



Merriest  
Christmas  
Ever

Betty Jo Schuler

# Merriest Christmas Ever

**Betty Jo Schuler**

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## Chapter One

Gracie Singleton Saylor brushed a wind-whipped strand of blonde hair from her eyes, pulled her red knit cloche over her ears, and rubbed her gloved palms together. The first day of December was nippy, and if the Indianapolis weatherman wasn't mistaken, snow would soon fly. The house she'd purchased just two months ago was decorated from top to bottom, with candles in every window, mistletoe in the doorways, and a nativity scene in the parlor. Snow on the ground would add the final holiday touch to the outside of her "Victorian Christmas card."

Standing back to admire the fragrant wreath she'd just hung on the front door, she smiled. Merriest Christmas, Gracie. The words were a self-promise, one she intended to keep.

All she needed now were two very tall trees, one for her stairway landing, and one for the parlor.

Ducking into the house, her house, Gracie studied the front room ceiling. Ten feet high if it was an inch and the landing could accommodate a tree just as big. Allowing for stands and stars for the tops, she jotted "buy two nine-footers" on her "to do" list, and picked up the keys to Old Blue, her aged, but beloved car.

\* \* \*

Heber's Gas Station and Christmas Tree Lot lay clear across town in the neighborhood where Gracie grew up. Will Heber needed the money the same as his father had, and she liked to help her own. Pop used to buy their tree at Heber's on Christmas Eve, after the final price markdown. It was always a scraggly, Charlie Brown type tree, but after the Singleton sisters decorated it with homemade paper chains and

added the star, they thought it was beautiful. That star was the loveliest thing their family owned.

Parking her ten-year-old Mustang next to a late model Jeep, Gracie longed to open its door and inhale its new car smell. She'd ridden in a new car once.

"Grace!" Will Heber rushed up to pump her hand. "We have a fine selection of trees this early in the year."

After a moment of small talk, Will's attention was drawn to a male customer with his back toward them. Gracie, following his gaze, was somewhat distracted herself. The man was tall, with dark hair, long legs, and lean thighs, and when he bent over to examine a tree's lower branches, the jeans tightened enticingly over his backside. She excused herself quickly, and while Will went to help the man, moved down a row of trees that blocked him from view.

When she was younger, she'd been a fool for swarthy sex appeal and a winning smile. Now, she'd prefer an ambitious man, with clean-cut good looks, who was ambitious and dependable. If she was in the market for a relationship, which she wasn't. She had a new business and home, and was starting life over in the town she'd left twelve years ago.

Lingering over an expensive white pine, Gracie inhaled its aroma and fingered its soft needles. She didn't want to overspend, but Christmas was special. Maybe if she bought just one tree...no...the Larrabys had two when they owned the house that was hers now. And she loved traditions.

Moving to another section, she circled each tree, checking for bare spots and comparing her height of five and a half feet to theirs. She found one the right size with a lower price tag that would do for the stairway landing, but she really wanted that first white pine for her parlor. Returning to circle it again, she looked up into its graceful branches.

Smack. Her face hit cold leather, and her head cracked against a firm chin. She swayed from the impact. Strong hands steadied her, and she looked up into jade green eyes, and gasped. It couldn't be... He raked his hand through his hair in a gesture she remembered well. "Merrett."

"Merrett Bradmoore." She had to say, taste, savor his name. His face was thinner, making the high planes of his cheekbones more prominent, but otherwise, he'd barely

changed in fifteen years. His dark hair, parted on the side, still tumbled onto his forehead, begging to be pushed back.

He lowered thick lashes to narrow his gaze on her, and she blinked, hoping he approved of what he saw as much as she did.

“Gracie.”

He looked even more handsome than in high school, and a nervous laugh caught in her throat. “I can’t believe we ran into one another again.”

“Literally.” Merrett’s voice was warm and husky, but his dimpled smile was slow in coming and didn’t quite reach his eyes. She’d loved the way his ready grin, bracketed by dimples, lighted his face. His eyes and voice had sparkled with fun and laughter. He’d changed.

“Daddy.” A little girl ran up to tuck her hand in his.

Merrett was married, with a child. He was the catch of his class, super athlete, and topnotch at everything he tried. So, why was she surprised?

His daughter, stubbing the toe of her shoe in the dirt, studied Gracie with huge brown eyes. Her waist length hair was darker than Merrett’s, almost black. Dressed in all pink with black patent Mary Janes, she was pretty, with long coltish legs. Her shoes didn’t look appropriate for the chilly day or task at hand.

Gesturing with her left hand clasped in his, Merrett introduced them. “Kirsten, this is Gracie Singleton. Gracie, meet my seven-year-old daughter.”

“I’m almost eight.” The little girl looked at the white pine Gracie had been circling. “We’re going to buy this one. I hope you didn’t want it.”

Gracie swallowed her disappointment. Merrett had, after all, been circling the same tree. “I was thinking about it, but I can find another.”

Kirsten politely thanked Gracie before scampering off to pet Will Heber’s old hunting dog.

Merrett shook his head. “Kids.” His eyes went to her gloved left hand, which told him nothing, and she felt oddly pleased.

His comment could mean almost anything, and as he followed his daughter with his gaze, Gracie couldn’t decipher his expression. “Do you have any?”

She shook her head.

“Kirsten was testing you. She does that to people. I don’t know why, but she wants to see if she can get your goat. She often gets mine.”

“Faithie used to do that.” Gracie’s younger sister seemed to delight in seeing how far she could push her. “I think she wanted to make sure I’d love her, no matter what.”

“Kirsten should know.” Merrett, watching his daughter crouch to examine the hound dog’s paw, frowned, and Gracie smiled ruefully. Faith hadn’t stopped testing her yet, but Merrett didn’t need to hear that.

He turned his attention back to her. “Hope, Faith, and Grace. I was always surprised your name wasn’t Charity.”

Grace often thought it should have been. She felt as if she’d spent her life giving to others what little she had to give. Love, care, devotion, and much of it...for what? First, Faith went astray, then Sonny. Had she given too much? Too little? Both had balked at her care-taking, and then come back for more. Squaring her shoulders, she smiled. “How’s your family, Merrett?”

“So-so.” He turned toward the tree she’d been considering; the one Kirsten decided she wanted. He examined it carefully, and the awkward silence grew.

“I can find another.” Gracie held out her hand. “It was nice to see you again.”

Merrett’s grip was firm, and she wished their hands were bare so she could feel the warmth of his touch. He’d never felt that way about her, but there was that one time when he had kissed her. That kiss fed into her daydreams, but the next morning, he and Holly were together again.

He held onto Gracie’s hand a second too long, and her heart hammered with hope. He might not be married now. But he had a child, and kids took more out of you than a spouse did. She’d seen that with Mom.

“I didn’t know you were in Ferndale.” Merrett folded his arms and looked down at her. A head taller and broad-shouldered, he’d always made her feel safe, somehow. “Are you living here?”

She nodded and wondered if he remembered the house where she’d lived before. “I came back two months ago and bought the old Larraby home.”

Merrett half-closed his eyes as if he was trying to remember something. Which he probably was. Gracie, biting back a smile, spoke quickly. “Living there is a dream come true.”

“I’m happy for you.”

He used to look at her that way in high school, when they were working on the newspaper together, and she’d done something that pleased him. Gracie’s cheeks grew warm. Her heart beat faster.

“I couldn’t wait to shake the small-town dust from my feet, but I hated Chicago. Cold. Lonely.” She shivered, then squared her shoulders and smiled. “I made a mistake moving there, but now, I’m back with a new business and new life.”

She dropped her gaze to her watch. Enough said. Next, she’d be telling him about Sonny’s behavior and their subsequent divorce, rushing on to explain it was all for the best. Then she’d describe Special Effects in glowing terms, and knowing her tendency to confide too much, tell Merrett her mortgage worries and what a chance she was taking.

“I lived in New York and liked city life, but Kirsten and I are staying with Dad for a while. Mama’s in a...a nursing home.”

“I’m so sorry.” Gracie laid her hand on his arm.

He laid his hand over hers and flashed his dimples. Gracie’s heart raced the way it used to. Once upon a time she dreamed of becoming Merrett’s wife, but it was a foolish fantasy. His family was well-to-do, with a home on the gracious-living side of Ferndale. Hers lived in the outskirts, where houses were crammed in with factories, and people lived hand-to-mouth. Two different worlds that were too different.

“Daddy,” Kirsten called. “Come here. This dog has a thorn in its paw.”

“I’d better go.”

“Me too. With the holidays coming, there’s a lot to do.” The mere mention of the holiday made Gracie feel better. “I’ll bet Kirsten’s excited about Christmas.”

“Her and Dad.” Merrett’s face folded into lines she’d never seen. His shoulders drooped.

But not you? He’d loved Christmas. Shivering, Gracie hugged her arms to her waist. Christmas had been different for both of them fifteen years ago.

Gracie was fourteen, Hope was twelve, and Faith, four. Pop was out of work and the Singletons were so hard up, they couldn’t afford even the spindliest tree on Heber’s lot. Despair lay over the family like dust so thick that Gracie could feel it in her throat. Mom hadn’t been well since Faith was born, so she was like Gracie’s own child, and the idea that the little girl would wake up to nothing, not even mittens or a cheap toy, was



devastating. Then, on Christmas Eve, the doorbell rang, and there stood Merrett Bradmoore. Dark hair falling over one eye, the handsome high school senior's arms were loaded with presents. Behind him stood his parents with a fragrant pine and a turkey with all the trimmings. But it was Merrett that Gracie saw. She'd worshipped him from afar, and now, like a fairy tale hero, he'd come to her rescue. Looking up into his deep green eyes, she fell in love that night.

Today, watching her holiday hero, face sad, remove the thorn from the dog's paw, Gracie knew his kind heart was intact, and good things would happen for him again. Sometimes they took a while, but if you hung onto your hope, they always did. Merrett's Christmas Eve visit had taught her that, and his precious gift of optimism had stood her in good stead.

Now, it looked as if Gracie needed to return it to him.

\* \* \*

Merrett was paying Will when he saw Gracie drive off in a Mustang with a tree lashed to the top. "This tree you got is a beaut. Probably the nicest on the lot," Will said.

Gracie had thought so, too. Merrett had seen the disappointment in her eyes when Kirsten laid claim to it. Will, following his gaze, nodded to a large tagged pine. "Gracie bought that tree, too. She's coming back for it. Imagine. A Singleton with two trees. Does my heart good."

Merrett's, too. He remembered the house where she had lived fifteen years ago.

"You go right by her place, don't you?" Will asked, with a tip of his head. "I could load her tree with yours, and save her a trip. If you were of a mind to."

It would be a neighborly thing to do, by local standards. In this small Indiana town where Merrett had grown up, people were friendly. Everyone knew everyone and their business, and that's why he'd lain low since returning from New York. He didn't like running into people he knew and of all people to meet today...Gracie Singleton.

With that wild mass of lemony curls hanging halfway to her waist, she looked like the innocent girl he knew in high school. Back then, when she looked up at him with lavender-blue eyes, her gaze as velvety as pansies, he'd longed to tangle his fingers in her

thick golden curls and draw her close. His fingers perspired inside his gloves, and he rubbed them together. Nothing had changed, and yet, nothing was the same.

\* \* \*

The sound of the Jeep's engine springing to life reassured Merrett, just as it always did. Its purchase, and subletting his apartment, were the only major decisions he'd made in more than a year. He'd become a procrastinator and indecision was a trait he couldn't stand, particularly in himself.

He turned on the heater and picked up one of Kirsten's pink mittens off the floor. Will had seven kids, and was just twenty-nine, Gracie's age. Merrett couldn't imagine coping with seven kids, day out and day in, at any age. One was challenge enough. His daughter was on her knees on the front seat, window rolled down, one hand out. "I think I feel snow."

Merrett dangled the mitten he'd found in front of Kirsten's face. "If you'd put your mittens on, you wouldn't feel snow. Please close the window, sit down, and fasten your seat belt."

"See," she declared triumphantly as a fat snowflake splatted against the car window. "I told you." She was such a know-it-all sometimes. She poked him in the arm. "Why are we taking that lady's tree? Why didn't she take it herself?"

"She bought two, and only one would fit on her car."

"Does she have two houses?"

"I don't think so."

"She might. She might have a real house and a playhouse." The surmising went on, with Kirsten coming up with a dozen ridiculous reasons why Gracie would buy two trees.

Merrett stopped saying "mm-hm" after a while and wondered again if Gracie had a husband. When he had asked Will, he'd looked at her check, and said it was signed Gracie Singleton Saylor, and that was all he knew. If she wasn't married now, she had been. Saylor sounded vaguely familiar. "No!" Merrett smacked his gloved palm against the wheel. "No."

“Why are you saying no?” Kirsten demanded. “Gracie might have bought that tree for someone who’s poor, like I said. Grampa told me you and he and Gramma used to take trees and gifts to people at Christmas. And turkeys, too.”

Merrett turned onto Maple Street. Gracie’s home was a stately Victorian, slightly in need of paint, but attractive. The blue Mustang sat out front, her tree still in place.

“Then you were talking to yourself. Old people do that, sometimes, Grampa said.”

Merrett parked the car and looked at Kirsten. She was a handful.

“Can I get out?” she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she was out and gone, running up Gracie’s front walk.

Merrett walked slowly toward the door, where a breeze tinkled silver bells and fluttered the red bow of a wreath. Tiny white twinkle lights outlined the porch with a blue star in the middle. The window candles weren’t lit, but when dusk fell, Gracie’s house would look beautiful.

A snowflake landed on his nose, and he looked up, hoping they wouldn’t get much. Snow paralyzed burls like Ferndale.

Merrett reached the porch and looked around for Kirsten. “Here I am,” she called from the end of the porch where she sat in a swing littered with dry leaves.

Merrett rang the bell. Seconds passed. His heart hammered. Why had he been so stupid? Gracie had a crush on him in high school, but it wasn’t his masculine appeal that had gotten to her. His family’s Christmas visit to her house convinced her he was some kind of hero. He jabbed the bell again, hoping Sonny wouldn’t answer. It wasn’t hard to imagine him as the type to sit home while his wife toted a couple of big trees around.

The door flew open. “Sorry I took so long, but—Merrett?”

“Gracie?” He couldn’t help grinning. “I believe we played this scene earlier.”

She laughed, a thick golden honey sound, and the last remnant of his self-anger dissipated. “I delivered your other tree.”

She looked beyond him to the Jeep, and clapped her hands like a little girl: a beautiful girl with flushed cheeks and a radiant smile. As slender as she’d been in high school, she still had those lush breasts, as well. His mouth suddenly dry, he licked his lips.

“Thank you.” Her eyes on his tongue, she blinked rapidly.

“I’ll bring it in,” he said, turning on his heel. The way she looked at him made nearly-forgotten parts of his body spring to life. He hadn’t reacted to any woman in that way in a long time, and a pang of guilt added to his discomfort.

“I’ll help you, Daddy.” Kirsten jumped out of the swing.

“Gracie, you should take that swing inside.” he said, turning back to her. “The weather will ruin the varnish.”

She played with the hem of her soft, clinging blue sweater. Lighter than her eyes, it intensified their outstanding violet-blue color. Liz Taylor eyes, he’d once told her. “I’ve been so busy getting settled, I hadn’t thought of it. It...it...came with the house.”

He strode down the walk to unleash the tree. What made him admonish Gracie about the swing? It was none of his business how she took care of things. Swinging the tree to the ground, he nearly hit Kirsten, who was hopping around underfoot. Giving her a warning look, he carried the pine to the house. If Sonny was around, he wasn’t showing his face until it was inside.

Gracie motioned him inside. “Put it in the parlor, please.”

Skipping ahead, Kirsten stared up the steep oak stairway, then peeked into the first room left of the hall. “This must be the parlor, and I’ll bet the tree goes there!” She pointed to the corner between the triple front window and a side window.

“Exactly right,” Gracie said, hugging Kirsten to her side.

Merrett smiled as Gracie pulled a tree stand from the opposite corner into Kirsten’s chosen place. The room was large but sparsely furnished. A gate-leg table bearing a manger scene stood against the wall to the left of the door. A brocade armchair and a pie crust table with a Tiffany lamp stood on the right. In the middle of the back wall, opposite the triple window, loomed an upright piano. Highly polished, it shone in the sun streaming through the lace curtains. “That piano’s beautiful.”

Gracie’s eyes sparkled. “It’s my prized possession, and I found it in the attic. At first, I couldn’t believe anyone would leave a piano behind. Then I discovered the player doesn’t work.” She ran her fingers over the keys. “I like it, anyway.”

As Merrett fitted the tree into the holder and tightened the screws that held the trunk in place, Gracie stood with her arm draped loosely around Kirsten’s shoulders. She’d had plenty of experience with kids, mothering Faith who was much younger. And Hope, although she was close to Gracie’s age, looked up to her, too. She’d been a real

mother hen, as he remembered. He stood and checked out his work. “There’s just room enough for a star.”

“When I was a child, we had a ceramic star with an angel painted on it. I’ve always wanted to find another like it, but grandma bought it at a church bazaar, so I probably never will.”

Kirsten tapped her on the arm. “What kind of star do you want for your other tree? And why do you have two trees? Do they both go here? I don’t mean in this room, because that would be dumb. I mean, in this house, or do you have another house?”

“Whoa.” Merrett gave her a stern look. She was talking a mile a minute, as usual. “A person can’t answer a dozen questions at the same time.”

She dropped her head, and studied her Mary Janes. “Sorry.”

Gracie raised Kirsten’s chin with her fingertip, and smiled. “It’s okay. The other tree goes on the landing near the top of the stairway. I’ll use an ordinary star on that tree.”

“You’re lucky having two trees.”

“Very lucky,” she agreed, her blue eyes meeting Merrett’s over his daughter’s head.

“I’ll bring your other one in now.”

“And I’ll make cocoa to warm you and Kirsten. Just set it on the porch, and I’ll have Hope’s husband carry it up as soon as they visit. Frank’s an attorney, and they’re busy a lot. They haven’t even seen my house yet.”

Merrett longed to rub away the tiny crease that formed between Gracie’s brows.

“Should I call you Mrs. Singleton?” Kirsten asked.

“Actually, my name’s Ms. Saylor, but please call me Gracie. Ms. Saylor sounds so old.” Gracie grinned and turned up her nose.

“And it sounds like the name of someone in an Old Maid deck. You know, Mr. Soldier, Ms. Sailor, Miss Marine.”

“Kirsten!” Merrett scolded. Gracie broke up, and fighting to conceal his amusement, he motioned to his daughter. “Come on, squirt. You can help bring in the other tree.”

“Thanks, but I’d rather help Gracie fix the cocoa instead.”

As his daughter tucked her hand into Gracie’s, a sense of foreboding settled over Merrett. Kirsten bonded with anyone who paid her attention, and when he took her back to New York to live, he didn’t want to add Gracie to the casualty list.

\* \* \*

Gracie watched Merrett study his daughter, uncertainty playing over his handsome features like shadows on a sunlit pond. Was he afraid Kirsten would be a nuisance while he was gone? “I don’t mind, if you don’t.”

“See, Daddy? It’s okay.” Kirsten smoothed her pink corduroy jumpsuit and gave him a happy wave. “Want me to see if I can find the kitchen, Gracie?” Without waiting for an answer, she skipped off down the hallway, Mary Janes clicking on the hardwood floors.

“Walk,” Merrett called after her.

Kirsten turned and gave him a level look. “My mother let me skip in the house.”

“No. She didn’t.” The look that came over Merrett’s face chilled Gracie. Pain, anger, devastation; one gave way to the other.

“Well, you used to, but you never let me do anything since—”

“You’re in someone else’s house now. You might break something.”

Kirsten opened her mouth to retort, but he shook his head, and she clamped her lips shut. Turning her back on him, she walked down the hall.

Merrett slammed out of the house. Kirsten walked demurely to the kitchen and sat down at the big oak table by the window. Bewildered, Gracie followed.

Neither of them spoke as she poured milk into stoneware mugs and set them in the microwave. A box of assorted Christmas cards lay on the table, and Kirsten opened them. Beside them lay Gracie’s address book. “When I lived in New York,” Kirsten said, patting it, “we never sent cards, but Grampa sends them.”

“My parents never sent cards, either. But I think it’s a nice tradition.” Gracie had been busy addressing the flyers for Special Effects she’d mailed yesterday, and planned to send a few cards when she had time.

The front screen banged again, and Merrett pounded up the steps. Gracie took the mugs out, and stirred sweet-smelling cocoa powder into the steaming milk.

“I leaned your tree in the corner by the bay window,” Merrett said, as he entered the kitchen. His eyes on Kirsten, he furrowed his brow.

“Thanks.” Gracie turned to smile at him. “I have to buy another stand, unless I find one in the attic. You wouldn’t believe how many interesting things are stored there.”

“I’d like to see,” Kirsten said. “I’ve never been in an attic before.”

Merrett gave her a dark look, and Gracie, sensing he was still upset with his daughter, turned away. While a whispered lecture took place, she arranged cookies she'd baked on one of her blue stoneware plates. Stalling for time, she folded napkins, set out spoons, and nothing left to do, plopped three marshmallows into a steaming mug, and walked across the kitchen to set it in front of Kirsten. "Blow first, so you don't burn your mouth."

Merrett sauntered over to the counter to get his cup, and Gracie followed. Who would have ever thought Merrett Bradmoore would be standing in her kitchen this Sunday afternoon? She was so aware of his presence that her hands shook. To steady them, she stirred the cocoa, and watched wisps of steam float away. He slipped two marshmallows in each of their cups, and shrugged. "I'm surprised you wanted to come back to Ferndale."

"Even though Pop never made a decent living here, people were always kind to us, and I like knowing my neighbors and the people I do business with." She smiled up at Merrett. "The only people I knew in Chicago were the people at work, one woman in our apartment building, and..." Gracie grimaced. "Sonny."

"You married the guy who lived over Pawley's Pool Hall?"

"That's right. Pool hustler, cool dude, drove a black pickup, and wore a leather jacket to match. Smoothest line in town, and I fell for it."

Merrett leaned against the counter and studied her, his gaze so probing that her pulse pounded in her ears.

"You were so quiet and smart. Sonny was..."

Gracie shrugged. "We stayed together ten years."

"And then?"

"Sonny lost his tenth job. Wrecked his fourth pickup. And his leather jacket wore out." She spooned a half-melted marshmallow into her mouth. No sense in telling him the whole truth. The wound was still too raw. "Our divorce was final six months ago, and shortly after that, I came back to town for Aunt Grace's funeral. This house was for sale, and I fell in love with it."

Looking across the room at Kirsten, Merrett gestured. "Okay for her to do that?" She was sorting through the Christmas cards, looking at the pictures and reading the verses aloud to herself.

Nodding, Gracie studied his troubled face.

“I liked New York and my work there, but Dad was alone and wanted me here. I felt like I didn’t have a choice.” Merrett stalked over to the table where Kirsten had stopped reading to watch fat snowflakes flutter past the window. Sitting down, he drummed his fingers on the table.

Gracie was determined to find a subject that would make him feel better, and he had said he liked New York and his job. “What did you do in New York?”

“He worked for a newspaper,” Kirsten piped up, “and I took dance lessons and voice lessons, and hated them both.”

“I always wanted to take dance lessons,” Gracie said, sitting down at the table. At least, his daughter was conversational. “I wanted to wear a pink tutu and silver toe shoes, and dance ‘Swan Lake.’”

Kirsten leaned forward and spoke confidentially. “You wouldn’t have liked it. Those tutu things scratch, and toe shoes are sure to pinch, and it’s all very boring.”

“What would you rather have been doing?” Gracie asked, chuckling. Merrett was staring out the kitchen window, and she wondered where his thoughts were.

“I’m pretty good at art. I was going to take painting lessons if we’d stayed in New York, and I might have liked those.” Gracie nodded; she’d been good at art, too, and longed for lessons. “I’d really, really have liked horseback riding lessons,” Kirsten went on, “but my mommy didn’t like the way horses smell. I also wanted to play basketball, but I wasn’t old enough for the team. You have to be in fourth grade. I was in first when we moved here. I’m in second now. I might not have been able to play basketball, anyway. It makes you smell, too.” Kirsten held her nose.

“Honestly, squirt.” Merrett sighed.

“I like it better when he calls me Princess,” she told Gracie, as if her father weren’t there.

As Kirsten turned back to the Christmas cards, Merrett sat, shoulders slumped, watching her. To fill the silence, Gracie turned on the radio that she kept tuned to an Indianapolis station with a DJ who shared her love for Christmas songs. I’ll Be Home For Christmas flooded the room. Smiling, she folded her arms and leaned against the end of the counter. “I’ll bet your dad’s glad to have you and Kirsten home for the holidays, Merrett.”



His stormy expression deepened.

“Grampa is glad, and I am, too,” Kirsten said. “It’s better here than in New York. Anyway, our ‘partment felt weird without Mommy.”

“How many times do I have to tell you it’s a-partment?” Merrett snapped. “Put those cards in the box. It’s time to go.”

Gracie heard the break in his voice, and knew he was hurting. Had Kirsten’s mother deserted them?

“Do we have to leave?” Kirsten lifted her dark eyes to his. “Can’t we stay and help Gracie decorate her tree? Puh-lease.”

Merrett rose and pulled out Kirsten’s chair. “Gracie can get along fine without us.”

And we can do without her. Gracie could almost hear his unspoken words. He wore a signet ring, not a wedding band, on his left hand. But he clearly didn’t want any involvement. Not with her, at least.

He was hell-bent for the front door when Gracie’s black kitten yowled and dived under the hall table. “Dad-dy! You stepped on the cat. Here, kitty, kitty.” Kirsten got down on her knees and tried to coax it out. “I didn’t know you had a kitten, Gracie. What’s its name?”

“Spook. He’s always hiding and jumping out when you least expect him.” Gracie kneeled to scoop him out. “I wondered where you were, you naughty kitten.”

“May I hold him?” Kirsten asked, arms outstretched, and he settled into her arms with a forgiving purr. “I wish I could have a cat.” She looked accusingly at Merrett, who stood, arms folded, by the front door.

“You’re always wishing. Last week, it was a dog.” He took her pink jacket off the hall tree and held it out to her.

“You wouldn’t let me have that, either. You won’t let me have a pet of any kind. Except something boring like a fish.”

“We’ve had this discussion before, Kirsten. Put this coat on.”

She slowly handed the kitten to Gracie, slowly put on her jacket and one mitten, then stopped to pet Spook again.

“March!” Merrett barked, and Kirsten stalked out the front door, her dad dogging her heels, but not before Gracie saw the tears that filled her big brown eyes.

Watching from the parlor window as they drove away, Gracie felt a deep sense of loss. Fifteen years ago, Merrett Bradmoore had given her — a nobody freshman wearing thrift shop clothes — the gift of hope, but somewhere along the way, he'd lost his own.

## Chapter Two

Kirsten didn't speak to Merrett all the way home. Damn, she was stubborn. A pet was a big responsibility for a seven-year-old, and he didn't feel like taking care of one for her. Besides they had Tippy, Mama's dog. How she'd loved that yapping ball of fur! When Merrett was younger, he'd complain about Tippy, asking when they were going to get a real dog and she'd laugh. "This house isn't big enough for two dogs. Besides, big doesn't mean real."

Mama was full of wisdom. "Pretty is beautiful, simply put," she'd told him, when he had said that Gracie Singleton was pretty, but Holly was beautiful. "Simply put" described Gracie perfectly. Warm, pretty, happy. If he hadn't already been seeing Holly...

Merrett scrubbed a gloved palm over his eyes. His mother had always understood him, while his father seldom did. When he wanted to quit band in high school, Dad was irate. "Life offers many choices, and we can't do everything. Merrett would rather play sports than a trumpet," Mama explained. Dad furiously asked why he couldn't do both. "He can't do justice to everything, and Merrett always wants to do his best."

How true, and how short he'd fallen. And Mama with all that wisdom wiped out, so that some days, she didn't know her own name. Dad said she recognized him; he could tell by the light in her blue eyes. Merrett, sure the light was the vacancy behind them, hadn't visited his mother since she'd gone to live at Sunny Haven.

"Daddy, you just drove by Grampa's house." Kirsten tapped him on the elbow with a mittened hand, and pointed with the other, which was bare.

Grandpa's house, not our house. He wasn't even giving his child a home of her own. He should do something about it, but that was the purpose of Harry Bradmoore buying

his only son the Daily Reporter — to bring him home, so they could live together. Further evidence his dad didn't understand him. He never wanted to publish a newspaper. He was a reporter.

Swerving into the neighbor's driveway, Merrett turned the Jeep around. It was a good thing his daughter was with him, or he would have wound up in Daleville. An awful thought hit him. What if he ended up like his mother? What if he forgot what he was doing, and where he was going, and who he was? Fright made his voice gruff. "Where's your other mitten, Kirsten?"

She held up her bare hand to stare at it. "I must have left it at Gracie's."

Merrett sighed, and then realized he'd been doing that a lot lately. Odd that Gracie Singleton, who'd probably never been to the ballet, dreamed of taking lessons. What else had she wanted to do that she couldn't? "You should be more careful," he scolded, taking hold of Kirsten's bare hand. "It's cold outside. Look how red your fingers are."

"Losing something is an accident."

She had one big new tooth on the top front, and the baby one next to it was loose. She was cute, even if she was impossible. "Your loose tooth wiggles when you talk."

"I didn't lose the mitten on purpose." She was impossible to distract when she was set on a subject. "We should go back to Gracie's, and get it."

"And pet her kitten so you could long for one, and pester me some more?" he teased, poking a finger in Kirsten's ribs. "We'll get you some new mittens."

Parking the Jeep in the circular driveway close to the house, Merrett leaned across to open her door. She was a wise little imp, part old lady, part innocent child. Maybe that's why it was so hard for him to deal with her. "Go ahead, hop out."

She put her hand on his arm. "I like those mittens, and it's snowing. I need to go back to Gracie's. Now."

Merrett pictured Gracie opening her door. Widening her eyes. Licking her lips. Her sweet scent enveloping him. Scrambling out of the Jeep, he slammed the door. Kirsten could pout all she wanted. Gracie made him feel the way he did when he had had chicken pox and couldn't scratch, and he couldn't — wouldn't — go back again.

\* \* \*

Making soft clucking noises, Gracie washed the cups and cookie plate. Poor Kirsten. Gracie had only seen Merrett angry once before. In high school, soon after he started dating Holly Lagere.

Holly, with her long ebony hair and designer fashions, was always laughing, joking, and hanging out with the most popular kids, and dating the coolest guys. One night, when she was out with his best friend Pete Hancock, Gracie saw Merrett at the public library, alone, and forgot all about doing her homework. Book open, he beat a rapid tattoo on the table with his pencil. The clock chimed nine, closing time, and he broke his pencil sharply in two. He headed for the double doors, and Gracie, moving swiftly, got there at the same time. Crashing into him, she reeled, and just as she hoped, he caught her. Wondering how she'd had the courage to work such a ploy, she looked up and nearly drowned in his ocean-green eyes.

"Sorry," he murmured. "I should watch where I'm going."

Gracie longed to lean against his hard chest and play the scene out as she planned, but she couldn't. It wasn't honest. Breaking free, she bolted down the steps, but Merrett caught up with her. It was dark, and she couldn't see his face, but his voice was warm and husky.

"You shouldn't walk home alone at night. Let me take you," he said, motioning toward his Camaro glistening under a street light.

Climbing into the black car, she inhaled deeply, taking in the new leather smell. He smiled, she ducked her head, and he tilted her chin with his finger. "It's okay."

She tried to lower her chin, but he kept his finger firm. "Hey," he said softly. "There's no reason to be embarrassed or afraid. Keep your chin high, and look the world in the eye. You're pretty and smart, and don't need to worry what anyone else thinks."

Slowly, he moved his face toward hers, and her heart almost stopped. Their breath mingled, and time stood still as his lips met hers in a gentle kiss with the sweet taste of heaven.

To this day, she'd never forgotten his advice, nor his kiss.

Gracie swabbed the kitchen table with her dishcloth. Merrett never kissed her again or mentioned that night. But, when they worked close together on the Clarion, the school newspaper, she'd feel the electricity between them. "M. B. wants to kiss me again," she'd written in her diary, "but he won't because of H.L."

Gracie hung up her cloth and dried her hands. She'd spun beautiful daydreams back then. Merrett asking her to his senior prom. Calling her nightly from college. Giving her his fraternity pin. Giving her an engagement ring. Walking down the aisle. Having a baby boy with dimples and dark hair. But none of her dreams came to pass.

"I'm dreaming of a white Christmas," Bing Crosby's voice crooned, and Gracie looked out the window at her lawn, pristine under a blanket of fresh snow. Across the yards, in the kitchen next door, Margaret and Homer Riggs smiled at one another over the dinner table. A chill swept over Gracie, and she hugged her arms to her waist as she turned away. The only thing missing from her life was someone to share it with.

Dusk came early in December, and as she walked up the dim hall from the kitchen to the front of the house, candlelight from darkened rooms lit her way. A street lamp shone through a stained glass window in her front door, casting a pattern of rays on the foyer floor. Today was Sunday, but the stores would be open until seven, and she needed to shop for lights and ornaments. An old-fashioned hall tree stood in the shadowy corner by the front door, and Gracie, groping for her coat, was startled by luminous green eyes staring up at her. Spook bared his tiny white teeth, and loneliness and fear disappearing into the night, Gracie laughed aloud.

\* \* \*

Gracie made a quick stop at Dollar Variety to buy tree ornaments and lights, then drove to Cherry Park Plaza. A sign at the entrance of the strip mall, known for its specialty shops, alternately flashed date, time, and temperature. December 1. 5:55 P.M. 32 degrees. Happy Holidays. If she hurried, she might be able to replace Kirsten's mittens before Merrett learned she'd lost one.

At Kids Galore, a warm blast of air and the jolly refrain of "Frosty the Snowman" greeted Gracie as she pushed through double doors. Tree lights twinkled. A mechanical Santa beat a drum. A child sat in one aisle, trying out a robot and laughing. Christmas was the best time of year, and kids were what it was all about.

Pawing through the mittens, she remembered a year when Faith longed for a Cabbage Patch Doll, and got Cabbage Patch mittens instead. Kirsten, like her father, would never have to worry about such disappointments.

The pink mittens looked babyish, and Gracie was about to leave when she spotted a pair of rose suede gloves that were velvety soft.

“Your daughter will love these.” The checkout woman added a candy cane to the brightly striped bag.

Her daughter. Soon to be thirty, there would be no little girl for Gracie. No son. She’d vowed long ago never to be an older parent, and her chances to be a young one had just about run out.

Smiling ruefully, she exited into a blowing snow. Powder-fine now, it would take a while to mount up, even with the inch or so they’d acquired earlier. She used to love playing in snow. Making angels. Sliding down a hill on a flattened cardboard box. Kirsten was probably dusting off her sled.

The Bradford house stood at the edge of town amidst pine trees that covered several acres of ground. A wrought iron fence surrounded the property, but wide double gates stood open, and Gracie parked behind Merrett’s Jeep in the circular driveway. Looking up at the impressive two-story colonial, her nerve almost failed her, until she whispered the words Merrett had taught her. Look the world in the eye.

\* \* \*

Merrett sat staring at The New York Times, wishing he were back East, eating salami on rye from Nickerson’s Deli instead of waiting for Mrs. Jarvis to finish dinner. The housekeeper, who had been with his family since he was a child, was an excellent cook, but grew slower each year. The aroma of beef roasting in rich brown gravy had been tantalizing him for what seemed like hours. And now, someone was at the door. Tippy was yapping her silly little head off.

“Gracie!” Kirsten cried. “Come in. Daddy’s in the library.”

You wouldn’t know by his daughter’s voice that she hadn’t spoken to him since he carried her in the house and sent her to her room for an hour. A blast of cold air rushed around the corner to where he sat. Tail between his legs, the old Pekinese, who had never liked anyone but Mama, scooted through the library door to hide behind his chair. Kirsten followed, smile radiant, dragging Gracie along.

Gracie, blonde hair streaming from beneath a red knit hat damp with glittering snowflakes, stood feet apart, hands behind her back. “Kirsten lost a mitten at my house.”

My house. She said it so proudly. It was his family’s tradition to help a family in need each Christmas, and when she had opened the door that Christmas, he’d seen hers was desperately poor. After school resumed, and he realized where he’d seen Gracie before — in his journalism class — he worried that she might feel embarrassed. Instead, she joined the Clarion staff where he was editor. Holly teased him about a freshman having a crush, but he never told her why Gracie looked at him with stars in her eyes.

Kirsten dangled a mitten in front of his face, and a loose pink yarn tickled his nose. “Did you hear, Daddy? Spook tried to eat my mitten, so Gracie brought me new ones.”

“Actually, I bought gloves. The pink mittens at Kids Galore were all so juvenile.”

“That means kiddish, doesn’t it?” Without waiting for an answer, Kirsten stuck her hand in the sack Gracie proffered, and drew out rose-colored suede gloves. “Oh, look, Daddy. Aren’t they bee-yoo-ti-ful?”

Beautiful but not practical. He could just see them after she threw a snowball or ate a chocolate ice cream cone. His disapproval must have shown in his eyes, because Gracie lifted her chin, bringing back the memory of the first time he’d really noticed her. He had been leaving the library when he’d crashed into her, and she had looked up, taking his breath away. Her eyes were the most incredible color, and with that mass of golden curls, she had looked too vulnerable to be out alone. So he’d offered her a ride home. Then he’d been the one to take advantage, by kissing her. What possessed him to do it, he didn’t know, but as enthralled by her sweet lips as by her silky gaze, his youthful body responded instantly to the feel of her. He had had a hard time falling asleep that night, and the sweet scent she wore lingered as he slept. He hated to shower next morning, but didn’t want Holly to find out, even though she’d been out with his best friend.

His father’s voice brought him back to the present. “Those gloves are beautiful. Just like you, young lady.”

Kirsten beamed up at him as he hugged her to his side. “Do you know Gracie, Grampa?”

Dad held out his hand to their guest. “We met many years ago.”



Kirsten crawled up on Merrett's lap, and laid her head back against his chest. Difficult as she could be, she was everything to him. He brushed his lips across her hair. She was probably tired.

"You're as lovely as ever, Miss Singleton," his father was saying.

"Her name is Ms. Saylor," Kirsten interjected, "but you can call her Gracie."

Merrett's father looked amused. "So you married Sonny, did you?"

Nodding, she turned up her nose prettily. "It's such an appropriate name; I wonder if his mother had a premonition he'd remain infantile."

"What's infantile?" Kirsten asked.

Merrett silenced her with a stern look. The aroma of roast beef was tying his stomach in knots.

"Sonny used to caddie at my club," Harry said, "and was undependable, even then."

"I know what undependable means," Kirsten announced proudly. "Someone who's late getting home from work."

"In this case, it meant someone who didn't show up for work," her grandfather said, glancing at Merrett.

Holly used to complain that he stayed on his newspaper beat too long, but he wanted to prove himself, and thought if he worked enough hours, followed enough leads, he could become an ace reporter. She'd craved the glamour connected with pro ball, and he'd let her down, botching up his knee. So, when he turned to his second dream of a newspaper career, and she suggested they move to the Big Apple, he wanted to make it big for her there. She'd grown up with so much; he wanted to make her happy.

"Speaking of dinner, ours is nearly ready. Why don't you join us, Grace? Or have you eaten?"

"Oh, no. I mean, I haven't but I can't."

"Why in blazes not? You must be hungry, and we have a meal ready."

Her eyes grew wide, and Merrett prayed she wouldn't let Dad intimidate her into staying.

"Mrs. Jarvis, put another plate on the table," Harry bellowed, holding out his hand for Gracie's coat.

"You better do as Grampa says," Kirsten told her. "He's the boss."

Gracie's laughter bubbled like champagne, but she looked to Merrett for approval. What could he say? Dad was boss, and it was his house. Somewhere along the way, Merrett had lost all control.

\* \* \*

"The meal was delicious." Gracie wiped her mouth on a linen napkin, a touch of elegance she'd never thought about for home. "Thank you."

Mr. Bradmoore patted her hand and nodded toward the stern-faced woman setting a fresh basket of rolls on the table. "When my wife was well, she liked to do some of the cooking herself. But now...Mrs. Jarvis does it all."

"I'm sorry about your wife, Mr. Bradmoore. Merrett told me she's in a nursing home."

"Harry. Please." He cleared his throat gruffly. "Alice is in Sunny Haven, a long-term care facility for Alzheimer patients."

Gracie's fork clanked on her plate. "I didn't know."

"It's not an easy subject to discuss." He glanced at Merrett.

Gracie tried not to follow Harry's gaze. "It must be very hard for you."

"We're all lonely without Alice, but her illness isn't a fact we can hide. Nor is there any reason to. It's not a contagious disease."

"That means you can't catch what Gramma has. I want to go see her, but Daddy won't let me." Kirsten stared at her father accusingly.

Harry patted her hand the way he had Gracie's. His granddaughter's presence must be a comfort. But she felt sorry for Merrett, with the two of them ganging up on him.

"Your parents died early, didn't they, dear?" Harry asked Grace.

She scooted her chair back a little, suddenly eager to leave. "Yes, sir. Pop was hit by a train, and Mom died a few months later of a heart attack."

"My mother died, too," Kirsten said, her voice choked with feeling.

"Oh, Kirsten. Merrett." Gracie wished she knew the right words to say. No wonder he'd changed - losing his wife, and left with a rambunctious child to raise alone.

"Holly had viral myocardia," Merrett said quietly, his eyes on his plate. "She died last year, two weeks before Christmas."

“It happened really fast. She got sick and went to the hospital and never came home.” Tears pooled in the little girl’s eyes.

He had married his high school girlfriend. Gracie blinked back tears of her own. Merrett, thirty-three years old and a widower. And poor Kirsten. “I’m sorry.”

Silence settled over the table.

“So, Grace,” Harry said, clearing his throat. “What do you do for a living?”

She struggled to set her mind back on track. “I managed a special occasion company for a lady in Chicago, and I’ve set up a similar business, Special Effects. I’ll decorate homes, churches, halls, whatever. For holidays, weddings, and other special occasions.”

“You really think a business like that will succeed here?” Merrett asked.

She’d asked herself that question time and again. “This town’s small, but it’s close to Indianapolis and its well-to-do bedroom communities. And I hope Ferndale residents will want to see a hometown girl make good.”

Gracie pushed her chair back. “If you’ll excuse me, I really should go. I have two banks in Indianapolis and a tearoom in Greenfield to decorate this week, and I have to make wreaths and bows tonight.”

“I could help, Gracie,” Kirsten said. “I can tie a bow.”

“Merrett could help spread the word about Special Effects,” Harry said.

“I’ll see Gracie out,” Merrett said, rising swiftly. “We don’t want to keep her from her work.”

Don’t let the door hit you in the back end, Gracie thought, as Merrett took her coat from the front hall closet. “Kirsten wants to help with everything, but her lopsided, rabbit-ear bows wouldn’t win you any customers.”

His dimples flickered, and Gracie longed to touch his face. He held her coat, and, sliding her arms in, she found herself leaning ever so slightly against his chest. When she was fourteen, she had known how bad things were for her family, and suspected they’d never get any better, but he’d given her hope for a better life. That alone could have made her fall in love with him, but there was so much more; charm, good looks, and a kind heart.

He slid the coat onto her shoulders, and paused, his hands tightening. “Gracie, I…” She looked over her shoulder at him questioningly. “I’ll see you around.”

\* \* \*

Gracie was thinking about Merrett the next day when she left Colleen's Crafts, head down against the wind. He'd done so much for her, she'd like to help him, but it didn't look like she'd have the chance.

Prices at Colleen's Crafts were higher than those of large supply houses, but Gracie preferred to buy from local business owners. She'd found most of the things she needed, and would try to make do without those that the smaller shop lacked. Pushing a full shopping cart across the mall parking lot, she wished she'd worn boots. The snow was packed down from traffic, and slick, and the wind pushed her and the cart along faster than she liked.

Thankful to reach her car safely, she dug in her jacket pocket for her keys. "Gracie!" Kirsten's voice rang out close behind her.

Gracie whirled, and her feet slid out from under her. She never could do splits, but was about to now. One hand caught in her pocket. She waved the other frantically.

Merrett caught her around the waist, just as her free arm grazed the ground. He eased her to her feet, and turning in his arms, she looked up at him. His eyes were dark, his brow furrowed, his breath warm against her face. Seeing his look of concern and feeling his arms around her, Gracie trembled, and he tightened his hold. She leaned into him. His breath grew ragged, and he steadied her, slowly drawing his hands away.

"Are you all right?"

She was shaking, but not so much from the fall. "I'm fine, thanks to you." Feeling foolish for having read too much into the moment, she reached into her pocket for her keys again, and winced.

"What's wrong?" Merrett took her elbow, and gently pulled her glove from her hand. A moan escaped her lips. "You scraped your hand through your glove."

He brushed her fingertips with his. Another time she might have appreciated his touch. "My arm is the problem. I must have twisted my elbow." He moved it gently back and forth, and she gasped. "Don't, Merrett. Please."

Kirsten, white-faced, clutched her father's camel-colored wool topcoat. Through her pain, Gracie smiled reassuringly. "You're not to blame. It was the icy lot, and my fault for not wearing boots."

“Stand still,” Merrett ordered. “I’ll put your purchases in your trunk, and take you to County General’s ER.” Locking her trunk, he shepherded her into the front seat of his Jeep, and Kirsten into the back.

Gracie had contracts to keep, and her future depended on them. Her head began to throb just thinking about it. Putting her hand to her temple without thinking, caused pain to shoot up her arm. “Those places take hours, and I have work to do.”

“Then I’ll take you to Doctor Hiram.”

Dr. Hiram delivered Gracie and her sisters, and she was surprised he was still practicing. Merrett drove fast, wheeling into the parking lot next to the doctor’s building with a squeal of tires. Jerking the door open, he helped her out. Kirsten, wearing her new rose gloves and a solicitous expression, walked beside her as they entered the small brick building. “Luckily,” Gracie told her, “it’s my right arm, and I’m left-handed.”

“You can’t do much with one hand,” Merrett muttered.

Of course she couldn’t, but she was trying to make his daughter feel better. Couldn’t he see that? He waved her toward a green vinyl-cushioned straight chair, one of a row that had probably sat there for the past thirty years or more. He talked to the receptionist, a young girl who appeared to be the only new addition to the office, and then sat down next to Gracie. There were other people in the waiting room, but five minutes later, she was called first. Angry at Merrett for pulling strings, she entered the doctor’s stainless steel-and-porcelain inner sanctum. Old-fashioned and unchanged, an antiseptic smell still filled the air.

“Gracie.” Dr. Hiram, his face wizened, hair thinner, still had a twinkle in his eye. “When I heard it was you who was hurt, I had to see you right away. It’s been a long time. How are you, dear, and how are your sisters?”

It wasn’t Merrett’s name and clout, but hers that got her in first. Tears sprang to Gracie’s eyes. After Pop’s job was phased out, they hadn’t had insurance, and seldom sought the doctor’s care. But Dr. Hiram was a kind man in a small town, with a memory for people. It was an affirmation of why she’d returned.

“Hope lives in Daleville, and she’s fine. I haven’t heard from Faith in over a year.”

“Family feud?”

“Family drop-out. Faith’s always had a mind and direction of her own.”

“She should have turned out well,” Dr. Hiram said, motioning Grace to climb up on the examining table. “You practically raised her.”

If Dr. Hiram was complimenting her upbringing abilities, the praise was undeserved. Faith had started rebelling in her early teens, and hadn’t straightened up yet. Job after job, guy after guy, town after town, until Gracie wondered how it would end. There was always the fear she’d receive a call and find out Faithie was dead.

“And you? Married? Kids?”

Gracie shook her head.

“Your elbow is sprained,” he told her, a little while later. “Wear this sling for a few days, and after that, this elastic bandage will do.” The doctor gave her the bandage, and wrote a prescription for pain medicine.

“I have work to do,” she protested. “Christmas...”

“By Christmas, you’ll be good as new,” he promised, giving her a dry peck on the cheek. “And, Gracie?” She looked at him. “Don’t wait too long for those babies if you want me to deliver them.”

Pain, far deeper than the pain in her arm, clutched Gracie’s heart.

\* \* \*

“Mr. Bradmoore’s already taken care of your visit.”

