

CHAS WILLIAMSON

A Paradise Series Short Story

SKATING
in Paradise

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Year of the Book

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Christmas Eve



Morning

Tammy Kunkle slipped the transmission into park, taking a few seconds to admire the decorations adorning the large colonial home. Festive garland was looped along the porch railings. Wreaths were hung on the twin polished oak doors, decorated with red, gold and silver balls. She had barely slipped out of her car when the entrance flew open and a brown-haired child raced down the steps.

“Tammy, Tammy.” The girl jumped into her arms.

“Molly, look how big you are. I missed you.”

After Molly gave her a sloppy kiss, the sweet voice of the child’s mother, Riley Campeau, called out, “Merry Christmas. It’s so good to see you. Let me give you a hand with your bags.”

The three ladies walked into the house, into an interior ripe with the scent of fresh-baked cookies and pine. A large, exquisitely decorated tree stretched skyward, the tree topper almost touching the two-story cathedral ceiling. Molly pulled on Tammy’s arm. “Look at the popcorn chains me and Daddy made.”

Riley corrected her daughter. “You mean, ‘Daddy and I.’”

Hands on her hips, Molly faced her mother. “Nuh-uh. Me and Daddy, not you and Daddy.”

Riley rolled her eyes and smiled. “Would you like some tea, Tammy?”

“Yes, please.”

Riley turned to her daughter. “Can you give Tammy the grand tour while I brew a pot for us?”

The tiny brunette took Tammy’s hand and led her through the mansion. Without it being expressed, Tammy could sense the love that filled this house. *Prayers do get answered.* It didn’t seem like that long ago that Molly was a patient on Tammy’s pediatric oncology ward. The little girl was suffering from a rare type of liver cancer. The same cancer that had claimed the life of the little girl’s birth mother just months before. And the poor orphan’s body hadn’t been responding to the treatments. Her situation had been dire. Only a transplant could save her life.

Molly pointed to a large wooden stick that hung on the wall at the top of the stairs. Uniformed men wearing ice skates surrounded Molly at center ice that was shaded pink. “Daddy got me a hockey stick signed by the Philadelphia Flyers. They skated me around the ice while everybody cheered.” Tammy could see the pride in Molly’s eyes. “My daddy used to be a hockey star.”

“I remember.” Tammy remembered more, much more. Like how God had a hand in this girl’s life. How Mickey gave up his career to adopt Molly. And how, beyond all explanation, Mickey had been a match for a transplant. She also remembered the secondary infection post-op that had almost claimed Mickey’s life.

Tammy’s thoughts were interrupted when a loud voice seemed to shake the walls.

“Fee, fi, fo, fum... I be lookin’ for my little one. Where be you hidin’, Miss Molly Campeau? Come out now, ’cause I’m gonna find you.”

The joy in the little girl’s face would have been hard to miss. Molly started screaming with delight as she ran down the stairs. “Daddy, Daddy!” A giant of a man stood at the base of the staircase with his arms flung wide. The little girl leapt into his embrace. The man twirled her around and around until both of them collapsed in a laughing heap on the floor.

Tammy also took notice of a second man standing behind the pair. Handsome, tall and muscular, his bulging muscles stretched the white tee shirt tautly across his chest. A giggle escaped her lips when she read the words emblazoned there—“Give blood. Play hockey.”

The man’s eyes landed on her and seemed to expand as if he were drinking her in. Her cheeks warmed when a smile slowly covered his face. “Daddy, Nurse Tammy is here. Did you see her?”

Mickey climbed to his feet. “Hey there, lady. So good to see ya.” With two giant strides, he reached her and engulfed Tammy in his arms. Mickey lifted Tammy off the ground and the bear hug squeezed the air from within her. “You be planning on staying for Christmas, eh?”

She could only nod until she could reclaim her breath. “Thanks for inviting me, though I’m a little worried about tonight.”

“Aww, now don’t be. It’ll be just like talking to friends.”

Riley appeared from another room. “The tea’s ready. Mickey, Rocco, I made some for you, too. Please join us.”

The smile on the face of the man in the white shirt widened. “Can we have some more of those cookies you and Molly made?”

Mickey turned to face the man. “Hey now, maybe just one for you. That be my private stash, you know? Don’t you be eating all my goodies.”

Riley led them into the dining room. The chinaware sported a couple skating in front of a pine forest.

