

YOU, ME,
AND A

*Little Red
Dress*

CHERYL KRAMARCZYK
a Christmas short story

Kelly tapped the brake and released an exhale when the shiny black surface was merely wet and *not* dreaded black ice.

Nevertheless, she clenched the steering wheel, the red leather of her brand spankin' new gloves catching the twinkling white light of a passing lamp post. She spared a glance at the set jaw and hard stare in her passenger seat. "Didn't she meet your mom and sisters on Thanksgiving?"

"I guess meeting Gramps would have made it official." He ran a hand through his dark locks and leaned his head back.

A teen with a teetering stack of boxes stepped away from the UPS truck and Kelly pulled to a stop to let him cross. She tapped a red leather finger on the steering wheel and hummed to the chorus section floating from the back speakers. *For unto us a child is born ... Unto us ... A son is given ...*

She lifted a hand to the UPS guy and eased off the brake. "Hey, did you hear the Grace-Filled Choir's version of this song? Oh man, gave me goosebumps."

"I posted it on Facebook." His smirk lit up his eyes—a shine she hadn't seen for a long, long time. With a light chuckle, he laced his fingers in his lap. "So yeah, I heard it."

"Oh, right." She resumed humming for a few measures. *And the government shall be upon his shou-ou-ou-lders!*

The traffic light turned yellow as she approached the intersection, but she managed a glance at the street name. *Taylor. Mmm, two streets to go.*

"But you're sure she won't be there?"

"Positive." She glanced at him, her mouth drying at the sight of his pinched eyebrows. Squaring her shoulders, she turned her attention back to the narrow, two-way lane and cleared her throat. "Only current employees are invited to the company party."

"Unless she's accompanying someone."

She gave a high-pitched laugh and waved his words away. "Like who? Ralph from payroll?"

He settled back, his exhale audible.

“You’re gonna get that promotion, Ben.” She squinted at the street sign, half-obscured by garland. Her stomach muscles released some tension. *Polk Street*. One more to go. She hadn’t missed the turn—yet.

“Yeah. We just show our face and then skedaddle, right?”

She felt his eyes on her and could imagine the worry wrinkles in his brow. But she couldn’t miss the next street, so she kept her eyes on the road and nodded. “Yep. Then we skedaddle.”

From her periphery, his thumb tapped his knuckle to a beat other than the current score of *Handel’s Messiah*.

She punched the music off. “Relax. Fifteen minutes tops.”

“You better believe it.”

“And we’re a healthy twenty minutes late, so Mr. Kromwell will have already gotten settled in with a drink or two. A couple of handshakes and we’re good to go.”

“More than good.”

She pressed lightly on the brake as she approached the next street, flicking on the turn signal as she peeked at the street sign. Her heart seized. *Tyler Street?*

Fingering the side pocket of her purse at her feet, she slid out her phone. “I knew I should have printed the directions.”

“Next street’s Harrison. Almost there.”

She let her phone drop back into the pocket and straightened, her heart thrashing against her ribs. “Sorry. I was hoping you could take a load off by not driving, but instead ...” She groaned and she tightened her grip on the steering wheel. “I want you to enjoy yourself tonight, that’s all.”

“Thanks for driving, Kels. Really. I probably would have taken us in the opposite direction if I was behind the wheel.” He pointed to the upcoming traffic light. “At the big wreath, turn right.”

Just like that, the intersection looked familiar and she carefully guided the BMW down the winding lane toward the Marriot.

Now, to find a parking spot and Ben’s gorgeous, shiny black car will have arrived in one piece.

Ben sighed in the passenger seat. “Darlene came with me last year. We parked right there, on the corner spot.”

Kelly ran her tongue across her top teeth as she drove across the parking lot. The pavement was sprinkled with a single layer of snow and she should be more careful. Oh well. When an idea struck...

Ben launched upright. “Where are you going?” His voice ended on a sharp exhale.

She slid the BMW in the corner spot and cut the engine, handing back his keys. Her heart pounding faster than snare drums. “Making new memories.”

He stared at her, his bottom lip falling open.