The receptionist shook her head when Gracie opened her purse to take out her checkbook. After wrapping her coat around her...the sling wouldn’t let it go on...he led her from the office, and inquired about what the doctor said. Gracie’s arm and head hurt, she had decorations to make while she was half-incapacitated, and the reminder of the babies she’d never have distressed her.

“My arm is sprained; that’s all. Merrett, I want to pay my own way.”

Casting a furtive glance at Kirsten, he spoke quietly. “I feel responsible for your injury.”

So that was the reason for the concern she’d seen in his eyes when he caught her; a sense of responsibility for his daughter’s part in the accident. It wasn’t concern for the woman he secretly cared about, as Gracie so foolishly hoped.

Refusing to get her prescription filled, she asked him to take her to her car, insisting she could drive home. Instead, he drove toward her house. When she pointed out she needed her supplies, he swung the Jeep around and returned to Colleen's lot to load them in his Jeep. At her house, he carried the things inside and set them in the hall by the door.

"Thanks, Merrett. I'll be fine now."

"Are you sure?"

She wished he'd leave before she felt further indebted. "I'm not going to sue, if that's what you're worried about."

"I'll have your car picked up and returned." His face was impassive, his voice cold, and guilt swept over Gracie as he turned to go. He'd tried to take care of her, and she'd acted badly.

"Wait."

Merrett stopped without turning around.

She touched his back gently and smiled, hoping he'd hear it in her voice. "I'm going to have a cup of hot tea for my crankiness. Would you care to join me?"

\* \* \*

Managing the tea kettle with one hand proved difficult, and Merrett rushed forward to help. "You don't need to," she said. "I can..."

Their hands locked next to one another's on the handle, and he grinned. "You're not very good at letting someone take care of you."

"I haven't had much experience."

"You might enjoy it. Let go, and rest."

She might, but what if she got used to it? His hand was warm against hers, and Gracie released her hold slowly. Merrett nodded approvingly, but she felt cold without his touch. Shivering, she excused herself to take aspirin in the tiny lavender-sprigged bathroom under the staircase.

When she returned, the kettle was boiling, and he'd set out tea bags, cups, and spoons. He'd even found the cocoa mix and marshmallows for Kirsten, who, tongue between her teeth, was arranging cookies in an overlapping circle on a plate.

“I remembered where you kept these, and thought you might be hungry. I am, after school.”

Gracie remembered feeling hungry after school.

Turning back to the cookie plate, Kirsten added a plump marshmallow to the middle. “That’s for decoration,” she said, setting it in front of Gracie.

“Do you like to decorate?” Gracie was glad to see Merrett wrap his arm around Kirsten’s waist. It was natural to lose patience sometimes, but they must be close.

“Yes, and my teacher said I’m good at it. She let me help decorate our room for the holidays.” Kirsten sat down, and folded her arms, looking up at Gracie with puppy dog eyes. “I’ll bet I could help you.”

Merrett tapped Kirsten lightly on the head, and motioned her to sit back. Sliding a cup of cocoa in front of her, he plopped in two marshmallows, and then slid a cup of tea in front of Gracie. “Cream? Sugar? Marshmallow?”

Laughing, she shook her head. It felt good to hear him joke.

“Could I help you? Puh-lease, with marshmallows on top.”

Gracie studied the little girl’s eager face. There were things she could do, and she’d be fun to have around. Gracie had always enjoyed Faith, while Mom, who was forty when she was born, had never had patience with her. Of course, Mom had only been thirty when Gracie was born, and had never had patience with her, either.

Kirsten touched Gracie’s sling. “Since I kind of made you fall, I should help you with your work.”

She wiggled her fingers, and pain shot up her arm. She eyed the boxes Merrett had set on the floor. Wreaths, ribbons, silk holly, and more waited inside them. Tying bows, winding ribbon, and hot-gluing all took two good hands. And if Kirsten was worried, it would make her feel better.

Merrett spoke up from where he leaned against the counter, sipping tea. “You’re too young.”

Leaning on a child for help was a desperate measure, but Gracie was a desperate woman. “I think she could help. My arm should be better in time for me to go to the sites and put things in place. But for the next couple of days, I have a lot to do, putting decorations together here at home. Kirsten could be my apprentice.” Gracie flashed a



smile at the little girl and looked boldly to Merrett. The man he used to be wouldn't have hesitated. The man she'd glimpsed earlier wouldn't consider granting her request.

He scraped his chair back. "If you really think so." He shrugged. "I'll set the supplies you bought in your work area."

"Yippee!" Kirsten leaped out of her chair.

Gracie, fighting the urge to throw her arms around Merrett, led the way to her workroom, the large sunny room that had once been a library. One shelf held the few books she owned. Craft materials and finished displays filled the others.

"Oh, this is pretty." Kirsten touched a cluster of silvery snowflakes strung on a blue silk ribbon that lay on the long table where Gracie worked.

Gracie explained how she'd made it, and soon, Kirsten was following directions for assembling another just like it. It was a simple project, but her fingers were small and nimble, and she showed skill for a child. She looked up at her father, who was watching over her shoulder. "It's real easy, Daddy. You could help, too. Then Gracie and I could finish faster."

Merrett straightened and checked his watch. "Are you feeling okay, Gracie? Are you sure you want to work now? It's five o'clock already. She could come after school tomorrow."

"I'm better." Knowing she had an extra pair of hands, however small and inexperienced, was reassuring. "And every minute counts. Go ahead with your business. Kirsten and I'll manage a bite to eat for supper, if it's all right with you."

Merrett addressed his daughter. "I'll pick you up at seven. Two hours long enough?" he asked Gracie.

It wasn't, but it would have to do. "Fine."

"Daddy?" Kirsten called as he started for the door. "Why don't you pick up a pizza and bring it back?"

"You'll be hungry long before seven o'clock."

"No, I won't. I'm full from cocoa and marshmallows." Kirsten rubbed her tummy. "And if Gracie and I don't have to cook, we can work more. What kind of pizza do you like, Gracie?"

The child was either a diplomat or con-artist. "Your dad doesn't want to—"

"It's okay. Just don't think it's going to become a habit," Merrett said sternly.

Gracie looked up, startled, and felt relieved to see he was looking at Kirsten. “I’ll eat whatever kind you two like.”

Kirsten burst into giggles. “Mushrooms and hamburger is what Daddy likes. Isn’t that dumb?”

While his daughter pretended to barf, Gracie saw Merrett out. “Thanks for loaning her to me, and taking me to the doctor.”

“I had to make sure you were okay, so you wouldn’t sue me.”

Gracie pushed out her lower lip. “And I thought you cared.”

He touched her cheek, looked into her eyes, and wet his lips with his tongue. She waited expectantly. Merrett rushed out the door.

Was he giving off mixed messages, or was it her?

## Chapter Three

Merrett drove around watching fat snowflakes swirl lazily to the ground. He didn't want to go back to work, and didn't want to go home. Dad's dinner meeting at the Country Club didn't begin until seven, and he would want to talk about Mama. He visited her every day after closing his clothing store, and reported every optimistic sign. She remembered something she'd had for lunch. She held hands with him when they walked the halls. She looked into his eyes and he could see the love in them.

The Jeep seemed by its own volition to turn onto West Seventeenth Street, where it passed Sunny Haven. A sprawling complex of gray buildings with slate roofs, dim lights shone from the windows. Dad said it was clean and nice inside, and they treated Mama well. The only Ferndale facility with an Alzheimer's unit, it was either Sunny Haven or an Indianapolis facility. And, he asked, what was more important, daily visits or fancy surroundings Mama didn't comprehend?

Merrett turned into the circular drive and stopped near the glass doors. The reception area had peach walls and pale green tile floors. Several women in white tunics and pants, LPNs maybe, milled around. In their breast pockets, they wore brightly colored handkerchiefs. That small note of cheer said something, didn't it? He couldn't bear to think of Mama in a bleak setting with workers who didn't care. There were no patients in sight. Were they in bed? Having dinner? Was Mama eating well? Was the food fit to eat?

He shot out of the driveway, skidding on the snow as he turned onto the street. He wanted to go see her, but he just couldn't. She was so lovely, so sweet. And now...

He drove by the newspaper office. Work would kill the empty time until he went back to Gracie's. Without realizing what he was doing, he found himself driving by her

place again. Kirsten wasn't old enough to help. He should have stayed. They were probably both hungry already. Hell, he was starving.

Twenty minutes later, Merrett, piping hot pizzas in hand, rang Gracie's doorbell.

"You're early. We've barely started." With her free hand, she shoved back one side of her hair. A gorgeous wild mane of blonde curls, it had darkened only slightly over the years. "I have so much to do." She laughed, a silvery sound, and motioned him inside.

He stamped his feet on the porch, and then wiped them one at a time. "Where's the imp?"

As Gracie looked over her shoulder, her generous breasts, still round and high, strained at the front of her soft lavender sweater. "She's so engrossed in her work she didn't even look up when the doorbell rang. Why don't you set those pizzas in the kitchen? There's beer and pop in the fridge, and paper plates in the cabinet to the left of it. Set out whatever you want. I'll get her."

"Gracie! Where are you? I have a knot here."

Gracie had an enticing walk, and in fast motion, swung her hips, a tempting sight in form-fitting jeans. Pizzas in hand, he followed and peeked into the workroom where his daughter sat on a high stool.

A jumble of ribbon lay in front of her on the table. A spool had rolled off on the floor, and the kitten was playing with it. Kirsten had red sparkle in her hair, silver on her sweatshirt, and a determined look on her face as she fiddled with a knot in a piece of delicate gold cord.

Setting the pizzas on the kitchen table, he took out the paper plates. Kirsten and Gracie were talking as they came down the hall. "I didn't mean to break it, but I didn't know that cord was such flimsy stuff," Kirsten complained.

"You'll learn. You have to be gentle when working with craft materials."

"What do you want to drink, Kirsten?" Merrett held up two kinds of pop. Gracie's violet eyes looked troubled, and he understood.

"Mountain Dew. Please."

"Coke or 7 Up are the choices." He wiggled the cans.

"You could have bought..."

He popped open a can of 7 Up and set it on the table, firmly motioning her to a chair. "Gracie? You look like you could use a beer."

A trace of a smile played around her full lips. “Sold,” she said, sinking into a chair.

Gracie opened the pizza boxes and neatly folded the foil covering, a trick with one arm in a sling. Licking her lips, a delightfully distracting habit he’d noticed, she passed slices around. “Mmm.” Chewing slowly, eyes closed, she took another bite.

He’d never seen anyone chew so sensuously, and when she closed her eyes in pleasure, she looked like someone enjoying great sex. The building tension in his body, and his corresponding arousal under the table, reminded him just how long it had been since he’d had great sex. Or any kind at all.

He studied the sunny yellow walls, the fruit border running around the middle above the chair rail, and the collection of wicker baskets on top of the oak cabinets. He looked out the window, where across the side yards, he could see a man and woman playing checkers at a kitchen table. Gracie’s radio was silent this evening. He dared another look at her.

“How’s the arm?” He should have asked sooner, but it wasn’t her arm he’d been thinking about. While she had a sort of ethereal beauty, a sweet innocence, she had a sultry side, too. The way she tossed her hair with a flip of the arm that made her breasts rise and fall. The way she raised one shoulder in a lazy kind of shrug. Damn! He was killing himself here. Shifting in his chair, he realized he hadn’t heard her answer. He barely remembered his question.

Gracie glared at her arm, and laid her second piece of pizza back on her plate. Sipping her beer from the bottle—he’d forgotten to give her a glass—she looked pensive. “I have to get rid of it soon.” She must be talking about the sling. Shrugging, she turned to Kirsten. “How’s your pizza?”

“Delucious.” He’d gotten her a small ‘cheese only’ of her own. She waved a piece in the air. “Am I good help, Gracie, except for that one thread I broke?”

Kirsten had this habit of mispronouncing words. Not regularly and not often; just enough to irritate Merrett. Sometimes he thought she did it for that reason.

“You’re very good.” Gracie looked and sounded sincere, and setting a far better example of patience than he could, went on to explain about apprentices being workers in training. It was hard acting as both mother and father, and he sometimes resented the need. While she talked, Merrett polished off the rest of their pizza, except for one piece. He was about to pitch it when Gracie waved the foil that had covered it.

“Don’t throw that away. Use this to wrap it.”

In the fridge, he saw several small dishes covered in plastic wrap, and his heart wrenched for the woman who saved everything because she had had so little as a child. Was Gracie financially stable now, or was her business a risk? She had a lot of work, and it would be hard with one arm. “I could spare an hour or two, if you need another apprentice.”

“Oh, Merrett!”

Pleasure flooded his senses as he saw the delight in her beautiful oval face. She had a perfect nose, slender and slightly tipped. Delicately arched brows. Thick lashes. Full lips. There had never been anything between him and her. Except a kiss. Desire. And an unspoken agreement to deny the strong attraction they shared.

Gracie laid her hand on his arm, and he felt the hairs stand on end. Her touch electrified him, just as it always had. When she’d made that joke about thinking he cared, he’d had a crazy urge to tell her he did, and confess how strongly he’d been attracted to her in high school. He remembered the flowery fragrance she had worn, and every tiny freckle that bridged her nose after a day in the sun. He remembered her sitting on a cement bench in front of the school, legs stretched out beneath her skirt, face turned upward to catch the sun’s warm rays. It was the spring of his senior year, he was going away to college in the fall, and she was only a freshman, but he’d wondered what her future held.

“You’re awfully quiet,” Gracie said.

He raised his eyes, and meeting hers, drew in a breath. “Bows take concentration.”

Gracie was cutting lengths of stiff gold ribbon and the gold cord used to secure the middles of the bows. Merrett, with Kirsten’s help, was folding ribbon, and then tying the center while she held it. After five bows, they ran out of gold cord. Looking around, Gracie came up with the idea of using silver wire, and hiding it from the front with sprigs of holly.

“Holly was my mother’s name, but she wasn’t named after that green stuff,” Kirsten said. “She was named after Hollywood.”

“The city of her mother’s dreams,” Merrett said, flinching. Star-struck socialite and atheist, his mother-in-law was one of a kind.

More comfortable with wire cutters and a glue gun than tying cord, he worked faster now. After a while, he looked up to see Gracie watching him with a grin on her face. “We should have done this from the beginning,” she said, counting the bows. “Fourteen. Six more to go.”

Kirsten moaned. She’d been flexing her fingers frequently. Now she licked them, one by one, like a puppy. “My fingers burn.”

“Why don’t you go in the guest bathroom under the stairs, and hold your hands under cold water?” Gracie suggested. “Then maybe you should take a break. Spook would enjoy someone to play with. Take one of those empty ribbon spools and roll it to him. He loves that game.”

“All right!” Kirsten shouted.

Before Merrett could shush her, she ran from the room, and he heard her splashing water in the bathroom. Kirsten was usually taking her bath by now, but he wanted to help Gracie as much as he could. While he glued silver roses and gold leaves, she added a red pearl to the center of each rose. Her job on the wreaths took less time than his, and between pearls, she sorted garlands into large carrying boxes on the floor.

A burst of music suddenly flooded the house.

Gracie, who was sitting back on her heels, fell on her rear with a thud. “Oh Tannenbaum? What on earth?” Scrambling up, she ran to the parlor, and he followed. “The player piano is playing.”

Sure enough, the keys were moving, and the music roll was turning. “Something must have been stuck all this time,” Merrett said, bending to gaze inside the open front where the roll was revolving.

The music stopped as suddenly as it started, and he and Gracie looked at it and waited. When nothing happened, she shrugged. “If it was my Christmas ghost playing, maybe she’ll come back again.”

“I remember now,” Merrett said, rubbing his hands together. “This is the house that the kids in school used to say was haunted.” It had been a long time since he’d heard the tale. “The ghost’s name was...”

“Mirabelle Mayor.”

“Mirabelle was engaged to one of the Larraby’s sons. Right? Help me out, here.”

“Jonathon, the youngest and only surviving Larraby, was going to marry Mirabelle on Christmas Eve, the night before her thirtieth birthday. In those days, a woman was considered a spinster if she wasn’t married by the time she was thirty.”

“So he was going to save her from disgrace.”

Gracie chuckled. “I assume they were also in love.”

“But he died before he married her.”

“The day of the wedding, he was shot in a hunting accident, and since he’d already had her name put on the deed, Mirabelle moved in here, alone. Less than a year later, she died. Of a broken heart, people said.”

“So every December she comes back to this house looking for her lost love?”

“According to the story, her soul can’t rest because she died an old maid.”

Merrett chuckled. He’d enjoyed recalling the tale with Gracie. “Some women never give up on marriage.”

“I can tell you one who has.”

He followed her back to the workroom, where she pulled aside the heavy drape to look out the window. It was dark outside. Was she looking into the past? He laid a hand on her shoulder. “Why did you marry Sonny?”

She stiffened beneath Merrett’s touch. “We dated most of our senior year, and he had what he described as a ‘big job opportunity’ in Chicago. I thought our life there would be exciting. She glanced over her shoulder. “I guess you always knew you’d marry Holly?”

“It seemed bound to happen, but I don’t know why.”

Gracie played with the edge of the drape. “Tell me about New York. Was it everything you expected?”

“I liked working my newspaper beat.” He never cared about Broadway shows and city lights, or fancy places the way Holly did. “Then going back to a news room buzzing with activity to write my stories.”

“So you were happy? In your job and otherwise?”

Merrett felt tension weave its way through his shoulder blades and into his neck. “I wanted to be the best reporter the Times ever had, so I worked long hours to prove myself. But I hadn’t made the grade when...I came back. So I left, dissatisfied.”



He'd felt cheated by time and his boss, but when he flew home to Ferndale for the funeral, he'd planned to return to work in two weeks and strive even harder. After leaving Kirsten with his dad, he went back and drank the rest of his two weeks away. And when the fury and grief went out of him, his motivation and love for his job went with it, so he'd resigned when school was out. But he still had something to prove. "New York wasn't magic, but the job was what I wanted, and I put everything into it and...failed."

Gracie turned to cup his cheek in her hand. "Fail is a strong word. There may have been circumstances you didn't know about, or the kind of reporting you were doing might not have been your long suit. Even if you do your best, everyone loses sometime."

Not him. Not until then, and when he did, he lost everything, including his self-respect. The only thing he had left was Kirsten. Gracie rubbed a finger across his brow, and realizing he'd been frowning, he smiled. She made him feel better whenever she was around. Everyone loses sometime. Was that a rule of life?

"I did my best at my marriage, but there came a time to cut my losses." She looked out the window again, and he laid his hands on her shoulders, fragile-feeling through the silky softness of her sweater. She tensed, and he kneaded her tight muscles gently until she softly released her breath and relaxed against his chest. She'd leaned back against him like that yesterday when he helped her with her coat. She was a woman who touched and liked to be touched, and he found himself wishing he could stroke the satiny skin beneath her sweater.

"I let Holly down. I wanted to give her so much more."

Gracie covered his hand with hers. "If you did your best, that's all you can do. I'll bet she knew how hard you tried."

She must have, but she must have been disappointed. He'd promised her the moon, and given her green cheese.

"Daddy. Gracie." Kirsten burst into the room, Gracie's cat in her arms. "Doesn't Spook look beautiful?"

The cat wore a crocheted doily off one of Gracie's end tables, and Kirsten had threaded her pink hair ribbon through to hold it on.

Gracie chuckled and hugged them both while Merrett looked on. "You're welcome to look through my scrap box. I'll bet you can find material for more outfits there."

“Really?” Kirsten squealed, dropping Spook in her eagerness. The cat yowled, and Merrett winced. She definitely wasn’t old enough for a pet.

Kirsten dug through the colorful confusion of cloth, ribbons, and lace as if she’d found a pirate’s treasure. Gracie must have saved every scrap from everything she ever made. “I thought you were going to help, too,” Merrett reminded Kirsten.

Sighing, she began stuffing the scraps back in the box. Gracie stared at the work-strewn table, and Merrett realized she was worn out.

“I believe we should call it a night.” He rubbed gently at the faint purple smudges beneath her eyes. “You look tired.”

“I’m tired, too. I’ll make Spook an outfit next time we help,” Kirsten called over her shoulder as she ran for the foyer and her coat.

“I wish I had half her energy.” Gracie shook her head and smiled.

“You can have all of mine, tomorrow evening, after dinner. I’ll leave Kirsten with Dad so she can get to bed earlier.” He saw the tiredness fade from Gracie’s face as she relaxed. She needed him, and that felt good. Impulsively, Merrett grazed her lips with his, and she tasted so sweet, he longed to fold her close to his heart.

\* \* \*

Gracie’s sling had come off during the night, but she awoke with her arm still cradled against her chest. She tried moving it. It hadn’t magically healed, but it felt better, and the memory of Merrett’s kiss lingered on her lips.

Closing her eyes, she said her morning prayer. She rose to wash her face, brush her teeth, and lay out a green sweat suit that fastened in the front. She’d managed to slip out of her jeans the night before, but getting her sweater off and her warm challis gown over her head was a feat she hadn’t felt like tackling. Gingerly slipping out of the sweater, she shivered and looked around. The bedroom door stood wide open, and she always closed it against drafts. In her post-Merrett haze, she must have forgotten.

Downstairs, she looked out on a new layer of snow, and told herself she had to buy a snow shovel next time she went out. She’d put it off, sure she could find one tucked away in some forgotten corner of this wonderful house. The basement had yielded the wicker

baskets she'd arranged in the kitchen. The attic had given her the piano. And she'd found a copper ring mold in the pantry that would come in handy sometime.

Grandma Carver had a copper ring mold she made Jell-O in, and Gracie, slicing banana onto her cereal, recalled the idyllic summers she'd spent with her mother's parents on their Ohio farm. The sun rising over a faded red barn. Fields to run in. Sweet clover to pick for chains. Dandelions to blow. Those were the best times of her life, but after Faithie came, Mama needed her at home.

Unfolding the Daily Reporter at the kitchen table, Gracie skipped over the spattering of national news and went straight to local. Twins were born to the Bossos' son Charlie and his wife. Sonya, the daughter of the Hensons who owned the fish market, was marrying a boy she'd met in college. St. Michael School's PTO was holding a bazaar, and Marianne Heber was chairman of the craft booth.

So many wonderful things were happening. Good things. Good people. Marianne, Will's wife, was donating time to help her kids' school. The Hensons had been able to send their daughter to college, even though a supermarket on the same block sold fresh fish cheaper. Big companies putting "the little guy" out of business was a real sore spot with Gracie. When National Manufacturing bought the smaller factory where Pop worked, they phased out his job, and that was when things took a turn for the worse.

Even the obituaries said good things about people's lives, but in the back of her mind, she harbored a fear of seeing the name, Faith Singleton. Silly, since it wouldn't appear in the local paper without Gracie or Hope knowing about her death first.

As Gracie folded the newspaper, an item caught her eye. Koch's Book Nook, the tiny store she loved so much growing up, was for sale. A larger ad on the same page heralded Simon & Sterns Superstore as having "thousands of books, a cappuccino bar, copy and fax machines."

Mrs. Koch used to let Gracie browse endlessly, even though she didn't have a dime. And once, she even gave her a copy of Little Women, saying it wouldn't sell because it was outdated. By the time Gracie knew the truth, she'd read the book a dozen times. And today, it stood on the shelf in her library-workroom.

Gracie picked up a pen, and made notations on her "to-do list." Send a baby card to Bossos. Mail Hensons a flyer about Special Effects, with a note offering them a special rate for the wedding. Drop by to see Mrs. Koch and buy a book.

If more townspeople would shop at small, locally owned stores, people like Mrs. Koch could stay in business. Resolutely picking up her pen again, Gracie wrote a letter. “Is saving a dollar or two on a purchase worth jeopardizing our neighbors’ living? Isn’t it time we remembered the little ‘guy’? Shouldn’t we turn our backs on big business?”

Ten minutes later, Gracie folded her impassioned plea into an envelope. It was the first letter-to-the-editor she’d ever written, but whoever sat at the helm of her favorite paper, the Daily Reporter, would print it, she felt sure.

\* \* \*

“Mr. Bradmoore reporting for duty.” Merrett saluted when Gracie opened the door. He wore faded jeans and a plaid flannel shirt under his jacket. His cheeks were ruddy from the cold, and he smelled like snow and leather. He looked just as appealing dressed down as dressed up. He clicked his heels together, she chuckled, and he pulled her close to rub his nose against her cheek.

“Oh,” she gasped. “You’re cold.”

“Punishment for laughing at my military manner,” he said, rubbing his nose against her neck. She struggled to get loose, and he quit nuzzling her neck and stood still, and held her quietly for a moment.

Looking over his shoulder, she caught sight of the moon. Big and beautiful, and unbelievably bright, it flooded the snowy ground with an iridescent light. She caught her breath in delight. “It’s a beautiful night. So quiet. So bright.”

He turned on the threshold, and gazed out over her yard. “It’s been a long time since I looked at the moon, and listened to a snowy night.” A dimple flickered in his cheek as he cocked an ear toward the snowy scene and darted a sideways glance at her.

“Let’s take a walk,” she said impulsively. Tonight, he seemed to be the carefree Merrett he used to be.

“Shouldn’t we work first?”

“I always do the responsible thing first. Just once, I’d like to be spontaneous.” Reaching into the corner inside the door, she pulled her coat from the hall tree and stepped outside, shutting the door behind her.

Merrett's eyes sparkled in the moonlight. "I haven't taken a moonlight walk since I was young."

Gracie laughed softly. "Listen to you, talking like an old man."

He helped her on with her coat, slipping one arm in a sleeve and securing the other around her. She'd left her boots on the porch, and while she balanced herself with her good hand on his shoulder, he pulled them on for her. His hand grazed the calf of her leg, sending a thrill of excitement through her. When he rose, the heat in his eyes told her he'd felt it, too. For a moment, they stood still, looking at one another, and she remembered the saying that eyes are the windows of the soul. Merrett's eyes said far more than he'd ever said aloud.

Strolling down the walk, her hand in his, she sighed contentedly. The only sound was the crunch of snow beneath their feet. The lights in the houses seemed remote as they passed. Their breath clouded in front of them, and moonlight bathed the footprints they left. "Snow seems to insulate you from the world," Merrett said. "It's as if no one else exists on the planet except you and me."

Their camaraderie gave Gracie a warm feeling, and she squeezed his hand. He returned the gentle pressure, and they walked silently for several blocks. What would they do if they were the only two people?

Coming upon a small park with a playground, Merrett picked up a double handful of snow, made a ball, and shot it overhand through a basketball hoop. Hitting the ground, it broke apart. "Two points, and that shot calls for a new basketball," Gracie said, laughing.

He began forming another one. "I feel like a kid." He wound up, threw his second snowball at a light post, and hit it.

"If there's only you and I in the world, then I'm a kid, too." It was hard to pack snow with one arm hampered by a sling, and her snowball fell apart in the air. When she tried to make another, he slipped his arms around from behind and helped her. His breath, hot against her neck, made her shiver, and he hugged her tighter as he packed the snow in her hand. "I could learn to enjoy being taken care of," she said softly, and he kissed her cheek.

Grace threw her snowball at a tree trunk, missed, and he made her another. She tried again. This time, it hit, but they were standing close, and when it broke, snow

showered their faces and hair. “Now you’ve done it.” Laughing, Merrett tried to put snow down her collar.

“No fair. I can’t fight with one arm,” she said. And as soon as he let go, she dropped a handful of snow down his neck.

“Truce,” he cried, shaking like a dog, so the snow would fall out.

She raised an arm in surrender, and he caught her by the shoulders and rubbed noses with her.

They looked into one another’s eyes, and his breath warmed her lips, making her long for his kiss. But afraid she’d appear overeager, turned away. She heard a whisper of a sigh escape him, and she wondered if he was disappointed, but when she turned around, he was already scooping up more snow.

Standing in the entrance to the park, he pitched a snowball overhand at a sign that said STOP. A police car cruised around the corner, lights spilling over the snowy street just as it hit. The noise from the metal sign reverberated. Ping-g-g.

“Duck.” Merrett dived behind a shrub, pulling her with him. She landed on top, and held her head up, trying to peer through the frozen evergreen. She couldn’t see, but as the lights from the car disappeared, he started chuckling.

“This is no laughing matter,” she said in her best strict-mother voice. “What would your father say if you got arrested for throwing snowballs?”

Merrett laughed harder, and she giggled, until she became aware of the movement of his body beneath hers. “What would my daughter say?” he asked.

His voice faded to a whisper in the matter of five words, and she knew he’d become aware of it, too. His eyes shone in the moonlight with what she hoped was desire. Gently shifting her so her sprained arm wouldn’t be crushed, he pulled her closer and groaned softly. Her coat lay open, and her breasts pressed against him. “You smell so sweet and feel so soft.”

She raised her head to look at him, and the pressure of her breasts deepened, and his hardness pushed into her soft belly. His breath grew ragged, and he raised his mouth. She met him halfway, and they sighed into one another, settling into the snow with their lips meeting and caressing, their tongues delving and touching. “Merrett.” Her word was a sigh.

“What?” he asked in a strangled tone.

“I...don’t know.” She sank into him, her head against his shoulder, the pain of desire cutting through her, a feeling so new and overwhelming she could scarcely breathe.

“I think we both know,” he said, and stopped to rain tiny kisses over her face and neck before finishing, “we should go home.”

## Chapter Four

Merrett awoke for the first time in months and months with a smile. He and Gracie hadn't gotten any work done the night before. He was afraid to go in after the incident in the park, but he'd promised to come back tonight, and told himself he'd exert strict control. When he said they should go home, he wanted to go in her house with her, but he knew better than to get involved.

"Mornin', boss." Henri Wilkes, a young redhead who dressed fit for work at the New York Times, greeted him in a small town manner.

"How's it going?" he asked, and she beamed him a smile. Feeling chipper, he smiled back. With a degree in journalism, she could have gotten work at an Indianapolis newspaper, but she'd chosen the Reporter. "Nice outfit."

"I think it's important for the society editor to dress attractively." She smoothed her hand over her short skirt.

"I think it's important to be comfortable." Grinning, the sports ed smoothed her gray sweats.

Both women had other duties in the small newsroom, but those were the favorite parts of their jobs. Chuckling, Merrett sauntered to the back of the office and his desk. He hoped he hadn't offended anyone when he had had a freestanding divider installed to separate himself from his staff, but he'd been determined not to become part of the office chit-chat pool.

"Coffee." A light knock on the divider sounded, as he settled himself in his wooden arm chair, and Emma Rollins, the motherly secretary-receptionist, popped in.

Motioning her to sit down, Merrett tilted his chair back. He'd told her a dozen times he could get his own coffee. "Thanks, Emma."



While he sipped, she slid the mail addressed to him across his desk, then recited a list of phone calls. “And your father called, suggesting you call a Ms. Saylor about decorating the office for Christmas.”

Merrett had taken off for work without breakfast; afraid Dad or Kirsten would spoil his good mood. Tenting his fingers, he took a swift look around. The office did look drab. The walls were tan with a few framed certificates; the only stab at decor. The certificates, which he’d scarcely noticed before, were mostly diplomas, but two were awards the Daily Reporter garnered under previous management. Could it win one again if he wanted to put forth the effort?

Emma tapped a pale green flyer at the top of the mail pile. “We also received an ad about holiday decorating today from a business called Special Effects.”

He’d avoided mentioning where he worked to Gracie. Everyone in high school thought he’d become a star athlete, but he’d botched up his knee first thing. Knowing he’d disappointed Holly, who had her heart set on being a pro-football player’s wife, he’d figured the glamour of New York City would help make it up to her, and it did. But once again, he’d failed to make it in the big league. And here he was, two career downs later, in a small potatoes job as editor of a daily rag in his small hometown. He couldn’t bear to see disappointment in those beautiful pansy eyes of Gracie’s.

Emma cleared her throat. “Decorations might boost office morale, if you don’t mind my saying so, sir.”

“What’s wrong with morale?” His tone was sharp, and Emma blinked rapidly.

“Well, since you asked. Long hours are tough on everyone. Since you’ve been here, two employees quit. I’m not saying it’s your fault.” She hesitated, looking at him searchingly. “But you haven’t replaced them. Which is your prerogative, of course, sir.”

It was true he hadn’t replaced the two, whoever they were. Had they quit because of him? He hadn’t been a picnic to work for. “Anything else?”

“Working conditions. The roof in the press room leaks. The water cooler doesn’t cool.”

“Why didn’t anyone tell me about these things?”

Emma studied her blunt nails. “You’ve had a lot of adjustments to make, sir.”

So they hadn’t bothered him with things he should have noticed for himself. “Call someone to fix the water cooler, and ask them to do it at once. Obtain two estimates on

fixing the roof and then get back to me. Bring me job descriptions of the employees who left, and I'll see about hiring replacements. I'll speak to Ms. Saylor myself about the decor." Thinking about Grace brought an unbidden smile to his face.

"Oh, thank you, sir. The others will be delighted."

Merrett straightened his tie. Like the society editor, he thought some decorum was needed. People who dressed sloppily did sloppy work, his mother said. Or was it his father who said that? Dad took great pride in his business.

"Your father didn't give me Ms. Saylor's number."

Ms. Saylor. It bothered Merrett to think of Gracie married to that creep, Sonny. The guy was a loser; anyone could see that. And how could Gracie, of all people, be so blind? But she'd wised up to him, and left, and if she knew about Merrett's lack of success... He tapped the flyer sharply. "She runs Special Effects. The number's here. And Emma, don't be afraid to come to me when things need done. I know I haven't always been cordial, but..." He tunneled his fingers through his hair. "I'm sorry."

"I knew you'd come around, sir." She smiled and started to walk away.

Please don't call me sir, he thought, but didn't say it. Did he want his employees to call him Merrett? Or Mr. Bradmoore? He didn't know how to relate to them. He'd never set out to be anyone's boss.

"Wait," he called. "I've changed my mind." She turned, looking alarmed. "I'd like you to call Ms. Saylor at Special Effects."

"Oh, that." Emma smiled, picking up the flyer. "I'll be glad to, sir."

"Make arrangements for her to decorate the office at night, and ask the custodian to let her in." It made sense to have the work done when everyone was gone except the Bosso boy. "And Emma, one more thing. Don't call me sir. Call me Merrett."

He could have told her to call him Santa Claus, she looked so astounded.

\* \* \*

Merrett called at five, and told Gracie he'd be late. It had something to do with his secretary being too efficient, and a repairman arriving already. Gracie, who had been counting the minutes until his arrival, hung up the phone. Checking her reflection in the mirror above the hall table, she fluffed her hair, admiring the way the yellow sweater

brought out the highlights. She moved away before she could change her mind about the choice. She'd changed clothes twice already. Hugging her arms to her waist, she remembered how it had felt to lie against him the night before.

An hour later, Merrett called again to say he wouldn't be able to make it for the light supper she'd suggested. The repairman had to go somewhere for a part, and had just come back. He'd eat a sandwich at work, and see her as soon as he could. Gracie wasn't hungry, so she continued to work alone. Their moment of passion last night must have scared him, considering the way he rushed her home and gave her a brotherly hug goodnight. She'd been scared, too, and she was embarrassed to admit, disappointed. He'd surprised her when he offered to help again tonight.

The doorbell rang. At last.

Gracie opened the door, and Kirsten shrugged out of her winter jacket and stomped snow off her boots. "Daddy still can't get away, so he asked Grampa to bring me over to help."

Gracie swallowed her disappointment as she and the little girl set to work together. Decorations for the banks were finished, and she'd set out materials for the Greenfield tearoom, Sugar and Spice, where the owner wanted a warm, homey look. Kirsten talked while she worked. "You knew my daddy a long time ago. So, you probably knew my mother. Mommy was beautiful. I'm not beautiful. Pretty, maybe."

Gracie had Holly's dark eyes and hair, but there was something of Merrett in her, too. "I'll bet your mother was pretty at your age, just like you. And when you're older, you'll be beautiful like her."

"I never thought of that. Pretty must be for kids, huh?" She hopped off her chair to give Spook a hug. "When we're finished here, I'll make you a Christmas outfit, I promise."

It would be hard for a parent to keep up with her. Mom never could keep up with her kids, so Gracie had had to chase after Faith and Hope. But she'd still envisioned her and Sonny moving to the city, where they'd live in a cute apartment, and have an adorable baby. Instead, they lived in a third floor walkup that stood in the shadow of a warehouse with a patch of cement below and sooty gray sky overhead. And Sonny had wanted to be a child, not father one.

Kirsten held the tip of her tongue between her teeth as she wired red cherries onto green calico print bows. Gracie sat next to her, painting wooden gingerbread men spicy brown. Dipping her brush into the paint jar, Gracie looked out the workroom window on a snowy lawn, gray-blue sky, and house lamps lit against an early dusk. She was glad she'd left Chicago behind.

“Last year, Daddy sent me here to spend Christmas. Gramma was in the hospital then, a real hospital, not a home like where she is now. She was mixed-up, and the doctors were trying to figure her out. We went to visit, and I liked her. She held my hand a lot, and called me Anna. That's her sister. Grampa said I look like Anna's pictures when she was little.”

Gracie smiled. “I remember your grandmother as being very nice.”

Kirsten bobbed her head in agreement. “Grampa's nice, too. He and I put up a tree together last year. We were going to bake cookies, but neither of us knew how. So we bought some at the store, and put icing on them. Then we sprinkled them with those colored thingamajigs, and put them in boxes to give people. We bought gifts, too, for a family without much money. And we had a turkey baked at Kroger's, and we took all that stuff. The people were really grateful.”

Tears sprang to Gracie's eyes, imagining Harry and his young granddaughter doing all that alone, for poor people. A man whose wife was in the hospital being diagnosed with Alzheimer's and whose daughter-in-law had just died.

“After Christmas vacation, I went back to Daddy, but I had to stay with a sitter after school. I hated her, and missed Mommy, and Daddy wasn't fun company. Grampa was lonely too, because Gramma had to go to that place to live, so we moved back here. I'm glad. Mrs. Jarvis watches me when Daddy and Grampa are gone, so I don't need a sitter. She doesn't smile much, but she lets me watch television all I want.”

Kirsten looked down at Spook who'd fallen asleep, his head on her foot. “If I'd had a pet in New York, I might not have felt so lonely.”

\* \* \*

When Merrett came to pick Kirsten up, she was searching the house for Spook. Her attention had waned, and Gracie excused her from work to make the cat a Christmas outfit, but she hadn't found him yet.

"I'm sorry," Merrett said, taking her hands. "I really meant to help."

"Kirsten and I got quite a bit done." Gracie wondered if she should mention what his daughter said about wanting a pet. As a child, Gracie had wanted a pet, too, but it was out of the question. As an adult, she'd lived in apartments where they weren't allowed. A few days after she had moved into this house, Spook was left on her doorstep in a cardboard box, and she'd considered the little kitten a miracle. It would be easy for Kirsten to have a pet at the Bradmoore house, but Gracie didn't want Merrett to think she was interfering.

"Daddy, come see what Gracie and I made," Kirsten begged, running back into the hallway and spotting him.

Gracie could tell by the bemused expression on Merrett's face that his thoughts were on something else when Kirsten showed him the results of their evening's work. "Nice. But we have to go now. It's past your bedtime." He handed Kirsten her coat, and turned the front doorknob.

"Nice?" Kirsten's lip dropped. "I think it's be-yoo-ti-ful."

Gracie hugged her arms to her waist, wishing he'd show more enthusiasm over the job Kirsten had done.

"It is beautiful. It is also late. I'm sorry I couldn't help, Gracie."

She nodded, sorry herself.

They were almost out the door when Spook popped out, and Kirsten grabbed him. "I didn't get to make Spook clothes, yet. Please, Daddy. I have to stay. I promised him."

"A cat has a fur coat and doesn't need clothes. Or understand promises." Merrett looked and sounded exasperated.

Kirsten looked to Gracie, her eyes begging her to understand. Gracie knew what it was like to be a little girl with no power. "These clothes were to be special, not to keep the kitten warm. And Kirsten knows what promises are. It wouldn't take long."

"She can wait." His eyes sparkled, and he backed toward the door.

"And you can't?" Gracie put her hands on her hips, and took a step forward. Kirsten had lost a mother, and was afraid she wasn't as beautiful as the ghost she'd competed

with for months following her death. She was afraid of being lonely again, and needed a pet. Or more attention and love from her dad.

Merrett's green eyes shadowed like a stormy sea. "I think I know what's best for her."

She was his daughter, and Gracie backed down, realizing she had no right to interfere. Children never wanted to wait, but they didn't hold a grudge like grownups did. She'd spent most of her life trying to keep people happy, and this wasn't the time to quit. Turning to Kirsten, Gracie smiled gently. "Your daddy's tired, and it is late to start an important project. I'll help you another time."

Kirsten wiped away a tear. "Could I come back and make cat clothes, Daddy?"

Merrett shuffled his feet, and she could tell he was angry. "Sometime, but I don't know when." He looked at Gracie. "I just told her last night she'd have to start riding the bus to and from school. Things are in a mess down...at the office...and I can't leave to pick her up every day."

"The bus could drop me off here after school one day." Kirsten, holding up her hand to talk behind it, confided in Gracie. "I hate school buses. They smell like rotten apples and dirty feet. But I'll ride one for you."

"And I could take you home when we finish. If that's okay with your daddy."

"Thanks!" Without waiting for her daddy's consent, Kirsten threw her arms around Gracie's waist. "You're the best!"

\* \* \*

"You're the best." Merrett savored the silence of night on the country road. Kirsten had fallen asleep soon after they left Gracie's, and he welcomed the time to sort out his thoughts. His daughter was vulnerable since she'd lost her mother, and was getting too close to Gracie already. And Kirsten wasn't the only one vulnerable to Gracie's charms. He'd be taking a chance if he went back to help again tonight, so he hadn't offered, but he hadn't been able to forget the way she had felt pressed against him the other night in the snow. He'd picked up the phone half a dozen times today, thinking he'd call and see if she needed his help. But he hadn't phoned because he couldn't do that to her. She was the type of woman to play for keeps, and he couldn't give more of himself than the

moment. He was determined to go back to New York and prove himself, and he didn't want to take a chance on hurting her when he left.

A vision came into his mind of Gracie sitting across the breakfast table from him in a robe that clung to her curves, hair tousled from sleep, the two of them looking down over New York's Central Park, with squirrels scampering, children playing, lovers strolling hand-in-hand. At night, over dinner, they'd gaze at the skyline, knowing soon they'd lie next to one another in bed. Gracie hadn't liked Chicago, but...under other circumstances...she might enjoy life in the city.

Kirsten sighed in her sleep, as if she knew he was daydreaming again. And he was. Gracie would be a fool to consider marriage to a man who ran a paper with a circulation of less than twenty-thousand, lived with his father, and was lacking in some serious aspect of the soul, as seen by his not visiting his mother. He wasn't the golden boy everyone at Ferndale High used to think he was, and Gracie would realize that soon. Not that he was thinking of marriage, nor could he afford an apartment in the area of Central Park.

Kirsten breathed gently in the passenger seat, and he touched a fingertip to her cheek. Gracie was patient with her, and he wished he could be. Perhaps if he didn't have so many things on his mind, he would be a better father.

Parking the Jeep in front of the house, Merrett stepped out. The snow had stopped falling, and lay like a blanket of serenity on the ground. Overhead, stars glittered in an onyx sky. He needed to find peace within himself. Lifting Kirsten gently from the seat, he carried her inside, her head on his shoulder.

Merrett yawned as he passed his father to carry Kirsten upstairs. "I think I'll turn in." He needed time alone to figure things out. It probably was time to move on, but he hadn't thought he could. He hadn't wanted to, and didn't feel he should—until now. He wanted to kiss Gracie, and hold her tight. She was so lovely, and he'd waited a long, long time.

\* \* \*

Merrett was riffling through the Daily Reporter's mail when he came across a letter addressed "Publisher/Editor." With a slash of a brass letter opener, he pulled out a sheet

of cream-colored paper. An impassioned plea for small business, the letter gave a slap in the face to large corporations that bought up little companies. It was the Reporter's policy to print letters to the editor, and many of the townspeople would applaud this one. He, personally, didn't agree with the sentiment.

Small businesses couldn't perform as efficiently as large ones. In the spreading offices of the City Times, everything ran like clockwork: computers clicking, faxes buzzing, presses rolling, everyone doing their job. The Daily Reporter's workers were willing, but the operation was little more sophisticated than the high school newspaper.

Gracie was one of the most capable members of the Clarion staff. Efficient, talented, even though she was only a freshman, she'd been willing to tackle any job he assigned her. The only time she'd ever hesitated, he'd asked her to interview the prom committee. Her eyes grew big with what he took for fear, but a second later, she agreed. He could have kicked himself afterward.

Holly's best friend, Beryl Marcum, was chairman of the committee, and recognized the blouse that Gracie had worn as one Holly gave to a clothing drive. When Beryl had smugly related the tale to Merrett and Holly in the school cafeteria, Merrett had stalked off, but Holly's laughing taunt followed him. "Merrett doesn't like us talking about his little fan."

The news had quickly spread through the school, and Gracie hadn't deserved that. When he'd told Mama what had happened, she'd been outraged as well. "A person doesn't have to blow out someone else's candle to make theirs shine brighter."

He'd often wondered if Holly wished she'd chosen his friend Pete Hancock over him. Pete was the CEO of a big company now, jetting all over the world.

Slamming down his mug, Merrett slopped coffee on the letter championing small business. Wiping it off with his thumb, he saw for the first time that it was signed, "Grace Singleton Saylor."

Big businesses served more people, and did a better job. Of course, as an entrepreneur starting out, she'd be all for the little guy. She was naïve and trusting, and probably making a huge mistake, starting a specialized decorating business in a burg like this one. You couldn't start a small newspaper like the Reporter, and succeed nowadays. Reaching for his Indianapolis Star, Merrett flipped it open to the business ads. If large corporations bought small companies all the time, chances were, there was



a newspaper conglomerate looking for a small paper to buy. Gracie was taking a big chance on her business. If he stayed around and kept seeing her, he might ask her to take an even bigger chance on him, and she'd be a fool to do it.

\* \* \*

Gracie was waiting for a traffic light to turn green, when a man in an overcoat and galoshes raised his hand and smiled at her. A paper carrier waved. People in small towns were friendly. Even when she lived on downtrodden Edge Road, townspeople treated her well. City folks were always in a hurry. It would be better for Kirsten if Merrett raised her in Ferndale. Better for Gracie, too.

She'd replayed the scene in the snow with Merrett a hundred times. He wanted her as badly as she did him, and just knowing that made her happy. She'd played the scene as many times with them giving into their desires, but her conscience, or fears, kept playing censor, so that the police came back and carted them off before they actually made love.

There were better places to make love than behind a shrub. Like in her feather bed, but Merrett walked her home, gave her a quick hug, and said he couldn't come in, did she understand? She did, and she didn't. She'd never made love with anyone but her husband and she knew such a precious act should be reserved for marriage, but she wanted to make love with Merrett.

Gracie caught the next light on red, too, and rubbed her arm. Wearing the elastic bandage, her on-site work went well. She didn't have any jobs after tomorrow's tea room, but with the flyers she had sent, and the Holiday Open House she was planning, something would turn up soon. At her open house, she'd fit some wedding and anniversary pieces in with the holiday displays, for those people who were planning ahead into the new year.

Someone behind her leaned on a car horn. Startled to see the light had turned green, she shot forward and nearly ran over a woman crossing on a "Don't Walk" light. Slender with pale reddish-blond hair pulled back, she walked with her head bent against the wind.

Faithie. Was it her? The girl's ears were red from the cold, and she wore tennis shoes—in the snow. Wheeling around the corner, Gracie edged along, trying to get a closer look. Without raising her head, the young woman ducked into Sandy's Soda Shop.

Not a parking place in sight.

Precious minutes later, Gracie pulled into a lot two blocks away, and half-ran to Sandy's. The stools at the counter were occupied. She didn't see the girl she was looking for. Sandy was making a shake. "Did you see a girl come in here in jeans and a denim jacket?" Gracie asked.

"A girl with a blondish pony tail bought something out of a machine and left." Sandy nodded toward a vending machine at the end of the counter.

Was Faithie too broke to eat anything but a candy bar? Sandy had owned the shop as long as Gracie could remember. "Was it Faith?"

Sandy's eyebrows shot up. "Your sister? No. I'm sure it wasn't."

