

romance

'TIS THE SEASON

Bayliss, Jenny. *The Twelve Dates of Christmas*. Putnam. Oct. 2020. 368p. ISBN 9780593085387. pap. \$16. CONTEMPORARY

ROMANCE

DEBUT In this charming first novel from British author Bayliss, fabric designer Kate Turner has settled into the tiny village of Blexford to help take care of her aging father. Wholly unmotivated to seek romance, Kate is persuaded by a friend to sign up for the Twelve Dates of Christmas, a speed-dating for singles program where she will go out with a different man for 12 nights. Despite having a dozen chances at love, something goes wrong on each date (no-shows, man tears, and sleazeballs are among the most memorable disasters). Kate begins to realize she's not clicking with her dates because she's harboring feelings for her childhood friend Matt, the

★Clare, Jessica. *Her Christmas Cowboy*. Berkley. (Wyoming Cowboys, Bk. 5). Oct. 2020. 320p. ISBN 9780593102008. pap. \$7.99. CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

Kindergarten teacher Amy McKinney moved to the small town of Painted Barrel, WY, to get away from her controlling ex-husband. When rugged, shy cowboy Caleb Watson sets eyes on his niece's beautiful teacher, he's instantly smitten. But how to get her to notice him when he's completely tongue-tied? Caleb hatches a plan to use his handyman skills to fix Amy's broken-down car and apartment while getting to know her. Amy is surprised and touched by Caleb's generosity, especially when he agrees to play Santa to her Mrs. Claus at the school's Christmas Carnival. When Amy starts receiving Secret Santa gifts from more than one admirer, Caleb realizes he'll need to step up his game in order to beat the competition.

Jaxon, Jenna. *The Widow's Christmas Surprise*. Zebra: Kensington. (Widow's Club, Bk. 5). Oct. 2020. 352p. ISBN 9781420149760. pap. \$8.99.

HISTORICAL ROMANCE

At age 19, Maria Kersey has the dubious distinction of being widowed twice and is now swearing off marriage. Her last husband was a notorious womanizer who was killed in a duel by a jealous spouse, leaving Maria to raise their unborn daughter alone. Unfortunately, the new Lord Kersey, a distant relation, could very well turn her out in the cold. Maria finds an ally in Hugh Granger, the estate's steward, though as a second son he's hardly a suitable match. Still, something undeniable sparks between them whenever they're close, and they both share a responsibility to care for the estate's tenants. As Christmas approaches, the new lord and his family arrive and make it clear they want Maria out of the way. The plot takes an unexpectedly dark turn as unwanted attempts at seduction and even murder plans are visited upon poor Maria. **VERDICT** Expect as much sinister intrigue as romantic Christmas warmth—although there's plenty of the latter, too. Those looking for a gothic take on a traditional Regency Christmas will find it here.—Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB

Morgan, Sarah. *One More for Christmas*. HQN: Harlequin. Oct. 2020. 416p. ISBN 9781335013804. pap. \$15.99.

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

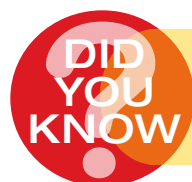
Gayle Mitchell has spent her life teaching women how to achieve success in business, at the cost of being a mother to her two daughters. Now they're grown with lives of their own, and she barely knows them. After sustaining a head injury, Gayle is determined to reunite with her family at Christmas. Eldest daughter Samantha, an accomplished travel planner, is particularly skeptical of her mother's change of heart, feeling like she can never live up to Gayle's exacting standards. Still, Sam agrees to let her mother and younger sister Ella, along with Ella's family, accompany her on a business trip to a remote Scottish lodge during the holidays. Sam has difficulty navigating the new family dynamics and her growing feelings for Brodie, their host in Scotland. Meanwhile, Brodie is nursing his own familial pain but is equally attracted to the strong-minded Sam. **VERDICT** The prolific Morgan (*Family for Beginners*) offers another tender,



A holiday abroad in a cozy café; a cowboy and a kindergarten teacher; romantic, with a gothic twist

owner of the local Pear Tree Café. Descriptions of Christmas baking and Kate's artistic process as a designer give the novel a cozy, grounded feel, even if the main romance, disappointingly, doesn't materialize until the end. **VERDICT** This slow-burn rom-com set in a small British village at Christmas will be the perfect cup of tea for fans of Marian Keyes or Helen Fielding.—Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB

But having grown up in the wilds of Alaska, he's completely inexperienced with women. **VERDICT** Those who love their heroes quietly strong and more than capable will melt like warm marshmallows for cowboy Caleb. Series fans will be eager for the next installment (*The Bachelor Cowboy*, due out in Jan. 2021), which gives the story of mischievous younger brother, Jake Watson.—Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB



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family-centered story told in alternating voices among the women of the Mitchell clan. The Christmas setting and romantic subplot will appeal to fans of RaeAnne Thayne and Susan Mallery.—**Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB**

Trentham, Laura. *A Highlander Is Coming to Town*. St. Martin's Essentials. (Highland, Georgia, Bk. 3). Oct. 2020. 304p. ISBN 9781250315052. pap. \$7.99.

