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Opening extract from
My True Love Gave to Me

Written by
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David Levithan and others**

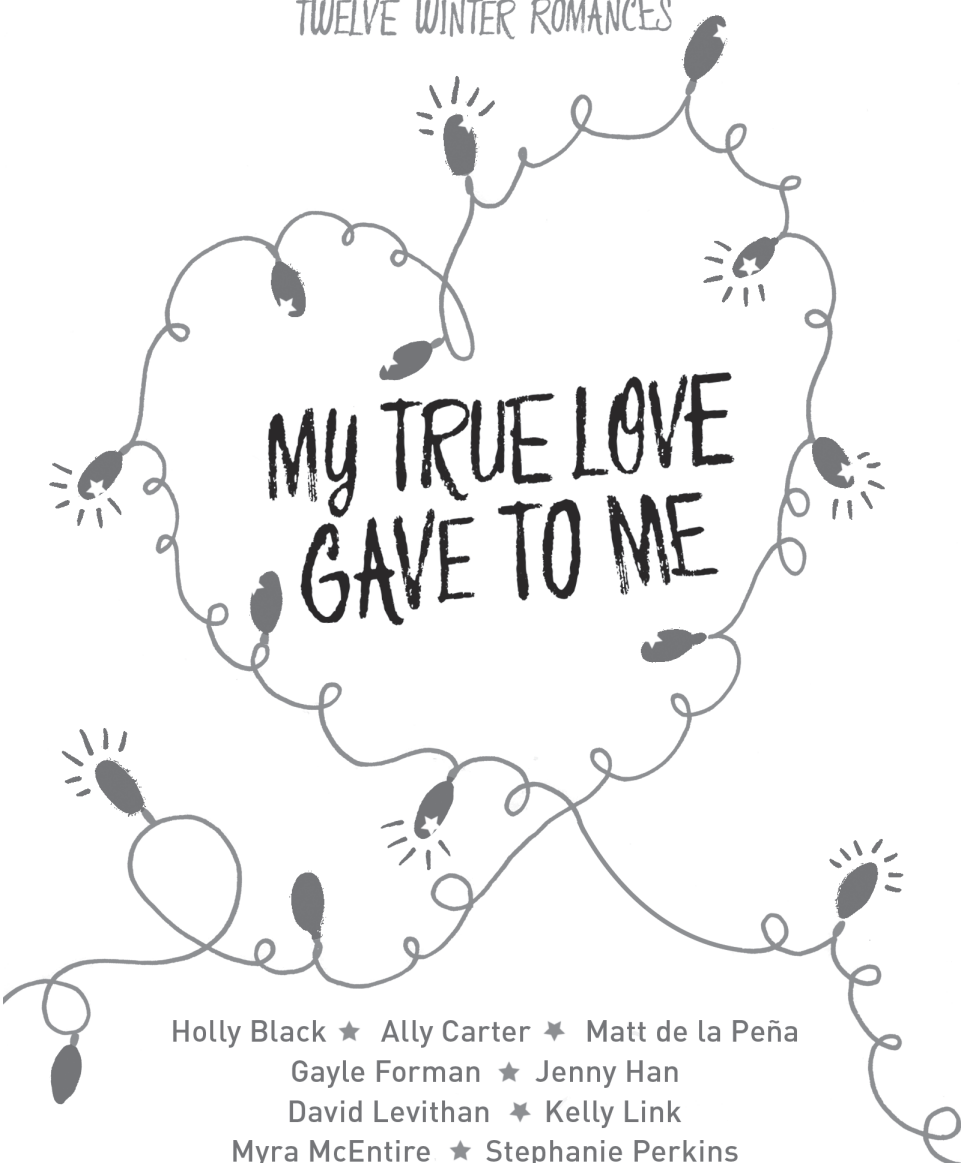
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TWELVE WINTER ROMANCES



MY TRUE LOVE
GAVE TO ME

Holly Black ★ Ally Carter ★ Matt de la Peña
Gayle Forman ★ Jenny Han
David Levithan ★ Kelly Link
Myra McEntire ★ Stephanie Perkins
Rainbow Rowell ★ Laini Taylor ★ Kiersten White

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IT'S A YULETIDE MIRACLE, CHARLIE BROWN

Stephanie Perkins

Marigold loved this Christmas tree lot. It was brighter—and maybe even *warmer*—than her mother's apartment, for one thing. Fires crackled inside metal drums. Strings of bare bulbs crisscrossed overhead. And, beside the entrance, there was a giant plastic snowman that glowed electric orange. Its pipe gave off real puffs of smoke.

