



## SMALL GIFTS, A Jewels of the Quill Christmas Anthology EXCERPTS

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**"When Rudolph was Kidnapped"**  
**(A Mischief in Moonstone Story, Book 1)**  
**by Christine DeSmet (Dame Moonstone)**  
**Excerpt**

©Christine DeSmet

Chapter 1

"He bit me, Miss Hagan! Marcus bit me! And he socked me in the gut!" Gretchen Johnson fell onto the snow in her pink snowsuit and boots, kicking and bawling as if in the throes of a theatrical death.

Ordinarily, Crystal Hagan would count to ten before charging into the middle of a first-graders' fray, but not when the thermometer placed the wind chill factor at twenty-below zero earlier that morning in Moonstone, Wisconsin. With the weather so bad, she only brought her thirteen students out for ten minutes right after lunch, just enough to help them settle down for the afternoon. Otherwise, they acted like Mexican jumping beans, though Marcus, ever challenging her, had reminded her once that those were actually moths trying to break out of their cocoons.

Crystal called out, "Marcus, come here this instant or you're not going with us to see Rudolph this afternoon."

Marcus stood atop the snow mountain the plow had created after two feet of snow hit recently in Moonstone, a town of three hundred huddled on the shore of Lake Superior. Other boys and a couple of girls allowed in Marcus's kingdom popped their heads over the snow mountain. They made Crystal smile. They looked like a row of baby dragons, but instead of fire breathing out of them, their mouths and noses spewed frost onto the icy air.

Looking up at the mountain of snow taller than she, Crystal said, "All of you play nice or Santa won't be coming either." She hated using that trump card, but teachers could get desperate. She still had her fingers crossed that Randy Mellen didn't back out on this date, too. His dentistry practice in Superior kept him too busy as of late, but when he'd called last night to postpone their date, he'd promised to make up for it by showing up in a Santa Claus suit today and tomorrow for the kids.

Crystal flagged Marcus down off the mountain, grabbed the little boy's arm and marched him over to Gretchen. "Show me where he bit you, Gretch."

Through blubbering and tears, and sucking at the air, the six-year-old girl finally said, "I don't remember."

Marcus broke into laughter. "See? She's lying. Maybe she can't go see Rudolph because she lied. No Christmas presents, Gretchy Vetchy."

"Stop that. Santa brings presents to everybody who's nice. It's time to go inside. Line up, everybody."

Somehow, she knew Marcus would create another disaster. He had a way of stirring up the other children. She thought about canceling their walk across the town Square from

the school to see Rudolph. The morning hadn't started well, and for the first time in years, trouble brewed over the live animal crèche created every holiday season for the village by Crystal.

Only a few hours earlier, before school started, she'd pulled the livestock trailer with her four-wheel drive Grand Cherokee into place on the snow-covered lawn area of the mansion long known as the North Pole. When she dropped off her reindeer and the donkey she'd met with protesters-the couple volunteering to play Mary and Joseph, and Mayor Bob Winters.

Pulling down the thick, woolen stocking cap over her long blonde hair, she got out of the truck to face Jeri and Kirk Kaminski who rushed up to her before even one of her tall boots sunk into the snow. She could barely see their faces, what with the fur hoods pulled tight against the nippy weather. Jeri's breath had created a ring of white frost on the blue woolen scarf she wore wrapped around her face.

"Enough is enough. I'm not standing out here on this property any more freezing my toes off. I want to be paid."

Not a very saintly thing for "Mary" to say, Crystal thought. "We all volunteer. I don't get paid to do this, Jeri. But the kids love it. Everybody loves it."

Kirk shook his head. More flumes of steam hit the air. "I'm out of a job."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

"Because of the old fart who owns the land under this snow right here." His thumb pointed at the mansion behind where they stood. "If he thinks he can lay me off, then watch me freeze my toes off from behind his warm windows, he's got a screw loose."

With that, they got into their pickup truck and drove away. Just like that she'd lost Mary and Joseph. Confused about what was going on, she didn't have long to wait for clarification.

Mayor Bob Winters, his portly girth covered in a camouflage snowmobile suit and blaze orange stocking cap, had trundled up to her next. He'd turned sixty recently without grace. The scarlet capillaries on his face from too many brandy old-fashions had turned to a shade of purple this morning. "No more live animals, Crystal. Take them home. Now."

At five-foot, ten inches, she stood eye-to-eye with the mayor. "Come on, Bob, we've done this Nativity for years. What's going on?"

"These are what's going on." He took several loose papers out of a pocket and waved them at her. "Letters of complaint. Mostly about me, for condoning such a thing."

She ripped the letters out of his hand and perused them. "They're all in the same handwriting. Bob, I'm sure it's just a prankster. Nobody's ever complained about the Nativity scene. Besides, we're on private land."

"That could be who's behind this. Old Henri LeBarron. The old coot is probably certifiable. Gotta be some reason he hasn't come out of that mansion in five years."

The Nativity scene was her very own idea to help make the town festive and attract more shoppers every year on the Saturday two weeks before Christmas. Knowing she couldn't construct the small, three-sided, roofed manger on public land, she'd sent a letter to Henri LeBarron, now in his eighties, asking his permission to use the generous front lawn of his mansion where she and Bob stood that morning.

The estate overlooked Lake Superior in the back, though nobody she knew remembered being invited to enjoy the sight. Ironically, the reclusive Henri had once played Santa for celebrations in Moonstone, but that was a couple of decades ago, when Crystal was in college and away. Now forty-three, and anchored in the harbor community, she bristled with the feeling of betrayal as she looked at the three-story home, a grand affair long ago dubbed the North Pole by children because of Henri's stint as Santa.

Indeed, the place looked like Santa's house. Her first graders said the detailed arches painted in red looked like eyebrows over windows and doors. They said the drifts whipped by the storm and hanging precariously over the eaves of the green roof reminded them of frosting on a giant cupcake.

She handed the letters back to Bob then went about unloading her pet reindeer and donkey. "I can't believe Henri would do this. He gave me permission years ago. I have it in writing, Bob."

"Yeah, and Kirk had an employment contract in the coal yards in the Superior harbor. Which Henri LeBarron put up for sale just yesterday then started in on downsizing the work force to make the deal look good."

"He's doing that at Christmastime?" With her hands on the halters of the animals on either side of her, she paused coming down the short ramp to stare in disbelief at Bob.

"I've been on the phone all morning. Twenty-eight families from around Moonstone are affected by the old bastard's actions. Talk about putting coal in the stockings of children literally."

"It doesn't make sense, unless Henri needs the money. But I always assumed he had all the money in the world." She looked at the mansion, the windows dark in the dim light of the winter's morning. Everybody knew Henri had sold his ownership of a Lake Superior cargo shipping business years ago. Had he run through his millions? An ugly thought struck her heart.

"You don't suppose he's going to sell the mansion, too? This has been the North Pole forever, and the last piece of private land on the entire Square. What will happen to the holiday crèche?"

The crèche had quickly become a tradition she loved doing just to see the smiles on kids and their parents' faces at the holiday. There was something about petting animals that brought out the best in people. She led Rudolph and Gracie the donkey into place inside the protective shelter of the plywood Nativity stable. With golden straw so deep it touched their bellies they would stay cozy. Both were used to the cold Wisconsin winters. Today was Friday, the trial run to acclimate them to the lean-to for tomorrow's big day when they hoped to draw shoppers to town. So far, the animals loved the adventure, while Bob did not.