After they were seated, Mickey turned to Molly. “Can you say the prayer to the Big Man for us?”

When the little girl bowed her head and clasped her hands, Tammy followed suit. “God is great, God is good. Let us thank Him for our food. And make sure Santa brings me my skates tonight. Amen.”

Riley smiled and then passed the large plate of cookies to Tammy. “As you can guess, Molly wants a pair of figure skates so we can go ice skating.”

“I want hockey skates, like my daddy wears. Daddy and me love to skate, don’t we, Daddy?”

“That’s right,” Mickey said. “I bought the farm next door ’cause it has a large pond. If Santa comes through, maybe all of us can go gliding along the slippery surface tomorrow.”

Tammy nibbled on a scrumptious peanut butter cookie. She caught the look Riley shot her husband. “Did you introduce Tammy to Rocco?”

Mickey smacked himself in the head. “Where be my manners?” He turned to face Tammy and pointed at the other man. “This is Rocco, one of my oldest

friends. We played hockey together back in Canada when we were just boys. You can call him ‘Streak’ if’n you want to.” He then pivoted to his friend. “And this nice lady is Tammy. She was Molly’s nurse ’fore I adopted my girl.”

To her surprise, Rocco stood and bowed. “So nice to meet you, Tammy. And please, call me Rocco or just ‘Rock.’ Ignore that ‘Streak’ thing. One thing I learned over the years, you always gotta pick and choose what Mickey Campeau says.”

Tammy offered the man a smile, which in turn caused her cheeks to heat. His brown eyes seemed to sparkle. “It’s a pleasure to meet you as well. Do you still play hockey?”

“Aye, but not professionally anymore. I retired after last season. Mickey and I were lucky enough to play on the same team our entire careers, and when he left, so did the fun. He was always pulling pranks on people, but most often it was on me.” His eyes seemed to drink her in. The room appeared to shrink until it was just the two of them.

Mickey’s laugh broke the trance. “The Streak missed me so much, he agreed to move into the farm we just bought. Let’s hope he turns out to be a better farmer than he was a goalie.”

“Hey now. Don’t be a hater just ’cause a few pucks got past me. I seem to remember quite a few of your failures, too.” Rocco turned to Tammy. “See what I mean about picking and choosing what he says?”

Riley touched her arm. “These two have been acting like teenagers since Rocco got here.”

Tammy was scared to look at Rocco because her hands might not stop shaking. The former goalie was very cute... and that smile? *I really like him.*

She mentally shook her head and forced her eyes back to Riley. Mickey's wife was sporting a know-it-all smile. *She can see right through me.* Riley shot her a wink.

"We appreciate you coming to the event this evening. It's always a fun time. We're bringing Molly along. She's kind of a local celebrity."

Without the consent of her mind, she turned to Rocco and asked, "Are you coming tonight?"

His eyes seemed to smile at her. "I don't know. What's going on?"

Riley replied, "There's a local fundraiser to fight childhood cancer."

Rocco raised his brows when he looked at Riley. "All because of your little girl?"

"Actually, it started because of another girl, Ashley Campbell. Ash had cancer twice, first at six and then at fourteen. She beat it both times."

Rocco looked at Tammy. "And you were her nurse, too, weren't you?"

His eyes seemed filled with amazement. *How could he know that?* Tammy slowly nodded. "Yes."

Christmas Eve



Night

Rocco held the door open for Tammy and the Campeaus. A lovely lady with black hair was standing nearby. She had dimples on her chin and right cheek when she smiled.

“Look who it is.” She knelt down and gave Molly a hug. “Are you ready for Santa?”

Molly nodded. “Yep. He’s gonna bring me ice skates.”

“I hope he does. Have a Merry Christmas.”

A cute blonde walked over. From the corner of his eye, Rocco caught Tammy watching him. *To see if I’m checking out the woman?*

“Merry Christmas and welcome to the Essence of Tuscany Tea Room and our annual cancer fundraiser. I’m Sophie Miller, the proprietor and your hostess.” While Rocco liked the lady’s British accent and thought she was pretty, his eyes were on Tammy. There seemed to be something special about this nurse he’d just met. Most women he’d dated while playing hockey seemed flashy and fake. But this lady? Compassion and care seemed to flow from every pore. *She’s the real deal.* The hostess dropped them off at a large table and then left.