Gracie felt like a balloon with the air let out. Mumbling her thanks, she sank down in an empty booth facing the door. The yellow plaid wallpaper was the same as when they'd come here in high school, and she found the sameness comforting. The aromas of coffee and Sandy's stew hung in the air. A lighted pie case displayed pies with meringue three inches high. The waitress came, and Gracie ordered a soda, something she hadn't done since she left Ferndale. The sun shone brightly through the plate glass window on the same aluminum Christmas tree with blue tinsel that had stood there fifteen years ago. Someone dropped a coin in the jukebox, a love song oozed out, and Gracie felt like a schoolgirl, sipping soda, and watching kids play pinball at the front of the store.

The door opened with a whoosh of cold air, in walked Merrett Bradmoore, and it was just like old times. Except, back then, she'd waited hours for him to come and nod as he walked past. And today, flashing a smile, he headed directly her way.

\* \* \*

Merrett crossed the worn green linoleum, and sat down beside Gracie. "How did the bank jobs go?"

She patted her well-stuffed shoulder bag. "I knocked them both off."

He laughed but quickly grew serious. "Are we all right?"

“I am if you are.”

“Good.” He motioned the waitress over and ordered a coffee. “The other night...I didn’t want to leave but...” He let his voice trail off. “And then last night, I’m sorry I got ticked off. What’s that you’re drinking?”

“Sandy’s holiday special, a strawberry soda with pistachio ice cream. I haven’t had a soda in years.”

“You know what I’ve been craving? Savino’s spaghetti. You can buy spaghetti all over New York, but no one makes it like that little Italian restaurant on the north side of Ferndale.” Holding his fingertips to his lips, he made a kissing sound. “Mama Mia.”

Gracie chuckled appreciatively. “Spaghetti-O’s was our Italian treat growing up.”

“If you’ve never been to Savino’s, you have to go. How about tonight? My treat.” Taking her to dinner couldn’t be too dangerous, and he’d love to take her places she hadn’t been.

She touched his arm. “Don’t feel sorry for me for what I’ve missed. I’m okay with it.”

Merrett took her hand, and looked into her eyes. She was proud, and he hadn’t meant to hurt her feelings. “I want to take you to dinner, want to share something I love, and think you’ll love, too. I know I blow hot and cold sometimes, but try to bear with me, will you? Everything is so different...” He raised his hands, unable to say with Holly gone, and you back in my life.

Gracie smiled. “I don’t know exactly what you’re saying, but I feel here that it’s all right.” She laid her hand over her heart.

She was some woman. She understood him, and cared what he thought and felt. “Let me make one thing clear. I’m not asking you because I want to make up for things you missed, but things we missed. Together.” Both the other night, and fifteen years ago.

## Chapter Five

“I have a date with Merrett Bradmoore.” Waltzing through her front door, Gracie scooped Spook up for a hug and gave him the news. She’d waited until Merrett was out of sight before leaving Sandy’s, afraid she’d break into dance in the aisles.

Her answering machine showed four messages. Listening to them, she grew giddier. The first was from a woman who wanted her to decorate the Daily Reporter office. The second was from the Country Club president who wanted to talk to her about decorating the ballroom. The third was from Harry Bradmoore who asked that she call him to discuss a couple of jobs. “Yes.” She punched the air, and Spook jumped out of her arms. Laughing, she listened to the fourth message.

“Gracie? It’s Hope. I just called to say hello.”

She immediately punched in her sister’s number. Family came first. Always. And Hope hadn’t called in too long. “Great to hear from you, sis.”

“You sound cheerful. I guess your ghost hasn’t put in an appearance yet.”

“Neither have you, and the Mirabelle story is a myth.”

“People in Ferndale have told it for years, and folks here have heard it, too.”

“Daleville is only twelve miles away, and I don’t care if they’ve heard the tale in Timbuktu. Or if it’s persisted since the beginning of time. The Mirabelle story is the reason I could afford this house.”

That and your inheritance from Aunt Grace.”

Gracie bit her lip. Their great aunt left her sole estate, five thousand dollars and the furnishings of her rented house, to her namesake. A windfall to her, the inheritance would have been a pittance to her sister. Hope lived in a custom built, professionally decorated home with her attorney husband, Frank, who gave her everything she wanted.

Except a baby. Hope wanted a child desperately, and Frank refused, but that had nothing to do with Aunt Grace. Holding the receiver with her shoulder, Gracie riffled through the mail she'd brought in. "What's really bothering you, Hope? You aren't usually like this."

"Like what? Pouty, petty, and ill-tempered?" She laughed, and then sighed. "I'm just out of sorts"

"I know something that will make you smile. Merrett Bradmoore is back in town."

Hope squealed so loudly Gracie almost dropped the phone. She'd always thought her sister had a crush on him, too. "Then it was him I saw coming out of Bradmoore's clothing store the other day. Is he working for his dad?"

"He hated working there when he was in high school, so I don't think so. He was a newspaper reporter in New York."

"He crossed the street to the Daily Reporter, but after working for a big city paper, he wouldn't work at a place that size."

Gracie didn't think so either, but right now, she wouldn't care if he sold Popsicles on the street. Reining in her excitement, she announced casually. "Maybe I'll ask him, when he takes me to Savino's tonight."

A door slammed, and Hope spoke in a low voice. "Frank came in. I have to go."

\* \* \*

Gracie stomped up the stairs, and dumped bubble bath into the tub She had just shared the most amazing news of her life, and Hope hung up without comment.

Running the steaming water, Gracie willed herself to calm down. If Hope wanted to drop everything every time her husband crooked his little finger, it was up to her. Sure, he was good to her, and loved her. But no better or no more than Gracie.

Both her sisters had lives of their own. And they were her sisters, not her daughters. But it was hard to let go and stop worrying about them. Leaning her head back against the edge of the stately claw-footed tub, she took a deep breath. So she'd brushed their hair. Given them baths. Slipped them part of her food. Even a mother had to let their kids go.

She took another deep breath, and deliberately turned her mind to something else. Someone else. Tonight, she would share an evening with Merrett, as she'd so often dreamed. Merrett. The honeysuckle scent and heat of the bath relaxed her taut muscles. Closing her eyes, she willed herself into a trance-like state where the shimmering bubbles, silky against her skin, became Merrett's fingertips, caressing her. Her belly grew taut, and her nipples hardened, and she bolted upright in the tub, sloshing bubbles over the edge. She was acting like a foolish old maid, aching with desire for a man who hungered for spaghetti, not her.

Scrambling out of the tub, into a terry cloth robe, Gracie went downstairs to return her other phone calls. The phone rang a long time before anyone picked up at Bradmoore Men's Store.

"Hello. Hello?"

Hearing Merrett's voice stunned Gracie, she eased the receiver into its cradle.

He returned to his father's business, after all. At the parlor window, she looked out at the snow glistening on her lawn in the twilight. She loved this house and her business. Merrett worked at a job he disliked, and went home to his parents' house at night. He must feel he hadn't moved forward at all since high school. No wonder he ran hot and cold. She wished she could make him run "warm" more often. Maybe tonight...

"Si-lent night." The piano started to play, and half-closing her eyes, she imagined she saw Mirabelle Mayor sitting on the polished piano bench, playing for her lost love. Since its first rousing rendition, Gracie had accepted the player's frequent performances without conscious notice. But tonight, the music touched her, and lifting the sides of her robe as she might a full skirt, Gracie danced up the steps to dress for her evening—with Merrett.

\* \* \*

Merrett tucked his black and white striped shirt into charcoal wool pants. Leaving the top button of his shirt open, he slipped a black cashmere vee neck sweater over his head, brushed his hair, and went downstairs.

Kirsten looked up when he entered the kitchen. “Where are you going, Daddy?” She had on Mama’s apron, hitched up with one of Dad’s belts. Both cooks had chocolate smears on their faces.

“To dinner with a friend.” His father raised his eyebrows, and Merrett knew it took all he had not to grin. “I didn’t know you could make fudge, Dad.”

“I found Mama’s recipe, and we’re giving it a shot.”

“Grampa’s going to take some to Gramma tomorrow. Can I go along?”

Merrett’s mouth watered, remembering Mama’s fudge. She spent weeks making candy and cookies before Christmas arrived. She would have loved teaching Kirsten to cook and bake. “We’ll see.”

Kirsten dropped to her knees. “Oh, please, with fudge on top. I want to. When you say ‘we’ll see,’ you always say no.”

“Why not let her, Merrett?” his dad asked. “Just because...”

“What?” Merrett snapped, daring him to say because you won’t go.

Kirsten said it for him. “Just because you’re too upset to see Grandma doesn’t mean I am. Even if she doesn’t know me, I know her.”

His daughter’s eyes were trusting and innocent, and dammit, her cockamamie remark made sense. Merrett kissed her fudgy cheek. Just because he was a coward, she didn’t have to be. Besides, she didn’t have the memories of Mama that he did. “I just didn’t want you to feel bad, Kirsten, because Grandma forgets things, and people. But you’re such a big girl now, I guess you can handle it.”

Merrett, looking up from Kirsten’s crushing bear hug to see his father battling back tears, felt like a heel for holding out so long.

\* \* \*

Gracie donned a soft blue knit dress, adding a crystal star-shaped pin for a holiday touch. The long sleeves hid the bandage she still wore, but her arm barely hurt now. Gathering her hair high on her head, she looked in the mirror. She wanted to look nice, but not so festive he’d think this was the most thrilling moment of her lifetime. Shaking the curls in back loose, she anchored the sides with small gold combs.

Downstairs, she turned on the tiny light over the stove and looked out the kitchen window. Across the yards in their brightly lit kitchen, her neighbors were doing dishes together, Margaret in a flowered robe, Homer in IU sweat pants and shirt. Sonny wouldn't carry his own dishes to the sink, but neither would her father. Men in their old neighborhood hid their lack of success behind long-winded boasts about other triumphs, or in Pop's case, preaching against the evils of materialism.

Gracie stood beneath mistletoe in the doorway to the darkened living room and inhaled the crisp scent of pine. She'd decorate her two trees soon. Most likely, she'd do it alone, unless she could persuade Hope to visit. Headlights swung around the corner, casting soft light on the snow-covered street, and Gracie ran to the window to watch Merrett hop out of the Jeep and swing up the walk. Tall. Handsome. Eager? Her heart quickened with hope. Maybe he'd help her decorate her tree if tonight went right.

\* \* \*

"Savino's used to be quiet on weeknights," Merrett looked around the crowded room. He didn't know what had come over him, asking Gracie to dinner. She looked so beautiful, he scooted his chair as close to hers as he could.

Glowing candles on wooden tables dripped colored wax down squat wine bottles. An Italian with a bushy mustache and a violin tucked under his chin strolled from table to table. The place was a cliché, but Merrett liked it and when he filled Gracie's wine glass, her eyes shone like a child's on Christmas morning. Raising the deep red liquid to her lips, she sighed, sounding contented. "How long have you been back in town, Merrett?"

"Kirsten and I came back in May when school was out."

"Your birthday month. The nineteenth, right?"

His father bought the Daily Reporter for his thirty-third birthday. It had been an unwanted but very generous gift. He reached out and toyed with the class ring she wore on the finger where she'd once worn a wedding band, surprised she knew his birthday. "How did you know?"

"I had this silly crush. Well, not silly. You were...are...handsome." Gracie looked beautiful when she was flustered. "I checked your birthday on your enrollment card



when I was working in the principal's office one day. I wanted to compare Zodiac signs to see if..." Her cheeks flamed.

"We were star-crossed lovers?" He couldn't resist teasing her a little. "I knew about your crush."

"How?"

"The way you looked at me was part of it," he said gruffly. "As if I were ten feet tall."

"You saved our family from the bleakest Christmas imaginable. No gifts. No..." She took a deep breath. "Nothing."

He'd suspected they had little or no food in the house. Her mother had been so thin, she looked like death. Her father had been so bent, so beaten. Merrett moved slightly away, hoping Gracie hadn't felt his involuntary shudder.

Turning suddenly, her head grazed his chin. Laughing lightly, she touched it with her fingertips. "How else did you know I had a crush?"

He laced his fingers in her golden mass of hair. Testing an unruly curl, he imagined he could feel the crackle of energy that was so totally her. Eyes glowing, an eagerness in her face, she seemed ready to tackle the world, just as she had back in high school. "You worked longer hours than anyone else on the Clarion, staying to help me with lay-out, clean-up, anything there was to do."

"You were my Sir Galahad, and I wanted to be near you." Laughter bubbled from deep in her throat, soft and husky. "The celebration of Jesus' birth is the real meaning of Christmas. Pop taught us that from the moment we were born. But you taught my sisters and me the other things Christmas can be. You introduced us to turkey with trimmings, store-bought ornaments, and presents wrapped in pretty paper and shiny bows. You gave us our first taste, not only of receiving, but the meaning of generosity and giving."

Merrett ran his finger around inside his collar.

"You changed my life. Not just one holiday, but my outlook, and I'm grateful."

There were stars in her eyes. Violet stars in a sea of midnight blue. But dammit, he was no hero. For the past year, he'd been little more than a robot. And before that, he'd been a struggling reporter. He wanted to be so much more.

The violinist approached, and Merrett was glad when he stopped at their table, even though it attracted other diners' attention to them. The song was soft and romantic, and

Gracie sank in her seat. He reached for the wine bottle, and as he poured the last of the ruby liquid into their glasses, his hand brushed hers. She looked at him, lips parted, and he brushed her cheek with the back of his knuckles. She touched her tongue to her lips, and he watched. Their eyes met again, and held. An electric current flowed between them, and he broke his gaze to stare into the candlelight. He didn't deserve a woman like her.

"I'll bet it's fun playing Santa to a little girl. Does Kirsten have a long list?"

Merrett blinked, surprised by Gracie's change of subject, and blinked again, realizing he hadn't thought about Santa duties. He hadn't thought much about Christmas. Dad and Kirsten nagged him into shopping for a tree so early. "She hasn't mentioned a list."

"Perhaps you should ask her for one." Gracie brushed his hair back off his forehead. "There are only twenty-one shopping days until Christmas, and that's a fact, because I read it in this morning's Daily Reporter."

Merrett swallowed hard. He'd expected Gracie to ask him about his work, but she hadn't, and he hadn't told her. The Reporter was drivel. Weddings, births, and obituaries. Court news, an occasional ribbon-cutting or human interest piece, and a smattering of news off the wire. Gracie would be disappointed in him when she learned he ran a two-bit newspaper, but perhaps it was time to level.

\* \* \*

Gracie took a sip of her wine and studied Merrett. Sweat beaded his forehead, and if he clutched his wine glass any tighter, he was going to break the stem. She sensed she made him uncomfortable expressing her gratitude, but couldn't imagine why he'd mind a discussion of Christmas shopping.

"Well, look who's here!" A rasping voice sent Gracie straight in the air. Merrett's knee banged hers as he jerked to attention. Perfume, so heavy and sweet it made Gracie's stomach turn, settled over their table.

A pencil-thin woman with black hair angled sharply from earlobes to shoulders tapped heavily-ringed fingers on their table. Her exquisitely tailored red suit screamed 'money,' and the disdain on her face looked familiar. She touched the fingers of one

hand to a cheekbone, accented with a deep stain of blush. “Merrett Bradmoore.” Batting a dark fringe of lashes, she gazed into his face and slowly, seductively smiled.

“Hello, Beryl.”

Beryl Marcum, Holly’s best friend. Feeling Merrett’s dismay, Gracie longed to squeeze his knee under the table in a gesture of comfort, but could only sit frozen against the leather booth.

“And who is this you’re with?” Beryl’s words dripped vinegared honey. She tapped a silver-tipped nail delicately against perfectly capped teeth. “Gracie Singleton? My, my.”

The witch, Gracie thought, in unaccustomed fury. Those two “mys” might as well have been stones cast. Merrett firmed his thigh against hers. His voice when he spoke was cold. “My what?”

Beryl slid into the seat across from him, and smiled. Merrett touched Gracie’s elbow. “We were just about to leave.”

“Oh, stay a moment.” Beryl fluttered her hand to touch his sleeve. “I’m not going to scold you for going out with another woman.”

“We’re not out. And it’s not like I’m cheating. Holly is...has been...”

“I know.” Beryl dabbed at the corner of her eyes. “So why haven’t you called? I didn’t even know you were in town.”

He motioned the waiter to bring their check. “I’ve been busy.”

“So I see.” Beryl’s eyes traveled up and down Grace. The waiter approached, and Merrett handed him his credit card. Beryl ordered a gin and tonic. “Gracie Singleton. So what have you been up to?”

“I...uh...moved back from Chicago and started a special occasion decorating business.”

“Real-ly? How quaint of you.”

“Sorry, Beryl, but we have to go.” Merrett threw down a five dollar bill for her drink.

Gracie, looking over her shoulder, saw Beryl’s glare still narrowed on them when Merrett let the door to Savino’s slam.

\* \* \*

Stars glittered like ice crystals in the sky. The moon shone brightly. Cold air filled the Jeep with the smell and feel of winter. Gracie's stockinged legs met the leather seat, and she shivered.

Merrett turned on the heater and eased the Jeep away from the curb. Blocks later, he spoke. "Beryl lives right behind you. She married and divorced Charles Cosgrove. She took back her maiden name, but kept the Victorian house where they lived."

Gracie shivered again, although the Jeep was warm and cozy now. She'd invited her other neighbors to her open house, but she couldn't possibly invite that woman.

A Christmas carol came on the radio, and Merrett switched stations. The romantic ballad was hauntingly beautiful. Leaning back into the leather seat, Gracie pushed away all conscious thought, determined to seize the moment.

At her house, he took her hand in his and walked her to the door. The rich-smelling cologne he wore tantalized her. Just standing near him was ecstasy. Tonight, she'd seen glimpses of the guy he'd been many years ago. His wife's death, and all that went with it, had justifiably thrown him off kilter for a while. But he had such buoyancy, such optimism, he had to get it back. "Would you like to come in?"

He took her hand and kissed her fingertips. "I should go."

Disappointed, she inserted the key slowly in the lock. Their time together had passed too quickly.

"Not that I want to leave."

Turning, her face hit his chest, the top of her head cracked his chin. "I'm sorry. I keep bumping into you."

He laced his arms loosely around her waist, standing so close his breath warmed her face, fanning fires of desire. "I'm glad we bumped into one another again." He spoke huskily. "And again. And again."

"Me too," she whispered, her pulse racing out of control as he drew her close.

Resting her hands on his muscled biceps, firm and hard beneath the soft leather of his jacket, she laid her head against his chest. He massaged the muscles at the back of her neck. She slid her arms around him, and a breeze, or perhaps it was his closeness, drew a shiver from her.

"Cold?" he whispered.

"Not at all," she said, raising her face to his.

“You smell sweet. You smelled like that in high school. I liked it even then.”

“My grandma sent me honeysuckle bubble bath and cologne every year for Christmas. It’s hard to find nowadays but I still love it.”

“So do I.” He slanted his mouth over hers, hot and seeking, his lips soft and at the same time crushing. Heaven must be like this. Hot and golden. His topcoat was unbuttoned, and she melted against him. Her breasts peaked and hardened against his soft cashmere sweater. She gasped, and he pulled her closer. His tongue sought hers, and she responded, smothering a moan. He pushed her up against the door. Reaching behind her, she groped for the knob. “Let’s go inside.”

He straightened, and like a man waking from a dream, shook his head. “I...we can’t. I can’t. I shouldn’t have.”

Shouldn’t have? Gracie froze, all the old fears flooding back. Fear of not being good enough. Fear of being rejected. But he wanted her the other night in the snow, and she thought he wanted her tonight. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s okay.”

“I would have...” Breaking away, he paced the length of the porch and jerked the chain of the porch swing. “You should take this damn thing inside before the finish gets ruined.”

Gracie gaped at him. “I—I...”

He ran his fingers through his hair, and paced back to her, then to the swing again. “It’s not okay.” His voice broke, and she clutched her handbag to her chest. “We’re not teenagers. I’m a mature man, and you’re a self-respecting woman.” He strode toward her and pulled her close. “You are just so damn irresistible.” Planting a quick, fierce kiss on her lips, he rushed from the porch.

“Thank you,” she whispered, too softly for him to hear. For the compliment or the evening? Or the surging feeling of joy and power he’d given her? If he was running hot and cold, she knew now that he was running from himself.

\* \* \*

Smiling, Gracie climbed the steps to the bedroom, humming into the darkness. Opening her door, she saw a shadow lying across her bed that looked like a woman,

arms spread wide. It could be a tree with outspread limbs, shadowed in the moonlight, or maybe it was Mirabelle waiting for her lover's embrace.

Was Mirabelle looking for Jonathon because she thought he could still save her from spinsterhood with some sort of celestial marriage? Or because she loved him so very, very much? Spreading her arms, Gracie whispered to the imaginary ghost. "Don't give up. Dreams can come true. One of mine did tonight."

\* \* \*

Gracie's lunch appointment with Harland Hamilton, president of the Ferndale Country Club, came off pleasantly after a nervous start. She'd tucked combs into her unruly curls, to hold the sides back, but looking at smooth bobs and French twists of the patrons in the lobby, felt unkempt. Harland arrived late, but a tall gentleman with silver hair and the picture of casual elegance in his navy jacket and gray pants, he'd quickly put her at ease. He knew what he considered appropriate, but allowed her creative license.

"I want the job done as soon as possible, and I'm sure your price will be fair, your plans good. Harry Bradmoore recommended you, and I trust his judgment."

Having escaped without making a fool of herself, and without running into Beryl and her cronies as she'd feared, Gracie was in high-spirits until she entered the Reporter's dreary office that evening. Looking at wooden floors marred with cigarette burns, tan walls, and a sagging counter with yellowing philodendrons, she was glad her arm was back to normal. It would take two good arms, and possibly a miracle, to make the place cheery.

Squaring her shoulders, she asked the custodian to carry in the bushy tree she'd bought at Heber's. A young man with dark curly hair, he looked familiar. As he rose from setting the tree in the stand, she took a long look at him. "Charlie Bosso, is that you all grown-up?"

"Yes, ma'am." He cocked his head to study her. "And you would be?"

"Gracie Saylor, the Singleton's daughter. You wouldn't remember me, but your parents would."

“I remember you sent us a card when our twins were born. My wife put it in their scrapbook.” He whipped out his wallet to show her the twins’ pictures. “Jess and Josephine are the reason I’m working this extra job at night. In the daytime, I work for my dad at Bosso and Son, Plumbing.” Charlie handed her a business card. “Mr. Bradmoore was nice enough to print these here without charging me.”

Gracie stared at Charlie. “Do you mean Merrett Bradmoore?”

“Yes’m. He’s the owner and editor, so he has the say.”

Gracie was floored. Why hadn’t he told her he was in newspaper work here? Was he embarrassed about working at the Reporter because it was a small daily? Setting the tree in front of the plate glass window, she thought about Merrett and his work as she lavished the pine with brightly colored ornaments and an abundance of tinsel and icicles. If that didn’t draw more people into the office, it would give them the Christmas spirit as they passed.

To cheer the office workers, she placed candy-striped mugs filled with holly on their desks. Deciding it would take more than that, she covered a gray room divider near the back of the office with sky-blue paper, and painted deep white snow banked around a small church. Enthralled with her task, she added people to the scene, then a wreath to the church door.

“You should have been an artist.”

She looked up into the awed face of Charlie Bosso.

“Thank you,” she said, touched. That had been her dream once, but as she matured and began hearing stories of starving artists, she knew it wasn’t for her.

Charlie left and asked her to lock up, and she was putting away her paint jars when a lid rolled under the free-standing divider she’d decorated. Walking around to retrieve it, she knew at once that she’d happened upon Merrett’s desk. The desks out front were littered with papers, pictures, and knickknacks, but his desk top held nothing but a brass letter opener, rosewood pen, and leather-bound desk calendar. Nothing personal marked it as his, not even a picture of Kirsten, offering silent testimony that he considered the job as temporary, she supposed.

Gracie ran her hand over the back of his chair, and the rich scent of his cologne rose to tickle her nose. He was set on going back east to prove himself, but a small town

editor could make a bigger difference in people's lives than a city reporter. In New York, he might ripple the stream of humanity, but here, he had the power to uplift the town.

After adding a special decoration to the boss's desk, hoping it would remind him of his special place in the office and in Ferndale, Gracie smiled.

Ebenezer Scrooge would sing Jingle Bells if he saw the Daily Reporter office now.



## Chapter Six

Merrett's day started off badly when he overslept. Pulling into a parking place behind the Reporter, he thought he'd slip in the back door, but discovered he'd forgotten his key. So, he walked around front. "What in blazes?"

A bright golden star winked from the corner of the front window, shining like an all night diner's beacon in the early morning gloom. A fat wreath with multicolored baubles hung on the door, and inside, stood the most-decorated tree he'd ever seen. Ornaments, tinsel, lights.

Gracie did this. He shoved through the door. On the counter stood a rustic-looking mailbox with Daily Reporter painted on it. Simple, that was fine. But he could see beyond that to Christmas mugs "blooming" on every desk. Cold air rushed in around him, carrying with it a soft rift of snow. Closing the door, Merrett stomped his feet and finger-raked his hair.

"Nice going, boss." The sports editor rushed up to pump his hand.

"It's beautiful." Henri, the society editor, gave him a hug.

"Special Effects are certainly special," Emma said, with an approving nod.

The other office workers joined in a round of applause.

Scowling, Merrett folded his arms. "If you ask me, it's overdone."

"Oh, no." A young copyeditor, blushing to the roots of her carrot-colored hair spoke up. "You can't overdo Christmas, Mr. Bradmoore."

"I'd like some coffee, please," Merrett growled, looking at Emma. "And a donut if there's one around."

"Yes, Mr. Brad...er, uh Merrett."

Hightailing it to his desk, he dropped into his chair and scrubbed his fingers across his eyes. He'd never asked Emma to bring him coffee before. "I'm sorry," he said, as she

set a steaming mug and a donut on a paper plate in front of him. “I missed breakfast and...uh...the decorations overwhelmed me.”

“Shall I hold your mail and calls?”

“Ten minutes should be about right.”

Merrett sank his teeth into the plump donut with rich chocolate frosting, and washed it down with a sip of strong black coffee. Five minutes of saturated fat chased with caffeine later, he leaned back in his chair and saw the tree on his desk.

It looked like a tiny specimen brought in fresh from the woods, its bows tipped with snow, and a cardinal sitting on a branch in quiet repose. A sense of calm settled over him, and his eyes misted. There was a feeder outside the kitchen window where Mama used to watch the cardinals on a snowy day.

If she didn’t have a feeder at Sunny Haven, she should.

Feeling mellower, he settled down to work. Even if he left here, he wanted to make some improvements. Pulling out paper, pencil, and catalogs, he set to work.

Hours later, as he was leaving for the day, Merrett saw the mural on the divider. Closing the door behind him, he looked back and saw the wreath on the door, star in the window, and tree behind it—beautiful symbols of Christmas—in a totally different light.

Dinner was ready when Merrett arrived home. He’d worked late, and then stopped off to buy a feeder and sunflower seed.

“Come on, Daddy,” Kirsten said, tugging him by the hand. “Mrs. Jarvis made meat loaf, yours and my favorite.”

Nodding amiably to his father, he took his seat across from his daughter. Dad still sat at the head of the table. Kirsten nodded toward the empty chair at the other. “We saw Gramma last night. You didn’t get home in time for me to tell you.”

So the excitement wasn’t totally about meat loaf.

“Grandma’s still be-yoo-ti-ful. I wish I had blue eyes like hers. They shine like twin skies,” Kirsten said, leaning forward in her eagerness.

Merrett concentrated on his food, carefully arranging a bite on his fork.

“She has a tiny Christmas tree in her room with twinkle lights. She said it needs a star. I’m going to ask Gracie to help me make one. Gold, I think, with blue diamonds and pearls.”

Blue diamonds to shine like Mama’s eyes. Merrett put down his fork.

“Gracie has a box of different colored diamonds. They’re not real, of course.” Kirsten chewed a bite of broccoli thoughtfully. “This stuff is awful. The little flowery things tickle my throat.” She lifted her napkin to her mouth.

“Those are cloth. Don’t spit it out,” Merrett warned, remembering having gotten what-for when he did that as a kid.

“I wasn’t,” Kirsten protested. Frowning, she swallowed hard and pushed the rest of the green vegetable to the edge of her plate. “Grampa says we’ll take the star to Sunny Haven just as soon as I get it done. You should go with us.” His daughter’s eyes were accusing. “Gramma couldn’t remember my name, but she knew me. She said, ‘you’re my son’s little girl.’”

A lump formed in his throat, as big as the baked potato on his plate.

“I said, ‘Yes, I’m Kirsten Bradmoore, and Gramma said, that’s a nice name.’ Then she hugged me.” Kirsten nodded at the fragrant red roses on the table. Mama had always insisted on fresh flowers, and Dad saw to it they still had them. “Her skin feels like rose petals.”

“And she smells like lavender,” Merrett said softly.

“Is that what that is? I like it, but I didn’t know colors had a smell.” Kirsten wrinkled her nose, looking at her pink sweater. “I should smell like cotton candy, but I don’t. Or maybe strawberry. Gawd, I’m sick of pink.”

Merrett stared at his daughter. “Don’t say that,” he said sternly. “You mustn’t use the Lord’s name in vain.”

“I didn’t. I said G-aw-d. Mama used to say that, and so does Meredith.”

Holly’s mother, who didn’t like to be called Grandma because it sounded too old, used the word frequently as a lament. Holly had said it occasionally.

“No matter, I don’t like it and neither does Grandpa.”

Shrugging, Kirsten looked back at her sweater. “Okay, but I am sick of pink, you know.”

“I didn’t know,” Merrett said, “but now that I do, we’ll see if we can buy you some other colors. Incidentally, lavender is a plant, an herb, and Grandma wears powder made from that.”

“If you’re sure, but she was wearing a lavender dress, or was it blue, Grampa?” Without waiting for an answer, Kirsten rushed on. “I want blue jeans for Christmas. All

the other girls wear them. I could still wear pink tops, I guess, if you really want me to. I know my mother liked them.”

“You were little then. I’m sure she’d understand you’re growing up now.”

“Thanks!” Kirsten bounced up and down on her upholstered straight back chair. “Could you take me to Gracie’s now, please?”

“You were just there after school.” She’d gotten off the bus there, and Gracie had helped her make Spook an outfit, then brought her home.

“I know, but she’s decorating her tree tonight, maybe both trees if she can get them done in one evening. Her sister Hope’s promised to come and help. I hope she shows up. I don’t think she’s dependable.”

“De-pendable.”

“Gracie’s worried, I can tell,” Kirsten said, turning up her nose at his correction. “About Hope, I mean, and she wishes her other sister could help too, only she doesn’t live around here. I’ll be the only one to help if Hope doesn’t show up. She’s glad she’s got me. I’ll bet she’d be glad to have you and Grampa help, too.”

“This is my night for the board meeting at the club,” Harry said, patting his granddaughter’s hand.

“I brought work home from the newspaper,” Merrett said.

His dad appeared startled, and Kirsten was openly doubting. “You never bring work home.”

“I did tonight. Besides, I’m sure Hope will show.” A thought occurred to him. She’d manipulated him. His daughter hadn’t asked if she could help Grace, only that he take her. “I don’t remember you asking me if you could go. It’s a school night.”

“Please. I stayed very clean today, so I could skip my bath. Just this once. I made A + on my spelling test cause I got the extra words right. And I’ve done my homework. All of it. Pretty please with meat loaf on it.”

How did you argue with logic like that? Especially when it had meat loaf on it? Smiling, he relented. “Okay. I guess...”

Kirsten ran around the table to hug him and plant a big kiss on his cheek. “You’re the best dad a kid ever had.”

She was definitely a con artist, but he was a sucker for her kisses. “And you’re the best kid a dad ever had, princess.”

\* \* \*

Merrett walked Kirsten to the door. He hadn't told Gracie he ran the Reporter yet, so he couldn't tell her how much the staff liked the decorations. Opening the door, she smiled faintly. "I thought it was Hope."

"Isn't she here?" Kirsten asked, dragging Merrett inside. The house was warm, and the aroma of cinnamon and nutmeg wafted into the foyer.

"Not yet." Gracie's cheeks were flushed. With her tangle of curls drawn up on her head in a narrow band of velvet, she looked girlish, but her velour shirt and pants hugged her breasts and hips, accenting her luscious maturity. He shifted uneasily, remembering how he'd left her and him both wanting the last time he was here.

"She called to say she might be late. Frank wanted to take her to dinner first." Gracie cast an anxious look toward the parlor. "I'm in a bit of a tangle. I was trying to place the lights strategically."

"Maybe I can help." Shrugging off his jacket, Merrett knelt before the tree and began working at the twists and knots. A bit of a tangle? Half a dozen strands were wound up on the floor, snaking their way around and into the tree, and each other. "You have enough lights here for the tree in Rockefeller Center."

"I like a lot of lights."

"Me too." Kirsten tapped Merrett on the back, and pointed to his jacket on the floor. "I'm hanging my coat on the hall tree. Want me to put yours there?"

"I'm not staying, thanks. I just want to straighten these out for Gracie."

Her Mary Janes clicked across the hardwood floor. Did she hate those as much as pink? They wouldn't look good with the jeans she wanted. Merrett, concentrating on the work at hand, patiently tried to undo the disastrous mess.

"I'll help." Gracie plunged her hand into a clump of wires.

"No, please." He lay his hand over hers. "Let me."

Her lower lip jutted out. And a lovely lip it was. Full and rosy-soft. "Two pairs of hands are too many. We'd pull opposite ways and add to the confusion."

Gracie wiggled off the hardwood floor onto an area rug, making herself more comfortable. She had an enticing wiggle, and as she settled herself and inhaled, her

breasts bounced distractingly. With a flick of the wrist, she settled her mane of golden curls.

Sweat beaded on Merrett's brow as he threaded one string of lights back through the other. The floor was hard on his bad knee, and he sat down, scooting onto the area rug beside her. She leaned closer to inspect the task he was performing, and her hair brushed his cheek.

"Don't you just love Christmas?"

Her enthusiasm crackled through the air like static electricity. He'd made a mistake sending Kirsten home last year. If he'd kept her with him, he would have gone through the holiday motions instead of drinking away two weeks of his life away before learning booze didn't help. And that period destroyed his faith in himself, sending him on a downhill skid. Not that he'd ever drunk too much again, but he'd seen a dark, helpless side of himself he didn't know existed. Everyone loses sometime, Gracie said. Did everyone feel helpless now and then?

"It isn't magical like when I was a kid."

"The magic is still there." Gracie touched his shoulder, and he paused in what he was doing. "I know you had some bad things happen near Christmas last year, but you can't shut out sorrow and pain without shutting out other emotions, like excitement and joy."

And love. "How do you know that?" She seemed so content.

"I've experienced my share of heartbreak. Mom's poor health. Faith going wild. Mom and Pop dying within months of each other. My failure at marriage. Not having..." Her lip trembled. Her violet-blue eyes looked like pansies kissed with morning dew. She shook her head. "Never mind."

Not having? Money? Was Gracie worried her business wouldn't succeed? He rubbed the back of his thumb along her cheek. "You said your failure at marriage. Correct me if I'm wrong, but I'll bet Sonny didn't do his part."

"It's still a failed marriage, and I was part of it." Drawing up her knees, Gracie rested her chin on them. "I left home to marry Sonny because I wanted my own life. I always had to run the house and take care of Faithie, and I didn't think it was fair. But I let her down, and didn't do myself any favors in the long run. Sonny and I were never meant to be, and when I was ready to admit that and come home, my parents were dead, and

Faithie had disappeared. Pop always said I'd get my just due for leaving, and I was down on myself for a while. I remembered you told me to always hold my chin high, and I finally figured out I'd done the best I knew how at the time."

"I didn't know how hard that advice would be to follow later in life. I wanted to accomplish more career-wise...wanted to be somebody."

Gracie grasped his arm tightly. "You are somebody."

The editor of a rinky-dink newspaper.

She gave him a little shake. "You have a daughter who loves and needs you. Stop beating up on yourself."

Merrett stared into the Christmas tree branches, still unlit. "I'm not even sure I'm doing a good job with her. She drives me nuts with her talking, and cons me, and comes up with off-the-wall-problems. She just told me she's tired of wearing pink."

"I was well aware of her talking and conning." Gracie's eyes twinkled. "It's the charming part of being a kid. As for pink, buy her some new clothes."

He started working on the lights again, patiently, slowly, untwisting. It wasn't such a big problem, and Gracie's infectious smile pulled a grin from him. There was a pause between Christmas carols, and he could hear Kirsten walking through the rooms calling Spook. She probably was a normal kid. He was doing the best he could with her, if that really counted, like Gracie said.

"Oh Little Town of Bethlehem" pealed forth from the piano as he clipped a set of lights to the tree. That one done, he strung another. The music was peaceful, and the aroma of fresh cookies blended with the scent of pine. It could have been another December in a time past, when he was single in his parents' home, and the woman sitting at his feet lived across town. So much had changed, and yet, something of Christmas remained. In his heart. "Thank you," he said softly.

She smiled as if she knew what he was thanking her for, even if he wasn't sure himself.

"Got that mess fixed yet, Daddy?" Kirsten bounced back into the room, the black kitten in her arms. "I found him in the workroom under a chair," she explained to Gracie. "Fi-nally. He's really good at hiding."

Merrett started to string the last set. "I won't be long now."

"Is this your new tree topper, Gracie?"

Merrett looked up to see Kirsten hold up a silver filigree star.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, raising it the light.

“And fragile, so put it down,” Merrett warned. Spook was struggling to get out of her arms. “Now!” Merrett ordered.

The kitten jumped. The star hit the hardwood floor. Gracie gasped. Kirsten covered her mouth with her hand. Merrett groaned. The cat leaped on the star. The song on the piano ended, and there was dead silence.

Kirsten grabbed up the kitten in one hand, the star in the other, and held them apart. “Look,” she cried, relief evident in her voice. “The star’s not hurt. Well, maybe, just a tiny bit bent.”

The doorbell rang.

“It’s okay,” Gracie said quickly. “It won’t be noticeable from way up there at the top of the tree. Besides, I’m still searching for a ceramic star with an angel like we had when I was a child.”

The doorbell rang again. “Is anyone home?”

The voice from the hallway sounded much like Gracie’s. Setting back on his heels, Merrett watched Gracie rush across the room to hug her sister. Hope was thinner than he remembered.

Gracie took Hope’s beige suede jacket from her hand, dodged around the corner to put it on the hall tree, and ducked into the room again. Only then, did she seem to remember he was there. A startled look crossed her face, and Hope followed her eyes.

“Merrett Bradmoore,” she said, smiling. Dressed attractively in beige slacks and a matching sweater, Hope wore pearls that looked real, and diamond rings on both hands. She must have married someone with money. “I’m so glad you came to help decorate Gracie’s tree.”

“I was just...helping for a minute. Gracie had a little tangle.”

“Big tangle,” Kirsten said, holding out her hand. “I’m Kirsten Bradmoore, his daughter.” She nodded at Merrett.

“I can tell that.” Hope slipped an arm around her shoulders. “You look like him.”

“I do?” The color deepened in Kirsten’s cheeks, and she turned to stare at him.

“High cheekbones. Aristocratic nose. A tiny dimple in your chin like the one in his cheek. And a wonderful smile.” Hope touched Kirsten’s features as she named them.



Merrett had only seen Holly in his daughter's face, but when he looked at her now, he felt strangely pleased.

"Oh, Gracie!" Hope exclaimed. "Your piano is beautiful."

"I knew you'd like it if you ever made it over here. Two months, and you haven't visited once." Gracie turned her smile into an exaggerated pout.

Two months, and Hope was her closest relative in the world, except for Faith, who was missing. The Singleton girls were close. What had happened? Raking his fingers through his hair, Merrett backed slowly toward the parlor door. Life was tough enough without trying to figure what made other people tick. "I'll pick you up at eight-thirty, Kirsten."

"Frank wants me home by nine," Hope said. "I can drop her off on my way out of town, and save you a trip."

"We have two trees to decorate. We can't do one in that amount of time." Gracie was still protesting her sister's early departure when Merrett shut the door behind him.

\* \* \*

Gracie showed Hope the house, then poured steaming cocoa from a stoneware pitcher into cups and set out a tray of snickerdoodles, Hope's favorite cookie. Sipping and munching, the two of them and Kirsten, started decorating the downstairs tree.

Kirsten hung three ornaments on touching branches. "Don't bunch too many together," Gracie warned. "We won't have enough to go around."

"We have plenty. You don't need any on the corner side where no one can see." Spook batted a shiny silver ball with her paw, and Kirsten moved it to a higher branch. "If you have some unbreakable ones, we could hang them down low."

Gracie looked at her admiringly. "You're very good at this."

"Yeah. Well." Kirsten bent to take another ornament out of a box. "Grandma's dog Tippy knocks the ornaments off the lower branches, so Grampa taught me that last year when I stayed with him. But what I said about decorating the back of the tree, I figured out myself in New York." Kirsten tossed her hair over her shoulders. "Mommy didn't do holidays, and Daddy was too busy to buy more ornaments, so we had to make the ones we had stretch."

“Why didn’t your mother do holidays?” Hope asked.

Gracie shot her what Hope used to call “the look.” She’d always been too openly curious.

“Because Grandmother and Grandfather Lagere didn’t. Isn’t that the silliest thing, missing Christmas, and birthdays, and everything?”

Hope looked uncomfortable, and Gracie thought she deserved it. Maybe she would learn yet, not to open her mouth without thinking. They worked in silence for a while, even Kirsten.

“This tree is beautiful,” Hope said. “Remember the pitiful ones we had when we were kids?”

“What do you mean, pitiful?” Kirsten stepped close to her.

“We couldn’t afford a nice tree. We never had a store-bought ornament until that Christmas—”

“We made paper chains for decorations.” Gracie cut her sister off. Kirsten didn’t need to know about Merrett and their past. Not just now, anyway. “Have you ever made them, Kirsten?”

“In kindergarten, we made red and green ones.”

“That’s what ours were, but you should see the beautiful chains you can make with the shiny paper ribbon I have in the workroom. I’ll show you, one day soon, if you’ll go get the fudge I made.”

“Nice kid,” Hope said wistfully, as Kirsten walked swiftly away.

“Is Frank still set against having children?”

“He’s not going to change his mind. I keep thinking I’ve accepted it, but...”

She shrugged her shoulders in an exaggerated motion, and as her sweater fell back into place, Gracie noticed how loosely it hung. Hope had lost weight, and there were circles under her eyes. She should have noticed it right away. “Are you okay, Hovie? You look...” She didn’t want to say “sick” and alarm her sister. “Tired.”

“I’ve been nauseous lately, so I haven’t eaten much. That, in turn, makes me tired.” She shrugged again. “It’s probably a virus that will go away by itself.”

“If you don’t feel better in a day or two, promise me you’ll go see Doctor Hiram.”

Hope nodded absently and smiled as she cast a glance toward the kitchen where Kirsten was talking to the kitten again. “Do you ever wish you’d had kids?”

“I wish I’d had them five years ago, even ten. But Sonny wasn’t stable, and I couldn’t bring a child into a world without knowing it would be well provided for and loved by both its parents.”

“It isn’t too late. You could marry again.”

Looking into the shiny bauble she was hanging, Gracie saw the vision that had come to her over the years, of a dimpled baby boy with dark hair tumbling onto his forehead. Merrett had a daughter, but not a son. “I’ll be thirty New Year’s Eve, remember? Same age as Mom when I was born, and she was too tired to do things other mothers did. PTO. School plays.”

“I remember how furious you were when she didn’t go see you in Snow White in fourth grade,” Hope said, chuckling. “That was the only time I ever saw you throw a fit.”

“I was Snow White, for heaven’s sake. You weren’t too happy when you were sixth grade cheerleader, and she and Pop never came to a game.”

“Or that Mom went to bed before I left for my senior prom. The dress your friend Linda loaned me was so beautiful, I felt like Miss America. Mom never even saw me in it.”

Their mother had suffered from some undetermined malady for as long as Gracie could remember, and after she gave birth to Faith, she spent most of her time on the couch or in bed. “Mom was too old for kids.”

Hope opened a package of icicles, and began adding them to the tree. “Lots of women have children when they’re past thirty or even forty.”

The icicles Hope hung shimmered. The ornaments glittered. When the lights were turned on, the Christmas tree would be a fabulous sight. Gracie had a life without kids, and it was going to be a great one, she’d promised herself that. “She was never there for us. Neither of our parents were.”

“So Pop was weird, too, especially after he lost his job. And he was even older than Mom.” Hope waved her hands impatiently. “So that was them, and then, we’re talking about you now. You’d make a great mother.”

Gracie shook her head. “I thought so, until Faith...”

“I worry about her, too, but what does that have to do with you?”

“When she started acting out, Pop said it was my fault. I spoiled her.”

Hope snorted. “You were a kid. She had parents who should have raised her.”

It was hard to explain guilt, and even harder to overcome. Holding your head high didn't remove the pain or the feeling of irresponsibility.

"Away in the Manger" poured forth from the piano, the keys moving as the song played. Hope clutched her chest. "I didn't see you turn the piano on, Gracie."

"I didn't. The player doesn't work when you want it to, but when it feels like it."

"Your piano plays by itself?" Hope clutched Gracie's hand. "Unexpectedly?"

Gracie nodded and pressed a coil of silver tinsel, the final touch except for the "slightly bent" star, into Hope's hand.

The carol came to an abrupt stop. Hope dropped the tinsel, and it uncoiled, snaking across the floor. "That's really eerie."

"The piano didn't cost me anything, and I'm grateful for the times it plays." Gracie grinned teasingly at her sister. "Except when it starts in the middle of the night, and I'm awakened by music floating up the stairs."

Hope shuddered and lowered her voice conspiratorially. "You don't think it has anything to do with that ghost woman, do you?"

"What ghost woman?" Kirsten appeared in the doorway, plate of fudge in hand. "Sorry I took so long. I stopped to give Spook some milk."

Grace glared at Hope, but she was so busy helping herself to a piece of fudge, she didn't notice.

"What ghost woman?" Kirsten prompted Hope.

"Mirabelle, the Christmas..."

"It's just a story," Gracie interrupted. Turning on her sister who was savoring her fudge, she tapped her foot. "I thought you'd lost your appetite."

"I thought so too, but this candy is perfection."

"Tell me the story," Kirsten said, tugging on Grace's shirt sleeve.

Knowing there was no way to distract Merrett's child, and already sorry for snapping at Hope, Gracie told Kirsten the story. She started and ended with a reminder that there was no truth to the tale of Mirabelle's supposed return to the house each December.

"Wow!" Kirsten's eyes were huge. "She comes back every year?"

"That's the myth, but of course, it isn't true."

“It might be,” Kirsten said, dark eyes glowing, voice rising in excitement. “And if the Mirabelle lady can come back, I’ll bet my mother can, too. She died in December, so she’ll probably come this month, like Mirabelle. Mommy never got to say good-bye to me, and I know she wanted to”

“Oh, no, Kirsten.” Gracie dropped to her knees, and took her gently by both arms. “You’ve got it wrong.” She explained again while Kirsten dutifully nodded her head.

Hope took a turn with her. “Forget that silly thing I said, honey. It’s just a story like Grace said. Look at the tree. We’re almost ready to light it.”

“Then it will be even more beautiful.” Kirsten smiled and held out the plate of fudge. “Have another piece.”

Rubbing her stomach, Hope smiled and helped herself. “One more, then...” Glancing at her watch, she gasped. “I promised Frank...I have to go.”

“Me too,” Kirsten said, running for her coat. “Sorry, Gracie, but we’ll have to put up the star and turn on the lights another time. Hope and I can’t be late getting home to Frank and Daddy.”

Gracie’s goose was cooked. Kirsten couldn’t wait to tell Merrett her mother would return to visit as a ghost.

## Chapter Seven

Merrett heard Hope drive up, and he opened the door for Kirsten who practically leaped into his arms. He held her away to study her face. She was glowing. Relieved, he helped her off with her coat. The way she'd come running, he'd thought she was frightened of something. "Did you finish decorating Gracie's tree?"

"The downstairs one, except for the star. Thanks for taking me tonight."

He smiled and squeezed her shoulder. "Go say goodnight to Grandpa in the library, then I'll go upstairs with you while you get ready for bed."

"Really?"

She looked so surprised Merrett felt a twinge of annoyance. Dad usually went up with her because he enjoyed it, and Merrett didn't. She could stretch goodnights into a three-act play. But tonight, Kirsten brushed her teeth without argument, and smiled while she laid out her school clothes for the next day. She put her dirty clothes in the hamper without being told, and set her shoes in the closet. Merrett ran his finger around the inside of his collar. Something wasn't right.