He waved the anonymous letters at her again. "If I end up getting sued over this holiday display, you're going to have to pay the lawyer's fees. This dang Nativity thing on the old coot's land was your idea."

He'd stomped away, kicking at the snowbanks along the sidewalk.

Now, herding her class toward the school, she glanced over at the LeBarron home, pines flanking it in the front yard. What kind of existence did Henri have these days? Everybody saw his helper, a mysterious man called Leonard Moline, skulk in and out of the grocery store now and then, but the man was so creepy nobody engaged in talk with him, not even about the weather. Maybe Moline was behind Henri's sale of the coal yards. Certainly he had no allegiance to Moonstone or any of the other small towns dependent on ship yards and train yards coming together in Duluth-Superior. Maybe he was lobbying for Henri to move south now, where it didn't reach thirty-below at night or even have a real winter.

Despite being bundled up and wearing her thermal t-shirt and leggings under her clothes, Crystal shivered with dread. There certainly was some kind of dirty dealings going on under the innocence of the white snow. With a heavy loss of jobs, land and home values in Moonstone would plummet. Residents losing their jobs would need to move away, and they'd get next to nothing for their homes. Who would want to move here? Some Christmas season this would be.

Suddenly, Gretchen broke ranks and tackled Marcus in the snow.

"Gretchen Johnson, stop that."

But the little imp was hot for revenge. She and Marcus rolled about, snow flying as their arms and stubby legs flailed. The other students took sides as if this were a Packers-Bears game with everything on the line. "Go, Marcus! You got 'im, Gretchen! Hit him harder!"

Crystal hauled both wiggling snow figures upright. "When I ask you nicely to come in, I expect you to respect me and come along."

Marcus, in even greater theatrics than Crystal, fell backwards, playing dead in the snow. Crystal sighed. He stiffened his limbs and squeezed his face tight, an act that many first graders seemed to do as they bridged from the age of temper tantrums on store floors to discovering new curse words from older children. Crystal wasn't looking forward to that stage either. She picked up the stiff Marcus and carried him into the school. There was an advantage to being tall and tough from farm work. She could pick up a child as if he were a naughty puppy gnawing on something he shouldn't.

"Ouch!" she yelped when Marcus pulled a strand of her hair escaping from under her wool cap. "That's it."

Instead of taking a right to her classroom, she turned left and marched with him down the yellow hallway to the principal's office. This would be the third time in as many weeks that she'd end up in a meeting with Lisa and Lowell Dane, Marcus's parents. She was on the verge of calling in Gretchen's parents as well. What more could go wrong today?



**"Special Delivery"**  
**by Carrie S. Masek (Dame Topaz)**  
**Excerpt**

©Carrie S. Masek

No one should cry on Christmas Eve.

Feeling every one of her sixty-seven years, Margaret wiped away a tear and forced her creaky knees to the damp lawn. The winter rains hadn't yet broken San Diego's annual drought, but Tranquil Gardens kept the grass thick and green with daily watering. Dots of water clung to the blades and glistened in the setting sun like tinsel.

When she was younger, Margaret spent the day before Christmas decorating the tree and roasting turkey. Even after her divorce, she always managed to take the day off. Half the kids in the neighborhood would gather in her kitchen to string popcorn, drink cider and munch cookies. Christmas Eve was pine-scented, oven-warm and onion-stuffed, full of high-pitched laughter and off-key carols. Christmas Eve was the best day of the year-if you had a family. Margaret didn't. Not anymore. For the last two years, she'd spent the holiday in the cemetery.

There were no headstones, only flat, rectangular plaques, set low to avoid lawnmower blades. Margaret laid the paper-wrapped bouquet beside her and traced the letters on her daughter's marker. *Karen Parkhurst. Rest in Peace.*

The evening breeze ruffled Margaret's hair and cooled her tear-dampened cheeks. She glanced at her watch. It was already five, but she should have time to finish up before the bus came. Despite the chill seeping through her slacks, she took clippers from her purse and trimmed the grass around the plaque. When she leaned forward to reach the farthest corner, her shoulder cramped. The clippers fell from her hand. Margaret sat back and tried to rub away the lingering ache. She really should call Dr. Guilder. Her bursitis was getting worse.

At least she'd tended the grave, leaving it neat and tidy for another week. She lifted last week's flowers from their vase and unwrapped the new ones.

Margaret had once dreamed of owning a house with a red-tiled roof and flowers in the yard. She sighed. Nowadays, she lived in an extended care facility and only planted flowers in this cemetery vase. She arranged the white carnations, Karen's favorite, around a small poinsettia and added baby's breath for Karen's baby who had died too young to get a plaque of her own.

A familiar weight settled in Margaret's chest. She missed her daughter deeply, but she missed the baby more. Poor mite-born dead in an emergency room operation an hour after the accident that killed her mother. Today would have been her second birthday. Margaret blinked away the image of a sturdy, dark-haired toddler. She'd always wanted a granddaughter. If that drunken teenager hadn't run Karen's car off the road, Margaret would be with her family now, frosting her granddaughter's birthday cake or unwrapping the angel for the top of the Christmas tree.

And she would have seen the baby, held and cared for her every day for the last two years. Watched her first steps, heard her first words. Needing her help, Karen had asked Margaret to care for the baby when she went back to work. Most of all, Margaret missed being needed.

She sniffed. Enough of this foolishness. Margaret scooped up the clippers, shoved them in her purse, and struggled to her feet.

The bus back to the home turned onto the road outside the cemetery while she was still shuffling down the hill. She broke into a labored run. "Wait!"

Another jab of pain shot through her arm. Margaret tried to call out again, but she couldn't catch her breath. The bus slowed as it passed the cemetery but didn't stop. The driver must not have seen her.

Margaret staggered to the deserted bus stop and dropped onto the bench. Her chest ached, and her eyesight went spotty. The sound of traffic dulled, as if her ears were full of cotton. She lowered her head between her knees to ease the dizziness, but the spots grew bigger.

The sound of a sputtering engine broke through the cotton. The weight on her chest lifted, and her vision cleared. Margaret sat up. A white delivery van pulled up in front of her. The window opened. A plump, swarthy man with short, graying hair and almond-shaped eyes leaned out and smiled at her. "Need a ride?" His voice was deep and brushed with a hint of faraway places.

Margaret clutched her purse. "Who are you?"

He dipped his head in a mock-bow. "Nicholas Myra, at your service. I saw you miss your bus."



**"A Kiss Under the Mistletoe"**  
**by Julie Skerven (Dame Peridot)**  
**Excerpt**

©Julie Skerven

**Chapter 1**

Jessie Barnes crunched through the snow as quietly as she could, creeping along the prickly juniper bushes surrounding Nick Maxwell's hideaway cabin, looking for the easiest way in. Not being a burglar by profession, she was making this up as she went along. Three days before Christmas, she was on a mission to rescue her brother.

She'd left her rental car tucked discreetly in a fire lane a country block away and trudged through snowdrifts up to her knees at times to get to her goal. Her feet felt like blocks of ice, her hands were frostbitten, and she was plastered with snow from falling down twice. But she couldn't let anything divert her. She had to get this done and beat the blizzard—and the last ferry back to the mainland. Otherwise, it meant an evening hunkered down in her rental car at the dock, a prospect that didn't fill her with joy. But all her discomfort was worth it if she came away with a clue to her brother's fate.