Three people were already seated there. Rocco watched as Tammy’s hand covered her mouth for a

second before she spoke. "Aren't you the news anchor from the Harrisburg television station?"

Riley spoke. "Good eye. You're right. This is Didi Phillips-Zinn. We used to work together and Didi's like a sister to me." The lady said hi to everyone and then stood to give Riley a long hug.

A couple was seated next to Didi. The man struggled to his feet, which seemed odd, based on his youthful appearance.

"We've met before." Tammy's words surprised Rocco. He followed her gaze to the man who stood before them. "You used to come into the hospital to visit with Ashley, but I can't remember your name."

He nodded. "I remember you as well. I'm Sam Espenshade, Riley's brother. And yes, I hung out with Ash during the rough times. Good to see you again." He lifted the hand of the second woman sitting at the table and kissed it. "And this is my bride, Hannah."

Bride? That struck Rocco as odd due to the difference in age between the pair. *Does age matter when you're in love?* His eyes drifted from Hannah to Tammy. *I know she's older than me.* He'd never been a good judge of age, but did it really matter how old Tammy was? *Nope, not at all.*

Rocco took the seat next to Mickey, and immediately could have kicked himself for not sitting next to Tammy. As he watched her, Rocco concluded she was nervous. Her hands were shaking. *Maybe I should just change seats and move over there.*

The voice of the owner drew everyone's attention. She held a microphone. "Good evening and Merry Christmas. Thank you for attending our charity dinner and fundraiser. We'll be inviting you to the buffet, table

by table. After the meal, we'll have a few speakers and then top off the night with some holiday dance music. Please enjoy yourselves."

When their table was called, Rocco intentionally rushed over so he could walk with Tammy. She gave him an anxious smile. He asked her, "You okay?"

The expression turned into a frown. "Not really. I'm remembering how little I adore public speaking. I'm really dreading the thought of standing up in front of everyone."

"I used to feel that way too, when I had to talk to a crowd. Mickey taught me how to get over it."

She eyed him strangely. "And how was that?"

"Pretend they're all naked. When I do that, all I can think about is how self-conscious they'd be if that were true."

The frown was replaced with a smile. "Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"And if that doesn't work, I have a suggestion guaranteed to succeed."

The corners of her eyes curved. "Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Look at me. I'll be your safe spot, your anchor and refuge in the storm of anxiety."

Tammy's eyes met his and it was as if time stopped. Her green eyes shimmered in the low light and seemed to beckon him closer. The warmth of her hand against his cheek surprised him. Tammy's lips were so close...

"Hey. You two mind either gettin' a move on or findin' a room? You know, some of us be hungry back here."

Rocco turned to face Mickey. “Hey. You be nice back there or I’ll have to come visit and teach you what it means to have patience.”

His friend laughed. “As if’n you could fight your way out of a wet paper bag. I dare ya’, Tinkerbelle.”

Tammy laughed. “Tinkerbelle? You need glasses, Mickey. I think Rocco’s more like Superman.” She patted Rocco’s shoulder. “Go ahead and take him, Rocco. The best way to deal with a bully is to stand up to him.”

Mickey did a double take. His laughter roared through the tea room. “Bully? I thought we were friends.”

She winked. “We are, but I couldn’t resist taking a shot.”

Mickey slapped Rocco’s shoulder. “She fits in purty well, don’t she?”

Rocco once again searched her face. “Aye. That she does. That she does.”

Rocco had moved next to Tammy during the meal. Some lady from the American Cancer Society spoke for a few minutes, followed by a short girl with thick blonde hair.

Tammy whispered to him. “That’s Ashley. I’m so proud of her.”

When the younger girl was finished, Riley walked to the podium and spoke about Molly’s life. How close she’d been to death, but God had saved her by sending Mickey Campeau into the little girl’s world. Rocco had never been a man to shed tears, but hearing the story made his vision blurry. He stared at little Molly,

watching her suck her thumb as she snuggled in Mickey's arms.

A hand squeezed his arm and interrupted his thoughts. "Wish me luck." Tammy stood and then walked to the podium. Rocco could sense her trepidation.

"Hi. My name is Tammy Kunkle and I'm a nurse. I work taking care of victims of childhood cancer." For a few moments she gave some statistics and then focused back on Molly. "I dedicated my life to fighting cancer in honor of my daughter, Marianne. She was diagnosed with Leukemia at fourteen months." Rocco saw Tammy wipe her cheek. "As a nurse, I felt sure and confident we could beat it."

