



Winter Winds

By Gayle Roper

Excerpt provided courtesy of www.gayleroper.com

Chapter 1

“Come on, Trudy, sweetheart. Stand tall. You can do it.”

As she raised her hand with the treat in it, Dori MacAllister smiled encouragingly at her little Dandie Dinmont. The dog in turn cocked her ears, watched the hand with the treat, but didn't move.

“Come on, Trudy, baby. Do it for mommy.”

Do it for mommy? Gag! Dori had promised herself when she spent way too much money to buy Trudy that she'd never become one of those weird ladies who talked to their animals like they were retarded babies.

And here she was, talking to the little white terrier as if she were a canine Rainman.

Dori cleared her throat. “Stand tall, Trudy,” she ordered in the sternest voice she could muster.

Trudy immediately went up on her hind legs.

Dori blinked. That was all there was to it? She thought of all the time and money she'd spent on dog obedience classes and the mixed results. Trudy always performed wonderfully before everyone there, but at home she only obeyed when she felt like it.

Dori pictured herself in class. She had always spoken firmly there, and Trudy did as asked. It was only at home she made a fool of herself with baby talk. With a sigh of disgust, she got to her feet. Just another proof that she needed a life.

The phone rang, and she stared at it for a moment. What of it was Bill Fralinger asking again for a date? Couldn't the man take a hint? Five refusals ought to make him realize her disinterest, or so one would think.

The answering machine kicked in after the fourth ring. “Dori, I've got to talk to you! It's an emergency! Call—“

She launched herself at the phone, heart in her throat. “Phil! It’s me. What’s wrong?” Not Trev. Please let it not be Trev.

“You’ve got to come at once,” Phil said without preamble. “It’s Pop.”

Dori’s stomach dropped. Before hearing *it’s Pop*, she’d thought that a stomach dropping was just a phrase writers used to convey distress. Now she knew it was a real sensation. “What’s wrong?” she managed to whisper.

“Heart attack, we think.”

Fear shafted through her, and she leaned against the wall to keep herself upright.

Pop! Sturdy, invincible Pop, the man who with his wife Honey had raised her, the man who stood grandfather to her, as close or closer than any blood grandparent could ever be.

“How bad?” She held her breath, afraid of the answer.

“It’s too soon to tell.” Phil’s voice shook. “He’s got tubes and wires and oxygen and…” He had to stop and clear his throat before he could continue. “You’ve got to come, Dori.”

“N-no, I can’t.” Not even for Pop. Her stomach pitched as her conscience and her emotions duked it out down there.

“He asked for you.”

Was that anger she was beginning to hear in his voice? “Oh, Phil.”

He must have heard her hesitation, her distress. “Look, Dori, you know I’ve never pried. I figured whatever happened was your personal business, but it’s time to come home. He needs to see you.”

“Phil, you just don’t understand.” She heard the anguish in her voice and flinched.

Trudy whimpered. Dori turned and saw her standing on the sofa, front feet planted on the arm, watching intently. Somehow she had caught Dori’s distress and was worried. Dori swooped her up and cuddled her close, drawing comfort from the animal even as she dodged her little pink tongue. There was no question; the little sweetheart was worth every penny.

“I can’t leave Trudy,” Dori said.

“Who’s Trudy, and why in the world not?”

“Who would take care of her?”

“Dori, is Trudy your dog?”

“I told you about her last time we talked, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, I just forgot her name. Now listen closely because this is what you do. You put her in a kennel. You give her to a friend. You take her to the pound.”

“What?”

“Dori, she’s a dog. We’re talking about Pop here.”

“You think I’m a terrible person.” Dori found she had tears in her eyes. She sniffed loudly and into the phone. Even though the tears were real as she felt herself losing the control she so ardently cherished, she couldn’t resist goading Phil.

“Are you crying?” Phil demanded, outrage clear in his voice.

She gave Trudy a teary grin. Worked every time. She looked around her small living room with the soft peach walls, the moss green carpet, the peach, russet and green floral love seat, and the two white wicker chairs with pillows that matched the sofa. She didn’t want to leave its security for any reason, but with an inward sigh, she admitted she had to go East.

“Come on, Dori,” Phil said. “Enough is enough.”

She closed her eyes and nodded, even though he couldn’t see her.

