air as she answered.

"Hey." He sounded tired. "I hope you won't be mad."

"Because you cancelled your own flight on purpose to avoid me?"

"Because there was only one seat left on the next flight through Los Angeles, which is tonight, and I put Jeff in it." Even as her heart sank from disappointment, she knew he'd done the right thing.

"Of course I'm not mad," she said resignedly. "Jeff needs to get home to Kate and the baby. He's already missed Christmas."

"My thoughts exactly."

"So when is the next flight?"

"The next open seat to L.A. is in two days." He sighed heavily. "But apparently I can fly to Jakarta and back six times before then. And on the bright side, they are giving us both tickets free now."

"Which puts you here the evening of the 28<sup>th</sup>? Dylan, I hate to play the rock star wife card, but can't you rent a private jet or something?"

"I checked into it," he said without hesitation. "There are only a handful of long range private jets that can go all the way to the States without stopping, and they're already booked."

"Didn't you just do a concert with Blake Shelton? I know *he's* not on some commercial flight."

"Ouch," Dylan said. "Kick me when I'm down, why don't you?"

She laughed, shivering in the cold December air on the Grosvenor's front porch. "I just meant, maybe he can give you a lift. *Idiot.*"

His smile was audible. "Just giving you hell, Scarlett. I already talked to him, and they're staying through Friday, then headed to Tokyo for a New Year's Eve party."

"Well that's too late. And the wrong direction," she agreed. "Wait. I just saw a commercial this morning – Blake Shelton is supposed to be in New York for *New Year's Rockin' Eve.*"

"When I get home, I'll explain to you the magic of tape delay."

She flushed. "Oh, right."

"I'm going to put out word with some of my contacts to see if anyone knows anyone who could help in this part of the world. In the meantime, Jeff and I are going to get something to eat and do a little sight-seeing. We've got some time to kill before he leaves tonight."

"Don't see anything too awesome without me."

"Only the worst Sydney has to offer." He promised. "Will you be okay?"

"Of course." Forty-eight hours. Suzanne knew it was ridiculous to be upset. Between his job and her work with their foundation, she and Dylan spent plenty of time apart. They'd missed Christmas together, but she'd known that going into this holiday. One more day shouldn't be a big deal.

“You’re not going to kill your mom are you?”

“Yes, I am. But that has nothing to do with you being gone.” She tried to sound light and reassuring. No reason for him to be bored, stranded and feeling guilty for something that wasn’t his fault. “Besides, I’ve got Chad and David’s New Year’s party to plan, and Marci to help keep me entertained. Bonnie is all over the place, she’s wearing Marci out. We’re taking her to see the Big Pink Pig tomorrow morning.”

“You are definitely going to have to explain that one to me later.”

Maybe it was the pheasant from the night before, or the stress of having her husband stranded on the other side of the planet. But when they’d disconnected and Suzanne turned to re-enter the sweltering front parlor, she felt a wave of dizziness. This was followed instantly by more intense nausea than she’d felt that morning. Before she had any chance to react or move to a more discreet location, Suzanne was vomiting red and green petit fours and tea biscuits into Mrs. Grosvenor’s front bushes.

# # #

“It wasn’t the pheasant,” Marci said the next morning, as she and Suzanne stood on the glaringly pink carpet in a temporary enclosure on the Lenox Mall parking deck, watching Jake try to keep little Bonnie entertained while she waited to ride the tiny train shaped like a pig. “Jake and I both ate tons of it and we’re fine.”

“Probably just a little stomach bug, then,” Suzanne said.

Marci took an immediate step back, one hand on her swollen belly. “Do you think you’re contagious?”

“First of all, whatever it is hasn’t been that bad. I feel mostly fine. I wouldn’t have come if I’d thought I was putting little Baby Spike at risk.”

“Stop calling him that! We are not naming him Spike.”

Suzanne shrugged. “Second, if I am contagious, I think you sealed your own fate when you snatched the last bite of my cinnamon roll without asking.”