Her mission was clear-slip inside the cabin while Maxwell was in town for supplies and look for clues. The rumors about West Tec, the computer software design business Maxwell and Michael had founded, floundering a few weeks before, had worried her. When she'd mentioned them to her brother, he'd told her not to worry, not to believe all she read in the trade papers. Now she knew it'd all been an effort on his part to keep her from worrying. Now that he was missing, she felt sure Maxwell was responsible.

Her older sibling's loss had left a void in her life that nothing would fill. Throughout their childhood, they'd relied on each for emotional support. Their mother, a jetsetter who'd left them in the care of a series of nannies, had taught them to turn to each other in times of need.

Nick Maxwell was dead meat if he'd dared to touch a hair on Michael's head. Her suspicions focused around the stories of a bitter proxy fight at West Tec. Could Maxwell have silenced her brother so that he wouldn't lose half of his company? The prospect chilled her. All she had to go on was the last item in Michael's date book—a meeting with Maxwell. As her only lead, she would follow it.

She had to find out if her suspicions were correct. She'd go to the ends of the earth to find her brother. Crunching through snowdrifts, crowbar in her hand, she knew that there was nothing she wouldn't do to find him.

Snow started to fall harder, fat flakes that stuck to her eyelashes. Jessie groaned in dismay. The blizzard wasn't holding off, as she'd hoped it would. Well, she'd better get to work before the weather prevented her escape from the island.

She stopped to catch her breath at the side of the cabin and glanced at the seedy looking place in surprise. For a wealthy entrepreneur, Maxwell's choice in a vacation dwelling was unusual. The shack had to be at least fifty years old, the green paint peeling.

Brushing the snow off her tan jacket, she shivered. This was a far cry from her home turf of Atlanta. She should have dressed warmer. She'd had no idea before she left her apartment how remote and frigid this location would be.

Yearning for a nice hot cup of cocoa, she crept up to a rickety storm window that seemed to be sticking out more than the others and started prying with her crowbar. The sooner she got this odious task over, the better. The storm window popped out with a sickening crack that sounded like a gunshot. Jessie let out a little yelp, quickly scanning the area to make sure no one heard. The woods remained silent all around the remote cabin.

A rabbit sat in the shrubbery, unmoving, as it stared at her with wary eyes. "It's okay, bunny," she whispered, and then turned back to her work.

Carefully leaning the broken storm window against the cabin's faded siding, she started in on the double-hung window. She edged the crowbar under the bottom pane. With all her strength, she tugged. The window finally rose with a drawn-out squeak of protest.

"Got ya," a voice suddenly muttered nearby. Before she could react, a pair of strong arms wrapped around her from behind.

Jessie struggled to pull free, the crowbar falling from her numb hands, but she was good and pinned to the big man's impossibly wide, muscled chest.

Nick Maxwell, Jessie realized. It had to be. A wave of terror washed over her. He jerked her up off the ground and carried her through the falling snow.

Jessie flailed in his arms, kicking the juniper bushes, covering them both with snow. It didn't even break his stride or his tight grip on her struggling body. Her breaking-and-entering had apparently made so much noise she hadn't even heard his footsteps crunching in the snow as he'd crept up in back of her.

"Let me loose," she yelled, kicking back at him. Her boot made contact with his tree-like thighs...and something softer and higher that made him swear. His balls, she thought in satisfaction. She'd kicked him in the balls. She aimed for his masculinity again.

With a growl, he turned her, flopping her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes, and his big hand spanked down on her butt hard. "Behave yourself."

She let out a screech of outrage, pounding futilely on his broad back. Her fists bounced off his muscular body like snowflakes. He didn't even seem to notice.

He carried her inside the cabin and closed the door behind him, stopping to lock it. From her upside-down position, she saw worn linoleum floors and an old eat-in kitchen. He turned to stride into the living room, giving her a view of threadbare carpet and some old, overstuffed furniture. The window she'd almost succeeded in entering stood half open. He stalked over to it and shoved it back into place.

Striding to the center of the room, he unceremoniously dumped her on her ass on the floor. He scowled down at her. "Explain."

Gazing up at his intense, scowling face, she felt like spitting. In a fierce glare, she took in Nick Maxwell's appearance, thinking that he looked a world different than she'd imagined. He held himself more like a boxer than the brain she'd expected because of his chosen profession. She recognized his sandy brown hair and good looks from the photographs she'd seen of him in a computer magazine that'd done a feature on the computer wizard. But the intensity in his chocolate brown eyes caught her off guard.

She crab-crawled away from him as fast as she could scurry until she butted up against the sofa, where she ran out of escape room. Trapped, her outrage won out over any initial fear.

"What the hell have you done with my brother?" she spat up at him.

In response, he gazed at her like she'd lost her mind.

She wasn't buying his innocent act. "Michael Barnes? Your business partner? Any of this ring a bell?"

"You're Mike's kid sister?" he asked with a sudden smile.

"Yes."

She wasn't surprised at his astonishment. She didn't much resemble her Hispanic half brother. They shared a slightly scatterbrained but very loving mother who'd gone through three husbands and had recently married number four. She was off on her honeymoon cruise now, and Jessie hadn't wanted to worry her about Michael's disappearance, so she hadn't told her.

"What have you done with Michael?"

His eyes narrowed as he frowned at her. "What do you mean, *done* with him? What's happened? Is he's missing?"

She scowled. "Yeah, he's missing As if you didn't know. And, by the way, I'm not alone." She followed her bluff by a quick check for the nearest exit. Then she scanned the living room, connected to the kitchen, for any signs of Michael's presence.

A royal blue laptop on the kitchen table caught her eye. Michael's laptop! It had to be. She jumped up and ran toward it, skidded on the snow-covered linoleum in her equally

wet boots. With a crash, she hit the cabinet with her head. She just barely her own groan as her world went dark.



**"Winter Enchantment"**  
**by Jane Toombs (Dame Turquoise)**  
**Excerpt**

©Jane Toombs

After dismissing Jacob, his valet, for the night, Robert Gregory, Earl of Malden, strode to one of the narrow windows in his bed chamber and pulled back the burgundy draperies to stare into the darkness. Earlier, he had glimpsed the evening star through the scudding clouds but now the clouds had thickened and he heard the whisper of snow being driven against the window panes.

Lord Malden's mood was as dark as the stormy night. December had once been a month of joyousness in Malden Hall, but there would be scant joy this year. He had no spirit left for the trappings of Christmas, no one to wish well and, God knows, enough enemies to wish him ill.

The winter wind swept round the great house like the avenging hawk on the Gregory family crest. The hawk in flight was a symbol of the family motto: *Vindex injuriae*. An avenger of wrong.

Lord Malden smiled grimly. Most of his thirty years had been dedicated to being faithful to that motto. He would never have been able to return to this, his home, otherwise. In the end he had triumphed, crushing those who had paupered his father—a disgrace that led to the early deaths of both his parents, and his ailing elder brother as well. He had been the last of the Gregorys, a friendless, penniless orphan of thirteen, wanted by nobody.

Look at him now!

Today he was one of the wealthiest men in England and, even more important to him, he had forced the usurpers from his family's estate, and thus returned in triumph to the place of his birth. More than once Malden Hall had been described as "a gloomy pile of stones situated at the end of nowhere," but this was his home and, by the grace of God, a lifetime of damn hard work and a bit of luck, it was now his for good and all.