The entire tea room was silent as they waited for her to continue. "But I was wrong. Cancer took everything from me. Marianne passed away three days before her second birthday. And the grief of her death drove my husband insane. It was too much for him. He joined my daughter the day after we buried her." Tammy was sobbing and palming her eyes.

I need to do something for her, but what?

"My baby would have been sixteen this year, but, but..."

Rocco stood and cleared his throat loud enough that most everyone in the tea room turned to face him. Tammy also heard the noise and her eyes engaged him from a distance. Through her tears she smiled sadly. "I couldn't help either of them, but I vowed to fight cancer with everything I had. Sometimes we don't win, but for every loss, there are thirty little ones with names like Ashley or Molly who do beat this disease. I try to do my part... and I do it for my Marianne. Now, please do your

part to help us find a cure for cancer. Let's not rest until no parent ever has to bury a child lost to cancer, ever again."

Tammy stepped away from the podium. Every chair was empty because every single person was on their feet applauding. The woman walked straight to Rocco and much to his surprise, threw her arms around him.

"Thank you."

"For what? I didn't do anything."

"Yes, you did. You were my anchor, my refuge in the storm." Her lips brushed his cheek.

"Wow. If I'd have known you were going to reward me with a kiss, I'd have stood on the table the whole time."

Christmas Day



The knock on the door raised Tammy from her slumber. “Yes?”

Riley’s voice floated in from the hallway. “Molly just woke up. Thought you might want to share Christmas morning with her.”

“Okay. I’ll be down shortly.”

“Good. Mickey made breakfast sandwiches and a fruit cocktail. I’ll get you a plate. Want coffee or tea?”

Tammy hadn’t slept well, for two reasons. “Coffee, please. With cream.”

“You’ve got it.”

Shuffling to the private bath, Tammy took a good look at her reflection in the mirror. It had been so difficult to give her testimony at the event, like ripping the scab off a nasty wound. The nightmare of the dual loss of first her baby and then her husband was as fresh this morning as when it happened. But that wasn’t the only thing that had kept her up.

A second knock on the door interrupted her. “Yes?”

Rocco’s voice now beckoned. “Good morning. I wanted to check if you were coming down.”

“Yes, I’m just getting my robe.”

“Would you like me to wait or may I save you a seat?”

Save me a seat? Maybe it hadn't been a dream. "If I can meet you downstairs, that would be great."

"Swell. I'm looking forward to it."

The mirror called her again. The second reason for her insomnia was that man. When she was speaking at the tea room, Tammy had been about to lose it. Until he stood up and became just what he'd said... the rock she could anchor to in that torrid sea of hurt. Like a lighthouse in a hurricane.

She considered his presence as she brushed her teeth. *What is it about him?* For the first time in years, feelings of affection that had been locked in the prison of her heart had escaped. *But I just met him.* Was it because of his looks... or something else that drew her to him?

More banging on her door. This time it was Molly. "Tammy, hurry! Daddy won't let me open my presents until you come down."

"Sorry, sweetheart. I'm coming now." She opened the door to her room to find the girl hopping around. Molly grabbed her hand and pulled Tammy down the staircase. "Santa came! Santa came!"

Beautifully decorated packages filled the space below the tree. Molly released her grip and ran to her parents. Mickey kissed her head. "Merry Christmas, little one. Pick out a present, then come sit on Mommy's lap."

Across the living room sat the man who'd been a stranger yesterday, but was so much more in her thoughts last night. He held a cup and saucer. "You look beautiful this morning. How about enjoying the cup of java Riley made for us?"

Rocco was sitting there, wearing an orange tee shirt that sported the mascot for the Philadelphia Flyers. His smile made her mouth dry.

Rocco patted the seat next to him. “Merry Christmas.”

She sat and he handed a cup to her. “This will help drive away the cobwebs.”

“Now don’t you be afraid to dig into dat food,” Mickey said. “I made dem sandwiches myself.”

Riley shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Please eat up. If you don’t, the master chef’s Christmas will be ruined.”

Mickey’s eyes were focused on his daughter. “Nah, nothin’ can ruin this day.”