She loved the husky green scent of the Fraser firs and the *crinkle crunch* of their shavings underfoot. She loved the flannel-shirted men, hefting the trees on top of station wagons and sedans, tying them down with twine pulled straight from their pockets. She loved the makeshift wooden shack with its noisy old cash register. The shack's walls were bedecked with swags and wreaths, and its rooftop dripped with clear-berried mistletoe like icicles. And she especially loved the search for the perfect tree.

Too tall, too short, too fat, too skinny. Just right.

Marigold Moon Ling's family had been coming here for years, for as long as she could remember. But this year, Marigold had been coming here alone. Frequently. For an entire month. Because how do you ask a complete stranger for a completely strange favor? She'd been wrestling this question since Black Friday, and she had yet to discover a suitable answer. Now she was out of time. The solstice was tomorrow, so Marigold had to act tonight.

Marigold was here . . . for a boy.

God. That sounded bad, even in her head.

But she wasn't here because she *liked* him, this boy who sold Christmas trees, she was here because she *needed* something from him.

Yes, he was cute. That had to be acknowledged. There was no getting around it, the boy was an attractive male specimen. He simply wasn't her usual type. He was . . . *brawny*. Lugging around trees all day gave one a certain amount of defined musculature. Marigold liked guys who were interested in artsier, more *indoor* activities. Reading the complete works of Kurt Vonnegut. Maintaining a respected webcomic. Playing the stand-up bass. Hell, even playing video games. These were activities that tended to lead to bodies that were pudgy or scrawny, so these were the bodies that Marigold tended to like.

However, this Christmas Tree Lot Boy possessed something that the other boys all lacked. Something she needed that only he could provide.

She needed his voice.

The first time she heard it, she was cutting through the parking lot that lay between her apartment and the bus stop. Every holiday season, Drummond Family Trees ("Family Owned and Operated Since 1964") took up residence in the northeastern corner of the lot, which belonged to an Ingles grocery store. It was the most popular tree-buying destination in Asheville. Lots were everywhere in the mountains of North Carolina—this was Christmas-tree-farm country, after all—so to distin-

guish themselves, the Drummonds offered friendliness and tradition and atmosphere. And free organic hot apple cider.

Asheville loved anything organic. It was that type of town.

The boy's voice had stopped Marigold cold. He was unloading slim, straitjacketed trees from the back of a truck and shouting instructions at another employee. Marigold crouched behind a parked minivan and peered over its hood like a bad spy. She was shocked at his youth. He looked to be about her age, but the voice issuing from him was spectacularly age-inappropriate. Deep, confident, and sardonic. It seemed far too powerful for his body. Its cadence was weary and dismissive, yet somehow a remarkable amount of warmth and humor underlay the whole thing.

It was a good voice. A *cool* voice.

And it was the exact missing piece to her current project.

Marigold made comedic animated short films. She'd been making them for herself, for fun, since middle school, so by the time she launched an official YouTube channel last year—her senior year of high school—she had the practice and talent to catch the attention of thousands of subscribers. She was currently trying to catch the attention of one of the many animation studios down in Atlanta.

She did most of the voices herself, getting additional help from her friends (last year) or her coworkers at her mother's restaurant (this year). But this film . . . it was important. It would be her mother's winter solstice present, *and* her ride out of town. Marigold was cracking. She didn't know how much longer she could live here.

She needed this boy's help, and she needed it now.

It was an unusually blustery night. Marigold searched between the trees—free organic hot apple cider clutched between her hands, she was not immune to its lure—and strained her ears over the sounds of laughing children and roaring chain saws. Under any other context, this combination would be alarming. Here, it was positively merry. Or it would've been, had her stomach not already been churning with horror-movie-like dread.

“Can I help you with anything?”

There. In the far corner. Marigold couldn't hear the customer's reply, but the boy's follow-up said enough. “No problem. Just flag any of us down when you're ready.”

She barreled toward his voice, knowing that the only way this would happen would be to place herself before him with as much speed as possible, so they'd be forced to interact. Cowardly, yes. But it was the truth. She hurried through a row of seven-footers, recently cut and plump with healthy needles. The boy rounded the corner first.

