



Lost and Found Husband (Family Renewal)

By Sheri WhiteFeather



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Against his better judgment, Erik lets this ray of sunshine into his life. But things quickly spin out of control and now Dana's pregnant. Erik will do the right thing and marry her. But can he retrieve his heart from the lost and found to give this feisty beauty the love she truly deserves?

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Sheri WhiteFeather is an award-winning, national bestselling author. Her novels are generously spiced with love and passion. She has also written under the name Cherie Feather. She enjoys traveling and going to art galleries, libraries and museums. Visit her website at www.sheriwhitefeather.com where you can enter her contest and find links to her Facebook and Twitter pages. She loves connecting with readers.

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Eric Reeves was dining in an eatery near his Southern California home, watching Dana Peterson, the bubbly blonde waitress, bring food to another table. His dinner, meat loaf and mashed potatoes, was only half-eaten.

He kept his gaze trained on Dana. With her bold pink uniform and her nicely curved figure, she was a sight to behold. They weren't friends, per se, but they'd built a friendly rapport through snippets of server-customer conversation. Eric ate here often.

When his wife was alive, he used to eat at home. Back then, everything had been wonderfully normal. But he'd lost Corrine seven years ago, and it had become a long and lonely road since then.

Dana whizzed past him on her way to the kitchen and smiled, her ponytail swishing. She was a twenty-six-year-old working her way through community college and enjoying the wherever-it-took-her experience. Eric was forty-two with a grounded job and a grown daughter. He and Dana didn't have much in common, except that his daughter was a college student, too.

By the time he finished his meal, Dana returned to his table. She shot him another of her upbeat smiles. Today she was wearing a purple iris fastened behind her ear. She always wore a flower of some sort. Sometimes they were artificial flowers in trendy hair clips, like the aforementioned iris, and sometimes they were real.

A while back, she'd given him one of the real McCoys when he'd revealed that he was widowed. She had always pegged him for divorced, and to make up for her error, she'd removed the flower she wore that day, a velvety red rose, and placed it gently in his hand. Later, he'd gone to Corrine's grave and left it for her. Somewhere along the way, he'd gotten used to talking to his dead wife. He'd even explained where the rose had come from, telling her about the warm-hearted waitress who'd bestowed it upon him.

"Can I get you anything else?" Dana asked.

He shook his head.

"You sure? The apple pie is fresh."

He thought she was fresh, too, light and springy—a modern bohemian, as she called herself, who'd yet to decide on a college major.

"Cherry is my favorite," he said.

"We don't have any cherry. But I promise the apple is delish."

He met her gaze. She had the bluest eyes and the blondest, most naturally golden hair. Everything about her shimmered.

She cocked her head. "What do you say? A la mode?"

He shifted his focus. Pie and ice cream. "Sure, okay."

"Coffee, too?"

"Yes."

Off she went: pink uniform, purple flower and Gidget ponytail. Eric found himself watching her again. He enjoyed looking at her. He enjoyed it far too much.

He was frowning when she delivered his coffee and dessert.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

You, he thought. He didn't want to be attracted to a woman who was closer to his daughter's age than his own.

"Nothing is wrong."

"Taste the pie." She waggled her fingers. "It's guaranteed to make you smile."

He did as he was told. Stupid as it was, he liked having her nearby, tempting him to take a mouthful of the forbidden fruit. The a la mode was an added bonus.

Sure enough, it made him smile. "You win."

"I always do. You know what would be great? There's a gallery opening tomorrow night that I really want to see. You can take me to it, if you're free."

He looked at her as if she'd flipped her lovely little lid. Her suggestion sounded suspiciously like a date. "You don't need an older guy like me taking you anywhere."

"You're not old. You're barely into your forties. Besides, you're yummy."

Yummy? His heart hit his chest. *Bang. Bang. Bang.* Like shots from a gun. His daughter wanted him to start dating again. But he doubted that she had someone like Dana in mind.

"Say yes, Eric."

He didn't utter a word. Instead he took a second bite, but the diversion didn't work. The gooey sweetness made him want to tug her onto his lap and kiss her hard and fast. To curb his appetite, he swigged his coffee.

She persisted. "Come on. It'll be fun. Besides, you're an artist. You'll be the perfect companion for a gallery opening."

He downplayed his profession. "I'm an art teacher at a middle school."

"You're still an artist. How about this? I'll give you my number, and you can call and let me know."

She zoomed off to tend to other customers, and he ate the devil out of his pie.

A short while later she returned with his check and her number, written on a scrap of paper. Eric tucked it into his pocket. He had no idea what he was going to do, but at least he had a day to think about it.

"I hope I see you tomorrow," she said, placing her hand on his shoulder.

