



Heart Of Winter: Woman HaterIf Winter Comes

By Diana Palmer

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Woman Hater -- Everyone in the office described the boss's mysterious older brother as wary of the female of the species -- a real woman hater. He'd been burned in the past, and now was twice shy, to say the least. So when Nicole White had to travel with her ailing employer to his brother's home in Montana, she was prepared for the worst.

What she found was a man more roughly masculine than any she'd ever met. But Winthrop Christopher's distrust of women ran straight to the bone. Nicki knew she couldn't hide from the feelings he stirred in her. Could she ever teach this woman hater to love again?

If Winter Comes -- Charismatic Phoenix mayor Bryan Moreland had already won the devotion of his constituents and was well on his way to getting reporter Carla Maxwell's vote . . . until she found out that the hunky leader wasn't all he claimed to be. Rumor had it the popular politician was an embezzler. It was just a rumor, Carla told herself. As a reporter she'd have to get to the bottom of it; as a woman, she wanted nothing more than to lose herself in sexy Mayor Moreland's arms. Or was that exactly where he wanted her, for reasons other than love and seduction?

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Editorial Review

Review

"Diana Palmer is a mesmerizing story teller who captures the essence of what a romance should be." -- *Affaire de Couer*

"Nobody does it better." -- *Award-winning author Linda Howard*

"Nobody tops Diana Palmer when it comes to delivering pure, undiluted romance. I love her stories." -- *New York Times bestselling author Jayne Ann Krentz*

"Palmer knows how to make sparks fly . . . heartwarming." -- *Publishers Weekly on Renegade*

"Sensual and suspenseful . . ." -- *Booklist on Lawless*

About the Author

The prolific author of over 100 books, Diana Palmer got her start as a newspaper reporter. A multi-*New York Times* bestselling author and one of the top ten romance writers in America, she has a gift for telling the most sensual tales with charm and humor. Diana lives with her family in Cornelia, Georgia.

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When Gerald Christopher first suggested going to his family ranch in Montana to rest his recently diagnosed ulcer for a few weeks, Nicole had instant reservations. He was the boss, of course, and if he wanted to go to Montana, there was no reason he shouldn't. But Nicole liked the pleasant routine of life in Chicago, where she'd spent the last two years working for the Christopher Corporation. At twenty-two, Nicole White had found a nice, pleasant rut for herself and she didn't particularly like change.

The problem was that if Mr. Christopher went to Montana for a month, as he was threatening, and closed down his personal office while he was gone, Nicole would be out of a job until his return. Despite her adequate wages, trying to live for a month without any salary was a frightening thought. That was almost laughable considering her background, because Nicole's family had been one of the old moneyed ones of Kentucky. Her father, in fact, was still one of the jet set, a noted sportsman as well as a horse-racing magnate, and lived the part. Nicole had long since renounced her share of the family fortune and gone to work for a living.

Her mother's death had been the last straw. Her father had been with his latest mistress at the time, not that he'd ever been home a lot. That hadn't mattered at the time, because Nicole had been sure that her new fiancé, Chase James, would set up their marriage and that his job as a real estate agent would make it possible for him to support the two of them. She'd figured wrong. Once Chase found out that Nicole had been foolish enough to give up her family fortune--and when he realized that she couldn't possibly be talked out of it--he asked for his ring back. His immediate defection to one of Nicole's moneyed and eligible girlfriends had shattered her young life.

At the age of twenty, she'd left the elegant brick mansion of her childhood in Lexington, Kentucky, and a racehorse farm worth millions, to live the frugal life as a secretary in Chicago, where she had a friend with

whom she could room. She smiled, remembering her lack of skills at the time, and how patient Mr. Christopher had been until she'd crammed in some courses at the local secretarial school. Lucky for her that he'd liked her personality and had decided to take a chance on her secretarial skills improving. They had. She'd graduated from the course at the top of her class.

It all seemed a long time ago now, a part of her life that was like some slowly fading photograph of a reality she no longer belonged to....

"You'll like it there, Nicky," Gerald Christopher said dreamily, staring out the window. "The ranch is in the southern part of the state, nestled in the Rocky Mountains. It's rich with forests, lakes, rivers, peace and quiet. Just the thing to help me get over this ulcer they've diagnosed. We can work in peace and you can have plenty of free time to yourself."

"But your brother and his family--won't they mind having your secretary to house and feed?" she asked, her pale green eyes hesitant in a plain but interesting oval face, surrounded by naturally curling short dark hair. Despite the fact that she'd worked for him for two years, she knew very little about his private life. He'd never made a habit of talking casually about anything personal, as some employers did. She knew he had a brother, and he'd mentioned a woman named Mary, whom she'd assumed was his sister-in-law. But that was really all she knew about him in any personal way.

"Winthrop doesn't have a family," he said, smiling as he turned toward her. He was tall with brown hair and dark brown eyes. Not a bad-looking man and he seemed pleasant enough, but he wasn't a woman chaser or a ladies' man. He was very businesslike and a terrific boss, and Nicky adored him. In a purely businesslike way, of course. Her heart was pretty impregnable these days, hardened by Chase's cruel defection. That had ended her dreams of marriage. The hated wealth that had blinded her to men's greed was gone now, too. And without her designer clothing and her diamonds, men didn't seem to notice her at all. Of course, her manner was stiff and off-putting with most men, but she didn't even realize it.

