

Heartbeats – Shortcut to Romance Sample

By Ann Herrick

“... and it’s not due for six weeks.” Ms. Remail clanked her bracelets with a wave of her hand. “So you don’t have to start *working* on the paper right away. Just start *thinking* about it. And, of course, read your assigned book.”

I moaned to myself. As if I wanted to think about a major assignment on the weekend before Valentine’s Day.

“Also,” Ms. Remail added a bit too cheerily, “you might want to start consulting with your partner. On an informal basis, of course.”

I moaned again. Out loud this time. Fortunately, I was drowned out by the bell. As I gathered my books, I glanced at Colt Blair, the partner I’d been assigned to work with on a paper about *Pride and Prejudice*. Now there was a combination. Farmboy Colt, with his old yellow dog and dented blue pickup, and Jane Austen’s romantic 19th century novel.

I mean, I knew that my living in a Victorian house in the center of Alder, Oregon didn’t exactly make me a sophisticated cosmopolitan. But it sure beat living on a farm somewhere on the outskirts of town. Colt had moved here at the beginning of the school year and I’d heard that he thought Alder, population 19,231, was “too big.”

Still, there was no arguing with Ms. Remail about partners or topics. She’d made that clear when she made the assignment.

Colt was so quiet, I was sure he’d never go looking for me to talk about working together. I scanned the hallway. His head of thick black hair stuck up several inches above most everyone else’s, so he was easy to spot.

I wanted to avoid him. Nothing personal. I just had better things to do than working on our assignment this weekend. Besides, I’d already read the book last summer just because I liked anything by Jane Austen. So I’d have to wait for Colt to read it anyway.

Suddenly Colt saw me, caught up and touched my sleeve. He shouted to be heard in the hallway as noisy as falling barbells. “Becca, we need to talk!” He stepped back against a locker and pulled me aside

I craned my neck to look up at a craggy sort of face that was already showing signs of becoming leathery. Bright blue eyes and amazingly white teeth almost jumped off his face in contrast. With my light brown hair and eyes and pale complexion I felt kind of blah in comparison.

I planned my pre-emptive strike. “I think we’ll need to read the book before we do anything. So next week is probably soon enough for us to start working on our assignment.”

“Well, sure,” said Colt. Only he pronounced it “shore.” “But, you see, I’ve already read—”

“I really have to run, Colt,” I said quickly, making a big deal of checking the time. “I’ll talk to you next week, after—” I almost said Valentine’s Day. But I didn’t want to sound too ... unscholarly. “After school.”

Colt rubbed his sharply squared-off jaw. “But—”

“I’ll miss my ride,” I said, already turning and heading down the hall. “I’ll talk to you next week!” I ran outside and jumped in Alicia’s car. She would never leave without me. But Colt didn’t know that.

“Hurry,” I said. “I need to get out of here before Colt sees me.”

“And hello to you too, Becca,” Alicia said as she pulled out of the parking lot.

“Hi,” I said, and then explained the circumstances.

“So,” Alicia said as she slowly pulled away from the school. “Your big plans for this weekend are ...?”

“Making a Special Delivery Valentine for Todd Cole. *Remember?*” Every year the French Club raised money by delivering valentines, from anyone to anyone, anonymously, for fifty cents a card. For fifty cents more, they’d make a card for you. But I wanted to create my own. Fancy and romantic and poetic enough to grab Todd Cole’s attention. And after he asked around school what girl could possibly have sent him such a completely magnificent card, I’d tell him. And he’d fall as hard for me as I had for him.

Alicia sighed. “Give it up, Becca. Todd is the handsomest, most popular guy in the senior class. He isn’t even going to notice a card from some lowly junior.”

It was my turn to sigh. “He won’t know it’s from a ‘lowly junior.’ He’ll just know it’s from someone who is his soul mate. Someone who is as poetic as he is. Someone he’ll be just dying to meet.”

“If you say so.”