“It’s not my fault your eyes are bigger than your stomach,” Marci said defensively. “You were so desperate for that one particular Cinnabon, and it had to be the biggest one with the most icing. I’ve never seen you like...” she trailed off, staring wide-eyed. Suzanne looked behind her to see if something had happened to Bonnie, but she and Jake were still waiting in line.

Marci's hand flew to her mouth. "It *wasn't* the pheasant," she said, like this was some big discovery. "And you are *not* contagious."

"What makes you so sure?" Suzanne hated when Marci got like this, all smug and knowledgeable.

Her friend leaned over, eyebrows raised, rubbing her belly significantly. "And if you *were* contagious, I'd be safe anyway."

"Marci, what the hell -" And then Suzanne stopped as her best friend's meaning hit her. "No."

"I think you are," Marci said, triumphant. "Your cheeks are super rosy, but you look exhausted. I thought it was from the cold earlier, but it's still the same after we've been inside for an hour. You're throwing up but nothing else is wrong..."

"No," Suzanne repeated, frantically doing math in her head, trying to retrace the calendar of the last few weeks. They'd been so busy lately, and it wasn't unusual for her to skip a period when she was under stress... November, October... Another wave of dizziness passed over her and she thought she might pass out. "Oh, *fuck*."

"Language!" scolded an older woman in a fur coat, walking by with twin little blonde girls in matching red velvet Christmas dresses. "There are *children* present."

"No shit," Suzanne murmured, brain too frozen to form the apology she knew she ought to give. All she could do was stare at the little girls, neither of whom was paying the least bit of attention, their blue eyes turned longingly to a giant M&M cookie in the hands of a boy nearby.

"Sorry, she's completely drunk." Marci gave a saccharine smile to the affronted lady, who began huffing away with her little dolls in tow. "We can't take her anywhere."

The smile became real as Marci took Suzanne's hand, the true delight on her face mixed with the satisfaction of someone who knows you will soon understand their most terrifying secrets. "Just think," she said sweetly, "in a few months you'll be swearing like a truck driver in front of your very own child. How are you going to tell Dylan?"

# # #

"Do you want the good news first or the bad news?"

Dylan's voice on the line the next afternoon sent relief washing over her. Suzanne had been waiting for his call all day, with his phone going straight to voicemail, and the strange number on her phone sent her into a momentary panic.

"Are you okay?" she asked, rather than answer his question.

"I'm fine," he said, in breathy annoyance. "The good news is that I was able to hook up with this software mogul dude who happens to be a big fan of mine. He was flying from Sydney to San Francisco and offered to let me come along. We left a few hours before the commercial flight, so I thought I would grab a flight from SFO to show up early and surprise you."

"Baby, that's so sweet." *And I have an even bigger surprise for you.* "Does that mean you're stateside, then?"

"Well, technically, yes. That's... actually part of the bad news. This software dude and his girlfriend had a huge fight on the plane, and she insisted we land at the first place possible so she could get out."

"Wait, is that even allowed? You can just stop a plane like it's a taxi and let someone out?"

"Apparently when you invented some plugin used by half the corporations in America you can. So, we're in Honolulu."

"Are you kidding?"

"She says she's not getting on that plane until he apologizes for God knows what, and he says he'd rather build a house here and stay forever than give her the satisfaction."

"Wow."

"I know," he agreed. "But, at least I'm stranded halfway home now."

Suzanne hesitated, hearing the frustration in his voice, wanting to make it better. The news was threatening to spill out of her: the three positive pregnancy tests, the joy, the terror, and their shared future, forever changed. But was this how he would want to hear the news? Alone and exhausted in an airport hotel?

"I can't even think straight right now," he said, as though answering the question she couldn't ask. "It took me forever to get through customs with my guitar and no commercial boarding pass. I still have to call the airline to put myself on the standby list for flights to Atlanta tomorrow. I think I'm going to order room service and go to sleep."

"What will you order?" she asked, trying to distract them both.

“Steak. Whiskey.”

“No vegetables?” she said, as wifely as she has ever sounded to her own ears. *Motherly*, she thought with a shudder.