Kirsten turned back the covers and hopped into bed. Patting the place beside her for him to sit down, she grinned. "You don't need to tell me a story. Tonight, I'm going to tell you one." Leaning toward him, she whispered. "It's a ghost story, and a very happy one."

\* \* \*

Next morning, when Merrett went downstairs to breakfast, he was still furious. He'd spent half an hour trying to convince Kirsten that the Mirabelle story was ridiculous. A myth. A fantasy. A tale that wasn't true. She didn't believe him.

Before he went to bed, he looked in, and she was lying on her side, her hands tucked under her face. On the bedside table was a picture of her mother, and on Kirsten's lips, a tiny smile. Her last words before "goodnight" were, "You never know, Daddy. It could happen if we have faith."

That sounded like something Samuel Singleton had put into his daughter's head, and Gracie had put into Merrett's daughter's. Have faith, and anything can happen. It was a great philosophy, but not when carried to the ridiculous. Merrett slammed his cup down, sloshing coffee in the saucer.

His father handed him the sugar.

"I drink my coffee black, Dad. What's the matter with you?"

"You act like you could stand sweetening up. What's wrong?"

Before Merrett could answer, Kirsten bopped into the room. Face shining, hair brushed, socks that matched...happiness worked wonders. But her bubble would burst, and she'd be back to where she was shortly after her mother's death.

Kirsten smiled as the housekeeper set a plate of French toast in front of her. "Good morning, Mrs. Jarvis."

The woman's jaw dropped. "Aren't we bright this morning, little miss?"

"Yes, thank you." As the dumbfounded housekeeper exited the room, Kirsten laid her napkin neatly across her lap and smiled at her grandfather. "Did Daddy tell you Mommy might come back for a visit, Grampa?"

\* \* \*

Merrett arrived first at the Daily Reporter, he turned on the light over his desk, leaving the fluorescents in the front office unlit. With any luck, he'd have some time alone before the staff showed up. He had an end-of-the-year report to write for the board of directors, and this baby was going to take some concentration. Turning on the computer, he flexed his fingers over the keys. The Reporter hadn't increased in circulation over the past year. It hadn't added any significant new features or signs of progress. The members would want to know why, and what he planned to do about it.

The "why" was easy: his lack of interest, but he couldn't tell them that. And the plan was hard. He intended to move ahead and improve the newspaper, step aside and return

to New York while someone else ran it for him, or sell out. He'd placed a blind "for sale" ad in the Star, but hadn't had any nibbles, and wasn't certain he wanted one. He'd failed as a reporter. Was he willing to fail at this, too? Merrett folded his hands behind his head, and tipped back in his chair. He could make a success of this daily rag if he chose to. But did he care enough?

His thoughts returned to breakfast and his daughter. The disappointment when her mother didn't come back as a ghost would be like losing her all over again. If he'd taken her away from Ferndale and its old wives' tales, this wouldn't have happened.

A pale blue screen saver with a horse-drawn sleigh and "Happy Holidays" drifted across the computer screen. An office computer buff, not realizing the office decorations were Dad's idea, thought he had the Christmas spirit. His father meddled, but looked like a Boy Scout next to Gracie. Merrett hit the spacebar. He didn't need any damned prancing horses reminding him to write.

He turned back his shirtsleeves and flexed his fingers over the computer keys. When Gracie was close, he wanted her closer. She was so desirable...but desirable wasn't part of his plan. A woman wasn't in his plan. Least of all, one who interfered with his child's upbringing, and thought he was the god of optimism. Gracie loved small towns, and hated big business. Her letter-to-the-editor was buried somewhere in his unfinished business file.

He cracked his knuckles. Mama used to tell him that that would make them big, and he'd never be able to get a ring on and off. Staring at the black onyx on his hand, he recalled taking his wedding ring off in an act of desperation. The gold band was a constant reminder of how he'd failed Holly. The onyx was a gift from his parents on his eighteenth birthday. He'd been unbelievably happy back then with not a care in the world.

Someone, the custodian maybe, had moved the tiny tree on his desk to the opposite corner, and when Merrett moved it back, the cardinal fell off. The feeder and sunflower seeds he had bought Mama were still in the trunk of his car. He'd planned to send them with Dad, and then had second thoughts.

Merrett set the bird back on the tiny tree, and rolled his shirt sleeves higher. He had a report to write.



A publishers' catalog lay on his desk; he hadn't looked at it yet. Leafing through—anything to put off the tough decisions his report entailed—he spotted a section on pagination systems. Pushing back his chair, he propped his feet on his desk.

\* \* \*

At four o'clock, Merrett decided to go home. He'd gotten nowhere with the report. If anything, he'd sunk deeper into confusion. There were ways he could improve the Reporter, and some of them looked pretty good.

His dad called and left a message that Kirsten was getting off the bus at Gracie's to make her grandma a star. After what had happened last night, Merrett would have refused to let her go, but Dad gave his permission.

Pulling up in front of Gracie's house, he honked the horn. Before he wrote the report, he had to decide the paper's future, and his, and whether the two would remain related.

Tapping the steering wheel, he watched the second hand go around on his watch. Two minutes passed. So he was an hour early, that didn't mean Kirsten couldn't leave. He honked again. Gracie's ghost story further complicated his life. She'd better have set Kirsten straight today.

Kirsten strode down the walk and climbed in. Turning in the seat, she glared at him. "That was very impolite. You should have come to the door, like you always do."

He spun the wheels in the snow taking off, and while Kirsten pouted, allowed himself the satisfaction of mentally reading Gracie the riot act. After a while, Kirsten wiggled in her seat and sighed. "Are you mad?"

"Not at you." None of this was her fault. "And not mad, but worried. I don't want you to be disappointed. I understand you want to believe Mommy will come back, but she won't. She can't. Heaven is for good."

"Grandma Meredith doesn't believe in heaven. She doesn't even believe in God."

Merrett bit his lip. He'd hoped Kirsten didn't know. "Well, I do."

"Me too," Kirsten said, casting him a shy smile. "But if Mommy was like her mother, God might not let her into heaven, and she could be drifting around out there." Kirsten waved her hand toward the window and the sky. "So, she might come see us."

“Where did you get an idea like that?” Merrett’s words exploded into the warmth of the Jeep, bouncing off the fogging windshield.

“In my head.” Kirsten tapped her temple. “The problem is, that ghost woman, Mirabelle, is looking for her almost-husband at his house. So what if Mommy looks for us at our apartment? If she goes to New York, she won’t find us, and she’ll be unhappy.” Kirsten screwed her face into a frown, the way she did when she was trying not to cry.

Merrett’s head reeled, and his gut hurt.

She laid her hand on his leg. “She won’t know to look at Grampa’s. We have to do something, Daddy. I don’t want to leave, but I think we should move back.”

“Kirsten,” he said, as sternly as he dared without causing an outburst of tears. “Mommy isn’t going to—”

Kirsten looked up at him with wide damp eyes. “I hope she does, don’t you?”

He parked the Jeep in front of the house, and looked at the stars blinking brightly in the cold night sky. Kirsten thought her mother was floating around up there, waiting to come see them. “It would be nice.” He took both her hands in his. “But it’s not going to happen. The whole story about Mirabelle is untrue. Someone who lived in that house heard something, and thought it was a footstep. Or a door banged. Or...”

“Gracie’s piano plays by itself. You heard it, and so did I. She found it in the attic. I bet it was Mirabelle’s. She might even be playing it,” Kirsten added in a whisper.

How did she come up with such ideas? And why did she have to decide they should move back to New York now, when he was thinking about staying at the Reporter, for a while. Pagination, with computer layout and paste-up, was more efficient and offered a more polished appearance; he knew that from the City Times. He’d just never considered it for the Reporter until he looked at that catalog. It would be an expensive improvement, but he really believed it would increase circulation.

“Let’s go.” Merrett opened the Jeep door. His head was reeling. Gracie. The newspaper. Ghosts. “It’s dinner time, and Grandpa will be waiting.”

Kirsten tucked her gloved hand in his as he strode up the walk. She had to hop-skip to keep up. “We could move back for a while.”

To an occupied apartment and a job filled by someone else? “You’d miss Grampa, and Gramma.” She talked about Mama a lot.

“I know. I’ll miss Gracie, too, and Spook and Mrs. Jarvis.”

“Really?” Merrett smiled. “Mrs. Jarvis, too?”

“Don’t joke, Daddy. This is important.” Opening the front door, she slammed it behind her, leaving Merrett standing outside in the cold, alone.

Important. Nothing in his background qualified him to rear an unpredictable, imaginative, stubborn—slightly rude—child alone. Leaning against the front doorjamb, Merrett looked up at the heavens, and wished Holly would appear.

\* \* \*

What effect did the ghost story have on Merrett’s little girl, and what would Harry Bradmoore have to say to Gracie when she decorated his house later today? Kirsten would have told him and Merrett both the ghost story. Would they be angry? Upset?

After a shower and breakfast, Gracie carried her to-do list to the drawing room next to the kitchen. Set at the back of her house, it had two walls of windows. The ones on the back wall ran almost ceiling to floor, the same as the others in her home. Those to the east were shorter because of a velvet-cushioned window seat, but the wall stuck out several extra feet, reaching toward the light.

Sunlight poured through the glass, lending a glow to the golden oak floors, and picking up the satin stripe in the ivory wallpaper. A bright, beautiful room, it was perfect for her Holiday Open House. Gracie hoped to furnish it one day with soft couches and plump chairs, and turn it into a family room, if she had a family. But right now, an empty room would be the best place for her displays.

She listed things she’d need: stands for wreaths, tables.

Her mind was still on her coming social affair as she drove to the Bradmoore house. She’d decorated for other people’s parties, and read library books about entertaining, but never given a party herself. Her RSVP notice read “Regrets only”, and no one had declined, so far, so she’d need a lot of food. Other than fancy cookies and cakes, what should she serve? Were paper napkins okay, or should she use cloth? She’d serve refreshments in the dining room.

Harry welcomed her with a handclasp, and waved her to a huge box, saying he’d like her to use some of Alice’s decorations, and then promptly excused himself. He’d be in the library, but he was giving her full rein. He looked tired. Had Kirsten upset him, as

well as Merrett, with the Christmas ghost? Was Harry sorry he asked Gracie to decorate, now she'd made a mess of things with his granddaughter?

Gracie soon lost herself in the joy of decorating. Placing candles in every window downstairs, she added bows and silk greenery. With the final decoration from Alice's box in place, she began to add things she'd brought. Mistletoe, tiny silver bells, glitter-frosted branches. Feeling like an impostor, she tiptoed from room to room.

Her feet froze to the floor when she entered an upstairs room that was obviously Merrett's. A youthful picture of him smiled at her from one frame, and an equally young Holly from another. Trophies. Sports poster. Time frozen in place. Gracie had wondered what his room was like back then. How often she'd pictured his long lean frame sprawled out on this bed. How often she'd dreamed about him.

Feeling as if she'd happened upon a shrine, she put his window decoration in place and was about to leave when she noticed a yellowed clipping under the glass on his night stand. It was a picture of her when she had won "outstanding new reporter award" for her work on the Clarion. Heart pounding, she left the room quickly.

Had he kept it because he was her mentor, or because it was her? Either way, a smile played around her lips. Her picture had lain at his bedside for years.

The door next to Merrett's bore a pink ballet shoe plaque with the words, "Kirsten's Room." Inside, Gracie expected to find the room of her own childhood dreams—a haven frothed in pink with a canopy bed and shelves of elaborately gowned dolls. But the walls and carpet were gray, the tailored curtains striped. An attractive guest room that seemed barely changed with her arrival, the only "Kirsten-touch" was a well-loved teddy bear, leaning against the bed pillows. The room needed a woman's touch, the same as Kirsten needed a woman's love.

Stroking the bear's tattered ear, Gracie smiled. Kirsten had dressed Teddy in a sash of bright calico print left from the Greenfield tearoom. Around his neck was a satin ribbon on which she'd strung some pearls and "blue diamonds", like she'd chosen for Gramma's Christmas tree star.

Gracie fetched the three foot tree she'd bought at Heber's, especially for Kirsten, from her car. Placing it in a corner of the room, she decorated it with strands of tiny multicolor glass beads, white twinkle lights, and a gold star.

“Very nice.” Harry’s deep voice startled Gracie. She turned to find him standing in the doorway. Smiling, he gestured toward the tree. “Kirsten will love it.”

“I hope so,” she said, gathering up her things. Kirsten should be there soon. “I’d like to make her happy.”

Harry eyed Gracie curiously, and she squirmed under his gaze. What had he made of her remark? Did he know she’d also like to make Merrett happy? “Thank you for asking me here today. It’s an honor. I can tell by your wife’s decorating materials that she knew fine things. I’ll bet she entertained beautifully.” Gracie hesitated, then rushed on to confide. “I’m giving a party, an open house, on the fourteenth, and there’s a lot I don’t know. I wish your wife were...” She broke off, the color rising in her cheeks.

“Alice could have trained you well.” He rubbed his brow. “Maybe I can help. She taught me a lot. Sit down.” Waving her toward Kirsten’s window seat, he seated himself on the bed. “Tell me what you have planned.”

“I think you should serve coffee and a mulled cider,” he said, when she finished. “The sweets you’ve described sound perfect, and I’ll have Mrs. Jarvis make you some canapés. In fact, I’ll loan her to you. And Alice has a silver tea service and crystal punch bowl you can use.”

“Oh, I couldn’t. Something might happen to them.”

“And if it did?” Harry shrugged, a frown passing over his face like a racing storm cloud. “It’s not as if we’re going to use them again.”

Gracie heard the front door close. She shut her eyes.

“Kirsten never arrives quietly. It must be Merrett.” Harry stood and offered Gracie his hand. “I think you should talk to him.”

“I tried to explain to Kirsten that ghosts aren’t real, but she got this wild idea.”

Harry squeezed her hand. “I know you’d never lead her astray on purpose, and I’m counting on you to convince her it isn’t true.”

Merrett glared at her when she reached the bottom of the steps. “Well, if it isn’t the ghost host.”

Gracie wasn’t amused. “I told her again and again the tale was a myth, and her mother couldn’t come back any more than Mirabelle could.”

“Well, guess what? She doesn’t believe you. Or me. Or Dad. And you know what?” He leaned closer, eyes flashing. “Holly’s going to look for us in our New York apartment. So we have to move back. At once.”

Gracie clapped her hand over her mouth. She’d lost so many people; she couldn’t lose him and Kirsten, too. Not that they were truly hers, but they’d become an important part of her life. “I had nothing to do with that.”

“Then, who did?”

Gracie dug clenched fists against her thighs and took a deep breath. She’d planned to apologize, but Merrett wasn’t giving her a chance. “You talk as if everything would be perfect if you went back to New York. Like your life would be the same as before.” She stopped struggling to keep her voice even and let it rise. “You make it seem as if Holly’s just waiting for you there. So maybe that’s why.”

“You think I’m to blame?”

“I think it’s time you got on with your life. You have a newspaper that’s yours, but act as if your job at the Reporter doesn’t exist.” His mouth fell open, and Gracie reveled in pulling the rug out from under him. “You don’t know where you belong, so what can you expect of her? Kids need security, and you’re supposed to give that to her.”

“What the hell do you know about raising kids?”

“I know they need love and attention, something I never had, and miss to this day.” She hadn’t known she was going to say that, and reeled from her own words.

He scrubbed his fingers across his eyes.

Gracie edged toward the door. She’d never identified Kirsten’s pain with hers before, and now that she had, she hurt for the child even more. “I’m going now.”

Merrett opened the hall closet and handed her coat to her. Turning back, he gaped at the stairway. “What have you done to this house?”

Gracie followed his gaze to the stair rail twined with silk greenery, velvet bows, and tiny gold jingle bells. “I...I decorated. Your father asked me to.”

“You used Mama’s stuff, and cheapened it with those dumb bells.” Merrett roughly jangled one.

She’d done it all wrong, and Harry had been too nice to say she’d botched the job. She’d made a mistake, the same as when she wore Holly’s blouse. Gracie Singleton Saylor was a fake from Edge Road, who’d never be able to pull off the party she planned.

And now that she'd confronted Merrett about the way he raised his daughter, she'd never hear from him again.

\* \* \*

Tired of staring at the computer screen, Merrett buried his face in his hands. He'd begun to make plans for the Reporter, but when Gracie called his bluff about being afraid to move on, he realized that staying in Ferndale was a coward's way out. A man with guts would return to the Big Apple, and rise to the pinnacle of success he'd promised himself.

He'd hurt Gracie, and when she ran from the house, he knew for sure she'd be better off with him gone. But when he called his editor friend in New York to ask for a job, Tom Hendrix said he wouldn't have an opening until after the first of the year.

"My, my, Merrett." A cloud of perfume settled over him as Beryl Marcum stepped around the divider. Perching on the edge of the chair facing his desk, she crossed her legs slowly. She wore a gold military-style dress with a very short skirt that hiked to mid-thigh with the motion. "You're deep in thought."

"Thinking is part of my job." She set his teeth on edge, and for her to drop by now, of all times, seemed like the worst of luck. "What's on your mind?"

"You. And me." She smiled, lowered her lashes, and leaned toward him. "We go way back, Merrett. We could be good together. Good for one another."

He was too horrified to speak.

"Don't look at me that way. Holly would have approved. She and I were friends. Now, Gracie Singleton is something else."

"You're out of your mind. You and I are oil and water. We don't mix."

"We could." Beryl's voice remained sultry as she sat back to uncross and recross her legs. "Let's have dinner, and see what we have in common."

"No." He bolted out of his chair.

"Oh, sit down. You're acting like a scared little boy, and it's not very attractive in a grown man." She stood and moved close to him. "I'll bet you are some man when you want to be." She licked her glossy lips and took hold of his tie.

Emma ducked around the partition to stack the mail on his desk. She leveled a cool look at Beryl. "I don't recall you asking for permission to come back here."

"I don't need permission." She pulled Merrett closer by his tie.

"Ms. Saylor is here to see you, Mr. Bradmoore"

"Thank you, Emma. Ms. Marcum was just leaving."

"You want me to leave so you can talk to poor little Miss Church Mouse?"

Merrett yanked his tie loose, and pointed furiously toward the divider.

"You're going to regret this," Beryl said furiously. "Mark my word."

She tapped off on her high heels, Emma following, and he sank into his chair. He had to get a grip before facing Gracie. He'd acted hateful the last time they talked, and seeing Beryl leave wouldn't make her any happier. His mind going every which way, he fiddled with the mail Emma had brought.

"May I come in?" Periwinkle eyes peeked around the partition. Full curves straining at a clinging sweater followed. Gracie, her hair caught back with a ribbon in a low ponytail, appeared, wearing a printed skirt that flowed over beige lace-up boots. The feminine look suited her. She took the seat Beryl had vacated.

"I came to talk about Kirsten." Gracie looked down at her lap. "And to say I'm sorry your home decorations weren't suitable. I'll do whatever I can to make them right."

"They're fine. Dad likes them, and he's the one who hired you." Merrett squirmed in his chair. "Actually, I like them, too. I'm sorry for the way I acted."

"Then let's talk about Kirsten. I want to make things right, and I have a plan. Let her spend the night with me. Let her find out for herself that life at my house...the old Larraby home...is ghost-free." Gracie leaned toward him, eyes bright. "No chains clanking. No footsteps on the stairs. No ghosts anywhere."

It was a ludicrous idea, but he'd hurt her enough, so he weighed his words. "Just because Mirabelle doesn't appear at your house on a particular night doesn't mean she won't another night. And it doesn't mean Holly won't visit our apartment in New York. Kirsten wants to believe. It won't be that easy."

"I know, but seeing my house is perfectly normal will help. Meanwhile, we need to give her something else to think about."

"Other than a ghost? What would you suggest this time? A fairy godmother? A wizard? Or how about seven dwarfs?"



“Oh, shut up!” Gracie’s words were soft and patient, her smile sweet. “Christmas is a miracle, Merrett, and this is a miraculous time of year. Talk about Christmas.”

“Ask for her list, you mean.”

“That’s right, and plan to take her shopping for her grandpa and grandma. If you give her things to look forward to, she won’t have to keep looking back.”

Merrett tented his fingers and closed his eyes.

“With pleasures in store, she won’t mind giving up the ghost so much.”

What Gracie said made sense. Kirsten had been so thrilled with the tree Gracie put in her room she’d talked about it for hours. Maybe Christmas was the distraction she needed. A quick move to New York was impossible, and Gracie was trying hard to make amends. “Okay.”

Gracie gave him a million-watt smile, and rushed around the desk to hug him. “You won’t regret this, Merrett. I promise you.”

Her cheek was velvety soft against his, and the sweet woman scent of her filled an empty spot in his heart. With a twist of his head, he could taste her lips, but a need so strong it twisted his gut rose inside him, demanding more.

“Since this is Friday, tonight will be perfect,” she whispered in his ear.

Any night would be perfect for what he had in mind. But it wasn’t him she was inviting to sleep over. With a wry smile, he hummed the opening to Ghostbusters.

Laughing, she smoothed his hair back off his forehead. “It’ll work. Don’t be a doubting Thomas. Is tonight all right?”

“Tonight?” He pictured her in his arms, in bed, her satiny smooth skin next to his. Tonight would be perfect. Ten minutes from now, the length of time it would take to drive to her house, would be even better.

“Merrett. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” he lied. The desires she awakened made him uncomfortable, but they were so painfully sweet, he was reluctant to let them go. He wanted to make love with Gracie. She was so tantalizing, so sweet and lovely. He touched his forefinger to her soft lips, and she parted them, her lavender-blue eyes wide with surprise. “Tonight is fine.”

“Merrett?” Beryl stepped around the divider again. “You know that dinner we were talking about?”

Gracie sidestepped quickly. Merrett bolted out of his chair, hating Beryl Marcum. “I thought you left. I told you...”

“I know what you said, but what you said isn’t what you meant.” She perched on the edge of his desk and smiled cattily at Gracie. “If you don’t mind, we’d like to talk privately.”

\* \* \*

Merrett rang the bell, Gracie opened the door, and Kirsten threw both arms around her. “Daddy said I’m spending the night with you. That’s super. He picked me up so I wouldn’t have to bring Teddy on the bus. Where am I going to sleep?”

Gracie’s eyes were on Merrett, and he squirmed under her cool gaze.

“Never mind. I’ll figure it out.” Coat still on, Kirsten ran for the stairs. “I’ll take my things up.”

“Hello, Gracie.” Merrett felt silly standing on the porch holding a raggedy-eared teddy bear and a pink overnight bag.

“You forgot something,” Gracie called over her shoulder to Kirsten.

“My coat.” She ran back to hang it up and left again, this time with her belongings.

“I know you’re in a hurry,” Gracie said, starting to close the door.

Her cheeks bore twin red dots. “Are you okay?” he asked, concerned she might be getting sick. She nodded and pushed the door a few inches farther. He stopped and held it open. “If this is about Beryl, I want to explain.”

“I told you to get on with your life, and what you do is your business, but I was surprised to learn you’d started dating her.”

“You’re jealous.” He couldn’t help grinning.

“Like Hades, I am.”

He wiped the smile off his face with difficulty. Gracie was a good, old-fashioned girl. “It’s cold standing on the porch. May I please come in?”

A sharp breeze whipped snow off the porch through the screen door. Her face impassive, she stepped aside with a sweeping gesture.

Another couple inches of snow had fallen overnight. Stomping his feet, he closed the door behind him.

“I’m not jealous,” she announced, arms folded. “Why should I be?” She had him there. She’d never said she cared about him, but for some reason, he thought she did. “But Beryl, of all people.” Gracie’s voice dripped disgust. “I ran out because she makes me sick.”

He’d tried to forget Beryl’s visit and threat to make him sorry, which she’d repeated with even more venom the second time. But it was clear Gracie hadn’t forgotten, and he took her hands in his. “I threw her out of my office the first time, and she came back for a second round.”

“It was only a matter of time before she came after you.” Gracie sighed. “You are the best-looking single man in town.”

Merrett chucked Gracie under the chin. “You really think so?” She turned her head, and he turned it back again, gently. “Beryl did suggest dinner, and say we’d be good together. Whatever that means,” he added, in a suggestive tone.

Folding her arms, Gracie huffed. “You were right to want to keep a low profile. If we hadn’t gone to Savino’s...”

Merrett couldn’t help enjoying her discomfort, but this had gone far enough. “I enjoyed my evening with you, in spite of her.” He kissed the tip of Gracie’s pert nose. “I can’t stand Beryl. I didn’t like her in high school. Now you were, and are, a different story. I always liked you. Admired you.” Wanted you. “If I hadn’t been going steady, I’d have asked you out.”

Her smile was brilliant. “I wasn’t jealous of Beryl,” she insisted.

Gracie did care. He cupped her chin in his hands. “If you were, I wouldn’t mind.” Her violet-blue eyes grew soft, and he stroked her cheek with the back of his thumb.

“Show me where I’m going to sleep.” Kirsten appeared and tugged on Gracie’s sweater sleeve.

The moment shattered like a fragile Christmas ornament, Merrett cracked his knuckles. His daughter was spending the night with Gracie, not him. On a ghost mission.

“Would you make sure Spook isn’t bothering the Christmas tree first, Kirsten?” Gracie asked, her eyes still locked with his. “I heard something in the parlor, and was about to investigate when you came. I don’t want him tearing open any presents.”

“It’s true.” She smiled at him. “I’m not making up stories to be alone with you.” She cupped his cheek tenderly, and he leaned into her touch. He had Kirsten’s Christmas list in his pocket, and wanted to share it with Gracie, but didn’t know if this was the time.

“Gracie,” Kirsten called. “I don’t see Spook anywhere. You think it might have been Mirabelle you heard?”

Merrett left so fast, he skidded on the snow on Gracie’s front porch, and after nearly busting his rear, drove off without a backward glance.

## Chapter Eight

“You’ve got a soft bed,” Kirsten said, bouncing on Gracie’s feather mattress. “It’s like a giant cloud.”

Dressed in flowered flannel pajamas, teeth brushed and face clean and shiny, she looked exactly like a doll Gracie had yearned for the Christmas she was nine. Grandma and Grandpa had sold off their cows, and sent a check to buy gifts for everyone. So she was sure, just once before she got too old, she’d get a doll. Pop bought her a Bible instead. White leather with her name in gold, it was beautiful, and she treasured it now, but little Gracie wanted a black-haired doll.

“Lie down, honey,” she said, as Kirsten bounced again.

Gracie explained about the piano after Merrett left, telling Kirsten a wire was probably loose. They’d talked about Mirabelle, with Grace repeating the story and her warnings it was a myth. They’d even gone to the attic where Grace pointed out their findings were typical. School books with yellowed pages. A button collection. Musty-smelling clothes. Pronouncing them all boring, Kirsten was ready to leave when she found an old sleigh.

“A sled! And it’s big enough for two or three people. Wow. Double-wow.

Gracie, spotting a photo album she’d never noticed before, picked it up without comment before helping Kirsten take the sled downstairs. “If your grandpa or dad will clean the rust off the runners, the wood is solid,” she said, running her hands over it.

“You don’t care if I use it?” Kirsten clapped her hands.

“You can have it.” Gracie bent to look in her sparkling eyes, and was rewarded by the happiness there, plus an all-out bear hug.

With the sled in the middle of the kitchen, and their stomachs filled with popcorn drizzled with maple syrup, the two of them had finally climbed the stairs to bed.

Snuggling into the pillows and downy mattress, Gracie yawned and rolled over to kiss Kirsten's soft cheek. "We've done a lot tonight. I'm sleepy."

"I'm not. I'm too excited about Mirabelle."

"You're spending the night so I can prove Mirabelle doesn't live here, and doesn't visit. Hear how quiet the house is?" Gracie propped her head on her elbow.

After a moment of listening, she looked at Kirsten, and saw her eyes were closed; dark lashes fanned out on her cheek, breathing quiet and even. Gracie lay back. If Kirsten slept through the night without hearing anything, would she be convinced? If not, what would prove ghosts didn't exist? This overnight stay was a long shot, but Gracie was determined to make things right with Kirsten, and Merrett.

Merrett. His breath warm on her face, caressing her cheek. He must care about her a little. If she was jealous, he wouldn't mind. Wasn't that a sign? Gracie fisted her pillow, wishing she could fall asleep as easily as the child beside her. He'd left in a big hurry when Kirsten mentioned Mirabelle, but tonight should dispel her belief in ghosts. At least that was the plan.

It was odd to have a little girl in her bed. Many years ago, Faith had slept beside her, strawberry-blonde hair fanned out. Where was Faithie now? In a man's arms? On the street among derelicts? Or safe, and too angry to call.

Hearing a tiny tinkling sound, Gracie sat up. It sounded like the bell Kirsten had hung on a low Christmas tree branch for Spook, but he was in the downstairs bathroom with the door closed for the night.

Was that a footstep on the stair? If there was a burglar in the house, Kirsten would carry home an even worse tale.

The footstep-sound was followed by another, and another, ever so light. Gracie clutched the covers. It was her imagination; it had to be. She heard the sound again, close to the top of the stairs. A cool breeze swept across the bed. She liked the bedroom door closed against winter drafts, but Kirsten had wanted it open so she could listen for Mirabelle.

Casting an anxious glance at the sleeping child, Gracie eased out of bed. She had to protect Kirsten. The sound stopped. Gracie stopped. The stepping sound began again, and Gracie, hand trembling, picked up the clock on her bedside table. It wasn't heavy enough to do a thief in, but it might stun one for a moment.

The house was so quiet she could hear the ticking of the clock in her hand.

She tiptoed out of the room and down the hall. The crystal chandelier at the bottom of the stairway cast points of light on the steps. She'd left it lit in case Kirsten should awake during the night and be confused by her strange surroundings.

Three steps down and Gracie reached the landing. A flickering shadow caused her to stop dead, but when it flickered again, she saw one of the chandelier bulbs was burning out. With a sigh of relief, she inched along. Nothing or no one in sight, she crept on until she'd reached the bottom of the stairs.

It was quiet down there, and she'd passed no one on the way. She checked and the bathroom door was still closed, so Spook hadn't rung the bell on the tree. Was it possible she just imagined the tinkling sound as well as the footsteps? She found that hard to believe, but she was certain she hadn't fallen asleep and dreamed.

Slipping up the steps and back into the bedroom, Gracie crept toward the bed.

"You missed her."

Gracie jumped at the sound of Kirsten's voice. Moving closer, she saw by the pale light of the electric candle in the window, she was sitting up in bed.

"You missed the ghost lady, Mirabelle. She was here, and said you'd gone downstairs."

"You must have been dreaming, Kirsten." Quickly returning the clock to the table, Gracie switched on the lamp, expecting to find a trembling girl, scared out of her wits by a nightmare. She saw, instead, a calm child with a beatific smile.

"I told her I thought she might be Mommy when I heard her, and she said, no, Mommy wasn't here." Kirsten's lip quivered for a second. "She said my mother was in heaven already, so she couldn't visit, but she was happy. Mirabelle said shadow ghosts like her aren't happy; they're seeking something to put their souls to rest."

Gracie sank down on the bed, unable to respond.

"I said I hoped she'd find what she was looking for. Then she disappeared."

"You had a dream," Gracie said, stroking the little girl's tousled hair.

"No way," Kirsten said, smiling and lying back down. "She was here, and when she gets to heaven, she's going to say hello to my mom. I wanted to talk more, but Mirabelle couldn't stay."

Gracie sighed, the sound drifting away on the draft from the open door. “Kirsten, I...” She’d fallen asleep. Again.

\* \* \*

Merrett smiled into the phone when Kirsten called to be picked up at Gracie’s, babbling about a sled, and with no talk of ghosts or her mother. It had been years since he’d been sledding; years since he’d sanded the rust from the blades of an old sleigh and sharpened them in Dad’s workshop in the garage. It just might be fun to take his daughter sledding.

When he arrived, Gracie and Kirsten were finishing a snowman. Smiling, they waved, and his sense of complacency grew. “Come help,” Kirsten called, as he climbed from the Jeep. “We have a carrot for a nose and buttons for eyes.”

A good old-fashioned snowman, but why should that surprise him when Gracie was a sweet old-fashioned girl? Fresh snow had fallen overnight, and it was a crisp, cold, beautiful morning. “I’ll get twigs for arms,” she said, flashing him a smile. “The snow broke some off a tree behind the house.”

Kirsten grabbed his arm the minute Gracie was out of sight. “Guess what, Daddy? I met the ghost lady, and Gracie didn’t. She got out of bed for something, and Mirabelle came while she was gone.”

Merrett, button halfway to the snowman’s face, froze.

“I woke up and saw this shadow standing between the window and bed, and she said, ‘Don’t be afraid. I won’t hurt you. I’m looking for someone.’ And I said, ‘I know.’ Then real quick, in case she might decide to leave, I told her about Mommy, and asked if she could visit us. The lady said no, that Mommy went straight to heaven because she died happy, and not to feel sad, because it’s beautiful there.”

“So I asked Mirabelle—I’m sure that’s who it was—why she didn’t go there. She said she wished she could. Then pow, she disappeared. I think she left because she heard Gracie coming back up the stairs.”

When his daughter’s fast-paced tale ended, Merrett, hand on chest, gasped cold air. “You must have dr...”

Kirsten’s dark eyes flashed. “That’s what Gracie said, but I didn’t.”



“Here we go.” Gracie rounded the house, holding out two sticks with forked ends.

“Oh good! The ends look like hands.” Grabbing the twigs, Kirsten poked one in the side of the snowman’s body. As she inserted the second, she bumped herself in the mouth. “Oh, look My toof came out.”

She tucked her tongue in the hole in her gum as she smiled and held up her tooth.

“You look funny,” Gracie said, chuckling.

“Daddy said I looked funny before,” Kirsten complained, shining her bloody tooth on her pant leg.

“Kirsten! Look what you did.” He pointed to a smear on her ski pants.

“That’s okay. Santa Claus is going to bring me new ones that aren’t pink.”

Gracie flashed Merrett a smile as she pointed to Kirsten’s tiny tooth. “I’ll bet the fairy’s been waiting for that.”

“You believe in fairies, and you don’t believe in ghosts?” Kirsten stared at her, openmouthed. “Not even when I saw one?”

Gracie whirled, fear and concern evident on her face, but Merrett couldn’t answer the questions he saw in those lavender-blue eyes until he’d had time, alone, to think. He didn’t believe for a moment Kirsten conversed with a ghost, but something she’d reported simmered inside his head. He took her hand. “We’d better go sledding. Thanks for letting her stay, Gracie.”

\* \* \*

“I have something I want to do before we go,” Merrett told Kirsten when they reached the house. “Grandpa used to help me clean and sharpen the blades on my sled. Why don’t you ask him to take a look at yours?”

“O-kay!” She bounced up the steps and through the front door. “Then I can tell Grampa about Mirabelle.”

Taking the steps two at a time, Merrett shut his bedroom door behind him, and pulled a photo album off the top closet shelf. Sitting in the armchair by the window, he leafed slowly through the pages of his and Holly’s life together. Their elaborate wedding. Their honeymoon. Their apartment. Baby Kirsten. Holly dressed for the opera. Him giving Kirsten a bath. Holly with shopping bags in her hand. Him asleep on the couch. A

photo of the three of them—they'd stopped a passer-by to take a picture—holding Kirsten between them, Holly looking at him with love in her eyes.

She was happy. He'd done the only thing he knew how; strive for success. It was what he'd always done, but this time, it was hard, and not knowing why added to his stress. She'd said she didn't mind their small apartment. She just wanted him to stop working so much so they could go out more. But neither of them could change, so she'd enjoyed city life, and thanked him for taking her to New York. He was the one who looked unhappy and thin in their later pictures. He'd started out doing it for her, but in the end, he was doing it for himself. But it was all he could do. Closing the album, he took it into Kirsten's room and tucked it away on a shelf for her. He couldn't have saved his wife if he'd worked less, and she was happy. And he'd done his best, so it was time to put the matter to rest and move on with his life.

\* \* \*

Snow was falling again. Fat flakes drifting to earth. If it kept this up, Gracie would have to buy that shovel. Taking a broom from the pantry, she cleared the snow from the porch swing with quick swipes. Snow that blew back from the swing clung to her clothes, and shaking herself off, she studied the front yard. The white stuff was definitely sticking and would be great for sledding.

She'd love to go flying down the hill with Merrett and Kirsten. Huddled close, fitting like spoons, laughing and shouting, but he hadn't invited her. Her ghostbusting plan had failed, and though he didn't act angry, she didn't know what to expect. Moving back to New York to satisfy Kirsten would be a drastic measure, but if he wanted to go back to the city bad enough, Gracie had provided him with a ready excuse.

The phone was ringing when she closed the front door behind her. "Special Effects. Gracie speaking."

"Special Effects? I hope you're not running a brothel." Laughter, harsh and unnatural, flowed through the wires.

"Faithie." Grace clutched the receiver to her ear. "Where are you?"

"Not in Ferndale, that's for sure."

"Are you okay?"

“Fine.” Dropping the caustic veneer from her voice, Faith sighed. “How about you, sis? What’s with the way you answered?”

Sis. It sounded so good to hear her say that, to hear her voice. “Special Effects is my small decorating business. I’ve been so worried. Why haven’t you called?”

“I’ve been out of work, and you’d lecture, and I’m in Chicago.”

Chicago, the lonely city. “Do you have enough to eat? A place to stay?”

Faith sighed loudly. “I’m not homeless or starving, just short on cash. Actually, I’m better than I have been in a while. I met a really nice guy, Gracie, and I’m in love.”

Again.

“I know what you’re thinking, but it’s right this time. Thing is, he’s out of work too, so he can’t help me. I could really use a loan.”

A loan. How much money had she already sent Faith? And what happened to it? Gracie sank down on a chair beside the workroom phone. “Tell me about this man.”

“He’s a truck driver, but a heavy load fell on his accelerator foot so he can’t drive. It will be a couple of months before he gets the cast off.”

“What else?”

“His personal history, is that what you want? Okay, he’s been married and has two kids who aren’t in school yet whom he supports.”

“Been married? Is he single now, Faith?”

“If you’re going to give me the third degree...”

Gracie chewed her lip, but remained silent.

“He’s going to get a divorce as soon as he has money for a lawyer.”

“If that’s what this is about, I’m not giving him—”

“I need a few hundred bucks for a place to live until I get a job. You don’t want me living with him, do you?”

Grace twisted the phone cord around her finger, wishing she had the portable so she could pace. She was reading between the lines, but she’d bet Faith was with him right now. If she really needed money for herself, that was one thing, but she wasn’t paying for a man to divorce his wife. Or for an apartment for Faith to share with him. Besides, Gracie didn’t have money to spare. “I’m out on a financial limb. I bought the old Larraby house.”

Faith whistled loudly. “Sounds like you won the lottery.”

Gracie explained that the price on the house was low. “But I have a lot of outgo, and at present, little income. Just come home, and I’ll take care of you here. It would be like old times, the two of us together. Tell me your address, and I’ll send you a bus ticket.”

The slam of the phone brought tears to Grace’s eyes. “Faithie,” she whispered softly. “How could you?”

She’d failed with her sister. She’d loved her and cared for her, but something had gone wrong. When Gracie left at nineteen, Faith was a lanky kid, torn between playing with Linda Warren’s hand-me-down Barbie dolls, and playing sandlot ball. Four years later when Grace visited, Faith was thirteen, going on thirty. Crimped hair, eye makeup, and according to Mom and Pop, a disgrace to the family. A hussy. Bad seed.

The closest Pop had to a favorite daughter, Faith betrayed him by dressing “in a worldly fashion.” Jeans, tight tees, and boots were typical teen fashions, Gracie argued. Mom said she didn’t know the truth about Faith because she’d been gone too long. Feeling guilty, just as she was supposed to, Grace backed off. But they lit into her then, with both barrels. It was her fault. She’d spoiled Faith. All her fault.

Gracie paced to the front window of her house and looked out. It would be better if she never had kids. She’d make a poor mother. Her own parents as much as said so. She fingered the edge of the drape, a tear sliding down her cheek. Inadequate or not, how did mothers learn to let go? How could she have told her little sister no? What if Faithie went hungry, slept on the street?

The telephone rang again, and Gracie snatched it up. “Faith?”

“No ma’am. This is...” It was a job, and Gracie was grateful. She had a business and home to worry about. Faithie had to grow up. It was just so hard...

When the phone rang a third time, Gracie eyed it uneasily but picked up. “Special Effects.”

“Hi, Ms. Special. Merrett speaking. How would you like to go out with me after Kirsten and I return from sledding? To dinner. And uh...Christmas shopping.”

It was all she could do not to whoop and holler. “I’d love to, Merrett.”

“I have Kirsten’s list. I’m taking your advice about things for her to look forward to. I’m taking her to The Nutcracker Suite next week.”

Christmas shopping. The ballet. And sledding. Gracie longed to touch his cheek. Smooth his hair back. Stand on tiptoe and kiss his lips. Her dreams of helping Merrett become the guy he-used-to-be were coming true.

\* \* \*

Stomping the snow from his feet, Merrett stepped inside Gracie's house. "It's still falling and piling up out there."

Gracie's smile was as bright as the green sweater dress that skimmed her curves enticingly before meeting trim ankle boots. Golden hair drawn up on her head, curls spilling around her face, eyes sparkling—she was breathtaking. "Your ears will get chilly," he said, curving his fingers gently over them.

"Oo, your hands are cold. Don't you like my hair this way?"

"It's beautiful. You're beautiful." Drawing her close, he closed his lips over hers, something he'd wanted to do all day. He tasted her mouth, her tongue, tightened his grasp on her shoulders, molding her body to his. He knew she could feel what she was doing to him, but he didn't care. He didn't care about anything except the taste, the wonderful sweet smell of her. Of Gracie.

Wrapping her arms around his neck, she deepened her tongue against his. They clung to one another. He ran his hands down over her back, cupped her bottom. She whispered his name. If he didn't quit, it would all be over before they started. Merrett eased his mouth away and loosened his hold, regretfully. "We'd better go. We have shopping to do."

"I suppose." She smiled, her lips soft and inviting, her arms still around his neck, her eyes glazed and accepting.

"At eighteen, I'd have said the hell with everything else." He rubbed noses with her.

"Patience comes with age," she teased, slipping her hands inside his coat and splaying them on his chest. He wanted her so much, he felt anything but patient. "And wisdom," she added, moving her hands to tickle his ribs. "Or so I'm told."

"Just because I'm older than you, I'm not Father Time." He captured her wrists. "You're almost thirty."

Gracie turned up her nose. “If I hadn’t fallen for you-know-who’s black leather jacket and gotten married, I would have officially become a spinster on New Year’s Eve, like Mirabelle.” As the ghost’s name fell from her lips, Gracie’s smile disappeared. “Kirsten’s ghost had to be a dream.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Merrett said. “She’s satisfied with what Mirabelle told her.” He chuckled and planted a kiss on Gracie’s lips. “And I learned something that’s put some qualms to rest.” She raised her eyebrows questioningly, and his answer was a kiss. A long, slow, sweet kiss that he hoped told her exactly what he meant.

\* \* \*

Lazarus’ Department Store at a mall near Indy was crowded, and Merrett drew Gracie close, tucking her hand in his arm. Rich perfume scented the air, and carols resounded joyfully. From their vantage point on the up-escalator, they could see people on the floor below, searching for just the right Christmas gifts. Tonight, with Gracie looking, touching, and sniffing, Merrett felt some of the old magic. Her happiness was so infectious, a smile played around his lips.

For the next two hours, they shopped for Kirsten. Jeans, plaid shirt, and red cable knit sweater. Yellow terry cloth robe. Disney-printed underwear. He’d boned up on all her sizes before leaving home. “Isn’t this lovely?” Gracie held a green velvet jumper up for Merrett to feel.

“Kirsten wrote on her list, ‘no pink or girlie stuff.’”

“We haven’t bought anything pink, and this isn’t real girlie.” Gracie, who had already bought Kirsten several things, fingered the material. “She’d like this, I’ll bet.”

It was obvious Gracie liked it, so Merrett whipped out his wallet.

She bought the blouse displayed with it, and a cute shoulder bag for Kirsten, before wandering over to the women’s department where she found some things for Faith and Hope. “That’s enough shopping,” Merrett declared, taking her by the hand. “I’m starving.”

“I guess we could come back and look at toys tomorrow.”

“Gracie,” he said gently, “you’re shopping like there is no tomorrow.”

Tightening the hold on her purse strap, she let him lead her from the store.

In the Jeep, she leaned back in the seat. “When I was a kid with no money, I’d spend hours in Woolworth’s, watching people shop. The sight of all those toys and the aroma of chili sandwiches were magnificent. The store Santa would give me a candy cane, and I’d lick it until it was sliver-thin. It was a fairy tale world.” She sighed. “I got a little carried away shopping tonight.”

Merrett took her hand in his and kissed it, then drove them to an all-night diner he knew where they had the best chili sandwiches. Sloppy Joes, they called them. “I was going to take you to a steak house,” he half-apologized.

Gracie shook her head blissfully, a tiny dribble of chili dribbling down her chin. “This is absolutely perfect.” She licked her lips.

The booth was red vinyl, the overhead lights bright, and the jukebox turned too low to hear the words to the songs. But he and the guys from Ferndale High used to come here often, and he was surprised how good it felt to be back. A couple of his close friends were still around. Did they come here now? Were they married?

Gracie pushed her plate away to raise the heavy root beer mug to her lips. Merrett, sitting on the bench next to her, hugged her to him. He’d tried to push the sight of her as a child at Woolworth’s away, but it tugged at his heart. “It must have been hell, growing up poor.”

She shrugged and stared into the root beer foam. “Hope and I had very few illusions, but Faith always wished for the sun, and expected to get it. I hated seeing her disappointed time and again. On a daily basis, as well as Christmas.” Gracie took a deep breath. “She called me today.”

He gently massaged the back of her neck. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Word by hesitant word, sentence by reluctant sentence, Gracie poured out the story. She carried around a heavy load of guilt. He tried to reassure her. “Faith wasn’t your responsibility.”

“Let’s just say she shouldn’t have been,” Gracie said as they walked out into the cold night again. Snow crunched under their feet as they crossed the parking lot to the car. A frosty spider web iced the windshield so they couldn’t see out, and no one could see in. Pulling her into his arms, he kissed her. And kissed her. And kissed her. Until he thought he couldn’t breathe any more.

When he walked her to the door, he touched her cheek. “I can’t come in tonight, Gracie. I just can’t. Do you understand?”

She nodded and stood on tiptoes to put her arms around his neck for a quick hug. “Thanks for a perfect night, Merrett.”

A perfect night. A perfectly simple night, but Gracie had enjoyed it, and so had he.

\* \* \*

Merrett arrived home tired and confused, but oddly happy. The feelings he had for Gracie, like rays of sunshine penetrating darkness, warmed his heart. He’d known the heat of passion before, but gentle compassion was a stranger. He sat down on the edge of his bed. She’d put the past guilt behind her, she said, but she was wrestling with the future and the present, wanting the best for Faith.

The phone rang, and he grabbed the extension. Would Gracie call him at midnight? He smiled, hoping to hear her voice.

“Merrett, old buddy. It’s Tom Hendrix. Didn’t wake you, did I?”

Merrett clutched the receiver. “No, but I am surprised to hear from you at this hour. What’s up?”

“Half the city, and soon, you’ll be back among the night owls. My city reporter is leaving December thirty-first.”

His breath caught in his throat. A job, opening up on Gracie’s thirtieth birthday. Now why should that pop into his head. “No kidding?”

“Editor’s honor.” Tom chuckled. “And you have a job with me, beginning January uno. Want me to locate an apartment for you? Or do you want to fly out, stay with Tammy and me, and look for yourself?”

“I...” Why now? For the first time in a year, he was glad to be here in Ferndale, ready to move on. This was his big chance to return to city life, smell the ink on hot stories, and prove himself. But he’d have to find someone to watch Kirsten, and he couldn’t work as late as he used to; she hated a sitter.

Their old apartment would be available for sublet in January—he’d checked when Kirsten thought they had to move back. So she’d have familiar territory for a few months, but their former home would stir up memories for them both.



“You fall asleep, Merrett?”

“Just reeling from the news, that’s all.” Merrett scrubbed his hand through his hair. “I have to work through some things, Tom. Dad and Kirsten are going to take this hard. And I have to do something with the Reporter. I advertised it in a couple of papers but haven’t had any nibbles. Then I got the idea to modernize it.”

“No need to do that now. You want to sell the rag? I can get you a buyer.”

