

Winter's Journey

By Kathryn Meyer Griffith

A suspenseful romance and murder mystery

For my husband, Russell, who once also traveled the snowy roads in a big truck.

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Chapter 1

The ringing phone jolted her awake. Reaching for the receiver in the dark, she glanced at the alarm clock and inched up in the bed until she was sitting. Who'd be calling her at 6:30 in the morning?

"Hello?"

"Is this Loretta Brennan?" a genial, female, and businesslike voice asked.

"Yes," she answered, still half asleep.

"This is National Carriers. The trucking company?"

"Yes, I know who you are."

"We were given your name by one of our regular drivers, Chad Amory, as someone dependable we could call on at the last minute. He said you owned your own truck. That you were an excellent driver. Chad was supposed to take a load of oranges to Cheyenne, Wyoming, today for us but something personal came up and he can't do it. Would you be interested?"

"Oranges to Cheyenne...today?" She woke up in a hurry. National Carriers was a large company with an exceptional reputation for paying their drivers good money as well as picking up the tabs for permit fees, insurance, tolls, and best of all, cutting their people per diem expense checks on the road. All of which was pretty rare these days.

This could be her big break. She'd been praying to get on with a company like National Carriers for months, but they had plenty of owner-operators and could pick and choose their drivers. And until now they hadn't chosen her.

Then she remembered the weather forecast from the night before. "Isn't there supposed to be a snowstorm up that way in the next few days?" The news had said it was going to be bad. Rain. Ice. Lots of snow. Smart drivers wouldn't risk their lives on icy roads, but those drivers probably didn't have a huge balloon payment due on their trucks in two weeks like she did, or a mortgage payment coming up soon. Her local routes wouldn't pay enough to keep her from losing her truck and the house.

"So they say. But, being oranges, the load has a tight deadline, and it has to go today."

"What's the deadline?"

"They need to be there by Friday," the woman said.

Loretta whistled under her breath. Wyoming was three states away. Getting there by Friday with the approaching storm was close to impossible. Just accepting the job would make her wonder if she were in her right mind.

"It's top pay, though, and there's a big bonus if you get it there on time." The woman rattled off a couple of amazing dollar amounts and Loretta's heart raced. The pay and the bonus would not only pay off her bank loan and her mortgage but give her living expenses for the next month. After the run she could even afford to take a week off to be with her daughter, Tessa. It was almost worth the risk.

Besides, there was no other way she could get the kind of money she desperately needed in the next fourteen days.

No, it's too dangerous. Inwardly she gasped, realizing the route was also the same one her husband, Jed, had taken that last time.

She took a deep breath. There was no way she could drive through a blizzard on the same roads—the same time of year—that her husband had died on. Yet, she really had to have that money or she'd lose everything she and Jed had worked so long and hard for. She needed this chance with National Carriers. Getting on with that company could change her life. It meant security and a good future.

Loretta paused for so long, fighting a silent battle of what she should do, that the woman on the other end of the line finally interrupted. "Mrs. Brennan? I need an answer now. Do you want the job or not?"

The words came out slowly. "Yes. I'll take it."

“Good.” The woman was pleasant again as she gave Loretta the details. Loretta listened half in shock that she’d accepted and half in growing excitement. She focused on the fact that afterwards, all her money problems would be solved, and the worry she’d been carrying for years began to slip from her tired shoulders.

She was going to Wyoming.

An hour later in her kitchen, fully awake and dressed, she took a deep breath of the sweet air coming through the open window, then finished her coffee. Strong with lots of milk and sugar, the way Jed had also liked it.

She closed her eyes and sighed. Jed. There he was again, or the ghost of him anyway lurking in the shadows of her mind, his form a misty outline, his loving expression pulling at her as usual. He wouldn’t let her forget him. She opened her eyes to chase the memory away.

Beyond the window the Oklahoma day was cheerfully sunny. The world and all it had to offer beckoned, and she suddenly longed to feel strong arms around her, warm kisses on her lips, to feel protected and cherished again. Jed had been gone over two years now and she was lonely.

She rose from the chair and poured another cup of coffee. Maybe it would help clear her head. Today she needed a swimming pool full of it.

For a moment, she caught her reflection in the cabinet’s glass door. She was close to thirty, but her sister, Cherie, said it was hard to tell because she had an earthy beauty that aged well. Those were Cherie’s words. Loretta smiled and tilted her head to the side. The green-eyed woman in the glass, tall and slender, who was wearing a lemon yellow T-shirt and snug jeans, smiled sadly back. No jewelry, no wedding ring, and barely any make-up. The woman in the mirror’s name was Loretta and she looked like her, but she wasn’t.