She let herself out of the car. Okay. Parking in the exact spot as Ben had parked in with his now-ex was borderline rude, but he needed a push to get over her. He was almost there.

Except when he wasn't. Which could happen in an instant and it seemed to take him forever to drag himself out of the slump.

Well, not tonight. Her chin tilted higher and her eyelashes caught the drift of snow from a nearby tree.

Colorful lights had been scattered across the rows of bushes and circled up the trunk. Her breath escaped in a wisp of steam and she leaned back to squint at the inky black sky. The snow had stopped—thank goodness. Her updo was already falling apart without the extra precipitation. No stars to be seen. A pity. With the parking lot lights surrounding her, only the blinking red and green lights of an overhead plane could be seen.

But she knew the stars were up there, twinkling and shining bright. Just like Ben would be. Tonight, he'd have the time of his life. A promotion, maybe even a dance or two under the sparkling ballroom chandeliers.

“Fifteen minutes.” Ben stepped next to her and shoved his hands in his coat pockets.

She grabbed his arm and beamed. “Mr. Kromwell can't be far.”

But his feet stayed planted, his lips pressed together. Against the fluorescent lights, his cheeks were ghastly white.

She tugged on his arm. “It won’t even take fifteen minutes. Just show your face and we’re outa here.”

His gaze flickered to her, the skin bunched at the corners of his eyes. “Yeah. Okay.”

Her gut clenched, but she kept her grip on his arm as they crossed the parking lot. His superiors couldn’t see him with that defeated expression. What sort of impression would he make if he attended the company holiday party looking like a lost puppy?

The chill in her bones didn’t let up in the heated lobby. “*Making new memories.*” Her own words—which seemed poetic at the time—became her assignment.

And designing spreadsheets was what they did. Impression was everything, from layout to color scheme. All in the presentation.

Ben had been pining for the lead architect for weeks—until Darlene broke his heart a week ago. She hadn’t understood before, but now that she knew he had invited his fiancé to his family Christmas get-together and she had refused, he had started to doubt every task he took on. And then the utter rejection happened. She’d dumped him at the worst possible time, when final projects were turned in and budgets were set for the new year.

If Kelly knew anything, and she’d known Ben since her first day at Sheffield, Inc., he needed this fresh start.

But for Ben to seem remotely enthusiastic in the position, he had to get out of this funk.

He started toward the banquet hall, but she ground her heels in the soggy floor mat and tipped her chin in the opposite direction. “Coat check’s that way.”

“For what? We’ll just be picking them up.”

She stomped off the remnants of snow from her apple-red flats. “I’m not carrying your coat around.”

He glanced at the tree adorned behind him, his gaze circling across the cheerful lobby. “Man. Everything looks the same.”

Her ribs held her lungs hostage. She might need more than fifteen minutes to wipe away his frown.

It had been his idea originally to become buddies with the higher-ups, to show up at all company events, to get on every phone call. A plan he started months ago and was now making traction.

If they could connect his face to his application, he'd get a fair shot at the job. Ben had even gone ahead and prepared questions to ask at every meeting he attended, knowing his name would make it in the notes that way.

Kelly wouldn't allow two years of hard work be dashed away because a girl waited until the last second to tell her fiancé she wasn't really that interested in life with him.

"Guess you're right." He shrugged out of his coat, his broad shoulders rising and dropping in a sigh. "Shouldn't look like we're rushing in, huh?"

She met his hazel eyes. Dim, even in the glittery lobby. A familiar tune drifted from the speakers about a rejected reindeer with a too-bright nose.

Without answering, she unzipped her poufy cream-colored coat. The zipper snagged and she let out a quiet moan.

He stepped closer to her, his coat draped over his arm. "Huh."

Her cheeks heated and moisture collected at her armpits. Before he could kneel in front of her to help, she shook her head and took a step back. "I got it. I'll just..."

With another firm wriggle, the material gave way and she unzipped, peeling the coat off her shoulders. Grinning, she faced him.

As she had hoped, his eyes swept down to her shoes and gradually lifted to her face. A crooked smile crept up his mouth. "You're wearing red."