Merrett told Tom he’d get back to him in a day or two.

“You asked for a job, and I need a man like you. Now get your butt in gear. You don’t belong in a hick town, old buddy. I’ve heard from Waldo what a great job you do.”

Merrett nearly dropped the phone. “Then why didn’t he promote me?”

There was a long silence on the other end. “You must have known that half the staff was related to his wife. Her daddy owned the paper, and he had to keep everyone in the family happy.”

His friend Waldo had misled and betrayed him, let him knock himself out without telling him the truth. Merrett didn’t know whether to be furious or elated when he hung up the phone. He hadn’t failed at reporting. He could work at a New York paper and excel. His old dreams could still come true, but there were issues and people to consider. The Reporter’s future and the employees. Kirsten. Dad. Mama. Of course, Mama wouldn’t know, but... The bird feeder was still in his trunk. Tomorrow... What?

Staring out the window at the trees heavy with snow, Merrett shivered. Gracie had put the tiny tree on his desk that sparked him to buy the feeder. Gracie brought out the good in him. He had been drawn to her when she had answered the front door that Christmas Eve fifteen years ago. And when he had kissed her a few weeks later, he had known that no matter what he felt for anyone else, he was half-in-love with her.

But a few days later, Holly told him she was ready to go steady—news he’d longed to hear—and even though he suspected it was because he’d been too transparent about his feelings for Gracie, he’d placed his class ring on Holly’s finger.

Soon afterward, the rush toward graduation and college acceptance set in, with Holly influencing him to go to IU, and deciding to go there, too. Gracie had three more years of high school, and though he sometimes thought about her after leaving Ferndale, he hadn’t expected their paths to cross again.

Now that they had and he was more than half in love with her, he'd be a coward to walk away without resolution.

## Chapter Nine

Sunday was dreary with clouds hanging heavy in the air, and a promise of snow, if you believed the weather predictions. Gracie returned home from church. Switching on lights as she moved through the dark house, she found yesterday's mail unopened on the hall table. It was probably junk mail, but she'd sort it over.

The kitchen wall phone jangled as she passed, and she jumped, sending the letters skittering across the floor.

Hope spoke in hushed tones. "Something terrible has happened."

Gracie sank down onto the floor. She'd known this call would come sooner or later. "It's Faithie, isn't it? Something's happened to her."

"Not Faith. Me." Hope replied irritably, and then lowered her voice to almost a whisper. "It's me who's in trouble. I'm pregnant, Grace, and when Frank finds out, he'll be furious."

Grace was angry at Hope for scaring her. Pregnant wasn't bad when you wanted a baby. She scooped up her scattered mail and rose. "I thought you took birth control pills."

"I do. But you know how wretched I've been feeling, and on the outside-chance, I bought a home pregnancy kit, and it's positive. What am I going to do?"

"Maybe you should see Dr. Hiram."

"I've taken three of those home tests, and I know. I'm going to have a baby."

"A baby," Gracie said softly. Three positives couldn't be wrong.

"Frank's already asking what's wrong. And when he finds out..." Hope's voice shook. "I've lost weight from throwing up, and I'm sleepy all the time, and it's hard to keep

pretending I'm fine when I'm miserable. I was afraid you would notice something was wrong when I came to decorate."

Gracie had blamed Frank for them not visiting, and instead it was her sister who'd wanted to stay away. "You always confided in me before."

"I know, but you worry too much. I didn't feel up to your fussing."

Hope used to like being taken care of. "I try to watch out for you, that's all."

"I'm a grown woman, Gracie. You act like I'm still a kid. Frank babies me enough. I need space." Hope paused. "What am I going to do?"

"It seems that's up to you. You're an adult. And you have Frank."

"At the moment." Hope sighed deeply. "You know I'd never have a you-know-what, but what will I do if he leaves?"

She sounded so desperate Grace softened her tone. Pregnancy must be making her hysterical. "Frank loves you. He'll get over this."

"You're wrong. He doesn't want... Oh dear, he's coming in the door. Meet me at the Soda Shop tomorrow for lunch. Eleven-thirty to beat the crowd."

Gracie stared at the phone after Hope hung up. Being an aunt would be the next best thing to being a mother, but would Hope let her fawn over the baby? Or would she accuse her of smothering it, too?

A sound, like water dripping, drew her attention. Cocking an ear, she followed the steady plop-plop to the drawing room. Opening the door, she gasped in dismay. Water was coming through the ceiling where the room jugged out, and the plaster around the hole looked ready to fall. A puddle on the hardwood floor was turning the varnish white. All the displays she'd set in the drawing room bore some trace of water damage. One particularly large red bow had bled onto a white paper maché pot, and when she picked it up, the pot crumbled in her hands

Wondering what would go wrong next, Gracie looked up to see a woman across the yards hang a Christmas banner with a smiling Santa from her back porch. The big red letters on the banner spelled HO, HO, HO, and moving to the window for a better look, Gracie recognized the woman who hung it as Beryl Marcum.

\* \* \*

“Careful, Kirsten,” Merrett cautioned, as his daughter picked up a delicate ornament. “That was your grandma’s when she was a child.”

Kirsten examined the bauble closely before hanging it with great care. “Are we going to see Gramma today, Grampa?”

Merrett answered for him. “I told Gracie that you and I would trim her stairway tree.” He’d tried to trade help, but she said she had urgent matters to attend to.

Kirsten bounced happily, and then looked to her grandfather. “Gramma might be expecting us.”

“I’ll visit her. Gracie is giving an open house next weekend, and I expect she needs help from you and your daddy.”

Merrett had forgotten about the open house. Of course, she was busy.

Each ornament he placed on the tree held a special memory. The bicycle built for two with Mr. and Mrs. Santa he had bought his parents with his first paper route paycheck. The basketball ornament they bought him the year the Ferndale Tigers went to state finals. The #1 they had bought when the Clarion was named “best high school newspaper in Indiana.” Gracie had helped them win that award, and he’d been thrilled when she won an honor for herself.

Merrett picked up a ceramic angel blowing a horn. “Where did that come from, Dad?”

“Mama made it. Remember when she took that class from Mrs. Bottorff who runs The Pottery Barn?”

Merrett remembered bowls, mugs and toothbrush holders, but he’d forgotten the angel.

“I want to hang the star,” Kirsten coaxed. “Please, with tinsel on it.”

Merrett boosted her into the air, and she put it in place. Harry pretended to blow a ceremonial horn. Merrett plugged in the lights.

“Let the festivities begin,” Kirsten called out.

Festivities. Looking at Kirsten’s face in the glow of the Christmas tree lights, Merrett realized she’d been easier to get along with recently. And his father, who seemed to make demands, had eased up. Dad, in all fairness, had only been looking out for his son, and Merrett might have done the same thing himself. He wanted a son he could teach to play ball and swim. A boy who would ask him to tie his tie, and pester for a car until he

gave in. Like Dad did. In a rush of understanding, Merrett clasped his father's shoulder. Dad hadn't spent a lot of time with him, but what he did spend was quality time, and their relationship was strong.

Dad, holding Kirsten on his knee in the armchair, laid his hand over Merrett's and gazed into the multicolored lights. "We did a good job."

The three of them. "Mama would be proud."

\* \* \*

Merrett left the house with one destination in mind, but when the sign on the Pottery Barn's door said "Closed Sunday," he decided to drive to Sunny Haven.

Feeling surprisingly calm, he checked the directory in the front hall that told him Alice Bradmoore was in West Wing, Room 6. She sat by the window, looking out.

"Mother?"

She turned around. The glow in her eyes wasn't emptiness. It was love. Pure and sweet. "My son."

"Mama." Crossing the room in two long strides, he knelt and folded her into his arms. Unashamed, he let the tears flow.

She stroked his hair. "I was looking for you. I thought you might be playing outside."

"I'm right here, Mama. Right here. I love you. I'm sorry I didn't come sooner."

"That's okay. You couldn't." She tipped his chin to look into his eyes. "Always such a handsome boy. And good. Where are the others?"

"Dad and Kirsten are at home. My wife, Holly, is gone, Mama. She died." The tears began again, and he buried his face in his mother's lap.

She stroked his hair until he grew quiet. Then she took a tissue out of her pocket and dried his tears. "You're a strong boy. You'll be all right."

Kissing her cheek, he remembered what Kirsten had said. It felt like rose petals, and she smelled of lavender. "I'm better already."

\* \* \*

Gray clouds had given way to huge snowflakes, and Merrett had to clean his windshield before he could pull away from Sunny Haven. His mother seemed pleased with the cardinal feeder, although he wasn't sure she knew what it was. There wasn't time to hang it outside her window, but he would, next time he went.

“Round yon virgin, mother and child...”

“Silent Night” was playing on the car radio, and he didn't switch the dial. His visit to Mama had healed the hole in his soul. And Mama's, too. He felt it in his heart. She'd waited for him, and he'd gone to her. Finally.

The newspaper office was dark except for the golden glow of the star in the window. Unlocking the door, he hurried to his desk, where he took the computer disc containing his annual report from a drawer and tucked it in his coat pocket. The board of directors wanted it before Christmas so they'd have time to approve it by January 1. Tonight, when he and Kirsten got home from Gracie's, he'd work on it. Even if he took the job in New York, he would leave the Reporter in better shape than when he took over. Even if? He had to decide soon.

\* \* \*

Gracie called every roofer in the Ferndale phone book, but none would come on Sunday. After scheduling her week's work and making a note to call Mrs. Jarvis about the party, she baked. And pondered.

Frank loved Hope. So what if they'd agreed not to have kids? When he learned he was going to be a father, he'd be thrilled, wouldn't he? Wouldn't any man? Would Merrett? Pinching the crust of a pumpkin pie she was making for dinner into a scalloped edge, Gracie set it on the oven. How would she feel if she were the one having a baby? Merrett's baby. Brushing flour from her hands, she pulled recipes for brownies and lemon bars from her recipe box, and set to work on them.

With so much to think about, it seemed like no time until she set the last of her baked goods to cool before freezing them for her Open House, and went upstairs to freshen up for Merrett.

Snow was falling, thick and heavy, outside her bedroom window, and to boost her holiday mood, Gracie donned a red skirt and sweater. She was fastening on gold earrings, tiny jingle bells, when Hope phoned again.

“As if I don’t have enough problems, Faith called to ask for money. Her boyfriend went back to his wife, and Faith needs a place to live.”

You don’t want me living with him, do you? Gracie felt sick at heart. By turning her sister down, she’d forced her to move in with that...wife-cheater, pervert, whatever.

“I told her to stand on her own two feet for once. She could go to the employment office for a job, and get a room at the YWCA.”

“You think I spoiled her, too, don’t you? Just like Mom and Pop said.”

“It’s not your fault, Grace, so get off that kick.”

Gracie bristled. Pregnancy certainly wasn’t helping Hope’s disposition. “Did you get Faith’s phone number?”

“It wouldn’t do any good if I had. She had to move by noon today.” Hope sighed. “You can’t always fix everything for everyone, Grace. I wish you could.”

\* \* \*

Gracie wished she could fix things for herself. The roof. The floor. So many things had gone wrong. But when Merrett arrived, everything seemed right.

He handed a white florist box, and she folded back the tissue paper with shaking fingers. “Roses.” She smiled mistily. “My very first.”

Her first roses, and he’d given them to her. His chest swelled a little, and his arms ached to draw her close, but he wouldn’t with his daughter there.

“They’re an apology, sort of,” Kirsten said, “for being late.”

Gracie smiled at him over his daughter’s head, and he knew she knew they were more than that. She never complained about him being late, and when he told her about visiting Mama, she’d be pleased.

Gracie’s ornaments were new and held no sentimental value, so the trimming of the stairway tree went quickly, but Kirsten lost interest before they were half finished. “I’m going to make Spook something new to wear from the scrap box, if I can find him,” she said, scampering off.



Merrett liked working with Gracie, fingertips brushing, the scent of honeysuckle drifting around them, blending with the aroma of pine. She seemed a little tense, but he attributed it to her upcoming Open House, and tried to keep the conversation light to relax her. When they'd hung the last icicle, she handed Merrett a simple star to set atop the tree, and he took advantage of the opportunity. "Tell me again about the tree topper you had when you were a child."

She described it in loving detail, and when he plugged in the lights on the tree, she smiled. But a moment later, she bustled to the kitchen, pleasure in her tree short-lived. "We're having a simple meal. I've been busy." Ducking into the pantry, she returned with some potatoes, and started peeling them.

"Let me do that," he offered.

She handed him the peeler, took hamburger from the refrigerator, and started making patties. She'd insisted over the phone that if he and Kirsten helped with her tree, they must stay for a meal.

"You don't always have to cook for me."

"I like cooking for people, and I get tired of eating alone." She formed patties at lightning speed. At the rate she was going, she'd have them cooked before he finished paring the potatoes. Something was bothering her.

"I hope you don't mind cheeseburgers and French fries."

"Mind?" He let out a whoop, and she eyed him suspiciously. "Cheeseburgers and fries were a tradition at the Bradmoore house the night we decorated our tree." Her gaze softened, and he laid his peeler down. "I went to see Mama today."

"Oh, Merrett." Gracie's eyes shone with sudden tears. "How was she?"

"She looked at me, and said, 'my son.' I'm not sure she could have said my name, but she knew." He ducked his head so Gracie couldn't see his own tears well up, but she cupped his cheek in her hand.

"I knew you'd go."

He sensed admiration in Gracie's voice, and caring. She would make a wonderful wife for a man who wanted to raise a family in Ferndale. Thinking of her married to one of the guys who went to High with them produced a pang of—jealousy? "Have you ever wanted children, Gracie?"

She looked at him questioningly, and then turned to gaze out the window. Across the yards, a light glowed in an empty kitchen. "I'll soon be thirty, and it isn't good for children to have older parents. My folks were too old when they had us."

"My parents were both past thirty when I was born, and I didn't turn out so bad, did I? And you certainly turned out okay." He turned her around. "You're a daughter to make any parents proud."

"Well, I didn't. I was never good enough to please them."

"That can't be true."

"They never complimented me on my good grades or other accomplishments."

He couldn't imagine that. His parents praised him for everything, especially Mama.

"They only talked about the things I did wrong." Like a dam bursting, the words spilled out, all her anguish over Faith, and her parents blaming her when her sister went astray.

Merrett held Gracie close to his heart, stroking her hair. "They weren't being fair. They were the ones who gave her life. Besides, you left when she was...how old?"

"Nine."

"And you ruined her in nine years? Gracie, I don't think so."

She looked up at him with wet pansy eyes. "She called Hope for help today, and she's never done that before. She's given up on me, and Hope turned her down, too. What if Faith feels unloved and unwanted, and does something desperate?"

"She won't. She caught onto your parents' trick of making you feel guilty, so she's playing it for all its worth. She knew Hope would tell you, and you'd be an easier touch next time around."

"Are you crying, Gracie? I think the meat's burning."

She fled to take the skillet off the stove burner. "Thank you, Kirsten."

"Are you crying?"

"I was, a little. I'm worried about Faith, my sister, but I'm sure your daddy's right; she'll be okay."

"Look at Spook. He'll make you smile."

The cat wore a silk poinsettia on its head, secured with a ribbon. Kirsten had wound a strip of green velvet around his middle. "I love green velvet," she said, rubbing the cloth. "Especially dark green like this."

The jumper Gracie picked for Kirsten was that color. “It’s a beautiful shade,” Merrett said.

Gracie, lifting a hamburger to check the underside, cast Merrett a furtive tear-stained smile.

They ate in companionable silence, with even Kirsten quiet, and afterward, she watched “Frosty the Snowman” on TV in the sitting room while Merrett helped clean up. “My daughter lost a fry or two on the floor. Where’s the broom, Gracie?”

“On the porch.” She looked up from the kitchen sink to grin. “I’ve been using it to clean the walks.”

The broom handle was cold, and Merrett was sweeping briskly beneath the table when an envelope slid across the floor. He picked it up. “Here’s an unopened letter.”

Gracie dried her hands and took it from him. “I dropped the mail when Hope called.” Gracie looked at Merrett, worry etched across her lovely face. “This is confidential, but she thinks she’s pregnant.”

“And that’s not good news?”

“Sadly, no. She wants children, but says Frank will be so mad, he’ll leave her. Surely, he won’t.” Gracie held the envelope up to the light. “I wonder what this is.”

“Why don’t you open it?”

“It’s from the Zoning Board.” She turned the letter over in her hands, and eased the flap open. Looking into the envelope, she chewed her lip. “The way my day’s gone, it probably says they’re making this a higher tax zone.”

“I don’t believe the zoning commission does that,” Merrett said, squeezing her shoulder. “Read it.”

Gracie scanned the thin sheet of paper, and gasped. “It says I can’t run a business here because this is a residential zone.” She grabbed his arm. “They can’t make me close Special Effects, can they?”

“I’m not sure.” He honestly feared they could.

“Oh, Merrett.” She burst into tears. “First the roof. Now, this.”

“What’s the matter with the roof?”

Sinking down on a kitchen chair, Gracie buried her face in her hands. Kneeling before, he patted her knee. “It can’t be that bad.”

“Yes it can.” She nodded hard, and her tiny jingle bell earrings rang, reminding him that he’d yelled at her over the bells on the stair rail at home. He’d made her think she’d done a poor job, just as her parents had. He stroked her cheek. “I have an open house coming up with fifty invitations in the mail, the drawing room roof is leaking, and now, the zoning board wants to shut me down.”

He picked her up and sat down, folding her into his lap. He kissed her hair and rubbed her back. “It will be okay, sweetheart.” He kissed the tears away from her cheeks. Kissed her eyelids. She parted her lips, her eyes eager, like a child wanting to trust. He’d do anything, everything, he could to help her. “Just take it from the top, and look at each thing in a positive fashion. Okay?” She nodded and clenched her hands in her lap. “Start with Faith and look at the bright side.”

Gracie smiled faintly. “She’ll call again, she always does.”

“Okay, you’re off to a good start. Next problem?”

Gracie traced her lips with the tip of her tongue. “Frank, unless he’s totally heartless, will come around. If he doesn’t, Hope will at least have a child.” Gracie’s sudden smile lit the room. “She and the baby could come here to live.”

Merrett didn’t think that would lighten Gracie’s burdens any, but he nodded, noting her eyes lit up at the word baby. “What else? The roof? I have a friend who’s a roofer. I’ll see if I can get him here tomorrow.”

“The zoning commission is the biggest problem, but I’m not hurting this neighborhood with my business, and the notice said I can appeal.”

“That’s the spirit.” Merrett took her hand and held it to his lips.

“But my open house is only six days away, and I’d planned to take orders, make sales, schedule jobs. Would that be allowed if my case was under appeal?”

“I don’t know,” he confessed. “Your brother-in-law is an attorney, isn’t he?”

“You think I need one?” Gracie looked as if she might cry again.

“I don’t know, but Frank will.”

“I don’t want to talk to him. He’s selfish and making Hope’s life miserable.”

That didn’t seem relevant in the face of disaster. Maybe he could talk to Frank for her. “It’s awfully quiet,” Merrett said, as last.

They found Kirsten asleep on the couch. “I should take her home.”

Gracie laid her hand on his arm. “I could use company a bit longer.”

“Is there a place I could move Kirsten to, so we can have the couch?”

“Upstairs on my bed. There’s only one other furnished bedroom, and it’s been closed, so it’s probably cold.” She trailed him upstairs to turn back the satin comforter, and Merrett, laying Kirsten down on soft flowered sheets, imagined Gracie curled up there, with him beside her.

She lingered to take off Kirsten’s shoes and kiss her forehead, and he pictured her putting his daughter to bed nightly, listening to her prayers, tucking her in.

\* \* \*

Merrett and Gracie sat, knees touching, hands clasped, watching a sit-com on TV. They were laughing when a weather bulletin broke into the programming. “A major winter storm warning is now in effect.”

Gracie rushed to the window, and he pulled the curtain back to stand beside her. “It’s dumped at least six inches since I got here,” he gasped.

“Roads leading in and out of Ferndale are drifting over,” the weather reporter was saying. “Roads presently impassable are Johnson County, Potter Shop and—”

“Potter Shop? We can’t get home.” Merrett raked his fingers through his hair. “I’d better call Dad. Maybe it’s a mistake.”

Gracie laid her hand on his arm. “I doubt it, Merrett. Look out front. There’s snow up to Old Blue’s hub caps.”

“The Jeep can plow through that easily.”

“Probably, but Potter Shop runs north-south, and the forecaster said winds out of the west were causing drifts.”

Merrett opened the front door, and a pile of snow fell in.

“Winds out of the west,” Gracie said dryly. “I’ll get the broom.”

When she came back, he swept the snow out. “I’m sorry, Grace. The last thing you need is overnight guests.”

She brushed snow from his hair. “I asked you not to leave.”

“That half hour wouldn’t have made a difference. I was just oblivious. I didn’t notice the wind howling, did you?”

Gracie shook her head. “I was busy feeling sorry for myself.” She cupped her hand against his cheek. “Then, you lifted my spirits with your incredible optimism.”

“You have me mixed up with a kid you knew fifteen years ago.”

Shaking her head, she traced his lips with her finger tip. “That same guy is standing here now, and the optimist inside him is fighting his way out. Look how much you helped me tonight.”

She’d solved most of her own problems while he listened, but her finger on his lips was doing incredible things to his body. He darted his tongue out to taste her skin.

“You can sleep on the couch,’ she said softly, “and Kirsten can sleep with me.”

“I’d rather it was the other way around.”

Her eyes said she wished it too, but she hurried upstairs to fetch him a blanket and pillow. He was hanging up from phoning his father when she returned to lay them on the couch. “I hope you’ll be warm enough.”

He took her by the wrist and pulled her nearer. “You could keep me warm for a while.”

“Not with Kirsten upstairs.” So she didn’t trust herself any more than he trusted himself. “I always shut Spook in the half bath under the stairs at night. Try not to let him out if you go in there.”

Merrett, thinking about locking himself in the bathroom with Gracie, began to unbutton his shirt. Her eyes darted to his chest. He unbuttoned two more buttons. Her eyes widened. He loosened the last one, and let his shirt fall to the floor. Gulping, she fled.

Grinning, he kicked his shoes off and lay down. He lay there for a long while, listening to her stage whispers. “Spook. Where are you? Spook?”

He had a lot of things to sort out. The end of the year report that wasn’t going to get done tonight. Gracie’s roof and possible end to her business. The job with Tom in New York.

\* \* \*

Merrett wondered where he was and what had awakened him. Staring into the darkness, he drowsily remembered... Gracie’s house. Snowed in. Closing his eyes, he was

trying to doze off when he heard it again. It sounded like...footsteps. Faint, light-as-a-feather steps on the stairway. Mirabelle.

Or Holly. He tried to picture Holly in heaven. He heard them again. Footsteps. A light breeze or a shiver passed over him. He froze, willing his body deeper into the couch. He lay with his head toward the door of the sitting room. The steps came closer. Like a child, he squeezed his eyes shut.

A cool hand stroked his forehead, pushing his hair back.

“Gracie.” A sigh escaped his lips. Opening his eyes, he smiled.

“Shhh,” she whispered. “Go back to sleep. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“What are you doing up?” He caught her wrist as she started to move away.

“I couldn’t sleep.” She tried to pull loose.

“Please. Don’t go. Stay awhile.”

She smiled. “Warm company’s good comfort on a cold night.”

“Your grandmother’s saying?” She’d told him her grandma, like Mama, handed out ‘homespun wisdom.’

Gracie nodded and settled onto the floor next to the couch. In the faint light, her honey hair fanned out around her pale face in a halo. “I thought you were a ghost.”

His eyes accustomed to the dark now, he could see the sparkle of mischief in her eyes. “Maybe I am.”

“You’d better not be. I need earthly company. When I felt you push my hair back, I knew. No one else ever did that.”

She pushed it back now, even though it didn’t need it.

“Lie here with me,” he whispered.

“Merrett, I can’t.”

He heard the fear in her voice. “I won’t do anything, I promise.”

“You don’t understand.”

“That you want me as much as I want you? I understand that very well.”

Gingerly, she lay alongside him, snuggling like two spoons in a drawer. “Do you understand why I can’t? We can’t?”

“I think I do. Actually, I’m not sure. It seems so right, Gracie. I know you have your morals, and I do too. But it seems so completely right and good.”

She snuggled a little, and his body sprang to life, blood surging. He willed it to stop, but it had a will of its own. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Gracie chuckled. "Yeah, sure."

He blew in her ear and tickled her a little. She giggled and turned her head for a kiss. He grazed her lips lightly. It was all he dared. If he kissed her deeply, he'd never stop. She nipped his lips with her teeth, and then turned her head.

"I'm not helping anything, am I?"

They were both quiet for a long while. "I'm glad you're beginning to enjoy the season," she said at last. "You are, aren't you?"

He confessed he was, and told her how he'd missed the closeness of holidays since he left his parents' house. "In New York, I did everything that was done for Christmas. Fixed the turkey. Put up the tree. Filled Kirsten's stocking. It wasn't the way I wanted it to be. I used to love the holidays, and that love is coming back to me."

Grace nodded against his bare chest, and he dipped his head to capture her lips. It was a tender, agonizingly slow, sweet kiss he wanted to last forever. Her robe slipped open, and his hand glided smoothly over her thin silk gown, so thin he could feel the heat of her body burn his palm. His fingers lingered, stroking her softly-rounded belly.

She dipped her hand beneath the blanket and extracted his, to lay it safely on her arm. Sighing, he nibbled her ear. When she didn't respond, he decided to behave himself. The time wasn't right, if it ever would be. Leave it to him to pick such a moral woman.

"You changed my life at Christmas time," she said, so softly he could barely hear.

"Don't sell yourself short. You'd have turned your life around without me."

She rolled over to face him. "You really think so?"

"Yeah, I do."

She smiled triumphantly. "I knew you were getting your optimism back. You think I'd have succeeded in changing my life, and seeing what you saw of my life back then, tell me that's not optimism." She punched him in the arm. "Tell me."

"You're nuts," he said fondly. "You're the optimist. Always seeing the good in everyone. Always helping people."

"I never helped anyone."



“You took care of your sisters, expecting everything to turn out for the best. That’s why you’re so disappointed in them right now.”

“Cockeyed optimism?” Gracie rolled her Elizabeth Taylor eyes skyward.

He abruptly sat up, and she nearly rolled off the sofa. He caught her arm, and she straightened, sinking back into the cushions. “I’m not the guy you think I am, Gracie. I’m no optimist and I’m not a hero.” For the next half hour, he told her why. He told her how he drank after Holly’s death. He confessed he’d resented his father buying him the newspaper, but had been too much of a wimp to tell him. He confessed he couldn’t make up his mind what to do with his future.

“Stop, Merrett.” Gracie laid her hand on his knee. “I’ve heard enough.”

He’d disgusted her, totally disenchanted her. He turned his head toward the door. “I’ll see if the roads are clear enough for me to leave.”

She turned his face around with her hand. “You’re a-wonderful-noble-person.” She tapped his chest, punctuating each word, as she said it. “A fine son, and a terrific father.”

“I wanted another child. A son.” It was the first time he’d told anyone, and he saw the amazement in Gracie’s eyes. “Holly enjoyed making Kirsten into a little lady, but didn’t want a boy. She wanted a social life like her parents. I wanted a home life like my parents had. Ours wasn’t bad. It just wasn’t the same.”

Gracie pleated her robe with her fingers, looking off into space, silent for a moment. “Most marriages aren’t as good as your mother and dad’s.”

“But they can be,” he said emphatically.

She smiled up at him. “I was ready to throw in the towel when I opened that zoning board notice, but you restored my faith with yours. And you still believe in a good marriage. Now, that’s true optimism. Whether you know it or not.”

“You always have to have the last word, don’t you?”

Chuckling, she leaned back in the curve of his arm and snuggled close, and he thought--with a woman like her, marriage would be good.

\* \* \*

If could have been minutes or hours later when the first strong rays of morning light fell across her face and Gracie stirred in Merrett’s arms. They must have fallen asleep

sitting up and tumbled over in the night, because when he opened his eyes, she was lying next to him in his arms. God, but it felt good to wake up next to her.

“Kirsten,” she murmured.

“Where?” Merrett looked around.

“I...I suppose she’s still in bed. I just don’t think she should find us like this.”

“How about like this?” he asked, before slanting his lips over Gracie’s.

She tasted his mouth thoroughly before drawing away. “I don’t think so. But just to make sure...” Gracie kissed him again, then leaned back to shake her head. “She shouldn’t.”

Laughing, she slipped away and stood at the window, looking out. “There must be a foot of snow.”

He came up behind her to slide his arms around her waist. “Completely undisturbed. They haven’t opened the roads yet.”

“You sound awfully happy for someone being held prisoner.”

“Mm,” he said, nuzzling her neck.

“I’m going to make coffee,” she said. “I can’t fend off passes until I’ve had something hot to drink and read the morning news.”

“Afraid you’re out of luck with the latter. No newspaper carrier’s going to ride a bike through that stuff.”

She opened the front door to look around. A cloud of snow blew inside on the wake of a cold gust of air. Shivering, she closed the door and leaned against it, grinning sheepishly. “I love the Daily Reporter so much, I had to be sure.”

“You love the Reporter?”

“Well, sure. All you hear on TV and radio are bad things. The Reporter is a window on the real world where good people are born, graduate, marry, have children, and their lives are celebrated when they die.”

Merrett had never thought of his newspaper as anything so noble. He’d wanted to save the Reporter to save face, but he’d never really thought about the people that read it—until now. Drawing his number one fan into his arms, he kissed her again. And again. He had to call Tom soon.

## Chapter Ten

Coffee bubbled softly in the pot. The smell of bacon hung heavy in the air. The kitchen windows were steamy, but outside, Gracie could see piles of fresh white snow, pillow-soft and shining. Across the yards, the Riggs faced one another over the breakfast table in matching plaid flannel robes. Could they see Merrett taking the bacon out of the microwave? Except for being barefoot, he was dressed, but Gracie was making French toast in her bathrobe.

Merrett laid the strips of bacon on a plate, and slid them into the conventional oven to keep warm. Passing behind Gracie to make more, he lifted her hair to kiss her neck, and she shivered. “You’re as beautiful in the morning as you are at noon and night,” he said.

She smiled up at him. “You have a poet’s soul.”

He chuckled and kissed her cheek. “No one ever accused me of that before.”

“Did we spend the night?” Kirsten’s sleep-drugged voice from the doorway sounded confused.

Her daddy swooped her up for a hug. “We did indeed, princess. We are snowed in. The roads are closed, and there won’t be any school today.”

“Oh, boy” She wriggled out of his arms and ran to the window. “I wish I had my sled. The snow is be-yoo-ti-ful. What smells so good?”

Gracie smiled at Merrett’s daughter. Her dark hair, usually silk and smooth, lay in tangles on her shoulders. “Why don’t you run upstairs and use my hair brush? By then, breakfast will be ready.”

Merrett opened the cabinet next to Gracie, and took out three cobalt blue glasses and blue pottery plates. As he set the table, he whistled a lilting tune. Gracie stole a glance at his handsome profile, and decided he looked particularly sexy unshaven.

Kirsten reappeared with neatly smoothed hair, and Gracie set the platter of golden, steaming bread next to the bacon, and then realized she was still in her robe. “I should dress.”

“The food will get cold. You’re fine,” Merrett said.

Wriggling her toes in her fuzzy slippers, she smiled as the piano began to play a carol. The music added to the warm feeling that pervaded the room. As Merrett savored his food, drops of syrup beaded on his lip. Gracie, aching to lick his sweet mouth, darted her tongue out to slowly trace her lips. He looked up, caught her action, and smiled seductively.

As Gracie looked through the wreath of steam on the window at Margaret and Homer, she half-wished they could see her, with Merrett and Kirsten gathered around the table. “I feel as if we’re in a cocoon,” she said, wrapping her hands around her hot cup. “Sealed off from the outside world.”

“Like caterpillars,” Kirsten agreed. “And like a real family.”

Her thoughts mirrored Gracie’s, and she glanced up to see Merrett’s fork freeze in midair.

Kirsten rubbed her tummy. “Breakfast was deluscious”

“The word is delicious,” Merrett said.

“I’ve heard of luscious. And everyone’s heard delicious. So deluscious might be double-good.” Kirsten jutted out her chin and grinned triumphantly. “Right, Gracie?”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” she agreed.

Merrett threw up his hands, and Gracie felt relieved to see him smile. “How can I win an argument with two smart, beautiful women ganging up on me?”

“Daddy thinks you’re beautiful, Gracie. Do you think he’s handsome?”

“Of course,” she demurred, scooting back her chair. “I should—”

“So why don’t you two get married?” Kirsten looked from one to the other.

“People don’t get married just because they admire one another’s looks,” Merrett said.

“But Gracie cooks good, and she’s nice. You like her, don’t you?”

Merrett clenched his coffee cup so tightly Gracie feared it would break in his hand. He hated the thought of marrying her; he couldn’t stand the idea. And she’d begun to

think he cared. Tears stung her eyelids, but she refused to let them fall. “Your father and I are friends, Kirsten.”

Tossing her dark head, Kirsten sat back. “Can’t friends get married, Daddy?”

He pushed his fingers through his hair and shoved his coffee cup away. Gracie bit her lip. Kirsten was indomitable when she wanted to be. She didn’t wait for her father’s answer. “Would you like kids, Gracie? You have to get married to have them. You don’t have any yet, and you can’t have them when you’re old.”

Merrett half-rose off his chair. “Gracie is far from being old.”

“I know, but she isn’t even married. She should get started.”

“And you should keep your mouth closed, young lady.”

Kirsten’s lower lip trembled. “Gracie would make a good mommy. You like me, don’t you?” She looked to Gracie.

“Certainly. You’re a very special girl.” Gracie’s heart ached, as she took Kirsten’s hand. She could be a good mother to Kirsten. You didn’t have to stay up nights with an almost eight-year-old, and the experts said the critical formative years were before age six, so Gracie couldn’t mess her up too much. But Merrett wanted a son, and the mother of a newborn needed to be young and energetic.

“You can’t pick a new mother like you would a toy, Kirsten.” Merrett’s voice was taut.

Gracie concentrated on the dark liquid in her cup. Merrett didn’t want her for a wife. Why had she ever thought he would? She was only passably pretty, and Ferndale offered plenty of beautiful women far more qualified to be a Bradmoore. Like Beryl Marcum for example; a woman of similar social status, even if she was a witch. Gracie spread her hands and forced a smile. “Christmas and my business are keeping me so busy. I don’t have time to think about marriage and children right now. But I’ll keep your advice in mind, Kirsten, for when I do. Now, who’s going to help clean up so we can play Scrabble?”

\* \* \*

While Kirsten traipsed back and forth to the sink, Gracie rinsed plates silently. Keeping his distance, Merrett put things away in the pantry.

He couldn't believe the dismay on Gracie's face when Kirsten initiated the conversation about marriage. Maybe he was conceited, but he thought Gracie cared about him. Was he just a charity case? I'll help Merrett set his life back on track, then I'll have done my good deed—is that what she thought? Merrett swept the floor with hard, swift strokes. Marriage wasn't in his plans, so why even try to figure it out? Stashing the broom, he slammed the pantry door. Gracie shot him a curious glance.

"I'll set the Scrabble board up," Kirsten said, clomping out of the room.

Those damned Mary Janes drove him nuts. Maybe it was motherhood that scared Gracie. But she'd known from the day they met again that he and Kirsten were a package deal. Last night, though, he'd confessed to wanting a son, and Gracie once told him it was too late for her to have kids. Which was ridiculous. Looking at her in her fluffy blue robe, hair drawn back, cheeks rosy from the heat of the dishwater, she looked like a wife and mother. She'd make a wonderful mother. And wife.

He straightened a dish towel on the rack, and their elbows bumped. She looked at him, startled, and he wondered if she felt the electricity between them every time they touched. He saw the longing in her eyes every time their gazes met. She wanted him in the same way he wanted her. He knew that. But a man liked to know he was wanted in more ways than one. So why did the mention of marriage upset her so much? He touched her. He couldn't help himself.

"I'm sorry my daughter put you on the spot."

"I wasn't the only one on the spot."

"But I'm the one who's supposed to have taught her manners."

Gracie raised a golden eyebrow. He traced it. She turned her head. "It was an honest mistake. It was a cozy scene."

Merrett turned her toward him. "And very pleasant. I wasn't belittling it. Last night was special."

"I thought so."

"Daddy, I want Gracie for my partner," Kirsten called from the parlor. "I can't spell very well by myself."

Merrett loved his daughter, but she had a knack for spoiling tender moments. He rested his forehead against Gracie's. "If you'd like, we can talk about this more when we're alone."

“I wonder if there’s anything to say,” she said gently.

\* \* \*

While he pondered that remark, the two females beat him at Scrabble. Once. Twice. And they were working on a third time. Snow had stopped falling and the sun peeked out, too high and cold to cause any melting, but a splash of sunshine spilled across Gracie’s golden curls. He yawned and stretched.

“Didn’t you sleep well?” she teased.

“I had a dream. A nice dream, but it kept me awake a while.”

Their eyes met in a smile. Lord, she was beautiful.

“This is bor-ing,” Kirsten declared, giving him a playful poke in the arm. “Gracie and I win every time.”

Merrett wrestled her to the floor, tickling her. The sound of a snowplow caused him to stop and sit up. “Listen. We’re being dug out,” he said, putting a finger to Kirsten’s lips.

She ran to the window, and Gracie reached across the Scrabble board that had somehow escaped the wrestling match to push his hair back. He smiled, and she touched the dimple in his cheek with a delicate forefinger.

“See? You two really like each other, no matter what you say.” Kirsten’s smile was triumphant as she took off, chasing Spook into the hall and up the stairs.

Merrett lowered Gracie gently to the floor. “The know-it-all is right. I really, really like you. And I like having you in my life.” The piano pealed “Joy to the World,” and Merrett felt Gracie’s smile against his lips.

\* \* \*

When Merrett and Kirsten left Gracie’s, they swung by the nursing home, so his Dad wouldn’t have to go out on the snow-covered roads to visit Mama. “You came,” she said, smiling. “And she came, too.”

Not their names, Merrett and Kirsten, but you and she. The recognition was there though, and the smile and the warmth in her blue eyes.

“We brought you some fudge, Gramma,” Kirsten said, holding it out.

“I used to make fudge.” Mama took a piece and held it up to the light, then nibbled a corner. “This is good.” She took another bite. “Did you make this, little girl?”

Kirsten shook her head. “Gracie made it and sent it to you.”

“Gracie Singleton,” Merrett explained. “Remember her?”

“The girl with blonde curls. Does she have a Christmas tree?”

“She has two, Gramma,” Kirsten said, touching her grandmother’s hand. “They’re beautiful.”

“Two trees? Does she have food?” She turned her eyes to Merrett.

Choking back a sob, he nodded. “She’s fine, Mama.”

“You’re a good boy. I knew you’d take care of her, Merrett.”

Merrett. Mama remembered his name. His heart struck up the Hallelujah Chorus.

\* \* \*

Merrett went back to Gracie’s house that night. He had to. He couldn’t get her out of his mind. She was an itch he couldn’t scratch. But he never expected to make love to her. He never planned to find himself in her bed. He just wanted to see her. Hold her. Kiss her.

But when she opened the door, they looked into one another’s eyes, and silently, fingers entwined, they climbed the stairs. She wore a knit dress, and he wondered where she’d been, but his thoughts quickly went to feasting his eyes on the promises it made as it skimmed her luscious curves. By the tree on the landing, he hesitated, searching her face, and even when he saw the passion in her eyes, he waited. She nodded and took another step. And another. Until she’d led him to the top.

He’d wanted her for so long. Forever. But since they’d lain together last night, sharing their deepest thoughts, touching, aching, the longing had grown to something more than physical. It was a desire so strong he wanted to crawl inside her heart and soul.

As he closed the door of her bedroom behind them, Merrett had no second thoughts. He was still wearing his coat when she walked into his embrace, and as he kissed her, he let it slide, one arm at a time, to the floor. She loosened his tie. He



unbuttoned his shirt. She unbuttoned his pants and he unzipped them. Her eyes on his erection, she sat down on the satin coverlet and edged her dress up her thighs.

When he saw her lacy black garter belt, his breath began to come in short gasps, and he knelt to slide silky stockings down beautiful legs and over delicately arched feet. Looking up into Gracie's face, he saw a panorama of emotions. Her eyes were smoky with passion, but her full lower lip trembled.

Merrett sat beside her on the bed to gather her beautiful mass of golden hair into his hands. Running his fingers through the ringlets, he brought one to his lips. He kissed it, stroked it, tasted it. Her eyes burned with desire, and Merrett kissed her gently before his control left him.

Kneeling quickly, he slid the knit dress up over her hips, and bunching it around her waist, removed the lacy garter belt and tiny strip of satin panty. Forcing himself to slow down, he kissed the flat plane of her stomach. She shuddered, and he kissed it again and ran his tongue down toward her golden triangle. She twisted her fingers in his hair and moaned. He worked his tongue in circles, slowly, tantalizingly, and Gracie cried out.

He lowered his mouth closer to her pleasure spot. Closer. And then...he worked the tiny nubbin between his teeth, and pleased it with his tongue. She made tiny sounds in her throat, and he slowed his pace, kissing her belly again. She wiggled impatiently, and he returned to her love spot, stroking, tasting, nibbling until her fingers tangled tightly in his hair. Shuddering, she screamed out her joy.

Her body heaved relentlessly, and he held her by the hips tightly, kneeling on the floor, looking up into her face, gradually slowing the movements of his tongue. The spasms slowed and so did her gasps. Seconds later, Gracie fluttered open her eyes, and smiled at him.

Dropping his pants to the floor, he laid her on the bed, and she turned to him with such eagerness he could scarcely keep from plunging into her immediately, seizing the moment. She lived life with ardor, and made love with abandon. What a wonderful, perfect woman she was. He'd known loving her would be sweet, but he hadn't known it would be wild. He held her tightly. He couldn't wait much longer, but he wanted to treasure the moment. And make it unforgettable for her.

Gracie ground her body against his. Not yet. He kissed her gently, slowing her pace and passion until he could slip away for protection.

The moment away from her heated body slowed his own labored breathing and stilled, temporarily, the pulsing dam that threatened to burst loose inside him.

When he came back to bed, she held up her arms and he faced her, fitting his body to hers. Unable to wait one second longer, he entered her. With agonizing slowness, driving himself and her both crazy, he ground his body against Gracie's. She returned the grinding, the bumps, digging her fingernails into his hips as she pulled him closer. As if he could get any closer. "Please," she begged. "Now."

He plunged deeply. Now. The white heat burst into flame and he went over the edge. She opened her mouth to cry out, and he swallowed her cry just as her body seemed to swallow his joy.

\* \* \*

"Merrett," Gracie said softly. She lay in his arms, her head on his shoulder, her breasts pressed against his broad chest, his hips touching hers, and wished the moment would never end. She'd never known lovemaking could be like this. It was the most beautiful experience of her life, and she wanted to weep. Merrett nuzzled her cheek. A wayward tear escaped, and he captured it with his tongue. Rising on one elbow, he looked into her face, worry knit between his brows. "Sorry?"

She'd never known such bliss, and who but Merrett could have given her such a precious gift? "Not for a minute," she said, slipping her arms around his neck. "Are you?"

He shook his head and held her close, stroking her hair. "It was every bit as wonderful as I knew it would be."

Gracie felt protected in his arms, as if for once, someone was sheltering her from the world. Wishing they could lie there this way forever, she sighed contentedly.

Merrett moved away to sit up, and raising his knees, draped his arms over them. Moonbeams and the candle in the window cast a glow on his skin. His body was beautiful. The profile of his face was dear. "I should have said this before; I want to be fair to you," he said, "and I know you don't take this sort of thing lightly, nor do I."

“I’m not going to ask you to make an honest woman of me because of what happened tonight, Merrett. Relax.” She sat up and drew warmth from the touch of his shoulder against hers. All she wanted was for him to love her.

His expression remained troubled. “There are things in my life I haven’t resolved.”

She knew he wasn’t ready to propose, but she could live with that. “I know, and I have my home and business and...” Did she dare say you? “I don’t need more than that right now.”

Merrett dressed slowly, his face serious as if he was deep in thought. Was he trying to work up the nerve to say he loved her? Watching him from her bed, she waited until he’d picked up his coat before she slipped into a robe to walk down the steps with him, hand-in-hand. At the door, he turned to her.

“I’m glad you understand about us just being friends, for now. More than friends, actually.” He smiled and ran a finger down her bare throat to the vee of her robe, dipping a finger to rub the top of her breast, and drawing a shiver from her. “I wouldn’t want to lose you, Gracie.”

\* \* \*

Gracie watched darkness swallow the Jeep’s taillights as he drove off into the night, Merrett’s words replaying in her mind, and suddenly the impact of what he’d said, hit her. I’m glad you understand about us just being friends.

Not only was he asking her to settle for less than marriage, but less than love. He hadn’t said he loved her. If he had, she could have settled for that, for now. But he’d said, or more than friends with a clear implication of what he meant.

She’d wanted to restore his optimism, but somewhere along the way, she’d come to want more. Now, she wanted to see him every day, wanted to face life beside him. She wanted to be loved. Needed to be loved. Love was something she’d never had. But he wanted to be friends, and lovers.

Gracie stalked to the kitchen and poured herself some milk that she heated in the microwave. Glaring at the steaming white liquid, she reached out to pour it in the sink. A twinge of conscience halted her hand in midair. Wastefulness was sinful, and she could use the milk tomorrow. Standing, undecided, she let her hand rest on the counter. She

loved Merrett, not just as a friend, not just physically as she had in the heat of passion, but every fiber of him. She'd hidden from the truth for a long time, but last night on the couch, over breakfast this morning, and in the heat of tonight in bed, she knew—she'd loved him for a long time. In some ways, it had begun that Christmas Eve many years ago, but the love she felt tonight was more than gratitude or hero worship. Dumping the milk down the drain, she turned out the light and climbed the stairs to her room. Merrett asked too much of her.

\* \* \*

Merrett looked out the window of his parents' kitchen at the snow and remembered that Gracie hadn't yet bought a shovel. Tomorrow, he'd buy one, and clean her walks for her.

Pouring himself a glass of milk, he was almost sorry he'd taken her to bed. Their lovemaking had been hot and sweet, and she wanted to make love as much as he did. But she was a woman with strict moral principles, and he didn't want to hurt her. Gracie was a woman who made you want to take care of her. She was a woman to love and be loved. But love meant commitment, and commitment would go soul-deep with her, and knowing that, he'd grown afraid. He'd committed before, and to make his wife happy, he'd sacrificed. The warmth of holidays. Closeness to family. Gift-giving. Church-going.

The things Gracie valued were once of utmost importance to him. But what if he'd forgotten how to be the man he'd once been, and the drive for success was the only thing left inside him? He hadn't been honest with Gracie the way he once would have been. He hadn't told he'd been offered a job in New York, because he wasn't sure he could turn down the thing he'd wanted most for the past year. And he hadn't told her he loved her because she had everything she wanted here in Ferndale. Except him. If she wanted him.

\* \* \*

Gracie, sitting down at the kitchen table with the stack of receipts from her holiday spending, saw exorbitant prices and foolish purchases. Not love wrapped in bright

ribbons as she had when she bought the gifts. She'd awakened early, and pushing thoughts of Merrett from her mind, decided to deal with first things first.

Her drawing room roof was falling in while the zoning board hovered, ready to snatch away her livelihood. She'd wanted this Christmas to be her best ever, but she'd spent too much. Her hands trembled as she looked at receipt after receipt, and realizing how foolishly she'd acted, decided to call Frank, like Merrett had suggested.

"You live in a residential area," he said, when she'd explained her problem, "but you haven't even hung a shingle. So I don't see why your business has suddenly become an issue."

"Do you think I'll have to close Special Effects?"

"It's an old neighborhood, and there's a chance the no-business rule isn't iron-clad, if it's there at all. If someone filed a protest, they may have done it without research. I'll file an appeal after I check a few things. You're not causing any of your neighbors any inconvenience or embarrassment, are you? No customers taking up parking spots, no large unsightly delivery trucks?"

"I haven't advertised in the newspaper. I haven't had customers to the house. I sent flyers to businesses and mailed invitations to a lot of townspeople for a Holiday Open House, and that's it." Gracie closed her eyes and rubbed her temple. The open house was just days away. "How soon will they hold my hearing, Frank?"