He wished that she hadn't touched him. The kiss he'd longed for came tumbling back. "I just don't know." He gazed at her mouth.

She moistened her lips. "You'll figure it out."

Would he? She was the first woman he'd desired since Corrine had died. He didn't know what that said about his libido, considering Dana's carefree attitude and age. "I've been out of the loop since my wife passed."

"Ours will be just a casual date."

"That doesn't change the age difference between us."

"It isn't that big of a difference."

It was to him. Even as attracted as he was to Dana, he'd never considered dating a twentysomething. "I'll call you and let you know either way."

"Okay. Thanks. I better get back to work now." She touched his shoulder again, rubbing it a little this time.

His stomach flip-flopped.

After she was gone, he paid with cash and left her a generous tip. On his way to the door, he turned around and looked for her, seeking her attention from across the diner.

She caught his gaze and flashed a don't-forget-to-call-me smile.

As if forgetting about her was actually possible.

After work Dana went home, excited about the possibility of going out with Eric. Even if he chose not to date her, she would still be proud of herself for putting it out there. She'd had a crush on him since she'd first met him, which was when she'd started working at the diner, almost a year ago. A year was a record for her. Not just to hold a crush for that long, but to stay at the same job. She liked to mix things up.

And boy had she done that today. She'd finally mustered the courage to ask Eric out. She'd been thinking about it for what seemed like forever and now that Valentine's Day was around the corner, she figured this was the time to do it. Plus, when she'd heard about the gallery opening, she knew she'd found the perfect event to invite him to attend with her.

He was such an intriguing mystery, a man she wanted to get to know. She especially liked to see him smile. He had a great smile that he didn't use nearly often enough.

She went into her bedroom to change. She lived in the most adorable guest house that she'd found on Craigslist. Her side of the yard, which had a white picket fence, hosted an English-style garden and a naked-cherub fountain. The cherub amused her because he was one of those mischievous little angels that appeared to be peeing in the water. Everything about the place was perfect. She even had an awesome landlord who owned the property and lived in the front house. In fact, she and Candy McCall were becoming the best of friends. Prior to living here, Dana had been in an apartment crowded with roommates.

She tossed her uniform on a chair and climbed into a ragged T-shirt and comfy jeans. She was anxious to talk to Candy about Eric.

Dana ventured outside. The weather was lovely on this February evening. As she passed the cherub, she smiled.

After crossing her flower-filled yard, she entered through the gate that led to Candy's equally colorful residence.

She approached the back door and called out through the screen. "Hey, you! Can I pop in for a minute? I have some news."

"Of course" was the reply. "Get your butt in here."

Dana happily entered. Candy was in her cluttered kitchen, preparing what most people would assume were regular cookies, but Dana knew they were homemade dog treats that had just come out of the oven. Candy was a yoga instructor who also taught classes in doga: yoga for dogs. On top of that, she was a strikingly beautiful, long-legged brunette who ate a strict vegetarian diet, burned luscious-smelling candles and spoke evasively about her failed marriage.

"Where's Yogi?" Dana asked, inquiring about Candy's yellow lab and the queen of doga.

"Napping. So what's your news?"

"I asked him to take me on a date."

"Him? Your hottie customer?"

Dana nodded. "I even told him that he was yummy." She relayed her conversation with Eric. "I'm going to plan my wardrobe for tomorrow night, just in case."

"Good idea. Send it into the universe and make it happen."

"The hippy-dippy way?"

"Yep."

They laughed. Hippy-dippy was a phrase Dana's mom used to describe her free-spirited lifestyle. Mom was much more conservative, aside from the wild one-nighter she'd had with Dana's elusive dad.

Candy turned serious. "When did Eric's wife pass away?"

"Seven years ago."

"And he hasn't dated since?"

"That's the impression I got. He said he's been out of the loop since then."

"Does he have any kids?"

"A daughter. She's a business major at UCLA, with a minor in women's studies."

"She sounds interesting. Have you ever met her?"

"No. He's never brought her to the diner. He's never even told me her name. But he speaks highly of her."

"What else do you know about him?"

"Besides him being a widowed art teacher with an eighteen-year-old daughter? Nothing, except that I want to go out with him and make him smile."

"This isn't a fixer-upper project, is it?"

"What do you mean?"

"He sounds a bit broken, and you're drawn to troubled people, Dana."

"You're not troubled." She amended her statement. "Well, maybe you are, but that's not why I'm friends with you."

Naturally, Candy didn't remark on her state of mind. They both knew that she'd yet to make peace with her divorce.

Instead she asked, "Did Eric ever tell you how his wife died?"

"She had cancer. But he never said what kind or how long her battle lasted. He only mentioned it briefly."

"How badly do you think he misses her?"