Alicia was about as romantic as eggplant.

That night after supper I went straight to my room. I pulled out my yellow lined pad of paper and my favorite Number Two pencil to work on the poem I would put in my valentine to Todd. I loved the sound and feel of the pencil lead moving across the paper and found that inspired me way more any other method of writing.

Trouble was, my hand was not moving. That's because my brain was not clicking. What exactly was it about Todd that made us soul mates?

I tried to think. But the more I thought the emptier the blank page of paper in front of me looked. What was wrong? Todd was gorgeous. I'd had a thing for him for months. Why couldn't I think of something to write? What was stopping me?

Finally, it hit me. Writer's block! I'd heard of it, but I'd never experienced it before. Frankly, I'd never exactly believed it existed before. I'd thought it was just an excuse. But now ... now! My mind was blank! As blank as the yellow-lined paper. It had to be writer's block.

Maybe if I started making the valentine itself, it would free my mind. I tossed aside my pencil and paper and ran to the pantry. I pulled out my box of art supplies and found ... nothing! My lace doilies. My silvery foil. My red construction paper. Gone! All gone!

"Randolph!" I shouted as I stormed down the hall toward my brother's room. I pounded on his door, then barged right in. "What have you done with my supplies for—eeeeek!"

All over his room were the remnants of my carefully chosen valentine supplies.

"Oh, was that your stuff?" Randy asked in the totally-unconcerned way only an eight-year-old could express. He picked up a wrinkled, lopsided red heart raggedly decorated with silvery foil and trimmed with portions of a torn lace doily. "I made this for my teacher. Pretty neat, huh?"

"Randolph," I said through clenched teeth. "Those are *my* valentine supplies. I went all the way into Salem to get them. I was saving them for a very special card."

"Oh." Randy lowered his eyes and looked truly apologetic. "I'm sorry." Then he brightened. "I know! We can go into Salem tomorrow." He ran over to his desk and picked up the old candy box he used for a bank. "I'll buy you more!"

Someday, I knew, Randy would reach the ripe old age of nine and turn into the typical completely bratty kid brother. But now he was still so ... sincere. So ... nice. "Yeah, if Mom'll let me borrow the car, we could do that."

“Neat!” said Randy. He opened the candy box and started counting out his money.

I knew I’d have to pay for most of the stuff. But if he wanted to chip in, that was okay. I knew he’d genuinely get a thrill out of it.

I told Mom about the supplies and asked about the car. She said the usual. *Yes, as long as it’s okay with your father.* And he said the usual. *Well, as long as your mother said yes.*

So, since I was having writer’s block anyway, I went to bed. I figured a good night’s sleep would free up my brain and clear up my writer’s block. Surely Saturday I’d think of plenty of romantic, soul mate-type stuff I could write to Todd.

The next morning I slapped my hand over my alarm clock. But it kept ringing. I sat up and realized it was the phone. I answered with a groggy, “Hello?”

“Hi, there, Becca! It’s Colt. I thought today would be a good day to get an early start on our assignment. What with the snow and all, it’d be a good day to be inside.”

“Snow?” It almost never snowed down on the flats in Alder. I looked out my window and rubbed my eyes. Sure enough, there were a couple inches on the ground—and it was still snowing! I’d have to get going before it got too bad or I’d never get to Salem. But I said to Colt, “Snow, what’s a little snow? Sorry, I’ve got plans today. But I’ll talk to you next week. Really. Bye!”

I didn’t exactly hang up on Colt. But I didn’t wait for him to say “goodbye” either.

I rushed out to the kitchen to grab a bite to eat and almost ran over Randy, who was standing next to the counter making toast.

“Hey! Did you see the snow?” he asked.

“Yes, and if we’re going to make it into Salem, we have to get going. Now!”