"A week probably. Let me make some phone calls and get back to you. And Gracie, don't worry. Just go on like you have been for now."

Go on like she had been. Hold the open house to establish her business and herself in the community. Feeling somewhat consoled, Gracie hung up. Frank was nicer than she'd expected. She'd been gone twelve years, and never really knew him, but assumed from his insistence he didn't want kids, that he must be a jerk.

\* \* \*

Merrett felt better since making love with Gracie than he had in a year. Maybe it was the physical release, but it seemed like a lot more. She'd said she could handle making love without commitment, and Gracie was an honest woman.

When he arrived at the Daily Reporter, his secretary-receptionist was sorting mail. “Emma, do me a favor. Send a poinsettia, the biggest the flower shop has, to my mother at Sunny Haven.”

“Of course, Merrett.” Smiling, she fiddled with the letter opener on her desk, a stainless steel blade with a plastic handle that resembled a cheap kitchen knife. Maybe she’d like a new opener for Christmas, something a bit more elegant. Maybe he should buy all his employees gifts.

Rolling up his shirtsleeves, he sat down in his cubicle. He’d like to send Gracie flowers, but maybe a bottle of champagne, delivered in person, would be better. After work. Smiling, he flexed his fingers over the computer keys.

The disc with his year-end report lay on his desk at home, but there was a copy right here on the hard drive. He’d had intentions of finishing it the night the snowstorm kept him at Gracie’s. The next night—last night—he’d returned and forgotten everything. Except the way she’d felt in his arms.

Shifting uncomfortably in his chair, Merrett did a search for the section of his report that read “Next Year’s Goals.” Fingers on the keys, he paused, wondering what his mother meant when she said...I knew you’d take care of her, Merrett.

Damn, he’d forgotten to find Gracie a roofer. He picked up the telephone.

Not one of them could come before Friday morning. That was cutting it close. And what about the zoning board? He telephoned Frank, and was surprised to hear Gracie had talked to him herself.

“Do you know of anyone who might want to cause her trouble, Merrett?” Frank asked. “It seems to me this is an act of vengeance.”

“No one would ever want to hurt Gracie. She’s an angel.”

Frank sighed loudly. “Well, if you think of anyone in her neighborhood.”

“Beryl.” It came to Merrett like a bolt of lightning. “Beryl Marcum Cosgrove lives right behind Gracie.”

“I know who you mean. Does she have good reason?”

“Not at all, but Beryl promised to get even with me for a...er...brush-off and...”

“She thought Gracie and Hope were poor trash.” Frank’s voice rose in excitement. “Now, Grace is living in her neighborhood, and that doesn’t sit well with Mrs. High and

Mighty. Add setting her sites on you, learning you're chummy with Gracie, and that's it. You've been a big help, Merrett."

Frank was a damned good lawyer, putting everything together like that. Merrett hadn't thought of personal vendettas when he tried to imagine why anyone would object to such a small business. Small business. Hot dog! He'd print Gracie's letter-to-the-editor and write an editorial in favor of small business, citing Gracie's courage. There was nothing maudlin about her roots; people in Ferndale already knew she grew up poor. He'd do a piece about a brave woman starting a small company, depending on townspeople for loyalty and support. On Saturday morning, the day of her Open House, he'd print the letters of response and support that came rolling in, plus the editorial.

It had been three days since Tom called, and he'd want an answer soon. But Merrett had important things to do before he could think about the New York job.

\* \* \*

When Gracie finished decorating the home of one of Ferndale's wealthier families, Mrs. Tate asked her to stay for lunch. The offer touched Gracie. "I'd enjoy that so much, but I promised to meet my sister for lunch today."

"Who would have thought a Singleton would ever be invited to lunch at the Tate manor?" Hope asked, beaming her pleasure at the story Gracie shared over a steaming bowl of vegetable soup.

Hope still looked wan, but some of the sparkle had come back into her eyes. "You know something, Hopie? I think you're beginning to get that..." Grace leaned closer, careful not to dip the bow of her candy-striped blouse in her plate of stew. "Glow."

Hope concentrated on her spoon, dipping it in and out of her bowl.

"Tell me about your pact with Frank not to have a family."

Gracie followed her sister's gaze as she looked off toward the counter where Sandy was refilling the pie rack. The stools were all full, and most of the booths, and it wasn't even noon. Crisp air swished through the door with each customer.

"He told me when we were dating we'd have a nice home and cars, and not to worry, I'd never have to work or have kids. I told him I wouldn't mind a job if I could find a

decent one. I was waitressing at that greasy spoon near our house at the time. And I said I thought I'd like to have kids someday. But Frank thinks he knows what's best for me."

"Haven't you talked more about it over the years?"

"Whenever I bring it up, Frank says we have a good life with just the two of us, then goes out and buys me some extravagant gift."

"All that will change when he learns he's going to be a dad. He'll forget whatever reasons he didn't want a family."

"I've known for years I wanted a baby, and I was pretty shook up at first. It will change our lives in many ways."

"But for the better," Gracie insisted.

"Yes, and that's what I'm going to tell him. I spent the morning browsing through infant wear departments and stores, and after seeing those teensy-tiny clothes." Hope smiled broadly. "I can't wait." She crumbled a cracker into her soup and brushed the crumbs from her hands. "Frank will have to want this baby, too, or I'll have it alone. I can get a job. I took business courses in high school."

"You'll be fine. You can move in with me if you need to."

Hope frowned and twirled her huge diamond engagement ring. "I love Frank."

And it would be hard for her to be poor again. She wore a black wool dress, and the coat slung over the seat matched it. Frank bought her the best of everything. Hope fell in love with Frank at eighteen. Gracie had been fourteen when she'd first fallen for Merrett. If he were interested in marriage, would she be able to keep up with Kirsten as a teenager, let alone a baby son?

"Earth to Auntie." Hope snapped her fingers in front of Gracie's eyes.

Jolted from her reverie, she smiled. "Aunt Grace."

"Heavens to Mergatroyd. You'd better be easier to please than ours was." Hope rolled her eyes toward the ceiling.

"I will be." Aunt Grace had been difficult, but Gracie was a people-pleaser. Hope wasn't. "You're not still sore about the money, are you?"

"I never did care about the money. I was mad I wasn't the old grouch's favorite."

A group of teens with ice skates slung over their shoulders rushed into Sandy's in a cloud of cold air. Chatting and laughing, they joined a cluster of office workers waiting



for booths. By mutual consent, the two sisters rose. Hope paused outside the soda shop to hug Gracie. “Thanks.”

“All I did was listen.”

Hope chuckled and hugged her tighter. “I know.”

\* \* \*

From Sandy’s, Gracie drove to the mall near Indy to return Christmas purchases she’d deemed too expensive. Cashmere and leather for her sisters weren’t in her budget. Neither was an expensive art set for Kirsten.

With several hundred dollars back in her purse, she drove to Ferndale for economy shopping. At Dollar Variety, she bought Faithie practical clothes, and assembled an artist’s set off the shelves for Kirsten. At Granny’s Trash and Treasures, she found a cloisonné locket for Hope, to hold her new baby’s picture, and a paperweight with a tiny newspaper in it for Merrett. She was smiling when she passed a woman with a string of little kids. “Marianne Heber!” Gracie stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

Marianne’s handshake was firm, and her smile quick. “Christmas shopping?”

“I overspent, so I returned some things and started again.”

“So you still watch your pennies like the rest of us.” Marianne lowered her lashes. “Will said you’d been keeping him in business buying trees for all your jobs.”

Gracie squeezed Marianne’s hand. “Will has the best trees in town!”

Marianne reined in her youngest child, and shook her head at one tugging on her coattail. “Thanks for asking me to your open house. I’m glad you’re back in town, Gracie.”

She was glad to be back, among old friends.

\* \* \*

It was past five o’clock when Gracie pulled Old Blue up in front of the newspaper office. The star twinkled in the window, and behind that, the Christmas tree sparkled with good cheer. She couldn’t see anyone inside, but the lights were still on. If Merrett hadn’t left yet, she’d see if he found her a roofer. He was afraid of commitment, but he’d

made strides in regaining his optimism, and she was going to see this thing through. If he could act like they were nothing more than friends, she could, too, even though her heart knew better.

She pushed through the door.

Charlie Bosso was polishing the front counter. “If you’re looking for Mr. Bradmoore, he has someone with him.” A chill swept over Gracie. Was Beryl after him again? “He’s interviewing a reporter. He’s taking on a couple new employees.”

Merrett was hiring? Did that mean he had decided to stay? Smiling, she turned to leave.

“He couldn’t get you a roofer until Friday, if that’s what you wanted to talk about. He told Mrs. Rollins he’d tried them all. I couldn’t help overhearing.” Charlie’s ears turned red. “But I’ve been thinking. I could do it tomorrow. I roofed our plumbing store. My dad won’t care if I take time off to help you. Business is slow, anyway.”

Gracie once again thanked God for her decision to move back to Ferndale. “Tell Merrett I dropped by, and you’re doing the job, and thanks, Charlie.”

\* \* \*

Five minutes after Gracie walked in the house, Frank called. “Your hearing is scheduled for Friday.”

Gracie clutched her chest. “I’ve invited fifty people to an open house Saturday. I was hoping the hearing would be afterward. What if they shut me down?”

“An open house is a party. Nothing wrong with that.”

“It’s an opportunity to entertain friends, but it’s partly business, Frank. I want guests to buy pieces that I display, and hire me for decorating jobs.”

“You could probably get by with that, unless someone’s out to cause trouble, and turns you in to the commission. In that case, you might be subject to a fine.”

“Cause me trouble?” Gracie moaned loudly into the phone. She didn’t want to operate on the edge of the law, and couldn’t afford a fine.

“Take it easy. You’re not out-of-business at your present location until the commission says so.”

She clutched the receiver tightly. “My next-door neighbor, Margaret Riggs, would testify Special Effects isn’t a nuisance if I need a witness.”

“Not a big help, Grace. Margaret testifies you’re not bothering her, and the complainant says you’re devaluating his or her property.”

“I’m scared, Frank.”

“Listen, Gracie. Your area is zoned, but it’s an old neighborhood, and people used to run bicycle shops in their garages and woodworking businesses in their cellars before there were zoning ordinances. Chances are, some people still do, and either they were granted variances—in which case I should be able to get you one—or you’re not alone in your violation, which should work in your favor. I’ll get to the bottom of this. Relax.”

Easy for him to say. “What time should I be there Friday?”

“Hey, you got things to do getting ready for your party, you don’t have to be there. I’ll represent you. That’s what you’re paying me for.” Frank chuckled. “I’ll call you when it’s over.”

When it’s over. Everything would be over for her if they shut her down. She couldn’t afford to rent a building for Special Effects, so if she couldn’t continue to operate from home, she’d have to close shop. And if she closed shop, she wouldn’t be able meet her mortgage payments and she’d lose the house. No one would buy the old Larraby place, even for what she had in it, because of the blankety-blank ghost. So she’d go bankrupt. And then... She’d have her old life back.

She had Charlie to pay. And more repairmen. And Frank, if he was serious about charging her for his services. The sun had almost disappeared when Gracie climbed into Old Blue and drove over to Edge Road. The house where she had grown up needed paint, and the porch sagged. A front window had been replaced with plywood. Gracie’s headlights caught a girl with braids, coming out the door. The child’s coat hem hung, her hands were bare, and her socks flopped down over her tennis shoes. Her mouth was a straight line, her eyes two dark holes burned in her face as she stared at the passing car.

Gracie, heart heavy with empathy and a feeling of helplessness drove straight home. Shutting the door behind her, she turned on the radio. She turned on the lights. Fear closed her throat. Her hands trembled. She’d end up like that again. Dirt poor. Unless something good happened.

## Chapter Eleven

Merrett stopped by Gracie's on his way home. Standing at her front door, he rubbed his chin. It was after seven o'clock, and he had a five o'clock shadow, but he wanted to see her. He felt good. Hell, he felt great...about all he'd accomplished at the newspaper office today. The Daily Reporter now had two more employees, and he'd written it into the annual report, along with his plan for increasing circulation. He hoped the board saw it his way about spending the money for a pagination system.

He had it all figured out, if they'd just listen to reason. The improved appearance of the newspaper would help them sell more papers. In addition, the system would increase efficiency so they could take on outside printing jobs and bring in more revenue. Pagination would practically pay for itself. Revenue might not be greater the first year, but by the next, the increase would be sizable.

Grinning, he jabbed Gracie's doorbell. He hadn't had time to pick up champagne, but on the way out of the office, he'd noticed they had two snow shovels, and he'd tied a red ribbon around one and brought it along.

Charlie said she had stopped by, so she must be okay with what he'd said last night. His stomach growled, reminding him he'd missed dinner and forgotten to eat lunch. Just like when he was in New York, he'd forgotten everything except work.

"I brought you a present," he said, hands behind his back. She tried to peek around him, and he shook his head. So she stood back, arms folded, tapped her foot, and grinned.

Realizing he'd overplayed a used shovel, he handed it over, and her grin turned into a smile he thought was forced, but she accepted it graciously.

“Thanks. I needed that.” She set it on the porch again, outside the door, and motioned him inside with a toss of her honey-blonde curls.

“Your house is so brightly lit, I was afraid you had company.”

“Twilight on a winter day can be depressing. Just getting off work?”

“Yes, and I’m sorry to come by so late.”

“You don’t have to apologize.”

He didn’t owe her an explanation. He could stay at the newspaper until all hours, and it felt good. Felt good to stay over at the Reporter.

“Merrett? Are you okay? You’ve barely said a word, and you keep smiling. You look as if you’ve had an epiphany.”

An epiphany. Was that what it was?

She touched his face. “Merrett?”

He lifted her off the floor, laughter spilling from his lips. Hugging her, he buried his face in her hair as he gently set her down. “Next time I’ll bring champagne instead of a shovel.”

She pushed his hair back, and laughed. “I needed a shovel. It’s okay. It’s good to see you happy.”

Gracie was an understanding woman. He started to kiss her, and his stomach grumbled noisily. “And hungry?”

“I have some barbecue in the kitchen. I bought it at the deli, but it’s good. I’ll make you a sandwich.”

He peeled off his coat and hung it on the hall tree. “I said you didn’t always have to feed me, and here I am, mooching again.”

“I like feeding and taking care of people. Are you going to share your revelation while you eat?” She took his arm, cocking her head to study his face. He felt his jaw clench—there was so much uncertainty yet. She traced the outline of his jaw with the side of her hand.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to tell me.”

He hugged her to his side on the way to the kitchen. While she spooned barbecue onto buns and stuck them in the microwave, he leaned against the door frame. “I hear Charlie Bosso’s going to fix the roof. I’m sorry I couldn’t get someone.”

“Charlie’s fine, and I’m sure he can use the money with new twins to care for.” She set a jar of pickles and bag of potato chips on the table, and leaned over to get beer from the fridge. Her jeans hugged her tightly, showcasing her beautiful rear, and he sighed. She’d looked beautiful last night in the moonlight, lying naked on the bed. And the way she felt...

“What?” Walking slowly toward him, she held the beers behind her back.

Grinning, he decided she looked even better from the front, with her full breasts straining at her clinging pullover.

“You look like the cat that swallowed the canary. What is it?” Setting the beer on the table, she walked closer, her eyes sparkling with curiosity.

“This.” He encircled her waist and slid his hands down to squeeze her delectable backside. “And this.” He slid his hands around front to cup her breasts through her shirt. “And the rest of you.”

“Merrett. We can’t...”

He lowered his face toward hers, to kiss her. She parted her lips. “Can’t what?” he whispered, pulling her shirt loose from her waistband to slide his hands slowly up her warm back. His hands were still cold from the outside, and she shivered. Or was it desire that made her tremble? “Why can’t we?”

She slid out of his grasp, her face pale except for two red spots high on her cheeks. She straightened her shirt, tucking it in again. “I can’t make love casually, Merrett. If you want to be friends, then friends it is. Your other choice wasn’t acceptable. I’d be lying if I said this makes me happy, but that’s the way it is.”

She turned his way again, and her eyes were dark pools of violet caught in bright light. Her hands were trembling, but desire still burned deep in her eyes. He raked his fingers through his hair. “What made you change your mind?”

“I...I thought over what you said, and it didn’t...set right. I don’t make love with friends.”

He didn’t know what she meant. She’d said the word friends two or three times. Was it a matter of semantics? Nothing had changed. And yet, since they’d made love, everything had changed. He wanted her more than ever before. His sigh escaped before he knew it was coming. Maybe she’d clarify things later. “I’ll try to keep my hands off you, but you may have to slap them now and then.”

“Gladly.” Her smile was sunlight after a long winter. If being near her was to be a delicious form of torture, he had the satisfaction of knowing he wouldn’t suffer alone. She wanted to make love as badly as he did.

Gracie reheated the barbecue, and sat down opposite him with a beer. “Frank called a while ago. The commission set my hearing for Friday.”

Two days from now? Had Frank told her he thought someone was out to cause her trouble? Did she suspect Beryl? “Frank sounded confident he could get you an exception.”

“I’m trying to think positive.”

Gracie took a healthy slug of her beer, and it seemed so out of character that Merrett chuckled. When he first saw her drink beer, he was surprised, but then he remembered she spent ten years with Sonny. “You’re cute.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “Charm will get you nowhere.”

“You really think I’m charming?”

“Stop fishing for compliments.” Gracie tapped his other sandwich. “You said you were starving.”

He was, and she wasn’t about to satisfy his hunger, so food would have to do. He took a bite, and found it spicy and sweet, like Gracie. Jerking his mind back to her open house, he had an idea. “Since it may take some time to get your drawing room back in shape, why not hold your party in the parlor? The Christmas tree lends atmosphere.”

“And takes up room. Then there’s the piano. I wouldn’t want it to start playing in front of guests.”

“You could count on Christmas carols.”

“And everyone in town believing my house really is haunted!”

“Maybe I could take something loose inside the piano.”

“No. You might not be able to put it back the same, and it would never play again.”

While he cleaned up his supper things, she stared into space. It seemed odd she liked that piano playing unexpectedly. And it only played Christmas music, which would be disconcerting after December.

“The natural light in the drawing room would show off my displays better, but I guess I will have to switch to the parlor,” she said, sounding resigned. “Unless I can find repairmen who work cheap and fast.”

“Miracle workers are hard to come by.”

Gracie looked at him questioningly, her eyes sparkling with curiosity. “Are you so cheerful because of your epiphany?”

“I’m cheerful because I made a few decisions.” Chuckling, he got himself another beer. “Want a cold one?”

She took a sip of hers and made a face, but shook her head. “I have half left.”

He dumped it out and got her another one. She had as many dabs of food saved in the fridge as before. She took a swallow and smiled. “This does taste better.”

He turned a chair around to straddle it, and told her about his year-end report and plans for the Daily Reporter. When he finished, her eyes shone.

“Does this mean you’re staying?”

He tipped his beer, letting the cold liquid soothe his suddenly dry throat. Did she mean at the newspaper or in Ferndale? “It means I can’t stand to leave the paper in worse shape than when I came.”

“Then you’re leaving?”

He rose to pace the floor. This was the one decision he hadn’t been able to make. “If I leave, Dad will miss Kirsten, and vice versa. And then there’s Mama to consider.” He walked faster.

Gracie came to him and put her hands on his arms to stop him. “What is it, Merrett?”

“Why don’t I just stay then? Is that what you mean?” If he sounded harsh, he was sorry, but he was disgusted with himself. He couldn’t decide, and didn’t know why.

Until Gracie turned on her heel and walked away from him.

He couldn’t imagine life without her, but couldn’t have a life with her in it. She wanted to live in Ferndale: he needed to prove himself in New York. He wanted kids: she thought it was too late for her. He wanted to make love, but she wanted something more. “I should have told you this before. I called a friend about a job in New York a while back. I can start January first, if I want.”

“If you want? You’ve wanted to leave all along, so, why don’t you do us both a favor and go now?” Her voice rose with each word, and taking a few swift steps, she threw open the front door.



“Gracie,” he said softly. She resisted when he shoved the door closed with his foot and tried to pull her into his arms. “Sweetheart. Please don’t do this.” She leaned into his shoulder, burying her face, and he carried her to the sofa, and held her on his lap. He rested his chin in her hair. She smelled like honeysuckle. “What’s wrong, Gracie?”

“Everything, and now you might leave.”

She didn’t want to lose him. Merrett folded her close to his heart, where she belonged. “Tell me about the everything,”

She told him everything that worried her, from the possibility of Frank leaving Hope, to Faith starving in Chicago. She told him how scared she was the zoning board would close Special Effects, and she would go bankrupt and lose her house.

Merrett kissed her eyelids, kissed her cheeks, kissed her trembling lips. She was bravely fighting tears, and he knew things seemed awfully bad. She was a fighter. “It’s going to be okay, sweetheart. Everything’s going to be just fine.”

She sighed, a sound that seemed to rise up from the bottom of her soul. “There’s more.” Tears streaming down her face again, she told him about the child she’d seen on Edge Road. “I felt so sorry for that little girl.”

Merrett hugged Gracie to him, longing to protect her from the world. “You’re not going to lose your house or your business. You’re not going to lose anything or everything. I promise. The zoning board will rule in your favor. If it doesn’t, we’ll find you a place to rent that’s not expensive.”

Gracie snuggled against his chest. He stroked her hair. She looked up to fix big eyes on him. “You really think everything will be okay?”

“You’re a survivor, and you’ll rise above all this. A month from now, it will just be a bad memory.”

She dried her eyes on her sleeve. “Merrett?”

“Mmmm?” He tipped her chin with his forefinger.

She smiled and poked a finger in his chest. “You are an optimist.”

“I haven’t felt like one for a long time.”

“I know, but you’re coming around.”

Bending his head, he closed her lips with his. He’d been able to cheer her tonight, but what would next day or next week bring? He didn’t know if he could bring himself to turn down the job with Tom, but he didn’t see how he could have it and her. And he

didn't see how he could walk away from her. Merrett brushed a curl back from her face. "I'll come over tomorrow night, and help you set up the parlor for your open house. What you need now is rest. Relax, put your arms around my neck, and I'll carry you upstairs to bed."

"Oh no, you don't," she said, chuckling.

"I'll be good," he promised.

Gracie looked up into his face as he laid her down, and seeing undisguised longing in her eyes, he thought for one crazy moment she might ask him to make love and "be good" that way instead. But she yawned widely instead.

"Turn over," he ordered, and without waiting for her to comply, turned her onto her stomach. Beginning between her shoulder blades, he kneaded the muscles in her back until they began to soften beneath his touch.

"Mmmm," she said, snuggling her head into the pillow. "That feels heavenly."

"Note, I'm keeping my hands above your waist."

"Mmmm, hmmm."

"But my mind is working below the waist."

She didn't say anything, and he bent his head to look into her face. Her eyes were closed, her breathing even. Kissing her gently on the cheek, he whispered. "Dream about me, Gracie." She didn't so much as blink. At the door, Merrett looked back at her, sound asleep. "Goodnight, my love."

\* \* \*

Goodnight, my love? Gracie heard those words, and suddenly wide awake, smiled into the darkness after he left, remembering... Merrett's touch. His kisses. His words.

And when he came by the next evening to help with the parlor, she was still smiling. "I meant to get here an hour ago, but I got busy at work and lost track of time," he said. "I brought two library tables Dad thought you could use for some of your displays. Will Heber loaned me his truck to bring them. Nice guy, Will," Merrett said, as Gracie directed him where to set the tables. "Said he read in the paper about the zoning board hearing, and wanted to know if there was anything he could do."

Gracie gave Merrett a hard look. “You published my zoning problem in the Daily Reporter?”

He shrugged. “It’s part of the legal notices. I don’t control those.”

“I just hate for everyone in town to know my dirty laundry.”

“That’s the whole point of the notices, so that anyone who wants to can appear and make a statement.”

That didn’t make her feel any better, but she didn’t have time to dwell on it. The evening flew by, and when they had finished, the parlor looked like something between a floral shop and what it was: a well-decorated parlor in a beautiful old house. “The drawing room couldn’t have looked better,” she said, tucking her hand into Merrett’s arm.

Her earlier good spirits had returned as they transformed the room. Merrett who’d seemed exhilarated earlier, leaned against the door frame, rotating his neck. “Worn out?” she asked, reaching up to massage his neck muscles.

“Tired and a bit tense. I’m planning major changes at the Reporter, and have appointments all week, trying to learn the particulars on cost, and so on.”

“Did you hire the reporter you interviewed the other night?”

Merrett nodded and sank down in the brocade wing-back chair, pulling her into his lap. “He has experience in advertising sales and reporting for a small town newspaper, which is exactly what I need. I also hired a sixty-year old man with thirty years’ experience in printing. Again, just what the doctor called for. Emma suggested I hire some employees. I think I’ll buy her a Christmas present.”

Merrett smiled, and the tiredness seemed to lift from his face. “Henri, my society editor wants an employees’ Christmas party. It’s late to find a place to accommodate our employees and guests—but I told her to try. Will you go with me if we have one?”

“I’d love to.” Gracie took his face in her hands, and kissed him. He was moving on with his work at the Reporter and his life. Something good had happened to renew her hope, just as it always did, but this time it was better than good—Merrett had regained his optimism. Her job was done. Now, everything was up to him.

\* \* \*

Merrett called Frank when he got home that night, but no one answered. So he called him the next morning, first thing. Frank sounded so chipper Merrett thought he must have good news. But he didn't.

“Beryl stirred up the hornet's nest. I play cards with her ex-husband now and then, and I asked, and he told me. I suspect they still sleep together, since he knows what's going on. But she's always bugging him, saying her alimony's not enough, so he doesn't mind ratting her out. She told him Gracie was trashing-up the neighborhood with her business—which we know isn't so. But she's a hard woman, and I don't think she'd drop the complaint if you asked her to. Even if she did, the commission might pursue it. Best course is to find someone else running a business, and make an issue of them getting by. I can't do it today. I have to take Hope to Dr. Hiram. I'll try to, tomorrow.”

Hope hadn't looked well when Merrett had seen her, but he didn't ask. He just hung up, depressed. Frank was taking his sweet time about this. And Merrett was more worried than he'd let on to Gracie.

At breakfast, glad Kirsten had already left for school, he confided in his father. “If I can find a business operating in the same residential zone as Gracie's, I might be able to save her business.”

His father took a long swallow of orange juice. “I can't imagine why Beryl would want to hurt Gracie.”

Merrett didn't feel comfortable explaining that Beryl had come onto him twice, and both times Gracie had been present, so he related the secondhand blouse incident. “Beryl's looked down on Gracie since high school.”

Mrs. Jarvis, setting muffins on the table, paused. Cleared her throat. Sniffed. “Beryl Marcum's mother grew up in my neighborhood without the proverbial pot to...plant petunias in. She married well, so Beryl had it nice. But her mother's sister wasn't so lucky. Lizzy Kendall has to make a living sewing. I wonder if Beryl looks down on her.”

“Sewing?” Merrett jumped up, knocking the muffin basket on the floor. “I saw a sign with a scissors and thimble. Near Gracie's. The other day. I didn't think...” It had been one afternoon, and businesses hadn't been an issue then.

Mrs. Jarvis looked at him as if he'd lost his marbles.

“If we can find another home-operated business in Gracie's neighborhood, the zoning commission may not shut her down.”

“Why didn’t you say so? There are two in garages. Jed Washburn, the watch repairman, a block north of her. And Tim Sanders, a dog groomer, two blocks over.”

“And Lizzy Kendall?” Merrett asked eagerly. “Beryl’s aunt? Where does she live?”

“A block south, and she sews in her house. She’s the one with the lighted sign in the front window with a scissors and thimble.”

Lighted, even. Maybe he could catch Frank at Dr. Hiram’s. He kissed Mrs. Jarvis on the cheek.

Smiling, she straightened his tie. “Now that’s the boy who grew up in this house.”

Merrett, mentally adding the housekeeper to his Christmas list, smiled as he loped down the front steps.

\* \* \*

Gracie opened Wednesday’s Reporter and saw her letter-to-the editor there. With all that had gone on lately, she’d almost forgotten writing it. At first, she thought it was ironic that Merrett should print it now, but on the way to her first job, she wondered if his timing might be intentional.

Decorating the drab tan interior of the local Moose lodge was akin to decorating the Reporter office. It was a challenge, and by the time she’d finished a modernistic apartment for a lady professor, she could think of little other than relaxing. But she listened for the phone until the time she went to bed. Merrett didn’t call.

Thursday’s assignment, decorating the cozy tract house of two newly married career people who were too busy to do it themselves, was pleasant, but sad. Everyone should have time for Christmas. Plucking a soda from the fridge when she arrived home, Gracie checked the answering machine. Two hang-ups after the beep. One message. Hope’s voice was extraordinarily cheerful. “Call me when you come in.”

“You’re not going to believe this!” Hope said when she heard Gracie’s voice. “Frank is happy about the baby. Did I say happy? He’s ecstatic. He thought I didn’t want children because of our unhappy childhood. I told him it wasn’t unhappy, just poor, and he thought the two were the same thing. That’s why he’s been so intent on making money and buying things and not letting me work all these years. Isn’t he wonderful, Gracie?”

Hope rushed on. "I can't believe how badly we misunderstood one another, but everything is fine, now. In fact, it's never been so good. Frank rushed me to the doctor, and I'm due in late July, near his birthday. He's hoping for a boy we can name Frank, Junior. Are you speechless?" Hope demanded.

Gracie's sitting room seemed suddenly stark and lonely. There were no pictures on the wall, none sitting on the tables, but one day soon, Hope's house would be filled with pictures of hers and happy Frank's kids. "You were so sure he would be angry, I am speechless, but I'm glad for you, Hopie."

"I've never been happier. I feel so different now, so open to the feelings and thoughts of being a mother. It's as if I suddenly feel pregnant where I didn't before."

There was a metallic taste in Gracie's mouth when she hung up, as if she'd told a fib. She was glad for her sister, but she felt "left behind," as Hope used to say when Grace reached a milestone first. First kiss. First high heels. First to marry. Those privileges had been hers. But Hopie would be the first to hold her child in her arms. And Gracie might never reach that milestone.

Left behind.

Trying not to feel sorry for herself, or scared, she was making a peanut butter sandwich for her supper when Dorothy White, from across the street, rang the doorbell. Although she peered curiously inside, she refused Gracie's invitation to come in. "Too bad about your zoning problems. I missed it in the paper, but Beryl told me."

Dorothy was reputed to be the biggest gossip in town, so the people who hadn't read it in the paper would know by now, which was probably Beryl's motive in telling her.

"I'm sorry I can't attend your Open House," Dorothy blurted, and left quickly.

In the next hour, six women telephoned to say they couldn't come. It was ironic that on the same day her plea for small businesses appeared in the paper, her small business seemed headed down the drain. She longed to ask for Merrett's opinion on the matter, but knew he was busy improving the Daily Reporter, and that, at least, made her heart glad.

\* \* \*

Gracie had trouble sleeping, and awoke with a splitting headache Friday. Coffee and a bagel hadn't improved the way she felt by the time Mrs. Jarvis rang the doorbell at nine o'clock. In her hands were two huge wicker baskets. She unwound the woolen scarf she wore wrapped around her neck and over her head.

Uncovering the first basket, Mrs. Jarvis set half a dozen snowy white boxes on the table. Each was labeled with the name or description of another type of canapé. From the second basket, Mrs. Jarvis took a silver tea service, two candleholders, and an ecru cloth with lace trim. "Now, show me where you'll be serving," she said.

The housekeeper set the so-far unused dining room up beautifully. "Harry said he suggested a mulled cider to you, but fruit punch with cranberry juice would be more seasonal. I'll make up some, and send it over in the morning. We have dozens of clear glass cups the missus bought at the Dollar Store, if you'd like to use them." Alice Bradmoore bought cups for entertaining at the Dollar Store? "When you have a pretty face and a fascinating old house that's supposedly haunted, you could get by with paper cups, but I do despise throw-aways for social occasions."

"I'm afraid some people aren't eager to see my face or my house." Gracie confided her fears in a rush. "No one called until today to say they weren't coming."

Mrs. Jarvis lifted her chin, and sniffed. "It sounds like someone's out to cause you trouble. If I were you, I'd think over the past, and see if you can remember an old enemy."

Old enemy? Beryl Marcum. The name popped into Gracie's head. She looked wide-eyed at Mrs. Jarvis.

The elderly housekeeper nodded her head. "Now that you've thought of someone, think how she'd do you dirty, and why."

\* \* \*

Merrett caught Frank, outside the zoning office, shortly before two o'clock Friday afternoon, and gave him the news about Lizzie Kendall. For an attorney, he'd certainly made himself unavailable. And Merrett was furious.

"Hot diggety," Frank cried. "Just what we need. A lighted sign is definitely more of a distraction than an unmarked location."

Merrett was still seething, but saving Gracie, even last minute, was what counted. “I find it hard to believe Beryl didn’t consider her aunt before she stepped in.”

“Maybe she thought Gracie wouldn’t do her homework. Or maybe Beryl didn’t do hers. Maybe she doesn’t care if her aunt’s shut down. But the fact is, the board will find it interesting in light of their relationship. And even more interesting...” Frank chuckled loudly. “Lizzy is the mayor’s mother-in-law, so I’d say it’s a done deal.”

“Can I ask you something, Frank? What if I hadn’t found this out for you?” Merrett demanded.

“I was going inside to ask for a postponement.” Grinning, Frank pulled a cigar out and handed it to him. “I haven’t been able to think straight since I found out I’m going to be a father.”

Gracie had said Hope was afraid Frank would leave when he found out. Stunned, Merrett stuck the cigar in his pocket.

“Can you believe I thought Hopie didn’t want kids? Women sure can give you mixed signals.”

Was Gracie giving him mixed signals? “Gracie thinks she’s too old for children.” Merrett never meant to confide in Frank. He barely knew the guy. He felt his ears turn red.

“Gracie would make a marvelous mother. She took care of Hope. Still tries to. Drives her nuts, sometimes.”

Merrett patted the pocket with his cigar. “I thought people waited until after the baby was born.”

“I’ll hand out whole boxes then.” He clapped Merrett on the back. “After I get that variance, take Gracie out to celebrate, and tell her to forget that fool notion about not having babies. Dr. Hiram’s counting on her to be next.”

Picturing Gracie with a swollen belly was strangely erotic, and at the same time, brought tears to Merrett’s eyes.

\* \* \*



Merrett waited outside until Frank came back to give him the news. Then he drove straight to Gracie's house. "The variance is yours," he said, swinging her around. "You can continue to operate Special Effects in this house."

She gasped "How?"

He told her about Mrs. Jarvis, the sign he remembered seeing, and calling Frank.

Gracie slipped her arms around his neck, and pushed his hair back. "You've come to my rescue again. What would I do without you?"

"Aw, shucks," he said, clowning. "It was nothing."

"Tell me all about it," she insisted, leading him to the couch in the sitting room.

"The mayor-seamstress relationship was Frank's ace in the hole, but there were other businesses besides Lizzie's, so he didn't have to resort to political maneuvers." Gracie nodded her approval, and Merrett pulled out the cigar Frank gave him. "I have more good news. Your sister underestimated her husband. The guy is tickled pink and blue. He said everyone should have babies, and Dr. Hiram's hoping you'll be next."

Gracie flushed, the stain moving quickly from her neck to her cheeks.

"He also said you'd make a wonderful mother."

She sat up straight, folding her hands in her lap.

"You really don't want children?"

"I'm not married, so it doesn't matter."

Touché

She jumped up to pace. "You should see the food Mrs. Jarvis brought, and the way she set the dining room table. It's beautiful."

Her words of praise and agitation didn't go together. She must be overwrought from work and worry. "I know this party is important to you," he said soothingly.

"You just don't know how important. None of us ever had a party, and I only went to one, ever. My friend Linda's birthday. The next year, Mom and Pop wouldn't let me go. They said there might be kissing games. Or drinking. At thirteen? I don't think so. Well, maybe kissing. But never drinking at Linda's house. If Mom and Pop hadn't been so strict, I would never have married Sonny."

Gracie plunked down beside Merrett, and he framed her face with his hands. "This isn't like you. Your party will go fine."

“People have been calling all day to say they weren’t coming, Merrett, and I couldn’t think why. Then Mrs. Jarvis suggested I consider old enemies, and I came up with one. Beryl Marcum hates me without reason.”

Merrett hadn’t mentioned the relationship between Beryl and Lizzie to Gracie because he didn’t want to scare her. If Beryl would put her aunt’s business at risk to hurt Gracie, she’d do anything. He’d meant to help when he printed her letter-to-the editor, but when the bitch saw what he’d done, she’d struck out at both of them. Praying his editorial would influence people to support Special Effects, he held Gracie closely. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. You’ve created a good business reputation, and you have friends. People will come.” He’d make sure of it.

## Chapter Twelve

Gracie's Holiday Open House—the day she'd looked forward to and dreaded—dawned bright and cold. She took a long shower, but couldn't scrub away her fear of failure. Would anyone show up? Would she handle things smoothly if they did? Hands shaking, she was working the snarls out of her curls with a wide-toothed comb when the telephone rang, and she panicked.

Up until Dorothy's visit, Gracie assumed the house would fill with guests, but a stream of people had called "with regrets" since, and this call could be someone else saying they weren't coming. After that, the phone might ring again and again.

What if no one came?

As Gracie reached the bottom of the stairs, the jangling lapsed into a series of impatient dots and dashes, and she realized it was the doorbell. Hoping it was Merrett with the punch, she threw open the door.

"Geez. A girl could freeze to death out here."

"Faithie." Gracie felt the blood drain slowly from her body. Clutching the doorframe with one hand, she held the other over her heart.

"Are you going to ask me in?" Faith's jeans had holes at the knees, and her denim jacket looked thin. Shifting from one badly scuffed western boot to the other, she looked like a scared, poverty-stricken waif.

"Oh, sweetie, of course." Gracie pulled her inside and into her arms.

Faith leaned into her sister's hug for a second. "I'm so chilled, I must be freezing you."

The frigid air coming off her was seeping right through Gracie's robe. Shivering, she laughed. "Take off your coat, and we'll see if we can get you warm."

Faith's face was red from the cold, her hair too long and full for her tiny features, and her hands shook as she hung her jacket on the hall tree. "It's a longer walk from the bus stop than I imagined."

"You should have called. I would have picked you up," Gracie said, taking her sister's hands in hers to rub them. "You should have gloves and a hat. You'll catch your death of cold."

"Stop fussing. I wanted to surprise you."

"You did." Grace was so happy, she laughed aloud. "What can I get you hot to drink?"

"Coffee. Lots of coffee. And I could use a bite of breakfast."

Gracie led the way to the kitchen, eager to take care of her little sister again.

"Looks like you're doing okay." Faith peeked in each room they passed. "Whoa. What happened here?" she asked when she opened the door to the drawing room.

"The roof leaked and caved in. It's fixed, but the floor and ceiling aren't repaired yet. There's a ton of responsibility connected with owning a house."

"The R-word already." Faith sat down at the kitchen table and wrinkled her nose. "I've heard responsibility from you since I was old enough to talk."

Gracie didn't want to get into a discussion that might turn unpleasant and spoil her little sister's homecoming. After sitting Faith down and pouring her a mug of steaming coffee, she began breaking eggs into a hot skillet while bacon sizzled in the microwave. "How have you been, Faithie?"

"Okay, except my heart."

Gracie dropped the egg she was breaking into the skillet, shell and all, and hot grease splattered her hand. She slid the skillet off the burner to run to the sink and turn cold water on her fingers. Shooting a look over her shoulder, she saw her sister bury her face in her hands. Faith was dying of heart disease, and she was tending to minor burns. Overwhelmed with guilt, Gracie rushed to kneel at Faith's feet. "Tell me what's wrong."

"You're getting me wet," Faith complained, pushing her hands away.

Gracie dried her hands on her robe, and winced. The burns stood out like angry red welts. But that didn't matter right now. "What's wrong with your heart?"

"Buck said he loved me, but he went back to his wife."

"That's it?" Grace bolted to her feet. "You have a broken heart?"

“It hurts to be dumped.” Faith’s lip trembled. A tear slid down her cheek.

“It’s no fun for a wife to be cheated on, either.” Gracie stalked back to the stove, fished the eggshell out of the pan, and turned the burner on again. The microwave buzzed, and she took the bacon out and plopped it on a plate.

“He and his wife were separated when we met. It wasn’t my fault.” Faith strode across the kitchen to slip two slices of bread in the toaster. “I thought I could count on you for consolation.”

“After the way you scared me? I thought you had heart disease.”

“Really?” Faith giggled. “I didn’t say that.”

Gracie counted to ten. Faith still acted like a child. Kirsten was more responsible. The R-word. Broken hearts did hurt, and her sister was home. “Tell me about it,” she said. Sliding Faith a full plate, Gracie sat down across from her with a cup of coffee.

“He said I was too complicated. His wife was easy to understand. All she wanted was a place to live and their kids. That was another thing. It cost too much to keep a place for us and one for them.” Faith talked all through breakfast, but put her food away with amazing speed. “That was delicious,” she said, pushing her plate away. “Buck said I didn’t know what I wanted.”

“Do you?” Grace ran cold water over the congealing egg yolk, and refilled their coffee cups while Faith talked.

“I know I want a man to love and take care of me. Buck took good care of me. He bought me little knickknacks, and rubbed my feet when they ached from that stupid waitress job, and fixed supper when I was too bummed to cook.” Faith rapped her knuckles on the table. “Damn it, I thought he loved me.”

Gracie frowned at Faith’s cursing. And her living with Buck and lying about it on the phone. “Maybe he did. But he had a family, and I expect he loved them, too.”

“He said he loved his kids, and they needed him. But I need him, too.” Faith sniffled and Gracie handed her a tissue. “He asked if I’d raise them, if he could get them away from his wife. But I didn’t know. Mom never raised us. She and dad were so cold to one another and us. And they never had any fun. I loved Buck, and he loved me, and I thought kids might spoil it all. I tried to explain, and that’s when he said I was complicated.” Faith laid her head on her arms and cried.

“Life is complicated, sweetie. And you made some good points.”

“He didn’t understand,” Faith wailed.

What could Gracie say to mend a broken heart? Murmuring soothing noises, she stroked Faith’s hair.

After a while, she blew her nose. “How do you survive alone, Gracie?”

“I missed Sonny after I asked him to leave, but I was alone in a sense even when I was with him. He was self-centered and thoughtless, staying out all night, and then...” Gracie braced herself to confess something she’d never told anyone. “I found out Sonny had another woman. He was cheating. Even though our love had pretty much died, I was devastated. So I know how Buck’s wife felt.”

Faith looked down at her folded hands.

“I’d stuck it out because of the way we were brought up, and even then, I gave him the chance to break off his affair. But guess what?” Gracie couldn’t keep the bitterness from her voice. “He wanted to keep us both in his life.”

“Buck would have liked that, too. Only I had to pay my rent and live by myself. So what did you do?”

“Told him to get out, and then started saving money to run a business like my employer’s. It was almost a year later when I took the bus to Ferndale, and bought this house.”

Faith looked around the big sunny kitchen wide-eyed. “It’s terrific. But you’re stronger than I am. I could never...” She shook her head.

“You could do as well if you tried,” Gracie declared fervently.

“What did you ever see in Sonny?” Faith asked.

“Freedom. Life in the big city. Excitement. Sonny, at eighteen, didn’t seem like a bad person.”

Faith leaned forward to touch Gracie’s arm. “I understood, even then, that Mom and Pop took advantage of you. And I didn’t blame you for leaving, but at the same time, I did, because I missed you.” Blushing, Faith waved a hand in the air. “It’s hard to believe you broke loose from the past to build a career and buy this place.”

“My Chicago employer was a lovely woman who was happy to teach me how to set up my own business. And I got lucky with the house, buying it for one-fourth its worth, because everyone else thought it was haunted.” Gracie recited the Mirabelle tale.

“Neat!” Faith’s eyes lit up like Kirsten’s. “Have you seen her yet?”

“Not a glimpse,” Gracie said, chuckling. Faith would love the story of Kirsten’s conversation with Mirabelle, but would want to know the Merrett story as well. That was another ballgame, one Gracie didn’t have time to go into just now. “I must warn you, however—and please don’t make too much of this—my player piano plays at will.”

Faith laughed out loud. Rushing to the parlor, she ran her fingers over the keys. “I wish it would play now.”

“I hope it doesn’t play while my guests are here, and perpetuate the haunted house story.” Grace checked her watch. “I have a lot to do before they arrive. Why don’t you go unpack and shower?” Faith had brought one bag with her. One bag to hold all her belongings. You can choose something from my closet to wear, if you like. I know you didn’t count on a party.”

“Really?” Faith smiled brightly and fluffed her strawberry-blonde hair. “You’ve always been good to me, Gracie.” Her smile faded as she pushed her full lips out in a pretty pout. “That’s why I couldn’t understand it when you wouldn’t help this last time. I hung up sometimes after dialing your number, reminding myself I should have pride. But I needed to stay in that apartment where Buck loved me. I needed to feel close to him.”

“Even a mother, and I often felt like yours, has to say ‘no’ sometimes, and I really didn’t have money to spare.” Gracie slipped an arm around her sister.

“Can I wear anything I want?” Faith laid her head on Gracie’s shoulder.

“Except the poinsettia-printed skirt and red blouse, my very first party outfit.” Gracie held her hand to her chest to stop her runaway heart. “I’m nervous, Faithie.”

“Don’t worry, sis” Faith hugged her. “We’ll show the local yokels the Singleton gals can look swell and give a great bash.”

Running up the steps, Faith stopped at the landing. “Wow! Two Christmas trees! And you said you didn’t have money to send me.”

\* \* \*

Gracie fussed nervously, tweaking ribbons on displays, checking the lighting. She was delighted to have Faith come home, but why today, of all days? When Merrett delivered the cups, punch, and pitcher, she fell into his arms.

“Buck up,” he said, lifting her chin with one broad forefinger. “Everything’s going to go fine.”

“Don’t say Buck.” She laughed nervously. “Don’t ask. It’s a long story.” One she didn’t tell, but she did tell Merrett about Faith coming home.

“Hey, that’s what you’ve been wanting.” He held Gracie close, and stroked her hair. “That should make you happy.”

“There are just so many things on my mind. What if—

Merrett sealed her lips with a kiss. “Your business is in the clear. Your sister’s here. Life’s wonderful. The party is going to be a success.”

“I don’t see how you can be so sure.” She smiled weakly.

“Trust me.” He gave her another quick kiss. “I have to run. My friend Tom, the editor from New York, is flying into Indy this A.M., and I’m meeting him at the airport.”

Gracie’s legs threatened to fold. Her palms grew damp. Merrett was leaving.

“I’ll pick you up this evening,” he said casually. “We’ll take a ride and look at the Christmas lights, then go someplace quiet for dinner, and celebrate your victory over the zoning board. How’s that sound for a small town Saturday night?”

“What about Tom?”

“He’ll only be in town a few hours.”

Just long enough to seal their deal. The deal that would send Merrett winging back to New York. “I’m not sure about Faith. I hate to run off and leave her.”

“It won’t be very romantic, but you can bring her along if you want.”

Romantic. How much longer did they have for romantic evenings? Just when things seemed to be looking up all around, they’d come to the beginning of the end.

\* \* \*

Gracie gave herself a pep talk. Her roof was fixed, the drawing room door locked, and the parlor and dining room attractively readied. She had bought candles, sugar cubes, and real cream, just as Mrs. Jarvis directed. She’d thawed the cookies and cakes, and frozen citrus slices and flowers in a ring mold to float in the punch. The ice ring, her friend Linda’s idea, was a special touch she would never have thought of on her own. If people just came...



Hope called right after the florist delivered the rose buds Gracie ordered to give each of her guests. “Have you seen this morning’s Reporter?”

“I’ve been busy...” Gracie could hardly believe it, but she’d forgotten to bring the paper in.

“Take a minute and read Merrett’s editorial first thing.”

Gracie was so excited that she hung up without telling Hope about Faith. Well, she’d find out soon enough. The carrier missed the porch, and Gracie scurried out to the front walk to get the paper. Clean! Who shoveled? Homer Riggs waved from his front walk. “Happy Open House!” he called. “I tried out your shovel for you.”

“Thank you!”

Leaning against the inside of the front door, she turned to the editorial page. “Small Business at the Heart of Ferndale.” Tears ran down her cheeks as she read Merrett’s words...

Gracie Singleton Saylor believes in Ferndale so strongly that she left her managerial position in a Chicago decorating business to bring beauty to her hometown. She believes in the townspeople, and if you’ve seen the work she’s done, you’ll believe in Gracie.