He had achieved his revenge completely on his own; he had never once asked for assistance, nor would he. To Lord Malden, seeking help was a sign of weakness, besides being an invitation for someone to betray him.

Now, at last, it was over. Everything he had vowed to accomplish was done. What did he care if everyone he knew and, quite likely, many who were complete strangers, thought him a curmudgeon or worse? He had no need for friends. No need at all.

As he allowed the draperies to fall back into place and turned from the window to warm himself at the fire, he was startled by the sound of a despairing yowl, followed by a thudding crash coming from the next room. More accustomed to acting on his own, rather than ringing for servants, he threw open the connecting door to the unused sitting room.

A bedraggled cat crouched in the unlit grate of the fireplace, its fur damp and streaked with soot. The animal's green eyes stared warily at him, obviously considering him a threat.

"How the devil did you get in here?" he muttered, even as suspicion flared in his mind. One of the servants had placed the cat in the room with the intent of bedeviling him. No, they would never dare! Incredible though it seemed, the cat must have fallen down the chimney.

His harsh words had alarmed the cat into flattening its ears and growling. Lord Malden's annoyance fled. He found himself shaken by a sudden sweep of sympathy for the forlorn animal. How well he knew the feeling of being cornered by an implacable enemy! Besides, you could trust an animal to be true to his nature. Unlike humans, they never sought to deceive or betray you.

He pondered what he should do for a moment before finally sitting on the floor, hoping to look smaller and less threatening to the frightened cat. Recalling the way his father's old groom had once calmed a panicked horse that had badly injured one of the stable boys, Lord Malden began to speak in a low soothing voice.

"There, now, puss, you have a friend, yes, you do. No one will hurt you as long as you have me to protect you. No one will dare hurt you. Come, puss, come to me."

The cat's ears perked up and the growling stopped. Pleased at the response, Lord Malden went on crooning to it, scarcely aware of what he was saying, intent on winning the cat's confidence. When the animal finally crept cautiously from the fireplace and inched toward him, he slowly offered his hand for the cat to sniff.

Very carefully he smoothed the matted fur behind the cat's ears until, reassured, the cat crawled onto his lap and began to purr. Eventually he was able to carry it into his bed chamber and lay it on his bed while he gently brushed off the worst of the soot with a towel.

"What shall I call you?" he wondered aloud. "Since you appeared from heaven as if by magic, you shall be Merlin the Magician."

Under the dirt, the cat's fur seemed to be a pale buff but possibly was white. "Merlin," he said, sitting on the bed next to the cat, "I daresay we may have to give you a bath to discover your true color."

Merlin looked at him and meowed piteously. Was the poor animal in pain? There were no obvious injuries.

There came a light tap at the door. "Milord?" Jacob said. "I thought I heard you call."

He bade Jacob enter. The valet, a handsome young man, stopped short, his mouth gaping open when his gaze fell on the cat. It was the first time Lord Malden had ever seen the usually impassive servant at a loss.

"As you can see, I have a visitor," Lord Malden said. "What do you know about cats, Jacob? My friend Merlin here seems to be in some distress. Perhaps from his fall down the chimney."

Jacob closed his mouth and then the door. Coming to the bedside, he peered at the cat, being careful not to touch it.

"Well?" Malden asked after a time.

"Milord, I don't believe uh-Merlin, did you say was the name?-is a tom cat. Toms, to my knowledge, are unable to bear kittens, and I fear this one is about to birth a litter."

"Kittens?" Lord Malden stared at Merlin, who was now crouched on the bed and grunting. He watched in amazement as the unmistakable head of a kitten emerged from the cat's hind-quarters.

"Sir, allow me to have one of the maids remove the animal to a more suitable place-I fear she's ruining your bedclothes."

Lord Malden shook his head. "My bedclothes be damned. She stays here; I refuse to have her disturbed. Since she chose me as her foster father, the least I can do is support Merlin in her travails."

Jacob frowned, his brow clouded, and his face took on an almost pained expression. "If you say so, sir."

"Since I expect her to be hungry once her family has arrived, you might bring Merlin some food-milk and a bit of the fish served at dinner ought to do nicely."

"Certainly, milord." As Jacob left, Lord Malden asked himself whether what he heard in the valet's voice had been disapproval or amazement or something else entirely. By God, he thought, Jacob had finally shown some emotion.

Jacob and every other servant in the house treated their new employer with stiff propriety. When he returned the month before as master of Malden Hall, he had kept all of the servants who wished to remain, which was everyone but Mrs. Avery's abigail and her housekeeper. He realized the servants were afraid to displease him and thus risk dismissal.

At least some of them, those dating back seventeen and more years to his father's time, had cause to fear him. Renfrew, the butler, Emma, the cook, and Lewis, in the stables, had worked for his father, then stayed on after the Averys had forced his parents from their family home. His lip twisted in scorn. Such was human loyalty.

As soon as Merlin cleaned her three kittens, two of them rooted blindly at her stomach, found teats and began nursing. The third, smaller than the others, failed even to find its mother. Malden gingerly picked up the tiny kitten and carefully positioned it in the proper place. He was worriedly watching its struggles to locate milk when someone knocked on his door.

"Come in, Jacob," he muttered, his attention fixed on the kitten.

The door opened. "Beg pardon, sir, 'tis Renfrew, not Jacob," the elderly butler said as he entered the room. He gazed down his nose at the domestic scene on the bed. "Sorry to disturb you, milord, but there seems to be an awkward situation downstairs."

Malden glanced at him. Whatever had happened below must be completely out of the ordinary. "A situation you find yourself unable to cope with, Renfrew? That surprises me."

"Sorry, sir, this is quite beyond my experience. As you may know, the snow is falling heavily."

"And what is difficult about snow, pray tell?"

"In this sort of foul weather, I hardly felt we could leave the child on the doorstep, milord."

Renfrew's words succeeded in capturing Lord Malden's entire attention. "Child? Child? What the devil are you talking about?"

"There came a knocking at the front door, sir."

"I heard nothing."

"Since I was on my way to retire for the night," Renfrew went on, "it took me some time to reach the door and open it. No one was there. That is, no one old enough to be able to reach the knocker. Whoever had plied it was gone, milord, but I regret to say whoever the person was, he or she left a baby on the doorstep. Unfortunately, I had little choice except to bring the child inside. Because of the snow."



**"Deck the Halls"**  
**by Cassie Walder (Dame Bloodstone)**  
**Excerpt**

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**Prolog**

*Sunday, July 29th*  
*Just before noon*

Laura Hall put down the cell phone on the seat of her car as she pulled out of the airport long-term parking lot. Her scheduled early Friday morning flight, after hours of waiting out Midwest storms, had been cancelled. That had been a fitting end to a long few months. No other flights had been available that would have gotten her home before Shabbat began.

When Laura had returned to her son's house Friday afternoon, the shocked look on her daughter-in-law's face told Laura much more than she'd really wanted to know. She couldn't blame Sarah for the reaction. Both fish and houseguests stink after three days. Laura had been her son's home over four months, helping them out. Sarah was clearly tired of her company and ready to be together with her husband and their new baby, without intruders. Yet, in spite of the over-the-top initial response to Laura's showing

back up on her doorstep, the younger woman had brought herself under control, done her duty, and made Laura welcome as a *Shabbos* guest.