“Fries. Those are potatoes.”

It was an attempt to pick a playful fight, she knew, but one neither of them had the energy to sustain it. “Love you,” she said softly.

“You too,” he agreed. “Tell Chad and David I *will* be at their party Saturday, come hell or high water.”

“The way things are going, you could have both,” she said, with almost no humor.

# # #

“When you think about it,” Chad said Friday morning, handing Suzanne another rinsed champagne flute to dry and set out. “He’s actually having my dream vacation. Australia, Hawaii, and now stranded in a freak December snowstorm in Denver. What are the chances? If you like surfing and skiing, it’s a dream come true.”

“It’s a nightmare,” Suzanne said flatly. “He doesn’t surf or ski – here, give me that one – and, besides, it’s not like he packed for that stuff anyway. He left here for three days in Sydney. Jeans, a few t-shirts, guitar, boots. He had to buy a parka at the Denver airport just for the walk to the hotel.”

“Poor guy,” Chad said. “Poor, sexy, sexy man.”

“Since we’ve only been married a week,” David said, entering the kitchen via the back stairwell that went through their laundry room. “I’m just going to pretend you are talking about me.” He planted a kiss on Suzanne’s cheek and swatted playfully at Chad as he passed by on his way to the refrigerator.

“If you had been helping us get ready for this absurd party, you’d *know* who I was talking about,” Chad said, putting the last glass out to dry. “Let’s take a break.”

“If you had taken my suggestion that we get married in Vegas like normal people, we wouldn’t be having this absurd party,” David countered, opening a cup of yogurt as they all arranged themselves around the kitchen table. Before Chad could continue into the discussion they’d had a zillion times already, David went on. “Where is your poor sexy man, anyway, Suzanne?”

"Last I heard he was trying to rent a car with snow tires to drive to Oklahoma City or Wichita or somewhere that isn't snowed in. I told him he didn't have to reenact *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* for me."

"What'd he say to that?"

"He didn't get the reference," she admitted. "I had to add it to our ever-increasing list of educational movies he has to watch."

"That's what you get for marrying a toddler," Chad said. Seeing Suzanne's expression, he threw up his hands in surrender. "Not that I wouldn't have done the same, obviously."

"Dangerous roads," David said, then pointed an interrogating spoon at Suzanne. "Does he know yet? About the baby?"

"David!" Chad turned almost purple. "What do the words 'double top secret' mean to you?"

"Well it's obviously not a secret to *her*," David said defensively. "I thought you just meant don't tell anyone *else*."

Chad rolled his eyes, and this time it was Suzanne who cut him off. "He doesn't know yet. I went to the doctor yesterday to have the results confirmed, but even after they come in I think I'll tell him in person."

"Good call," said David easily. "With your expertise, you can have so much fun with it. What are you going to do? Pregnancy tests in a Christmas gift box?"

"That's disgusting," Chad said. "You're basically handing someone your pee. 'Here you go, Merry Christmas, here's my urine.'"

David ignored him. "I work with a lady who had a onesie made to tell her husband about their first child. He's UPS driver so she got this little brown onesie that said in yellow 'special delivery June 2012' or whatever the year was. It was cute."

Suzanne had never heard David use the word "cute" in all the years she'd known the two of them. Either he was less cynical about babies than everything else on the planet, or their recent marriage was having a softening effect on him.

"Oh!" Chad said. "You should tell Dylan on stage somehow. Wouldn't that be awesome? Surprise him."

"I don't think that would work," she said, thinking that they had both had enough of their key relationship events in the public eye. "He doesn't have another concert planned until February."

"It's too bad you don't have a dog," David said, almost wistfully. "Have you seen that commercial with the golden retriever who brings the pacifier to the guy when he walks in the door?"

"Oh!" Chad chimed in. "What about the one with the army dude, and he's about to Skype with his wife..."

"But she's in a hospital gown, and he gets all worried?" David finished. "And then she moves the laptop toward the monitor and he sees the little baby on the ultrasound?" To her shock, he was actually tearing up a little. Maybe pregnancy hormones *were* contagious.