"I don't know, but I can tell that he's still struggling to get over her loss."

"Does that concern you?"

"Actually, I think it's nice that he loved her so much. What kind of man would he be if he'd never loved his wife?"

"Not a very good one," Candy replied, a tad too uncomfortably.

Dana studied her friend. Was that a reference to her ex? If it was, Candy wasn't saying anything else. And

Dana didn't push her. Instead she said about Eric, "I really hope he agrees to go out with me."

"What happened to your plan-your-wardrobe-for-tomorrow-night confidence?"

"I guess I'm getting a little nervous that he'll decline the offer. But I'm still picking out something to wear. My crush on him isn't going away anytime soon."

Yogi came into the kitchen and yawned. Apparently she was up from her nap. Dana patted her head.

"Hey, sweetie." The dog wagged her tail and sniffed the canine-cookie air.

"Do you think Eric is a dog person or a cat person?" Candy asked.

"Hmm. Good question. I'd venture to guess cats." He had a catlike quality about him, warm but still somehow aloof. "You should see him. Tall and dark and chiseled.

He's half Cherokee."

"How do you know what his heritage is?"

"He wore a Native Pride T-shirt once, and I asked him about it."

"So that's one more thing you know about him."

Dana nodded. "It isn't much, is it? For a whole year? But I haven't told him everything about myself, either. Mostly I just refill his water more than I should as an excuse to keep returning to his table."

"I'll bet he appreciates you doting on him."

"He certainly watches me a lot. I can always feel those dark eyes roving over me whenever I walk away."

"Sounds like a mutual crush."

"You have no idea how many times I've fantasized about him while I was in bed, moaning like a tart." For the sake of drama, she pulled a vintage Meg Ryan and demonstrated the noises she made.

Candy laughed. "Are you going to tell him that?"

She laughed, too. "Sure? Why not? I've been known to say what's on my mind." And these days Eric took up a lot of room in her mind. "I'm going to go dig through my closet now." She wanted to choose an ensemble that would please him. Maybe even something that showed off a bawdy bit of cleavage.

'Cause life was too important to waste.

Eric couldn't do it. He couldn't date someone as young as Dana. Hell, he couldn't date anyone at all. He wasn't ready, not even for something casual. Keeping to himself was easier.

He picked up his cell phone, intending to call Dana and decline her offer, but he dialed his daughter, Kaley, instead, needing to hear her voice.

She'd chosen to live in a dorm, even though her campus was fairly close to home. Eric supported her decision. He wanted his daughter to spread her wings, to find her independence, to enjoy her youth. But damn, he missed seeing her every day. Of course, she still came by on weekends sometimes. But between her studies and her social life, those weekend visits were becoming less frequent.

"Hi, Dad," she said, by way of a phone greeting.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

"Getting ready to go out. I'm going to a Valentine-themed party with my girlfriends. There's another one tomorrow night, too. Both of them are for singles only. How great is that?"

Valentine's Day was on Monday. It was a holiday he no longer celebrated, but apparently Kaley and her crowd were intent on enjoying it. He feigned an upbeat tone. "Sounds fun." It also sounded as if she wasn't going to be home any time this weekend.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

He almost said, "Nothing," but he didn't want her to feel bad for him, so he replied, "I was invited to a gallery opening tomorrow."

"Really? Are you going to go?"

"I don't know. I haven't decided." That was better than admitting the truth.

Kaley didn't ask who invited him. She probably thought it was one of his old artist friends. He wouldn't have told her who it was, anyway, so he was glad that she hadn't asked.

"You should see me, Dad. I'm wearing this cheesy pink gown." She laughed. "And a tiara. The party tonight is dress-up."

He smiled. She used to love wearing princess get-ups when she was a kid. "Take a picture and send it."

"I will, as soon as I get my lipstick on."

"Pink, I presume."

"What else?" She made a silly kissing sound. "I love you, Daddy. Have fun at the gallery opening tomorrow."

"I didn't say I was going."

"Well, you should. It's just your sort of thing."

He sidestepped her encouragement. "I love you, too, kissy Kaley. Be good."

"Okay. Talk to you later."

They said goodbye and as he ended the call, a big jolt of emptiness consumed his heart. But that didn't stop

him from dialing Dana to decline her offer.

"Hello?" She answered in an eager tone. Hoping, perhaps, that it was him on the other end?

"Hi. It's Eric."

"Oh, I'm so glad you called, especially now. I've been trying on clothes for our date, just in case you say yes. I want to look amazing and blow you away."

Eric winced. She was too young and sweet for the likes of him. "I just talked to my daughter. She said that she was wearing a pink gown and a tiara to a Valentine-themed party. She's supposed to send me a picture."

Users Review

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