These days Loretta was just a mother and a businesswoman who owned and operated a Kenworth conventional eighteen-wheeler she affectionately called Baby Blue. She did it all on her own and she was proud of it. She and Jed had financed Baby Blue four years ago, and after one more payment it would be all hers. Unfortunately, it was a huge balloon payment. One she didn’t have. Yet.

She fingered the thick crimson braid she wore down the back of her neck. She’d been thinking of cutting her hair short. Should she? Could be it was time for a change. She should cut it and stop dwelling so much on memories of her dead husband...but a new haircut wouldn’t help her forget Jed.

She walked away from her reflection and stuffed the last bite of cinnamon roll into her mouth, still thinking about the job.

I have to be crazy to have taken it. For a moment, she thought of calling National back and saying she’d changed her mind. Then she rubbed her eyes and shook her head. She needed that money. She needed that job. She didn’t call.

Instead she waited at the table for her daughter to come downstairs. They took walks together in the mornings before Tessa went to school. It was their special mother-daughter time that not even Loretta’s job interfered with.

She’d seen other drivers lose their families to the road too many times. They were gone so much they had no family life (and eventually no family), nothing besides sitting behind the wheel and clocking in the miles and hours. They ended up alone and that wasn’t going to happen to her. Family was more important and nothing was more cherished to her than Tessa, except maybe keeping a roof over their head and food in their stomachs. Loretta had to leave within the hour to make the Wyoming trip, so today the walk would be a short one.

Paws, one of her three cats, rubbed up against her leg and she stroked her behind the ears. Most people, when they saw the animal, couldn’t believe a cat could get so large. Then they’d see her other two cats, Sweetpea and Precious, and their eyes would widen further. The tabbies were the size of small

pumas. People joked it was something she must be feeding them. Not so. It was genetic. All three were from the same litter. Their parents had been big cats, too, and they loved to terrorize the other neighborhood cats and get into mischief.

The cats never listened to her. Jed had been the one they minded.

Upstairs, she could hear her daughter moving around. She looked at her wristwatch and hoped Tessa was hurrying. Loretta was ready. She'd completed her paperwork, set up her logbook for the trip, and made sure one last time that her out-of-state driving permits and most recent truck inspection papers were in order. The blue zippered pouch lay on the table beside her.

After she told Tessa about the new job and they had their walk, she'd drop Tessa at her Aunt Cherie's and get on her way.

Loretta admired the view outside the bay window into the back yard. She was lucky to have a sister like Cherie. She'd never be able to take overnight or out of town jobs without her. She didn't like to leave Tessa alone too much, but leaving her with Cherie was different. Tessa loved her aunt and Cherie didn't charged for babysitting.

And there was the money issue again. Money wasn't just needed to exist. Tessa was so smart. She liked computers, and technology was expensive. No matter what their finances, Loretta was determined that Tessa would have what she needed and that she keep Tessa's education fund growing. The child wanted to be an archaeologist someday. That took college and college took *lots* of money.

Tessa clumped down the stairs two at a time and rushed into the kitchen bundled up for their walk. The girl, a carbon copy of her mother in looks and temperament, was delicate boned and small for her age. She'd never get as tall as her mother.

"Let's go," Tessa announced eagerly. "I can eat breakfast when we get back."

After Loretta put her jacket on, the two of them stepped out into the chilly, cloudless day and started down the path into the woods behind their house.

"Honey," Loretta said, "I've taken a job driving to Wyoming this week. It's great money plus a bonus I couldn't turn down. There's a snowstorm coming. It could be tricky."

Tessa turned and looked at her mother as she dodged a hanging tree limb. "Wyoming?" The expression of surprise on her daughter's face alerted Loretta to the fact that Tessa remembered where and how her father had died.

"I know. But we need this money. I don't want to go that far away, bad weather and all, but I have to."

Tessa understood. She always understood. "How long will you be gone?"

"I hope to return in about a week." She caught the open disappointment steal across her child's face and added, "Or less. You'll stay with Aunt Cherie. I already cleared it with her."

"You can't get there and back any faster?"

"Sorry, no. You know the rules. I can only drive a ten-hour shift at a time when I'm running single, and then I have to take a mandatory eight hours to sleep." It would take half the time if she had someone with her. She could drive straight through, napping while her partner drove and driving when her partner slept. But she had no partner.

She'd thought at times about hiring someone, but after Jed's death she'd needed time alone to heal and later it seemed almost a betrayal of his memory. Besides, until this job she hadn't really needed another driver. Now she wished she wouldn't have been so shortsighted and hired someone. *I could sure use you on this one, Jed.*

"It's okay." Tessa grinned. "Just be careful. You're all I got."

"Don't worry. I'll try to call you each night and get home as quickly as I can."