"I do love those commercials," Suzanne agreed, trying not to show how overwhelmed she was at the task of letting Dylan know about their baby in just the right way. "Unfortunately, we don't have pets. And I don't have a sonogram scheduled yet."

The dismay in her voice must have been obvious, because the men looked at one another in apprehensive silence.

"You'll think of something fabulous," Chad said eventually, patting her hand. "You always do."

# # #

Suzanne did not, however, think of something fabulous. By the time the New Year's Eve party-slash-wedding-reception started the next night, she was exhausted and had exactly zero great ideas. She and Marci had combed through Pinterest and found some really cute pregnancy announcement ideas, but none of them had the feeling of Suzanne and Dylan. Nothing could compare with the two extremes of their relationship milestones so far: his declaration of love for her on national television, or their impromptu beach wedding with toilet paper streamers. Nothing felt right. And by the time she had helped Chad get every last detail of his own wedding reception perfect, nothing felt possible.

She had started at least twenty letters to Dylan over the past two days, and ended up crumpling them all in a rage. She scoured the aisles of greeting cards when she was supposed to be helping Chad pick out the perfect raspberries for the champagne cocktails, but nothing felt right there either.

Meanwhile, Dylan had made it to Kansas City that morning, texting her in frustration that even from there, he was not able to get a flight out until New Year's Day, no matter what class or airline. Apparently many of the planes to Denver had re-routed to Kansas City in the storm, and there were waiting lists for every flight through the Atlanta hub, filled with travelers heading everywhere but into the snow. Not even the charming celebrity thing was working on the harried airline workers, none of whom seemed impressed that they had one of country music's hottest young acts in their presence.

"Free concert tickets got me nowhere with the gate agent," he said when they talked. "She did give me a hotel upgrade, not that I care. I want to be home with you, not watching Ryan Seacrest in a king suite with room service."

"Room service sounds pretty good actually," Suzanne said, worrying at a fingernail. Could she do something with room service? Have a note sent up to him under one of those little silver domes? Tucked in with the ketchup and steak sauce?

No. It wouldn't even be her own handwriting then. And the truth was, Suzanne wanted to be with him when he found out. She wanted to hold his hand and hug him and, if she were being really honest, to see his immediate reaction. To know if he would be as terrified as she was.

"How did you tell Jake?" she asked Marci as they drove to Chad's to help set up for the party.

"The first time, I didn't do anything cute," Marci admitted. "I was in such shock that I just walked out of the bathroom with the positive test and said, 'I guess I can't have margaritas for a while.'"

"With this one," she gestured at her swollen belly beneath the steering wheel. "I had Bonnie tell him. I bought her this cute Big Sister outfit and put it on her before he came home for dinner. She was only nine months old, though, and not walking yet, so it took him almost an hour to notice what she was wearing."

They both laughed. "I guess you can never go wrong with the cute kid angle, though," Suzanne said. "Maybe I can borrow Bonnie tomorrow when he finally gets home."

"She can say *Mama, Dada, Ball* and *Baby*, if any of that is helpful. Oh, and '*Pone*.' She loves my iPhone already. Little wretch."

"Is Jake bringing her tonight? I know Chad specifically wanted her invited."

Marci nodded. "For a bit. Now that she's walking so well and into everything, I'm afraid she will ruin the party for the grownups if they stay too long. I'm yours all night, though. Had a nice long nap so I can make it well past midnight if needed."

She grabbed Suzanne's hand, and Suzanne squeezed back gratefully.

# # #

In execution, the party was everything Suzanne hoped it would be. She still regularly planned events on a much larger scale than this one. But this was Chad, her longtime assistant and longer-time friend, and she wanted everything to be perfect.

