

Twelve Times Blessed

by Jacquelyn Mitchard

Chapter One Excerpt

February

My Funny Valentine

We challenge you to find more soul-satisfying chocolates than these, packed inside a red satin keepsake box (maybe to hide those first lost teeth, after the Tooth Fairy comes?). That's for you alone. Baby will snuggle in a white-and-red striped hooded pullover, suitable to the season, and each of you will sport a size-appropriate pair of seasonal socks, edged with golden arrows for boys, and hearts and beads of pink and red (impossible for even the most curious little fingers to remove) for girls. Romance missing in your life since the advent of you-know-whom? Not after you relax to this CD. "Bolero" is only the beginning.

A familiar place, when you have gained heft of life, can feel as confining as a familiar pair of pants when you've put on weight. True Dickinson has gained both, and her discomfort is as much the pinch of regret as the bitterness she feels when she has to suck in her gut to fasten her buttons.

As the crow flies, which is how people like to put it, True Dickinson lives only a mile from Nantucket Sound. But recently, and with regret, she has been unable to see the pewter of its winter billowing with customary awe, just as she has stopped looking at her friends with gratitude, at her success with pride, at her small family with surprised contentment. Not since she came from her birthplace in Amherst to the Cape, first as a sitter during college summer breaks, then as a bride with her husband, a pilot for the commuter airline, has she felt such unaccustomed restlessness. Stray and strange thoughts of moving away sometimes escape her purposeful days like loose strands that occasionally escape from her tight and sensible French braid, which True is so accustomed to plaiting every morning she could do it in the dark. She catches herself thinking, I'll blow town, light out for the territories, just my son and me, leave the Cape altogether for a someplace with more oxygen and more sky.

Her consternation, of course, is misplaced.

It is situational, not locational.

For just as crows don't really fly straight -- they are so curious, always swooping off on avian tangents to explore something shiny or smelly, that it probably takes a crow longer to get anywhere than it takes a human being in a car obeying the speed limit -- True feels trapped not by the lack of space in the life around her but by the profusion of empty space of life within her. She is lonely. The ends of her life are working their way loose. Her son, whom she is accustomed to thinking of as a little

child, is nearly ten, middle-aged, in kid years. Thus, True can no longer pretend she is a "young widow." Her mother is growing older; her longtime assistants speak of plans to relocate, to take on new adventures.

She is beginning to see herself as the point from which other things depart.

Would she describe herself in this way? Perhaps under hypnosis.

True knows that she's suffering from seasonal lag. And 'tis the season for *that*. February is no less lonely a month in a resort community, where every view is a watercolor landscape, than it is anywhere else, and may be more so. The closed lids of shops shuttered until summer are depressing to those who pass them, even to locals who rave about having their streets and churches all to themselves. It's a common misconception that people who are inclined to take their own lives do so at Christmas. The truth is that fingers itch for a strong piece of rope or a stash of sedatives starting in February, when the holidays have failed to deliver on their promise, and when the unbearable renewal of life brims just around the corner.

It is a particularly bad month for True. The month of her birth, it is also the month of her husband's long-ago death. Peter Lemieux, who flew eight-seater Cessnas through rowdy coastal weather for a living, died ironically, struck by a motorist on an icy night very much like this. Pete had stopped to help a woman whose car had blown its radiator. A moving van had mowed him down. For years, True has been unable to remember the sound of Pete's voice, and she has no idea whether the image of him she can summon to her mind is a mental snapshot of the wedding photo that she dusts along with her lamp and her hand lotion, or a true memory of the way he looked. True's mother, Kathleen, also widowed young, also by a car accident, nods in solemn empathy when True keeps refusing to bring out and watch the few videotapes she and Pete made during their son Guy's babyhood. Kathleen periodically suggests watching the tapes together, as if an erased life were something to be revealed in, like a great exfoliating bath. True knows that, even after eight years, the sight of Pete's platinum crewcut and square-cut face with its pilot's crinkled tan, perpetually young, will shatter her complacency, which she maintains by carefully separating before from after.

But more than this, she reckons intuitively that what she really cannot bear to see is the infant image of Guy, the only child she likely will ever have -- miniature, mirthful and trustful, his cheeks drooping, round as peach halves, wider than his forehead. That velvety baby touch True can remember, and it grieves her to think it will quite probably be a touch that, for the rest of her life, she will only borrow.

She also knows that, while not quite the merry widow, she is not like her mother, not like the other young widows at the group she attended briefly, who had vied with each other to claim which limbs and digits and months of life they would trade for an hour in the arms of their husbands ...