Laura really hadn't minded flying out to Vegas or of taking care of her son's house, his wife, and their unborn, then newborn, child. That was what grandmas were for, to help out when needed. Wasn't it?

As much as she'd enjoyed her time with her son and daughter-in-law, and fussing over her new grandson, she was glad to be nearly home. It was a good thing that *Hashem* gave children to the young. No one else had the energy to manage them.

Life just moved too fast. She wasn't at all sure she was ready to be a grandmother. Then again, ready or not, life gave her no choice. With two married children, she was certainly more than qualified to be a grandmother. Sam had just become a father, and Anna-Laura's married daughter-was due in November.

*So, I'd better get used to the label 'grandmother', shouldn't I?*

Grandmother. The word still felt utterly alien, not at all like a label that should be applied to her. Where had her life gone? She either didn't feel or think of herself as 'middle aged.' That both her children should be grown and living in opposite sides of the country seemed so improbable to her. Still, what more could she ask for other than her children's happiness?

Yet, 'grandmother' remained a hard word for her to apply to herself.

Laura sighed heavily as she guided her car through fairly heavy traffic. *It'll be good to be back home. Sleeping in my own bed, with Mike snoring beside me, will be heaven.*

Even though she'd known she'd be busy taking care of Sarah, Laura'd taken along her laptop computer. She'd been able to keep up with her responsibilities for the family corporation. Seeing how easily she could keep up with the work from long distance, she was ready to suggest she work like this from now on. Or, at least, that she worked this way until they could hire someone else at the printing plant to fill her shoes. It was time for her to chase her own dream.

Launching her own *chocolaterie* had been delayed for a long time because the family needed her help in the printing plant. It had been good to work with Mike over the last fifteen years. She'd done the work to get the necessary fiscal controls and processes into place and now the plant's finances practically ran themselves. She felt ready for a new challenge.

There had never been a better time to launch. With a good website, she should be able to function with a relatively small store front, making her special chocolates on site and shipping them out all over the country. Yes. This was the time to make her move.

Picking back up her cell phone, she dialed another number from memory. Her friend, Mary Ellen Anderson, picked up on the first ring.

"Anderson."

"Hey, Mary, it's Laura."

Her friend laughed. "Are you back from Lost Wages?"

Laura chuckled. "Just left the airport, heading home. Should be there in a couple of hours, depending on traffic."

"Good. I know Mike's missed you, dreadfully."

"Have you seen him lately?"

"He was here on Thursday night for the Poker game with the regular crowd."

"But you haven't seen him since?"

"Is something wrong?"

"I don't know. I can't reach them. None of them are answering their phones."

"That's odd!"

"Tell me about it."

"They're probably just putting the finishing touches on a surprise welcome home party for you."

"Are they?"

"It's possible. You want me to go run them down and have them call you so you don't sit in your car and stew about not being able to get them?"

"No. It's okay. I'm just being a worrywart. I'm sure everything's fine."

"How's that grandson of yours?"

"Growing. But that's what he's supposed to do."

"Thanks for the emailed pictures. He looks like a real heartbreaker."

"He's adorable, all right. He reminds me of his father at that age. Sam was a cutie and a good baby, too. You know me, proud grandmother."

"You have every reason to be proud. The first grandchild is something very special. See you tomorrow for lunch? You can tell me all about it."

"Emma's at one?"

"Sounds good. See you then."

Laura rang off and popped a CD into the player. The strong strains of Wagner flowed over her. Mike had taught her to listen to and appreciate German opera. It certainly hadn't been part of her early life. This style of music was his passion and, over the years, it had become one of hers as well.

She tried not to worry about Mike, but she couldn't help it. Being away from his phone was definitely not like him. Maybe they were planning some good, welcome home surprise for her like Mary said. Yet, somehow, she couldn't dismiss the fear gnawing at her belly.

Laura let the music play as she drove towards home to distract her from her growing worry about Mike and his parents and brother and sister-in-law. But it didn't work. The closer she got to home the more she worried. Being out of touch was so unlike them. Something was wrong.

She pulled into the driveway of her house. Mike wouldn't be home this time of day. They'd all be at the printing plant working. But she could at least drop off her bags and grab a bite to eat before she went to the plant.

Two newspapers were on the front step. *Mike hasn't picked up either the Saturday or Sunday paper? Something's definitely wrong here.* As the garage door opener lifted the door, Laura saw that Mike's car was gone. That, she expected. She pressed the button on the remote for the garage and closed the door. Shutting off the car, she went to check the mail. All of Saturday's mail was still in the box. *This just isn't right! Mike wouldn't leave the mail.*

Mike's parents lived a couple of blocks over. She drove there and noticed that the house was dark and the weekend's newspapers were still on the front step. Laura couldn't remember any time that David and Rivka had ever failed to read their Sunday newspaper before going in to the plant. She fought the sense of impending doom she felt.

She drove over to Aaron and Lisa's house, Mike's brother and sister-in-law, another couple of blocks away. It was the same story over there. Newspapers unread, still rolled, on the doorstep. No lights were on in the house. Mail overflowed the mailbox.

She put the car into gear again and drove, faster than was legal, downtown to the printing plant. Mike's car, David and Rivka's car, Lisa's car, and Aaron's car-all were in their assigned parking places.

Making a mental note to chew on all of them for worrying her, she parked her car and walked up to the front door of the printing plant. The perennial beds flanking the door were in full bloom. But Laura hardly even saw the colorful floral display, except to register the bees buzzing among the flowers. Her keys in her hand, she noticed the heavy solid oak door was slightly ajar, not quite open, not fully shut. Just as none of the family would be far from a phone, neither would they leave a door open and unattended for anyone to just walk in off the street.

Fear made her stop and notice everything, looking for anything else out of place. Movement from the window drew her attention. The room darkening shade in the reception area wasn't down. Flies were simply massed on the window. Feeling bile rise to the back of her throat, Laura backed away from the door. Her knees felt weak. That many flies could only mean one thing. Someone or something was dead in there.

Laura forced herself to the front door. She pushed it open and stepped inside. No lights were on. There was no sound of the presses running. The air conditioner was clearly off. Staggeringly hot was the only phrase to describe the inside temperature. It had to be in excess of a hundred degrees in the reception area.

Print shops normally abound with odors: acetones, toluenes, developers for plates, inks, papers, all of them and more. She'd been around those odors for so long, she didn't even notice the heavy smells of the petrochemicals anymore. The sick odor that now assaulted her was different.

The scent was all too easy to identify. VIOLENT DEATH, in capital letters. That was a scent she'd never forgotten, not in all the years since she had first smelled death as a child in her parents' apartment on the day she'd found them murdered.

Laura froze in the doorway, telling herself that her imagination was simply working overtime, that she had just worked herself into a worried state and was getting carried away by her fear. Both the awful odor and the flies told her that she was wrong.

She stood there listening for any sound beside that of her own racing heart pounding in her ears. There was none. No machines. No sound of voices. No nothing.

No sound, that was, but the sound of flies.

The air was thick with the heavy, sickening stench of ripening corpses. *Adonai, please, not my family!* Yet, even as she sent up that silent, anguished, prayer, she knew it was in vain.

Laura didn't want to see this, didn't want to face it, didn't even want to think about it. As strong as the odor was, chances were that whoever this was had been dead for some time.

This much scent of death-of blood, body fluids, and excrement-couldn't be generated from just one body.