The only slight hiccup occurred when David's iPod full of carefully curated music fritzed out unexpectedly, and Suzanne came to the rescue with her phone, plugging it into the internal speaker system Chad and David had wired throughout the house. She set it to play her favorite Internet jazz station, which was already loaded and ready to go at a moment's notice, and the disruption lasted less than three minutes. Soon people were dancing just as they had been to David's techno beats, and there were smiles and hot cider all around. Suzanne looked over the room with satisfaction. The whole pregnancy thing had her a little shaken, but at heart, she was still a party planner - ready for anything.

She instructed the catering staff to hand out the champagne and gather the crowd in the living room, where they faced the main stairway to the balcony area above. Suzanne gave both grooms and both sets of parents glasses for toasting, and Marci paused the music while Suzanne clinked a fork against her glass of sparkling cider to introduce the toasts. They went beautifully, and even Chad's rather stodgy father managed to pull off a couple of jokes that landed well with the crowd.

Next came the world's shortest photo session on the stairs, with the crowd returning to buzzy conversation around them as the catering staff circulated another round of sweets. Suzanne was still standing on the bottom stair, formally congratulating the families, when she heard the music fade out once more, replaced by a robotic voice that was painfully familiar. "You have one unheard message."

She scanned the room in confusion, and spotted little Bonnie on the other side by the stereo system, looking positively gleeful in her holiday dress, white tights and tiny patent leather shoes. "Mama Pone!" she said, red cheeks screwed up in delight. "Mama Pone!"

Several feet away, Marci was on her actual phone, looking at her child with absolute mortification. "Bonnie, no. Put it down."

"First new message..."

“Wait!” Marci cried, trying and failing to maneuver her large pregnant belly through the crowd, as Bonnie obeyed for the first time ever, and toddled happily toward her mother. “Go back! Pick it up! Press the red button, baby!”

But it was too late. “Mrs. Burke, it’s Tisha from Dr. Allen’s office.” The nasal voice of Tisha, a kind nurse with a long ponytail and too much eye shadow, echoed through the room while the stunned party guests looked at one another, wondering if this was a joke or just part of the festivities. “I wanted to let you know we did get the test results back from your pregnancy hormone test and they are positive. You can call us on Tuesday to make a follow up appointment...”

The phone beeped and the automated voice asked the hundred or so people present whether they wanted to delete the message, save it, or listen to the next one. Suzanne felt the gazes on her, heard the whispers. Marci, who had lunged for the phone as gracefully as someone in her advanced state could, sent a babbling Bonnie over to Jake, who had reentered the room after choosing the Worst Time in the History of the World to Go to the Bathroom.

With one identical iPhone in each hand, Marci glanced nervously from Suzanne to a spot in the hallway behind her, beyond the stairs. “Should I save it?” she asked, voice cracking with uncertainty. “Or play it again for... um, anyone who didn’t hear?”

Following Marci’s meaningful gaze, Suzanne looked down over the railing toward the front hall, where she heard the slow, familiar tread of boots. She heard the crowd behind her murmuring as Dylan appeared, wearing his traveling clothes and camo hat, ignoring (as usual) the party dress code. He held a bright blue parka that was not at all his style and a plastic airport duty free bag. He was wearing his trademark stage smile; but as he turned to look for her, Suzanne could see that underneath the cavalier façade, his face was white with shock.

“I am SO sorry,” Marci bumbled from a hundred miles away. “Jake went to the bathroom... and Dylan called...”

Suzanne heard none of it, staring at her husband. Even three feet below her, looking tired and ragged, he was larger than life. “You’re here,” she said stupidly. “Yep.” Dylan touched the brim of his hat lightly with two fingers, saluting her in almost reflexive casualness. “Bribed some guy in first class to give up his seat.”

“You were coming home tomorrow,” she said. Suzanne felt like she was about two minutes behind everything in this conversation.

“Thought I’d get back early to surprise you,” Dylan said with a little smirk. He made a gesture that included their audience of partygoers and the voicemail that still hung in the air. “But as usual, Scarlett, you got the better of me.”

# # #

"I've been trying to figure out how to tell you," Suzanne said as they made their way into a guest bedroom upstairs David had been using to stash the coats. "I wanted to do something spectacular. Pinterest-worthy. But now it's ruined." She could feel tears hot on her cheeks despite her best efforts to keep them at bay. Is this how it was going to be now? All hormones and humiliation?