She’d been eight when she met Pop, nineteen when she left him. She had taken her heart and run to save herself, and though she hadn’t intended it, she knew that Pop had paid a stiff price for her emotional retreat. Honey, too. For seven long years, she’d stayed away, and, coward that she was, she’d planned to extend her absence indefinitely. But how could she do that in light of, “He asked for you”?

She sighed. Much as she hated to admit it, Phil was right. Enough was enough. “I’ll catch the red eye.”

“Good girl. Let me know your arrival time, and I’ll meet you.”

“You needn’t bother. I’ll rent a car.”

“I’m picking you up. No arguments.”

Dori stood unmoving in the living room of her San Diego apartment long after Phil hung up. It wasn’t until Trudy complained loudly about being hugged too tightly that Dori moved. First she called for her airline ticket and got a compassionate fare leaving at 11:30 this evening, arriving in Philadelphia at 9:30 tomorrow morning. Next she called Meg Reynolds, owner of Small Treasures and her boss.

“Oh, Dori, I’m so sorry,” Meg said as soon as Dori told her about Pop. “Take as much time as you need. I’ll be fine.”

“Thanks, Meg. I—” Dori stalled. Meg knew more of her story than anyone, and she alone could understand Dori’s mixed feelings. She tried again. “I want to be there for Pop, but—”

“But you’re afraid you’ll see Trev.”

Dori closed her eyes. There it was, spoken brazenly and boldly. “I’m scared to death,” she confessed, her voice a mere whisper. “What would I say? What would I do?”

“Ah, Dori, don’t underestimate yourself. You will manage fine. I have every confidence in you.”

The affirming words were balm on Dori’s battered spirit.

When she’d first moved to San Diego seven years ago, she’d been in dire need of a job. She’d gone to a mall, thinking that surely someone there would need a sales clerk. There she found Small Treasures, a gift shop with the most creative inventory she’d ever seen. She spent two hours looking at all the lovely items, yearning for the money to buy some of them, knowing it would be a long time before she had discretionary money of the type she was used to.

Then she’d brazenly asked for a job.

“Your inventory is so wonderful, even I could sell it,” she said. “Please.”

The owner, Meg Reynolds, a short, dark-haired woman of indeterminate age, not only hired her. She trained her, taught her, gave her ever greater responsibility until Dori was now Meg’s right hand with a small percentage of the store in her name.

But most importantly, Meg had given her love. She became the mother Dori no longer had, the anchor that held her stable in the hurricane-tossed sea her life had become. Meg invited Dori to dinner frequently, sometimes with just her and Ron, her big bear of a husband, sometimes with her three sons and two daughters-in-law too. They weren’t Pop and Honey or Trev and Phil, but they were wonderfully accepting of the quiet, wounded young woman she’d become. Slowly she learned to relax, to smile again, then laugh freely.

It was Meg who found the small apartment that Dori lived in, and Meg who gave her a used bedroom suite that had belonged to one of her boys. Dori was so grateful that she wouldn’t have to bunk on the floor that the Batman sheets that came with Meg’s gift seemed like the finest of bed linens.

“I’d give you more,” Meg said, “but the boys cleaned us out when they married or moved.” She grinned. “I still had the bed because it’s a single and these sheets because for some reason the wives don’t want to sleep on Batman.”

Perhaps Meg’s greatest kindness was that she never pressed, never probed. She waited patiently for the time Dori was willing to trust, willing to open her heart. When Dori finally talked and talked and talked about home, about Trev, Meg just listened, her eyes full of tears when Dori told of Trev’s betrayal.

“Ah, lamb, I’m so sorry.” She wrapped her arms around Dori. “Unfortunately not every man’s as wonderful as my Ron. I’d make it better for you if I could. Since I can’t, I’ll just love you.”

And Dori cried. The unequivocal acceptance helped heal her as nothing else could have.

When the tears abated, Dori smiled at Meg. “I bet you regret the day I walked into your shop.”

“Never. Not for an instant.”

“Why did you hire me if you weren’t looking for help?”

“It was the please that did it,” Meg said. “That and the desperation in your eyes.” Her warm smile took any sting from the words.

Dori never wanted to be that needy again. That was why she feared the trip East.