Her heart beat hard against her ribs. Her breath came with difficulty. Bile rose once more sickeningly in the back of her throat. She swallowed hard, trying to stay in control, although she knew she was going to retch any moment. Death lingered in her nostrils and imprinted on her brain.

Laura backed out of the still open door. Then she pulled the door snugly closed behind her.

Taking big gulps of air to keep herself from fainting, trying to keep herself from vomiting wasn't working. Laura dropped to her knees beside the door. Bees buzzed before her, flittering from flower to flower. But, in spite of how allergic she was to bee sting, she couldn't worry about that now. Her body, revolting against the horror of the moment, had an agenda of its own and wouldn't be denied.

When she could stop throwing up, she became aware of a pair of running shoes on very masculine feet, attached to hairy male legs, standing beside her. That the legs were so blurry puzzled her for a split second until she realized she was crying.

"Laura? What's wrong?" Jack Decker, an old friend from the synagogue, asked in clear and genuine concern. "Take my hand. Let me help you up. Do you need a doctor?"

She rose to her feet with Jack's help. But she knew she wasn't going to stay on her feet long. The world spun madly out of control. "*Barukh dayan emet,*" Laura whispered the traditional Jewish prayer at the time of learning of a death. Blessed is the one true Judge. Then the world grew dark as her knees gave out.



**"A Home for Christmas"**  
**by Karen Wiesner (Dame Amethyst)**  
**Excerpt**

©Karen Wiesner

*December 19th.*

*You have to do this, Craig Stevens lectured himself with the phone still a grip away. Squirming in his easy chair, his hands clasped the arms in a death-grip fueled by memories and lost chances. You chickened out earlier today-who could blame you? Every day she's more beautiful. Every day you trip over your own tongue at the first glimpse of her. But not this time. This time, get over how her voice turns you inside out. This time, it's now or never.*

He could almost hear his brother Gregg lecturing, *Isn't she worth gettin' out of your comfort zone for?*

Worth it?

Craig closed his eyes against an agonizing wave of desire and brokenness. He'd fallen for Christie Renata Zondervan at pretty much the instant he'd first laid eyes on her. Outside of her beauty, her sweetness inside and out, she was a woman unlike any other he'd known. His every prayer for clarity always led him back to her. She was the love of his life and didn't even know it. At the age of thirty-seven, he was as sure as he'd ever be that she was the only woman who would ever do for him.

And she was in love with his brother.

The silence in his compact apartment sounded like a tidal wave in his ears that receded only when he heard a door open in the apartment above his. A minute later, an enthusiastic-if off-key-voice caroled along with the Christmas jingle on the suddenly blaring stereo.

What if she didn't call? What if this one night, she decided not to call him? For the past five years, his cultivation to get her to trust him, rely on him, turn to him in every situation had backfired. In ways, he guessed he really had no life outside of waiting to see her, waiting for her to call him. He didn't *want* a life outside of her.

Not once in all those years had he imagined she would fall for his brother and Craig would find himself in the position of being the shoulder she cried on.

Just as Craig had expected him to, Gregg had carelessly broken Christie's heart, then proceeded to fall for someone else shortly afterward. It'd been months since his brother had dumped Christie unceremoniously in Craig's lap, and he'd been telling himself, *Not yet. She's not ready. She's still not over him.* And, because Gregg had now deduced that Craig was in love with Christie himself, had been for years, he got an earful of "Why aren't you doing something to make her yours?" advice from his brother.

Craig glanced up at his pristine ceiling, annoyed tonight by the cheerful warbler he lived below.

He shook his head. How could he compete with his brother? Maybe Gregg didn't see it that way, but Craig had observed all through their childhoods, their teenager years, their adult years that Gregg could charm any and every woman without even trying. Craig cast himself as the exact opposite of his irresistible brother. He didn't know the first thing to say to a woman he liked. He felt uncomfortable in nearly every social situation. The truth was, he didn't see himself even remotely as interesting as the next guy. So what did he have that Christie might want or need?

Craig pressed index and middle fingers to his throbbing temples.

He was an ear. A shoulder. The voice of encouragement to keep Christie's spirits and confidence up. Those were all he'd dared to offer her up until now.

But it wasn't enough. Not for him. His own unfulfilled desires were eating him alive. Would it be enough for her if he loved her more than anything except the Lord? If there was absolutely nothing he wouldn't do to win her? To make her happy? To give her each and every single last thing she needed for the rest of their lives, until only death separated him from her and reunited them in heaven?

He wasn't sure, but he knew he had to take a chance and make that next step to either losing her, or winning her finally.

Leaning forward, he put his head in his hands and tried to block out the jingle bells rock and stomp above him. *Show me what Christie needs, Lord. Make her see me in a new light, as more than simply a friend who's always there for her. I can be the man she needs. I know I can. Just..help me to have the opportunity to do that without tripping over my own tongue. But Your will, not mine. If this isn't Your will, show me. Take away this torturous desire. If it is Your will...make the phone ring.*

Craig lifted his head, glancing back at the phone, willing it in his hard gaze to ring. And, a moment later, it did. He sat back and grabbed it, already anticipating her soft, sweet, melodic voice, filling all the cold, dark corners inside him.

"Did you ask her yet?" Gregg demanded.

A frustrated groan filled Craig's voice at hearing his brother's voice. He clenched his teeth to keep it from escaping, but said, "No, but she's supposed to call."

"She said she would?"

"No." "Then how do you know she will?"

*She always does. Every night at 8:30, she calls. She has since you broke her heart. Your loss. My gain.* Craig reluctantly reminded himself that the gain could be only temporary. If he risked everything and asked her, would he lose everything?

"You better call her."

"How's Stormie?" Craig asked, but his brother saw right through him.

"My wife is fine. Now call Christie. Or I may take matters into my own hands."

Though Gregg's tone was teasing, Craig's ire rose immediately. "You do, and I'll never forgive you."

"That I'm used to, brother. I think you'd rather that than livin' with never forgivin' *yourself* if you don't do this. Step out on a limb for her, Craig. You've done it for other worthy causes. You've got enough faith to get you through anything. Call her. Ask her. You won't regret it."

How could he be so sure of that? Craig's efforts to convince himself of that never lasted beyond a few minutes or hours. Every time he thought about asking her, taking that chance, all his fears rushed back in. He'd rather be something in her life than nothing, and this risk could easily make him lose even the position he had in her life.

But he knew Gregg was right. He had to do this. He had to.

After telling Gregg he'd call Christie, Craig hung up and realized that God had answered his prayer-the phone *had* rang. As was frequently the norm, the Lord had just chosen to answer in a completely unexpected way that left Craig wondering if he'd misunderstood the obvious again.

He could easily imagine God being as frustrated with him as he was with himself.

"Now or never," he lectured out loud, to the tune of "The twelve days of Christmas." This was his countdown to making Christie his, or losing her forever. Now or never.

He dialed.

\* \* \* \*

Craig's line was busy. Christie could barely get herself to believe it, but each time she dialed, she got a busy signal. After a half hour of it, she merely got his answering machine. He wasn't there.

*You're not the center of his world*, she scolded herself, grimacing as she jabbed her finger against the power switch of her stereo. Christmas music usually depressed her. Certainly, it did tonight. *Craig doesn't sit around waiting for you to call him. So he went out. He had something else to do. Maybe he had a date.*

She wasn't sure why, but the thought bothered her. It bothered her almost as much as the thought that had been whispering itself in her ear for the past few weeks.