She lifted her arms, the coat dangling from her hand, and gave a quick spin. Then she curtsied. "I went on a spree." *Like, an hour ago. For tonight. For you.*

He perused her bright red wrap-around dress with pleated front. It cost her half her take-home pay, but she couldn't come in the typical black get-up she wore to every company party. Tonight was Ben's night, to snag the opportunity he deserved.

And, if she remembered right—and she had—he'd be wearing his flashy black suit and Christmas tie. The bright-red one with three shiny white, over-sized snowflakes.

It only made sense for his date to look the part. And besides, Ben—

A chill suddenly swept down her bare shoulders and she pressed her coat to her chest, suddenly wishing for a shawl over the cinchy red straps.

Who was she kidding? Last year, she'd gone to the department store, too, wanting to find just the thing to attract Ben's attention. But why purchase anything when the beautiful Darlene with her stylish outfits had been on Ben's arm all evening? He probably didn't even know she showed up last year.

Or that she had sat at a table with a plastic cup of Sprite all night, watching him whisk Darlene across the room to meet his colleagues.

His *other* colleagues. A girl from marketing didn't make the cut.

Why had she expected tonight to be any different?

She shifted her weight, biting down on her bottom lip. "Um, you know what? We can keep our—"

"New memories, huh?" He tilted his head, scrunching his nose. "I'm seeing that."

He tugged her coat from her clenched grip and turned on his heel, leaving her in the center of the lobby, the draft from the entrance sweeping goosebumps down her arms.

She started for the banquet hall. Her spot at the table was probably available and she'd plop down and wait the fifteen minutes while he greeted his future bosses.

"Where are you going in a hurry?" Ben snagged her arm right as she was about to take off. His hand was warm as he tucked her arm into the crook of his elbow. "You did this for me, huh? Red is the most noticeable color and Mr. Kromwell is bound to remember me now." Ben laughed and pressed her against him.

"I hadn't thought—" She glanced at him and caught his grin, his hazel eyes glowing. Heat bloomed on her cheeks. "Absolutely. That job is yours."

"Good call, Kels. I owe you." He scanned her face for a moment and then his gaze darted off hers to scan the room. "Think we should grab a drink? You know, look like we're enjoying ourselves?"

She managed a smile, chiding herself. Tonight wasn't about *her* and her little crush on him. This was all about Ben and everything he aspired to. Everything he deserved.

Blinking back tears, she squared her shoulders. A little red dress wouldn't make him suddenly notice her.

"Yes. A drink." *Or something stronger than Coca-Cola products.* And then she quickly added, "Might as well."

They strolled arm-in-arm to the bar. Leaning an elbow against the counter, he took a sip of Sprite. "See Kromwell?"

"Umm..." Her gaze had hardly moved across the room when a shiver shot up her spine at the sight of the blonde. Another furtive glance but she didn't see Mr. Kromwell. And now it didn't matter. A certain someone would soon deflate his dreams. Again.

Unless Kelly stopped it.

She took his cup and tossed in a garbage can. "Dance with me."

"What?" He staggered forward as she yanked at his arm.

"Get some pink in your cheeks, maybe a bit of sweat on your brow."

He winced. "You know, I don't think we need to appear to have *that* much fun here. How about we...?"

She turned him around, facing her and set his hand on her hip. She swayed back and forth, suddenly remembering she had two left feet. "Aww, come on. New memories, right?"

He lifted his eyebrows. "This isn't a slow song."

She put his other hand on her shoulder, the warmth of his hand seeping into her arm. Passing a glance over his shoulder. She'd lost the blonde. Probably not for long. Her attention dragged back to Ben and she forced her lips to spread in a somewhat convincing smile. "Very memorable."

"To who?" He looked over his shoulder, but she touched his cheek, pulling him back. Then steered him to the right.

"Kels?" He peered at her. "What's going on? Do you see Kromwell?" Then his eyes went wide. "Is he looking at us—*watching* us?"

She pressed her lips together, not caring to lie, but not able to tell him the truth. Closing the gap between them, she let out a sigh as she spotted the woman in a skimpy red dress slip back into the crowd.

Darlene had seen Ben too. What was she up to?