“What are you going to do with Trudy?” Meg asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Let us keep her for you. We think she’s the cutest thing there is.”

“Oh, Meg, would you?” One problem solved.

“You just get your stuff together and get to the airport. Ron and I will come get Trudy. We’ve got your key, remember?”

With a strange mix of anxiety and excitement turning her stomach upside down, Dori made it through security checks twenty minutes before her flight left. She walked right down the jetway and sank gratefully into her seat, prepared to sleep until Chicago’s O’Hare and her plane change. She grabbed a pillow and a blanket and tucked herself in. All over the plane passengers were doing the same. The only difference between the others and her was that they slept.

Instead she remembered.

Her mother and Phil’s had gone to college together and become fast friends. Even geography, marriage and parenthood hadn’t diminished their friendship, and joint vacations were an annual event. Dori vaguely remembered Disney World, Yosemite National Park, and the Rocky Mountains, all shared with Phil and his older brother Trev. Every other year, they all trooped to Ocean City, Maryland, the MacAllisters from Chicago and the Trevelyans from Amhearst, PA.

Then came the year she was eight. They were vacationing in Ocean City, Maryland, when the police came to tell the three children that their parents, out together for an evening, had been killed by a drunk driver. With no grandparents still living and with her parents both only children, Dori had had no family to come to her aid. In fact, in her little girl’s mind, she had nobody but Phil and Trev.

The authorities sent a woman officer to get her and take her to social services. She could almost feel her child’s heart hammering against her ribcage, desperate, terrified.

I was Little Orphan Annie without Daddy Warbucks, she thought. And I knew the officer was going to give me to Miss Hannigan who was waiting just around the corner.

It was Trev who changed everything. She could picture him, a skinny nine-year old with ribs you could play like a xylophone, staring at the woman officer.

“You aren’t taking her anywhere! She’s ours!” He’d pushed Dori behind him to protect her.

And Pop who had come for the boys. “What will happen to her?” he’d asked.

“Foster care, I imagine,” the officer said. “She’ll be just fine.”

“Not adoption?”

The officer shrugged. “She’s probably too old to be adopted.”

“We’ll adopt her,” Trev yelled, his voice shaking with emotion. “You can’t have her.”

“Don’t let them take me,” she whispered. “Don’t let them, Trev.” She wrapped her skinny arms around his waist and buried her face in his back. They’d never pull her free. She would be like one of those barnacles that encrusted the big pilings that went down, down into the bay where they’d rented Skidoos yesterday. Daddy had scraped his leg against one, and the barnacle hadn’t been hurt at all. Daddy had bled.

Phil sidled up beside Dori and put an arm around her heaving shoulders.

Pop, Honey and the policewoman stood facing the three orphans. The officer held out her hand. “Come on, sweetie. The Trevelyans have to go home.”

“No!” she screamed over and over. “No!”

Pop moved then. He reached over Trev’s head and pulled her up and into his arms. Try as she would to hold onto Trev, she couldn’t fight Pop’s strength. Her heart was already broken because Mommy and Daddy were never coming back. She was surprised when it broke a little more. She turned her weeping gaze to Trev.

Help me! Help me!

But he wasn’t even watching her. He was looking at Pop. So was Phil. They were both smiling.

She realized suddenly that Pop hadn’t handed her to the police lady. He was holding her close, patting her back, and Honey was stroking her arm. They crooned to her softly. “Shh, sweetheart. It’ll be all right. The boys are right. You’re ours. You can come with us.”

The police lady had protested. “You are not a relative.”

Pop had pulled her closer, an arm under her bottom, a hand splayed over her back. She wound her dangling legs around his waist. A barnacle, glomming onto Pop.

“Her mother was my daughter’s best friend,” Pop said.

“That does not count,” the police lady said.

Pop scowled at the woman. “This little girl belongs to Honey and me as much as our two grandsons.”

“Mr. Trevelyan, there are laws.”

“We’re taking her.” He began moving toward the door. “You cannot stop us.”

The policewoman hurried after them. “There may be a legal guardian named in the will.”

“She’s ours.” Pop turned to Honey. “Grab some clothes.”

Honey strode to the bedroom, opened drawers and scooped out clothes. Trev and Phil helped, grabbing up toys and the baseball caps reading Ocean City, MD that their daddies had bought them on the boardwalk.