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

The small town of Highland, GA, once again plays host to romance in Trentham's third series installment (after *A Highlander in a Pickup*). Whiskey heiress Claire Smythe has ditched her Scottish rock band and is hiding out in Highland while caring for an elderly widow, trying to decide her next move. She's not looking for romance with a local man—and that includes hunky farm boy Holt Pierson. But Claire's prickly personality is no match for the charming and persistent Holt, who offers the bike-riding Claire plenty of lifts in his pickup truck to get to know her better. While Claire is happy to join Holt in his truck and his bed, she refuses to grant him access to her heart, knowing she may soon return to Scotland. But as the holidays approach and Claire becomes more involved in the community, that decision becomes more difficult. **VERDICT** Pair with *A Highlander in a Pickup* for a double dose of small-town charm and a continuation of the previous couple's story alongside Holt and Claire's new relationship.—**Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB**

Weis, Alexandra. *The Christmas Spirit*. Rosewind: Vesuvian. Nov. 2020. 260p. ISBN 9781645480419. pap. \$14.95.

GOTHIC/PARANORMAL ROMANCE

In this supernatural romance from paranormal author Weis (*Sisters of the Moon*), accountant Courtney Winston bails on spending yet another Christmas at home with her family to hole up in a remote Tennessee cabin to write. Her agent has asked for major revisions to her latest novel, but Courtney is quickly distracted by Peter, who owns the property where Courtney is staying and who warns her that she may not be safe alone in the woods. Courtney begins to feel a menacing presence in the cabin, despite frequent visits from a large black cat, a meddlesome cook named Mrs. Finn, and Peter, who suddenly seems old-fashioned and surly. Peter's story of his lost love touches Courtney as she comes to terms with her own broken heart and seeming inability to love. The longer she stays, the more she realizes there is something not right about the visitors who seem to appear and reappear at her door. **VERDICT** Ghostly occurrences and ancient folklore make this feel

like a modern, romantic twist on *A Christmas Carol*, which will appeal to paranormal fans.—**Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB**

Wheatley, Denise N. *Love at the Icicle Café*. Tule. Jan. 2021. Nap. ebk. ISBN 9781952560774. \$3.99. CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

For years, California lawyer Mina Richards has dreamed of making partner at her law firm. But as a woman—especially a Black woman—she's had to work twice as hard to prove her worth. Just when a partnership opportunity appears, Mina is inconveniently summoned to the small town of Gosberg, Germany, to represent her family at the town's annual Icicle Fest. The event is sponsored by the Icicle Café, which her parents co-own with another family. Handsome Scott Dawson, son of the other owners, has transformed the café into the magical, sugar-filled heart of Gosberg. At first, Scott is resentful that Mina has been absent from the café, especially as she seems indifferent to their parents' plans to sell it. Naturally, Mina becomes enchanted with both the diner and Scott as she gets more involved with baking, planning the festival, and deciding where her true passion lies. **VERDICT** Wheatley (*Wards of the Women*) creates a cozy European village setting, combined with mouth-watering descriptions of pastries and a feel-good romance, making this heaven for lovers of made-for-TV holiday movies.—**Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB**

THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

★ **Burrowes, Grace. *The Truth About Dukes*. Forever: Grand Central. (Rogues to Riches, Bk. 5). Nov. 2020. 400p. ISBN 9781538700334. pap. \$7.99. HISTORICAL ROMANCE**

The moment Constance Wentworth locks eyes with Robert, Duke of Rothmere, at her sister Althea's ball, they quickly rekindle an old, secret friendship that turns to love. Years ago, Constance had fled home to work in a private hospital where Rob was locked away for treatment of epilepsy. In the fifth installment of the acclaimed "Rogues to Riches" series (after *A Duke by Any Other Name*), Burrowes delightfully twists many of historical romance's traditional beats. Constance and Rob become engaged in the first half, and their commitment to each other never wavers—instead they face their challenges as a team, as outside forces do their best to ruin them. Rob deals with constant inquiries into his competence that threaten to jeopardize the guardianship of his estate, while Constance seeks out the illegitimate daughter she gave up for adoption and desperately wishes to find. Constance grapples with understanding Rob's epilepsy, but her focus remains on him as a person, endearing her to him and to readers. Burrowes beautifully conveys the couple's growth as

they come to believe they are worthy of happiness. **VERDICT** A refreshing, remarkably crafted Regency that will garner the multi-award-winning Burrowes (*When a Duchess Says I Do*) legions of new fans.—**Jennifer Rothschild, Arlington Cty. Pub. Libs., VA**

Bellefleur, Alexandria. *Written in the Stars*. Avon. Nov. 2020. 384p. ISBN 9780063000803. pap. \$15.99.