She almost smacked into his chest.

The boy startled. And then he saw her face, and he startled again. “You've been here before.”

Now it was Marigold's turn to be surprised.

“That hair.” He nodded at the thick, stylish braid that she wore like a headband. The rest of her coal-black hair was pinned up, too. “I'd recognize it anywhere.”

It was true that it was her signature look. A sexy twenty-something with an eyebrow scar had once told her it looked cute. She *felt* cute in it. She did not feel so cute in this moment. She felt like someone who was about to upchuck.

“You know,” he said over her silence, “most people only have to buy a tree once.”

“I live over there.” Marigold pointed at the apartment complex next door. “And I catch the bus over there.” She pointed at the street beside the grocery store.

“Ah. Then I won't stand in your way.” Though he didn't move.

“I'm not going to the bus stop.”

“So . . . you *are* buying a tree?” He looked at her as if she were somehow askew. But at least he didn't seem frustrated. His brown eyes and brown hair were as warm as chestnuts. He was even larger up close, his arms and chest even broader. He was wearing a red plaid flannel shirt with the sleeves rolled up, the uniform of Drummond Family Trees.

Was he a Drummond or a seasonal hire?

It wasn't that Marigold didn't want a tree. She did. She really, really did. But her mother was saving for a new house, and she was saving for an apartment of her own in Atlanta. Her brain scanned for another way around this situation. She needed time to suss him out—and time to show him that she was a totally normal human being—before asking him the scary question. Unfortunately, a tree seemed to be her only option.

“Yes,” she said. “Well, *maybe*.” Better to qualify that now. “I was wondering if you guys had any . . . you know. Charlie Browns?”

The moment she asked it, she felt sheepish and ashamed. And then further ashamed for *feeling* ashamed. But the boy broke into an unexpected grin. He took off, and Marigold hurried after him. He led her to a gathering of pint-size trees near the register. They came up to her knees.

“They're so . . . short.” It was hard not to sound disappointed.

“I'm sorry,” he said. “But did you or did you not ask me for the *Peanuts* special?”

A thrill went through her, hearing his voice again at such a close range. Superior and aloof, but definitely with that paradoxical underpinning of friendly amusement. It probably allowed him to get away with saying all sorts of rude things.

Marigold could play this game.

“Charlie Brown's tree was pathetic,” she said, “but it was almost as tall as he was.”

“Yeah. And he was short.”

Marigold couldn't help cracking a smile. “How about something taller . . . but with a large, unsightly, unsalable hole? Do you have anything like that?”

The boy's eyes twinkled. “All of our trees are salable.”

“Surely you have at least *one* ugly tree.”

He spread out his arms. “Do you see any ugly trees?”

“No. That’s why I’m asking you where they are.”

The boy grinned—a slow, foxlike grin—and Marigold sensed that he was pleased to be verbally caught. “Yeah. Okay. Maybe we have something over here. *Maybe*.”

He strode back into the trees and led her down the row beside the chain-link fence. They stopped before a tree that was shorter than him but taller than her. Exactly in between. “This one’s been sitting on the lot for a few days. It has a sizable hole down here”—he picked it up and turned it, so its backside now faced forward—“and then this other one up here. But you could put them against a wall—”

“Like you guys did?”

He gave her another mischievous smile. “And it would still look full to anyone inside your home.”

A boisterous, chatty family wandered the row beside them—a mother, a father, and a young girl. The girl pointed at the tallest tree on the lot. It towered above everything else, a twenty-footer, at least. “Can we get *that* one?” she asked.

Her parents laughed. “We’d need a much bigger living room,” her mom said.

“Do people *own* living rooms that big?”

“Some people,” her dad said.

“When I grow up, I’m gonna have one that big, so I can buy the tallest tree here every year.”

The words pierced through the air to stab Marigold in the heart. Memories of her own childhood here—of that exact same proclamation to her father—flooded her system. Last year had been the first year that her family hadn’t purchased a tree. Melancholia blossomed into longing as Marigold realized . . . *she wanted one*. Desperately. She touched the tall Charlie Brown, letting her fingers fan down its boughs.

“I *do* like it. . . .” She turned over the paper card attached to the tree and winced.

“Oh, that’s the old price,” the boy said. “I could knock off ten bucks.”