“Okay, let’s go.” Pop carried Dori out the door. Honey and the boys followed.

Dori buried her face in the bend of Pop’s neck and shoulder and held on as tightly as she could. He put her in the middle of the back seat of his shiny black car and buckled her in.

“You’ve got to let go now, sweetheart.”

She’d tightened her grip on his neck.

“I’ve got to go drive the car, Dori. You’ve got to let go. It’s okay. You’re safe now.”

Reluctantly she released her death grip, and Pop backed out of the car. Trev climbed in on one side of her, Phil on the other. Honey and Pop climbed in the front seat, and off they drove, the policewoman watching helplessly from the curb. Trev put his skinny arm around Dori and patted her shoulder.

She didn’t stop shaking until they pulled up in front of the brick Colonial.

That was nineteen years ago now. Unbelievable.

Dori blinked her gritty eyes as she deplaned at O’Hare. They didn’t call these flights red eyes for nothing. She located the gate for the final leg of her flight and found herself in the middle seat of the next to the last row with a big man on either side, each reading a full-sized daily. She gave up on any idea of grabbing at least a little nap as they rattled their papers, folding and refolding them until her nerves screamed.

She pulled out a paperback, small, compact and easy to handle. She would have enjoyed the romance and the suspense a lot more if she hadn’t been elbowed quite so often. At least the man in the aisle seat mumbled, “Sorry,” every so often. The guy in the window seat never bothered.

Even agonizing flights eventually end, and Dori eyed the luggage circling the baggage carousel in Terminal A at Philadelphia International Airport. Why was hers always the last piece off? And why did she wonder? It was just another example of life’s little conspiracies designed to make her more miserable than she already was.

“Come on, come on,” she now muttered at the unseen baggage handlers, then brightened. Here came her black bag. In the sea of black bags she knew it was hers even before it got to her because it had the red yarn tied around the handle. She settled her laptop against her small roll-on and shouldered her way to the slowly moving belt. As her suitcase slid past, she reached for it. She bumped into a young woman also reaching for the bag.

“Sorry.” Dori gave her a wan smile. “This one’s mine.”

She dragged her suitcase off the belt, pulled up the handle on the case, and wheeled it to her other luggage. The ads said that she could take this baby onto the plane too, but she’d stuffed it

with not only her clothes, but gifts from Small Treasures for everyone in her Pennsylvania family. She collected things whenever she saw something she thought one of them might like, mailing them for any and all occasions—birthdays, Christmas, Arbor Day, the Fourth of July. She'd recently been collecting Valentine's Day presents, and there were several gifts inside, even one for Trev. As a result, every expansion zipper on the suitcase was open, making it too fat to fit either under or over a seat. Not that she would ever have been able to lift it into the overhead bin given its weight. It had been all she could do to pull it off the carousel.

She found the attachment thingamabob stored in the front zipper pouch and clicked it to the bag. She clipped the other end to her small roll-on. Gripping the laptop in one hand and tugging her luggage behind her with the other, she walked out the automatic doors and to the curb. She shivered inside her chenille jacket as the frigid January air wrapped around her. She hunched her shoulders and thought with longing of the green down-filled parka she used to have back when cold Pennsylvania winters were an annual event in her life. And the warm gloves. And the knit ski cap. Six years in San Diego had thinned her blood.

She shuddered again, wishing she didn't have to deal with what weather.com had told her would be a week of single-digit temperatures all through the Mid-Atlantic States. Maybe, she thought hopefully, Pop still had her red Lands' End Squall, the one with the navy lining. Grandparents kept things like that, didn't they? After all, it had meaning for him where the green parka didn't. He'd bought the whole family the red jackets one year for Christmas, Trev's senior year in high school if she remembered correctly. They'd all told Pop he was nuts, they weren't some athletic team to be dressed alike, but they'd all worn the jackets with pride, even Honey.

Like he'd kept a coat for her for six long years.

Just when she was certain she was going to be struck down with pneumonia as she waited for Phil, she heard her name called.

“Yo, Dori!”

She looked in the direction of the voice and saw a man waving to her from the end of the line of cars pulled to the curb awaiting passengers.

Her heart sputtered. Trev!

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