

Christmas Card Talk

For the briefest of seconds, Katie Carlisle thought that her watch must have stopped. But as she looked closely at her wrist, she could definitely see the slim second hand making its slow circuit around the old-fashioned watch face.

Wow, she thought, shouldn't there be more shoppers in here just a couple of weeks before Christmas? The aisles of the only card shop in town were never this empty this late in the shopping season. Not that the three folks besides herself weren't important, but she'd expected to be jostling others to get at the cards. This was unexpected, but would make picking out cards easier. If the two older shoppers in front of the family card selection would just move on faster, she'd get the whole section to herself.

Might as well let them look, she thought, glancing up the aisle. A lone guy stood fidgeting at the end of the long display of everyday cards.

"Excuse, me," Katie whispered as she approached him. "But you look like you could use some help."

As the man turned, Katie drew in her breath. From the back, all she had seen was a head of ebony colored hair tickling the collar of a light blue plaid shirt, which was in turn tucked into a pair of tight fitting light blue jeans. Now, as the man's

head turned, she found herself looking up into a pair of eyes the color of dark chocolate pudding.

He shrugged, the muscles of his chest tightening beneath the stripes and solids of the blue against white plaid shirt. "Well," he said hesitantly, "I guess so."

For a second, Katie wondered what he was guessing about. As she watched, the muscles beneath his shirt relaxed somewhat and the material fell away from his chest. Right. Come on, girl, she told herself, get a grip; one handsome stranger shouldn't be throwing you off. "What sort of card are you looking for?"

"Well," he began then stopped. "It's kind of personal." From a guy who was at least six feet tall, Katie had expected a louder response.

"Oh." What should she say? "Did you have an argument with your wife?"

"Oh, I'm not married."

Katie started to smile then caught herself. "Then you're looking for something for your girlfriend?"

"Nope. I just moved to town a few weeks ago, and I haven't really met anyone yet."

This time she did smile. She'd known from the first moment she'd spotted him in the store that he wasn't a town local, but she had thought that maybe he was just passing through to the local tourist destinations on the other side of the county. In a

community the size of this place, everyone pretty much knew everyone else in town was.

"Well now you've met me." She stuck out her hand. "Katie Carlisle."

As he accepted her outstretched hand and clasped it in his own, Katie felt a tingle of excitement run up her arm. "Robbie Longfeather."

"Welcome to town, Robbie."

"Thanks."

Forgetting for a second that they were standing in the middle of the card aisle, Katie squeezed Robbie's hand. As the older woman who had been looking at Christmas cards brushed past them, Katie reluctantly dropped the handsome stranger's hand.

"Well if you don't need a card for your wife or girlfriend, then maybe we should move to another section of cards."

At Robbie's confused look, Katie pointed toward the descriptive headers hanging over the racks of cards. "This is the selection for 'sweetheart' sentiments."

Despite his dark complexion, Katie could tell that Robbie was blushing.

"I don't usually buy that many cards," he said, looking down at the floor.

"Oh don't worry about it." Katie leaned in closer toward Robbie's side as if to divulge a secret, glad when he raised his

head to look at her. "Most men need help finding things in a store like this all the time." As the other shopper maneuvered back up the aisle again, Katie found herself pressed right up against Robbie's plaid shirt. Be still my heart, she silently thought. "Ah, what sort of occasion are you looking for a card for?"

"Hmmm?" Could he be as distracted as she was in such tight quarters? "Oh, sympathy, I guess."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She pushed herself away from his chest. Here he was trying to find a card for someone who had suffered the loss of a loved one, and she was making chit-chat and daydreaming. "Was it a sudden loss?" she asked, leading him around the stacks to the sympathy section in the next aisle.

"Sort of." He came to a stop only a couple of inches from where she stood, and she could feel the warmth of his breath against the top of her head.

"I'm so sorry." She needed to put some distance between them if she was going to be objective about this. Stepping a couple of inches away, she asked "Was it someone close?"

Robbie paused again. A sudden death at the holidays would be beyond awful, but Katie hoped her simple question hadn't churned up additional reminders of his pain all over again.

"I'll help in any way I can," she said trying not to lose herself in the depth of his eyes.

"It's for my little sister."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Katie felt like she'd just been kicked in the stomach. "How old was she?"

"My sister?"

Katie nodded.

"Oh, I guess she's about seventeen now."

Seventeen. And from the way he said it, it sounded like there was a gap between their ages. That meant that Robbie was probably in his late twenties. Oh, stop it, Katie, she mentally chided herself. You're trying to help this man, not pick him up.

What should she say? "And your move here and the new job wouldn't allow you make it home for the funeral?"

"Hmmm." Robbie was looking over the cards as they talked. "There wasn't a funeral."

No funeral? What sort of family traditions did they have in the community where this man came from?

At her puzzled look, Robbie put the card he was holding back in its slot and turned to face her. "What?"

"Nothing." Katie shook her head. Maybe she hadn't heard him right. "Your sister died and there wasn't a funeral?"

"My sister didn't die." Robbie pulled another card out and looked at it.

"But you just said it was for your sister."

"Yeah." He put that card back and selected another one.

"The card is for her."

"Your sister's okay."

"As much as can be expected for any teenager."

"Then why do you want a sympathy card for her?"

"Oh, man." A huge grin broke out on Robbie's face. "I'm so sorry. I guess I was paying too much attention to your..., ah, ...I mean I guess I wasn't paying too much attention to your questions."

Katie took a step back. He'd been looking at her the same way she'd been looking at him? This was amazing. This was incredible. Then that other customer pushed back up the aisle past them, loudly clearing her throat as she walked.

Robbie grabbed Katie's hand and pulled her closer to him. "Her cat died," he said in a hushed voice.

"Oh."

"She had him for almost eleven years."

"Oh." Katie smiled. "You know there's a whole section of cards for pets on the other side of the store." She reached out and grasped Robbie's arm. "C'mon."

Robbie laughed. "No, that's okay." He raised the small, flowery sympathy card he still held in his hand. "I think this one will do."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, I'm glad I could... help."

"You know, you could help me some more," Robbie said as he turned to lead the way down the aisle toward the Christmas cards.

"Sure," Katie answered, wondering what sort of cards he'd be comfortable sending - funny, religious, or generic. "I'm sure we can find just the right holiday cards, too."

Robbie laughed. "That's not exactly what I meant." He stopped and let Katie draw up alongside. "What I really need is to learn more about my new home town. I was thinking about dinner. You must know where the best restaurants are."

"I sure do," Katie said. "Dinner would be great, although you must realize that there really aren't that many places in town to choose from."

"Then I'll leave the choice of eatery to you." Robbie reached into his back pocket and pulled out a business card. "I've really got to get back to work now, but you could give me a call this afternoon to set it up."

Turning the card over in her hand, Katie realized that Robbie was the new engineer she'd read about in the local paper. Tongue tied, it was all she could do to croak out an okay.

As she watched, the tall, handsome stranger who had become her dinner date disappeared around the end cap display and headed toward the cash register at the front of the store.

Wow! Dinner. Something to look forward to and take the dullness out of another long afternoon.

"Excuse me."

It was the same older woman who had bumped her way past Katie and Robbie a few times already.

"Yes?"

"I could really use some help finding a birthday card for my nephew."

"Oh," Katie said, returning Robbie's wave as he pushed on the exit door. "I'm sorry, ma'am, but I don't work here."