“Okay.” Randy grabbed the toast from the toaster, buttered one piece, handed it to me, and smothered the other piece under peanut butter, jam and mashed banana. “I’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

That was five minutes faster than I was ready. Mom and Dad weren’t up by the time we were set to leave—thank goodness. I’m not sure they would have let me go if they knew it was snowing. But the highway would be plowed and sanded, so I figured it’d be no big deal.

As Randy and I piled into the car I said, “I don’t want to be gone too long. I have stuff I need to do today.”

I pulled out of the driveway and tested my braking skills. Pump, pump, pump. Worked fine. We were on our way.

The going was kind of slow. The snow come down harder and the wind picked up. "I wish we'd get to the highway," I said. "Then we could make some time."

"Take the shortcut at the next intersection," said Randy.

"The shortcut?" I thought for a second, then I remembered. I used to go horseback riding at a stable out that way, until the owners retired. The road circled around the town and avoided all the stop signs. As I recalled, it was faster by at least ten minutes. So I turned off at the next intersection.

Trouble was, I'd forgotten how narrow and winding the shortcut was. The area of farms and the fields offered no protection from the wind. Snow blew across the road and formed drifts.

Suddenly Randy screamed, "Look out!"

A huge pickup truck roared around a curve.

I skidded and swerved and slid off the road right into a ditch as the truck disappeared in my rear-view mirror.

I tried to pull out. The wheels spun. We were going nowhere.

"Are we stuck?" Randy asked.

"Sure looks that way," I said. "I'll try giving the car a push."

I stepped out into the snow. I hadn't worn boots because I hadn't thought I'd be walking in the snow. I'd figured I'd go right from the parking garage into the store and back. The icy cold oozed into my shoe as I stepped into a snowdrift. Just walking to the back of the car, my toes were already icy.

I pushed and pushed, and pushed again. I felt my face go as white as the snow. The car didn't budge.

I got back in the car.

"So, what are we going to do?" Randy asked, more out of curiosity than any kind of fear.

I was the one with an icy ball in the pit of my stomach. We hadn't seen anyone except the person in the truck. How long would it be before someone else came along? I looked around. There was a mailbox just ahead. Where there was a mailbox, there must be a house, even it was set so far back off the road that I couldn't see it. "What I am going to do," I said, "is walk to a house and find some help. Maybe I can call for a tow truck."

I started to open the door. Randy grabbed my arm. “Wait! I’m going with you.”

“No point in both of us getting cold and wet,” I said.

“I’ll be fine!” Randy said with a huge smile. Then he added quietly, “Besides, what would I do if you didn’t make it back?”

“Let’s not even think about that!” I grabbed Randy’s hand. The snow fell faster. The flakes grew fatter. The wind screamed. I wondered if we’d even be able to see to find the house. But sitting in the car, running out of gas and freezing didn’t seem like a better option.

We reached the mailbox and found the opening in the fence where there must’ve been a driveway. Trouble was, the snow was so thick we couldn’t see the driveway. I imagined us walking in circles and being found, frozen, in some bean field.

A few moments later, I had to beat back the fear that being lost in the storm was more than just my imagination.

“Can you see a house?” Randy shouted.

“No. I mean, not yet,” I yelled back. My feet felt like slabs of ice. Lost, in my own hometown. If it weren’t so pathetic, it’d be funny.

Suddenly Randy slipped and almost pulled me down with him. “Ow, my ankle!” Randy cried. “I twisted it.”

“Come on,” I shouted, “lean on me.” But Randy could hardly walk. His leg kept buckling. I was ready to give in to full-fledged panic.

Then a loud bark almost scared me out of my clothes. A big yellow dog stood inches in front of us. It barked and barked and barked some more. But not at us. More like *to* someone. More like Lassie telling someone Timmy was in the well from the old TV series that popped up once in a while.

“What is it, Maggie?” said a deep voice. “What’s out there, girl?”

Maggie pointed at me and Randy and barked.

I saw a pair of cowboy boots, jeans, a heavy jacket, and a leathery face topped off by a black cowboy hat.

Amazon: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B06XDLYPW8/>