"Your brother came to the office once, didn't he?" she ventured, recalling vaguely a tall, very cold sort of man she'd barely glimpsed on an unusually hectic day and had learned later that it was Mr. Christopher's mysterious older brother.

"Yes, he did," he said. "Winthrop owns a small share in the corporation, you see, but he's the silent partner. He doesn't care for desks and boardrooms. Dad left him the ranch, which is worth a mint, and I have an equally small share in that. He's primarily a cattleman, and I'm a businessman, so we each have what we like most. He's something of a loner. But as long as we keep out of his way, we won't have any trouble."

That sounded ominous. She looked at the green-lined white steno pad in her lap. "A month is a long time," she said slowly.

"Come on, Nicky, what have you got going that you can't walk away from?" he chided gently. "No boyfriends, no evening classes. A month in the country would do you good. If that wealth of potted plants you surround your desk with is any indication, you must be a country girl at heart. Or at the very least, a frustrated gardener."

She laughed. "I do love plants. And, yes, I'm a country girl. I was born and bred in Kentucky," she confessed, "and I guess I do miss it sometimes. My people were farmers," she added, tossing off the white lie as easily as she twirled the pen in her slender hand. That was the story she told people, anyway, and it prevented a lot of embarrassing questions about why she'd given up all that money.

"And farming isn't the best profession to be in these days," he agreed with a fond smile. "I can see why you came to the big city. But since you do like the country, I presume, where's the problem?"

She sighed. "It's not quite orthodox."

"No, little puritan, it isn't," he agreed. "But for the next month, you're my private secretary and I'll even increase your salary to make it more acceptable."

"Oh, but that's not nec--" she began.

"Certainly it is," he countered, waving a lean hand at her. "I'm tired of the rat race, Nicky. I need rest or this ulcer is going to put me in the hospital. We'll both benefit from some mountain air."

"It's October," she reminded him. "Late October. Doesn't it snow in Montana in late October?"

"Oh, frequently," he agreed. "And the ranch is way up in the Rockies, near the Todd place--" he paused, glancing at her with an odd expression "--you remember Sadie, don't you?"

"Yes. She was very nice." A nurse, in fact, and Nicole's taciturn young boss had dated her and had been devastated when she left several months ago to take care of her invalid mother. Hmm, Nicole thought; that was about the time his health problems reared their ugly head.

"Anyway, the ranch is near the Todd place," he continued, "and we used to get snowed in a good bit. But we always get a chinook when we need one, and we can dig our way out. Stop worrying."

"What's a chinook?"

"A warm wind that comes unexpectedly to melt the snow," he said, smiling. "You'll love it there, Nicky. I promise."

I hope so, she thought. All at once she wondered if he had more than just health reasons for wanting to work at home. Sadie had managed to drag him out of his shell, and there had been a tangible something between them before her abrupt departure. It might turn out to be an interesting trip. "All right, I'll go," she agreed. "But you're sure your brother won't mind?"

He looked vaguely disturbed for a second. Then he smiled. "Of course I'm sure."

Nicky wondered later about that hesitation. Mr. Christopher had hardly ever mentioned his brother in all the time she'd worked for him. But through the office grapevine there had been some small bit of gossip about the Montana rancher, something someone had whispered just after his brief visit. If only she could remember it.

Becky, a blond and vivacious woman who worked for one of the vice presidents, breezed into the office after Mr. Christopher had left for the day.

"What's this I hear about some exotic vacation you're taking with the big boss?" she teased.

Nicky laughed. "If you call the backwoods of Montana exotic, then I guess it's true." She sighed as she covered the computer. "I do hope you'll come to my funeral. I have visions of being eaten by a puma or carried off by a moose."

"You might be carried off by Winthrop." Becky grinned.

"Or haven't you heard the grizzly tales about him?"

Nicole turned, her eyes wide and curious. "Is he terrible?"

"A wild man, from what we hear. They said some society girl threw him over a few years back, and he actually went to her engagement party with a Hollywood movie star--a girl who turned out to have been a school friend of his and owed him a favor. He called up the friend and paid her expenses all the way from Hollywood, just for the occasion. Ruined the event, of course, since the movie star got all the attention. He used to be a ladies' man and he's always been well-to-do, and he traveled in those very ritzy circles. But since then, he's pretty much given up his playboy status and turned to the great outdoors. They say his experience with the blond heiress has soured him against rich women in a big way. Can't blame him too much, can you?"

"He sounds...interesting." Nicky chose her words carefully; it wouldn't do to show her fear.

"Looks that way, too, except for the scars and the limp. Although the scars had faded nicely the day he was in here." She grinned at Nicky. "He sure gave you a look, but you were so busy you didn't even notice him."

"I remember him, but I didn't look long enough to see the limp." She frowned. "How did he get it?"

"From the wreck. Deanne Sharp--of the Aspen Sharps, you know, ski-resort wear and accessories, and Winthrop's fiancée at the time--was driving. They crashed. H..."

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