While the adults munched their breakfast, Molly tore the wrappings off her presents. Tammy’s mind was elsewhere, specifically on her daughter’s last Christmas. Were the visions in her head the result of the memories she’d dredged up last night?

A quiet whisper brought her back to the present. “Are you thinking about your little girl?” Tammy turned to find Rocco’s eyes on her.

“How did you know?”

“It took a lot of courage and selflessness to do what you did last night. You spoke from your heart and I know it came with a cost, didn’t it?”

She studied his face in wonder. “How could you possibly know that?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “I’m not really sure. I can’t explain it, but I feel like we... like... like you and I are connected in some way.”

“Connected?”

Rocco nodded slowly. "I felt it last night, when you were at the podium. You were struggling and, I don't know why, but I knew you needed me. That's why I stood up. To let you know I was there for you."

"You, you felt that? How?"

"I'm not sure. Nothing like this ever happened to me before."

Molly stamped her foot. "I'm mad. Santa forgot."

Both Tammy and Rocco turned to face Molly and her parents. Mickey pulled his daughter onto his lap. "What's wrong, Molly?"

The little girl's lip stuck out. "I didn't get no skates."

"Are you sure?"

"There's no more presents for me under the tree."

Mickey winked at his wife. "Well, Molly, ya did get a bunch o' stuff. Maybe Santa put it somewhere else. Did ya check the closet?"

Molly turned, hands on her hips. "Why would he put it there?"

Riley brushed the girl's hair from her eyes. "I don't know, but maybe you should check."

Molly still didn't appear to be convinced, but she walked to the closet door and pulled it open. The little girl let out a squeal as she found a wide, thin and tall box from the closet. She carried it over and jumped on Riley's lap. Molly tore the paper away and retrieved a juvenile hockey stick.

"Daddy, Daddy, will you play hockey with me today?"

Riley was laughing. "That stick has to be used outside, okay Molly?"

"Can we play hockey today, Daddy?"

Mickey snapped a photo with his cell and then scratched his head. "You be missing somethin'. Maybe you better go back and look in the closet to see if'n Santa left anythin' else."

Running back to the storage area, Molly lugged a square box to her parents. Mickey lifted his daughter onto Riley's lap. Molly ripped the coverings off, then threw the lid to the floor. "He remembered! Look it, Daddy." From the container, Molly lifted the cutest pair of skates Tammy had ever seen.

Tammy noted the look of confusion on Riley's face. "Uh, Mickey. I think Santa was confused. Those look like hockey skates, not like the regular type we discussed... with Santa."

Mickey's face turned red. "Yeah, well maybe he got confused, eh?"

Riley shook her head as Molly tried to don the skates. "You need to wait until we go outside to use those. Could you pass out the other gifts?"

Reluctantly, the child returned the skates to the box. She retrieved several packages and delivered them after Mommy read the tags. To her surprise, Molly handed two to Tammy and one to Rocco. The thoughtfulness of the Campeaus touched her.

Rocco opened his gift to find a John Deere ball cap.

"You can wear dat while you're out working on the farm," Mickey teased. "Ya know, to remind you to do farmwork instead of warmin' the bench as a backup goalie."

Riley's eyes were on Tammy as she opened the smaller of the two boxes. Inside was a grey silk bag. Tammy lifted the ornament from the bag. It was the

outline of an angel and Molly's picture was on one side. On the flip side, an inscription waited.

You are an angel in our eyes and words can never express the gratitude for the kindness you gave to our Molly. We are forever grateful for you, Tammy. Love, Riley and Mickey Campeau

Everything was getting blurry. "Thank you. I don't know what to say."

Both Mickey and Riley walked over and took turns hugging her. Mickey's voice was soft. "Riley and I talked about dis. We want you to be active in Molly's life and hope you'll visit often. You're a part of dis family now. And you are always welcome in our home."

Molly came over and gave Tammy a hug. But the girl's words were almost too much. "I love you, Tammy."

She drew Molly into her arms and clung tightly. Marianne's face flashed before her eyes.

Tammy released the girl and sat back. To her surprise, Rocco quickly squeezed her hand. "It's okay, my friend. I'm here." She turned and took in the wonder and strength in his eyes. Her gaze drifted to his lips.

"Tammy, open up your other present. Me and Mommy picked it out." Molly was holding a square box.

"Is this for me?"

Molly was dancing around. "Yep. Open it."