Christmas was coming. Every year, on December 21st, Craig went home to Olympia, Washington to spend the holidays with his huge family. He called her every day even then, saying he didn't want her to run her phone bill up, but...it wasn't the same as knowing he was only a few minutes away.

Dropping the cordless phone on the table, she walked to the picture window that dominated the front part of her duplex. Across the street, a car drove up with an absolutely huge blue spruce strapped to its comparatively tiny top. Two men and two young children jumped out. Their faces spoke volumes in the next several minutes as the older man and the presumed father of the children worked cheerfully to liberate the tree from the car and the kids urged them on with their bouncing forms.

A movement from beyond drew Christie's gaze. At the open door of the house stood the mother and grandmother, waving and smiling. The green and red apron the mother wore was covered with white powder. Holiday baking-a family event just as the tree decorating clearly was.

Christie swallowed the lump in her throat, almost hearing Johnny Mathis singing "I'll be home for Christmas."

Home. A home for Christmas.

She let the curtain fall back with a sigh.

Nearly all of her friends left her alone during holidays-not that she blamed them. Unwilling to bring them down, she insisted she had a full schedule of volunteer activities throughout the holidays. Truthfully, she would have liked nothing better than to be surrounded with family, but she had none. She couldn't even expect them to give her a second thought while they were away, enjoying their loved ones. Yet Craig always

remembered her. For the past five years, he'd been her mentor and the very best friend she could imagine. He was always there for her. Always.

Except tonight.

*She sank down into her suede sofa, holding her fluffy cat Lucy against her. I hate feeling this lost, Father, almost as much as I hate remembering how stupid I was. How much I wanted Gregg to be the answer to every prayer I've ever had for love and family and intimacy. I should have realized someone like him could never love someone as needy as me, someone who's so easy to forget or avoid. It's so silly to feel like this, because I know You love me, and that should be all I need. I should never feel lonely again, but. I do. You know my heart. Help me to stop feeling like this, or to find someone else I can love and who can love me.*

Christie glanced back at the phone, not bothering to wipe the tears running down her face. Craig was so busy with the various ministries he was involved in. Maybe he'd taken up something else-without telling her about the change in his schedule. But she'd seen him just that morning and he'd said nothing then.

*Why does he have to tell you every detail of his schedule?* She snatched up the phone again and pressed the number one on her speed dial. *The man wasn't put on this earth to comfort you. Never mind that he always seems to know just when you need him.* Instead of a busy signal, his answering machine picked up her call. Her doorbell pealed through her home.

Frowning, she allowed Lucy to jump out of her arms, then rose. Who would visit her? She almost never had any visitors. Though she worked in various ministries herself, she'd never made friends easily. She considered many of the people she worked with sisters or brothers in the Lord, yet their lives didn't merge after hours since they all had families to take care of. She'd assumed most of them also had their own circles of friends. Being single at her age, she didn't really fit in with any of them. So who was here at this time of night?

Once more, she went to the window overlooking her little section of lawn, her sidewalk, and the communal driveway she shared with the other tenant in the duplex. In the light of the street lamp, she saw Craig's dark blue car.

Her face flushed at the realization that he'd come. He'd come just when she needed him. He hadn't been out on a date. He'd been home between 8:30 and 9 o'clock-the busy signal she'd gotten when she tried calling him told her that. And then he'd come here.

Smiling, she rushed to her front door, unlocked it, and pulled it open with her cat underfoot. Craig stood on her doorstep and relief flood his expression until he saw her wet cheeks. "Are you all right?" he demanded in a tone that sounded both harsh with worry and loaded with the tenderness she associated with him.

Christie couldn't help laughing at her own foolishness as she stepped forward to hug him and simultaneously invite him inside.

"I tried calling," he started. "Was that you?"

He looked confused, and she laughed again. "I was trying to call you. I kept getting a busy signal. We must have been calling each other. Is that why you came over?"

When she eased back, sensing his reluctance to let go, his grin was sheepish. "I got worried," he admitted.

Though she was no longer in his arms, his familiar, woodsy scent clung to her and surrounded her. Christie smiled at him, appreciating how, even at the end of a long day, he always looked immaculately dressed and groomed. His black trousers didn't have a single wrinkle and they fit him like the designer had used him as the model.

"Are you all right, honey?"

She reached around him to close the front door. She should have felt completely foolish, embarrassed to confess the truth, but she didn't. Craig knew her better than anyone else. "I'm just...lonely. It's this time of year."

When she peeked up at him through her lashes, she saw that little frown that brought his elegantly arched eyebrows together. It was the little frown that he often wore and made her sometimes wonder if she was the center of his universe. Well, a little left of center. She knew the Lord firmly occupied the center of Craig's life. His active, living faith buoyed her own faith, giving her encouragement and security.

"Why this time of year?"

"Come in. Sit down," she murmured as Lucy rubbed up against his leg affectionately, and he leaned down to greet her effusively the way he always did. "Do you want some hot chocolate or something?"

He shook his head, now leading her to the sofa, where they sat side-by-side. He faced her. "Tell me."

Christie sighed. "Everyone has family this time of year. Everyone disappears. I don't begrudge them for it. I do envy them. It's hard to be alone this time of year."

"You're not alone. You'll never be alone."

The intensity of his voice brought a smile to her lips. "I know. I know the Lord is always with me."

His jaw tightened slightly, and he looked down for an instant. She'd often wished for his smooth ability to gauge the effectiveness of his words before he said them. His dark eyes met hers again. "You're not alone," he repeated.

For the first time, she realized how much he and Gregg looked alike, and the realization surprised her more than it should have. She'd seen pictures of the Stevens family. They all had gorgeous dark hair, dark eyes. All six brothers had that telltale strong jaw and full, sensual lips. Even the two girls, though their features were much more feminine in beauty, had the Stevens similarities.

Though Christie had always seen that Craig's looks rivaled any of theirs, she'd never noticed how perfect his face was with those intense eyes that could steal the breath right out of a girl until she could barely stand without help. The way Gregg had every single time he'd looked her way, even long before he'd noticed her for all of five minutes.

"You don't have to be alone," Craig murmured, and she could see he wanted to glance away the way he frequently did, and she'd never been sure why. He wasn't a man she considered shy.

"I don't have to be what?"

"Alone. During the holidays."

What was he saying? She could hardly believe he'd said it. Craig loved spending the holidays with his family. He always returned from his visit like a new man, like he had more confidence in himself, in his goals. As though his family restored a part of him that waned during the rest of the year he wasn't with them. It was a sentiment she could never understand. She'd never had a family of her own. But she'd imagined what it could be like, and Craig's family had become an ideal for her. She wanted what they had, even knowing there was a good chance she'd never have anything like it.

"No! Oh, Craig, I didn't mean." She put both hands on his chest, unwilling to allow him to make that kind of sacrifice for her.. "Of course I'm not asking you to stay here this year. I know how much your family means to you. Going there during Christmas. Don't worry about me. Just...call me when you can. I like to hear all the children giggling in the background. And the music, when your family sings Christmas songs around the piano."

He leaned further against the saddleback sofa cushions, taking a deep breath, and then he surprised her again when he said, "Maybe I will have that hot chocolate."

"Oh. Okay."

She expected him to follow her into her kitchen, and when he didn't she was even more thrown.

Working through the routine task, she mixed up a batch of hot chocolate and brought it to a slow boil while she set out her two favorite mugs.