LGBTQ CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

DEBUT Polar opposites come together in Bellefleur's cheerful #ownvoices debut. Elle is a free-spirited social media astrologer. Darcy is a straight-laced actuary. On the surface, they have nothing in common, which is why their first blind date is a complete disaster. When Elle hears Darcy telling a friend on the phone that she thinks Elle's a hot mess, Elle ditches the date in disappointment. But Darcy's brother Brendon is pushing Darcy to go on more dates, so she claims she and Elle are a couple to get him off her back. Only Elle, who works with Brendon, discovers Darcy's lie. What can they do except to pretend to be a couple so that Brendon will stop interfering in Darcy's life and Elle can impress her family? The two sign a contract to "break up" on New Year's Eve, and only their growing attraction stands in the way of messing up their perfect arrangement. **VERDICT** A dash of *Pride and Prejudice* and *Bridget Jones's Diary*, mixed with a fresh, millennial f/f twist of opposites attract.—**Kathryn Howe, Saint John Free P.L., NB**

★ **Cole, Alyssa. *How To Catch a Queen*. Avon. (Runaway Royals, Bk. 1). Dec. 2020. 384p. ISBN 9780062933966. pap. \$7.99.**

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

Sanyu wasn't prepared to become Sanyu II, King of Njaza. And he certainly wasn't ready to get married, but tradition dictates he wed before taking the throne, and it's his father's dying wish. His match from RoyalMatch.com is Shanti Mohapi of Thesolo, a commoner whose dream and life goal has been to become a queen so she'll have the power to help people. The initial sparks that fly seem to fizzle during the four-month trial marriage, but Shanti isn't giving up on her dream, and Sanyu is seeing a greater world through her eyes. But will his insecurities and unwillingness to topple tradition allow for his own happily ever after? **VERDICT** Cole (*An Extraordinary Union*) launches the "Runaway Royals" series with a bang, introducing a sexy but shy king, a determined and caring queen, and a host of characters who leap off the page into the reader's imagination. Fans of the "Reluctant Royals" series will adore cameos by some of their favorites, but this is a solid starting point for new readers.—**Melanie C. Duncan, Washington Memorial Lib., Macon, GA**

Collins, Manda. *A Lady's Guide to Mischief and Mayhem.* Forever: Grand Central. (A Lady's Guide, Bk. 1). Nov. 2020. 352p. ISBN 9781538736135. pap. \$14.99.

HISTORICAL ROMANCE

In Victorian England, Katherine Bascomb has the audacity to enjoy being a widow. Free from the restraints of an arranged marriage, she has control of her late husband's vast newspaper empire. Katherine and Caro, her new cohort in crime reporting, decide to get the female perspective from crime scenes of a serial killer and discover an eyewitness Scotland Yard failed to interview. When an innocent man is arrested, Katherine comes face to face with DI Andrew Eversham, the man whose career her column might have destroyed. Thrown together at a country estate house party after another murder, Katherine and Andrew begin to untangle their sudden attraction to each other and the motivations of a murderer. **VERDICT** Librarian Collins (*One for the Rogue*) blends historical romance and mystery with characters who embody a modern sensibility. While the ending seems a little too neatly resolved and coincidental circumstances abound, the protagonists and setting of this first in a promising new series are thoroughly enjoyable.—**Nicole J. Suarez, Frankfort P.L. Dist., Frankfort, IL**

Curtis, Barbara. *Forever with You.* Forever: Grand Central. (Sapphire Springs, Bk. 1). Nov. 2020. 352p. ISBN 9781538703076. pap. \$7.99. **CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE**

DEBUT In Niagara, NY, wine country, Leyna Milan has inherited her grandfather's Italian restaurant and plans to open a second location at the winery owned by Stefan, her grandfather's best friend. However, she is unsure how she can fulfill her grandfather's wish without any funds. To make matters worse, Jay Wynter, Stefan's grandson, has just returned to his family's winery from France to take over the family business when Stefan retires. Leyna thought she and Jay would be together when he walked away from their relationship 18 years ago. Now she has to work with him on this new business deal. Little does she know that Jay's leaving was the hardest thing he ever had to do. As he sets out to win back her heart, an unforeseen tragedy might have him leaving all over again. **VERDICT** Curtis's small-town debut focuses on the emotion of her characters without much in the way of lovemaking scenes, so fans of Susan Wiggs will find this heartwarming romance to their liking. It also serves as a nice setup for the next book in the series to tell the story of Leyna's best friend Emily Holland and longtime crush Tim.—**Kara Kohn, Plainfield P.L., IL**