Dylan closed the door, locked it and crossed the room to her in two big strides, putting his hands on her hips. He looked like hell, which Suzanne supposed was understandable. His lips were chapped, eyes puffy, and he clearly hadn't shaved in at least three days. But his eyes were wild with excitement. "Are you kidding? What's ruined?"

"The pregnancy." Her hands flew unconsciously to her abdomen. "I mean, the pregnancy isn't ruined, obviously, but I always thought if this happened I would do something cute to tell you. Like that commercial."

He kissed her neck. "The one with the balloons?"

"The golden retriever." Suzanne felt her throat clog with emotion just at the thought. Ugh. Seriously?

"We don't have a dog." Dylan's hands moved to cover hers, low on her still-flat belly. "So this is real?" He looked like a kid watching fireworks.

"Does that mean you're happy?"

"Are you kidding? I'm over the moon. We're going to have a baby. What could be better than that?"

"I just thought, I don't know, that it would be later. After we'd had more time, just the two of us. I've heard babies ruin your sex life."

He touched his forehead to hers. "Is that what Marci says?"

"No," Suzanne admitted. "But..."

"But what?" He was at her ear now, using his lowest, smoothest voice - the one that made fans around the world weak in the knees. At this moment, Suzanne was no exception.

"I'm so *emotional*," she said.

"You are," he agreed into the hollow of her throat, where he was planting kisses. "What else is new?"

"My face is all broken out. It's like high school."

"I liked high school." He reached for the strap of her dress. "Especially under the bleachers."

She batted his hand away. "Be serious."

"Fine. Let's talk seriously." He pushed aside some of the coats and laid out the blue parka on the bed. Pushing her gently onto it, he knelt on the carpet in front of her, and took her hands in his.

He made a mock-serious face. "Mrs. Suzanne Hamilton Burke, are you, or are you not, my wife?"

"Oh, stop. That isn't what I meant."

"Yes or no will be fine. This is a serious inquiry."

Suzanne knew him well enough to know he would not let up until she played along. "Yes," she sighed.

"And are you currently carrying our child?"

"Yes." This time her voice was a whisper, cracking with emotion.

She could see tears glistening in Dylan's eyes, too. He was happy, she realized. He was overjoyed and nothing else mattered.

"And are you expecting to vomit anytime in the next ten minutes?"

"No," she said, confused. "It's mostly in the morning or when I'm hungry. Why?"

"Good," he said, slipping off her shoes. "Because I've been away from my wife for almost two weeks, she just told me the best news I can imagine, and it's about to be a brand new year. I figure it's the perfect time to figure out what pregnancy does to your sex life."

Before she could respond, he grabbed her behind the knees and pulled her to the edge of the bed, making her squeal in surprise. He kissed her, hard, running a hand up her bare thigh. "Dylan," she said weakly.

"Shh..." he chastised, with an evil grin Suzanne knew meant she was in trouble. "I'd sure hate for all those nice people, who just found out I am going to be a father, to have to listen firsthand to how that came about."

"I really *am* sorry about that," she started, but he quieted her with another kiss, pushing her backward with his body until she lay half-sprawled across the parka and the pile of coats.

"Don't move," he said in a growl. "And for the love of Auld Lang Syne, don't scream." He knelt in front of her again, giving her a scolding look when she tried to sit up. He ran his hands up her bare legs and under her dress, over her panties to the slight swell of her abdomen, where he cupped her belly with both hands. "It's the same," he said, his voice cracking with awe. He looked up at her. "Does it feel different to you?"

"Not yet," she said, clamping down the eagerness in her voice. She had wondered almost hourly at what point she would begin to *feel* pregnant at some time other than when she was losing her lunch. "I mean, aside from vomiting for eight hours a day."

"My poor baby," he said. His tone was full of sympathy but he was unable to keep the grin from his face. He planted a series of little kisses on her inner thigh for emphasis. "I. Am. So. Sorry."