Again Loretta wished she could afford a laptop for the truck so she'd be able to e-mail Tessa from

the road. It was on her list—at the bottom—of things to buy as soon as she had the money. There were other things they needed more, like braces for Tessa. Loretta's insurance wasn't that good. It had big co-payments and no dental.

At least she had a cell phone, but it was an older model and didn't always work if she was out of roam range. In certain areas she couldn't always get a signal.

Breezes riffled the trees. Tessa chattered on for a while about what she was going to do in school that day. Loretta listened at first, but after a few minutes her mind wandered to the journey she had to make.

Out of nowhere, another feeling of foreboding rushed over her. She'd felt the same way before Jed's last run to Cheyenne. She'd had a bad case of the flu and couldn't go with him and—

"You're really worried about this trip aren't you," Tessa asked. The girl knew her too well.

"No. Oh, a little." Loretta hugged her child to her side as they strolled through the trees. "But it'll be all right, honey. I'm a good driver. I'll be home before you miss me."

Shaking off the premonition of doom, she frowned and sent the bad memories away. She refused to dwell on the things that might happen.

The fall foliage was so stunning it took her mind off the ice and snow that might be awaiting her up north. They'd already gone past the halfway point and were aimed toward the house. Tessa picked leaves from the trees. She was collecting them in an album between cellophane pages for her science class.

Back in the kitchen they took their jackets off.

"What do you want for breakfast?" Loretta went to the cabinets.

"Just cold cereal."

"You sure? I could make pancakes or French toast? We have enough time if I make them real quick." Which wasn't true, but Loretta couldn't help herself. It was over compensation. Another thing she had to stop doing.

Tessa gave her a look that said it all. "We're in a hurry aren't we?"

"Kind of."

"Raisin Bran will be fine. I'll get it." The girl took the box and a bowl from her mother's hands, collected the sugar and milk, and sat down at the table. She was an independent little thing and didn't want anyone to do anything for her she could do for herself.

Bent over her cereal bowl Tessa's head gleamed strawberry red from the sunlight. Her daughter had combed her hair already so Loretta pulled rubber bands out of a kitchen drawer and braided it. At eleven, Tessa was a little old for that, but for some reason she let her mother fix her hair like she had when she was younger.

Tessa looked up at her. "You know you're not good in the snow, not good on ice." The unspoken message being: *Don't wreck*. Loretta knew that her dying behind the wheel was one of her daughter's greatest fears.

"You know I'll be extra careful."

The girl pushed her bangs off her thin forehead and nodded. Her jade-colored eyes were on her mother. "I'll hold you to it, too." The next second Tessa was up and in Loretta's arms, hugging her tightly.

It was rare for Tessa to be so demonstrative when her mother was leaving. So Loretta knew how concerned she must be. Her fear over losing her mother, since she'd lost her father, was almost an obsession. "If it starts to snow, I'll drive slower. If there's a blizzard, I'll pull over. I promise."

Tessa pulled away. "You better."

Loretta noticed the time. "I need to get you over to your aunt's. Are you about ready?"

"I know, you've got places to go, a deadline and a delivery to make. My mother the truck driver." She tossed her head and grinned again. "I'm done. I'll clean up for myself and we'll go."

"You're such a good kid." Loretta grinned back.

While Tessa washed out her bowl and spoon, dried and put them away, Loretta went upstairs and gathered her bag of clothes and necessities. Then back in the kitchen she filled a large thermos with hot coffee and prepared a bag of fruit, candy bars, and donuts for the week. She loaded everything into the sleeper of the truck beneath the bed. It was much cheaper taking munchies along instead of buying them on the way. She plopped a Panama hat with a feathered band on her head, added Tessa's suitcase, and they were set to go.

Bad weather ahead or not, she couldn't have asked for a more beautiful morning to begin a job. She loved autumn. The crisp air, heavy with a tart mustard scent and taste that made her feel achingly alive, vibrated around her. It made her want to go out and conquer the world. A feeling she'd been missing for a long time.

She glanced at the house in the soft dawn's light. The house she and her daughter had moved into six months ago for a fresh start. It was a good house with trees around it for shade. It was small and isolated but it was just right for them.

They locked up and got into the truck. Because her sister's house was close by, she dropped Tessa off at Cherie's on her way to National's local office where she'd collect her assignment and the trailer of produce.

An hour later, Loretta was at the weigh station watching the trailer being filled with crates of sweet smelling citrus. It was a busy place. There had to be at least five other trucks waiting behind hers for their turn, but most of them were going south, not north. Loretta set the refrigeration controls on the truck's trailer, hooked it to her truck, filled out the forms, paid the fees, and recorded everything in her log book.