Why had he come here tonight? Why would getting a busy signal when he tried to call her worry him enough to send him across town in person? Had he actually intended to stay in Milwaukee over Christmas instead of going home to his family for a little longer than a week, the way he always did, if she asked him to? Would he do that for her?

Somehow she completed her task, topping the chocolate with fresh crème, but she didn't do it with conscious thought. She thought about Craig, going off for a week. She thought about him staying with her for that week. Both thoughts made her experience a kind of devastation. She didn't want him to go, but she didn't want him to stay for her. How could she accept something like that? It was too much. What did she have to offer him that would make up for the loss of seeing his family?

Though she hadn't wiped the tears from her face before she opened the door to him, she did now. She didn't want him to see that she'd been crying again, caught between two choices that weren't hers to make or even influence.

She carried a small tray with the hand-painted mugs and double chocolate chip cookies she'd made earlier into the living room. Craig's gaze met hers as though he searched for reassurance from her. She wasn't sure what he needed reassurance for, but she set the tray on the glass table, then sat beside him on the sofa again. Turning toward him, she took his hand in both of hers. "You're a fantastic friend, Craig. I can't even believe you'd offer it, but I can't ask you to stay here with me when you should be with your family for the holidays. Thank you. I love you for it. But you should go."

She turned away to pick up one of the mugs, telling herself she'd done the right thing.

"I'm not offering to stay here," he said as she handed him the hot chocolate.

"You're...not?" Heat filled her face. It certainly wouldn't be the first time she'd completely jumped to the wrong conclusion.

Craig took the mug, but set it down again. At first, he took her hand in his tentatively, but an instant later, he'd completely enveloped her hand between his two large ones. Only a moment ago, she'd done the same with his hand, but this felt much more

intimate. Forming words was too much for her. She opened her mouth anyway, looking at her hand in his. For the first time ever, she was uncertain of his intentions.

"Come with me."

He might have whispered, but the soft-spoken words echoed through her mind like reverberation. Go? Go with him? To Washington?

"I know you don't like airplanes, but I promise once we're up you'll forget you're so far over land. I'll distract you."

She was so shocked by his suggestion, she laughed with a follow-up of, "Go with you?" as if he'd asked her in Japanese.

"My family would love to meet you. You know they would."

She'd spoken to his parents, some of his sisters and brothers, even met a couple of them who'd visited Craig and Gregg in Milwaukee. In ways, she acknowledged that they did know her well enough to warrant this, but. She was confused. She didn't know why she should be confused, and why it bothered her so much to be confused about this.

"They can't possibly have room," she heard herself say. "Not with everyone else who'll be there."

"You haven't seen the house Gregg and I bought them. There's plenty enough room. The kids camp out together on the floor in one room. It's like a big camping trip for them. I can call Mom, but I know she'd want you there."

*Why would she? Does she know how lonely I get during the holidays? I'd hate to be there, knowing everyone knows the real reason I'm there. I don't want anyone to feel sorry for me because I don't have anybody else. Because I have no other place to go. Or is it something more?*

"Craig, you've never...told anyone else...well, anything I told you? About Gregg? Do they know Gregg and I.?"

He shook his head firmly. "No. Why would I mention that? Stormie's the only woman he's ever talked to them about."

Jealousy and pain flared through Christie at the words, and she looked away to grab a cookie. Stormie Knight. Even the name irritated her. Stormie Knight, now Stormie Stevens, the woman who'd prevented any chance at all of Christie changing Gregg's mind. She tore into the gooey cookie.

Ugh, but Christie didn't even believe that herself anymore. Much as she wanted to believe Gregg had loved her, just a little, she knew his sentiments resembled those of a Christian brother with a sister. Her embarrassingly shameful attempts to seduce him had, praise God, been averted before any real damage had been done to more than her heart.

"I would never tell anyone the private things you've told me, Christie. You know that, don't you? You're safe with me."

She glanced at him, blinking back tears as she nodded. Swallowing the suddenly bitter cookie, she fought the need to snuggle into his arms and lose herself in being cared for. "I don't know, Craig. I don't want to...intrude."

"How could you ever intrude?" he said like she was insane for even suggesting it.

"I'm not a part of your family."

"I've known you for five years, honey. I think you've gotten to know my family in that time, too, not just...Gregg. They love you, Christie."

This time she did feel silly when fresh tears filled her eyes. No, she'd never met Craig's and Gregg's family, but she did feel like she knew them. She loved them, too. His mother not only sent her a card for every holiday, including her birthday, but she called every few weeks, as well. Craig's oldest sister, who came with her family to Milwaukee for Thanksgiving with her brothers each year, called frequently. Christie had met her the year she'd done her first recording with Craig's record company.

*I love Craig's family. I won't be intruding on their family gathering. They'll welcome me as one of their own. It's the kind of people they are.*

She glanced up at Craig, helpless to fight the tears slipping from her eyes. She'd never undergone more relief than when he made a soft noise of sympathy before drawing her into the haven of his embrace. It was better, definitely better, to cry in his arms than in his ear over the phone.

"I'm such a baby," she murmured.

He made an excuse for her that made her giggle. "You've been through a lot lately."

"A lot of my own making."

"I'm sorry my brother hurt you."

Christie shook her head without moving far from his chest. "He didn't. I hurt myself. He never gave me any encouragement or promises. The opposite, in fact. He said he wasn't going to be the man I deserved. But I wasn't paying any attention. I let my heart go because it's what I wanted. It's not his fault. And I'm sorry I've been crying all over you these past few months. It can't be fun for you." *But you're always there for me anyway.*

When she started to pull back to give him a break from the weepy mess she'd become, he refused to let her go. "Stay here. I don't mind at all."

Christie swallowed the lump in her throat as he tucked her deeper against him. His chest made the most comfortable pillow in the world feel like a rock. She could have fallen asleep so easily in his arms, against his chest. "You're a good friend, Craig. The best. I honestly don't know what I'd do without you."

Closing her eyes, she focused on his rapid heartbeat and the rhythmic way he stroked her hair. She wondered a few minutes later if he held his breath. His chest felt unyieldingly rigid. When she looked up at him, her confusion grew. The look of utter anguish on his taut face made absolutely no sense. Was she hurting him? What else could that expression mean?

"Say you'll come home with me. I'll take care of everything. Just say yes."

She feared getting on a plane. Craig had known she harbored that fear before he signed her on as one of the artists on his record label, and he'd arranged for alternate methods of getting her to her concerts. But she imagined being with Craig and his family, with all their little young ones, surrounded with peace, joy and Christian love. She imagined them singing carols around the neighborhood, putting up the Christmas tree, attending Christmas services in the church his father pastored. She imagined warmth, good food, laughter instead of huddling with her cat in front of her own pathetic tree, loneliness, overeating for solace. Crying her eyes out, the way she usually did this time of year.

"You don't have any singing gigs scheduled, do you?" Craig asked.

She hadn't done an album of her own for over a year. Along with her volunteer work, taking back-up gigs and commercial spots had kept her busy, though the royalties she received steadily from her album were more than enough to live like a queen for years. "Nothing I can't re-schedule."

He cradled his hand against the side of her face. "Then there's no reason for you to stay here."

That much she couldn't argue with. At the moment, she could see no reason to stay here and wallow in her misery, not when she could be happier than she'd ever been in her life for a few short days with Craig.