"You don't *seem* sorry," she said, without malice.

He gave her a look that was both playful and as hungry as she'd ever seen. He emitted another low growl, which vibrated against her thigh, making her tingle. She shuddered, and he kissed her thigh more firmly, hands still cupped against her lower abdomen as though he were shielding the little grain of rice from the world. A wave of desire and excitement swept over her. She shuddered a little, feeling the muscles in her tired legs begin to tremble.

"Okay?" he asked. She could feel the warmth of his breath against the thin fabric of her underwear.

"Definitely," she said, letting out a ragged breath.

He hooked a finger under her lacy black La Perla panties and tugged as though he were going to rip them off. She bolted upright and grabbed his wrist, all nervousness disappearing into the comfortable, playful anger of an old argument. "Don't you dare. These are expensive, Dylan. I just bought them."

"I'll buy you another pair."

"No," she said firmly, loud enough that he glanced at the door with a raised eyebrow. She lowered her voice and tried for a more conciliatory tone. "I... I'll have to buy different underwear soon. Great big things with a terrifying amount of Spandex."

"So what?" He gently extricated his wrist from her grasp. "You know I don't care about that stuff."

Suzanne sighed and flopped back onto the bed, covering her face with her hands. She directed her comments at the ceiling "I know it's stupid and superficial, but even after the pregnancy is over, my body won't be the same. I won't be able to manage a dress like this without military grade lingerie holding everything in. Soon I won't... I don't know if I'll be able to buy these kind again."

Dylan was quiet. How could she explain? Her husband lived in worn boots and perfectly ratty jeans, and women swooned no matter what he wore. He had also just turned 28, damn him, and none of the ego-killing annoyances of aging and life on the road were catching up with him yet. There was no way he would understand that, pregnant at 36, she was facing down a major change in her identity. Frilly, silky, crazy-expensive underwear were a private indulgence she'd allowed herself ever since her first paycheck. She'd been around Marci long enough to know that – even in the unlikely event she got her figure entirely back after a baby – things like gorgeous lingerie and beautiful shoes were bound to take a backseat to more practical choices once she was a mother.

"Oh, God, I am going to be buying underwear in those horrible little six packs at Walmart," she said, trying to keep the sob out of her voice. "At the same time I am buying diapers and formula."

"What's wrong with Walmart?" Dylan asked, missing the point as usual.

"Ugh!" She threw her hands up in exasperation before returning to cover her face more tightly than before. "Now I feel like a snob *and* a bad mother. Who the hell worries about their underwear when a whole new human being is depending on them? I'm going to be terrible at this."

"You are *not*."

"I'm not ready."

"First of all," he lay down next to her, gently prying her hands off her face and holding them against her stomach. "You are, far and away, the sexiest woman alive. No matter what kind of underwear you have on. The idea of this body changing because our child is inside makes you sexier and more beautiful in my eyes, not less."

She turned and nuzzled against him, smelling stale coffee and airport hand soap and the familiar scent of her husband. "Second," he said quietly into her ear. "You are ready for this. You will be a wonderful mom. And we might have no idea what the hell we're doing, but we'll be clueless together. I will be with you every step of the way."

"You will?" She knew the answer before she asked the question. But still.

"Even at Walmart."

With a playful smack on the arm, Suzanne let herself relax into him, the stress and uncertainty of the last few days melting away. He rubbed her back, letting his hand linger at the curve of her spine, kissing her neck lightly. She tilted her head back to encourage him, loving the feel of his stubbly face against her skin.

After a moment, his hand drifted under the satin of her dress, with the same urgency as before, but more controlled. "May I?" he breathed, his finger crooked under the lace of her panties once again.

"You know my terms."

"Yes, ma'am." He gently pulled the disputed underwear down her bare skin, taking an exaggerated amount of time getting it past her ankles and feet, leaving her to writhe in giggly anticipation in the nest of coats. To take the point further, he folded the underwear into neat quarters and set it aside before lowering himself next to her.

"Very funny," she said.