He went on to mention businesses she’d decorated, including his office, and finished with a paragraph about her bravery and her incredible loyalty to her roots. On the same page, half a dozen letters agreed with her stand on small business.

Gracie’s heart soared. People cared. Merrett cared. Not just about her, but about small businesses and the small town she’d come home to.

\* \* \*

When Gracie came out of the bathroom, Faith was standing in the middle of the bedroom in a printed bra and matching bikinis, and Grace smiled fondly. Holding first one dress and then another in front of her, she looked like the nineteen-year-old she was, not the woman of the world she’d like to be. “Which one do you like, Gracie?”

“The blue sweater dress.”

“I think I like this.” She held up the long skirt that Gracie liked to wear with boots.

“That looks good, too.”

Pairing it with a loose silk blouse, she topped it off with a long gold rope necklace and hoop earrings, items Gracie rarely wore because they didn't suit her. But they suited Faith, as did the gold sandals she'd brought with her. Her dress-up shoes, they were a gift from Buck.

Linda Donvillough, Gracie's high school friend, was the first to arrive. Gracie had talked to her on the phone but hadn't seen her. "You didn't tell me you were pregnant!"

"I wanted to surprise you." Linda hugged her. "I'm due early next month."

Grace was surprised and a bit envious. She and Linda used to dream about the day they'd marry and have kids. Everyone seemed to be pregnant nowadays, but her. She and Linda were the same age, and this was her first child.

Hope arrived next, and paled when she saw their younger sister. "You two take a minute to say hello," Grace said, leading Hope to a chair. "But only a minute. I need both of you."

Marianne Heber appeared awed. "Your skirt is beautiful," she told Gracie, gingerly touching the scarlet and green printed chiffon before looking around wide-eyed, "and so is your home."

Harry Bradmoore came next, then Harland Hamilton, followed by the woman who headed the Chamber of Commerce. Gracie greeted her guests, showed them around, and answered questions about Special Effects. Linda and Faith served refreshments, while Hope helped guests who wanted to purchase display pieces or book decorating jobs.

Another dozen business people came, and a generous number from the old neighborhood, including the young and old Bossos. The house was filled and Gracie was bursting with joy when an old classmate, Ginny Ball, came up to her.

"This is like a soap opera," she said, around a mouthful of Mrs. Jarvis' paté. "Girl from Edge Road comes back to hobnob with the other half."

Gracie excused herself, and while she was trying to recover her poise, overheard two women talking.

"I simply can't believe this gorgeous house is haunted."

"Maybe you can't, but I'd never get a good night's sleep here."

Gracie glanced uneasily at the piano, and jumped when the doorbell rang. Ferndale's mayor welcomed her warmly to the community. "We should hold a ribbon-cutting for Special Effects," he told her.

Squirming after her recent encounter with the zoning board, and remembering that his mother-in-law was Lizzy Kendall, Gracie assured him it wasn't necessary.

Hope stood in the parlor doorway, a frantic look on her face, and Gracie, excusing herself, rushed over to her. "Linda's having pains. She says it must be false labor, but she keeps clutching her belly and frowning. I think someone else should serve punch."

Gracie led Linda to the sitting room sofa, and suggested she call her husband, Mark. "It's too soon to be real," Linda protested. "I'll just put my feet up for a few minutes."

Faith took over at the dining room table alone, Hope stayed with Linda, and Grace was headed back to the parlor when Ginny Ball moved in on her again.

"Did you notice Beryl Marcum isn't here? I heard by the grapevine she called your neighbors and told them you were violating the zoning code, and if they showed up here, they'd do the neighborhood a disfavor."

So the assumptions Gracie had made were right. "The zoning commission granted me a variance yesterday."

"I know. I saw it on the front page of this morning's Daily Reporter."

"The front page?" Gracie had read the editorial and letters, and missed the front page.

"The Reporter always does publish the important stuff."

"I guess my neighbors haven't read their papers yet."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Beryl went out early and stole them off their porches." Ginny planted her fists on her generous hips. "She was the cattiest girl in Ferndale High."

Feeling a sudden rush of warmth for her old classmate, Gracie was about to urge her to have more paté when Margaret Riggs entered, followed by Dorothy White and half a dozen neighbors who'd called to say they weren't coming. Gracie blinked back happy tears, and welcomed them warmly.

The rest of the party passed in a memorable blur. Linda's pains persisted, and Mark arrived to take her home. Gracie got five bookings. More than half of her display pieces were purchased. And the piano kept its silence. Until the last guest left, when it broke into a resounding chorus of "Joy to the World."

"It's uncanny," Hope whispered.

"It's terrific," Faith said, delighted.

It's Mirabelle. Gracie's hostess duties must have left her overwrought, because she wanted to shout the words aloud.

\* \* \*

Hope went home soon after the other guests, and Faith went upstairs to change clothes, leaving Gracie to her mixed emotions. She felt so drained; it might be a very long time before she gave another party. Merrett saved the day with stories in the Daily Reporter, but he had a chance at a job in New York, and reporting in the Big Apple was what he loved. She'd managed to forget Merrett's imminent departure for a while, but now that the party was over, her worst fears came flooding back. She'd lose him soon, forever.

After calling Mark Donvillough and learning Linda's pains had lessened, and that the doctor thought her labor was false, Gracie phoned Merrett to say she didn't feel like going anywhere. "I'll just fix a bite of supper for Faith and I, and go to bed early."

"Is something wrong?" Merrett asked.

He'd spent the afternoon with Tom, and she couldn't bear to hear about his new job plans. "Thanks to you, everything is fine." Trying to keep the despair from her voice, she told him about her bookings, sales, and prominent guests. "Even the mayor was here," she said cheerfully. And when she told him about Margaret and the entourage, she almost forgot to be sad. "It was magnificent. I appreciate all you did, Merrett."

"You still don't sound right."

Sighing, she told him about Ginny's remark about a soap opera, the woman who said she couldn't sleep in Gracie's house and about Beryl blackballing the party. "You were right, Merrett. People in small towns are petty."

"I wasn't right. I was bitter. Why are you talking that way?"

"A dose of reality just butted heads with my naive optimism."

"I think I should come over."

"No. I'm tired, and you've had a full day with your friend from New York."

She heard Merrett take a deep breath. "Okay. Spend the evening with your sister, and get a good night's sleep. We'll celebrate your successful party tomorrow evening."

\* \* \*

Merrett leaned his elbows on his desk. Saturday night, and here he sat at the Daily Reporter, trying to sort things out. When Gracie canceled on him for the evening, he'd come here to be alone and close to the source of his problem. His world had spun out of orbit today.

He loosened his necktie and leaned back in his chair. When he was a kid, he'd had a book where you flipped the corners of the pages with your thumb and they ran together like a movie. Staring at the tiny Christmas tree on his desk, his day flipped through his mind in a series of scenes.

First, he'd called Margaret Riggs, and she'd promised to undo Beryl's damage. Then...

The airport... Him pumping Tom's hand. "I couldn't believe it when you said you were flying in. What's on your mind?"

Tom's grin was boyishly disarming. "Big things, Merrett."

Merrett had big things on his mind, but not a clue what Tom had on his. Driving his New York editor friend to the Daily Reporter, Merrett told him about his current operation and future plans. "I'm having the pagination system installed the first of the year if the Board of Directors approves. What do you think, Tom?"

"I wondered why you hadn't gotten back to me."

"Even if I take the job, I wanted to set things right here first."

Tom rubbed his chin. "Pagination is a must for a happening paper, but how do you plan to make it pay with such a small circulation?"

"The Reporter's new appearance will be polished and easier to read, and to show it off, I'll offer a week's free papers to potential subscribers. To widen the range of the newspaper's appeal, we'll add a full page of regional news, using stringers from surrounding villages to gather it. And with paste-up time, etcetera, reduced, we can take on extra print jobs. Flyers for supermarkets, sales barns, and what-have-you will bring in additional revenue." He cracked his knuckles, and waited for Tom's reaction.

"Sounds workable, and could even prove profitable, after about a year. But I thought you wanted to come to the Herald and work for me. Cover New York. Stare up at tall

buildings and bright lights. Share a few drinks after work. Have dinner with Tammy and me. Like the old days.”

A shadow passed over Tom’s face, and Merrett knew he’d remembered too late, it would never be the same without Holly. “The plans started with the necessity to submit a year-end report, and they grew on me,” Merrett said. “The excitement built, you know?”

Tom smiled and leaned across Merrett’s desk. With short red hair and a freckle-sprinkled nose, he looked younger than his forty years “More exciting than working for me? Then let me paint you a more attractive picture. You want to know why I flew in today, old buddy?”

An hour later, a totally befuddled Merrett drove Tom to the house for dinner, where he met Harry and told Kirsten how much she’d grown. Then he took Tom back to the airport where they shook hands. “I need your decision ASAP.”

Merrett shifted from one foot to the other. “It’s a tough call.”

“It doesn’t need to be. Sure, your father’s pleased to have you home, and Kirsten is happy here, but your old man wants the best for you, and kids are flexible. A major buy-out of your paper will put a tidy sum in your pocket, and you’ll have your new job as a city editor in New York. How much better can things get?”

“I don’t know, Tom. A while back, I wanted a conglomerate to buy the Daily Reporter,” Merrett confessed, “but now...”

“It’s happening all over. Big companies buying up little ones. And Dixon-Pope News is a heavy player. They’re snapping up small papers all over this part of the country, and particularly in your area. I’m not usually the one to make the contact with the seller, but I asked to make this trip because you’re my friend.” Tom shrugged and studied Merrett’s face. “I thought you’d be so excited you’d go nuts.”

It’s happening all over. Big companies buying up little Dixon-Pope was offering Merrett a lot of money for the Daily Reporter. Just when he’d gotten all worked up about making it a success. And just after he’d written an editorial in support of small business. “I’m sorry if my reaction is guarded, but your offer came as a big surprise.”

“Maybe I’m missing something,” Tom said, picking up his carry-on bag as his flight to New York was announced for the second time. “Maybe you haven’t told me the whole

story. Is there a woman in your life, Merrett? Is that why you want to stay here in Smalltown, USA? I always took you for a city boy.”

Merrett didn't like Tom's tone or his tactics. Ferndale was small, but there were a lot of good people here. When Gracie told him that, he hadn't believed her, but more and more, he did. And when he'd started thinking about his paper as a “window on the real world” like she'd said, he'd begun to place a higher value on his work. “It's a big decision, Tom. That's all I can say. I'll have to let you know.”

“You've got one week, tops. You can't dangle a big company like Dixon-Pope for long.”

Sunny Haven was the next picture in the flip-book of Merrett's mind. After Tom's flight left, Merrett couldn't say why, but he went to see Mama. It wasn't one of her better days. She held out her hand to him, but simply stared while he rambled on and on.

Home was next. Merrett arrived home to have Kirsten hand him a new Christmas list. She'd revised it a dozen times. He reached for it. “I'll pass it on to Santa, and see what he can do.”

“Dad-dy. You're not listening. This is a list of things I want to buy for the people in my life.”

The people in her life. He sat down and pulled her onto his knee. “Read it to me.”

“Grampa. I think he needs a new bag to carry to the gym. He said his is ratty.

“Gramma. I'm going to buy her a sun catcher for her window. She likes things that are pretty. She loved the sparkly star Gracie and I made for her Christmas tree.

“Spook. I'm going to get him a jingle bell, so he'll be easier to find, even though he hasn't been hiding as much lately.” Looking at her list again, she pointed to the word Gracie followed by a question mark. “I can't decide what to get Gracie. I thought maybe you and I could just look until we find something wonderful.”

“We can do that,” Merrett said softly. “Is that the end of your list?”

“I can't shop for you when we're together, so Grampa or Gracie will take me. And since my other grandma and grandpa don't celebrate, I'll just paint them an un-Christmas picture after Santa brings my new paint set. A letter came from them today. Want to see it?”

Without waiting for an answer, Kirsten ran to get the letter. When she finished reading it aloud, Merrett shifted uncomfortably in his upholstered chair. They would be

home from Hollywood in the spring, and wanted her to spend a few days with them. “I don’t really want to stay with them, but they said they’d take me to my mother’s grave, and I probably should go.”

He held her tightly. He and Kirsten hadn’t been to the cemetery since the funeral. “Do you want to go there?”

“No, but you went to see your mother when you didn’t want to.”

Merrett blinked back tears as he kissed his daughter’s head. “Even if your mother didn’t get excited about Christmas, we could take her a wreath.”

“I don’t know if she can see it from heaven, but that’s a good idea. First, could we shop for Gracie?”

That request did a number on his mind. And then, Gracie called to say she didn’t want to see him tonight.

Willing the flip book of scenes to continue, Merrett discovered he’d reached a dead end that found him back at the office facing reality. Gracie stewed about the Holiday Open House for weeks. She should be happy. Maybe the aftermath was a letdown, like post-partum blues after a baby is born. Maybe a Christmas light tour and dinner would cheer her. But not if he told her about Tom’s visit, and of course, she’d ask.

Merrett squeezed his eyes shut against the scene of him telling Gracie he’d sold the Daily Reporter to a conglomerate, and he was moving to New York. It was a wonderful opportunity, but after the editorial he’d written, he’d look like a hypocrite.

When he was a kid, flip books made Merrett laugh. Today’s happenings, running through his mind, made his head hurt. Gracie needed his strength the past few days the way he’d needed hers since they had run into one another again—a surprising turn of events, and a sobering one.



## Chapter Thirteen

What would he do with a million dollars? Merrett was unbuttoning his shirt when there was a knock on his bedroom door. “I know you’re tired, son, but I had to talk to you. You seemed preoccupied over dinner” His dad shifted from one foot to the other, and Merrett motioned him to the armchair by the window. “Did Tom want you to come back to New York and work for him?” His father blurted out the question.

Merrett sat down on the bed and folded his hand between his knees. “Something like that.”

His father’s mouth thinned, and he looked suddenly old. “If you want to talk, I’m here for you.”

In the last year, his father had more than made up for the years he’d left Merrett’s concerns to Mama. “I know, Dad. Maybe tomorrow...I’m tired. And confused.”

His dad had no sooner left than Kirsten came to stand uncertainly inside Merrett’s bedroom doorway. “What’s the matter, princess?”

“Squirt is okay if you’d rather call me that.” She climbed into his lap. “I heard you and Grampa talking, and I wanted to talk, too.”

“What about?” He tipped her face toward his.

“That man, Tom. He’s from New York, and if he wants you to take a job there, I hope you told him no, because I’m not going. If you go, I’m staying here with Grampa.”

“You’d let me go alone?” Merrett’s words were lighter than his heart.

“You could come home weekends, couldn’t you? I’m Student of the Week when we go back to school after Christmas. Did I tell you that? I get to bang erasers and help the teacher and lead the lunch line. I’ve waited all year for my turn. Everyone gets a turn,

but it is so dumb...Ms. Margolis decided to go in backwards ABC order. She said we do everything else the other way around, and this was fairer to Susan Zacharias.”

Kirsten took a breath and went on. “When I told Gracie, she said that was true. Singleton was close to the end of the alphabet, and she was always near the end of the line. She should never have married someone named Saylor, should she, Daddy? ‘Cause she’d still be at the end. If her name was Bradmoore, she could finally be up front, though.”

The little matchmaker was still at work. “Grownups don’t have much cause to go alphabetically, pumpkin.”

“Hey, that’s a new one.” Kirsten threw her arms around his neck, then pulled back to grin. “But it sounds like Thanksgiving. How about Star or Angel or—”

“Sleepyhead.” Laughing, Merrett tapped her lightly on the head. “About bed...”

“I could sleep better if I knew what I was buying Gracie for Christmas. What are you getting her?”

“Can you keep a secret?” Merrett told her about the tree topper he’d ordered made at the Pottery Barn.

“Oh, Daddy! She’ll love that. But you really should give it to her early, so she can put it on her tree.”

“Would Christmas Eve be soon enough?”

Kirsten tipped her head sideways to think, and then nodded. “She can use it again next year anyway. What else are you buying her?”

“I haven’t decided. Maybe I’ll get some ideas when you and I go shopping.” Merrett picked his daughter up and carried her to bed. Laying her down gently, he pulled the covers up to her chin. “I’ll take you one night next week.”

“Why don’t you take a whole day off, and take me Friday when we’re going to The Nutcracker at night?”

“Okay, it’s a date. Friday, I’m yours from breakfast to bedtime.”

Giggling, she hugged him happily. “You’re the bestest, Daddy.”

If Merrett took the job in New York, Kirsten would have to come. He couldn’t get along without her. He’d purposely dodged her question about Tom’s visit, but looking in to find her sleeping peacefully a little later, he knew he’d done the right thing. Now, if he could just do the right thing about Tom’s offer.

\* \* \*

When Gracie opened the door to Merrett on Sunday evening, she was deathly pale, her eyes red, her face blotched. She looked so stricken that he drew her into his arms and held her close. “What’s the matter, sweetheart?”

“Faithie’s gone,” Gracie whispered. “Again.”

Clenching his fists against Gracie’s back, Merrett wished he could meet the sister who kept hurting her.

“I just couldn’t keep my big mouth shut. At breakfast, I mentioned the R-word. When I got back from church...she wouldn’t go...she was gone.”

“The R word?”

“Responsibility. She says I preach it, but I was only trying to help when I suggested she choose a career route and enroll in a couple of college classes on the IUPUI campus in Indy. I told her she’d have to find a part-time job, but if she did that, she could stay here with me rent-free. She didn’t argue, so I was feeling good when I said, ‘I’m glad you’re ready to accept responsibility.’ But when I came home, eager to cook her Sunday dinner, she’d gone. No note. Just a smiling face drawn on my bathroom mirror with toothpaste.”

Merrett brushed Gracie’s tears away. “Faith couldn’t have been too upset if the face was smiling.”

“You just don’t understand, do you?” In one fluid movement, Gracie swept her coat off the hall tree and slipped her arms into the sleeves. “Let’s go see those Christmas lights.”

Merrett had been seeking out the brightest and best Christmas displays for the past week. Gracie had been so busy, he knew she hadn’t gotten out at night, and he’d been eager to see her excitement, but she seemed unimpressed.

She sat close to the door, and he wished she’d move closer to him. He reached for her hand and held it on the seat between them. She didn’t respond. Her hand lay loosely in his as she stared straight ahead. Merrett turned to study her profile in the moonlight. Even tightlipped, she was beautiful. Her hair fanned out around her face like a halo. Her

lashes formed feathery arcs over her eyes. He wished she'd talk to him. Faith didn't seem like a safe subject. "Is Hope relieved Frank wants the baby?"

Gracie nodded.

Her sister was off the hook with her husband, and Gracie was going to be an aunt. So why didn't that thrill her? Merrett pointed out the first outstanding display he'd discovered, a spreading nativity scene lit with soft blue and white lights. She murmured approval. The next display was gaudy. A scene with hundreds of lights, it featured Mr. and Mrs. Claus surrounded by drummers and elves, prancing reindeer, and a train that circled the whole thing while music poured from loudspeakers at mega-decibels. Gracie shook her head. "Some people don't know when to stop."

Her approval and disapproval were both understated. "Want to talk about it?"

"There's nothing to talk about." She turned her head to gaze out the window.

He nodded slowly. Tom's offer was like holding a ball of twine, and searching for a loose end, something to grab onto. Until he did, Merrett couldn't talk about it. That must be the way Gracie felt about Faith.

Given Gracie's lack of enthusiasm for Christmas displays, he hoped she'd like his plans for dinner at the Ferndale Country Club. Dad said the decorations she'd done were outstanding, "a feather in her cap, certain to bring her more business." And she'd met many of the people who might be dining there at her Open House, so he'd planned it as a special treat.

Merrett's parents had belonged to the club all his life, and they'd eaten there frequently when he was growing up. This was his first time since coming back to Ferndale, so it was a positive move for him as well.

When he swung the Jeep into the club's parking lot, Gracie gave him her full attention for the first time that night. Wide-eyed, she stared at him, her jaw slack. "I made dinner reservations," he said. "I hope that's okay."

She nodded mutely.

The dining room was crowded, but the maître d' promptly led them to a circular banquette near the big stone fireplace. Round-faced and pleasant, he was new since Merrett had last been there. "Nice to see you, Mr. Bradmoore. Your father's been promising you'd come in."

Left alone with Gracie, Merrett marveled at the miracles she had wrought in the room. White ostrich plume snow lay in soft glittering piles, and a crescent moon hung against an ebony sky. A sleigh, with a midnight blue velvet robe, overflowed with gifts wrapped in shining gold, silver, and white. Blue spotlights lit the moon and stars. “It’s breathtaking.”

Seeing Gracie flush with pleasure and smile, he took advantage of the moment. Singing the first line of “Blue Moon” softly into her ear, he slid closer on the upholstered seat.

“We’re not alone.”

“I don’t see anyone but you,” he whispered.

Smiling, she looked up at him. “What’s gotten into you tonight?”

Merrett tried serenading her with a line from “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.”

He loved her golden laughter. Her hand felt cool and velvety in his. She smelled like wintry air and summer honeysuckle. A candle in a faceted crystal holder cast patterns on the pale blue cloth. Waiters moved about on soft-soled shoes. One brought their wine and left. Everything was perfect.

Candlelight flickered in Gracie’s velvet eyes. The firelight shone on her curls, turning them to gold. If he were an artist, he’d try to capture her image as she looked tonight. He slipped his arm around her waist and drew her closer. “You are incredibly lovely.”

She smiled fleetingly. Her full lower lip quivered. She had a sensual mouth, soft and warm, and so inviting. Like the rest of her. He firmed his leg against hers under the table. She moved away. Merrett sighed. “Is something bothering you that you’re not telling me?”

“It’s nothing. Just Faith leaving.”

Seconds passed. Merrett took a bite of his steak. It was the best he’d ever tasted. He took another. He should have come to the Club sooner. He hadn’t wanted to see familiar faces. He hadn’t wanted people to see him, actually. He’d been hiding. Now, it felt good to see people. Now that he might be leaving?

“How was your visit with Tom yesterday?”

It was as if she’d read his mind. Or perhaps that was what had been on her mind all evening. Merrett’s juicy steak suddenly tasted like aged leather. He’d hoped to make the evening one to remember and to avoid this discussion. Tom and New York were a topic

better left untouched, until Merrett knew what he was going to do. "It's always good to see old friends."

Gracie wound and unwound linguini on her fork. "Why did he come to Ferndale?"

"To visit. Talk. I asked his opinion on my plans for improving the Reporter and increasing circulation."

"Did he think your ideas were good?" Her voice was eager.

Merrett trained his gaze on his plate. He couldn't get her hopes up, couldn't lie to her. Although it would have been a helluva lot easier. "Tom thought he had better ideas."

"Better than pagination?" Gracie touched his arm, and he dared a glance at her. "Is it something you think will work for you?" Her eyes glowed with hope, but her lower lip trembled again.

He pushed his plate away regretfully. Half a steak wasted. "I don't know," he said honestly. "What Tom proposed is a whole different ball game."

Gracie clanked down her fork. "He still wants you to move to New York, doesn't he?"

"That and more." Merrett didn't like the taste of bitterness in his mouth. He didn't like the idea of hurting someone he cared deeply about. But she had a right to know, and he needed to know what she thought. "I'd made up my mind to improve the Reporter, make a real go of it." A smile twitched his lips. "At first, I just wanted to succeed at something. Then, I thought I'd like to remain at the helm, and see how it went. And maybe even, stay permanently." The thought crystallized into words without ever taking shape in his head.

"But?" Gracie prodded.

Merrett turned to her, and she lifted her napkin to her mouth with shaky hands. She'd lost Faith again. Could he tell her she might lose him? "Tom made me an offer I'd be a fool to refuse."

Gracie stiffened her spine, and toyed with her glass. He slipped an arm around her and hugged her to his side, needing to feel her closeness. She leaned away from him. "Tell me the rest."

He lifted his glass and took a sip of wine without tasting it. "Tom came to me with an offer from Dixon-Pope Newspapers to buy the Daily Reporter." Gracie made a strangled sound, but now that he'd started, Merrett had to go on. "They're offering a

fabulous price, and he still wants me to work for him. So I could move to New York and start over again, pretty well-fixed.”

Gracie stared into the fire. “Just what you’ve always wanted.”

“I haven’t said yes.”

“You haven’t said no.”

“It’s the opportunity of a lifetime, Gracie. It deserves full consideration.”

She turned on him, eyes blazing, voice wrung with anguish. “How could you even consider handing over the Reporter to a stranger? A conglomerate like Dixon-Pope would send someone in here to run the paper who doesn’t care a fig who’s born or who dies. Someone who doesn’t know or care about the town. A stranger.”

Merrett defended himself. “They might hire a local as editor.”

“Who?” Gracie spat the word at him. “Who else in this town, besides you, knows anything about running a newspaper, Merrett?”

“What would you do if someone offered you close to a million dollars for your business?”

Her gasp was barely audible, but it felt like something of a victory, and Merrett poured himself more wine. She held her hand over the top of her glass. “None for me, thanks.”

He had a feeling those words referred to more than wine, but he persisted. “Would you say ‘no’ without thinking twice?”

“If a big business made the offer, yes. A small town is the place for small businesses. As you so recently stated, in your eloquent editorial.”

“I meant what I said.”

“Did you? Or were you just playing hero? Coming to my rescue once again?”

He felt like she’d slapped him. He had never come to her rescue without the purest intentions. Besides, he thought she liked seeing him as a hero. They both stared into their wine glasses. Seconds ticked away like minutes. Two minutes felt like two hours. He felt torn a thousand ways. He’d begun to acquire new dreams, but the old dreams still lingered. He could prove himself the way he’d longed to, the way he’d promised himself he would.

Tom would advance him if he worked hard. And he could find an apartment close to a park where Kirsten could take the riding lessons she wanted. He'd find her a different school, and let her play basketball.

"Go." The word exploded softly from Gracie's lips.

Startled from his daydreams, he stared at her. She couldn't have said what he thought she did.

"Go. Your eyes are shining. You're smiling. If this is what you want, there's no choice."

"I'm of two minds, and can see both ways. The dream I've had for years. Me, the big city reporter writing big stories. Or me, a small town guy again, making my small paper a big success." He laid his hand over hers. "I'd begun to think about spending a lot of time with a very special woman."

"But quit when big bucks were dangled before your eyes."

"It's not just the money, and I didn't quit thinking about us, but I did begin looking back." Sighing, he lifted his glass to stare into the deep burgundy liquid. He wasn't sure he was making a lot of sense. "Gracie, have you ever wanted to live in New York?"

She stared at him. "Why are you asking?"

He needed to know. "Have you?"

"Maybe a thousand years ago when I was young."

"That's right, you're going to be thirty soon."

She traced the lip of her glass with her fingertip.

"Would you even consider it?" He didn't know why he was pressing her.

"What's this all about, Merrett?" She narrowed her eyes on him.

"I'd like to make the trip, check things out, and thought you might come along." Once again, he surprised himself with his words, but once he'd said them, he was eager for her to go. "You'd love New York at Christmas time. The lights are breathtaking."

"I have a business to run." She wiped her mouth. "This decision is yours. If you go, you need to go alone."

He didn't want to go to New York alone. "Gracie?"

She raised her head to look at him. He bent his to capture her soft lips. They tasted like wine, and he flicked his tongue across them. "Merrett," she said, planting a hand in the middle of his chest. "No."



Moving away from her, he tried not to show how wounded he felt. He looked around, and was glad not to see anyone watching. “See anybody you know? Some of your guests from yesterday?”

Gracie seemed startled by his question, but glanced around the crowded dining room. “The mayor is sitting in the other corner with his back to us, and there’s...” She clamped her napkin over her lips.

Spotting Beryl Marcum, Merrett groaned. Beryl was with a bearded blond man who caught hold of her hand as she rose from the table. Patting his cheek, she pulled free and headed for the ladies’ room. Black-sheathed hips swaying, fox stole dangling from one shoulder, she spotted Merrett watching, and blew him a kiss as she opened the door.

“That...bitch,” Merrett sputtered.

“She wants you,” Gracie said flatly.

He told her about Beryl taking a chance on ruining her aunt’s seamstress business to hurt Special Effects. “Add phoning your neighbors, and she’s even lower than I expected. I hope someone told her they showed up at your party, anyway.”

Gracie stood quickly. “I’m going to talk to her.”

Unbelieving, Merrett stared after the gentle woman he’d come to care so much about.

\* \* \*

Gracie’s stomach clenched with anger, but crossing the room full of elegantly-dressed diners, her fingers itched to smooth her flyaway curls. If Merrett had told her they were coming here, she’d have piled her hair up. Surreptitiously smoothing her dress, she was glad she’d worn the black sheath. She’d chosen it for the color, black for depression, and it still suited her mood, but the dress was both conservative and classy.

She’d expected Merrett to leave, and yet, she’d been unprepared. Was she a fool to tell him to go? Could she have done anything else, knowing he would never be satisfied otherwise?

Gracie was three steps from the powder room when Harland Hamilton stepped out from behind a potted palm. “Grace. You can’t imagine the raves I’ve heard concerning

this room.” With an extravagant wave of his hand, the club’s president smiled broadly. “You did a marvelous job decorating.”

She thanked him, but her pleasure was dimmed by the task she’d set herself. After Beryl tried to sabotage her party and her business, Gracie had to stand up for her rights.

Harland stood between her and the door. “Your work became the topic of discussion at the latest board meeting, and we voted unanimously to have you decorate for our annual Valentine’s Day Sweetheart Dance. Are you available, dear?”

“I’d be delighted.”

“Then it’s settled. I’ll inform the chairperson of the affair that she won’t have to worry about decorations. I just saw Beryl enter the ladies’ room, and I’ll catch her when she comes out.” Harland kissed Gracie on the cheek. “I’ll give the board your okay, and you can stop by any day to sign the contract.”

Victory tasted so sweet, Gracie shoved through the door, empowered.

Beryl met her gaze in the mirror, and raised one arched brow.

“Why?” Gracie asked. It was a simple question. One Beryl understood.

“You belong on Edge Road. Not at the Ferndale Country Club. Not in the Larraby home, even if it is haunted.” Beryl’s laughter was cold. “And not with Merrett Bradmoore. You can rise only so high before someone puts you back in your place. I appointed myself the mission. Simply because I enjoyed it.”

She pushed through the door, chuckling deep in her throat.

Gracie gave Harland one minute to tell her his news, and then exited just in time to see Beryl’s face turn purple. Flashing her old high school enemy a smile, Gracie’s revenge became even sweeter. Even the high-and-mighty, cold and vicious, could be knocked down a peg or two.

Gracie crossed the room in long strides, to Merrett Bradmoore. Sliding in close to him, she whispered, “Kiss me.” His emerald eyes widened in surprise, but he bent his mouth to hers. Thinking of Beryl, Gracie smiled against his lips, but as his kiss deepened, Gracie forgot everything and everyone else.

\* \* \*

When Merrett walked Gracie to her front door, and stopped, she turned to him fearfully. Her victory with Beryl seemed small compared to her loss of the man she loved. Even though she was angry he'd consider selling the Reporter, she longed to be held, kissed. She longed to throw caution to the winds, and make love with him throughout the night. She was shameless, but it might be her last chance. She touched his cheek.

"I'll see you when I get back," he said, squeezing her arm.

He couldn't wait to go. She could see him breezing back to pick up Kirsten and their things, and then breezing out again. Headed for the Big Apple to live, he'd stop by for another quick farewell. "When are you leaving?"

"Tom needs my answer ASAP. I'll tie up loose ends at the office tomorrow, and catch an evening flight. I'm spending Friday with Kirsten, taking her Christmas shopping and to The Nutcracker Suite, so I'll fly back Thursday night." Merrett tipped Gracie's chin and kissed her quickly. "I won't come in. If I did, I couldn't settle for kisses."

If he didn't leave quickly, she was going to cry, or cling to him and beg him not to leave. But he had to go. He had to put this thing about New York behind him, or he'd never be free to move on completely. She was bitterly afraid of losing him, but he'd come a long way, and the final destination was his to choose. Like Faith and Hope, he had wings of his own. "Goodbye, Merrett."

"I'll be back, you know."

She nodded. "Have a good trip."

"Take care of yourself, Gracie." He held her for a moment. Tightly. Then, dropping a kiss on her hair, he left, running down the steps toward his Jeep.

\* \* \*

Gracie was surprised when Harry Bradmoore called her Monday morning. "You have to catch Merrett before he takes off today, and see if you can get through to him. He was miserable in New York before, and will be again."

Miserable? "Then why does he want to move back?"

Harry sighed. "Merrett hasn't known what he wanted since Holly died. He went to New York to make her happy, but missed home and family. He's a small town boy with a

big heart, and the only reason he'd go back is to prove he can make good there. But he could just as well make good here, and be happy. I can't lose him, and Kirsten, not after losing Alice to that dreadful illness. Call him. Go down there if you have to. But please stop him."

He'd said goodbye without hesitation, and broken her heart. "What makes you think I can?"

"My son's in love with you. He's just too blasted stubborn to admit it, even to himself. Especially to himself. But I thought you knew."

When Merrett asked if she'd ever wanted to live in New York, for one crazy minute she'd thought he was going to ask her to move there with him. And she might have. She cared that much. But he was only looking for a travel companion to help him face the ghosts of the past. "I told him to go, Harry. There are things he needs to work out, and you and I can't do it for him. He has to reach this decision on his own."

\* \* \*

"Grace? This is Mark." It was evening, and Gracie was sitting on the piano bench, staring at the silent keys, when the phone rang for the fourth time, and the answering machine kicked on. She hadn't answered because she didn't feel like talking to anyone.

"Linda's in labor, for real. We're at Ferndale General."

Gracie nearly stumbled over Spook in the dark hall. She grabbed up the receiver. "Mark? Are you there?"

"We're in the birthing room. They're prepping Linda for delivery." There was a murmured conversation on his end of the line. "She said to tell you to forget having kids. Labor is hell."

An hour later, when Gracie saw her at the hospital, Linda had changed her tune.

"Birth is life's greatest miracle, and she's worth every danged pain I suffered through." After spouting every cliché Gracie had ever heard, her best friend beamed down at her newborn girl. "Isn't she beautiful?"

Gracie agreed, touching the tiny rosebud face. "What are you going to name her?"

"Merry Grace. Merry, spelled with an 'e' and two 'r's' is for the season, and Grace for my dearest friend."

Gracie cried for the second time that night, but these were happy tears. If she never had a child of her own, she had a namesake.

\* \* \*

When Merrett arrived in New York, he took a cab to the part of the city where he used to work, and coat collar up against the biting wind, walked the streets. The flash of neon lights, the beckon of billboards, and roar of traffic still excited him, but not as much, in the ever-present shadow of the despair he'd almost forgotten. The homeless, druggies, and prostitutes were still there. So were the graffiti-covered walls, crumbling curbstones, and emaciated dogs knocking over garbage cans in alleys that reeked of alcohol and urine. It wrenched his heart and turned his stomach.

When he was finally able to hail another taxi, he was whisked—brakes squealing, cabbie cursing—past the theaters and department stores Holly had loved, past the towering office building housing the City Times, to the neighborhood where he and Holly used to live.

The winds didn't seem as cold there.

Merrett walked by their apartment building, the market where they had shopped, and the movie house. He stopped by the stand where he had bought his morning paper, and felt disappointed to see a different vendor. Sauntering on to the coffee shop he used to visit in the early morning and sometimes late at night, Merrett stopped again.

Maybe it was then—when he stood gazing through the steamy window between letters that spelled 'Hot Coffee' at good old Gus, the owner—that Merrett had the epiphany Gracie thought he'd experienced earlier. Or maybe it was when Gus pumped his hand and gave him coffee and pie on the house, just because he was glad to see him. Whenever... At some point, Merrett knew he was happy to be in the old neighborhood again. Not in New York City, but back in familiar territory with people he knew, and who knew him.

Gracie had said something much like that about being back in a small town, and he'd scoffed, but he'd been wrong. Those things were important to him.

Merrett talked to the doorman at their old apartment building, ate salami on rye at Nickerson's Deli, and walked through Central Park in the snow. Then he dropped by the

City Times to talk to Waldo. The paper had gone to press, and the editor waved Merrett into his office. Merrett took the seat he offered, but refused the cup of coffee. “Tom told me you said I was a valuable employee.”

Waldo raised his bushy eyebrows, lit a cigar, and studied Merrett curiously.

“You never promoted me.”

“And did Tom explain that to you?”

“Not to my satisfaction. I want your story, Waldo.”

“Damned in-laws. I couldn’t find a better spot. That’s the truth of the matter.”

“I worked hard, waiting, promising Holly.”

Waldo bowed his head, clenched the edge of his desk. “I felt so rotten that even though I didn’t want to lose you, I was going to send you out in the field to run a small paper I bought on my own. A daily in Ohio. Probably similar to the paper you run now.”

Merrett began to sweat. The smoke from that damned stogie was choking him. He coughed. He mopped his brow. The job wouldn’t have been exactly what he wanted, but it would have made him feel a helluva lot better to know Waldo trusted him that much.

“Tom tell you that?”

Merrett shook his head.

“It was right after you went home for your thirtieth birthday, and you seemed like you’d had such a great time, I thought you might like the small town atmosphere. And I knew you’d do a fine job with my investment. I got so damned excited, and thinking it would make a dandy belated birthday present, I planned to make a big deal of it. Dinner with me and Doris and you and Holly. Me making the announcement over a toast.”

Merrett’s heart pounded so hard that he thought he might have a heart attack.

“I called Holly. You know how women are about special occasions. I thought she’d like to choose the place. And...” Waldo’s grin faded. Taking a deep breath, he sat back to study Merrett’s face. “I hope this isn’t bothering you, but you deserve to know...Holly said she couldn’t face living in a small town again.”

Merrett’s heart stopped pounding. He held his chest, fearing it had stopped altogether. Did heart attacks happen like that?

“Naturally, I couldn’t make you the offer after that. I wanted to do you and me a favor, not break up your marriage and our friendship. Holly asked me not to mention it. She said it would be better if you didn’t know.”

Merrett had never felt so betrayed in all his life. He'd blamed himself for failing Holly, and she'd helped prevent his success.

Waldo pulled a bottle of Scotch out of a drawer, and handed it to Merrett. "You look pale, boy. Maybe I shouldn't have told you, but it's been eating me. I wanted you to know I cared, but my hands were tied."

Merrett stared at the Scotch, remembering how he'd tried to drown in a bottle after Holly died. He didn't know if he would have taken the job, knowing Holly wanted to stay in the city, but he would have known his work was good enough, that he was respected. He handed the bottle back without taking a drink, but shook Waldo's hand. He'd told him what he needed to know, to turn down Tom and Dixon-Pope. Merrett had nothing to prove by staying in New York City.

When he left to have dinner with Tom, he knew he wouldn't tell him about his conversation with Waldo. He might never tell anyone. But he was glad he made the trip, and laid the past to rest. Someday, he'd come back to New York for a visit, and hopefully, not alone.

## Chapter Fourteen

Twenty-four hours had passed since Merrett's scheduled arrival home, and Gracie hadn't heard from him. Was Merrett really unhappy when he lived in New York? Would he be happy there now? Did he love her, even a little? She ran her fingers lightly over the piano keys. The piano hadn't played for days. Its first tune had come into her life the same day as Merrett. Maybe the magic player missed him as much as she did. She'd been miserable ever since he left, afraid he would decide to move. Not phoning proved her suspicions were right, and he was too cowardly to tell her.

"Mirabelle?" she whispered to the empty room. "I could use a happy tune."

She was turning into a loony, talking to imaginary specters. She wanted to tell Merrett she couldn't go to the Reporter's party with him tomorrow night, but it might be too soon to call. He and Kirsten might not be home from Christmas shopping yet. If she waited too long, they'd leave for the ballet. Deciding she needed something to do, she gathered some presents to wrap, and sat cross-legged under the Christmas tree. She'd bought Merry Grace tiny red corduroy shoes with furry white trim, and for Hope's baby-to-be, a pale yellow romper suit. Aunt. Godmother. But never Mother.

Had Mom and Pop ever been eager to have kids? Ever been glad they had them? Lying back on the floor, staring into the fragrant branches of her ornament-bedecked tree, Gracie tried to recapture a happy memory from her childhood...and came up with one. It was a balmy day when Mom, Pop, Grace, and Hope held hands, walking four abreast to Miller's Dairy Bar. It was Hope's second birthday, and they ate ice cream cones sitting on a bench outside. Hope's melted and dribbled down the front of her, and she tried to lick it off, and their parents laughed. Mom had a silvery laugh that sounded like tinkling bells. Pop's was raspy, like a record that's been played until it's worn out.



Not long afterward, Pop lost his job, and Mom became depressed. A few years later, Faith was born, and after that, Mom never laughed again. She said she was sick, but Gracie thought she didn't try to feel good, so she used to give her pep talks. Pep talks? At such an early age? Maybe she was an optimist before she met Merrett. Maybe she didn't get all her hope from him. If he left...when he left...maybe she'd be all right. No. No maybes about it. She'd stood alone before, and could do it again.

But she loved Merrett, and hoped she wouldn't have to.

\* \* \*

"Daddy, this is the mostest fun we ever had," Kirsten exclaimed, as they sat down to lunch at a cafeteria in Washington Square Mall. "We bought a lot of gifts. Only I still haven't bought anything for Gracie, and it's important to find her something good. She has a whole bunch of presents for me under her tree." Kirsten paused, chicken leg halfway to her mouth. "And two for you."

"Only two, and you get a bunch? Does that mean you're more important than me?" Merrett asked, pushing out his lower lip.

Kirsten giggled happily. It was late when he had gotten home last night, and she was already asleep, but he'd kissed her anyway, and she had smiled. This morning, she'd been so eager to start their shopping trip that they hadn't had time to talk. "How is Gracie?" he asked.

"Happy. Linda had a baby, and named it after her. Merry Grace. Merry like in merry Christmas, and Grace for her best friend. Hope's going to have a baby, too, did you know that? Gracie wants her and Frank to come over Christmas Eve, but they're going to his parents' house to tell them about the baby, and take Christmas presents. I told her we might come over so she wouldn't be alone, and she said we didn't have to. She might just buy some Christmas presents and food, and take them to somebody who's lonely."

A lump formed in Merrett's throat. "Maybe you and I could go with her."

"Really?" Kirsten's dark eyes sparkled.

Merrett nodded. "If she'd let us."

"She will. She's really nice. I love her."

His daughter stated it so easily and matter-of-factly. Why did love come so hard to grownups?

“Do you?”

“What?”

“Love her, silly.”

“You don’t call your father silly,” he said sternly.

“You’re just changing the subject because you don’t want to admit it.”

Maybe Kirsten was right, he thought, as they shopped after lunch. Ever since his visit to the City Times, he’d thought of little else except coming home, but was he ready to put his feelings for Gracie into words? “Buy Gracie whatever you want. I’ll pay for it.”

“A diamond ring?” Kirsten asked, grabbing his coat sleeve. “I’ll bet she’d absolutely love a diamond ring.”

“Ab-so-lute-ly,” Merrett corrected automatically.

Kirsten wasn’t listening. She’d spotted a periwinkle cashmere sweater. “Oh, it feels good, and it’s the color of Gracie’s eyes. Can I get her that?”

“It’s perfect for her,” he said.

A gold Minnie Mouse pin caught Kirsten’s eye next. Then she found a rose-flowered silk journal. “Gracie can write in this when she sees Mirabelle, and stuff like that.”

“Has Gracie seen Mirabelle? I thought you were the only one.”

“So far I am, but she will.”

A red dress with a flowing calf-length skirt caught Merrett’s eye, and he bought it, after finding a salesgirl who looked about Gracie’s size. And when the girl held up a tiny red-sequined jacket she said would go well with the dress, he bought it, too. Before he got out of the store, he bought a little black evening bag he chose himself.

The more he bought Gracie, the more he wanted to buy. He chose a gold pen, a satin neck scarf, and a silky blue robe. When he picked out some silly slippers that looked like Tweety Bird, Kirsten giggled. “Spook will pounce on those.”

Merrett almost put them back, but he didn’t.

“There. That’s enough shopping,” Kirsten said, pulling him along toward a candy-striped house in the middle of the mall. “As soon as I talk to Santa Claus, I’m ready to go home and get dressed for The Nutcracker Suite, unless you’d like to get a fudge sundae with whipped cream and a cherry.”

They were passing a jewelry store, and he stopped to look at a case where a solitaire diamond set in a wide gold band sparkled in the store lights. Gracie had long, slender fingers.

“Oh, oh, oh!” Kirsten clapped her hands. “That’s be-yoo-ti-ful. Gracie would love it.”

Merrett wasn’t even sure Gracie was speaking to him. She’d told him to go to New York, but he didn’t think she was happy he went. “That’s an engagement ring. When you give it to a woman, it means you’re asking her to marry you.”

“That’s okay. I think Gracie truly wants to be our mommy.”

“What makes you say that?” Merrett’s sharp tone was due more to his own thoughts than Kirsten’s comment.

“She likes you a lot; I asked her. And she likes me, too. And she goes moony-eyed whenever she talks about Linda’s baby, so I asked her if she wanted one. I thought if she did, we could have a big family.”

Merrett gaped at his daughter. “You asked Gracie if she wanted a baby?”

“Yes, and she said no. It was something she should have done when she was younger. So if she truly doesn’t want to have a baby, I guess she could just have me. I was born when she was younger. Are you going to buy her the ring?”

Merrett took a moment to digest all that information. Running his fingers through his hair, he moved away from the store window. “Gracie might like me, but that doesn’t mean she loves me.”

Kirsten caught his hand. “She almost cried every time I talked about you while you were gone.”

She’d missed him, and he’d missed her.

“I think she loves you, Daddy.”

Maybe she did, and maybe he loved her. Maybe? He smiled and grabbed Kirsten’s hand. There wasn’t a doubt in his mind he loved Gracie, but buying a ring without telling her first was putting the cart before the horse. “Let’s get that sundae, Kirsten.”

“What about the diamond?”

He stared at it through the glass. “Maybe Santa will bring her one.”

\* \* \*

Merrett was standing in the library at home, already wearing his topcoat, when he phoned Gracie. Her sweet “Hello, Gracie speaking,” made his heart race. He couldn’t wait to see her, touch her; tell her he loved her.

“Hello? Special Effects. Is anyone there?”

“I called to apologize. Kirsten and I were just ready to leave for the ballet, when I remembered you wanted to take lessons. I should have asked you to The Nutcracker Suite, Gracie.”

“It’s fine. You two need time alone. Did you shop together?”

“We spent hours and bought lots of good stuff.” He patted the bulging pocket of his topcoat. “Surprises,” he added in a confidential tone.

“Merrett...uh...I was going to call but I thought you were out. I...wanted to tell you something.”

“That you missed me as much as I missed you?” Closing his eyes, he pictured her, the phone cradled to her soft lips. He couldn’t wait to taste that luscious mouth.

Gracie spoke in a rush. “I can’t go to the Daily Reporter’s party like you asked.”

“Why?” Merrett felt like he did when that bully in sixth grade kicked him in the stomach.

“We’ll talk about it later. You’ll be late for the ballet if you don’t go now.”

Kirsten stood in the hall by the front door in her coat and hat, waiting, but he couldn’t leave things this way with Gracie. A thousand things went through his mind, but the words that came out were inane. “You have to go. I’ll be the only one there alone.”

“You can get another date, Merrett.”

Date. The word did strange things to his head. He was dating, and had an engagement ring in his pocket. Love. Marriage. Commitment. He’d come back from limbo and was ready to move on with life and love, but Gracie didn’t know it yet. He should have gone over to her place last night when he got back. He hadn’t told her he loved her, but he’d bought her a ring. What if she wouldn’t marry him? Shrugging his coat off his shoulders, he ran his finger around inside the stiff collar of his white shirt.

She had to. Because dammit, he loved her. “I don’t want to take someone else. I want to take you..”

“Appearing with me would raise questions. Are you prepared to answer them?”

No one had connected the two of them yet, but so what? “I’m game if you are.”

Gracie’s sigh was audible.

“I thought you loved the closeness of a small town, but if that’s what this is all about, I’ll let you off the hook.” It was just an office party, with him giving out Christmas gifts, and he could go alone. He longed to tell Gracie all he’d discovered the past few days, but there was only time enough to reassure her. “You were right when you told me to go to New York. It was a very positive move.”

“You’re going to be late for the ballet, Merrett.”