★ **Dade, Olivia.** *Spoiler Alert.* Avon. Oct. 2020. 320p. ISBN 9780063005549. pap. \$15.99. **CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE**

This latest from Dade ("There's Something About Marysburg" series) delves into the world of fandom, in which superfans attempt to wield the weapon of fanfiction to right the wrongs perpetuated in a universe that has jumped from book series to TV show. Geologist and cosplayer April (aka Unapologetic Lavinia Stan), and actor and secret fanfiction author Marcus (aka Book!AeneasWouldNever), are good friends in the online community dedicated to shaping the wildly popular internet couple Aeneas and Lavinia. What no one in the fandom realizes—since it could cost him his job—is that Marcus is Aeneas. Or at least, he plays him on TV. When April's latest plus-size Lavinia costume goes viral, Marcus asks her out to dinner to quiet the internet trolls but soon figures out their virtual connection. He can't admit who he is online, but that's not the only thing he's hiding, and April is immediately suspicious that the Marcus the world sees is nothing like the real man. Can a relationship begun online survive in real life? **VERDICT** Even those new to online fanfiction will find this a charming and engrossing read. Issues of body positivity, dyslexia, and found families are among the topics addressed with sensitivity and realism. The between-chapter segments of fanfic server chats, fanfic synopsis, and truly horrible screenplays add to the fun.—**Rebecca Moe, Alden Ewell Free Lib., NY**

★ **Putney, Mary Jo.** *Once Dishonored.* Zebra: Kensington. (Rogues Redeemed, Bk. 5). Oct. 2020. 368p. ISBN 9781420148114. pap. \$8.99. **HISTORICAL ROMANCE**

Spurned by the society in which she once flourished, Kendra Douglas seeks justice for the wrongs committed against her by her former husband. With her reputation in tatters and her son kidnapped, Kendra needs allies in order to gain back her standing in the community and have some kind of life. Lord Foxtan, Lucas Mandeville, is scarred by his time in war on the continent, but more damaged is his sense of honor after his escape from a French prison. He admires Kendra's determination to face her problems head-on and offers her his assistance. Finding comfort and encouragement in each other, the couple discover that maintaining propriety while fighting the inextricable pull between them becomes as difficult a battle as restoring Kendra's good name and finding her son. **VERDICT** In her own signature style, paying impeccable attention to period details, Putney continues to vindicate the honor of scoundrels in this fifth entry of the stunning "Rogues Re-

STOCKING STUFFERS

Agdern, Stacey. *Miracles and Menorahs.* Tule. ISBN 9781952560033.

de Guzman, Carla. *Sweet on You.* Carina: Harlequin. ISBN 9781335652843.

Roberts, Sheila. *One Charmed Christmas.* MIRA: Harlequin. ISBN 9780778360926.

Shane, Lizzie. *The Twelve Dogs of Christmas.* Forever: Grand Central. ISBN 9781538735879.

Thomas, Jodi & others. *The Cowboy Who Saved Christmas.* Kensington. ISBN 9781496725493.

deemed" series (after *Once a Spy*). Fans of historicals will root for our brave, intelligent heroine and the hero who stands beside her.—**Jenna Harmison, Champaign Cty. Lib., OH**

Rosche, Janine. *Wildflower Road.* Berkley. (Madison River Romance, Bk. 2). Oct. 2020. 336p. ISBN 9780593100523. pap. \$7.99.

CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE

The River's Edge Resort in West Yellowstone, MT, has been struggling for a few seasons, and Ryann Marie Ashcroft's only goal for the summer is to help turn the floundering family business around. Throwing herself into work also helps keep her mind off her husband's heartbreaking death. Former pastor Shane Olson, a newcomer to West Yellowstone, is trying to put his own dark past behind him and make a fresh start as the new cook at River's Edge while keeping his head down and staying out of the spotlight. The last thing Shane wants is for Ryann to learn about his time in jail, or the viral video that led to the loss of his ministry and destroyed his life back in his home state of Ohio. There is an immediate attraction between fiery Ryann and the more reserved Shane, and the two slowly begin to open up to each other. Shane starts to believe Ryann and her welcoming church community could help bring him back to his faith. But as they grow closer, shadows from both Ryann's and Shane's pasts loom and threats to their budding relationship close in. **VERDICT** Serious themes of mental illness and assault and intensely written scenes of violence and loss ground this Western romance between two imperfect people trying to live lives of Christian faith despite past hardship and mistakes. A satisfying second offering in the series (after *This Wandering Heart*) that can be read as a stand-alone.—**Jessica Moore, Milwaukee P.L.**