The look of anticipation on the girl's face made Tammy excited. She tore the wrapping and opened the lid. Inside was a pair of white ice skates. "Oh, wow! I

haven't had ice skates since I was a little girl, back in Nebraska. This is so thoughtful.”

“You can play hockey with me now.”

“But it's been so long. I might fall.”

Rocco's touch was soft against her arm. “Skating is like riding a bike. It'll come back. And besides, I'll be right beside you. Like your anchor in a storm.”

Christmas Night



“Say goodnight, Molly.” Riley held the little girl in her arms.

With a sleepy voice, Molly managed a half-hearted wave. “Night.” The day filled with happiness had exhausted her.

Rocco watched as Mickey took the child from his wife and the trio headed up the stairs. Rocco turned his gaze to the beauty next to him, Tammy. His palms still tingled from her touch when they’d skated earlier. The lady had clung tightly to him at first, but he’d been right. Just like riding a bike, skating had come back.

“Thank you for today... and for your strength last night as well.” Tammy’s smile lifted his heart, but when her face changed into a frown, his spirit tumbled. “You were a godsend and I’ll miss you when I head back tomorrow.”

“It doesn’t have to be the end. How far away is your home?”

“I live in Elizabethtown, about thirty miles away.”

“Well, that’s not so far. I don’t know if you remember, but I’m moving to the farm right next door. I was hoping to ask if I could come visit you sometime. I really like you.”

Her smile was sad. “Rocco, I’m attracted to you, too, but there are a lot of things stacked against us.”

“Such as?”

“Well, the distance for one.”

“I like driving. Just bought a new car. What else you got?”

She pursed her lips before speaking. “My work schedule is crazy. I work days, nights and evenings, then every third weekend and alternating holidays.”

“I used to have a crazy work schedule when I played in the NHL. Now it will be easier, being a farmer. I won’t have all that wicked travel. Next issue?”

She seemed to have trouble meeting his eyes. “You’re so young and in the prime of your life. I’m older and life has filled me with so much sadness, I, I... it would drag you down. I don’t know what you could possibly see in me. And we’re facing impossible odds.”

I don’t see it that way. “Let me tell you a story. A couple of years ago, our team was the number one seed in the conference. We’d set all kind of records. But in the second round of the playoffs, we stumbled. My team gave away the first three games and our backs were to the wall. And in the fourth game, our opponents handed us our heads in the first two periods. We were down by three goals. Then on a freak play, our first-string goalie broke his leg. Victory was impossible. We were doomed.”

Tammy’s eyes were glued to his face. “I’m sorry. I don’t follow hockey very much, but it must have been disappointing.”

“Every man on the team knew it was over, except one.” Rocco pointed up the stairs. “Mickey Campeau. The same man who carried his daughter upstairs tonight. Mickey called a timeout and motioned for the entire bench to come out on the ice. I still remember

his speech. *'Boys, our backs are to the wall. Ta most everyone else, dey've done thrown in the towel. This season's eulogy is written. Know what I say? BULL CRAP. We still got time to write our own story. Instead of a tale of disappointment, let's leave them all with the legend of how we turned it around and won everything. This is our appointment wid destiny, and I believe we were born for this moment in time, to be Champions. And if we truly believe it, we can do it. Now let's go kick their butts.'*

She continued to stare at him. "What happened?"

"We fought as hard as we could, cutting their lead to two and then down to one. With less than a second left, Mickey scored the tying goal and we beat them in overtime. The team won every single game from there on out and we took home the Stanley Cup."

Tammy shook her head. "That's a nice story, but..."

I'm not giving up. "Tammy, before you say no, will you do something with me?"

"W-what?"

"Come outside and go for an evening skate."

"But Rocco, it's dark outside."

"Actually, there's a full moon tonight and not a cloud in the sky to block it. What do you say?"

Tammy took several measured breaths before nodding. Rocco took her hand and led her outside, past the hockey snowmen they'd built in the yard. Over the white-planked pasture fence. Through the meadow, until they reached the three-quarter acre pond. Side by side they sat on a bench in the moonlight while they laced up their skates. Tammy's were white and dainty. Rocco's were husky, black and scarred.

He waited until she was finished and then offered her his hand. He couldn't help but notice how she trembled. They skated in silence for a few rounds along the edge before he led her to the center. "Now, look at the moon." Tammy turned away from him to face the celestial object. Rocco shifted and wrapped his arms around her. "What do you see?"