“Today with Kirsten was a positive move, too,” he persisted. “You were right suggesting I spend more time with her.”

“You’re using the word ‘move’ a lot.”

What difference did it make if he used the same word? “Is something bothering you?”

“What could bother me? Business is booming. Hope and Frank have turned into two lovebirds since they found they’re having a baby. I have a namesake. Everything’s coming up roses.”

Gracie was never facetious or sarcastic, and he couldn’t believe she was now. She had no reason. Merrett ran his fingers through his hair, then realizing he was making a mess of himself when he was taking his daughter out, smoothed it back again. He wished Gracie were there to do it for him. But there was a pregnant silence on her end. “Kirsten told me about your namesake.”

“Merry Gracie is beautiful.” There was a catch in Gracie’s voice. “You should go see her.”

“Why don’t you and I go tomorrow afternoon? We could visit Mama, too. Would you mind that, Gracie?”

“I’d love to see your mother, and Merry Grace.” There was another long pause. Didn’t she want to see him? Had something happened while he was gone? Gracie’s piano started to play in the background. “Listen!” she cried. “It hasn’t played for days.”

“Mirabelle lives,” Merrett said, and was rewarded with Gracie’s honeyed laughter.

“I guess I could go with you tomorrow afternoon,” she said.

\* \* \*

Gracie loved Christmas, but as it grew closer, her time with Merrett grew shorter. She wouldn't go to the Reporter's Christmas party Saturday evening because she couldn't bear to watch him make fools of his employees, handing out gifts and wishing everyone happy holidays, knowing he was going to hand them and the helm of the Reporter over to a stranger. Each day brought him closer to his dream of returning to New York, and her closer to a loss too deep to bear. But this afternoon, he'd be with her, and she planned to enjoy every moment.

Gracie riffled through her cookie cutters, and spread a pastry cloth on her kitchen table. Pushing up her sweater sleeves, she measured sugar and flour in a flurry. With two hours between lunch and Merrett's arrival, she had to occupy her time, and she'd been too busy, until now, to make cookies for friends and neighbors. But with the holiday so near, business was at a lull, and would be, until New Year's came and went—and she was thirty-years-old.

Thirty and unmarried like Mirabelle. Childless and lonely. "The divorced equivalent of an old maid with a cat," she told Spook, who was worrying a catnip mouse on the floor nearby. Merrett, unlike Mirabelle's beloved, however, was leaving of his own accord.

Did the piano's playing again mean anything?

"What could it mean?" Gracie scoffed aloud. Only fools believed in signs from a ghost, and she was no fool. Leveling off a measuring cup of butter, she plopped it into a mixing bowl and creamed it and the sugar. Sifting in flour, she continued to work the dough, her mind moving faster than her hands. She'd dreamed since she was fourteen of marrying Merrett, but that dream would be dashed to bits forever, today.

How could he? The Reporter had been part of Ferndale since it was incorporated, and always been locally owned and run. How could Merrett sell it to Dixon-Pope? She slapped the dough onto the pastry cloth, and pummeled it with both hands.

Spook hopped up on a chair to watch with curious green eyes. Holding her breath, Gracie worked faster, smoothing and rolling the dough. "Get down," she ordered.

The black kitten cocked his head at her. Her hands were too messy to take hold of him. He'd recently become outgoing. And nosy.

Gracie quickly cut shapes and laid them on cookie sheets. Sticking them in the oven and setting the timer, she breathed a sigh of relief. Spook had run off somewhere, and it

was snowing, giant flakes that would add a fresh layer of white, brightening the landscape. Pouring powdered sugar for frosting into a bowl in a cloud of white dust, Gracie spotted Margaret Riggs at her window across the way and waved.

Margaret smiled and pointed.

“What?” Gracie mouthed the word and shrugged.

Margaret frantically pointed down.

Gracie had forgotten to move Spook’s chair, and he was back with his front paws on the table. She squealed. He dipped one paw into the sugar. She grabbed for the cat and he leaped--smack into the middle of the bowl.

Powdered sugar filled the air. Spook sneezed, spattering even more sugar. Yowling, he jumped out, tipping the bowl and sending white powder everywhere: in Gracie’s face, in her hair, all over the floor and table. Wiping her eyes with the hem of her apron, she looked across the way, and saw Margaret and Homer holding their bellies and laughing.

Gracie laughed, too—until Spook streaked through the house in ghostly white, leaving a trail behind him. She was hot in pursuit when the doorbell rang. She threw open the door, and Merrett flashed her a dimpled grin. “Is it snowing in here, too?”

“You’re early,” she accused, as Spook shot into the living room. Her jeans and red sweatshirt were spattered with flour, sugar, and bits of dough. She touched her hair, knowing she must look a mess. “Way early.”

Laughing, he motioned her to the hall mirror. Her face looked like a sheet with two holes cut in it for eyes. Her hair looked as if she’d developed terminal dandruff. She burst into laughter.

“I thought Mirabelle opened the door,” Merrett said.

Gracie swatted him, and got sugar on his chin.

He grabbed her, and pulled her into his arms. “Now see what you’ve done?” he said, rubbing his sugary face against hers.

“See what you’ve done,” she said, leaning back to look at his white-dusted jacket. “I rubbed off on you.”

“In more ways than one.” He grazed her lips with his. “That will have to do until we catch that cat of yours.”

A few moments later when the two of them were stalking Spook on their hands and knees in the parlor, Spook made a run—from behind the piano to beneath the chair. “Gotcha!” Merrett pounced and came up with the cat by the scruff of the neck.

“My hero,” Gracie teased, holding her arms out to take the kitten.

“No, you don’t.” Merrett shook his head. “If anyone’s going into those arms, it’s not going to be the cat.” He set Spook inside the bathroom, shut the door, and held out his arms.

She went into them, knowing she was a fool for wearing her heart on her sleeve, but unable to help herself. Merrett took her mouth with his, hungrily devouring her kisses, and when he probed with his tongue, she answered with hers. His whisper was husky in her ear, his breath hot. “I missed you.”

She kissed his neck as she snuggled into it. “I’m glad you’re home.” At least for a little while. Telling her nagging mind to shut up, she kissed his neck again.

Merrett held her away, his face far too serious, his jade eyes too dark. “We have a lot to talk about, Gracie.”

“I...uh...need to clean up the kitchen and change if we’re going to see Merry Grace.”

“There’s plenty of time. It’s only noon.”

The timer dinged in the kitchen. “Whoops. My cookies are done.”

\* \* \*

While Gracie slid a spatula under each golden Christmas cookie, Merrett leaned against the doorjamb and watched. When every star, tree, angel and Santa was cooling on a wire rack, she opened the door to the pantry and took out a broom. He took it away. “Don’t you want to hear about my trip to New York?”

“There’s still this powdered sugar mess to deal with. Like you said, we have plenty of time.”

All he really wanted to tell her was that he loved her, but she wouldn’t stay in one spot long enough. When he took the broom, she grabbed up a sponge, and began washing the table. Her efforts were frenetic. Why was she so reluctant to talk? Had she changed her mind about him? Had he only imagined she cared?



Sighing, he made a clean sweep of Spook's path, and when he came back to the kitchen, Gracie was just finishing up there. "Now I'll make myself presentable," she said, and disappeared up the stairs.

Left alone, Merrett sat morosely at the kitchen table. He wanted to tell her he loved her. He wanted to tell her about his epiphany.

Half an hour passed before Gracie came back, looking tantalizing in a soft green sweater and slacks, her hair pulled up with a few lemony curls spilling down her back.

"You smell as delicious as those cookies," he said, kissing her cheek, and inhaling her honeyed scent.

She followed his gaze and laughed. The cookies shaped like trees were the biggest, and she handed him one, then set the others in her workroom and closed the door before letting Spook out of the bathroom. "Ready to go?" Gracie moved rapidly to the coat tree.

"I might as well be. You're on a roll." For some reason, she didn't want to talk, and maybe it was just as well they got their visits over with. It was snowing hard, and could accumulate fast.

Sunny Haven was closest, so Merrett drove there first. His mother was in her room, looking out the window toward the bird feeder. "Mama? I brought you company."

Gracie stepped forward to take her hand.

"Did you know it's almost Christmas?" Mama asked.

Gracie nodded. "Do you like Christmas?"

"Oh, yes. I love it. He does, too," she said, pointing to Merrett. "Don't you, boy?"

"Yes, Mama. I do." He met Gracie's gaze before leaning down to kiss his mother's cheek.

His mother didn't say anything else while they were there, just listened, but when they left, she held out a hand to Gracie. "Come back. Will you?"

Gracie's eyes glistened. "I'll come back on Christmas," she promised.

The drive to Linda and Mark's was quiet, but inside their bungalow, all hell broke loose. A furry mutt half as big as a house loped in circles, barking, and in an adjoining room with a closed door, baby Merry Grace squalled.

“Stop, Dumbbell,” Mark ordered the dog. Wagging his tail, it stopped long enough to beat a rapid tattoo against the table leg. “He’s only a pup, but you’d never know it by his size.”

“I think he’s cute,” Gracie said, petting the animal’s huge furry head.

“I bought him for Linda for her birthday, thinking all poodles were little and cute. He’s a standard poodle and a case of mistaken identity.”

“This house isn’t big enough for a dog and baby, too,” Linda declared, peeking around the door. “Put him in the garage, Mark, so I can bring Merry out.”

Mark left with the dog, and Linda sat down with Merry Grace on her lap.

“Gracie was right,” Merrett said. “She’s beautiful.” He separated the baby’s tiny fingers, and she grabbed one of his tightly. She had a fine layer of dark fuzz on her head, big bright eyes, and was incredibly tiny. “Strong, too. And smart.” He stroked her gently rounded cheek.

“Wait until you hold her.” Linda eased Merry into his arms. She smelled like baby powder. Soft and warm, she felt good, too. It had been a long time since Kirsten was this small, and somewhere deep inside him, he felt a longing so strong it was painful. Making a funny little sound, Merry stuck out her tongue. After wiggling a little, she settled down and closed her eyes. Merrett’s heart swelled with love for Gracie’s namesake.

He looked up to find her watching them, an intent expression on her face. His eyes met hers, and she looked away.

Linda opened the package with the large stuffed giraffe he’d brought the baby, and Merrett smiled at Gracie’s excitement. She touched the giraffe’s long eyelashes, and laughed. She waggled the toy in the air over Merry, even though she was asleep.

Slowly laying the stuffed animal down, Grace touched the baby’s tiny face. Her fingers. And even her toes, turning back the blanket and slipping off one bootie. She’d flatly stated she didn’t want a child, but she appeared enchanted.

“Want to hold her?”

“No.” Gracie sat back and folded her hands in her lap. “It might wake her if we switched her around.”

“She’s a sound sleeper. You took her bootie off, and she didn’t wake up.”

Gracie picked a picture up off the table to admire it, diverting their hosts' attention, but not Merrett's. Was she afraid if she grew close to Merry that she'd want a baby of her own?

He bent his head over the baby again. Her tiny lips were pursed into a half-smile. He'd heard when a baby smiled in its sleep, it was dreaming of angels. He wanted a baby, a boy preferably, but looking at the little girl in his arms, he knew he'd be happy with either one.

If Gracie absolutely refused to have kids, was he willing to limit his future? He had Kirsten whom he adored, but would that be enough? Ready to move on at last, he was hungry for life and all it had to offer. He had a diamond for Gracie, and he loved her, but would he have to sacrifice his dream of another child?

An earsplitting howl split the air. "Dumbbell doesn't like the garage," Mark pointed out needlessly. "I'd better let him in before the neighbors call to complain again."

Linda took the baby from Merrett, put her in the bedroom and closed the door. Mark opened the door to the attached garage, and the dog came bounding in. Linda came back to turn the baby monitor on, and sighed. "Dumbbell likes Merry Grace too well to leave them in the same room."

The Donvillough's life had turned into a zoo, and Merrett, impatient for time alone with Gracie, rose to go. He wanted to tell her about his trip to New York and his revelation, before he had to go home and dress for the company party. When she rose, too, he slipped his arm around her waist, and she looked up at him in surprise. Recognizing another error of omission, public display of affection, he drew her close to kiss her cheek.

She stared up at him, mouth open. Tapping it closed with his finger, he grazed her lips. Blushing, she pulled away. Linda's eyes met Merrett's, and she smiled approvingly. The dog nuzzled his hand, and he petted it. Gracie leaned down to hug its neck.

"Kirsten would love him."

"No," Merrett protested, "she wouldn't."

"She's always wanted a pet," Grace explained to their hosts.

Gracie was getting even with him for kissing her in front of friends. "I'm sorry," he whispered in her ear. Aloud he said, "Dumbbell would eat Mama's dog Tippy in one bite."

“You could keep Dumbbell outdoors.” Gracie’s violet eyes sparkled with mischief. “There’s plenty of room for him to run at your place.”

“It’s cold. He’d freeze.” The dog licked his hand.

“He likes you, and his fur coat will keep him warm.”

“He’d eat us out of house and home.” Dumbbell sat back on his haunches to gaze at Merrett with soulful eyes. He remembered asking Mama when they were going to get a real dog. This one was real all right.

“You can have him free,” Linda said.

“The biggest, cheapest gift you’ll find your daughter this year,” Mark put in eagerly. “And you’d be doing us a favor.”

Gracie’s eyes pleaded with him. “He’s so cute.”

She was serious. “About as cute as a Mack truck, but to make so many people happy...” Merrett threw up his hands. “We’ll take the beast.”

\* \* \*

Dumbbell dragged Merrett up Gracie’s front sidewalk. The dog’s big feet threw snow all over Merrett’s pants, and he cursed under his breath while Gracie smiled. He was sweet to do this for Kirsten and the Donvilloughs.

“What are we going to do with this ox?” Merrett grumbled, stomping his feet off on the doormat.

The dog and the man on the other end of the leash were snow-covered, and Gracie handed Merrett the broom she kept by the front door. He swept the dog’s back, and it rolled over and put all four paws in the air. The porch was covered with blowing snow, and the dog got his back snowy again. “Dumbbell!” Merrett gave him a nudge in the ribs with the broom before brushing him again.

Gracie opened the door. Dumbbell pulled loose from Merrett, and bounded. Spook hissed. The dog stopped in its tracks. Spook hissed again, and Dumbbell skulked under the hall table. Gracie was still laughing when she shut the bathroom door behind her kitten. “Maybe he’ll be afraid of Tippy, too.”

Merrett took off his jacket while warily watching the dog, lying with his head between his paws. Gracie hung up her coat, and shook her head to fluff her snow-dampened hair.

“What are we going to do with the mutt until Christmas?” Merrett asked.

“I suggest you give him to Kirsten right away.”

“I can’t do that. He’s a Christmas present.” He grinned devilishly. “I was thinking maybe you could board him.”

“Getting even with me...?” Gracie stopped, seeing Merrett’s expression turn serious.

He drew her into his arms. “The way that snow is piling up, I may have to spend the night.”

“You have a party to attend.”

“It’s only four o’clock, and I have until seven.” He kissed her nose, and she smiled. He kissed her lips, and she tasted his. He held her tightly, and she wrapped her arms around him. It felt heavenly to be in his arms again. She’d missed him so much. “We have plenty of time.”

“For what?” she asked, smiling into his shoulder.

“Whatever we want and I want you.”

There was laughter in his voice but she knew he was serious, and she seriously wanted him, but they couldn’t. Any moment now, he’d make his declaration that he was moving back to New York, and she wasn’t about to become his going away present. “Merrett...” She pushed gently against his chest. “You know how I feel.”

“I have something to say that may change your mind.” His wonderful green eyes shone with some emotion she’d never seen before. “We have to talk, Gracie.”

His words sent tremors through her, but she led him to the sofa in the sitting room. Sinking down beside him, her heart beat so fast that she felt faint. “If that’s what you want.”

“Actually, I want to make love.” He flashed her a dimpled smile. “But I have things to say first. Things I should have said before now. No.” He shook his head. “I’m putting the cart before the horse again.”

His hair tumbled down on his forehead with the motion, and she pushed it back. She would be afraid to ask, if he didn’t look so vulnerable. “What is it, Merrett? What cart? What horse?”

He leaned his head back, closed his eyes, and retraced his steps in New York for her. When he started talking about his old neighborhood and a shop where a man named Gus gave him pie and coffee on the house, Merrett slowed the pace of his story, a half-smile on his face. “You’d think after a year he would have forgotten me, but he remembered, and was so glad to see me, I could hardly believe it.”

Merrett turned to grasp her arms, and looked deep into her eyes. “I was happy to see him, too, and it came to me then, that’s what I miss about New York. The friendliness of people in the old neighborhood and familiar places. Not the bright lights and sounds of the city, or walking a beat and turning in my story, but the man who sold me my morning paper and the dry cleaner and everyday people, like Gus.” Merrett gave Gracie a little shake. “Do you understand what I’m saying? My neighborhood was a small town within a city, and I loved it.”

She felt certain she’d missed something important, but was too confused to know what to say.

“I’m a small town reporter, not a big city guy.” Merrett grinned broadly, his green eyes glowing, his dimple deepening. “I like knowing people, and having them know me. I’d been away from Ferndale so long I felt more at home in my neighborhood in New York, but that will be easy to change, now that I know I’m here to stay. How’s that for an epiphany?”

Gracie sat on the edge of her seat, afraid that she was dreaming. He drew her into his arms and held her tightly “I’m not going to sell the Daily Reporter and move. I’m staying right here, Gracie.”

She understood those words perfectly. Tears came to her eyes. “Oh, Merrett.”

The planes of his face softened, and his emerald eyes shone. “We want the same things, sweetheart. I lost my place in life and my way for a while.” He hugged Gracie tightly to him. “But I’m back now.”

Gracie smiled up at him through her tears, caressing his dear face.

“There are people in Ferndale just like those in my old neighborhood. Sandy at the diner. Will at the gas station and tree lot. Gracie at Special Effects.” She smiled, and he kissed the tip of her nose. “I don’t want to live in New York, and work at the Herald for Tom, and let Dixon-Pope have my newspaper. I want to become the best damned editor the Ferndale, Indiana, Daily Reporter ever had. And I want you by my side.”

Gracie's breath came so rapidly, she was sure she'd hyperventilate. Surely Merrett didn't mean what she thought he did. He held both her hands tightly, and looked deep into her eyes. "I love you, Gracie."

"You love me?" She looked at him in awe. "You love me?"

"I do," he said softly. "I should have told you before, but I didn't know. Well, maybe I knew, but didn't recognize the truth."

He looked so bewildered and so adorable, Gracie fell, laughing and crying, into his arms. He'd said the magic words she'd longed to hear. "I love you, too, Merrett."

Their kiss was so long and blissful, she raised her mouth for another. She just didn't dare think what the future might or might not bring.

"I fell half-in-love with you the night I first kissed you, and in a corner of my heart, I think that love stayed alive."

Happy tears streamed down Gracie's cheeks. "I've always loved you."

A long, extremely delicious kiss later, Merrett slowly released her. "Your heart is beating so loudly I can hear it."

Gracie heard something too but it wasn't...she burst into laughter and pointed. Dumbbell was watching them and wagging his tail. Thump, thump, thump.

Merrett's laugh was deep and uncontrolled. She'd never seen him like this. Gracie's hopes and happiness rose another level.

"How could we have forgotten the beast was still at large?"

"Large beast at large," Gracie said, giggling.

The dog cocked his head, and tongue hanging out, watched them.

"I think you should give him to Kirsten today," Gracie said, poking Merrett in the ribs.

"And ruin her surprise on Christmas morning? No way." Rising, he held out a hand to Gracie. "I only have an hour to get ready for the Daily Reporter's party. Since you refused to go, I'm taking the squirt as my date."

Gracie felt like dancing and singing and kicking up her heels on Main Street after Merrett's declaration of love. If he hadn't asked Kirsten, she would have changed her mind and gone, but he was a good father. "You can leave Dumbbell here until Christmas if you like."

"Now that's love," he said, grinning down at her.

“Or insanity,” she said, tracing his dimple.

Merrett opened the door, and looking past his broad shoulders, Gracie gasped. “The snow is deep.”

“I wish I could stay,” he said, turning back for one last kiss, “and we could get snowed in together.”

\* \* \*

Gracie missed Merrett the moment he drove away, but feeling joyful, she frosted the cookies she’d baked earlier. She’d shifted the dog and cat, and Dumbbell let out a howl from the bathroom. Trying not to hear the dog’s mournful wail, she laid the cookies in Christmas tins.

The snow, as far as she could tell by the glow of the streetlight, had let up, but the sidewalks were barely visible, so it wasn’t a fit night for delivering cookies. It was a perfect night to curl up with a good book.

Upstairs in her bedroom, Gracie searched for a romance novel she’d bought more than a month ago, and hadn’t started. Finding the album she’d brought down from the attic, she went downstairs to curl up with it instead. Perhaps Merrett would call when the party was over.

Gracie leafed slowly through Mirabelle’s photograph album. She was a beautiful young woman, and her beloved Jonathon was tall and stately. She looked so happy, holding onto his arm, and he looked so proud, gazing down into her eyes. The album pictures started with Mirabelle’s high school graduation, and ended with her being fitted for her wedding gown. Part way through the pictures, Gracie stopped to fix herself a cup of cocoa, and when she picked the album up again, a yellowed newspaper clipping with Jonathon’s obituary fluttered to the floor. Dashing away a tear, she folded it back neatly.

The doorbell rang, and Gracie put the album aside. His death was a tragedy, and she wished somehow, Mirabelle could realize her quest to rejoin him. Gracie glanced at her watch before opening the door. The evening hours had passed quickly, and it was too late for Merrett and Kirsten to stop by.

“I took the imp home to bed, but I couldn’t stay away,” Merrett said, stepping inside with snowy feet to pull Gracie into his arms. “I’m sorry.”



Whether he meant for tracking up her floor or kissing her without taking off his snow-wet coat, Gracie didn't know or care. Kicking the door closed on the outside world, she returned his kiss with all the pent-up hunger of a woman who'd waited fifteen years for the man of her dreams.

And when he raised his eyebrows to ask what he needed to know, she nodded eagerly, and he carried her up the stairs.

Lying in Merrett's arms after their lovemaking, Gracie felt like a whole woman at last. And when he went home in the wee hours of the morning, she lay looking out at the moonlight, content. She was loved.

## Chapter Fifteen

The next morning dawned bright and cold, with a foot of snow. The roads, however, and been cleared during the night, and some kind soul had once again shoveled Gracie's walk. With a neighbor like hers, she might never need to use her shovel.

Happily donning coat, boots, hat and gloves, she delivered cookies to old friends ranging from Mrs. Koch at the bookstore—Merrett's editorial produced a silent donor to help her stay in business—to Dr. Hiram whom Gracie told she might still have babies.

"I remember how happy your mother was when you were born," he said, kissing her cheek, and she felt he'd given her a special gift.

Mom wanted Gracie.

Hours later, when she'd filled her cart at the supermarket with two turkeys and a double order of trimmings, Gracie returned home to find Homer Riggs in her backyard. She'd chained Dumbbell out there, and Homer was just setting an old dog house in place, filling it with straw to keep the dog warm.

"We had this house in our storage shed. Haven't used it in years. Our only child moved clear across country, and we don't have any grandkids. Yet."

She ran inside to get the double batch of cookies she'd saved for the Riggs, and when she went inside again, the phone was ringing. Gracie snatched it off the hook.

"The staff and crew are jubilant over my decision to revamp the Reporter," Merrett announced without preamble. "If I'd known they'd heard rumors about Dixon-Pope and were worried, I'd have made my announcement last night at the party."

"I have a lot to do here today. For starters, I have an editorial to write, assuring Ferndale residents I'm staying, and this paper won't be sold to a conglomerate as long as I live." Gracie's chest swelled with pride. That was her Merrett talking, the one she'd

loved for years. “I also have Christmas shopping to finish, so I probably won’t see you today.”

Disappointment threatened her morning’s joy, but she smiled. “I understand.”

“I love you, Gracie. That’s not going to change.”

“I know, and I love you,” she said tenderly.

“Tomorrow is Christmas Eve,” he announced, as if he’d been the one to make a fabulous discovery. “I want us to be together then. I told the princess that the three of us might visit a needy family together. Would you like that?”

“Oh, yes! And if it’s okay, Merrett, I have one in mind.”

“The one on Edge Road?”

Her eyes filled with tears. “You remembered.”

“I couldn’t forget,” he said softly. “That little girl is you, isn’t she, Gracie?”

Tears spilling unashamedly down her cheeks, she agreed. “I bought the turkey and other food.”

“Kirsten and I will come over in the morning to help you stuff the bird.”

“She may see or hear the dog.”

“We’ll give him to her first thing. No reason to wait one more day to give her what she’s always wanted. Agreed?”

Merrett was asking her opinion, saying “we.” A wave of excitement washed through her. With his declaration of love, she discovered a new strength. She could cope with Kirsten as her daughter, she was sure.

A wave of fear smacked into the one of joy. He’d always wanted a son.

Gracie thought about how it would feel to hold a baby of her own in her arms. Small and perfect, soft and warm like Merry Grace. Only her baby would have a tiny dimple and soft brown hair spilling onto its tiny forehead. Her baby. Merrett’s baby. Their baby. Her mother wanted her. But she hadn’t been able to handle motherhood. Was wanting enough?

The thoughts ran around and around in Gracie’s head. While she baked pumpkin pies. While she made cranberry relish. While she broke bread for the dressing she would make in the morning for their Christmas dinner.

It was late afternoon before she took a rest. Lying under the Christmas tree while Spook worried his catnip mouse, she thought about Merrett, smitten with baby Merry. If

only Gracie believed she could be a good mother...but Faith's disappearance once again proved her inadequacy.

Kirsten had alluded more than once to wanting marriage for her daddy and Gracie, and Gracie tried to imagine what life would be like, the three of them together. Would Merrett be willing to live in her house? She loved this place, and could picture them sitting at the kitchen table together, like the Riggs; tucking Kirsten into bed together as they had their child. Gracie and Merrett would give her the room next to theirs, the big sunny one with windows looking out over the backyard where she could watch Dumbbell play. Would she let Gracie furnish it with a canopy bed, or would she object to ruffles and lace?

Spook leaped on the mouse, and it popped out from under him. Turning his head from side to side frantically, he crouched, and narrowed his eyes. The silly cat had no idea where the mouse had gone, but he pounced—on Gracie, landing with a soft thud on her midsection. “Oof!”

Spook stared her in the eye, and she laughed. “You’re a silly baby,” she said, lifting him up to her cheek. He was soft and cute, but nothing like Merry Grace. Gracie’s arms ached to hold a child of her own.

After all this time, why was she having second thoughts? Rising impatiently, she set Spook on the floor, and fetched him his mouse from beneath the piano bench.

The telephone jangled sharply, and Gracie answered in the hall. “Special Effects, Gracie speaking.”

“Did you find my message in the bathroom, the one that said to keep smiling?”

“Is that what that meant?” Gracie couldn’t help chuckling. She was so happy to hear Faithie’s voice. “I could have used another thought or two, like where you were going, and why you left.”

“The mirror wasn’t big enough, and I wasn’t positive I’d go through with my plan. But I am, and can tell you now.”

Gracie clutched the receiver. Surely she wasn’t going to kill herself. Maybe Buck asked her to come back. “Is something wrong?”

“No, something is right for a change. I got a job and a room at the YWCA, and I’m going to enroll in a couple of business classes.”

“Oh, Faith, that’s wonderful! Where are you?”

“Indianapolis, where I’m close enough to come home and bug you once in a while.”

“Even more wonderful. You could have stayed with me, you know.”

“I want to stand on my own two feet, Gracie. It’s time I grew up.”

Nineteen is still young, Gracie wanted to say, but her heart bursting with pride, she whispered, “I’m proud of you.”

“I’m proud of you, too, and that’s why I’m doing this. When I saw what you’ve done, making a life and buying a house, I decided I could do the same if I tried. It won’t be easy, and I may bellyache now and then, but I’m going to make something of myself.”

Gracie dashed away her tears with the sleeve of her sweatshirt. “Where are you working?”

“At a flower shop.” Faith burst into giggles. “Following in your footsteps. The owners are a nice older couple, and they’re swamped with orders for the holiday season. They won’t promise they’ll keep me on after Christmas, but I’m going to show them they can’t do without me. When the job becomes steady, then I’ll move out of the Y into a room or an apartment. This isn’t a bad place to stay, but I’d like someplace quieter and more private.”

“And the classes?”

“Beginning Business and Introduction To Computers. I picked up the entrance forms and class schedules today. Gracie, this goes against the grain, and I would have called you anyway, but could I borrow the money for my class fees?”

“Even if I had to hock Mirabelle, I’d come up with money for that!” Gracie replied, laughing.

“What if I’m really planning to use the money to return to Chicago and Buck?”

“You’re not. I can tell.”

“You always could read me,” Faith said softly. “I never could tell you a lie without you calling me on it. I could never be sad or mad or troubled without you sensing it. You were born to be a mother, Gracie, but not mine.”

“What are you saying?” Gracie tightened her grip on the phone.

“That I’m lucky to have you, and I’ll be eternally grateful you’ve been a mother to me, but it’s time you got married and became a mother for real. Isn’t there someone in your life? I wish I’d gotten to meet that Merrett guy. You’re not getting any younger. You’ll soon be thirty. Don’t you think you should get married?”

Gracie burst into laughter. “You sound like his daughter. He’s a wonderful man, Faith, and I promise to introduce him next time you’re home.”

“Is this an announcement?”

Gracie sobered, considering. Faithie seemed to be turning out okay, after all, and maybe thirty wasn’t too old to be a mother. “Not at this point, but I’ll keep you posted. How soon do you need to pay your fees?”

“As soon as possible, so the classes don’t fill up. I have a new friend, Brad, who owns the dry cleaners next to the flower shop. I could ask him to drive me to your place this evening, if that’s okay. Both shops close at six.”

Another man friend, already.

“Remember the question I asked about me being complicated? Brad’s had some psychology classes, and with his help, I think I’ve figured it out. Mom and Pop didn’t love one another, so their life was miserable. You know how they never kissed or hugged. Well, I wanted love in my life, so I searched for it hard. Too hard. But it’s worse to have the wrong person in your life than to have no one at all.”

Faith thought Mom and Pop were unhappy because they didn’t love one another. Hope thought their problem was poverty. Gracie felt certain having kids at a late age ruined Mom and Pop’s lives. Were she and her sisters like the blind men who had different perceptions of an elephant? Each right from where they stood, but none of them grasping the whole picture? That fable had always intrigued Gracie, but never as much as now.

“Makes sense, don’t you think?” Faith prompted.

Gracie was still reeling from the influence the perceptions, or misperceptions, had played in each of their lives. Faith seeking love in all the wrong places. Hope and Gracie not having kids. But it wasn’t too late. Faith and Hope were making up for lost time, and so could she. Gracie smiled into the mouthpiece of the phone. If Faithie’s friend owned a dry cleaners, he must have his head on straight. And if he didn’t, she did. “I’ll fix dinner for you and Brad, if you like.”

“You’re on. A shoestring budget doesn’t lend itself to great eating.”

“I could...” She’d been going to say, give you a little money. But Faith wanted to stand on her own feet, and it was time to let go. Gracie had influenced her sister in a

positive way. Faith said so herself. All the years she'd never said 'thank you,' and all the years Gracie's spent worrying floated gently away.

"Gracie?" Faith paused, and her voice became husky. "I love you."

Faith hung up quickly, and Grace bawled like a baby; a very happy, proud, totally astounded baby. Or a woman who might at last become the mother of one.

When she finished, she called Dr. Hiram. "I have to know something." She explained that she and her sisters all had different perceptions about the lack of attention they received.

"I thought you knew, Grace. Your mother's depression was clinical. It didn't help that your father came from a strict, almost abusive background. So he wouldn't let your mother visit her parents, who were kind and warm. She loved your daddy, though, and I think she married, expecting to help him. But she couldn't. Help him or you girls. Or herself. I couldn't help her, either. I tried."

So it wasn't age, or poverty, or lack of love between them. After the holidays, the Singleton girls would get together, and Gracie would share the answer to their enigma. Now was a time for happiness and bright lights and joy. Faithie and Hope were okay, and so was Gracie.

\* \* \*

Christmas Eve. Smiling, Gracie stirred the bread crumbs into the celery and onion she was sautéing. Pouring in some turkey broth, she seasoned the stuffing mixture, and the savory smell of sage filled the room. Merrett, who was readying the turkey, opened his mouth for a bite. She gave him a forkful, and he smacked his lips.

"I want a bite, too." Kirsten was washing grapes for Waldorf salad, standing on a stool at the kitchen sink with an apron tied around her. "This is fun. I like us cooking together."

"Me too," Merrett said, giving Gracie a tender smile, as she fed Kirsten a forkful of the mixture. "And talk about fun..."

He couldn't wait to give her Dumbbell. Gracie could see the excitement in his eyes as he began to stuff the bird.

"What, Daddy?" Kirsten abandoned her job to tug on his sleeve.

Merrett's dimple flashed, and his eyes sparkled. "We have a present for you. It's a Christmas present, but it's kind of big, so we want to give it to you today."

Gracie, relishing the word "we," smiled.

Kirsten jumped up and down. The soft-soled sneakers Merrett brought her from New York barely made a sound. "I can't wait. I can't wait."

"Five minutes," he said. "Give me five minutes to get this turkey ready."

"Hurry, Daddy," Kirsten pleaded. Spooning in the last bit of dressing, Merrett laced the turkey shut, and slid the bird into the oven. Kirsten jumped up and down. "Now, you can get my present, and I'll wait under the tree."

The dog was out back, and would be snowy, but Gracie laughed and shrugged. "I'll wait in the parlor with her."

"Why did you put Spook in the bathroom?" Kirsten asked, as she and Gracie sat down beneath the tree.

Dumbbell bounded into the parlor, tail wagging, big feet clumping, and barker in perfect working order. He ran around in circles like he was chasing his tail, before bounding up to Kirsten, and planting his two front paws in her lap. Thrown off balance, the already surprised child looked amazed to find herself on the floor, gazing up into a big mouth with a dangling pink tongue.

"Wow," she breathed.

Dumbbell kissed her thoroughly.

"That tickles." Kirsten giggled and giggled. Fighting her way to a sitting position at last, she threw her arm around the shaggy dog's neck. "Is he really mine?"

"Really and truly," Merrett said, and Gracie nodded.

"What's his name?"

"Dumbbell," Merrett said.

Kirsten's mouth fell open. "I can't help it if I don't know his name."

Her daddy laughed so hard he had to motion Gracie to explain. "Dumbbell is the dog's name, but you can change it."

"I'm going to call him Jingle Bell," Kirsten announced. "He'll still hear the 'bell' part, and know it's his name, but the jingle is much kinder, and besides, it's Christmas Eve." She planted a big kiss on the dog's head and he kissed her in return. Wiping her face, she grinned. "Now, Daddy, give Gracie her early gift."



“I get an early present, too?” Gracie laid her hand on her chest. “Moi?”

“Yes,” Merrett said, laughing. “I’ll just be a minute.” He made a quick trip to the Jeep, and came back with a gift-wrapped box. “For you,” he said, kissing Gracie’s cheek.

Out of the corner of her eye, she caught Kirsten’s surprised expression, and blushing, ducked her head. But Gracie’s embarrassment was quickly forgotten in the excitement of opening her gift. “My first Christmas present of the season,” she said, laying aside the red bow. She carefully removed the brightly striped paper, and folded it neatly. It was too pretty to throw away, and could be used again. Opening the box slowly, she savored the anticipation. She hadn’t received many gifts in her life, and this one, from the man she loved, was special.

“Hurry,” Kirsten urged, and Merrett chuckled.

Gracie licked her lips, took a deep breath, and laid the tissue aside. “Oh,” she breathed, as she uncovered a ceramic tree topper with an angel painted on it. “It’s perfect, and as nearly as I can remember after so many years, just like the broken one.” Impetuously, Gracie wiggled across the floor to wind her arms around him. “You’re thoughtful and kind and wonderful. Thank you.”

Kirsten giggled. “I think you two are getting to be more than friends.”

Gracie set the topper down and crawled across the floor fast to hug and tickle her. “You were in on my surprise, weren’t you?”

Kirsten giggled until Gracie stopped, then slid her arms around her neck. “Did Daddy tell you the good news? We’re never going to move back to New York. I’m glad, aren’t you?”

“Very glad,” Gracie said, hugging her.

Merrett gathered them both into his embrace. “Do you mind if we are more than friends?” he asked his daughter.

“Why would I?” She stared at him in surprise. “It was my idea in the first place.”

\* \* \*

The rest of the day passed in a happy blur. Merrett had asked Marianne Heber about the family that lived in the Singletons’ old house. The girl Gracie had seen was twelve,

and she had a six-year-old brother. The mother and father were both laid off from the large factory that bought out the small one where Gracie's father used to work.

While the turkey baked, Merrett, Kirsten, and Gracie shopped for gifts for the family. Merrett's eyes shone, as he picked out trucks and cars and sports equipment for the boy. Watching him, Gracie's slowly-growing decision took form. Even at the ripe old age of almost thirty, she was exuberant with plenty of love to give. If Merrett wanted to marry her, she'd love to give him a son. And if it was a girl, well, they both loved Merry Grace. And there might even be time enough for them to try again.

She hadn't told him yet what Faith said that changed her mind. Like a precious present, she'd been hugging her sister's loving words and appreciation close to her heart.

Merrett caught her eye occasionally, and smiled, as she shopped for the girl and the parents. Kirsten ran back and forth between her Daddy and Gracie, helping them both, while worrying whether Jingle Bell missed her.

After buying ornaments and picking up a tree at Will Heber's, they drove back to Gracie's where they wrapped gifts. Kirsten played with the dog and cat, switching off until she discovered they could get along by respectfully ignoring one another. Merrett had brought wicker baskets and hampers, and near dusk, they loaded the Jeep.

On the way across town to the house where the Singletons once lived, Gracie told Kirsten about that Christmas Eve fifteen years ago. When she'd heard the story, Kirsten leaned forward in her seat belt to touch her father's shoulder. "You have a really nice family, Daddy."

"I do indeed," Merrett said, flashing her a dimpled smile as he laid his hand on Gracie's knee.

On the way home, Kirsten sighed. "Those kids were sure happy. The mom, too, and the dad almost cried. Is that how your family felt when Gramma and Grampa and Daddy came to your house, Gracie?"

"Yes," she said softly. "That's exactly how we felt."

Merrett turned the corner and slowed down. He was driving by their churches, his on one side of the street, and hers on the other. Church bells were ringing and the sidewalks were filled with churchgoers wrapped up against the winter weather. Candles glowed in the windows and wreaths hung on the doors.

“My place or yours?” Merrett asked Gracie.

“You mean...we’re going to Christmas Eve services?”

“You wouldn’t want to miss them, would you?” She scooted across the seat to kiss him. “That’s what I thought.” He grinned. “It’s about time I started going again.”

“I don’t care which church you choose, as long as we’re together.”

“Grampa’s taken me to our church before. Let’s go to Gracie’s,” Kirsten piped up, and they all agreed.

Gracie was so proud to enter the church with Merrett and Kirsten Bradmoore, she prayed the Lord would forgive her for her lack of humility, and thanked him for the blessings he’d reigned upon her.

“Mama used to make grilled cheese sandwiches, and fix canned tomato soup on Christmas Eve,” Merrett said wistfully, as they reentered Gracie’s house. “It was an easy supper to prepare after a busy day.”

After they ate, Kirsten yawned. “It’s nine o’clock. Time for me to go to bed.”

Merrett looked shocked. “It’s Santa Eve,” Gracie reminded him, and he laughed at himself for forgetting.

“I’ll be back,” he whispered in Gracie’s ear, as he left to take his daughter home to bed.

Gracie, shutting the door behind them, smiled. It had been a perfect day, and now it was going to come to a perfect close.

\* \* \*

Merrett tucked Kirsten in bed, the diamond ring in his pocket, and drove back to Gracie’s house. It was Christmas Eve, and snow was drifting gently to earth. “Silent night, holy night...” The carol on the radio described the peace of the night perfectly.

A tree glowed in Gracie’s parlor window, and another in the bay window upstairs. His breath formed tiny wreaths in the cold air, and his feet crunched crisply on the snow. Merrett tightened his hand on the small box in his pocket. What would he do if she said no? What if she turned him down and refused to be his wife?

Standing on the top step in front of the old Larraby home, Merrett looked up at the thousands of tiny stars twinkling in the sky. She loved him. She’d watched him make

over Merry Grace, an unreadable expression on her face, and she'd made over the baby, too, but refused to hold her. If Gracie turned him down, it would be for one reason. And in that case, there was only one thing to do.

Gracie opened the door and walked into his arms. "I missed you."

"I've only been gone an hour," he teased, before slanting his mouth over hers.

She tugged at his coat while seeking his lips for another kiss. "Take it off."

"Stand still and let me look at you." She complied, a shy smile on her face. She wore a soft blue velvet robe with the zipper just low enough to expose a vee of creamy skin and an edging of ecru lace. Her feet were bare, and her hair hung loose in a cascade of golden curls. She was the most beautiful woman in the world, bar none. Turning his back to take off his coat, he performed a sleight of hand, slipping the jewelry box into his blazer pocket.

"I have a bottle of wine." Gracie's lips were parted, her cheeks bright, and her violet eyes glowing. She didn't look like a woman that was about to say 'no' to marriage. "The realtor gave it to me when I bought the house."

Merrett followed her to the kitchen, where she set out two stemmed glasses, and handed him a corkscrew. "Dom Perignon, no less."

"Not just any old wine is befitting of a woman who buys a house with a ghost."

Gracie's smile was slow and lazy, her stance against the counter casually seductive. Merrett looked out the window. He wanted to whisk her off to bed, but not yet. Across the yards, her neighbors stood in the middle of the kitchen, kissing. Looking back at Gracie, he longed to draw her into his arms. Now.

"What shall we toast?" Gracie asked, touching his arm.

He felt himself harden, and wondered if the ring could wait. Brushing a stray curl from her cheek, he kissed the spot where it had lain. He kissed the tip of her pert nose. He touched her satiny skin just about the ecru lace. She gasped, and gently pushed him away. "The toast," she said, raising the glass he'd filled.

Smiling, he took her glass away and set it on the counter. She sighed her impatience. "The toast," she repeated.

"We need to do something first."

She laid her hand over her the spot he'd kissed. "Our wine will get warm."

Merrett chuckled and took her hand. "This won't take long."

“Well, I’m not sure I like that!” she protested as he led her down the hall. And when he turned into the parlor, she gasped. “Under the Christmas tree?”

“Where else?” He could barely contain his laughter.

Grace’s blush worked its way quickly from the tantalizing dip between her breasts to the roots of her beautiful hair. “In bed?” Her voice was timid.

The laughter spilled from his lips as he dropped to his knees. “That’s not where I usually hand out Christmas presents.”

Her blush deepened, and she sank down beside him, clutching her robe shut. “Presents? Is that what this is all about?”

Quickly sobering, he remembered what this was all about. “I love you,” he said, taking her hand in his. The lines of her face relaxed into a tender smile, and he laid the tiny gold-wrapped package in her hand. “Merry Christmas, Sweetheart.”

Her slender fingers flew; her breath came fast. He smiled at her eagerness as she tore the paper and tossed it aside. The velvet box tumbled free, into her hands, and she looked up at him. He nodded, and she opened it, and stared at the diamond inside.

“Gracie, I want you to be my wife.”

Her lip trembled.

“I know how you feel about having children, and it’s all right. I have Kirsten, and she’s enough, as long as I have you. She is okay, isn’t she? I mean, you can accept her? She has to be part of the package.”

“Merrett.” Gracie threw her arms around his neck. “You dear sweet man.”

“Does that mean yes?” She was smothering him with kisses, but he had to hear her say it.

“Yes. Yes, yes, yes!”

He slowly slipped the ring on her finger. She took a deep breath, and looked up at him through thick golden lashes. He kissed her, but the kiss was short because she wanted to talk.

“Kirsten is fine, I adore her.”

“Good,” he said, and tried to kiss Gracie again.

She held him away. “And Merrett?”

Something in her tone stopped him. “Yes?”

“I want to have your baby.”

His eyes filled with tears. "Are you sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life. But thank you, darling, for offering to make such a sacrifice."

Laughing and crying together, they kissed and kissed, and then Merrett made a toast. "To us," he said. "And a New Year's Eve wedding."

"To us." Gracie touched her glass to Merrett's. "And to holidays and heroes and optimism."

\* \* \*

Merrett and Kirsten arrived at Gracie's at noon on Christmas Day. Kirsten was wearing blue jeans, a red-and-green striped sweater, and a baseball cap. Jinglebell was wearing a red bow adorned with gold jingle bells. "I borrowed them from the stairway decorations," Kirsten whispered behind her hand before heading straight for the tree.

"Merry Christmas, sweetheart." Pulling Gracie into his arms, Merrett nuzzled her hair. "Mmm, honeysuckle."

"I expected a comment on the savory smell of turkey roasting in the oven," she said, raising her lips for a quick kiss.

"That, too," he said, inhaling deeply as he hugged her close.

Gracie leaned away from him to twist the diamond ring on her finger. "Merrett, Kirsten doesn't know about us, does she?"

He shook his head. He'd gone back and bought the ring later, alone. "I thought we'd tell her together."

Gracie led the way to the parlor, where Kirsten was talking to Jingle Bell. Hands behind her back, Gracie looked to Merrett who stood beside her. "We have a surprise, Princess."

"You're going to get married, aren't you?" Kirsten shouted, jumping up.

Arf! Jingle protested, as she stepped on his tail.

"Sorry." Kirsten gave him a quick pat. "Are you?"

"Yes," Merrett said, and Gracie held out her hand to show her the diamond.

“All right!” Throwing an arm around each of them, Kirsten pulled them together in a hug. Jingle forgivingly joined them, sticking his nose in Gracie’s ribs, and Spook appeared from somewhere to hiss at Jingle.

“Let’s open presents now, okay?” Kirsten asked, breaking the clinch.

“So much for sentimentality,” Merrett said, smiling as Gracie handed over Kirsten’s first gift.

“What’s cinnamon tallity?” Kirsten asked. “Wow! An art set. Just what I wanted. Santa Claus gave me some great stuff, too, and so did Grampa and Daddy.”

After she finished opening, Merrett and Gracie exchanged presents. “It’s beautiful,” Gracie said, fingering the silkiness of the red dress, and gasping with pleasure over the matching sequined jacket.

Kirsten glanced over from where she was drawing. “Why didn’t you wait until today to give her the ring, Daddy?”

“When you give a woman an engagement ring and ask her to marry you, princess, the two of you should be alone.”

“Well, okay, but I think she should know...” She grinned at Gracie. “Buying you a diamond was my idea.”

“Thank you,” Grace said, hugging her future stepdaughter. “That’s nice to know.”

Merrett opened his gifts next, and was especially elated with his paperweight. After kissing his bride-to-be in deep appreciation, he rose. “Dad’s really pleased you invited him to dinner. Just wait until we tell him our big news.”

“When we visit your mother afterward, she may not understand, but I’d like us to tell her, too.”

Merrett pulled Gracie close. “You are one helluva great woman.”

Harry agreed later, but in different words, when he gave a toast at dinner. “To my son, who’s made me very proud, and to the brave, beautiful woman he loves.”

Kirsten raised her Shirley Temple. Jingle Bell thumped his tail against the table.

It was—without a doubt—Gracie’s best Christmas ever. She’d found love with her holiday hero and a warm loving family, with promises of a baby boy with a dimpled smile--all her wishes come true. As she clinked glasses with Merrett, she wondered how he knew to whisper, “Merriest Christmas ever, Gracie.”

## Epilogue

Gracie sank into the depths of the feather mattress, next to her husband, happier than she had ever been. Their short, but oh-so-sweet, honeymoon was over, during which they'd started trying to make a little brother for Kirsten.

The diamond on her left finger caught the sparkle of light coming in the window, and next to it, nestled a plain gold band. Once, Merrett had given her the gift of hope. Now he'd given her the gift of certainty that happiness lay ahead.

A breeze whooshed unmistakably across her bed, and Gracie half-sat up. The window was open, but she didn't remember Merrett raising it. A blur of white crossed the room and paused on the windowsill. Gracie blinked once, twice, and the window was closed! But outside, a blur of white crossed the dark night sky, headed directly upward.

Was Mirabelle headed home, at peace at last, now that she'd brought love and marriage to hers and Jonathon's earthly home?

The End





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