Ben's hand on her waist relaxed, although the speakers indeed blared *Jingle Bell Rock*. "You're right. These lights are already making me boil. But I doubt I'll be out of breath at this rate."

"You'll get that job, Ben."

He swallowed hard. A shoulder lifted in a half-shrug.

Nope. Not happening. Tonight wouldn't be ruined—not by Darlene's intervention or Ben's own undoing.

"Remember that opportunity on the East side of town? Four high rises, concrete jungle?" Words dropped from her lips as fast as they came to mind. Whatever it took to remind him, to wake him up the dreams he had pined for not so long ago. To wake up the man who had captured her heart so long ago, the man she believed in. "I read your proposal on that—it was genius."

"Oh, that." His hand at her waist dropped and he grimaced. "I took that on to impress Darlene's father, I was never really interested in—"

"For not being interested, your ideas were solid. If only Kromwell could see it."

His feet halted, a muscle in his jaw clenched. "It's a half of a proposal. I tried to pick it up today and couldn't." He shook his head. "Not even sure what I was thinking."

Her pulse raced. He couldn't remember? Well, she could!

She stepped closer and put both arms around his neck, keeping her voice low. "I haven't danced in forever."

"I know why." He grimaced and pulled away to look at his shiny dress shoes, now dented from her high heel digging into his big toe.

She gave him a sultry smile. "Doesn't mean I don't miss it."

He rolled his eyes and drew her into his arms again. "You were saying Kromwell missed something. Mind to share?"

Her chest muscles tightened with anticipation. This was her opportunity. And for the first time, Ben had opened the door. "You were thinking of the community there. To commercial four buildings together and set urban gardens in the center."

"There's already a plot in place. That wasn't my idea."

"And to beef up security, a shared system, so not just one building would be secure, but would share the expense for the benefit of all."

He squinted as he tried to recall. Good thing, too, because that had been the extent of her intel on the project. “Nothing was dedicated at the time. Didn’t make sense for only one building to pay an arm and a leg, while the other three went without.”

A smile twitched on the corners of her lips. *Welcome back, Ben.* “Another plus for the community was the drop-box for books. Pure brilliance.”

He nodded, his eyes softening. His hand went back to her waist and he resumed a gentle sway as Elvis crooned *Blue Christmas*. “That idea came on when I took a visit down there.”

Her chest warmed, her fingertips that were grazing the edges of his hair startled to tingle. She dredged up a conversation they’d had at the cooler one day. “You mentioned people are willing to help, if only there were funds for them to contribute. Had that been part of it?”

“Ah, I did say that. Several other community endeavors discovered just that. I might have sited one or two of my favorites resources.”

She let go of a laugh, the last of her reserves slipping away. Her crush on the innovative creator had become more than that. “Just one or two? I tell you: you’re a genius.”

“You keep saying that.” He grinned, his eyes shining with more green than brown. “How long have you had a thing for me?”

His forehead glistened from the warm bodies surrounding him, but she was sure the pink on his cheeks were from the fire that had relit inside him. His hand on her side sent a buzz through her belly and Kelly’s breath caught in her chest. “What did you say?”

“You heard me. How long?” He pressed her closer to him as they swayed to a tune only they could hear. “Everything you’re saying... I remember now how I had to stop working on it three weeks ago because I didn’t have authority to get permits. That was one of the reasons I applied for the job as lead.”

He bit on his bottom lip and his gaze drifted off her, but his hand on the back of her head drew her to his shoulder. As she rested her head on his blazer, she could just about hear the gears turn in his mind. “I was tired of selling my ideas to my bosses, of projects left uncompleted because a superior couldn’t see. So, tonight, what if I...?” His

voice trailed. When she lifted her head to look at him, a flame lit his eyes. “What if I pitch to Kromwell tonight? Spawn new life into what I’ve begun?”

The buzz spiraled up her chest, cascading across her neck. She had hoped that he would walk into the office one day and decide to do just that. For his ideas to take root, to get a plan off his desk and on the ground—with or without a new job.

Their noses were hardly two inches apart, his minty breath tickled her cheeks.

She couldn’t catch her breath. Two and a half years ago, when she’d first met, she’d seen him with this fire in his eyes and knew he had this in him, this gusto to get deals from his head to the city. To impact societies, make a difference. All he needed was someone to cheer him on.