"I don't know. I see the moon, I guess. How about you?"

"When I was a boy, I'd gaze at the lunar surface for hours some evenings. I used to think how the moon would look back at earth and all the things it saw. Tragedy, storms, happiness, life and death. And then I thought about how each of us here has our own story, our own life to live. Your native Indians used to tell time by the passage of the moon."

Tammy turned until she faced him. "I've read that."

"I believe you have many moons to live yet, Tammy. And you also have a choice. You can live them alone, stuck in the past, or you can write a new story from here on out. A story filled with happiness... and hopefully... love." Rocco rubbed his nose against hers, before finding her lips. Their first kiss was warm and wet. "What would you think about seeing where we go? Over time, I mean."

"Is this a dream?"

Rocco again pressed his lips to hers. "I don't think so. I believe this is real, at least I hope so. Let's make our own story, one that future generations will look back on in amazement. What do you think?"

Time stopped. It was as if she were watching a movie. Rocco's eyes sparkled in the moonlight, but the image of his face slowly faded. The face of a little girl

gazed back at her, silently begging her for help. It was Molly, and Tammy knew the exact moment. It was the day they had decided to discontinue Molly's treatment. The girl's chance of survival was almost nil. But God had brought Mickey Campeau not only to adopt Molly, but to be the perfect donor for a transplant. That was a miracle.

Molly's face dwindled away and Rocco's handsome visage was smiling. *He wants me, but how could it ever work?* A light breeze rippled through the man's hair.

A second man's image appeared. He was deathly pale as he lay in the intensive care unit. The patient was Mickey Campeau and Riley sat holding his hand as she tried to be brave. Tammy well remembered this moment as well. An uncontrolled fever wracked the man's body, caused by a secondary infection following the transplant surgery.

Tammy's vision blurred with the memory. Mickey's doctor had recommended comfort care to allow the big man to pass peacefully, but Mickey's sister had insisted they do what they could. As a nurse, Tammy knew that even if Mickey did beat the odds and live, the probability of permanent brain damage was almost certain.

The hospital scene transformed to a moment she'd witnessed today. A happy memory where Mickey and Riley skated on the pond, a smiling and boisterous brunette laughing between them. Mickey should have died, but beat all odds. That was another miracle.

Rocco's smile once again took precedence over her thoughts. The twinkle in his eyes transported her to yet another vision. It was summer and Rocco was dancing

with her, under a summer moon. A warmth filled her chest, like she'd never known before.

A voice filled her ears. *If I can cure a little girl from cancer and save a good man's life, don't you think I can free your heart to love again? Do not be afraid because I am with you, always.*

Rocco's voice broke the illusion. "Will you skate off into the moonset with me... make our own story, one that future generations will look back on in amazement? What do you think?"

I trust in Your promise. Tammy slowly nodded her head before she took his hand. Together, they skated into the night and under the moon, toward a future ripe for a happy eternity.



*Thank you for reading **Skating in Paradise**. The **Paradise** series is about the lives and loves of those who frequent Sophie Miller's Tea Room.*

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Whispers in Paradise – Brothers Harry and Edmund Campbell have but two things in common – their mutual distrust and their taste in women. What happens when they fall in love with the same girl – not once, but twice?

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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Janet, my soulmate, my best friend, my wife. Your love and encouragement gave me the courage to believe I could live out my dream. I wish I could go back to the first second I saw you, and cherish every second we've spent together. Instead, I'll settle for spending eternity by your side. No words could ever describe how I feel about you, so I'll offer this – *I love you forever and ever!*

Acknowledgments

To God, for all the blessings You have sent my way.

To my best friend, for being, well, perfect.

To Demi, for helping me grow as an author.

To my children and grandchildren – as you read these stories of love, realize they have their root in the life Janet and I have lived. May you always have love in your heart and know, no matter where you go or what you do, we'll always be with you.

About the Author



Chas Williamson's lifelong dream was to write. He started writing his first book at age eight, but quit after two paragraphs. Yet some dreams never fade...

It's said one should write what one knows best. That left two choices—the world of environmental health and safety... or romance. Chas and his bride have built a fairytale life of love. At her encouragement, he began writing romance. The characters you'll meet in his books are very real to him, and he hopes they'll become just as real to you.

True Love Lasts Forever!

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