"I thought so," he agreed, with his usual unfettered arrogance.

His hand returned to her hip, pushing the fabric of her dress upward before grazing her belly once more, seemingly obsessed with this part of her and the new mystery it contained. Then he let his hand drift lower, spreading her thighs apart gently and running one finger gently along her flesh.

"God I missed you," he breathed into her neck, his hot breath giving her gooseflesh. Experimentally, he pushed the finger gently inside and she gasped. "Okay?" he asked, voice ragged with concern and the effort of restraint.

Suzanne answered by letting her legs fall farther apart and digging her fingers into his back, pulling him closer. He responded with gusto, moving against her with a frantic urgency, as though they had been apart for two years rather than two weeks. She found that her body was more sensitive than usual, as though the nerve endings had been awakened by the pregnancy, and she had to bite into his shoulder to keep from moaning so loud that the entire party would surely hear downstairs. This spurred him

on to move faster, seeming to cover every inch of her flesh with his calloused hand even as his fingers worked inside her.

She came faster than she ever had, the strength and suddenness of her orgasm surprising even Suzanne, as wave after wave hit her. She had to bury her face into his shirt to keep from shrieking, as she bucked and rocked against his hand, quaking with pleasure. And then he was inside her, before she had even realized he had undressed, before the last waves of pleasure had washed over her.

“Alright?” he asked again, more an affirmation than a question, already moving hard and steadily within her.

“Yes,” she whispered, wrapping her arms around his neck.

The time apart and the emotion of the evening had clearly impacted Dylan, too, because in a matter of minutes, he was plunging hard into her, whispering her name and telling her he loved her in time to the new year’s countdown downstairs. After, they lay curled there, entwined and kissing, while the shouts and toasts and horns told of the celebration below. “It took me a week to get home, but I got what I wanted,” he said quietly. “To kiss you at midnight.”

“And to be a father?” she asked.

“That too,” he agreed. “As long as I get to be the guy who kisses you, I can be anything.”

They lay in silence, until the sound of the television countdown show was replaced by music again. The party would be breaking up soon. It was time to rejoin the crowd, say their goodnights, and finally, *finally*, get back to the quiet of their own bed in the townhouse. Dylan located her lined black trench coat at the bottom of the pile and pulled the parka on himself.

“That might be my new favorite jacket of yours,” she said, playfully pulling at the zipper. Then she gestured at the duty free bag, the thick white plastic crinkled and dull from its long journey with Dylan. “What’s in there?”

“Oh. I got this for you in Honolulu.” His expression grew sheepish as he held it out. “It’s not that great. I mean, if I had known...”

“Don’t be silly,” she said, grabbing the bag from him and pulling out an elegant box with a new, top of the line iPhone. At airport prices, it must have cost a fortune. “Oh, Dylan.”

"I figure since you're now also the mother of my child, you need to be able to reach me."

She threw herself into his arms and he hugged her tightly, the puffy material of the jacket swishing around her. "Besides," he added, kissing the top of her head. "This way you can text me while I'm at Walmart to let me know if you need some giant underwear."

She pulled away and smacked him on the arm, to little effect against the cushion of the jacket. He looked down unfazed at the spot where she'd hit him. "This might be my favorite jacket, too."

"You're impossible," Suzanne said in mock irritation, opening the door to let in the cool air and the sounds of the party below. "You didn't deserve a Pinterest pregnancy announcement anyway."

As she turned to step into the hall, Dylan grabbed her wrist and pulled her into one final kiss in the doorway. "Damn straight," he said with intensity, putting a hand on her belly again. "I deserve you, though, and that will always be enough."

~ The End ~

If you enjoyed this short story, be sure to read the beginning of Suzanne & Dylan's unique romance in M.J. Pullen's novel [REGRETS ONLY](#), and find more in [THE MARRIAGE PACT](#) and [BAGGAGE CHECK](#), all available from Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press.

You can learn more about M.J., get the latest updates, and be first in line for new book announcements at [mjpullen.com](http://mjpullen.com).