And she had, for so long, except he hadn’t noticed. Until this instant.

His breathing became faster and heavier as the idea took on speed. “Tonight. I’ll just walk up to him and tell him—”

It had only taken half a second but she knew the instant he saw his ex. His eyes bounced off hers for a brief glance, but then his stare narrowed on the crowd behind her. Soon after, the color drained from his cheeks and the corners of his lips drooped.

She leaned up and surrounded his lips with her own.

He pulled away. “What are you—”

“You asked me how long. I’m trying to tell you.” And she kissed him again. This time passionately, hungrily. If he missed this opportunity now, if he let himself derail ... *Please, don’t quit. Not now.* Cradling his face with her palms, she deepened the kiss.

His voice had turned raspy as he pulled away gently. “That long, huh?”

“You’ve got this, Ben.” When she let go, she centered her gaze on him. “Don’t let Darlene ruin this for you.” Her throat stung with emotion. “She never saw how far you could go, how brilliant you are. This is *your* night. She can’t steal that from you.”

His eyebrows lifted, wrinkles creasing his forehead. All humor gone, she had gotten his attention. And he was grasping it. Finally, *finally*, he was ready to take the leap.

“I’ve wanted you to go to Kromwell months ago...” Her voice shook, realizing for the first time he was listening to her. And something else, too, but she didn’t have the bandwidth at the moment to understand it.

She looked away, her vision blurry. “You had worked so hard on the Dengies’ project and they spoiled it, turning a parking lot into a gymnasium ...”

“Did you say Dengies? How did you find out about that?” He touched her chin. “That was the first project I took on—turned my scraps of paper into a proposal on a hunch. I still have it, in fact. One of my favorites—but yeah, they...”

Swallowing, he looked away. Most probably his gaze falling back on a blonde, laughing too loudly with a colleague who had been fooled into bringing her.

“It’s not fair they take my work and butcher it.” His words held an edge. And she realized she had been wrong. He might have retraced his gaze to his ex but he wasn’t giving up. When he looked back at her, his expression had hardened, determination rippled in his eyes. “I’d had about enough of the guys above me throwing *my* ideas out of the window for cheaper, less effective ones.”

He drew her hands from his face and tightened his grip on her fingers. He leaned closer to her, their noses nearly bumping. “If only I had the authority to do something about it. For months it’s what I wanted—and tonight, with you, a girl who happens to like me a whole lot.” The corner of his lips curled up. “We’re in the business of making new memories, right?”

She nodded, words clogged in her throat, a band around her chest refusing to let her lungs inflate.

He cocked his chin to the right. “Kromwell will be seated with the other executives. Back there.”

She followed his gaze off the dance floor, to the corner where appetizers had been set up. Her tongue loosened. “I’ll find a seat and—”

“What? And miss this?” He threaded his fingers through her and weaving around the dancers with her in tow. “Tonight you stay by my side.”

“Oh, I forgot.” She forced a laugh. “Red is memorable.”

He stopped and she stumbled into his chest. His lips formed into a full smile. “If you want this as much as I do—and I’m thinking you do—you deserve to see the moment when Kromwell accepts it.”

“But the job?”

His eyes twinkled, reflecting the white lights surrounding them. “I don’t need a promotion to get permits. Just need allowance.” Turning serious, he brushed his lips against her cheek, setting her face on fire. “I’ll keep my sights set on that job. It’s got my name on it.”

She pressed a hand on his arm. Her breath returned with a whoosh. Along with air, she found a smile to match his. “It does.”

“Come on.” He winked at her, pulling her alongside him. “Let me show you how it’s done.”

The sudden chill as her dress billowed around her thighs in the rush across the room was soon replaced with heat charging through her as a handshake became a promise. And her color choice hadn’t influenced the night one way or the other—but sure made the night one she would never forget.

Dear Reader,

Thanks for reading Kelly and Ben's sweet Christmas short story romance! The idea of someone needing a little bit of encouragement always excites me. How much more in a cutesy romance?! 😊 I hope you enjoyed this little tale!

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