She was ready to go and glad of it. Time was a wasting and the stares and good-natured whistles from the male drivers were beginning to annoy her. Men truckers. The attention was new to her. When she'd had Jed by her side the other men left her alone and were respectful. Today, she tried to ignore them. She knew they didn't mean her any harm. She could take the appreciative catcalls better than the snide under-the-breath comments. Thank goodness most truckers were good hearted, hard-working men who'd do anything for anyone. On the whole truckers looked out for each other.

She sighed and leaned against her truck to hide from the curious eyes, hat tilted to shadow her face.

"Hey, there, pretty lady." A burly man with a beard, a beer belly, and a dirty maroon baseball cap on his head walked up to her from across the parking lot. She recognized him from the truck stops. He came on to every woman he met, though he was married. She couldn't recall his name. He edged in close to her and tried to start a conversation, thinking she must be fair game now that she was a widow. She didn't have time for his nonsense.

Loretta raised her head and met his eyes. To show any weakness on her part with him would lower a green flag. She had to be firm if she wanted him to leave her alone.

"Haven't seen you in a long time, Red," he said giving her an ingratiating grin. "Must be lonely traveling the roads by yourself. How you been?" He didn't have to mention her dead husband's name, they both knew what he was talking about.

"I've been too busy to be lonely. Sorry, I can't stand around chatting. I have a deadline to make."

"Where you going?"

"Wyoming." She wasn't about to go into details or keep talking. It was best not to give him any further encouragement.

"Whew. That's a long haul for such a pretty little thing. They say snow's coming up that way to

boot. You're gonna have a hard time of it going all that way by yourself. How about having breakfast with me, and I'll give you some short cuts?"

Almost smiling, she decided to be nice. His kind of man came on like gangbusters, but they usually had fragile egos and there was no need to hurt him and make an enemy.

"Sorry." She gently shoved her admirer aside and moved away. She screwed the gas cap back on and made sure it was tight. Time to go. "I've already had breakfast with my daughter and now I've got to leave. Maybe next time."

Or when the sky turns vermilion and the earth rotates backward, she thought. She made it a point to stay away from married men, and he wasn't her type anyway. Too chauvinistic.

"You're really driving this rig?" He wasn't giving up easily.

Fifteen percent of all truck drivers were women, but most men still seem surprised when a woman got behind the wheel or owned a big truck.

"Not just the driver. I own her," she couldn't help but reply smugly. "See you later, friend. I have to get on the road. Big bonus if I get the truck to my destination on time."

Before the man could say another word, she turned around, yanked the truck door open, and made a deft quick step up into the seat.

She practically shut the door in his face then threw her hat in the passenger's seat. She turned the key and listened as the engine rumbled to life. She didn't look his way again, so she didn't know if he was mad or not over the brush-off. And she didn't care. The road was calling.

The D.O.T. Officer in the weigh station gave her the green light and waved her through. She aimed her truck out toward the highway and took note of the healthy sound of Baby Blue's engine. The familiar hum was as much home to her as the house in the woods twenty miles away.

She peered in the mirror to see the man in the maroon baseball cap scratching his head and waving at her. He seemed disappointed. She waved back.

She headed down the highway, shifting into third, fourth, fifth, and sixth gear, then into the second range and through all of them again. The cool wind blasted her face and blew through her hair. Her eyes were peeled for cops.

It was good to be on the road again. The CB was switched on and crackled with truckers making small talk spiced with gossip and current events. Human voices temporarily chased away the solitude of a trucker's life. They weren't alone in the world. They had friends.

She chuckled. The CB was the Internet of the trucking world.

Happily, she mused: *I'm going to get all seventy thousand pounds of these oranges to market on time, and I'm going to claim that money and that bonus.*

Baby Blue responded smoothly to her commands. From the first time Jed had put her behind the wheel as a scared teenager, she felt as if she'd been born to it. Later on she'd gone to community college, done extremely well, taking mainly business courses so she could help Jed manage the business. She discovered she had the mind for it, yet loved driving the most and felt at home behind the wheel in her trucker's life, going places, seeing new things, and meeting people along the way. She'd loved everything about it, except driving in extreme weather like heavy fog and snowy, icy conditions.

But that was when Jed had been alive and she'd been part of a team. It was different now. Driving alone was hard work, but she still loved it.

The miles clicked beneath the wheels and Loretta's eyes soaked in the woods, prairies, and glistening lakes and rivers. It was true. America was beautiful. She never ceased to be amazed at how breathtaking the country was. There was no better scenery than what was to be found in Oklahoma, Colorado, and Wyoming with their lush trees and majestic mountains—and she'd been to all the states except Hawaii.

Loretta planned on stopping that night outside of Richfield. A ten hour sprint if she pushed it, ate her meals quickly, had fair weather, and the cops didn't stop her for anything. Big trucks meant big fines and in some towns the police pulled over truckers for any reason they could come up with so they could slap them with big fat tickets.

In other words, she'd make it to Richfield that night if she were lucky.
